Andrew Clark: It's exciting to have a guest on who I've known for almost thirty-odd years (*applause),* who is very funny, who won—I'll talk about that later—but who's one of the funniest and most famous comedians in the world. He hails from Ottawa, the Big O, and he's here today to talk to us about comedy in China. So please welcome, Mark Rowswell. *(applause)*

Mark Rowswell: Hey Alan!

AC: That's Alan, that's right.

MR: That's my opening joke.

AC: Like I said, I've actually known you for many, many years. We went to the same high school that created Bruce Cockburn, yourself, and Kevin O'Leary, apparently.

MR: Our next dictator.

AC: The first time I saw you really perform, you were always kind of a funny guy, but it was when you ran for class president, or student body president. You wore a toga, and you promised to change the school colors from purple and gold to green and black, and many other things. And you won in a landslide, and then you were struck from the ballot, right?

MR: No, the story's getting a little twisted. The base of that joke was that I was ineligible to run. In those days, we still had Grade 13, right, so if you were Grade 13 rep, you were "head boy," we called it, head boy and head girl, and you had to be in Grade 13 to run for this position, and I was in Grade 12, so I was technically ineligible. That was the whole joke.

AC: I didn't get that.

MR: I was getting all this support, and I was ineligible. Well, then the next year comes around, and everyone remembers these posters and the toga in the cafeteria and everything, and I didn't run in Grade 13, because that wouldn't have been fun. *(laughter)*

AC: Right. And then we lost touch, not that we were hanging out all the time, and then you ended up doing comedy in China. I'm just gonna throw that to you, if you can tell us how that came about.

MR: So right at the end of high school, Ottawa technically being a bilingual city, although the west end of Ottawa is very English, right, very Anglo, downtown is bilingual. So even more than in Toronto, the official bilingualism across Canada, but especially in Ottawa, there's all this pressure to learn French for us Anglos. And like any young person, I kind of rebelled against that. Nobody wanted to study French, nobody enjoyed it. It was finally an elective in Grade 13, so I had to do it to Grade 12, but Grade 13 you were free, so everyone dropped it. And I just felt at the time that there weren't a

lot of Asians in our high school, but there were Hungarians and South Asians, there was one Japanese girl, and I just started to think that there were all these languages other than French, and I'd really like to learn a foreign language, I just don't want to learn French. Spanish is kind of boring. The European languages are boring. Just get rid of those. I wanted to learn Swahili or something.

Anyway, this is like 1983, 1984, so at the same time, China is just kind of opening up, and it's in the news, and Deng Xiaoping is *Time*'s "Man of the Year," and the next century belongs to China, all this sort of media hype around China opening up. And I just thought, yeah, why not Chinese? So I actually started doing a little bit out of high school. I went to U of T just because I wanted to get out of Ottawa and come to Toronto, and I just barely squeaked into U of T, and it was only a coincidence that I found you. I actually took Chinese at U of T, so I took one course, and then I started to major in it, and then I just got sucked in. A friend of mine told me afterwards, studying Chinese is not like studying Spanish or German or Russian. Anybody who's taken Chinese at university, it just changes your life It just grabs you somehow. So I did that for four years at the University of Toronto, basically because of this interest. I wanted to learn something different from my own culture, a different language, something non-European, and maybe it'll be useful, because China's opening up, and blah blah blah, but I figured a BA's not gonna get me a job anyway. I might as well enjoy the time in downtown Toronto, get a nice degree, have fun, broaden my horizons, and then figure out what to do for a living.

So I did that for four years, basically not thinking about the consequences at all, and then I thought, I got my BA, I need to go to China for like six months to get this out

of my system and say, “OK, I did that.” Here I am, 23 years old, I learned Chinese, now it’s time to do something else. Basically, within two months of arriving in China, I get a chance opportunity to appear on television, and they put me on the show, and there are 500 people in the audience. I was terrified. I’d never been on a big stage like that. I’ve always been kind of a goofy kid, I guess, but I’d never really done comedy or done performing. I didn’t even take drama in high school. What they didn’t tell me is that, sure there are 500 people in the audience, but the television audience is about 550 million. It was the New Year’s Eve gala. I use the analogy of the *Ed Sullivan* days of television. I got there and I was on *Ed Sullivan*, and everybody watches that show. So all you had to do was appear on *Ed Sullivan* once and everybody knows you, or *Johnny Carson* or something. It’s like that age, where there only were two channels, and when this channel had a big show on, that channel, they sort of alternated. So everybody watched that show. And next thing I know, I’m this thing, I’m Dashan, which is the name of the character I played in that first skit.

AC: I remember when I did a story on you for the now-defunct *Saturday Night* magazine, you said that you went out the next day, and people were waving at you.

MR: And I thought they were from the audience, because that was at Beijing University, right? And I knew that of these 500 people, there were a hundred or so that had been bused in from the university, because the university had sort of worked in partnership with the TV station. So I thought, “Isn’t that a coincidence? This is a big university, but

that's one of the guys who was there last night." But that's when somebody told me, "No, this was on national TV, 550 million people.

AC: So that's when you started doing shows. right?

MR: Yeah, so all of a sudden I'm this thing, right? Everyone knows me as Dashan, that guy from the skit. And basically the skit was, it was a culture clash in terms of it being two foreigners performing. The skit itself was kind of garbage, but the hook was, these are two foreigners, and not just speaking Chinese, textbook Chinese, typical foreign-student-learning-Chinese kind of Chinese, we were speaking real down-to-earth, taxi-driver kind of slang, vernacular Chinese. And the whole thing was just sort of playing on Chinese slang.

So that was the kind of thing…there's a scene from *Good Morning, Vietnam* where Robin Williams is talking to this group of Vietnamese peasants, typical sort of stereotypical setup, where they're wearing their straw hats, and nobody speaks English, totally blank face, and Robin Williams is trying to express something, and there's no response at all from the people. And he says something under his breath, I forget, I haven't seen the scene myself in years, so it's kind of a foggy memory, but he's expressing his frustration, like "I can't get through to these people." And this little kid gets up in the back of the audience, and he's got a Yankees hat on, and he says it in perfect Brooklyn English, he says, "It's not that we don't understand you, it's that we think you're a fuckin' asshole." And all of a sudden, these Vietnamese peasants, one of

them stands up with a Yankees cap on, right? It's that kind of cultural switcheroo all of a sudden.

And that was our first skit. It was two foreigners that get out there, and all of a sudden they're speaking this down-to-earth slang that you would never see in any textbook anywhere, and it's like, where the hell did they learn this stuff?

AC: Can we talk a bit about the idea of "cross talk," which goes back to around 1850, right, or a bit later? It's akin to vaudeville, and the idea of flights of illogic and logic and tongue twisters…

MR: Straight man/funny man.

AC: I don't want to put you on the spot, but just so people can get a sense of how it hears, could you do a tiny, tiny, tiny bit, just for the audience to get a sense of how it would sound to a Chinese audience? I know we're not gonna *get* it…

MR: I don't know if I can really do it, because it's a dialogue, right? It's a straight man/funny man (dynamic), so not a lot of people remember Smothers Brothers now, but it's very much like that. Smothers Brothers, one guy was sort of borderline retarded, right? And then his brother was the smart one. And the dumb guy was always saying these dumb things, which actually turn out to be brilliant. There's a saying in Chinese: "Ignorance taken to its extreme is brilliance." This guy is actually brilliant. So I can't really recreate it, but that's the idea. It's a straight man/funny man (dynamic), and the

straight man, of course, is representing the audience, because Chinese audiences tend to be very passive and laid-back and everything, and the street man is basically saying whatever the audience is thinking, and bouncing the jokes off him, because the audience is very passive.

AC: So when you started doing shows, were you the straight man, or the punchline guy?

MR: I was the funny man. The first thing I did was a skit, it was sketch comedy. I was the husband who returned home late, and my wife had locked me out, and we're having this argument through the door, and we're speaking in this real down-to-earth vernacular Chinese. And that led to this recognition as Dashan, which then led to the other opportunities to appear, and meeting some of the comedians. One of the top xiangsheng comedians, the Bob Hope or Jerry Seinfeld at the time, basically the number one comedian in the 1980's in China, took me under his wing and decided to do a xiangsheng with me. So the first one wasn't a xiangsheng, and xiangsheng, it's typically a two-man dialogue, but sometimes you can have a third man, and that's a typical way to sort of bring on a pupil, right? "Let me introduce you to my new pupil," and usually the pupil is totally retarded, right? That's part of the shtick, too. The pupil comes in, he's totally retarded, but the more he performs, the more you realize it's actually the mentor who's retarded, and the student knows more than the mentor. So there's the comedic twist to it.

So he brought me on, and this is what led from me being a novelty to being an established figure on Chinese TV, was this switch from being an out of the blue success in one sketch to performing with (the Chinese) Bob Hope. It's like, "Here's the next Bob

Hope." So that was the setup for that. My mentor was introducing me as the future of xiangsheng, "Here's my new pupil, and xiangsheng is going global, and he's gonna take xiangsheng to the world, and he's so wonderful," and everything As the first step, because xiangsheng is very much about linguistic acrobatics, tongue-twisters, rapid-fire banter, double meanings, all these language tricks, he's gonna teach me lesson number one, which is to learn some tongue-twisters. And of course, he can't do them, and he fakes his way through them. He can't do them. So I get this partner, who says, "Sorry, when I'm with a foreigner I always get mixed up, because I start to think in English." He doesn't speak a word of English, but he's bullshitting his way out of it. The partner does the tongue twister better than he does, but he still holds it back. In terms of skill level, the first guy just totally flubs it up. The partner comes in and says, "Let me show you how to do it." He does it, but he holds his skill level to like a six out of ten. And then I come in and try to blow it out of the park, right? So all of a sudden, I've gone from being a foreigner speaking slang, which is one step, but now I'm performing with these guys who are really considered performing artists in China. It's considered the *art* of comedy.

AC: Is that like "the rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain" kind of tongue twister you're talking about, or much harder?

MR: English tongue twisters tend to be a short phrase repeated over and over and over. The Chinese tend to be a story. So the first one I did was *(utters rapid-fire, difficult series of Chinese phrases). (applause)* So all of a sudden, these are like top-level state performing artists, and I'm taking them for a run. So all of a sudden, that's the switcheroo

there. I'm the master and he's the pupil. And that we played over and over and over, that basic shtick where it led to this image of Dashan, the foreigner who's more Chinese than the Chinese. This guy knows everything, you can't get anything past him. This guy recites tongue poetry in his sleep. It's actually one of the reasons I later moved away from cross-talk, we call it cross-talk in English, but it's like, just call it xiangsheng. So you can do that over and over and over, you set up this image where you're just the comedic god. There's nothing you don't know. Once you've established that, there's not much more you can do with it. Each time you take it to another level, it's like, "Oh sure, he can do tongue-twisters, but can he sing Peking opera?" And now I'm singing Peking opera. You can do anything for fifteen seconds if you practice enough, right?

So I became an expert at absolutely everything, to the point where, and we see this even now, twenty-five years later with social media, everybody's allowed spelling mistakes on social media, right? You're typing with your thumbs and everything. Any time I make a spelling mistake, I get dozens of comments saying, "See? He's not perfect after all!" How do you follow up on that? So that's why I sort of moved away from comedy later. I had a couple of lucky steps, and I worked really hard at it, and I never played the dumb foreigner. I had lots of directors come and say, "You know, you're getting a little too good now. Everyone likes that sort of funny, dumb foreigner. Can you please play Manuel in *Fawlty Towers*?" And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to do the best I could possibly do, and we played that shtick to the limit, where we really couldn't play it anymore. I didn't know what to do next.

AC: You moved on to kind of a combination of financial and political kind of bridging and advising, right, to governments and companies?

MR: I started Chinese because I was interested in the language and culture, and I wanted to somehow be a diplomat, or a businessman, or an academic or something. I wanted to do something between China and the West, but I didn't really know what. It wasn't my goal to be a comedian. The reason I did the comedy was because that was a way to get out of school, and I already had my degree anyway, right? I'm just there doing independent study, so I traveled around the country with a bunch of performers, seeing a side of China that foreigners don't usually see. You're traveling around with a local performing troupe. We were going to places that were actually not even open to foreigners, and you just pull your hat down a little bit, because you're not supposed to be there. I performed in a jail once. Not for the inmates, we went to perform for the staff at a prison in China. These are not the typical kind of places tourists go.

So I was loving it, right? It was a way to get really deep into China. But my goal was to be a bridge between east and west, somehow. So I started to get into business consulting, and blah blah blah. I was trying to treat this as a stepping-stone to a career. And it gradually sort of evolved into this cultural-ambassador figure. What is a cultural ambassador, you know? It's a really vague kind of term. If you've read this mandatory reading *Stand and Deliver*, I'm in there. *(laughter)* I have a blurb in there. In my rosy imagination, you know how memories improve over time, right? They get better and better. Not clearer and clearer, they got foggier, but they just feel better. I thought I earned a whole chapter…

AC: Well, you're definitely more than a blurb. It's a good 2000 words, at least.

MR: A couple of pages, but it's not a chapter! *(laughter)* In my mind, I was like a chapter in this book!

AC: Well, you were a major story in *Saturday Night* magazine. That's important.

MR: I still have that.

AC: It's interesting you mention that, because one of the reasons I think initially, because this is back in '91 or '92, and the relationship between Canada and China in the 90's was a special kind of relationship. Can you talk a tiny bit about that, and then we can sort of move into comedy? When I originally talked to you about what was happening for you in China, you mentioned this perception of Canada among a lot of Chinese people, and that kind of thing.

MR: So in the 1980's, when I first started studying Chinese, this is China first starting to open up, and the world is sort of fascinated with China, and China's fascinated with the world, and we're getting to know each other again. Then, of course, along comes 1989, Tiananmen Square, right? And everything is sort of clamped right back down. In '91, '92, it starts to crack open again. but we're still under this cloud of Tiananmen Square. I think, in a Chinese context, that was an important context for me as a performer, because it was

non-political. Everything between China and the West has become so politicized now, and it's us versus them, except here's this guy who's just doing comedy, don't worry everyone, we're still friends. And I was OK with that, because I don't like this idea that our entire relationship is run between two governments. I wanted to work more on the people-to-people thing. But I think that when you did the interview, it was at a time when I was really thinking, "OK, I've been doing this Dashan thing for two or three years now, this is a stepping stone to something. I don't want to be doing comedy anymore." And now I'm like 26, 27, I've gotta get a job, right? I've gotta get a career, a woman.

AC: Yeah. And you did that?

MR: Yeah. We were married in '93. So when I go back and I read the article now, that's definitely a time when I was already feeling the straight jacket of what I'm doing and trying to break out of that. And I did that. I worked at the embassy, I worked for different companies, I did consulting. I worked on the Olympics with Team Canada. I was Commissioner General for Canada at Expo 2010. So in terms of moving away from comedy and being more of a cultural ambassador, I had some success in that. It was really after Expo 2010, 2011, 2012, now I'm like fortysomething, pushing 50, and I'm thinking, I'd like to get *back* to comedy.

AC: And you reengage, and that's what you've been doing…

MR: That's what I've been doing the last couple of years now, especially since 2013. How many people here know Joe Wong, the Chinese-American comedian that did the White House Correspondents' Dinner a couple of years ago? Joe Wong, you can look him up on Youtube. He's one of these guys that's come back from the States and is bringing standup to China now.

AC: Well, why don't we talk about that, because you just did a show not too long ago here in Toronto, which is your one-man show, and you're also doing standup in China, in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, those are the two…

MR: Those are the big sort of cosmopolitan, more outward-looking cities, not the interior, but Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, basically.

AC: Would you want to talk a little bit about standup in China now, and how it works?

MR: At first, I was really skeptical, because this is a typical Western media kind of hook, is that you try to find a little bit of the West in China, and then it becomes like a big thing, when really it can be this tiny little niche of China. Any time I looked into these articles about people doing standup comedy in China, when you look into it, it was expat bars, and people speaking English. It had nothing to do with China, right? You could be doing this in Koala Lumpur or Dubai or anywhere where you got lots of expats. Basically, it's Americans and Brits looking for comedy from home. It has nothing to do with China, particularly. There are some Chinese performers, but again they're speaking

in English, and they're speaking to an audience of foreigners, so it's really kind of irrelevant or removed from the local society.

Around 2011, I started to see another side of it, which was actually Chinese language clubs, with young Chinese guys and some girls as well doing standup in Chinese for Chinese audiences. And a lot of it is inspired by the West, of course, because through the internet and Youtube and everything, Jon Stewart, Colbert, they're really well known in China. For people who like comedy, Chris Rock and Louis CK are obviously really well known. The performers doing standup in China don't tend to know anything before Chris Rock. Maybe Jerry Seinfeld, but even there you're getting kind of old. Steve Martin, that generation. Richard Pryor, they've never heard of him. Eddie Murphy even, they've never heard of. But through the internet, people are watching more American comedy, especially loving any time that Jon Stewart would say stuff about China, right, would make fun of China. That would go viral in China, not through sort of state-approved channels, but on the internet people just love making fun of Kim Jong-Il and all this kind of stuff.

AC: Can you tell us a little bit about how that…because people in Canada are used to accessing whatever they want. Can you show us the difference a little bit in China for context about how people would access comedy online, in terms of state-run versus illegal channels or grey areas?

MR: So the internet has been an open forum, right, where there are lots of things you never had access to, and now you do through the internet, and that is actually less and

less true now. The early days of the internet, it was wild and open and uncontrollable, and it was a breath of fresh air. Now, the Chinese government is very, very effective at controlling content on the internet. They basically have their own Chinese internet, with this little bridge to the international internet. It's much more of a closed system now. Basically, all media in China is state-run. There is no private media. And increasingly, even though the internet is user-generated and sort of a free-for-all, it's much, much more heavily regulated now. So for instance, the ones that they can't regulate, like Facebook and Youtube, they just totally block. So you can't get on Facebook or Youtube in China, unless you have a VPN, and even then they're cracking down on VPN's now. There doesn't seem to be any technical limit to the amount they can control, which is kind of bizarre. Ten years ago, we thought, and we were told by all these techies, nobody can control the internet. Well, that's obviously not true. They do a very good job of controlling it.

But I have to say, it's not just about people are starved for content, and the Chinese government is controlling them. People get used to their own media environment as well. Even though it's relatively easy to access the international internet through VPN's, the fact of the matter is, 95% of Chinese internet users don't bother. Why would I want to go on Facebook when I have Weibo? Why use Google when I've got Baidu? And anyone who uses both, you just say, "Baidu's a piece of shit! I can't find anything on Baidu!" But for most people inside China, Baidu's fine. So there's actually very little incentive to access the international internet for most people. That's just a fact of life for 95% of people. And most people are quite happy with their domestic consumption. But for someone who's trying to get media exposure in China, it's all state-controlled, so

you'd better play it safe. There's not a lot of leeway there for any kind of political satire, and even on the internet, there's a very limited environment for it.

AC: How do Chinese officials and the government view standup comedy, then, which is kind of, in its nature, a little bit…

MR: Well, this goes back to why…I had to make a choice in 1989, after Tiananmen Square. What am I gonna do? I've been on TV for six months already, I'm known around the country. Everyone knows this Canadian guy named Dashan. Now we've had this Tiananmen Square, so what should I do? And I got more opportunities to appear on TV in China, and it's all state media. Should I be doing this or not? And I got a lot of criticism at the time, because I did keep doing television after Tiananmen Square. The criticism is always, "You're legitimizing the Communist Party of China, you're appearing on their shows, you're legitimizing them." My perspective was from a Chinese perspective. This is the government of China, like it or not. This is one of the most powerful political organizations in the world. They don't need a guy performing tongue twisters to legitimize them. That's not gonna go over one way or the other.

My goal at the time really was to present the idea that we've got all this stuff in the news, us versus them, we've got all this political tension, but that doesn't mean we can't keep doing people-to-people interactions. It doesn't mean I support the Chinese government, it means I love Chinese culture, I love doing Chinese comedy, I like dealing with Chinese audiences. It's people to people. It's a political statement in terms of saying, "Screw politics." Being non-political in itself is a political statement. So this is kind of a

roundabout way to answer your question, but one of my goals as Dashan has always been to say that the relationship between China and the world is not just what we read in the newspapers, it's people face to face, and we're not enemies. Don't let anyone try to convince us we're enemies, because we're just people, we're just people like your people, and we're all just people.

AC: Who's in the standup clubs in, say, Beijing? Is it essentially bookstores, or there's one comedy club now? How's it run?

MR: There's one full-time club in Shanghai called Kung Fu Comedy, which basically modeled after Standup New York, sort of a semicircular little stage, holds about a hundred people, really great club. It runs full-time, and it started out primarily as an English club. Again, this is standup getting a foot in the door in China, it's through English, and sort of a hip, urban, cosmopolitan Chinese-speaking-English club. And then it starts to spill over into Chinese. They just brought Eddie Izzard in, so they're getting bigger, and they went into a theater for about 500 people for that. So they're starting to bring in some names. Ruben Paul, that kind of level of comedian. They do Chinese tours.

So now a lot of these American comedians are going to Malaysia or India or Hong Kong or Japan or whatnot. Now Shanghai is one dot on the tour. And that's starting to spill over into Chinese, but fundamentally the club operates illegally. It's a grey area. They don't have all the permits. You can't get all the permits. But they have space in a club that does have permits, and then this is just kind of a grey area. It could be closed down at any time. The stuff outside of that club, which is the only full-time club in China,

the stuff outside of that is sort of once every three or four weeks. The book room in Beijing is the main venue. It's a booked room/café/bar. They have a space, it's not quite this big, you could fit more than a hundred people in here, right?

AC: Oh yeah.

MR: So it's a capacity of about 110, the bookroom in Beijing. Once every three or four weeks, they put on a couple of shows.

AC: So if you're in town, you'll do that?

MR: Yeah. Looking back to 2011, 2012, when I started to get into this, I met some of the young guys, and I'm 50 now, so most of the guys doing this are 15, 20 years younger than me. They're full of energy, and it's kind of a new perspective. But after two or three years doing this, you realize there are only about 20 guys doing it. So there are maybe half a dozen really good ones, ones that can do a full hour show too, and I'm at 50 percent of that. There's like one other guy that can put on an hour show in standup comedy in China. That's it. So it's still very early days. So that's what I've been doing lately. And again, my long-winded answer there is that I'm still trying to present this idea that governments come and go, government policies change, but international relations is political. People are people. I'm a performer and you're an audience, and we're up here doing our thing.

AC: Great. Maybe we'll take time out in case there's a question. *(to audience)* Yeah. Can you just pass (the mic)? We're gonna record this so that everyone, if they're listening later on, can hear (the questions).

Audience member: Hello!

MR: Hi.

Audience member: I just wanted to ask about women in comedy in China. Do they play much of a role? Have you seen a lot of them, or is it more just kind of sketch comedy, not much of them doing their own thing?

MR: So I'd address that like, standup and just comedy in general separately. Because standup is something that's sort of new and groundbreaking and edgier in China. Comedy in general in China tends to be much more ritualistic and kind of chauvinistic, actually. Broad, mainstream comedy in China that is still sort of stuck in this thing like "ugly women can't get married" kind of jokes. *(laughter)* It's sad, but it's one of the reasons I did all the mainstream stuff, the big state TV stuff and everything, and after a while I get tired of it, because it's all just sort of, "Ah, you're a foreigner, you can speak Chinese, hah hah hah!" Let's do something a little bit more…because Chinese society is much more diverse or layered now, there are actually these voices saying, "Come on, guys, this is misogynistic. The way you're treating women, the way you're treating disabled people…" It's sort of that vaudevillian shtick, where you used to be able to do that.

I once did a skit, this is on the number one show in China. This is like the Super Bowl halftime show that we're doing. And we're talking an audience of like 800 million or something, and the whole joke was about how we had been caught driving drunk, and how we were gonna get out of this. And someone said, and I didn't even think of it, because you're sort of in this Chinese mode, and this is like, "OK, we've been stopped by the cops, we're drunk, how are we gonna get out of this?" That was the whole premise of the skit. You couldn't possibly do that in the West, make fun of drunk driving. You could thirty years ago, but not now. But in China, mainstream humor is still very much stuck in that kind of paternalistic old thing.

When it comes to standup, the girls that are doing standup…I shouldn't use the term "girl," but they're all very young women. The standup performers in China tend to be 25 and younger. It's a relatively young demographic, especially when you're speaking from the perspective of a 50 year old. *(audience)* They tend to be pretty raw. One of the guys that had an impact on me is actually an Irish-American comedian, Des Bishop, who's spent two years in China. He was sort of my in to the standup comedy world in China. He's the guy that brought me into that. He spent two years in China, and now he's back between Dublin and New York. And he was saying to me that that's actually fairly common in standup. The raunchiest jokes are all told by the women.

AC: Well, I think that standup in general is much more raunchy than virtually any other kind of performance, period. And I think that there's almost like a scale. There's Lisa Lampanelli, and then there's this sort of sliding scale. So when you're saying "raw," is

that the same thing as here in North America, which is explicit, sexual, anatomically correct *(laughter),* is that what's happening in these Chinese clubs?

MR: When you're in a club of 50 or 100 people, it's one of the release valves, I guess. The Chinese government knows that this club exists, and they know these events are going on and everything, but as long as it's sort of limited in scope and it's not spilling over into society in general, they turn a blind eye, because that's one of the release valves. So yeah, the humor there, some of the stuff I've heard women do is very sexually explicit, big-dick jokes and all that. *(laughter)*

AC: It's comedy.

MR: But that's the spirit of standup that appeals to the Chinese, of course, is that freedom of expression, right? Chinese comedy tends to be very tradition-oriented. We're gonna redo the classics. So you're gonna do your own version of "Who's on First," and everybody knows "Who's on First." Well, here's my version of "Who's on First." It's very much sort of redoing the classics, and the people that are into standup, it's basically a rejection of that. "I'm not gonna do the classics, I'm gonna do my own thing, I'm gonna talk about my own life." That's very much the appeal of it. It's a breath of fresh air and freedom.

AC: And where do you think that's coming from? We talked earlier a little bit about the idea of standup comedy in America and Canada, to some degree, in the 50's changing

from objective, “take my wife, please” kind of humor to subjective, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, talking about politics or themselves. The difference between what’s obscene and what’s not obscene, and that kind of thing, being part of America. But you have some ideas, right, about where you think that’s coming from?

MR: So there are some parallels there. I hesitate to do this, because this is kind of a trope that’s overused, saying “China today is like America in the 50’s.” You’re always looking back in time. Sometimes I think we should do an article about how China looks like how America *will* look in 20 years. They’re actually ahead of us. But yeah, there are certain parallels, and you obviously know more about this, but in general, post-WWII, you get a stratification of Western society where it’s not everyone listening to the same program. You’ve got the rise of a counterculture. People who aren’t satisfied by mainstream TV anymore, who want something a little bit different. You’re seeing that in China. There are different levels of society, some much more cosmopolitan, and different niche markets. So it’s not like when I first appeared in China, and it was very much the Ed Sullivan days, and everyone watched *Ed Sullivan*. It’s much more stratified now.

So it’s still a niche market in China, but it’s gradually starting to spill over into the mainstream media. Poorly, though. Nobody’s really doing standup on mass media. It’s still very much a club thing. But that’s something that I’m trying to break through. My public image is squeaky-clean, so I made my name through state television. The stuff I did was non-political and non-controversial. It’s all just about, “Here I am, a foreigner learning about Chinese culture, and friendship and peace and happiness everywhere.” So for me, I’m promoting the idea that if you come out to see my live show, you’ll see the

real Dashan. You all know me from television, but let me tell you the backstory. And I've done a little bit of experimentation with that, and I've realized that actually it's not so much the state. We always focus on state censorship, but it's also audience expectations. Audiences don't want to hear me do really raw humor, because it's too big a shock for them.

So I'll give you a specific joke example. I was playing with my own image a little bit. This really typical comment I get from people is, "We grew up watching you on television." In the audience's mind, I have that kind of image now. "We remember seeing you 20 years ago when we were little kids, and I was at home watching a program. I grew up watching you." So I play on this age thing, and I say, "There are all these people born in the 1980's, 1990's and everything…" I don't know if the joke really works in English, but the idea is, I really like hanging out with millennials, because all of my girlfriends are millennials." So here's Dashan, Mr. Perfect, and all of a sudden he's a sugar daddy, so I'm taking the piss out of my image that way. Some audiences responded well to that, and others were like, "Oh God, what's Dashan doing? Here's this guy, this cultural figure that we really admire and look up to, and now he's a pimp."

So that's one example of where I took the core of a joke and I reworked it. I flipped it around. So I still use the same joke, but instead of saying that all of my girlfriends are born in the 1990's, I just say…it doesn't really work in English, but in Chinese you're saying, "I'm a daddy." *(laughter)* "My kids are born in the 1990's." And the association is sugar daddy, but you don't say that directly. I just say, "My kids were born in the 1990's—no, my *real* kids, not my girlfriends." Doesn't really work in English, but you set it up there so it's like, what does he mean? What does he mean he's a

"daddy"? No, I'm really a daddy, my kids were born in the 1990's. You take it up to the edge and you pull it back, instead of just throwing it out there and saying, "My girlfriends were all born in the 1990's," which is really just sort of slap-in-the-face kind of directness. So it doesn't really work in English, but that's the kind of thing I've been playing with.

AC: And you work that in clubs occasionally? You write it down?

MR: That I can do in theaters. I've tried some more raunchy stuff, because sometimes when you're in a bar, I actually went with my friend Des back to Ireland and performed in Irish bars for Chinese audiences in Dublin. And I loosened it up a little bit, and I took some video clips and put them up on the internet, and I realized, who would like that? If you're not actually in that Irish bar, the humor just is way over the top. The joke I told in Ireland that went really well with the audience is like, "I've been in Ireland for two weeks now, and I hear a lot of the f-word and the c-word here. Everyone's always f this and c that and everything, and I met this guy, and he said, 'Ah, you've been in Ireland now for two weeks. Have you learned any of the local language?' And I said, 'Of course I've picked up some of the local language, you fookin' cunt.'" *(laughter)* And that worked really well in a bar, but for somebody who's not in that bar, it's like, "Oh my God, what's Dashan doing now?"

So that's been kind of the exploration for me. But again, even if you're playing it safe, the kind of jokes we're doing onstage, you couldn't do on TV. So for me, that's the sweet spot there. No one's gonna be really offended by this stuff. I'm still keeping the

family-man kind of image onstage, but I'm doing something you can't see on television. That's the sweet spot for me. And hopefully I can take that and get it past all of the government censors and everything because we're performing in a theater. When you're talking about 500 people instead of millions on TV, it's a little bit more open. And you gradually are developing that idea that this is why you come out to see live comedy, is because I can't do this stuff on TV. Even though there's nothing wrong with it, it's just not gonna pass…

AC: When you mention government censorship, do you mean that when you do a show, the government will actually send somebody there to sit in the audience and watch what you're doing? Or is it more of a general (sense) of if you get on the radar, you might get critiqued?

MR: Have you ever noticed, and this is like a cultural observation, but even in Canada you'll noticed often that Chinese, especially with recent immigrants, Chinese Canadians often play fast and loose with the rules. They're not really a rule-based kind of culture. One of the reasons is in China, if you follow the rules, you couldn't get anything done. Everybody is playing in a gray area, because technically, you're not supposed to be doing this, but it's OK, so don't worry about it. And any time the authorities want to clamp down, they have a thousand and one different excuses, because you didn't get this or that permit. You couldn't possibly do anything if you (waited until you) had all the permits. Even with a live performance.

I've done this a few times. A live performance, if you want to actually go online and sell tickets and have a commercial performance promoted through the media, technically you're supposed to have the Ministry of Culture approve the entire script. So your entire 60-minute standup comedy script, you have to provide in writing, sometimes with a video accompaniment as well, six weeks in advance, and they will approve every joke. And then they always tell you, well, nobody's actually gonna come to the theater and follow you line for line. Just get it approved and play it safe. You can play with it a little bit in the theater, but within reason. Everything's within reason, right? But then the fact, of course, is that if you go off-script, there's another red flag if you want. They can shut you down. So technically you're supposed to have everything approved, so no improv.

But for me, that's one of the places where I can sort of play with the grey area in the middle, because I have this legit reputation from doing state television for so many years and having a safe and reliable family humor. When they hear, "It's Dashan," we'll go through the process and everything, "Give me a script and I'll put a stamp on it and you'll do your show, and as long as you don't cause us trouble…" If the audience is getting drunk and having fistfights, obviously they're gonna cut the show down. If you're making fun of the government directly…One of the standup guys I worked with, for my show I do 60 minutes, so I have 20 to 30 minutes where I have other guys come on before me, and not during one of my shows, but one of the guys I work with in the clubs started to make jokes about the Chinese flag. Like, why is the Chinese flag red, and why are there five stars? The five stars represent everything, and of course he had his own sort of independent interpretation, and you're not allowed to do that. So the Cultural Bureau shut

down not only that show, but didn't allow that theater to ever do standup again. And they said, "You're making fun of the Chinese flag. Why is the Chinese flag red? Well, it's red because it's stained by the blood of martyrs, and you're making fun of the blood of martyrs. No thank you."

So they take it very, very seriously. So no overt political criticism or satire of government policies or leaders, but you make fun of corrupt officials, because corrupt officials, the government doesn't like them either. The government is trying to clamp down on corruption, so you make fun of corrupt officials, but just make sure they're low-level corrupt officials. There are no corrupt mayors, only corrupt department heads. *(laughter)*

AC: OK. There's a lot of nuance. *(to audience)* Another question? Can we pass the…there we are.

Audience member: Hello.

MR: Hi.

Audience member: If you're comfortable answering this, what is your best and worst experience doing standup in China?

MR: I haven't had a total bomb. It's hard work to get people to buy tickets, though. This is something I've found, a perception. "We all know you from TV, everybody knows

Dashan, blah blah, it's only a 150-person theater, you'll sell it out." It's not actually that easy to get people to buy tickets. Everybody wants to see something for free. So I haven't had a real bomb or anything, where I've shown up and there's been no one there, but each time it's a real struggle to get people to pay money to come out and actually see a show. But when it works, it works really well.

I'm trying to combine worlds. I'm trying to do East-meets-West, but also this sort of counterculture and mainstream culture in China, trying to bridge that. I managed to get the Beijing municipal government, they have this huge festival called Meet in Beijing, and they get artists from all around the world, and it's like this official state-sponsored Beijing municipal-government festival, and they wanted to hire me because they had sort of a Canadian theme. They wanted to hire me as MC, and I used that to convince them, "I'll be MC, but I want to have my 60-minute show included as part of the festival." Because I want the approval. This is a state festival, and this is standup comedy for the first time on a state-approved stage, 900-seat theater. We're gonna do the Dashan show, and I'm gonna get the Beijing municipal government to put it on for me. That was me trying to straddle those two worlds.

And they did that, but they had no idea how to promote standup comedy, and they did their typical thing where they just kind of organized an audience, and most of them were retired people. I was telling them, "Get university students. If we're not selling the tickets, let's go to the university and bus in a couple hundred." So I ended up performing to a very senior kind of audience. A lot of white hair in the audience. And that was really brutal. That was pretty brutal. I've been in that position onstage, and you just have to relax and say, "OK, people are out to see me. They know Dashan from TV, and they're

just happy to come and see you live. It doesn't really matter what you say. So just relax and have some fun with it. That's what you have to tell yourself onstage as you're dying. If you fall apart then, that's even worse. Even if you're just performing for yourself, you've gotta do the show.

But other times, it's worked really well. The Kung Fu Comedy club in Shanghai, it's 100 people, and they're doing shows every weekend. He's been doing that place now three, four years, and I don't know why we hit the sweet spot, but one day when I went on, I came off after my set, I did about 40 minutes, and the owner said, "The whole room just sort of bounced when you came on. The whole thing shook. I've never felt the room shake like that." And I thought, "OK, maybe we're on to something here." It's not for a mass market yet in China. You've gotta hit the right audience. And that's the trick. How do you get people to come out, not just to see Dashan, this famous guy from TV, but they want to come and see the new Dashan doing standup. How do you find that audience? Because that's a niche audience.

AC: *(to audience)* Another… if you want to just pass it to Eric…

MR: Along the side here.

Audience member: So, are you currently living in Canada, but doing comedy in China?
MR: Yeah, but I've been based back here. I was at the University of Toronto from '84 to '88 doing my BA in Chinese Studies. I went over in 1988 and I started appearing on TV, and this whole thing blew up, and I basically stayed there until 1995. So that's seven

years full-time. But since 1995, I've been based here, and just gone back and forth all the time.

Audience member: So you would just fly there if a venue asked you to…

MR: The problem is, it's kind of far to go for one gig. But the performing tends to be seasonal. I go there for the peak season. I try to go for five, six weeks in and a couple weeks out, but if you're just going in for a gig and everything, it's expensive, and it's tough on your body, too, the jet lag and everything. It's a 13-hour flight. But I'm based in Canada. Especially once you have kids and everything, it's a much nicer environment for kids growing up here. My wife is Chinese, so as a mixed-race kid in Beijing, you stand out like a sore thumb. You're Dashan's kid, you're a celebrity dad and everything. Here in Richmond Hill, as a mixed-race kid, nobody notices. So it's a much better environment for the family here, and then I travel back and forth.

AC: *(to audience)* Erica, and then we'll give it to Steve.

MR: I can't hold it any longer.

AC: You gotta see if you've won?

MR: "Please play again." *(laughter)* That's OK. I've already won three coffees this year. I'm on a roll.

Audience member: So you said you've performed all over the mainland, but have you ever performed in Hong Kong, and do you find a big difference, because there's always that argument that Hong Kong is more westernized…

MR: Although Hong Kong is much more Chinese now than it was 20 or 30 years ago. When I first went to Hong Kong in the late '80's, early '90's, you'd go to Hong Kong and your eyes would just google in your head, because you hadn't seen so many commercial things. You were living basically in a third-world country in China back then, but you'd go to Hong Kong and you'd see these stores full of stuff, and it would just be mind-boggling. And it'd be easy to get around just speaking English, because the taxi drivers all spoke English, and you could speak English anywhere. And that's different now.

First of all, now, anything you can buy in Hong Kong, you can get in China. Sometimes Chinese cities, like Shanghai and Tianjin, look more modern than Hong Kong. And in Hong Kong, it's much easier to get around now in Mandarin than it is in English. So it's gradually being absorbed by the mainland. It's not as distinct as it used to be. So I have performed there, but you're not performing to the local Cantonese, you're performing to the recent Mandarin immigrants, which is what I do all around the world, actually. When I perform here in Toronto, I did the Toronto Center for the Performing Arts just two weeks ago, you're basically performing to people who have emigrated from China within the last 25 years, and that's the demographic that knows all about Dashan.

So the big breakthrough for me this year is that I'm into the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in April, and then I'll be doing Sydney and Auckland as well, so I'm doing these mainstream English comedy festivals, and these are all cities like Toronto and Vancouver with lots of Chinese people, but I'll be the only Chinese act in the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. But even there, I'm performing to the same demographic, right? These are people that have emigrated from China in the last 20 years. So that demographic you can find in Toronto, Vancouver, Melbourne, Sydney. You can find it in Berlin or Buenos Aires or Helsinki. They're everywhere. So that's one thing I'm hoping to do, is to play to that demographic around the world. Even in Hong Kong, there is that demographic, right? All the mainland Chinese that have moved to Hong Kong in the last twenty years.

AC: Great. *(to audience)* How about down here for Steven?

Audience member: Do you forecast an easing of barriers to entry to standup, like political, bureaucratic, cultural things like that? And follow-up: as standup becomes more prevalent in Chinese society, do you think the government might take steps to regulate or curtail its growth?

MR: They already are. It's still hard to get any approval for a standup show. Even for Kung Fu Comedy in Shanghai to get approval for Eddie Izzard was really difficult. Russell Peters did Shanghai last year, but that's tough. That's really tough. And again, they'll have to have a script approved in advance, and make sure they don't make any

jokes about Tibet and Taiwan, and no jokes about the Chinese government. So it is already very heavily regulated, and so we're all playing sort of at the edge of that. And is it gonna get any better? Probably not, actually. The way things are going now, probably not. I don't know if I ever actually finished that thought off, but this whole idea that since 1989 I've been trying to present the idea that we're not enemies, it's not China versus the world, we're not enemies, we're not natural enemies, we're all just people, I'm still trying to do that now.

In that sense, I think my career has been an abject failure, because we seem to be more like enemies now than we were 20 years ago. And with the rise of Trump in America, it's even more like that. It's America against the world, it's China against the world, everyone is retreating into their own little tribes. There's a huge rise of tribalism around the world, whether it's Brexit or Trump or China. And someone like me is really working against that. I don't belong to the Chinese tribe, but I'm just as Chinese as you are, why not? We're all just people. So that's sort of been my theme, is to blur those distinctions, and unfortunately I think the general tide of our times is against that. So I don't actually see things opening up gradually. At this point in time, anyway, it's getting worse.

One of the things I try to get across to the Chinese media when I talk about my show and standup in general is that it's not a Western art form, it's an individualistic kind of art form. It's you as an individual telling your story or your perspective on the world. And the Chinese are individuals just as much as anyone's an individual. In general, it's a more collectivist kind of culture. But each person is still an individual. They still have an individual point of view, and you work within your own culture, but you're still an

individual. So I think that's the appeal of it. Chinese standup will be different from American standup just because the cultural environment is different. Each individual is different.

AC: British standup is different from American standup, right? There are always differences. It depends on how large they'll be.

MR: In the big picture, this is something that will still develop, but in terms of current affairs now, with the political environment in China and with Trump in America, I think the immediate environment now is moving in the wrong direction. But I think the general trend of history is still towards that.

AC: OK. Great. *(to audience)* Can you pass back to Anne, please?

Audience member: I lived in Singapore for three years, and I wrote sitcoms in Singapore, which is at the bottom of southeast Asia. Anyway, just for those of you who don't know, it's an 85, 90 percent Chinese country. First of all, have you ever gone there and worked, or performed?

MR: Yeah. I don't have a lot on Youtube and everything, because again, it's blocked in China. It's kind of useless to put up anything on Youtube because nobody in China watches Youtube. But one of the things that is there, if you do search for Dashan on Youtube, is something that I did that's not standup, but it's a solo sort of traditional

comedy, and it's a play on words. I don't know how to describe it. I should put up a link on your site or something. Anyway, that was actually shot in Singapore. I was there in 2004 or 2006, I think. We did a show. But again, you're reaching a specific demographic in Singapore, which are the Singaporeans who are more closely tied to mainland China. I found Singapore really interesting, because like Toronto, it's a multicultural city, but unlike Toronto, it's really clearly defined. You're either Chinese or you're Malay or you're Indian, or you're Asian, which is a mix. You're one of four. Whereas here, you could be one of a thousand different things. Whereas with Singapore, you're these four categories. You're either Chinese, Malay, Indian, or you're like Euro-Asian.

Audience member: Yeah, I was just curious if you noticed what the main differences were in the Chinese culture there, because it's also a dictatorship of sorts. They number the voting ballots, and they let you know that. They censor a lot…

MR: We deal more on a cultural level than on a political level, and culturally there, I think the appeal of my performance in Singapore, again, and it's something that's similar in China but even more pronounced in Singapore, is that there's this pride in traditional Chinese culture and who we are as Chinese people, and our history and language and everything. There's that natural pride, but there's also this anxiety about losing traditional culture. We're all speaking English. Nobody does calligraphy anymore. We don't know poetry anymore. We're losing this traditional culture, and here's this white guy who speaks beautiful Chinese, and he talks about Chinese poetry and Chinese culture and everything. He's coming from the other direction. And that's something about my public

image that I think Chinese audiences have always found really reassuring. “We’re learning English, we’re eating at McDonald’s, Starbucks and everything, we’re losing our traditional culture, but here’s this guy that actually comes from Canada, and he shows us, maybe globalization is not just Westernization. Maybe there’s hope for the future of Chinese culture.” When I went to Singapore, it was actually to participate in a Chinese language education festival they have. They were sort of promoting the idea, “We should learn Chinese, we need to speak Chinese, because we are sons and daughters of the dragon. We need to learn our historical mother tongue and everything, and here’s this white guy that’s gonna teach us.” *(laughs)*

Audience member: I wrote sitcoms in Singapore, and I had the same experience.

MR: It’s a great city.

AC: *(to audience)* Yeah, there’s a couple questions right here.

Audience member: Hi. So…

MR: In Chinese or English?

Audience member: You want to translate?

MR: We met just before the show…

Audience member: In China, when I was about 24 or 25 years old, and I saw you for the first time on television, and I did not believe you were Canadian. I thought you pretended to be a Canadian so that we'd love you. *(laughter)* During that time, we hated Americans. *(laughter)* But we always loved people from Canada. And then later on, I saw him really frequently on television, and I thought he was so tall, so handsome, and today I see he looks better than he does on television. *(laughter)* Thank you for being here. It's really nice to know you as a real person. So my question is, you said learning Chinese can change your life. What is the most significant change in your life because you learned Chinese?

MR: So it is pretty fascinating. Learning any foreign language or any kind of foreign experience you have, one of the main advantages is actually gaining a perspective on your own culture, your own language, your own society, because if you grow up in a homogenous kind of environment, you read about the world, but you only see it from your own perspective. If you actually travel abroad, or live abroad, you start to hear a different perspective on your own country. I think that's one of the main advantages. I think also that Chinese and Westerners are both in love with this idea of the mysterious Orient, 5000 years of history, and this Confucius-said-this and Confucius-said-that and all this traditional philosophy, and it's so dark and deep and mysterious and everything. We hold onto that idea because it's so attractive, and Chinese people love the idea that "We're deep and dark and mysterious people, and foreigners will never understand us because we're fundamentally different." And Westerners love that idea. "Oh, the Orient!

The mysterious Orient! Full of surprise and mystery!" And really, my experience is just to find commonality.

So for instance, I read traditional Chinese poetry or traditional Chinese philosophy, and it's fundamentally all about the human experience. It's just expressed through a different language. And if that piece of poetry or whatever touches you, that's because there's something human in it. So that's something I try to portray in my show. People say, "Oh, he's so Chinese, he's so Chinese." Well, in fact, one of the reasons they think I'm so Chinese is that they have this sort of bizarre picture of what foreigners are like. They have this cartoon of foreigners. If you grew up in a more racist kind of past, where we had cowboys and Indians, and then you actually meet somebody from the First Nations, they're totally different from what you thought when you played cowboys and Indians. "Oh, you're not like an Indian because you don't go whoop whoop whoop!" If you grow up in that environment, you have this really bizarre picture of what the outside world is, and then when you actually meet someone from there, you just think, "Oh, you're kind of normal!"

And I think that's the same thing. I think one of the reasons Chinese audiences think I'm so Chinese is, first of all, I got past the language barrier, but apart from that, I'm just myself onstage. I don't play a foreigner. And especially in the live show, so like you said, "It's nice to see you as a real person." That's exactly what I try to do through my shows. You all know me from television, which is polished and packaged and everything. We're doing a skit, it's all rehearsed. And I'm playing a certain role. It's a certain version of me, right? It's the television version of Jerry Seinfeld, it's not Jerry Seinfeld the person. So Dashan is like that, but if you come out to the live show, I get up

and I tell you the backstory where I'm not so perfect after all. Here's the show you saw on TV. Here's what was happening backstage. And I think that's part of the attraction, where people say, "We're kind of sick and tired of the perfect Dashan. We'd like to see the flawed Dashan."

AC: And some of that backstage stuff is typical backstage antics, in terms of nerves and that kind of thing?

MR: No. It's mistakes I made along the way. One of the things I play on, and again this is something you could never do on TV, but it's not necessarily all that sensitive, is the idea that there seems to be this natural assumption that any foreigner who speaks fluent Chinese must be a spy. (*laughter*) So I play with that. As a comedian, I'm learning tongue twisters. What am I spying on here? I'm learning the secret tongue twisters of China or something. So I play with that. I play with that, and I tell a story about how I've always been really careful to stay out of politics and everything because I'm like a spy to start with, so it's best to keep an arm's distance from that.

But then I'm put in this situation, and this is based on a true story where my mentor Jiang Kun, as a gift, gave me a box of this really nice rice. It's organic, really high-quality rice. He gave it to me as kind of a holiday gift. But on the packaging, it said that it was military issue. It was like it was for the air force. This is really good stuff. But if it's for the air force, this is actually military supplies. How could I, as a foreigner, I've got military supplies in my house. If they came…*(laughter)* If anyone found this rice in my house, how would I explain this? So it's a really innocent story, but you make this

into this thing. So in the end, I give it to my Japanese neighbor, and then I make an anonymous call. *(laughter)* It's even worse (for him to have it). A Canadian spy is one thing, but a Japanese spy, that's even worse. *(laughter)* That's the end of the story.

So that's a five-minute bit of my skit, is how my mentor was like a father to me, and he's so good to me, and he gave me this thing, and I'm really careful not to get him into trouble, because if people thought I was a spy, that would reflect poorly on him, and then he puts me in this situation where now I've gotta get rid of this thing. How am I gonna do this? And I finally hand it off to the Japanese neighbor. That's like a five-minute bit I do. And again, you could do that in a theater, and the political censors could see it and say, "Oh, he's kind of on the edge there, but there's nothing wrong with it, except for we'd never put that on television."

AC: *(to audience)* Andy, did you have a question?

Audience member: Sure, thank you. You spoke to this a little bit in this last couple of questions, but I find it really fascinating what you're talking about, this idea of globalization, and obviously in your career is a great representation of this. And I'm thinking of a musical example. The Beatles coming to America and largely bringing American music to America. I wondered, you've expressed this in very positive terms, your interest in poetry, philosophy and the language, but I wondered, have there ever been whiffs of the other side, of you as cultural appropriator, for example. Have claims like those ever surfaced?

MR: No, that's funny. For instance, this controversy about Matt Damon and the Wall. Here's this mega-Chinese movie, and the lead character is a white guy. That controversy primarily is a controversy within liberal America, worried about this kind of thing. Chinese audiences didn't seem to care about it at all. It's Matt Damon! We got an A-list star doing our movie, yeah! *(laughter)* So that's much more sort of liberal or progressive America being sensitive about this. I've never received any kind of…the Chinese are just so happy to see their culture and their language and everything spreading around the world. They just think it's great. So I try to couch it in those terms.

One of the reasons I feel that I can do this, my own show now, is that I've paid my dues. I spent 20, 25, 30 years learning the language, learning the culture, starting from just mimicking to actually becoming an established xiangsheng performer, considered part of the official xiangsheng hierarchy. I'm an established member of that hierarchy. I'm the 9th generation xiangsheng performer, officially recognized. Based on that, that I've paid my dues, I can now bring a little of my own stuff in and say, "Here, I'm gonna bring in a little bit of Lenny Bruce." So that's how I try to present it to people, that I'm not here doing Canadian comedy, I'm not doing American comedy. This is some of the comedy from my bones, combined with the comedy of all these sort of blood transfusions I've had in China. I'm trying to find a middle ground. That works much better in Chinese. I say, "This is the (utters phrase in Chinese)." It makes sense in Chinese, doesn't it? *(utters another Chinese phrase)* The culture in my bones, which is Western culture, combined with the culture in my veins, which is Chinese culture, it's my bones and my veins together, and we're doing something together, and you realize standup isn't night and day. Solo comedy is solo comedy. It very much depends on the individual. And

everyone is an individual. Well, here I am as an individual, Dashan, I'm a little bit of East, I'm a little bit of West, and that's what my comedy is all about.

AC: I've often asked comedians, who is that person you take a joke to first? Your sounding board. Do you have one? Is it a friend?

MR: Well, my wife hates my work. *(laughter)* It's a problem. It's one of the reasons I fell in love with her. As a celebrity, you're naturally cautious about why somebody likes you so much. Do they like that thing they see on TV? One of the things that really attracted me to my wife in the first place is that she hated the stuff I was doing. She said, "Oh, you're that goof on TV, aren't you?" OK, that's the one. I use the smaller clubs. I get up, and I don't like performing to a small group of peers. A small group of peers will get together at the Kung Fu Club, and we'll get up in front of an audience, and you watch from the back, and I'll have my reliable stuff that I'm gonna do, but I'll throw little things in. And then we'll talk afterwards about whether or not it worked, but I don't like performing directly to peers. It has to be performing to an audience and having peers watch.

AC: OK. *(to audience)* If we can pass that over there.

Audience member: I wanted to ask: when you're in public, do you get noticed a lot? Do you have to hide your identity?

MR: This is one thing that's interesting about public image, is that I'm not a big screen…first of all, I think television celebrities are different from film celebrities. One of the things I've heard about that that makes a lot of sense is that you get to know television celebrities in the comfort of your own home on a small screen. It's a very intimate kind of relationship you have with a television celebrity, as opposed to watching a big blockbuster film in this theater. That's a whole different level of celebrity. So the image of Dashan is very much a guy who's from the other side of the planet, but he's really just like the next-door neighbor. He's Norm on *Cheers*. So there's recognition, and sort of friendliness and everything, but it's like a neighbor, like your famous neighbor. "Oh, there's Dashan!" And maybe a picture, maybe an autograph, but (it's) not screaming fans and paparazzi kind of celebrity. Through the power of state television, and especially the Ed Sullivan days, and I'm OK now with audiences up to sort of university age, but audiences that were born after 2000, the really young audiences, they don't know me. But anybody through the 1990's, basically anywhere…because literally, when you're on Chinese state television, you're dealing with audiences of 500 to 800 million people that are watching. It's almost everybody.

AC: Wow. *(to audience* Another question? Yep, right there.

Audience member: Hey. So, you may have kind of answered it already a little bit, but have you ever been in any trouble from the government in China for something you've done in one of your sets? Has anything ever gotten a little…

MR: Even if there is, you almost never know yourself. It's just that they don't invite you back, that kind of thing. And you start to wonder, did I do something wrong last time? Why have I not been invited this time?

Audience member: Has that happened to you?

MR: Well, you never know, right? *(laughter)* There are always a lot more people than are not inviting than there are people inviting you. There's an awful lot of self-censorship before that. Nobody really knows what the limit is. It's not black and white. It's vague on purpose. It's vague on purpose to keep everyone on their toes. And really, there's no one in charge. It's a system. It's kind of an organic system, and what you could do yesterday, maybe in this venue, you can't do.

I did get a show shut down once in Suzhuo a couple of years ago. The first time I went there with my solo show, I did an interview on television saying, "I'm going to this club, The Camel." It was a typical kind of expat club in Suzhuo that had English standup on a regular basis, like every couple of weeks they'd have an English standup. This was the first time they were like, "Let's bring Dashan in and see if they can do it in Chinese." I went there and did a media interview, and two hours before the gig, we were told that authorities—you never quite know who—but authorities have showed up, and they were casing the joint, and they wanted to see the permits, and since we didn't have permits, they were gonna shut us down. I said, "Well, at least I've gotta go up onstage and thank people for coming and saying, 'I'm sorry, we can't do a show, but let's all hang out and have a drink,'" and they said I can't do that either. Because as soon as you get onstage

and put a microphone in your hand, that will be proof that you're doing an illegal performance, and then you're in real trouble.

So the show just disappeared. Two hours before the show, it just disappeared. And the organizer called up, because people had bought tickets online, they had registration, they left a phone number and e-mail or something, the promoter just called everyone up and said, "I'm sorry, the show's been cancelled." And everyone understands, "Oh, it's been cancelled. Yet another show has been cancelled." But why was it cancelled? Is it a political thing, or is it really just turf? Is it because we were performing in this city, and we didn't go through the channels like we were supposed to, and we infringed on someone else's profit? Maybe it's not even political. Maybe it's just business. Kung Fu Comedy has had a couple of shows shut down like that, where you're never quite sure, is it really the political authorities that are clamping down, or is it because you're performing in this bar, and that bar didn't like it, and so he used his friend there to sort of…it's just a turf thing. You're never quite sure. And that's the thing: nobody ever comes out and says specifically to you, "Here's what you did wrong, and here are the consequences."

AC: *(to audience)* Is there one more question down here? Yep.

Audience member: Did you ever do comedy in university?

MR: No, not here, no. I've talked with Andrew about this. In theory, it would be nice to be totally bilingual and have an English career and a Chinese career side by side. And

that's what Joe Wong does, I mentioned him earlier, the Chinese-American comedian who's now gone back to China. He does it. For me, the stuff I do in China is so highly customized for a Chinese audience. It's not just sort of international humor performed in Chinese. It's based on the fact that you know me from television, you know my back story. It's all playing on the fact that I'm a Westerner engaged in Chinese culture and everything. Most of the stuff wouldn't work in English at all. So for me to do an English career would really be parallel and unrelated, and it's hard enough just doing the one career without trying to do two careers at once.

AC: *(to audience)* Uh, yeah, Andrew.

Audience member: Do you try to localize your comedy with different expat audiences? Is there a difference between a Chinese audience in Melbourne versus a Chinese audience in Mississauga?

MR: Only to a certain extent. They're not just Chinese-speaking, they're recent immigrants from China. That's why, whether I'm performing in Toronto or Melbourne, it's really the same Chinese demographic. These are not people born and raised in Melbourne. Localization goes a long way in comedy, especially in terms of breaking the ice at the beginning of a performance. But you almost never think of that in advance, because any idea you have in advance is probably so stereotypical, they've heard it so many times before anyway. You really need that sort of 24, 48 hours before a show, when something actually does happen to you, or you actually see something that gives

you a bit of an idea that you can use locally. We use that traveling around China as well. You try and find a little bit of local dialect, something like that. So yeah, that is always a big hit, of course.

AC: Do you notice much of a difference between an audience, say, in mainland China, and the expat audiences?

MR: The standup is a niche in China. The audiences we're dealing with at places like the Kung Fu Comedy Club, or in Beijing at the Bookworm, a lot of them are sort of globalized Chinese anyway. So often, even at the club in Shanghai, I get a lot of people that have come back from Australia or Canada. They're back home in Shanghai, and they want to see a little bit of how East and West come together. A lot of the people that are pushing comedy, like one of the first guys to do standup comedy in Shanghai is a graduate from Carlton University that just got into it in Ottawa and just loved it, went back to Shanghai and just thought, "I could do this in Shanghai." The guy that did it in Hong Kong 25 years ago, Dayo Wong, he's a huge star in Hong Kong, but he only performs in Cantonese. But this is a massive megastar in Hong Kong. He's a graduate of the University of Alberta. He learned about standup in Calgary, went back to Hong Kong in the 1990's, and basically developed Cantonese standup based on what he'd learned in Canada. And we're seeing that sort of pattern repeat in the mainland.

Dayo Wong. Nobody outside of Hong Kong's ever heard of him, but he's like an A-list celebrity there. He'll do ten days in a row at a 10,000-seat theater, like a stadium. He only performs once, he performs for ten days a year, November, 10 days at this

stadium, 10,000 seats, and he just does ten days straight, and then he disappears for a year. And he comes back next year with another 90 minutes of new material. And he's been doing this for 25 years. Amazing. Where does he rehearse? Because he just gets up in front of 10,000 people. He doesn't do any small gigs.

AC: He may have writers?

MR: No, his stuff is very personalized too. He's just a real personality. That's the thing about solo comedy in general, is that it really relies on the personality of the person. It's a highly individualized kind of thing.

AC: Did you learn anything about playing arenas, arena-sized crowds? You did some of that, I'm guessing. Is it fun to play a crowd at 10,000 versus 100?

MR: It's a blast in some ways, but you can't do very much, because the larger the venue, the more you have to slow things down and accentuate. So there's no subtlety to the humor anymore. You start to project more and more and more. In Steve Martin's autobiography *Born Standing Up,* he talks about that, where at the end he was performing to 40,000, 50,000 people, and he suddenly realized he's not performing anymore, he's just the MC of a big party. Everyone's here just to have a big party, and he's the MC, and they just want him to do the Wild and Crazy Guy over and over and over. I think, for what I'm doing now, a hundred people is still kind of small. The sweet spot is really 300 to 800. Like a 500 seat theater is perfect for this kind of performing. Once you get over

800, 1000, 1500, you're starting to push the limit. Once you get to 2000, you're just projecting so much. Anything over 2 or 3000, you're not in a theater anymore, you're in a stadium, and you can't really do standup anymore, I think. But you know, it's actually much more difficult. This would be tough here. It's much easier to perform if you've at least got 200, 300 people, and then the audience, you're still close, it's still close and intimate, but the audience becomes a little bit more anonymous then. If you're talking with ten people, that's pretty stressful.

AC: I've got one more question, and then there may be one last one (from the audience). There aren't people doing material about the government (in China), but we were talking earlier about how people love watching Jon Stewart or Stephen Colbert. Is there an appetite or leeway for material that's political about other politics? In other words, about, say, Donald Trump, or about Justin Trudeau's abs or something? I don't know if they know about those…*(laughter)*

MR: That's one of the most overused jokes in China. The performers say something about how, in America, we can make jokes about our president, and the Chinese guy says, "Well, it's no different here. We can make jokes about your president too." *(laughter)* That joke has been so overused in China. No, overt political humor is still limited, but I think that's OK. There's a huge area to develop there, just in terms of, instead of doing traditional comedy, we're doing comedy about daily life. Something happened taking a bus. Which you'll find with audiences in China, and probably here too, not everybody is into political humor. A lot of people, that's just not their thing. Look at

some of the biggest standup stars of all time, from Steve Martin, or even Bill Cosby, to Jerry Seinfeld, they've basically done no political humor. It's all observational, daily-life humor. There's a huge area there to explore. So that's sort of what I'm trying to do.

One of the things that is taking off in China is actually the roast format. It's more like complaining, really. It's like a big complaining party. You get a celebrity, and you have eight guests, and the eight guests are sort of the performers that are active in clubs like Kung Fu Comedy but have no name recognition. A lot of them are more writers than performers. Kung Fu Comedy is kind of a place they go to practice their stuff. In Shanghai there's a show that has been going for about a year now that's really popular where they bring on a celebrity, and they basically just dump on him for 40 minutes, and then his revenge. So that sort of roast format is something that's taking off. They had one episode that was shut down because the guest was a female, and they thought there were too many sex-related jokes, too many masturbation jokes, and that was a little bit too much for television. The guy would get up, and he'd say, "I love your stuff, and your pictures and everything," and then the more he talked, the more you realize he's jerking off to her pictures. *(laughter)* So that kind of humor. That was a bit too much for television.

AC: *(to audience)* One more question? No, we're good? Great. Well, this has sped by. It's been an hour and a half, and it sped by. Would you suggest any Chinese writing in English that we oughta look for, for instance? Anything like that? It's a tough one…

MR: The one guy that really straddled both worlds, I've mentioned already, is Joe Wong. He and I are really the only two active in China now that can put on a solo show that would really be standup. First of all, there's not a lot of solo comedy in China. Chinese humor tends to be more sketch comedy or dialogue. Solo comedy has always been more of a niche form in China, and solo comedy is not necessarily standup. So people that are doing sort of an international-style standup that can really do an hour, who can bring in an audience just to see them at a solo show, that would be either me or Joe Wong right now. So Joe Wong is worth checking out. He was on *Ellen* and *Letterman* a couple of times, so he's a pretty well-established second-tier comedian in America, and now he's one of the guys leading the charge back in China.

AC: Great. Well, thank you so much. We have a little something for you, Mark. *(applause)* The traditional Humber gift.

MR: Thank you, thank you very much.

AC: Any students, if you want to remain here, we have someone from Sketchfest coming to talk to you about special deals for Humber students, but I just wanted to thank you again. This is fantastic.

MR: One shoutout here, one up and coming comedian in the back row, Eddie Huang! *(applause)* Alan Huang, sorry! I kept coming him Eddie! Alan Huang!

AC: A Humber alumni who opened for Dashan two weeks ago.

MR: At the Toronto Center for the Arts, he was one of my opening acts. In terms of opening acts, I also work with dancers and singers too, because it's so hard to find good comedy, but Alan did a great job. *(applause)* You've got the video, right? You can put it up sometime, show people. Put subtitles on it. I keep calling him Eddie Huang, sorry about that.

AC: He changed his name!

MR: What's that show called...

AC: *Fresh Off the Boat.*

MR: Right. No, Alan Huang. Much better than Eddie Huang.

AC: Great. Thanks very much, guys. Thank you again.

END