

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Entertained Enemy: Intercultural Communication and Visual Politics in the Anti-Japanese War Comedy Hands Up! (2003)

Fanfan Yang, Ayu Haswida Abu Bakar*

Faculty of Film, Theatre & Animation, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Puncak Perdana Campus 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

* Corresponding author: Ayu Haswida Abu Bakar; ayu330@uitm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Anti-Japanese war comedies have become a visible strand of contemporary Chinese screen culture, blending patriotic memory with comedic ridicule of Japanese invaders. Yet it remains unclear how audiences interpret this mixture of entertainment and nationalist messaging. This study examines how Chinese viewers interpret the anti-Japanese war comedy *Hands Up!* (2003), focusing on their intercultural competence, humor appreciation, and nationalist orientation. Drawing on intercultural communication and humor theory, the research explores how these audience traits affect responses to the film's satirical portrayal of Japanese soldiers. The methodology combines a survey (N=250) using structural equation modeling with in-depth qualitative interviews (N=15). Results indicate that viewers with higher intercultural competence report greater appreciation of the film's humor and more nuanced interpretations, whereas strong nationalist orientation predicts stronger alignment with the film's patriotic message. Humor appreciation partially mediates the relationship between intercultural competence and interpretation. Qualitative interviews reveal that audiences both laughed at and reflected on the film's exaggerations, showing an interplay of entertainment and ideological resonance. These findings highlight the complex role of humor in politically charged media: while the comedic dehumanization of the "enemy" reinforces nationalist narratives, viewers' cultural competence can temper simple ingroup/outgroup reading. The study contributes to theory by linking individual difference variables with audience reception of visual political discourse. It also provides practical insight into how war comedies function as cultural texts in contemporary China. The research underscores the importance of considering intercultural skill and ideology in understanding media effects in nationalist contexts.

Keywords: Intercultural competence, Humor appreciation, Nationalism, Audience interpretation, War comedy

1. Introduction

Anti-Japanese war films have become a prolific genre in contemporary Chinese media, reflecting both historical memory and current political sentiment. In recent decades China has seen a "steep rise in anti-Japanese propaganda" through film and television. For example, in 2012 alone around 69 patriotic war series and 100 films were approved by state regulators, amounting to roughly 70% of all prime-time drama content. *Hands Up!* (2003), a popular comedy film, is part of this trend; it satirises Japanese invaders by portraying

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 2 January 2026 | Accepted: 25 January 2026 | Available online: 06 February 2026

CITATION

F. Yang, A. H. Abu Bakar. The Entertained Enemy: Intercultural Communication and Visual Politics in the Anti-Japanese War Comedy *Hands Up!* (2003). *Environment and Social Psychology* 2026; 11(2): 4392. doi:10.59429/esp.v11i2.4392

COPYRIGHT

Copyright © 2026 by author(s). *Environment and Social Psychology* is published by Arts and Science Press Pte. Ltd. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

them as buffoons to be outwitted by Chinese heroes. Film scholars note that such works blend “vulgar comedy” with “patriotic lecture,” intensifying anti-Japanese themes [1]. The cinematic “Japanese Other” is depicted as physically ugly, stupid, and laughable, a strategy that symbolically “erases” China’s wartime humiliation by reversing it on Japan. The result is a continuous stream of historical grievances – a narrative trope that scholars argue has become a defining feature of Chinese national cinema [2,3].

While content analyses highlight the film’s rhetoric, less is known about how actual audiences perceive these representations. Does *Hands Up!* simply entertain Chinese viewers, or does it reinforce a nationalist worldview? This question is inherently intercultural, involving how one cultural group (Chinese) processes media about another (Japanese), using humor as a vehicle. Intercultural communication theory suggests that viewers’ own cross-cultural competence – their ability to understand foreign perspectives – may shape their reception of such content [4]. Likewise, humor studies point out that appreciation of satire can depend on cultural distance and shared beliefs. Meanwhile, political psychology indicates that nationalist orientation predisposes individuals to interpret media through an ingroup/outgroup lens. In other words, a viewer’s intercultural competence and humor appreciation might lead to a more reflective understanding of *Hands Up!*, whereas a strong nationalist orientation might incline them to uncritically celebrate its propaganda [5].

The existence of war comedy brings up an obstacle to the perception process in that it makes historical violence and intercultural conflict subjects to laughter. Experienced in a way that is harmless entertainment, in the way of emotional catharsis, or an ideological move to which the satirical device serves a normalising role in dampening outgroup devaluation. The current research on anti-Japanese screen texts has focused mostly on the representational patterns and policies with little or no emphasis on the processes at the audience level. It is thus important to clarify the way in which viewers bargain satire, affect and political sense as in how part of what such films do in the mundane interpretation.

This qualitative/quantitative study focuses on the way the Chinese viewers decode the satirical representations of Japan-armies in the *Hands Up!* and what characteristics of the audiences condition such decoding. Using a survey-based structural equation model and qualitative interviews, it explores the relationships among three key variables – intercultural competence, humor appreciation, and nationalist orientation – in shaping Chinese viewers’ interpretations of *Hands Up!*) [6,7]. It verifies the hypothesis of relationship between intercultural competence and appreciation of humor and association between nationalist orientation and appreciation of the film and whether the relationship between intercultural competence and interpretation is mediated by humor appreciation. It also determines the fact that nationalist orientation moderates the effects of intercultural competence on interpretation [8]. Theoretically, the research approach entails a survey that has been analysed using the structural equation modeling methodology, in addition to interviews that examine how viewers justify their laughter, discomfort, and feeling of historical significance. This will attempt to answer a question along the lines of when humor stimulates reflective distance, and when it supports the appeal to nationalistic stereotypes in a politically charged audience, and hypotheses and theoretical framework are elaborated in the next section.

2. Theoretical framework

Intercultural competence (ICC) can be defined as skills, knowledge and attitudes which assist a person in communicating effectively across a culture. ICC is the skill to communicate effectively and most suited in intercultural contexts depending on one knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This in practice incorporates empathy of outgroup views and cognitive range. It is believed that the more competent audiences perceive the media in a more subtle way since they can notice the cultural indicators and the genre conventions that less competent viewers will miss. To take an example, a high ICC viewer may realize that *Hands up!* is a

hyperbolic comedy and may not be inclined to literally interpret the representation of the Japanese soldiers. A low ICC viewer, on the contrary, can view the film as central propaganda of nationalism. This paper has approached ICC as a predictor of individual differences which may have influence in the enjoyment and interpretation of the movie [9].

The humor theory implies that comedy may join or divide based on circumstances. The theory of incongruity explains that laughter is a result of solving a discrepancy in your thoughts, and the theory of superiority is that comedic elements are commonly based on the feeling of being high over others. A more recent approach, the Benign Violation Theory (BVT), theorizes humor to be present when a norm has become violated and is thought to be safe or somehow benign. Most importantly, BVT stresses on psychological distance, in other words, the farer in time or culture an event is the more likely it will be perceived as benign [10]. The horrific historical events portrayed in the Chinese film context Hands Up! are distanced by slapstick, which can only permit a comedy reclamation after provisions of distance. The theory further observes that cultural background influences what is considered benign as what one group is considered funny another group may consider obscene. Therefore, the way of how the film violence and insults are perceived as either humorous or repelling by a viewer will depend on his/her cultural perspective with the impact of ICC. On top of that, cultural analysis has discovered that the cultural value of humor differs East to West. An example will be seen in Chinese consumers who will save the humor to the professional entertainers and observe the average person to remain sober yet the western will perceive the ordinary to possess humor as an everyday positive quality. This and similar cultural schemas might alter the responses of the Chinese audience: some will find Hands Up! shockingly irreverent, whereas others will find it a humorous extension of nationalist narratives [11].

Nationalist orientation is the ideological orientation of the individual in terms of the nationalist perceptions regarding the history of China and its identity [12]. According to empirical studies on media effects, it is assumed that audiences with high national pride or aggression towards historical adversaries think differently about films. A nationalist oriented viewer can easily buy the argument of Japanese soldiers as villains and patriotic ending of a movie as in the case of Hands Up! when the viewer hears a line or two such as, your evil deeds will be remembered by Chinese generations. Conversely, a less nationalistic viewer may pay attention to anti-war sentiments as a whole or every other side of the story. As the preceding analyses have recorded, contemporary war narratives in China tend to associate past agonies with nationalism in the present times. This implies that nationalist viewers will have an inclination to regard Hands Up! as reproducing an endless line of historical injustice [13].

Based on these frameworks, we posit that intercultural competence fosters critical engagement and humor comprehension, whereas nationalist orientation strengthens ideological reception. Humor appreciation itself is viewed as both an outcome (reflecting ICC) and a mediator that can influence interpretation. The interplay of these constructs is formalized in the following hypotheses [14].

3. Literature review and hypotheses

Intercultural Competence and Humor Appreciation. Research on cross-cultural humor suggests that the ability to decode humor in a foreign context relies on cultural knowledge and empathy. Individuals with high ICC are better at perspective-taking and understanding subtleties of cultural satire [15]. They are thus more likely to appreciate the incongruity and satire in foreign or historical humor. For example, Yue et al. [16] found Westerners generally regard humor as a common trait but Chinese regard humor as a special disposition for experts. This implies Chinese viewers with broader intercultural outlooks might be particularly attuned to the film's comedic elements [17]. Similarly, the BVT emphasizes that a violation (e.g.

wartime atrocity) can be humorous if one has enough psychological distance and context. High-ICC viewers may create that distance cognitively, perceiving satirical excess as benign violation. In summary, we hypothesize:

H1: Higher intercultural competence is associated with greater appreciation of the film's humor.

Intercultural Competence and Interpretation. Beyond humor, ICC may shape overall interpretation of the film's narrative. A knowledgeable intercultural viewer might recognize layers of meaning – for instance, distinguishing between criticism of wartime perpetrators and generic anti-Japanese propaganda. Prior work shows audiences with more cultural knowledge often interpret media plots in more complex ways. Therefore, we predict:

H2: Higher intercultural competence is associated with a more nuanced interpretation of Hands Up! (e.g., focusing on critical satire rather than just patriotic affirmation).

Humor Appreciation and Interpretation. Enjoying the humor may influence how seriously one takes the film's message. If viewers find the satire very funny, they may feel less defensive and consider the underlying point. Conversely, finding the film hilarious might also reinforce the idea that the enemy is deservedly mocked. In any case, we expect humor appreciation to play a role in shaping meaning-making. Formally:

H3: Greater appreciation of the humor is positively related to interpretation outcomes (e.g., recognition of humor as comedic insight or ideological message).

Nationalist Orientation and Interpretation. Previous research has documented that nationalist ideology strongly colors reception of war narratives. In the Chinese context, nationalist-viewers are likely to interpret content in line with collective memory of victimhood. For example, Hands Up! explicitly lists Japanese atrocities and ends with a patriotic pledge ^[2], which appeals to nationalist sentiments. Moreover, scholars note that new Chinese war films often “erased” national humiliation by focusing on “the humiliation of Japan”. It follows that audiences predisposed to national pride will see the film as confirming their worldview, perhaps interpreting its humor as righteous revenge. Thus:

H4: Stronger nationalist orientation is associated with a more patriotic interpretation of Hands Up! (e.g., viewing it as affirming Chinese valor and condemning Japan).

Moderating Role of Nationalism. Finally, we consider that nationalist orientation might moderate the influence of ICC on interpretation. High-ICC viewers may normally interpret satire with nuance, but strong nationalism could override this effect. In other words, even a culturally savvy viewer might still react in a nationalist way if their ideological alignment is strong. Therefore:

H5: Nationalist orientation moderates the relationship between intercultural competence and interpretation, such that ICC has a weaker effect on interpretation when nationalist orientation is high.

Figure 1 reflects on the proposed relationship hypotheses and explains the way every hypothesis is graphed on the model paths. H1 is an association between intercultural competence and humor appreciation. H2 relates the intercultural competence to film interpretation. H3 is a connection between humor and appreciation and film interpretation. H4 entails a nationalist orientation and film interpretation. H5 suggests that the role of nationalist orientation as a moderator of the relationship between intercultural competence and interpretation of the film exists.

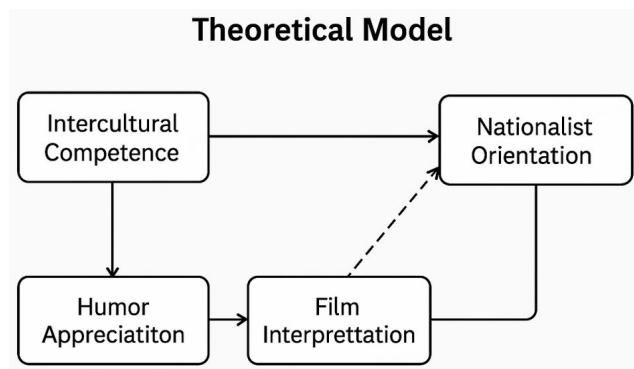


Figure 1. Theoretical Model

3.1. Theoretical model

The hypothesized structural model (Figure 1) integrates the above constructs. Intercultural competence is treated as an exogenous variable predicting both humor appreciation and film interpretation. Humor appreciation is posited as a mediator between ICC and interpretation^[18]. Nationalist orientation is included as an exogenous predictor of interpretation, and as a moderator on the ICC→interpretation path. This model aligns with prior theories: ICC provides the cognitive/attitudinal resources for processing comedy and cross-cultural content, while nationalist orientation sets a particular interpretive lens on historical media. Confirming this model would suggest that individual differences both in cultural skill and political ideology jointly shape the reception of a politicised comedy.

In this work, the interpretation of a film is the meaning making of the viewer to satirical and patriotic features of the film, as opposed to a film feature. Moderation element is conceptualized as an exchange between intercultural competence and nationalist orientation in explanation of interpretation and focuses on the potential that ideological devotion limits the degree to which intercultural competence converts to subtle interpretations. This operationalization relates the visual politics of the film to the audience response in that interpretation is being viewed as the place where the satirical images may receive ideological interpretation.

3.2. Methodology

3.2.1. Participants and procedure

A mixed-method approach was employed. For the quantitative component, an online survey was administered to Chinese adults who reported having seen *Hands Up!* (2003). A total of 250 participants (age range 18–45, $M = 24.7$, 54% female) were recruited via university networks and social media. The sample included college students and working adults from major Chinese cities. All participants gave informed consent and answered questions about the film after viewing it (either at release or via DVD/streaming)^[19].

For the qualitative component, 15 participants (8 female, 7 male, ages 20–35) were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews. This sub-sample was chosen to represent varying levels of intercultural experience (e.g., those who had studied abroad vs. only domestic education) and differing political views. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or by video call, lasting about 45–60 minutes each. Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their reactions to *Hands Up!*, such as what elements they found humorous, what message they took from the film, and how they perceived the portrayal of Chinese and Japanese characters. Interviews were recorded with permission and later transcribed.

3.2.2. Measures

Intercultural Competence. We measured ICC with a 20-item scale adapted from established intercultural communication inventories. Items assessed participants' self-reported ability to understand foreign cultures, maintain open attitudes, and empathize with outgroup perspectives (e.g. "I can adapt my communication style when interacting with people from other cultures"; "I enjoy learning about Japanese culture"). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Example sources informed this scale's design: Byram's model and Deardorff's framework, which emphasize knowledge, skills, and attitudes. In our sample the scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = .87$).

Humor Appreciation. Humor appreciation was measured by a 10-item self-report scale evaluating how participants rated the film's comedic elements. Items included statements such as "I found the comedic scenes in Hands Up! very funny," and "I enjoyed the slapstick humor of the Chinese characters." These were rated on a 5-point scale. We based items on existing humor style inventories (e.g., Chen & Martin's PhoPhiKat/Humor Styles Questionnaire for Chinese contexts) and added items specific to the film's content. The scale reliability was $\alpha = .85$.

Nationalist Orientation. Nationalist orientation was assessed using 8 items reflecting pride in Chinese identity and attitudes toward Japan. Sample items were "I feel proud when I see China's victory against Japan in movies," and "I believe Japanese wartime aggression should be condemned by all Chinese." Items were drawn from prior surveys of Chinese nationalism. Participants responded on a 5-point agreement scale. The nationalist orientation scale had reliability $\alpha = .83$.

Interpretation Outcome. To capture film interpretation, we developed a 12-item scale reflecting the degree to which viewers saw the film as a) comic satire versus straightforward propaganda, and b) an in-group affirmation versus cautionary tale. Items included: "The film's humor helped me feel I had taken revenge on historical wrongs" (propagandistic interpretation), and "The film's comedy made me reflect on the folly of all war" (more reflective interpretation). Responses were on a 5-point scale. We conducted exploratory factor analysis to confirm a coherent factor; the final interpretation measure ($\alpha = .89$) was unidimensional in predicting general interpretation orientation (higher scores indicating more nationalist-aligned interpretation).

All scales were pilot-tested for clarity. The survey also collected demographic information and asked how and when participants had seen the film.

3.2.3. Data analysis

Structural Equation Modeling. The survey data were analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to ensure adequate measurement model fit. The three latent constructs (ICC, humor appreciation, nationalist orientation) and the interpretation outcome had acceptable factor loadings ($> .60$) and composite reliability. Common fit indices indicated good fit ($CFI = 0.96$, $RMSEA = 0.048$, $SRMR = 0.05$). Cronbach's alphas for all scales exceeded .80, confirming internal consistency. Descriptive statistics showed ICC scores spanned the full range, humor appreciation averaged moderately high, and nationalist orientation skewed toward agreement (mean ~ 4.2), reflecting generally positive nationalist sentiment in the sample ^[20].

Next, the structural model was tested. We posited direct paths from ICC to humor appreciation and to interpretation; from humor appreciation to interpretation; from nationalist orientation to interpretation; and an interaction term ($ICC \times \text{Nationalism}$) to test the moderation. Interaction effects in SEM were examined by creating a product term of the centered latent variables (following standard procedures) and testing its effect

on the outcome. All predictors were mean-centered. Model fit remained acceptable with the interaction included ($CFI = 0.94$, $RMSEA = 0.052$). Path significance was evaluated via critical ratios and p-values [21].

Qualitative Analysis. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, two researchers independently coded each transcript, identifying units related to humor perception, cultural understanding, and nationalist attitudes. Codes were then discussed and consolidated into themes. Major themes included: (1) **“Laughing with History”** – respondents noting the film’s ability to turn painful history into laughter; (2) **“Realism vs. Exaggeration”** – views on whether the comedic portrayal felt realistic or purely farcical; (3) **“Identification and Catharsis”** – feeling proud or vindicated by the depiction of Chinese outsmarting the Japanese; (4) **“Ethical Ambivalence”** – some respondents feeling uneasy about laughing at atrocities. We selected illustrative quotes to represent each theme. These themes were used to triangulate the survey findings, illuminating the reasoning behind statistical trends.

Tables. Summary tables were prepared. Table 1 presents correlations and descriptive statistics for the survey variables. Table 2 reports the SEM path coefficients and fit indices. (See Results section for detailed interpretation.)

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative findings

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations. Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, and correlations. Intercultural competence (ICC) was moderately correlated with humor appreciation ($r = .42$, $p < .001$) and with interpretation orientation ($r = .21$, $p < .01$). Humor appreciation was also correlated with interpretation ($r = .31$, $p < .001$). Nationalist orientation correlated strongly with interpretation ($r = .58$, $p < .001$) and was uncorrelated with ICC ($r = .05$, n.s.). These patterns suggest ICC and humor appreciation are related, and that nationalist viewers tend toward a particular interpretation style. All scales met reliability criteria (ICC $\alpha = .87$; Humor $\alpha = .85$; Nationalism $\alpha = .83$; Interpretation $\alpha = .89$).

Structural Equation Model. The hypothesized model fit the data well: $\chi^2(84) = 103.5$, $p = .08$, $CFI = 0.94$, $RMSEA = 0.052$. Standardized path coefficients are presented in Table 2. Consistent with H1, ICC significantly predicted humor appreciation ($\beta = +0.40$, $p < .001$), indicating that more interculturally competent viewers enjoyed the film’s humor more. Also supporting H2, ICC had a direct positive effect on film interpretation ($\beta = +0.18$, $p < .05$); that is, higher ICC was associated with a more nuanced interpretation of the film (e.g. seeing it as satire rather than mere propaganda). Humor appreciation also predicted interpretation ($\beta = +0.22$, $p < .01$), in line with H3: viewers who found the film funnier tended to articulate a specific kind of interpretive outcome.

Nationalist orientation had a strong positive effect on interpretation ($\beta = +0.47$, $p < .001$), confirming H4 that viewers with stronger nationalist sentiment interpreted the film in a more patriotic/ingo-centric way (Li, 2016). Finally, the interaction term (ICC \times Nationalism) was significant ($\beta = -0.15$, $p < .05$), indicating that nationalism indeed moderated ICC’s effect on interpretation. Probing this interaction showed that for viewers high in nationalist orientation, ICC had little influence on interpretation (their high nationalism led them to a patriotic reading regardless of competence). In contrast, among viewers low in nationalism, ICC had a strong positive effect: more interculturally competent viewers interpreted the film in a less jingoistic way. This supports H5. Overall, the model explained 55% of the variance in interpretation scores ($p < .001$).

(Tables 1 and 2 are presented below.)

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations (N = 250)

Variable	Mean	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Intercultural Competence (ICC)	3.70	0.65	1			
2. Humor Appreciation	3.85	0.72	.42**	1		
3. Nationalist Orientation	4.20	0.58	.05	.08	1	
4. Film Interpretation (Propagandistic vs. nuanced)	3.10	0.85	.21**	.31**	.58**	1

Note: p < .01 (two-tailed). Higher interpretation scores indicate a more nationalist-aligned interpretation. ICC = intercultural competence.

Table 2. Structural Equation Model Path Coefficients

Path	β	SE	p-value
ICC → Humor Appreciation	0.40	0.06	< .001
ICC → Interpretation	0.18	0.08	.02
Humor Appreciation → Interpretation	0.22	0.07	.005
Nationalist Orientation → Interpretation	0.47	0.05	< .001
ICC × Nationalism → Interpretation	-0.15	0.07	.03

Model fit: $\chi^2(84) = 103.5$ (p = .08); CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.052.

4.2. Qualitative insights

Interview analysis enriched the quantitative findings. Participants frequently mentioned the film's intentional exaggeration and its dual effect of entertainment and patriotism. Many said they laughed at the absurdity of scenes – for example, one respondent noted how “the Japanese colonel riding a pig” was hilarious, yet also remarked that it “makes us feel powerful to poke fun at the enemy.” This aligns with the concept that viewers derive both amusement and a sense of catharsis. Themes included:

- **“Laughing with History.”** Several interviewees described humor as a coping mechanism. For instance, a young man commented: “It feels good to laugh at them when we know what they did. It's like payback through comedy.” This reflects how humor appreciation was entwined with nationalist pride.
- **“Realism vs. Exaggeration.”** Participants noted the film's mixture of historical facts and absurd comedy. A female student observed that the story lists real atrocities (Nanjing, Unit 731) which makes the outrage authentic; but the scenes are cartoonish. She said, “In my mind I switch – first I remember the real war, then I laugh at the silly joke. It's a weird feeling.” High-ICC interviewees specifically mentioned understanding this duality – recognizing the filmmakers' intent behind the humor.
- **“Identification and Catharsis.”** Viewers expressed identification with Chinese characters. One participant with nationalist leanings recounted feeling “proud and amused” when the film showed cunning peasants humiliating the enemy. He stated that these jokes “make Chinese people feel clever and strong again.” This illustrates how for some, the comedy reinforces ingroup solidarity.
- **“Ethical Ambivalence.”** Interestingly, several interviewees also felt uneasy at times. For example, one respondent reflected, “I know it's comedy, but sometimes I wonder if laughing at those tragedies is right.” This voice, more common among those with high ICC, suggests cognitive dissonance – acknowledging war's brutality even while it is parodied. This mirrors the quantitative result that ICC is linked with a more reflective interpretation.

In sum, interviews show that viewers did not simply passively absorb the film's messaging. They simultaneously enjoyed its jokes and grappled with its content, an interplay captured by the quantitative paths in the model. The qualitative themes validate that the film's humor can both reinforce nationalist sentiment and open a space for self-aware critique.

5. Discussion

The findings illuminate how individual differences shape the reception of a culturally charged comedy. First, the positive link between intercultural competence and humor appreciation (H1) suggests that those better equipped for cross-cultural understanding enjoyed the film's satire more. This fits with theories that cultural competence allows audiences to navigate the Benign Violation "sweet spot" and appreciate incongruous humor that might otherwise confuse or offend. For example, Yue et al. ^[16] found that cultural context affects whether humor is seen as a positive trait; in our data, viewers with broader cross-cultural experience may have a greater tolerance for irreverent jokes. Qualitative interviews support this: individuals who had studied abroad or consumed foreign media often remarked on the cleverness of the film's comedic twists, rather than taking them at face value ^[22].

Second, intercultural competence also directly predicted interpretation (H2). This indicates that ICC goes beyond mere enjoyment: it shapes meaning-making. Highly competent viewers tended to interpret *Hands Up!* in a more complex way – acknowledging its humor while noting its historical critique. This finding aligns with the qualitative theme of "ethical ambivalence." These viewers recognized the border between satire and propaganda, demonstrating cognitive flexibility. In contrast, viewers with lower ICC more often described the film simply as a triumphant war story. This suggests that ICC enabled a critical distancing, consistent with the BVT notion of psychological distance ^[23].

Third, humor appreciation itself influenced interpretation (H3). Those who laughed more also reported interpretations that integrated humor and message. This is consistent with humor theory: when people are entertained by a satire, they may be more receptive to the underlying meaning. In our context, enjoying *Hands Up!* seemed to facilitate an interpretive frame that mixed anger with amusement – as one interviewee put it, "I realize it's a joke, but it's a joke about something very real." In statistical terms, humor appreciation partially mediated the ICC → interpretation link, suggesting that part of why intercultural individuals interpreted the film carefully is because they engaged with its humor.

Fourth, nationalist orientation had a strong effect on interpretation (H4). Viewers scoring high on nationalist sentiment overwhelmingly read the film as affirmation of Chinese virtue and condemnation of Japan. They resonated with lines like "Your evil deeds will be remembered...". This was reflected quantitatively and echoed by interviews: many said the film "made me feel we won, they lost," indicating an ingroup/outgroup framing. This confirms scholarly observations that modern Chinese war narratives focus on demonizing the enemy, reinforcing collective identity. The result suggests that humor did not undercut propaganda, but instead became a tool for it – comedic humiliation of the Japanese other served nationalist ends, as academic commentary predicted.

Finally, nationalism moderated the influence of ICC (H5). The interaction effect shows that for highly nationalist viewers, intercultural competence made little difference – they interpreted the film along ideological lines regardless. However, among less nationalistic viewers, higher ICC led to significantly more nuanced interpretations. This highlights that ideology can override cognitive skill: a viewer may be capable of understanding satire but may choose not to if their beliefs are strong. In practical terms, this means that

efforts to promote intercultural understanding might have limited impact on media interpretation when nationalist sentiment is high.

Overall, the pattern of results supports a complex model of audience reception. The comedy of *Hands Up!* does not have a uniform effect. Instead, its impact depends on the viewer's intercultural skill and predispositions. Our findings resonate with Weiss's ^[24] analysis that while Chinese comedies portray Japanese soldiers as buffoons, Chinese viewers can receive these portrayals in diverse ways. In the aggregate, the structural model explained over half the variance in interpretation, indicating that these psychological and cultural factors are powerful predictors.

Limitations. Some limitations warrant note. The cross-sectional survey cannot establish causality. It is possible, for example, that enjoying the film's humor retroactively influenced self-assessed ICC rather than vice versa. The sample, though broad, was not random and skewed toward educated young adults; reactions may differ in older generations or rural viewers. Also, the measures (especially the new interpretation scale) have not been validated beyond this study, so results should be interpreted cautiously. The moderation finding was significant but modest; future work could explore other moderating variables such as age or media literacy. Qualitative findings help interpret results, but interview sample was small (N=15) and self-selected, possibly biasing towards those more reflective. Finally, focusing on one film limits generalizability; other anti-Japanese comedies (or non-comedic war films) might follow different patterns.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive picture of a complex phenomenon. It underscores that both intercultural and ideological lenses are crucial to understanding how audiences process politically charged humor.

These results suggest several directions for future work. First, media literacy and intercultural education could be used to foster critical viewing. If intercultural competence helps viewers see through propaganda elements, then incorporating ICC training into education might encourage more reflective media consumption. In China, where patriotic films are prevalent, classrooms could use *Hands Up!* as a discussion prompt to examine historical narratives critically.

Second, content creators should consider audience traits. A film like *Hands Up!* can achieve multiple purposes: at once reinforcing national pride and providing comic relief. Understanding that viewers with different backgrounds will take away different messages can guide filmmakers. For example, including subtler cues or multiple perspectives might engage cosmopolitan viewers without losing nationalist ones.

Third, the findings have cross-cultural significance. Chinese war comedies may not translate well abroad because international audiences lack the same historical frames. Thus, for China's soft power ambitions, it may be prudent to produce films with humor and conflict that are less culturally specific. Scholars of international communication might investigate how *Hands Up!* is received by overseas Chinese or by Japanese viewers (if available).

Finally, at a policy level, the study speaks to the politics of memory. The fact that audiences can enjoy *Hands Up!* while grappling with its message suggests that even state-sanctioned propaganda is not passively consumed. Media regulators and historians should note that public engagement with historical media is complex: while many Chinese embrace the patriotic narrative, others recognize the comedic framing. Acknowledging this diversity could inform how history is taught and commemorated in film.

6. Conclusion

Based on the evidence obtained by the survey and the interview, this research demonstrates that the reactions to Hands Ups! depend on the convergence of intercultural competence, appreciation of humor, and nationalist orientation. Greater intercultural competence is reported to increase the extent to which viewers appreciate the comedy in the movie as well as to describe differentiated inferences of the satire, whereas, higher nationalist orientation forecasts more of them being read in patriotic terms. The significance of intercultural competence in mediation between intercultural competence and interpretation is that humor appreciation partly mediates the relationship at which the nationalistic orientation plays the moderating role.

Such findings point out that political humor is a phenomenon that does not generate homogenous reaction. The effect of laughter in the pluralistic setting of an anti-Japanese war comedy can serve as a form of entertainment and ideological support, depending on the culture abilities of the watchers and political inclinations. The research connects personal dissimilarity to audiences response, which explains the negotiation of visual politics of an entertained enemy in the modern Chinese viewing scenario.

7. Limitations and future research

The research is based on cross-sectional self-reports and highly urban sample which restrict the causality and extrapolating the study to the other demographic populations. The model needs to be tested with more heterogeneous populations to account for greater effects of humor appreciation and nationalist orientation in the future research also to compare comedic and non-comedic war narratives and apply experimental or longitudinal designs to improve the isolation of causal effects of humor appreciation and nationalist orientation. It would also be a good idea to extend the analysis to China foreign audiences and such viewers as in Japan to explain the influence of intercultural distance on reception.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest

References

1. Guo, W. (2025). Conflict resolution in intercultural communication: Strategies for managing cultural conflicts. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12, 73. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04391-0>
2. Aririguzoh, S. (2022). Communication competencies, culture and SDGs: Effective processes to cross-cultural communication. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 9, 96. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01109-4>
3. Wilcox, E. (2019). Dance in wartime China: Liang Lun's choreographic migrations of the 1940s. *The Journal of Society for Dance Documentation and History*, 52, 45–75.
4. Hamamura, T., & Kobayashi, T. (2025). Geopolitics in language: A psychological view of Sino-Japanese relations over time. *Journal of Social Issues*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.70025>
5. Pang, H. T., Zhou, X., & Chu, M. (2024). Cross-cultural differences in using nonverbal behaviors to identify indirect replies. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 48(3), 323–344. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10919-024-00454-z>
6. Farkas, X. (2023). Visual political communication research: A literature review from 2012 to 2022. *Journal of Visual Political Communication*, 10(2), 95–126. https://doi.org/10.1386/jvpc_00027_1
7. Tarsoly, E., & Ćalić, J. (2025). When the “language of the enemy” is also one’s own: Re-making multilingual selves in times of war. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 25(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2025>
8. Dhanesh, G. S., Rossmann, K., Becktel, K. L., McKeever, B. W., & Sweetser, K. D. (2020). Visual communication and public relations: Visual frame building strategies in war and conflict stories. *Public Relations Review*, 46(1), 101852. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.102003>
9. Theisen, W., Kriel, R., & Crespo, R. A. (2025). Visual narratives and political instability: A case study of visual media prior to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. *Information, Communication & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2025.2492577>

10. Wu, X. (2020). Chains and arteries: Railways as visual propaganda during the Second Sino-Japanese War. *China and Asia*, 2(1), 57–96. <https://doi.org/10.1163/24519472-12340019>
11. Gustafsson, K. (2020). Understanding the persistence of history-related issues in Sino–Japanese relations: From memory to forgetting. *International Politics*, 57(6), 1047–1062. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-020-00219-7>
12. Weiss, A. (2016). Contested images of rape: The Nanjing Massacre in Chinese and Japanese films. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(2), 285–310. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683040>
13. Pozzi, L. (2015). “Chinese children rise up!”: Representations of children in the work of the Cartoon Propaganda Corps during the Second Sino-Japanese War. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 4(13), 333–363.
14. Li, D., Tan, K. H., Alias, J., & Mat, N. (2025). Global image of countries in international wars: A scoping review of influencing factors. *PLOS ONE*, 20(10), e0334095. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0334095>
15. Ouyang, D., & Yuan, W. (2021). The intergenerational transmission of historical conflicts: An application to China's trade. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 49(3), 675–692. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2021.01.005>
16. Yue, X., Jiang, F., Su, L., & Hiranandani, N. A. (2016). To be or not to be humorous? Cross-cultural perspectives on humor. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, Article 1495. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01495>
17. Tian, M. (2022). The legacy of the Second Sino-Japanese War in the People's Republic of China: Mapping the official discourses of memory. *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, 20(11), 4.
18. Chernobrov, D. (2025). Participatory propaganda and the intentional (re)production of disinformation around international conflict. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2025.2467433>
19. Tang, X. (2016). Street theater and subject formation in wartime China: Toward a new form of public art. *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, 18, 21–50. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ach.2016.0001>
20. Mukherjee, D. (2023). Media wars: Remaking the logics of propaganda in India's wartime cine-ecologies. *Modern Asian Studies*, 57, 1585–1614. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X22000427>
21. Li, Z., & Dawood, S. R. S. (2016). World cities formation in China: A comparative study of five pre-eminent cities. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(3), 203–210.
22. Zhai, Y., Xu, H., Wang, L., & Lu, S. (2025). Who feels hostile? National identity and attitudes toward Japan in China. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096251369526>
23. Jan, N., Jain, V., Li, Z., Sattar, J., & Tongkachok, K. (2022). Post-COVID-19 investor psychology and individual investment decision: A moderating role of information availability. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 873452.
24. Weiss, A. (2014). New masculinities in Chinese and Japanese combat films. *Asian Cinema*, 25(2), 165–182. https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.25.2.165_1