

No Pun at All

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Our office gets lots of calls from clients who felt they were wrongfully terminated from their jobs. For example, last week I got a call from a client who was fired from his job at the calendar factory because he took a day off. I said I couldn't help him because I knew his days were numbered.

Another called after getting fired from the dairy for getting in the whey. A massage therapist was let go for rubbing people the wrong way. A man who worked at the orange juice factory couldn't concentrate, so he was canned. A cemetery employee couldn't urn a living after making a grave mistake.

Anyone who meets me quickly learns (usually to their great dismay) that I love puns. I tell them all the time and they're all terrible. I tried quitting for 168 hours, but found out giving up puns for seven days makes one weak.

That's why I'm very lucky that this column doesn't appear in Chinese newspapers.

Last month, the Chinese State General Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television issued an order restricting puns and irregular wordplay on television, in advertising and other media.

The agency posted the new policy on its website, claiming the use of puns could mislead young readers. As a result, it will be more difficult to promote traditional Chinese culture.

The Chinese use puns often because their language contains so many homophones, or words that sound alike but mean different things. Access to the Internet has increased the use of puns in China exponentially, and traditionalists fear the people will lose their old ways.

Under the new policy, the media is required to comply with the standard use, phrasing and meanings of characters and idioms, or sayings. The rule is particularly intended to protect the integrity of traditional Chinese phrases that the agency claims is "one of the great features of the Chinese language." Straying from tradition, officials warn, will result in "cultural and linguistic chaos."

Insiders view the new anti-pun rule as the latest move in the Chinese government's effort to control the media and revert to more traditional values. Cai Fuchao, chairman of the regulation bureau, recently asserted that today's movies and TV shows are "rubbish" and he campaigned for a return to conservative Chinese social values. Similarly, in a speech to television and movie personalities, President Xi Jinping asked the artists to "uphold the Chinese spirit."

There is no word yet on what the pun-ishment will be for violators of the rule.

I'm just lucky that I don't live in China. If I couldn't tell puns, I think I'd die. But who am I kidding – old lawyers never die, we just lose our appeal