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A SOCIO-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS  
OF WÚLÍTÓU ‘NONSENSE’  
IN TAIWANESE VERBAL INTERACTIONS

Abstract  
Humor has long attracted scholarly interest in many academic disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, etc. Among the various types of humor, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ has greatly influenced Taiwanese’s sense of humor. Based on previous studies on the concept of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ (e.g., Tan 2000; Jiang 2004; Chueh 2006; Yen 2009; Tao 2010), this study further examines its social-pragmatic functions in Taiwanese verbal interactions, as well as the discourse strategies used to construct it. The methodological approaches used for analysis are informed by conversation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and interactional linguistics. Major findings are: (a) There are three discourse strategies frequently used to construct wúlítóu ‘nonsense’: theatrical performance, fictional episode and dramatic expression/code. (b) Taiwanese’s frequent use of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ shows not only their playful attitudes towards their life, but also their dealing with the pressures in life with xiǎoquèxìng ‘the pleasure coming from trivial, but exact daily things’.

Keywords  
discourse strategies, humor, interactional linguistics, multimodal discourse analysis, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’

1 Introduction  
Your gloomy eyes, stubble, wonderful kitchen knife skills and that cup of Dry Martini. All these have deeply attracted me. However, even though you are such a perfect man, I am not supposed to break my own rules. Anyway, you should pay me for last night! Do you think prostitution is free?  
(From Beijing with Love by Stephen Chow)
Wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is an important element in Stephen Chow’s1 farces (Tan 2000; Jiang 2004; Chueh 2006; Yen 2009; Tao 2010), which has greatly influenced Taiwanese’s sense of humor. As a farce is intended to promote laughter through highly exaggerated and extravagant situations, the style of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’, therefore, is embedded with these characteristics, usually through the rhetorical devices of hyperbole and irony. This term consists of three Chinese characters: 無 wú ‘without’, 厘 lí ‘millimeter’ and 頭 tóu ‘head’. According to Tan’s (2000) investigation, this term first appeared as a popular Cantonese saying in Fóshān, a prefecture-level city in central Guǎngdōng, China. When a person’s behavior and words are hard to comprehend, as they are vulgar, arbitrary and without a clear purpose, this person might be referred to as expressing wúlítóu ‘nonsense’. Tan further adds that wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is expressed through ridiculing or mocking each other. In an interaction, may it be verbal or non-verbal, a participant’s use of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ still gets to the essence of the topic, but with a playful attitude towards life. The use of it therefore conveys a profound social connotation. Jiang (2004: 159–171) further summarizes the characteristics of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ as being without rhyme or reason in one’s verbal and non-verbal behavior.

Based on the observations above, there are grounds to claim that when a speech participant’s contribution is out of expectation in a certain speech context, as it may deviate from the main topic but still gets to the essence of it, this participant can be referred to as wúlítóu ‘nonsense’. This type of humor can also be understood in terms of the relevance-theoretic notion of weak implicatures, which acknowledges that implicatures may be weakly manifest, and that the relevance of the speaker's utterance does not depend on any particular one of them (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Allott 2013). These weak implicatures, however, may further generate a number of social meanings and non-propositional effects to compensate for the lack of interest that the nonsense utterance exhibits. The verbal and non-verbal acts of this person are sometimes malicious and may also be highly exaggerated and ironic. The following extract is from Stephen Chow’s 1994 Hong Kong action and comedy film, which illustrates the characteristics of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’:

(1) Linglingq Dāzhàn Jīntiāngkè
01. → nüren: ni yiwéi ni duò qilái wǒ jiù zhào bùdào ni le ma? méi yóuyòng de, nǐ shì náyàng làifēngde nánrén, bùguān zài shénme dìfāng, jiù hàoxiàng qíhéi zhōng de yínghuǒchōng yìyáng, náyàngde xiānmíng, náyàngde chūzhòng, nǐ nà yōuyùde yánhén, xīxīde hūzhāi, shěnhūqíji de dǎofū, háiyòu náběi dry martini, dǒu shēnhshēnde mǐzhù le wǒ.

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1 Stephen Chow, also named Zhōu Xīng-Chī, is a famous Hong Kongese actor, comedian, film director and producer.
02. → búguò, suírán nǐ shì nànyàngde chūshì, dànshì hángyǒuhánggù. búguān zēnmeyàng, nǐ yào fūqìng zuòwàn de guòyéfēi ya! jiào nǚrén bùyòng gěi qián ma?

03. nánrén: wǒ yìwéi píng wòmen liàngrén de jiāoqìng, kěyì tān yìdiǎn gānqìng de, xiǎng bùdào hái shì yìbǐ mǎimài.

04. nǚrén: jiāng gānqìng yè shì yào fù qián de a!

‘From Beijing with Love’

01. → Woman: You think you can hide away from me? You will not make it. A chic man like you is like fireflies in the darkness. You are always bright and outstanding no matter where you are. Your gloomy eyes, stubble, wonderful kitchen knife skills and that cup of Dry Martini. All these have deeply attracted me.

02. → However, even though you are such a perfect man, I am not supposed to break my own rules. Anyway, you should pay me for last night! Do you think prostitution is free?

03. Man: I thought we are already on a friendly term and could go out sometimes, but it still turned out to be transactional sex.

04. Woman: Going on a date with me also costs money!

The above sequence is taken from a scene of the film, in which a man and a woman are talking in the market. The man is a vendor selling pork, his upper body naked but with a blue apron. He is somewhat dirty since he is chopping pork. On the side of his cutting board is also a cup of Dry Martini. The woman is wearing a white dress, gazing at the man soulfully. From the outfits of both characters, it seems reasonable to suppose that the man and the woman, in the film, perhaps belong to the lower-middle class. The dialogue starts in such a way that the woman is showing how much she appreciates the man. From the utterances in line 1, we might be lured into a parse that the woman is pursuing the man, longing to win his heart. She in line 2, however, abruptly changes the topic and shows us her real intention; that is, she is a prostitute and she is asking the man to pay her for her sexual service the previous night. This abrupt change of the proposition is unexpected and is a typical case of garden-path humor (see, e.g., Yamaguchi 1988; Dynel 2009). More specifically, the audience is led to construct a situation into which the first part of the dialogue fits. The constructed situation, however, is eventually contradicted upon and thus generates incongruity. Incongruity, thus, can also be regarded as one of the characteristics of wūlítóu ‘nonsense’ and can be seen in many of Stephen Chow’s films.

The woman’s description of the man is also worth a mention in passing. She uses many expressions to show her appreciation to the man, e.g., yōuyüè yánshèn

2 Shultz (1976) and Suls (1972, 1983) have further proposed a two-stage incongruity-resolution model to perceive humor as such.
‘gloomy eyes’, *xīxū de húzhāi* ‘stubble’ and also a metaphor, e.g., *qīhēi zhōng de yīnghuōchōng* ‘fireflies in the darkness’. It is interesting to note that the first two expressions are about the details of the man’s face, both denoting “sexiness” of the man that attracts the woman. In the scene of the film, however, the man looks sloppy and unkempt. All these expressions, therefore, are highly exaggerated and ironic.

In her analysis of Stephen Chow’s films, Chueh (2006) argues that the use of *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ also implies transfer of power to the speaker. Goffman (1999: 319) in studying the elements of human behavior points out that “societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as self-regulating participants in social encounters”. More specifically, elements that are related to universal human nature are built into an individual, which may include the ethical rules that each of us acquires from our society. In other words, people’s everyday interaction is bound by an established set of rules. The use of *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ in a verbal interaction, however, is in an attempt to break the social norm of speaking. The speaker very often goes off the track in his/her narration, ignoring the rules that s/he should abide by. The use of this type of humor, therefore, can be regarded as a speaker’s struggle against power.

It is observed that *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’, as a humor type, is prevailing in contemporary Taiwan. Based on the notion that this type of humor has contributed to the social interactions in Taiwan, the present study aims at investigating its structure, pattern and socio-pragmatic functions in Taiwanese verbal interactions. To illustrate, I will use examples from television variety shows. As *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ is constructed by using one or more discourse strategies, I will illustrate and discuss each relevant discourse strategy before showing the examples of *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’. In Section 2, the background information of the data, its transcription and methodological approaches used for analysis are introduced. Section 3 presents my analysis of the discourse strategies used by Taiwanese friends to negotiate previously established friendship and intimacy in a humorous way. Section 4 illustrates how the same discourse strategies are combined together to construct *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ on the selected program. Finally, Section 5 discusses the implications and concludes findings of this study.

### 2 Methodology

In this section the background information of the data and the transcription systems are provided. Next, the methodological approaches used for analysis are introduced.
2.1 Data and transcription

The data used in this study come from the large data corpus consisting of six 45-minute episodes from Kang Xi Laile, randomly selected in 2010, 2011 and 2012 and casual conversations of same- and opposite-sex groups. Kang Xi Laile is a late-night variety show conducted by pairing two hosts (Cai Kang-Yong and Xu Xi-Di) with completely different interviewing styles. While Cai is an elegant, courtly intellectual who likes to ask serious questions, his co-host Xu is known for her unruly behavior, as she frequently teases the invited guests of the show. Thanks to the chemistry between the two hosts, the most instances of wulitou ‘nonsense’ can be observed. Although this study is based on a large data corpus, only the data concerning wulitou ‘nonsense’ and the relevant discourse strategies will be presented. In addition, Han yi Pinyin ‘Transcription of Chinese Characters’ and Ban lam Hong’ggiian Pingyiim Hong’an ‘Southern Min Dialect Spelling System’ will be adopted to transcribe the Mandarin and Southern Min spoken data. Each of the examples will be accompanied by an English translation. Moreover, as part of my data come from casual conversations among Taiwanese friends, pseudonyms will be used in order to protect the confidentiality of the speech participants. To present the data from Kang Xi Laile, on the other hand, speech participants’ real names will be used.

2.2 Methodological approaches

Three methodological approaches are used in my analysis of the data, including conversation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and interactional linguistics. Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) is a newly-developed approach used to analyze conversational data. It was first developed by Sacks and his colleagues in analyzing turn-taking, adjacency pairs and story-telling in audio-recorded telephone conversations (Schegloff 1992a, 1992b). As inspired by Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology and Goffman’s (1983) interaction order, CA facilitates the understanding of how people achieve a success of communication in everyday face-to-face interactions. However, many CA-based studies today still base their research findings on audio-recorded data, without looking at speech participants’ non-verbal behaviors. As argued by Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998), speech participants who are being recorded have visual access to each other, certain salient features in their interaction might be missed out if focused on their verbal performances exclusively. In other words, while the CA-based approach may help us see the structures and patterns of wulitou ‘nonsense’ in an interaction, it is also important to look at speech participants’ non-verbal performances in constructing this type of humor.
As pointed by Seyfeddinipur and Gullberg (2014: 1), “[l]anguage use is fundamentally multimodal”. That is, a speech participant may show how s/he is engaged with other speech participants in a social interaction by resorting to visible bodily actions. Indeed, as Kendon (2004: 1) has argued, “[H]umans, when in co-presence, continuously inform one another about their intentions, interests, feelings and ideas by means of visible bodily action”. As I will show in my analysis, a speech participant is very likely to resort to the simultaneous use of multimodal resources when s/he constructs wúlítóu ‘nonsense’. Furthermore, based on Kendon’s (2004: 13-14) account of one feature of gestures as “manifest deliberate expressiveness”, it is expected that a speech participant may intentionally use gesticulation to reinforce his/her humor.

While the approaches of CA and multimodal discourse analysis may serve as linguistic-analytic tools for micro-analysis of the data, the interactional linguistic perspective further helps us in accounting for how humor is shaped by interaction. According to Li (2014), interactional linguistics is developed from British CA-informed phonetics/phonology (cf. Local, Wells and Sebba 1985; Local, Kelly and Wells 1986), interactional prosodic study (cf. Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2001) and discourse-functional linguistics (cf. Ford, Fox and Thompson 2002). It draws upon Gumperz’s (1982, 1992) interactional sociolinguistic theory. While this approach also adopts the CA-based methods, it focuses on language in its social context. To conclude, by adopting the three methodological approaches informed by CA, multimodal discourse analysis and interactional linguistics, the structure and pattern of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ can be understood. Furthermore, how this type of humor contributes to a talk-in-interaction can also be understood.

3 Discourse strategies used to construct humor

As pinpointed by Gumperz (1982: 3), “[a] general theory of discourse strategies must therefore begin by specifying the linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge that needs to be shared if conversational involvement is to be maintained, and then go on to deal with what it is about the nature of conversational inference that makes for cultural, subcultural and situational specificity of interpretation”. Gumperz’s observations on discourse strategies have shown that “an individual’s choice of speech style has symbolic value and interpretive consequences that cannot be explained simply by correlating the incidence of linguistic variants with independently determined social and contextual categories” (p. vii). To negotiate previously established friendships and intimate relationships in a humorous way, Taiwanese friends use a lot of discourse strategies in their conversations. Additionally, among the discourse strategies used to bring about laughter, three are frequently used to construct the humor of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’, including theatrical...
performance, fictional episode and dramatic expression/code. In the following subsections, how each of these three discourse strategies is used to bring about laughter will be illustrated and discussed. While the examples used for illustration are not concerned with wùlítóu ‘nonsense’, they help exemplify the mechanism of humor built through these discourse strategies.

3.1 Theatrical performance

Before turning to the term theatrical performance used in this subsection, we must draw attention to the two terms theatricality and performance. According to Postlewait and Davis (2003), theatricality is an expansive concept, which touches upon “the aspects and nature of performance, the history of aesthetic styles, the means and modes of representation, the communicative power of art and artistry, the formation of subjectivity, and the very operations of public life (from politics to social theory)” (p. 2), whereas performance is categorized as “illusory, deceptive, exaggerated, artificial, or affected” (p. 4). Given the above contending meanings of theatricality and performance, respectively, we may briefly define theatrical performance as showy mannerisms or behaviors, usually exemplified by exaggerated self-display, and practically inextricable from artificiality.

When theatrical performance is used as a discourse strategy, the humor producer very often resorts to the performing body, i.e., dramatic gesticulation or body movement, to result in the humorous effect. In other words, the funniness relies on the speaker’s non-verbal communicative skills, rather than on the content of the utterance itself. Extract (2) illustrates this point, in which Dù uses theatrical performance as a discourse strategy when she cooperates with Zhào in constructing a negative identity for Jennifer, the target for a gossip exchange. Her use of this discourse strategy to construct humor is based on her body movement.

(2) [Dù (F), Chén (F), Zhào (F)]
01. dù: è, zhào ní zhèyàng jiǔ, zhēnde jennifer fūchū hěn duǒ ye.
02. chén: shì a.
03. dù: jiù shì gěn wáng jīnglí nàyàng, ránhòu wǒ zhīdào jiù yīge.
04. zhào: duì a, chángcháng jiù hùì juède shuō, wèi shènme?
05. dù: jiù āiér chuán gē shēnme, nǐ zhīdào, v lǐng de yǒu méiyǒu.
06. zhào: a, wǒ zhēnde zuò būlāo, wǒ juède zījī dōu...
07. dù: tā hěn xīhuān chuān v lǐng, tā chāo xīhuān chuān nàge jiūshī...
08. chén: tā shēncái yǒu hěn hǎo ma?
09. dù: yǒu, tā shēncái búcúo.
10. zhào: tā, duì, tā hūi bā, wǒ, tā jiù měìcì dōu bā zījī nòngde fēicháng shā.
11. ránhòu biérén jiǔ shuō, “bú hui la, jennifer, nǐ zènme yǎng, zènme yǎng.”
12. ránhòu tā jiǔ shuō, “zhēnde ma?”
13. ránhòu wǒ jiù zài pángbiān...
The above sequence is mainly on Jennifer’s dress sense. In the beginning of the interaction, Dù introduces Jennifer for negative gossip. In lines 1 and 3, Dù says that Jennifer is trying everything possible to attract men’s attention, which can be seen in her interaction with Manager Wáng, as well as with other men. Dù’s opinion about Jennifer is immediately supported by Chén and Zhào, as evidenced in their tokens for agreement, i.e., shì a ‘exactly’ (line 2) and duì a ‘right’ (line 4). The topic of the conversation then shifts to Jennifer’s preference for sexy clothes. In lines 5 and 7, Dù says that Jennifer seems to have a preference for V-neck shirts. Dù’s hand gesture (i.e., touching her own chest with both hands) accompanying her utterance and her intended smile suggest Jennifer’s motivation of wearing a V-neck shirt. That is, Jennifer perhaps intends to show off her cleavage in a deep V-neck shirt. Zhào in her turn speaking immediately shows her agreement by saying that she will never be able to act like Jennifer does (line 6).

Chén hardly speaks in the interaction, as she probably has never met Jennifer. This is evidenced in her question in line 8, in which she asks whether Jennifer is in good shape. This question suggests that she does not know how Jennifer actually looks, and that women who like to put on a V-neck shirt are very likely to be in a good shape. From the responses of Dù and Zhào in lines 9 and 10, respectively, we
may say that both of them think that Jennifer has got the means to attract men, as she is in a good shape and that she is doing everything possible to make herself even more attractive to men. In lines 11-12 Zhào has a step further and directly quotes Jennifer’s utterance with others to dramatize the speech event. Zhào’s rolled eyes (as described in line 13) further reveal her loathing of Jennifer’s hypocritical reaction to others’ flattery of her, as she was the witness of the whole interaction.

To make Zhào’s directly quoted speech more interesting, Dù uses theatrical performance as a discourse strategy to expand the dramatized speech event, i.e., Jennifer’s interaction with others which Zhào witnessed. In line 14 Dù starts to imitate how Jennifer, in the imagined interaction, shakes her breasts in deep V-neck shirt to attract men’s attention. The humorous effect results from Dù’s dramatic body movement accompanying her utterance qián xiōng jiù kāishī dǒudòng ‘start to shake her breasts’. Clearly Dù’s aping of the way Jennifer shows off her sexiness is exaggerated and artificial, as we can see in Zhào’s response in the following turn. In line 15, Zhào says it would be ridiculous if Jennifer did it that way, despite her intention to attract men’s attention. Dù’s use of theatrical performance as a discourse strategy not only attracts laughter from Zhào and Chén in the following turn, but it also helps her build rapport with Zhào. In other words, she cooperates with Zhào in constructing a negative identity for the gossip target Jennifer, but in a humorous way. By constructing a negative identity for Jennifer, Dù and Zhào cooperate in lowering the esteem of Jennifer’s dress sense. Indeed, Guendouzi (2001) has observed that women’s roles in the current social marketplace are still restricted by attributes, such as “physical appearance,” “moral worth” and being regarded as a “good mother”. Therefore, women are frequently found to discursively compete for the social capital, which has been tied to these attributes, perhaps by “bitching”3.

3 Guendouzi (2001) studies the genre of gossip and suggests two distinctive sub-genres, i.e., bitching and peer group news-giving, both of which are operating in the private domain. Focusing on the sub-genre of bitching, Guendouzi argues that bitching is a backstage, off-the-record talk that relies heavily on “a ‘safe’ discursive environment to avoid any risk to the gossip instigator’s positive self-image” (p. 34).
speaking turn. Both Cái and Zhāng are found to use touch as a cue for the subsequent humor.

(3) [Cài (M), Zhāng (M), Sūn (M)]
01. cài: yíhù wǔqiānwàn? nàme kuài jiù mài wán le a?
02. zhāng: mài wán le a! náge...
03. cài: wǒ hái xiāng shuō, e...
04. → zhāng: hái xiāng shuō nǐ yě xiāng mǎi yíhù o! shì bú shì?
05. cài: xiāng shuō, nǐ gài wán, wǒ, wǒ bān qù, wǒ guòqù zhù a.
06. qiān nǐde míngzi jiù hǎo le.
07. zhāng: qiān wǒde míngzi o?
08. cài: duì.
09. → zhāng: nǐ kěnèng huí bèi rénjiā gàn chūqù a. qiān wǒde míngzi a.
10. cài: wǒ jiù shuō wǒ shì...
11. sūn: lái la, lái la, zhège gěi nǐ zhù la!

01. Cài: A house costs fifty million NT dollars? All of them were already sold out?
02. Zhāng: [Zhāng looks at Cái.] They were sold out! As for...
03. Cái: I was thinking, well... [Cái pats Zhāng on the shoulder.]
04. → Zhāng: You were thinking about buying one, right? (L: Zhāng) (l: Sūn)
05. Cái: I was thinking, [Cái pats Zhāng on the shoulder.] when you finish the interior decorating, I, I can move, I can move over. (l: Zhāng)
06. I can simply claim that I know you.
07. Zhāng: You are going to claim that you know me?
08. Cái: Yes.
09. → Zhāng: [Zhāng puts his right hand on Cái’s shoulder.] You probably will be swept out if you claim that you know me. (L: Zhāng) (l: Sūn) [Cái does not know how to react.]
10. Cái: [Cái imitates holding a microphone.] I would say that I am...
11. Sūn: [Sūn passes a house-shaped pepper shaker to Cái.] Glad to be of help. You can live in it!

One of the speech participants Zhāng is working for an interior design company. Prior to the above interaction, Zhāng was talking about the houses he had decorated. Although they were extremely expensive, all of them sold out in a very short period of time. Zhāng’s interactant Cái therefore expresses his surprise at the wealth of those who could afford to buy the houses, as we can see in his question (line 1). After getting an answer from Zhāng, Cái subsequently shows his interest in moving into one of these houses (lines 3 and 5). It is interesting to note that in line 4, Zhāng does not wait for Cái to finish his utterance, but he interrupts and immediately offers an answer based on an imagined situation, which is prefaced by a directly quoted speech from Cái’s utterance in the prior speaking turn. More specifically, in line 4 Zhāng quotes Cái’s utterance hái xiāng shuō ‘was/were thinking’ followed by a fictional episode, in which Cái already planned to buy an
expensive house. Zhāng’s laughter further reveals his intention to frame his utterance as “play,” which is appreciated by the other speech participant Sūn, as evidenced in his smile.

Not following Zhāng’s fictional plot, Cài says that he was in fact thinking about moving into one of those expensive houses, but did not wish to pay for it. He could simply claim that Zhāng is his friend, who was responsible for the interior decoration of the house (lines 5 and 6). Interestingly, when Cài says that he could simply claim that he knows Zhāng, he uses the expression qián nǐ de míngzi jiù hǎo le, which literally means ‘I could simply sign your name’. By using this expression, Cài perhaps intends to construct Zhāng as an extremely important person in the interior decoration company, who can give away houses at his discretion. Obviously, Cài is simply joking. In his turn speaking, Zhāng repeats Cài’s expression (line 7) and says that this expression will get Cài swept out instead (line 9). Zhāng’s utterance is also based on an imagined situation. His subsequent laughter and Sūn’s smile can be used as indicators for humor.

3.3 Dramatic expression/code

This discourse strategy is based on speaker’s dramatization of a certain speech event to result in a humorous effect in an interaction. Different from the discourse strategy of theatrical performance as discussed in 3.1, the funniness of this strategy relies heavily on the content of the utterance itself, rather than on the speaker’s non-verbal communicative skills.

In the following interaction, Zhāng responds to Cài’s joking behavior with dramatic expressions. The funniness of Zhāng’s utterances result from his deliberately created appreciation, which appears awkward in a casual interaction among friends.

(4) [Cài (M), Zhāng (M), Sūn (M)]
01. cài: nàge, nàge yìhòu wǒ jiǎ yào zhuānhuāng jiù kào nǐ le.
02. zhāng: kào wǒ o?
03. cài: dui a.
04. → zhāng: shì o? gànxiè nǐ gěi wǒ zhège jīhuì!
05. cài: wǒ, wǒ huì tōngzhī nǐ de.
06. sūn jiā-fēng, zhāng shēng-nián de diànhuà jǐhào? jiào tā guòlái a!
07. méiyǒu niàn cuò míngzi ba?
08. zhāng: méiyǒu, méiyǒu niàn cuò, nà nǐ yào zhuānhuāng jǐhù? há?
09. cài: wǒ yìhù jǐhǎo le.
10. zhāng: yìhù o?
11. sūn: yìhù éryí.
12. zhāng: tài shào le la, yìhù tài shào le la.
13. sūn: *zìzi ǒ ài guīcíng hòo kītiào*. 
14. zhāng: wǒ shì, wǒ shì dàsuàn xiābàn bēizi dōu kào nǐ le ne.
15. cái: háo, méi wèntí, wǒ, wǒ jiā yiqiānping a.
16. zhāng: yiqiānping o?
17. cái: wǒ jiā yǒu yiqiānping, ránhòu jiǔcéng lóu gāo, jiǔ jiào gēi nǐ le.
18. sūn: háo, *ā bBIN’ ēzāi āi kāisi doó āi gāo cūlái ā oô*.
19. cái: zhè yípiào ràng nǐ gàn dàde a!
20. → zhāng: o, gānxì nǐ dānshì!

01. Cái: [Cài pats the bag on Zhāng’s leg.] Well, in the future if my house needs interior decoration, I will depend on you.
02. Zhāng: (l: Zhāng) You want to depend on me? [Zhāng looks at Cái.] (l: Zhāng)
03. Cái: Yes.
04. → Zhāng: Really? I appreciate your giving me this opportunity! (L: Sūn, Zhāng)
   (l: Cái)
05. Cái: I, I will call you. [Cái imitates making a phone call.]
06. Sūn Jiā-Fēng, tell me the number of Zhāng Sheng-Nián. Ask him to come over!
07. This is your name, right? [Cái points at Zhāng.]
08. Zhāng: [Zhāng puts his right hand on the shoulder of Cái and looks at him.]
   (l: Zhāng) Yes, it is correct. So how many houses of yours need interior decoration? Huh?
09. Cái: (l: Cái) [Cái stretches his index finger.] One is enough. (L:Sūn, Zhāng)
   (l: Cái)
10. Zhāng: [Zhāng turns around and looks at Sūn.] (l: Zhāng) Only one?
11. Sūn: Only one. (L: Sūn)
12. Zhāng: That is not enough. One is not enough. [Cái pats the shoulder of Zhāng.]
13. Sūn: *At least a few thousand houses*.
14. Zhāng: [Zhāng puts his right hand on Cái’s shoulder and looks at him.] (l: Zhāng) I, I have decided to depend on you for the rest of my life. (L: Sūn)
15. Cái: Okay, no problem. My house measures a thousand pyeong.4
16. Zhāng: (L: Zhāng) A thousand pyeong?
17. Cái: My house measures a thousand pyeong and it has nine floors. You will be responsible for it. (L: Zhāng)
18. Sūn: Great, *and tomorrow you have to hand in the house layout plan*.
19. Cái: You will get a pretty good haul! (l: Cái)

Prior to the above interaction, Zhāng was talking about his job as an interior decorator. Cái then says that he will ask Zhāng for help if his house needs interior decoration in the future (line 1). Cái’s choice of the verb kào ‘to depend on’ suggests his intention to exaggerate the speech act of requesting (i.e., asking Zhāng

4 A pyeong is an area unit used in Asian countries, such as Taiwan, Japan and Korea. One pyeong is approximately 400/121 square metres (i.e., 3.3058 square meters, 3.954 square yards or 35.586 square feet). Also refer to Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pyeong).
for doing interior decoration for his house), as this verb also encodes the semantic molecule of trusting. In other words, Cài’s request can be regarded as a joking behavior. In his response, Zhāng repeats Cài’s verb kào ‘to depend on’ in his confirmation about Cài’s request (line 2), which suggests that he has noticed Cài’s intention for joking. He subsequently expresses his gratitude to Cài for trusting him (line 4). Zhāng’s response, thus, can be regarded as framing Cài’s request as a favor to him.

Note that Zhāng’s expression of gratitude in line 4 consists of the verb gànxiè ‘to thank because of appreciation’, followed by the imposition caused by the favor nǐ gěi wǒ zhège jīhuì ‘your giving me this opportunity’. It therefore belongs to the appreciation strategy category (Cheng 2005). Comparing how Mandarin and English native speakers express gratitude, Cheng has observed eight thanking strategies (i.e., thanking, appreciation, positive feelings, apology, recognition of imposition, repayment, other and alerters). The results of her t-test analysis further show significant differences between speakers of the two languages. That is, native Mandarin speakers use significantly less thanking, appreciation and repayment strategies than English native speakers.5 In addition, among the eight thanking strategies used by native Mandarin speakers, the appreciation strategy is still not a preferred strategy.6 Zhāng’s choice of this thanking strategy is therefore intriguing.

In addition, as the degree of gratefulness encoded in gànxiè ‘to thank because of appreciation’ is higher than that encoded in xièxiè ‘to thank’, it would be awkward to use it as an expression of gratitude in a talk among friends.

From the above, we may reasonably assume that Zhāng’s high level of gratitude in a talk among friends, especially for the favor that does not exist, can be regarded as an intended humorous response to Cài’s prior joking behavior. The inappropriateness and awkwardness of Zhāng’s appreciation strategy in such a context is the source of the humor. Zhāng’s laughter perhaps indicates his intention to frame his utterance as “play.” The other participant Sūn’s laughter further indicates that Zhāng’s discourse strategy to construct humor is understood and appreciated. Zhāng’s intention to frame his high level of gratitude as “play” is evidenced in the subsequent interaction with Cài. In line 8, for example, Zhāng asks Cài how many houses of his need interior decoration. Zhāng’s smile and his touching Cài on the shoulder can be used as cues for humor. Zhāng’s subsequent reinforcement of the imposition on Cài (lines 10, 12 and 14) and the other participant Sūn’s cooperation with Zhāng (line 13) further suggest that Zhāng’s appreciation strategy is not to express gratitude, but to result in a humorous effect,

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6 According to Cheng (2005: 55), frequency of preferred thanking strategies for Mandarin native speakers shows that directly expressing thanking is mostly preferred (36%), followed by strategies of alerters (23%), positive feelings (12%), repayment (10%), appreciation (7%), apology (6%), recognition of imposition (4%) and other (1%).
while at the same times as a response to Cài’s joking behavior. In line 20 Zhāng uses the same discourse strategy again in response to Cài’s utterances in prior speaking turns. In this line Zhāng not only shows a high level of gratitude, but also uses the positive word dǎnshì ‘courage and insight’ to strengthen the degree of gratefulness.

As illustrated and discussed in Section 3, the above discourse strategies can be used to negotiate previously established friendship and intimacy in casual conversations among friends in Taiwan. As I will show in Section 4, a speech participant needs to construct a certain type of humor (e.g., wúlítóu ‘nonsense’) via the use of one or more than one discourse strategies. In addition, the funny episode is very often constructed by more than one person.

4 The construction of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’

The term wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ can be summarized as a playful attitude towards life, which is very often expressed through ridiculing or mocking each other (Tan 2000). The verbal and non-verbal acts through the use of this type of humor are likely to be vulgar, arbitrary, highly exaggerated, ironic and without a clear purpose. More specifically, this type of humor is very likely to be constructed by using theatrical performance, fictional episode and the choice of dramatic expression/code. The following extract illustrates the above characteristics of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’. In Extract (5) the host Cài asks one of the invited guests Wáng whether she is willing to make friends with other two guests sitting next to her, both female. As these two guests are known for their very sexy images, the two hosts Cài and Xú employ wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ for humorous effect, by describing them as spider demons.

(5) [KXLL 18.11.2010]
01. cài kāng-yòng: suǒyì jǐntiān rúguǒ shì pándiǎn nǎlǐǎngwèi yào gèn nǐ zuò pěngyǒu dehuà, nǐ yuānyì ma?
02. wáng yīn-píng: wǒ juéde zuò pěngyǒu shì ok a.
03. cài kāng-yòng: nǐ bù huì hěn pà tāmen ma?
04. wáng yīn-píng: rúguǒ shì yào zhèndé hěn pà dehuà, wǒ kěyì juéde...
05. → cái kāng-yòng: tāmen wǎnshǎng kěnèng huì bā pi ná xiālvái zài chuǎnhǎng huà.
06. lín wěi-ling: náyǒu, cái bù huí!
07. → cái kāng-yòng: ránhòu tǔ sǐ chūlái.
08. → xú xī-dì: hě de yǐnlèào dōu shì nánrén de xiē.
09. wáng yīn-píng: kěshì wǒ juéde, wǒ juéde kěyì xiān shī zuò pěngyǒu, ránhòu qù tiàojì tāmen dàodí shì shènme yángzǐ de rén.
10. → cái kāng-yòng: bā b two yóng zhīzhū sǐ kūn qīlái!
01. **Cǎi Kāng-Yǒng**: So if now these two guests sitting next to you tell you that they want to be your friends, are you willing to accept their friendship?

02. **Wáng Yǐn-Píng**: [Wáng looks at the two guests sitting next to her and turns back.] I think it is okay for us to be friends. [Wáng keeps nodding her head.]

03. **Cǎi Kāng-Yǒng**: Aren’t you afraid of them? [Wáng turns her head and looks at the two guests again.]

04. **Wáng Yǐn-Píng**: If I was really afraid of them, [Wáng looks up and stretches her both hands slightly forward, palms up.] I think… (l: Wáng)

05. → **Cǎi Kāng-Yǒng**: (l: Cǎi) They probably would spread their skin on the bed and paint it at night. [Cǎi imitates the way of spreading the skin.] (L: Xú) (L)

06. **Lín Wěi-Líng**: (L: Lín) [Lín speaks with arms akimbo] How could it be? I would never do that! (l: Wáng)

07. → **Cǎi Kāng-Yǒng**: (l: Cǎi) And silk would come out from their mouths. [Cǎi moves both hands forward and backward to imitate silk coming out from the mouth.] (L)

08. → **Xú Xī-Dì**: (l: Xú) All the beverages they drink are men’s blood. [Xú imitates the act of drinking.]

09. **Wáng Yǐn-Píng**: (l: Wáng) But I think, I think we can first try to be friends, and then I can understand what kind of people they are.

10. → **Cǎi Kāng-Yǒng**: (l: Cǎi, Xú) They can bind B2 with their spider silk! [Cǎi imitates the act of binding.] (L)

The host Cǎi first initiates a question, asking Wáng whether she is willing to make friends with the other two sexy and erotic guests (line 1). He later asks whether Wáng is afraid of them (line 3), since a sexy woman is very likely to be connected with an image of being glacial. Before Wáng finishes her utterance (line 4), Cǎi goes on and creates an imagined situation, in which the two guests are demons that would spread their skins on the bed and paint them at night (line 5). Cǎi further uses hand gestures to imitate how the two guests spin silk (line 7). Cǎi can be regarded as using theatrical performance and fictional episode as discourse strategies to construct *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’. The abrupt change of proposition, from the discussion of making friends with sexy women to an imagined plot, is a characteristic of *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’. Cǎi’s use of *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ also encourages his co-host Xú to join him in making the story more plausible, as we can see in line 8.

It is interesting to note that Lin rejects Cǎi’s description of her as a spider demon (line 6). Wáng also tries to pull the two hosts back to the topic by answering Cǎi’s original question (line 9). Their utterances, however, are ignored by the two hosts, as Cǎi and Xú are already highly involved in making the story. In other words, Cǎi and Xú play a conversational duet, intentionally breaking the social norm of speaking. Instead of focusing on the interview, they employ *wúlítóu* ‘nonsense’ to result in a humorous effect. Their story, however, still gets to the essence of the topic (i.e., the sexiness of the two guests), but in a playful manner. Their story is based on two famous classical Chinese novels *Xi Yóu Jì* ‘Journey to
the West’ and Liáozhāi Zhìyì ‘Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio’, in both of which a demon takes the form of a beautiful, sexy woman. Cāi’s use of wùlítóu ‘nonsense’ later joined by his co-host Xú, as well as others’ understanding of it (including other speech participants and the audience), we may say, require the common socio-cultural knowledge. In other words, this type of humor may fail if any of them does not share the same culture.

While in the above extract the two hosts are observed to use theatrical performance and fictional episode as discourse strategies to construct wùlítóu ‘nonsense’, there is one more strategy that can be used to construct this type of humor. In the following interaction, the invited guest Xiè not only uses the above two discourse strategies to construct this type of humor, but she also chooses a dramatic code as a cue for humor. Xiè’s choice of certain English words is later taken by the hostess Xú as an invitation to co-construct the humor.

(6) [KXLL 31.08.2011]

01. cāi kāng-vōng: qǐng wèn, nǐ dāngshì qù “dà xuèshēng le méi” biáoyán zhè yídùăn de shìhòu, shì běnlái xiàngyào tuídào, yào zài zhùnbèi jiù yídùăn cāi yào qù de ma?
02. xiè vī-lín: mèi'yōu, mèi'yōu, yīnwèi nà shìhòu shízài, yìqiè láide tài túrán le.
03. → yīnwèi wǒ kěnèng gēítān yǒu yīge paris de xiū wǒ yào zòu, suǒyì shūō...
04. xū xǐ-dī: nǐ gēi wǒ hào'hào jiānghuá!
05. xiè vī-lín: sorry, sorry, sorry.
06. xū xǐ-dī: suǒyì shì linshǐ bèi gōng shàngtí, shibúshǐ?
07. xī vī-lín: linshī, linshī.
08. cāi kāng-vōng: shì nǐ tóngxué bāng nǐ báoming de ma?
09. xiè vī-lín: en, shì zhižuó dānwéi dà diànhuà dào wǒmen bānshàng shuō, “qǐng wèn, nǐmen bānshàng yǒuméiyǒu hēn hui gāoxiào de rèn?” ránhòu jiù bǐ wǒ qù.
10. cāi kāng-vōng: nà jiéguò nǐ zài xuéxiào lǐmiàn jiù yīfēng zhīdào zhè yídùăn shì tèbì shòuhuānyíng de ma?
11. xiè vī-lín: yes.
12. cāi kāng-vōng: háishì nǐ zhìyǒu zhè yídùăn?
14. xū xǐ-dī: nǐ yě, nǐ yě, nǐ yě, nǐ yě mèi'yōu cáng yīxiè xiàohuà huò mòfāng ma?
15. xī vī-lín: mèi'yōu.
16. cāi kāng-vōng: suǒyì wànyī wǒmen...
17. → xiè vī-lín: yīnwèi wǒ dōu zài xiè xìu fashǐon, suǒyì so..., wǒ, wòde, yīnwèi wǒ zhúànggōng de nà yíkù shì fashǐon, wǒ bù zhīdào gāoxiào shì shènme, wǒ bù juéde wǒ háoxiào a.
18. cāi kāng-vōng: ok, nǐ shì rènzhēn de.
20. cāi kāng-vōng: suǒyì nǐ xiànzǎi, xiănzǎi suánshì jīnruǐ yúlè quán le ye.
22. cāi kāng-vōng: nà nǐ yī hòu...
23. → xiè vī-lín: bìjiào busy, wǒ yòu yào gào, gào fashǐon, yòu yào gào yúlè.
Cài Kāng-Yǒng: When you were invited to perform what you just did on “College Talk,” did you ever think of rejecting their invitation and spending more time practicing it?

Xiè Yī-Lín: No, no, but honestly the invitation just came unexpectedly.

It is because probably on the next day, Xiè moves her left hand forward and touches the back of her left wrist with right hand.] I might have a fashion show in Paris. [Xiè moves both hands slightly forward, forearms slightly upward, palms downward.] So...

Xú Xī-Dì: (V) You speak normally! (L: Xú) [Xú pretends throwing something onto the ground with her right hand.] (L)

Xiè Yī-Lín: Sorry, sorry, sorry.

Xú Xī-Dì: So you were invited to perform that unexpectedly, right?

Xiè Yī-Lín: Right, unexpectedly.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: Did your classmates put your name down for that show?

Xiè Yī-Lín: Well, the production unit of that show made a phone call to our class, [Xiè imitates making a phone call.] asking, “Excuse me, is there anyone in your class that is good at doing something comical?” Then I was forced to do it.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: And when you were at school, did you already know that this part of your performance would become the most popular?

Xiè Yī-Lín: Yes.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: Or is it that this is all you can do?

Xiè Yī-Lín: [Xiè talks with her eyes wide open.] This is all I can do. (L) (I: Xiè)

Xú Xī-Dì: You, you, you, are you secretly good at telling jokes or impersonating celebrities?

Xiè Yī-Lín: [Xiè talks with her eyes wide open.] No.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: So what if we...

Xiè Yī-Lín: It is because I have devoted myself to fashion, so, so... [Xiè rolls her eyes, moves her left hand slightly forward, left forearm slightly upward, left palm downward.] I, my, my specialization is on fashion. I do not know how to do something comical. I do not think I am funny.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: Okay, you are taking it seriously.

Xiè Yī-Lín: Yeah.

Cài Kāng-Yǒng: So now you can be regarded as formally entering the entertainment industry.

Xiè Yī-Lín: Yes.
22. Cài Kāng-Yǒng: Then in the future you...
23. → Xiè Yī-Lín: I will become busy. [Xiè shakes her head.] I have to be engaged not only in fashion, [Xiè moves her right hand slightly forward, forearm slightly upward, palm downward.] but also in the entertainment industry. [Xiè moves her right hand slightly forward, forearm slightly upward, palm downward.]
24. → Xú Xī-Dì: So how could you deal with both of them? Which do you prefer, fashion or entertainment?
25. → Xiè Yī-Lín: [Xiè moves both hands slightly forward, forearms slightly upward, palms downward.] I do not know. I hope I can manage both at the same time. [Xiè pretends that she is troubled by this problem.]
26. → Xú Xī-Dì: You can try to do both at the same time! [Xú moves her right hand slightly upward, right forearm slightly upward, right palm downward.] (l: Xú) (L)
27. → Xiè Yī-Lín: Doing both! (l: Xiè) [Xiè moves both hands slightly forward, forearms slightly upward, palms downward. She then points at Xú.] (L)
28. → Xú Xī-Dì: You can just enjoy them!
29. → Xiè Yī-Lín: Enjoy them! (l: Xiè) [Xiè moves both hands slightly forward, forearms slightly upward, palms downward.] Just like you. [Xiè points at Xú.] Ha, ha, ha!
30. Xú Xī-Dì: You see that, you see that... (L: Xú) (L)

Before my analysis of the data, Xiè’s background should be briefly introduced. Xiè is a net celebrity in Taiwan, who first became famous for being willing to entertain the audience, especially by making fun of herself. For example, right before the above interview Xiè performs a one-man show, in which she is a fashion-loving socialite. She, however, puts on dramatic makeup to play the clown in terrifying fashion. Furthermore, she intentionally code-switches to English a couple of times to show that she, in her one-man show, is not only a fashionable socialite, but also an intellectual who frequently speaks English and therefore has difficulties in smoothly speaking the mother tongue Mandarin.

In the beginning of the above interaction, the host Cài asks Xiè what she was thinking about when she was invited to have a debut on “College Talk,” which later made her well-known to most people in Taiwan (line 1). In her response, she briefly answers the question (line 2) and subsequently uses three discourse strategies to construct wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ (line 3). She first uses fictional episode as a discourse strategy. While she is an invited guest expected to answer the host’s question honestly, she chooses to continue with her created role in the one-man show: a fashionable socialite who needs to go to Paris occasionally. Clearly Xiè plays this role in her interview to result in a humorous effect. However, Xiè can be viewed as not following the social norm, in the sense that a guest in an interview is not expected to distract from the topic in discussion. This is evidenced in the hostess Xú’s ensuing reaction. In line 4, Xú pretends that she is irritated by Xiè’s unexpectedly switching to the created role. Xiè’s use of fictional episode as a
discourse strategy thus implies transfer of power, which is a feature of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ (Chueh 2006). In addition, despite the fact that Xiè unexpectedly switches to her created role, her answer still gets to the essence of the topic. Moreover, both Xú’s smile and others’ laughter can be taken as cues which frame Xú’s anger as “play”.

In addition to the use of fictional episode as a discourse strategy, Xiè also reinforces wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ by using theatrical performance and by choosing the dramatic code, i.e., English. In lines 3, 5, 11, 17, 19 and 23, for example, Xiè intentionally chooses English words (as marked in bold). She also repeatedly uses similar hand gestures to imitate how an affected socialite overdoes, as we can see in lines 3, 17, 23 and 25. Both strategies frequently appear in Xiè’s subsequent utterances. While they can be used as cues to frame Xiè’s utterances as “play”, Xú also uses the same strategies to co-construct wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ with Xiè. Xú’s first move in co-constructing the humor is evidenced in line 24, in which she directly quotes Xiè’s repeatedly used word fashion. She in the following speaking turns purposefully chooses two English words both (line 26) and enjoy (28) and also imitates Xiè’s hand gestures (line 26). Xú’s use of the same discourse strategies to construct humor further encourages Xiè to continue with role-playing. Xiè’s repetition of Xú’s English words (lines 27 and 29) and her pointing at Xú further show that she knows that Xú understands her humor. In other word, the humor of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ in the above interaction is partially constructed by Xú. To conclude, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is created by using a few discourse strategies simultaneously. In addition, this type of humor is frequently co-constructed by more than one speech participant.

5 Discussion and conclusion

As illustrated and discussed previously, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is a humor type used in Taiwan. It is used without a clear purpose, usually expressed with vulgar and arbitrary behaviors and words (Tan 2000). In addition, this humor type is constructed not only verbally but also gesturally, mainly through the uses of the three discourse strategies, including the uses of theatrical performance and fictional episode, as well as the choice of dramatic expression/code. As wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is a humor type frequently observed in interactions among the middle-class Taiwanese, it seems reasonable to presume that the life style of the middle-class Taiwanese has influenced their habit of using this type of humor and taste for it. Before we go further, some ink should be spent on the discussion of the attitude of the middle-class Taiwanese.

The attitude of the middle-class Taiwanese can be seen in a newly popular word in Taiwan 小確幸 xiǎoquèxìng ‘the pleasure coming from trivial, but exact
daily things”. It is borrowed from the Japanese Kanji 小確幸 (しょうかっこうshoukakkou), created by the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. The semantic molecules of xiǎoquèxìng in Taiwan may include ordinary, trivial, healing, slow, unique and cherishable. In other words, xiǎoquèxìng can be the pleasure coming from a cup of coffee, or from a jazz song if one feels it with the heart. The rise of xiǎoquèxìng in the Taiwanese society, thus, has reflected the fact that as the middle-class Taiwanese are composed of more educated people who want to be successful, and that they are not able to achieve a great success like the upper bourgeoisie (e.g., high-ranking government officials, owners of sizable companies, etc.), they therefore turn to trivial, but exact daily things to get pursuable happiness.

Similarly, the social meaning of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is like that of xiǎoquèxìng. While xiǎoquèxìng is happiness that can be pursued in life anytime and anywhere if one feels it with the heart, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ also means that the source of humor can be anything in life, and that it can be produced by anyone in his/her own way without thinking whether it is also entertaining to others. Its funniness, like pleasure from xiǎoquèxìng, can be obtained if one feels it with the heart. As defined by Yue (2010: 407), wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is “[m]alicious, and self-entertaining humor shown via various verbal and non-verbal acts”. Recall that in Extract (5) the two hosts Cài and Xú co-constructed their female guests as demons spreading their skins on the bed and painting them at night. While Cài and Xú were involved in entertaining themselves, they at the same time broke the social norm of speaking by switching from the interview to an imagined plot. In Extract (6), moreover, their guest Xiè chose certain English words to play the role of a fashionable socialite. Xiè can also be viewed as not following the social norm of speaking, in the sense that she switched to her created role without considering her identity as an interviewee. The two examples of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ have shown that the goal of humor is to entertain the humor producer himself/herself without considering the imposed social norm.

To conclude, the self-entertaining function of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ seems to be more salient than its other-entertaining function. Although it is commonly agreed that humor is produced to better a social interaction by entertaining others, wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ as a humor type might not be easily understood, especially by those outside the Mandarin-speaking community. It is because it is mainly used to entertain its producer or those who are willing to get the funniness of it with the heart. This has perhaps explained why wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ is sometimes not understood even by people within the same culture. On the other hand, the frequent use of wúlítóu ‘nonsense’ in Taiwan has also reflected the middle-class Taiwanese’s playful attitude towards their life. Life for most of them might be tough. They therefore need to look on the bright side of it, perhaps by getting pleasure from daily trivial, but exact things that are approachable to them. In the
meantime, wúlítòu ‘nonsense’ as a humor type further serves this self-healing function.

Appendix

Transcription symbols

| (L) | An upper case “L” in parentheses indicates laughter from all speech participants. |
| (L: X) | An upper case “L” in parentheses indicates laughter from X. |
| (l: X) | A lower case “l” in parentheses indicates a smile on X’s face. |
| bold | Bold type is used for important words. |
| underline | Underline indicates speech participants. |
| → | An arrow indicates the line to be analyzed. |
| [...] | Words in brackets show the simultaneous action of the speech participant. |
| … | Three dots indicate unfinished sentences. |
| (V) | An upper case “V” in parentheses indicates increased volume. |
| *...* | Words between asterisks indicate code-switching to Taiwanese Southern Min. |

References


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