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Stand-up comedian Qiqi performs at a shopping mall in Beijing. — AFP photos



Stand-up comedian Qiqi



Stand-up comedian Qiqi sets off on her e-bike to a second show after performing at a theatre in Beijing.

China's trailblazing female comedians tackle taboos

Strutting onstage with well-honed confidence, 23-year-old comedian Qiqi is part of a new wave of young, female stand-up acts in China, crashing into what has always previously been a man's world. Her jokes were met with roars of laughter from the well-heeled young professionals watching in a packed Beijing theatre.

"I've always liked making people laugh ever since I was small, it gives me a sense of accomplishment," Qiqi told AFP, using her stage name. She is among those benefiting from a surge of interest in stand-up in China, thanks to a wildly popular new web series called "Rock & Roast". It racked up hundreds of millions of views this summer, and made viral sensations of several of its female stand-ups-their refreshingly outspoken anecdotes about awkward romantic encounters, body image and annoying male traits clearly striking a chord with audiences.

Millennial gripes

"My boss can't even properly describe the tasks he wants me to do," Qiqi, sporting dyed strawberry blonde pigtails and dangling cherry earrings, riffed to knowing chuckles from the crowd. "He said, 'Hey, can you arrange a meeting with so-and-so?' The person, time and place are all missing. It's like he expects us to have some kind of telepathic connection!"

Qiqi's full-time job is at an internet media company, and her sets often draw upon her daily life and common millennial complaints. She first dabbled in open mic performances three years ago, when stand-up was making its first inroads in China-shows where she says she "had no idea what she was doing". But the self-deprecation in her act is something fans are drawn to. "One of the biggest characteristics of female comedians is that they dare to laugh at themselves," said one audience mem-

ber after a recent performance. And Qiqi is steadily gaining fans, earning up to 9,000 yuan (\$1,400) a month from shows.

'Men swearing is normal'

"When I first arrived in Beijing after graduation, I realised Beijing has inherited an age-old traditional northern Chinese culture-swearing," ran another of Qiqi's jokes, playing on a trope well-known to her audience-the renowned surliness of the locals. Recalling her dealings with a foul-mouthed woman who runs a restaurant near her, she gleefully recounted profanity after profanity. Qiqi says she was once called "vulgar and cheap" for swearing by an online viewer, and argues that women are subjected to more scrutiny than their male counterparts. She shies away, though, from being labeled a "feminist"-seen as an inherently political term in China. Yang Mei, another Beijing-based

comedian, agrees that audiences "don't like female comedians swearing but see men swearing as normal, maybe because they think women are supposed to be more obedient."

Battle of the sexes

Yang, 27, left her film industry job last year to perform full-time. "I'm wearing a new jumper I bought for the occasion, just in case there are any hot guys in the audience," she quipped in one of her shows. "I just had a look around at the male audience members-I think I can probably take it off now."

She says web-streamed shows like "Rock & Roast" have brought the industry "forward by at least five to ten years". However, the increased exposure has also left contestants open to online criticism and abuse. One of the most prominent "Rock & Roast" contestants, Yang Li, gained legions of fans for a much-shared joke asking why men "look so

mediocre, but still have so much self-confidence?" But it prompted an angry backlash online, with a prominent Beijing law professor calling Yang and her fans "pampered little princesses".

And Yang Mei says she avoids jokes about controversial topics, because people would see it "as if their little sister or nursery school teacher suddenly decided to talk about sex". Yang and Qiqi both say overall, shows like "Rock & Roast" have encouraged women to try performing, and boosted their visibility. "I think women are natural performers, because we've been considerate of men's thoughts and feelings since we were little, but suppress our own," said Yang. "But nowadays, there are more and more channels for women to express themselves-including stand-up comedy." — AFP



Children feed donkeys in a yard at a dairy farm in the village of Paper. — AFP photos



Donkeys eat in a yard at a dairy farm in the village of Paper.

Udderly healthy: Donkey milk a hit in Albania

On a small farm south of Tirana, donkeys happily munch on hay while customers flock to scoop up bottles of their milk, a niche product winning fans who believe in its health benefits. Touted as rich in vitamins and a boost for the immune system, the high-priced milk has been flying off the shelf during the coronavirus pandemic-a time when many in Albania are looking for an extra health kick. "The demand for donkey milk is rising sharply" alongside virus infections, says 37-year-old Elton Kikia, the manager of the small farm in the village of Paper, where around a dozen of the small, knobby-kneed animals romp around a green pasture.

The high demand is good news for the donkeys themselves, whose comfortable lifestyle on the farm is a welcome respite from their traditional roles as beasts of burden. Typically enlisted to carry heavy loads and pull carts through Albania's mountainous terrain, donkeys are frequently subject to mistreatment, in the form of beatings, overwork or saddle sores. "Yet it is a very delicate animal, which to produce its milk needs tenderness and love," says Kikia.

Two years ago he left his job as a journalist to take over the family farm, which is only one of two in the country to raise donkeys for their milk. At 50 euros a litre, the price of their milk is exorbitant in a country where the average wage barely reaches 400 euros a month. But fears around Covid-19 have set off a flurry of interest. While no one is branding the milk as a cure for the virus, aficionados are convinced its nutritional profile-which is close to human milk-helps strengthen the body's natural defenses.

Klea Ymeri, a student in agro-environmental engineering, recently travelled to Paper to buy two 250 millilitre bottles to help her parents recover from COVID-19. "On top of the medicines they are taking, donkey's milk could be a good natural

remedy for the respiratory system", she told AFP. The family also uses some of the milk to make soaps, masks and other beauty products. Regina Beqiri, a relative and pharmacist who concocts the mixtures, says sales are up at a time when virus restrictions mean "people are spending more time at home and can take better care of their skin".

Two-way therapy

The farm currently has four pregnant donkeys and four milk-producing mothers, each with a calf. With a maximum production of three litres a day, "we can't meet the demand", Kikia told AFP, saying he plans to expand his herd to 100 donkeys. But that is no easy task in Albania, where the donkey population is on the decline. Waves of emigration from villages to cities, plus with the use of machines in agriculture, has shrunk the number of donkeys and breeders across the Balkan state. Milk production is thus also a way of "protecting" the species, according to the farmers, whose animals still bear the scars of their difficult past lives. "They are cared for and rehabilitated, including psychologically," says Riza Kikia, 71, Elton's father.

Geni, for example, is a white female donkey who arrived with a wounded ear and a scar-streaked back. "She was weak, sad, she didn't want to stay with the others. Now she plays, she eats well and she makes good milk", said Kikia. The donkeys are also a draw for local children from the village who come to take rides, feed and pet the animals. "This bond between the donkeys and the children is a therapy in itself," Kikia explained. "It is a psychological remedy that has magical effects, both on the behavior of the children and on that of the animals." — AFP



Donkeys stand in a yard at a dairy farm in the village of Paper.

New 'Star Wars' film 'Rogue Squadron' due in 2023

Disney announced a new "Star Wars" film from the director of "Wonder Woman" and several new TV series within the sci-fi franchise, including two spin-offs from the creators of smash hit "The Mandalorian." Patty Jenkins will direct "Rogue Squadron," which is set in "a future era of the galaxy" and will be the next "Star Wars" movie released, scheduled for Christmas 2023. "This story will introduce a new generation of starfighter pilots, as they earn their wings and risk their lives in a boundary-pushing, high-speed thrill ride," Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy told Disney's investor day.

Jenkins immediately posted on Twitter a video of herself donning a "Star Wars" starfighter helmet and marching toward

an X-wing, adding she had been inspired to take on the film by her air force pilot father. "So when he lost his life in service to this country, it ignited a desire in me to turn all of that tragedy and thrill into one day making the greatest fighter pilot movie of all time," she said. Jenkins will be the first woman to direct a "Star Wars" feature film.

Kennedy also announced "Rangers of the New Republic" and "Ahsoka," series for the Disney+ streaming platform that will be developed by Jon Favreau and Dave Filoni, set simultaneously and sharing storylines with their "Mandalorian" show that launched the enormously popular Baby Yoda character. "These interconnected shows, along with future stories, will excite new audiences, embrace our most passionate fans and will culminate in a climactic story event," said Kennedy. Another new series will be "Lando," based on fan favorite Lando Calrissian from the original "Star Wars" film trilogy. It will be helmed by "Dear White People" creator Justin Simien. — AFP

Disney+ streaming tops 86 million subscribers

Walt Disney chief executive Bob Chapek told investors that the company's year-old streaming TV service Disney+ had passed 86.8 million subscribers, beating its "wildest expectations." The entertainment giant is prioritizing exclusive programming, original shows and movies, and bundled streaming services to build on the momentum of its various offerings which extend beyond Disney+ to include ESPN, Hulu and Star, executives said during an investor day.

"We knew this one-of-a-kind service featuring content only Disney can create would resonate with consumers and stand out in the marketplace," Chapek said of Disney+. "This success has bolstered our confidence in our continued acceleration towards a direct-to-consumer first business model." Disney+ competes with streaming television titans Netflix and Amazon Prime in a crowded market for online entertainment. The streaming service, which will raise its US price by a dollar to \$7.99, "has exceeded our wildest expectations with 86.8 million subscribers as of December 2nd," Chapek said.

In a recent corporate reorganization, Disney split distribution from content creation in an effort to be more nimble in its delivery of shows to viewers, according to executives. Data gathered by Disney+ on audience preferences is shared with creative teams to tailor shows to viewers' tastes, the company said. "This is especially important now given consumers' rapidly changing consumption behaviors and the prolonged uncertainty due to the pandemic," Chapek said. Given the pandemic, Disney has planned film premiers on its streaming service and when feasible also at traditional theaters.

Positioning for 'future growth'

Regardless of where Disney content premiers, it will end up on Disney+ according to media and entertainment division chief Kareem Daniel. "While this has been a very tough year for all of us here at Disney, we continue to take deliberate and innovative steps in running our businesses to best position them for future growth," Chapek said. The company has an array of Marvel, Star Wars and Disney shows lined up for release on its streaming service over the next few years, according to Daniel.

Disney will expand its television streaming services in 2021 to more markets, including Hong Kong, South Korea and Eastern Europe, according to head of international operations Rebecca Campbell. Disney will also beef up its streaming service in India, where it has a partnership with Hotstar. — AFP