



# Make Me Laugh

Meet the stars of Shanghai's comedy scene

By Dominic Ngai, Laura Uhler, Laura Potten and Nicole Stanton

**W**e've always found Shanghai to be an endlessly funny place: from the *laowai* tripping over their tongues trying to learn Mandarin to 80-year-old women in Metallica T-shirts, there are plenty of characters that have us giggling to ourselves. But while most of us tend to keep it in for our own amusement, there are a now a gaggle of new comedy groups that have broken onto the scene to impose their comedic will on the city, and Shanghai's happily laughing along. Read on to discover the funniest groups currently making their way around town.

## The People's Republic of Comedy

"Vasectomy!" might be one of the random words you blurt out while attending one of the People's Republic of Comedy's improv shows. Improv, in which original live performances are created based on suggestions from the audience, is a comedy staple in the West, but has only recently gained ground in Shanghai. The PRC itself is a relatively new group. Christopher Brantley, one of the PRC's co-founders and a former member of Zmack!, PRC's predecessor, says that part of the decision to rejig their group is that they "wanted to move away from the workshop atmosphere and into a professional company." "It's improv's time to shine," adds member Joe Schaefer. "The scene now is ripe. People in Shanghai are starved for live entertainment."

Improv relies on two components: the synergy of the group and the energy of the audience. According to Schaefer, the difference between a good audience and a great one is "the difference between someone yelling out 'scooter' and 'a jet powered Segway.'" The crazier the suggestion the better. "There was a scene we did when we were in an airport and Audrey was giving birth, Liz was crowd surfing, and Andy was exorcizing a demon, or maybe he was being born? I mean, it started off as a pretty scattered scene and the audience was just losing their sh\*t. It was so crazy and funny and spectacular."

Besides riffing off audience suggestions, the group uses structured games. Some involve singing, some are long form and others are guessing games: "You'll be designated an 'electric tampon,' for example, but you won't know it," Brantley says. "So we'll set up a panel to give you hints like, 'My name is Bill from moon cycle monthly,' 'People are worried about electrocuting themselves,' and so on." The harder the time the person has figuring it out, the more outrageous the scene becomes.

Improv is all about the group, so maintaining a certain dynamic and momentum throughout a performance is essential. How does the six-member PRC cultivate camaraderie? Brantley recalls that their old leader "used to force us to dance with a 'dance club' vibe" before every show to get loose. You may not see them club dancing again anytime soon, but you can still catch them starting on March 28 at their bi-weekly Wednesday night shows at Malone's (¥50).

Find it: [www.improvshanghai.com](http://www.improvshanghai.com)

Go wild with the People's Republic of Comedy



**Kung Fu Komediy**  
fights crime  
and bad jokes



**Yuzhoujiletuan's**  
just making it up

## Kung Fu Komediy

Stand-up comedians have some major cojones. You have to deal with the pressures of entertaining an audience of finicky expats, trying to remain calm (hooray for beer!), remembering to be funny ... fail to master any part of that and you could bomb. For most, this would be terrifying, but in Shanghai some comics are doing it and doing it well. Kung Fu Komediy is a locally based stand-up comedy collective developed by Melbourne native Andy Curtain. It started on a whim when Curtain decided to branch out from Zmack! and the PRC and develop a stand-up troupe in Shanghai. After celebrating their one-year anniversary last month to a packed house, it looks as if their humor has found a home in Shanghai.

Unlike improv, stand-up comedy is a much more personal performance. These comedians draw on the expat experience—it's about "being a foreigner in China and having those 'China moments' when you just have no idea what's going on," says Curtain. "It's moments like that that make for the best jokes."

If you have ever wanted to try your hand at stand-up, head over to Beedees for their regular open mic nights, when newbies get their first shot and the KFK crew tries out some new material. A bit of wisdom from Curtain: "Before going on stage, have something to drink. Don't bomb; it's not very nice. And heckling means they're paying attention at least." In addition to the open mic nights, you can catch them regu-

larly at Malone's (¥50) and at their next show at Massé on March 24. Check online or get at them on Weibo and Twitter @kungfukomediy for a schedule of all their upcoming performances.

Find it: [www.kungfukomediy.com](http://www.kungfukomediy.com)

## Yuzhoujiletuan 宇宙即乐团

If you're looking for some improv in Chinese, check out Yuzhoujiletuan (宇宙即乐团), Shanghai's first Chinese improv theater group. Founding members David Warner and Christopher Brantley (also of People's Republic of Comedy and Zmack!) started the group after they met audience mem-

bers at past shows who suggested that they should start a Chinese improv group so that they could bring their Chinese girlfriends along. So auditions were held, and Yuzhoujiletuan was born, performing their first show in March 2011. Current cast members also include Joe, Jacky, Xiao Ai, and Ying (all native Chinese speakers). Roughly translated, the group's Chinese pun-filled name is "The Universe."

"Our audience is about 95 percent Chinese and consists of college students, people in their 20s and 30s, and several foreigners with their dates (pick-up alert!). Though the show

is in Chinese, it is simple enough for Chris and I to understand," Warner tells us. A typical 90-minute show is split into five games where they build and perform skits, songs and rhymes on the spot based on audience suggestions. One of the group's favorite games is called "World's Worst," which plays off one-liner gags offered by the audience.

"Chinese improv has huge growth potential in and around Shanghai. The increasing influence of social media is fueling an exciting movement of indie theater salons," the group explained. If you speak Chinese fluently and love performing, Yuzhoujiletuan welcomes you to join them. "No acting experience is required," says David, "but just remember, this is not a language exchange club!"

The group performs regularly at L0gO, with their next show coming up on March 24 (¥50); show up or contact them through their website if you're interested in auditioning.

Find it: [www.yuzhoujiletuan.com](http://www.yuzhoujiletuan.com)

## Fengkuang Laowai 疯狂老外

As creators of concocted comedy, the duo of Mark Powers and Dave Spivey make entertainment for Chinese and foreigners alike. In recent

"Heckling means they're paying attention at least"

## One Funny Dudette

We speak candidly about Carrefour and squat toilets with one of **Shanghai's most hilarious expats**, Audrey Murray

**What makes you the funniest person in Shanghai?** People normally tell me that I'm the least funny person in Shanghai. This is normally after I've finished one of my killer knock-knock jokes.

**Does that make it easier or harder to pick up guys?** I'm not sure. I only pick up guys at Carrefour. **Why?** They say distance makes the heart grow fonder. And let me tell you, there is distance between the first and last person in line at the checkout. **What about China makes you laugh most?** The fact that no one pronounces "MINT" "M-one-nt." **If Shanghai was a drink, it would be ...**

A virgin sex on the beach, because it seems so safe, and somehow you still end up at Shiva Lounge at 6am on a Tuesday. **Tell us a dirty joke to send us off.** Knock, knock. Who's there? Squat toilets.

Catch Audrey Murray at her performances with Kung Fu Komediy and People's Republic of Comedy

It seems so safe, and you still end up at Shiva Lounge



Think you're funnier than Audrey? Got a dirty joke you can't wait to share with the rest of Shanghai? Get online and let us know at [www.cityweekend.com.cn/shlaugh](http://www.cityweekend.com.cn/shlaugh)



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### 7 convenient locations in Shanghai

#### Puxi

- Specialty and Inpatient Center, Xintandi
- Hong Qiao Medical Center, Changning
- Minsheng City Medical Center, Gubei

- Glenside Medical and Surgical Center, People's Square
- Shanghai Centre Medical and Dental Centers, Putunian

#### Pudong

- Jin Qiao Medical and Dental Center, Jin Qiao

- Shanghai Jin Mao Tower Medical Center, Lujiazui



Fengkuang Laowai, the crazy foreigners



Watch out for the Cheesecake Mafia



ChopSchticks brings Chicago Improv to Shanghai

years, Fengkuang Laowai (translated as "Crazy Foreigners") have created their own unique style which, if canned, would definitely include the label, "Warning: not to be taken at face value!"

Their material is a mélange of off-the-wall scenarios, absurd props and hilarious memorable personae, like "Max the God," a toilet-dweller who flips from being a charming mortal to a wrath-fuelled god after ingesting a sip of alcohol. In a recent episode, the existence of a character named "Old Tea Bag" has his traditional tea shop come under threat when Madame King-pin and her Cheesecake Mafia prepare to bulldoze the area.

The FKLW duo rushes in at the last minute to save the day.

Their brand of comedy is a bit raw, and FKLW openly embrace their limitations: "Some people just don't understand us. You know when you see a crappy TV show and you end up feeling angry? Sometimes I think we're like that." But given that they're already in the second season of a homegrown Chinese sitcom online, it's not likely that too many have felt that way.

As well as fighting crime, last year these lads also raised a more than respectable ¥20,000 during a Charity Auction and Comedy Night. Their latest project, the Fengkuang Laowai Phrasebook iPhone app, aims to undo the hard work of English teachers and equip the Chinese with American and British slang. So don't be shocked if your Chinese colleagues start to pop out phrases like, "My boss keeps touching my ass! Does your job suck too?" Spivey and Powers are currently working on a stand-up show as well, and if you think that "Big Bird Zogor" character you've been working on in secret might work well with FKLW, get in touch—they're happy to play with others.

Find it: [www.fengkuanglaowai.com](http://www.fengkuanglaowai.com)

## The Pros

If you'd prefer to leave it to the pros, check out the Punchline

Comedy Club and ChopSchticks. Both started in Hong Kong in the '90s with local and amateur groups before switching to becoming professional comedian recruiters. "Ever since I was a kid I've loved comedy," says John Moorhead, founder of Punchline Comedy Club. "I quit my job and made comedy my life."

Chopschticks creator Richard Robinson describes comedy as a "labor of love." "I enjoy the vibe of live entertainment and wanted to bring more American-style comedy to China," explains Robinson. "After watching comedy for 35 years, I know what works with the expats—not too cerebral, but not low brow. I want comedians that are dynamic, cosmopolitan, clever, international, and flexible. Basically, 'non-assholey.' In Shanghai, ev-

eryone works, and by Friday, people want a release," he says. To that end, ChopSchticks had the Chicago Improv All-stars over last November and has another show planned for May.

Punchline has brought in its own share of stars as well, including a host of funnymen (and women) and the English "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" cast in the five shows last year. "We pick the right comedians," says Moorhead. "Bill Bailey [who we previously brought over] is my favorite comedian and is now a massive star. Michael McIntyre has also become huge in the UK."

Usually the comedians are the stars, but the audience can be part of the humor as well. "One funny incident," reminisces Moorhead, "was when ventriloquist Paul Zerdins' puppet, Sam, was being rude to a very big man. At the end of the show the man stopped Paul and said, 'You are all right, but tell your puppet he is out of order!'"

The comedians have also gotten some great material out of their trips over, Robinson tell us. "Russell Peters did about five minutes in his last comedy special, *Red, White and Brown*, about stuff that happened on his Beijing tour. And Jake Johannsen did a full set on Letterman about his shows in Hong Kong with us."

Punchline is about to up their game to put on a show each month, starting with all-Irish St. Patrick's day show featuring Ardal O'Hanlon, Karl Spain, and Andrew Stanley at The Hacienda March 22-24 (¥290).

Details: Punchline, [www.punchlinecomedy.com](http://www.punchlinecomedy.com); Chopschticks, [www.chopschticks.com/city-shanghai](http://www.chopschticks.com/city-shanghai)

"My boss keeps touching my ass! Does your job suck too?"



Zhou Libo has Shanghai in stitches

## Humor Me

What makes **Shanghairen laugh?**

China has a long history of comedic performances. The most well-known brand of Chinese comedy is *xiangsheng* (相声), or comic crosstalk, which features solos, duos, or groups performing planned monologues or dialogues filled with punny punchlines and satire on stage. It originated from north China in the Ming Dynasty and gained international popularity courtesy of Mark "Dashan" Roswell (Google him to see examples). Traditional *xiangsheng* shows are performed in Chinese with a thick northern accent spoken rapidly. Mastery of four skills, speaking, imitating, teasing, and singing, are crucial to a *xiangsheng* performer.

But where traditional Chinese comedy generally revolves around neutral subjects, modern Chinese comedians like Shanghai's own Zhou Libo focus their jokes around issues that relate to the everyday lives of his audience. His

satirical commentary, known as "Shanghai-style small talk," cuts deeper and pokes fun at Shanghai's economic and political matters.

David Warner, Yuzhoujiletuan's co-founder, sees all this play out in their shows. "Westerners expect sex jokes from you (especially after a few drinks), but a Chinese audience actually feels somewhat uncomfortable listening to dirty jokes." Chinese crowds, he says, tend to respond better to status or family-related material. "A street sweeper who turns out to be a millionaire and starts bossing people around goes down well," he says.

"Chinese college students love scenes dealing with pressure from Dad and Mom, whereas a Westerner would probably just go, 'The hell with it, I'm moving out!'" Most Chinese audience members also like see bits of pop culture in skits. "Enacting popular Weibo posts featuring three stereotypes of young people—"putong qingnian" (普通青年, 'ordinary'), "wenyi qingnian" (文艺青年, 'artsy'), and "erbi qingnian" (二逼青年, 'weirdo') are typical crowd pleasers", says Ying, a native Chinese cast member.

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# Easter Hunt

Starting from March 11th until April 8th, get your hands on the Easter goodies at Bauernstube. Find candies and sweets like chocolate bunnies, Easter chicks, and chocolate Easter eggs of all sizes, or everything in collectable Easter goodie basket!

On Easter Sunday, head down to Café Bistro for brunch and enjoy the Easter Egg Treasure Hunt with other fun filled activities like egg painting, live rabbit farm and exciting give away. Be sure to take a photo with the cute rabbits.

March 11th to April 8th 2012  
Sunday to Friday 10:00 - 20:00 and  
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