

POOR HUMOR

Poverty really is no laughing matter, especially the type that limits the imagination

By SUN JIAHUI
The World of Chinese

There is a popular old joke, often used to mock people who — let us put it delicately — lack much knowledge, experience or imagination: Two poor farmers are plowing the fields and begin talking about what the emperor's life must be like. One says: "The emperor can probably eat as many steamed buns as he likes for every meal." The other one replies: "Yes! And the hoe he uses to work the fields must be made of pure gold!"

It is a pretty good, albeit obvious, punchline that describes what some see as a genuine social phenomenon, summarized in the web slang "贫穷限制了我的想象力" (Pín qióng xiàn zhì le wǒ de xiǎng xiàng lì. Poverty has limited my imagination), a phrase first popularized in 2017.

The exact origin of this expression is unknown, but most learned of it after one of China's highest-paid actresses, Fan Bingbing, showed off her engagement ring — featuring a shockingly huge diamond. Some netizens innocently wondered about the practicalities of doing everyday tasks with "such a heavy thing on her hand". Predictably, such questions incurred a chorus of mockery: "Did you think she had to hand-wash her clothes every day?" others jeered. The people who asked the question in the first place were forced to admit: "Poverty has limited my imagination."

About 1,300 years ago, China's greatest realist poet, Du Fu, in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907), gave voice to the poor and wretched with his savage stanza. 朱门酒肉臭，路有冻死骨。(Zhū mén jiǔ ròu chòu, lù yǒu dòng sǐ

gǔ). "While the portals of the rich reek of sour meat and wine/Outside these gates, frozen bodies lie by the wayside."

But today, many people choose to face the income gap with humor and self-mockery, rather than satirizing the superrich. Perhaps it is because, rather than those truly living in extreme poverty, it is members of the middle class who like to proclaim themselves poor. You may have heard the bewildering expression "五行缺钱" (wǔ xíng quē qián, short of money among the Five Elements). The Five Elements, or *wuxing* (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), are a fivefold conceptual framework in many traditional Chinese fields, used to explain everything from cosmic cycles to the interactions between internal organs.

In folk beliefs, many people attribute bad luck to the lack of a particular "element" in their life. But for many people, poverty is the greatest misfortune, hence the joke: "The one *wuxing* element I am really short of is money."

Still, in other cases, it is rich folks spending their money conspicuously who become the target of teasing and ridicule. There is a term for these extravagant fools — 人傻钱多 (rén shǎ qián duō, rich in dollars, poor in sense) — who are soon parted from their money.

But sometimes it can be hard to define someone's exact expenditure, especially in these times of online economies and cryptocurrencies. For example:

He donated tens of thousands of yuan to a livestreamer — is he just a rich idiot, or has poverty limited my imagination?

Tā dǎ shǎng le jǐ wàn kuài gěi wǎng luò zhǔ bō. Shì tā rén shǎ qián duō, hái shì pín qióng xiàn zhì le wǒ de xiǎng xiàng lì?

他打赏了几万块给网络主播。是他人傻钱多，还是贫穷限制了我的想象力？

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贫



穷



pín qióng, poverty