

Comic Visions of Modern China: Introduction

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In May 1939, a Kunming literary journal published an essay by Qian Zhongshu entitled “On Laughter” (Shuo xiao), which begins:

Since humor literature was first promoted, “selling laughter”¹ has become a profession for men of letters. Humor is, of course, vented by means of laughter, but laughter is not necessarily an indication of humor. Liu Jizhuang’s *Guangyang Notes* states, “The donkey’s bray sounds like crying; the horse’s whinny sounds like laughter.”² Yet the horse is not celebrated as a great humorist—likely because he has a long face. In truth, most people’s laughter is akin to the horse’s whinny and cannot be considered humorous.³

Although he never names his target, Qian goes on to object to Lin Yutang’s crusade to inculcate humor (*youmo*) and its purported humanistic values in his countrymen. Promoting humor, Qian argues, cannot help but transform its fluid nature into mechanical doctrine, thereby destroying its essence; and instead of eliciting the pleasant ring of silvery laughter, this counterfeit humor can only give off the dull thud of a leaden slug. Appearing in the third year of the War of Resistance against Japan, however, Qian’s contribution to the polemics of laughter seems oddly belated. After all, it had been seven years since Lin’s humor magazine *The Analects Fortnightly* took Shanghai by storm, sparking a wide-ranging public debate about

¹ The pejorative expression *maixiao*, usually translated as “selling smiles,” is most often associated with courtesans, prostitutes, and sing-song girls, the latter of whom might clarify to clients that she “sells smiles but not my body” (*maixiao bu maishen*).

² Jizhuang is the style name (*zi*) of the early-Qing scholar Liu Xianting (1648–1695). *Guangyang Notes* (*Guangyang zaji*) is an important Qing collection of “notes” (*biji*) on various historical, legal, administrative, geographical, agricultural, medical, and artistic topics.

³ The earliest version of this essay appeared in a series titled “Cold Room Jottings” (*Lengwu suibi*) published in *Criticism Today* (*Jinri pinglun*) in May 1939 while Qian was teaching at Southwestern United University in Kunming. The title phrase *shuo xiao* carries two additional meanings besides “On Laughter”: telling jokes or funny



stories; and, most literally, talking and laughing. The essay was republished in 1941 in Qian's collection, *Written on the Margins of Life* (Xie zai rensheng bian Shang).

what type of laughter China needed. By 1939, the "humor age" in China seemed to have already passed—*The Analects*, like most of its imitators, had folded in 1937 following the Japanese attack on Shanghai, and Lin himself had long since left China for the United States. Who, besides the transplanted students of Southwestern United University, could appreciate Qian's rejoinder from the margins?

Comedy in modern China has often been displaced by historical contingency, but historical contingency has just as often been a comic muse. The same war that expelled Lin, the "Master of Humor," from China and marginalized "On Laughter" also inspired Qian Zhongshu's great Menippean satire, *Fortress Besieged* (Weicheng, 1947), and generated a flourishing of comic drama in occupied Shanghai and Nationalist Chongqing. Indeed, examples of this productive relationship can be found in many periods of China's modern history, from the "playful" (*youxi*) gallows humor found in late-Qing literary magazines to the joke books that circulated underground during the Cultural Revolution.

Yet contemporary historiography—Chinese and foreign—has rarely paused in recounting modern China's epic tale of political catastrophes and self-inflicted traumas to register the laughter that helped its citizens endure—and sometimes even enjoy—life amidst disruption and turmoil. Within China, critical neglect of comedy has been due in part to the enduring "old society" vs. "New China" paradigm, which depends on a record of historical suffering to serve as its foil to a narrative of ongoing revolution or modernization. Its logic presumes that pre-Liberation comedy could not exist, except as a discourse of resistance by the oppressed. Outside China, the Mao period (1949–1976) has traditionally been regarded as devoid of comedy—an era that was "comic" only in the most farcical and ironic sense.⁴ Chinese comedy—particularly Hong Kong film comedies—has come to be recognized as a "mainstream" cultural phenomenon only in the mass-media culture of recent decades.

We must thus ask to what degree the historical "contingencies" that

⁴ Two notable exceptions are Marja Kaikkonen's 1990 Ph.D. dissertation, *Laughable Propaganda: Modern Xiangsheng as Didactic Entertainment* (Stockholm: Stockholm University) and Perry Link's (2007) recent book chapter, "The Crocodile Bird: Xiangsheng in the Early 1950s." On the Mao era as a "divine comedy," and for a general introduction to late-Qing and Republican comic culture, see Christopher Rea 2008: esp. 399–401.





resulted in the exclusion of comedy from modern China's literary canon have been accidental, rather than the result of other agendas. C. T. Hsia's notion of the "obsession with China" long ago recognized that modern Chinese writers were preoccupied with national suffering, and even the arch-pessimist Lu Xun himself once criticized his countrymen's compulsion to "pull a long face" when discussing national affairs.⁵ Virtually all subsequent major histories of modern Chinese literature have glossed over comedy, however, acknowledging laughter as legitimate only when it is paired with bitterness. Chinese people have been said to be caught "between tears and laughter" (*tixiao jiefei*), to have "not known whether to laugh or cry" (*ku xiao bu de*), or, at best, to have managed to "make merry amidst their bitterness" (*ku zhong zuo le*). Consequently, authors such as Xu Zhudai or Ding Xilin, discussed in this issue by Christopher Rea and John Weinstein, respectively, have been reduced to mere footnotes in a grand narrative of literary struggle. Other well-known authors, such as Zhang Ailing, have had their significant contributions to comedy ignored. As Kenny Ng's article shows, however, an investigation of Zhang's repertoire as a comedic screenwriter offers fascinating new insights into one of the most celebrated cultural figures of modern China.

Comedy's marginal position in Chinese literary history in particular—especially considering its enduring commercial value—begs historiographical questions. Which comedic authors and works have been included in the history of modern Chinese literature, and which have been excluded? When, why, and by whom? Our ideas about what is "mainstream" and what is "minor" or "marginal" have been shaped by both key participants in the literary field and forces outside the realm of cultural production. To name but one such intervention (albeit a highly influential one), the solemnizing literary debates that led to the canonization of May Fourth "New Literature" delegitimized a wide spectrum of commercially driven literatures, ranging from sentimental romances to farcical *huaji* fiction. Thus, although the compilers of influential collections such as the *Compendium*

⁵ In a short essay entitled "From Humour to Gravity" (*Cong youmo dao zhengjing*, 1933), Lu Xun (1985: 3: 261) wrote: "I am really afraid there will soon be a law ordering all citizens to pull long faces. Laughing was not illegal to begin with. But then unhappily the northeastern provinces were lost, the whole nation was aghast, and when patriots sought the cause for our loss of territory they discovered that one reason was the young people's love of pleasure and addiction to ballroom dancing."



of *New Chinese Literature* (Zhongguo xin wenxue daxi, 1935–1936) were not prejudiced against laughter per se (their selection criteria may indeed have bolstered modes such as satire), their rejection of literature written for entertainment purposes led to the exclusion of all those forms of laughter that did not testify to a traumatic reality or militate against it. Hence, any contemporary writings that did not subscribe to the grand narratives of the nation and its suffering were denied the status of “New Literature,” the label defining the new “mainstream.”

These canonization decisions had implications beyond the immediate May Fourth context; they retroactively affected the status of entertainment literature from before the age of “New Literature,” and they colored the reception of comic writing in subsequent decades. Wide swaths of “commercial” literature from the late-Qing and early-Republican periods, for instance, were dismissed as trivial once new literary histories began appearing in the 1930s (not coincidentally, many of these works were penned by chief protagonists of “New Literature”) that in turn prejudiced many later historians against comedy. After the founding of the People’s Republic, some of the most vocal advocates of the new “mainstream” literature and film, such as Mao Dun, Guo Moruo, and Xia Yan, found themselves in leading positions in the new cultural and educational bureaucracies, from where they were able, with the help of state power, to turn into national policy a position that had originated as a radical polemic twenty or thirty years earlier. The cultural monitoring system in the PRC took a narrowly defined approach to humor, actively discouraging writers and filmmakers from making comedies that were not “eulogistic” (*gesong*). The implications of these processes for the fates of comedy and humor, laughter and play, have yet to be fully understood. The powerful legacy of historical contingencies and the conscious interventions into the process of canonizing modern Chinese literature, however, are readily apparent, for example, from the debates even in the late twentieth century, when discourse surrounding Wang Shuo’s “hooligan” novels centered

on the moralistic question of their purported lack of “socially redeeming value” rather than on the aesthetic achievements of their farcical plots and language.

How has comedy mattered to China? For one, comedy, which we interpret broadly to mean any mode of imagination or representation that elicits smiles or laughter, is clearly implicated in the history of emotions, because it aims at affective response. Comedy in modern China, like love (Lee 2006), has subscribed to its own “structures of feeling.” Tragicomedy, for instance, was a prominent vein of comedy in the Republican period and the Mao era, embodied by Zhang Leping’s cartoon orphan Sanmao, the laughable yet despicable Ah Q, and any number of onscreen Chinese imitators of Chaplin’s Little Tramp. Mockery, a malicious mode of comedy, on the other hand, can be regarded as the unsympathetic flip side to the late imperial “cult of *qing*” (Huang 1998; Lee 2006: 25–59) or the rise of “popular sympathy” (Lean 2007) during the Republican period.

Comedy is also a powerful rhetorical discourse that Chinese artists have turned to in order to sanction, critique, subvert, and transform established patterns of thought and expression. If the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction writers of the 1910s parodied new jargon and social situations to make them seem less threatening to their readers (Link 1981), Zhang Tianyi’s “Mr. Hua Wei” (Hua Wei xiansheng, 1938) shook up the wartime literary scene by inventing a Chinese pseudo-patriot whom anyone—even the Japanese—might wield as a satirical weapon. Joke telling, as Chinese politicians and cultural icons alike have recognized, is a way to assert authority and accrue cultural capital. Witticisms ascribed to Deng Xiaoping such as “It does not matter whether the cat is black or white; as long as it catches mice, it is a good cat” helped to bolster his image as a wise leader and rhetorically preempt criticism of his policies. Comedy, then, is a discourse that has appreciably influenced modern China’s social and political power structures.

This special issue is entitled “Comic Visions” to acknowledge that

comedic sensibilities project, as well as reflect, worldviews. As both modes of observation and techniques of representation, satire, parody, and farce each encourage their audience to adopt a particular interpretive stance toward the world. Whereas Wu Jianren's *Strange Events Eyewitnessed Over Twenty Years* (Ershi nian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang, 1903–1910) invites readers to view the “abject carnival” (Wang 1997) of late-Qing officialdom as a spectator sport, Lu Xun's “The True Story of Ah Q” conveys its bitter judgment on the Chinese national character through comedic sarcasm and irony. Yang Jiang's novel *Baptism* (Xizao, 1987), written decades later, offers a humorous retrospective on the petty manipulations of a literary research institute engulfed in the political tides of the Mao era. In a different vein, Feng Xiaogang's film *Big Shot's Funeral* (Da wan, 2001) both mocks and pays homage to the excesses of contemporary multimedia advertising. Even more recently, bloggers have contributed their own sarcastic reactions to the current fad for blockbuster costume dramas through home-edited spoofs circulated via the World Wide Web.

We are also interested in the opposite question: what can China tell us about comedy? The essays contained in this issue show how China's comic visions intersect with other discourses, including those mentioned here, but they are concerned first and foremost with the nature of the risible itself. Xinyu Dong rereads the well-known film comedy *Laborer's Love* (Laogong zhi aiqing, 1922) within the transnational context of early global cinema. Drawing on Neil Harris's notion of “the operational aesthetic,” Dong reveals that *Laborer's Love* shared with its European and American counterparts a playful delight in gags, gadgets, devices, and the mischievous potential of the cinematic apparatus. Dong's layered reading situates the figure of the playful laborer in love within an industrial age besotted with technological innovation. She argues that *Laborer's Love* constitutes a “comedy of inventions” in which “invention suggests the invention of cinema as well as the inventiveness of the laborer” and of the filmmakers. By coining this genre category in her essay, Dong opens up a new interpretive lens on early

Chinese cinema's comic fascination with the way things work.

Christopher Rea explores how cultural entrepreneurs in Republican Shanghai promoted a culture centered on a comic sensibility known as *huaji*. Focusing on the life and works of the popular fiction writer and jack-of-all-trades Xu Zhuodai, Rea illustrates how Xu imagined "*Huaji* Shanghai" as an arena that had been made "funny" by cultural agents like himself who were adept at multiple modes of cultural production, including drama, cinema, and advertising. Rea identifies the hoax as a leitmotif in Xu's "funny" stories, and explains how it functions both within a work of fiction as a narrative device that simulates a comical writer-reader relationship, and at a metatextual level as a literary practical joke that the writer uses to draw his readers into a community of laughter. In addition to retracing the genealogy of modern China's comic cultures, Rea uncovers the cosmic vision beneath Xu's comedic treatment of media themes such as plagiarism and false advertising, and explains how it represents a creative commentary on the increasing prevalence of entrepreneurial modes of cultural agency.

John Weinstein's article contrasts the comic visions of two masters of modern drama, Ding Xilin and Chen Baichen. Drawing on contemporary audience reviews and firsthand accounts from performers themselves, Weinstein shows how the witty protagonist of Ding's humorous comedy *A Wasp* (*Yizhi mafeng*, 1923) struck a chord with May Fourth-era Beijing youth in search of a new language and new role models. Student performers sought to convey Ding's combination of Wildean aestheticism and Ibsenian realism through a "natural" acting style that would give voice to their collective desire for self-actualization. Chen Baichen, in contrast, sought to divide his postwar audience through aggressive satire that exaggerated behavioral differences. In his 1945 masterpiece *Promotion Scheme*, Weinstein argues, Chen creates a collective protagonist—the proletarian mob—that disassembles "the tidy triumvirate of author, character, and spectator" we find in Ding's plays. With the angry mob as

his authorial voice, Chen added a disruptive and unpredictable element to his satire in an (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to preempt a backlash from the officials he ruthlessly mocked.

More gentle, and subtly melancholy, were the comic screenplays of Zhang Ailing (Eileen Chang), who entered the movie business after World War II out of political and financial necessity. Kenny Ng investigates a little-explored chapter in the celebrated author's career by comparing the screenplays she wrote in Shanghai during the late 1940s with those she wrote in the 1950s and 1960s for the Hong Kong film industry. Rather than posit Zhang as an "auteur," Ng reinterprets her as "cultural broker" subject to the demands of the studio system and audience expectations. Ng explores how Zhang's romantic film comedies mediated between the narrative conventions and affective modes of Chinese sentimental comedy and Hollywood screwball comedy. He shows how Zhang self-consciously adapted and transformed both indigenous and imported styles, considering the tastes and preferences of her audiences in Shanghai and, later, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. In the process, Zhang's scripts redefined the nature of film comedies in Hong Kong cinema, and opened up new possibilities for Chinese comic writing.

How did comic artists who remained in mainland China after the founding of the People's Republic laugh, and at what? Ying Bao's case study of the filmmaker Lü Ban examines the precarious existence of film comedy and its practitioners in New China through the Hundred Flowers movement (1956–1957). Bao reads Lü's *Unfinished Comedy* (Meiyou wancheng de xiju, 1957), a social satire that was banned before its release, as a metacinematic commentary on both the relationship between the artist and the state and comedy's genre crisis in the early 1950s. During the brief liberalization in 1957, filmmakers tested the permissibility of laughter in a socialist society, poking fun even at the authority of the Party-state, represented in the film by a buffoonish censor who is punished for his ignorance of comedy with mocking laughter. Bao takes us through the history, politics, and polemics

surrounding Lü's film, and explains the significance of his comic response to mass ideology.

Kin-Yan Szeto's essay gives us a fresh look at Jackie Chan, the most globally recognizable face of contemporary Chinese comedy. Examining Chan's cinematic career as a whole, Szeto detects a "cosmopolitical consciousness" at work in his construction of comic personae vis-à-vis genre conventions and the film industries of Hong Kong and Hollywood. Chan, she shows, has defined his public image in terms of displacement rather than rootedness, "appropriating, cutting, and mixing" onscreen identities, even by mimicking cinematic icons of masculinity such as James Bond and John Wayne. Just as Chan's opportunistic fighting style makes use of tactical retreats and pratfalls to eventually defeat his opponents, so has Chan both "collided" and "colluded" with prevailing ideologies and power structures in order to achieve his goals as a filmmaker. As a cosmopolitical agent, then, Chan has used his comic skills to maintain his "always both outside and inside" status, which allows him to continuously add new associations and redefine his own identity.

A number of common observations about modern Chinese comedy emerge from these essays, only a few of which we mention here. First, cultural agents in modern China have tended to adopt comic modes not to elude social, political, and humanistic issues, but rather to engage with them by redefining interpretive frameworks and perspectives. The shape-shifting tricksters who appear in Dong's, Rea's, and Szeto's papers, for instance, use disguise and ingenuity to re-center the world around their own larger-than-life personae. They refuse to accept predetermined interpretive and discursive roles and instead create new vantage points, poking fun at those who fail to see their own ridiculousness. Both Dong and Bao draw attention to glasses as a filmic prop that obscures rather than enhances vision. The camera in Zhang Ailing's films discussed in Ng's article, too, peeps at characters from unconventional angles. In all of these cases, comedic points of view de-center an established vision and challenge

patriarchal, political, and gender hierarchies.


Second, these agents' laughter is highly self-reflexive. The derisive undertones of the verb "xiao" (laugh, mock) may partially account for why Chinese cultural critics have often been ambivalent about laughter and interpreted it primarily as an attack against others. In these essays, however, we see that laughter probes the self, constructing, as well as deconstructing, individual and collective subjectivities. This tendency appears, for instance, in the works of Xu Zhuodai, Lü Ban, Jackie Chan, and the makers of *Laborer's Love*, all of whom conspicuously draw our attention to their own roles as performers and producers, even as they entertain and amuse us. They critique and reimagine not just their object-environments (e.g., "society") but also the very nature of cultural practice. If Qian Zhongshu (1939: 13) is to be believed, "true humor can laugh at itself. It not only has a humorous view of human life, it has a humorous view of humor itself." The prominence of metatextual and metacinematic awareness in almost all of the works discussed in this issue and the inventiveness with which they transcend the conventions of "realism" testify to laughter's power and sophistication as a narrative mode.

Third, laughter travels. Belying the notion that humor is notoriously difficult to translate, the essays assembled in this issue provide ample evidence for humor's translatability across genres, industries, cultures, languages, and national borders. Indeed, comic aesthetics clearly thrive on borrowing, recycling, and repackaging existing forms and conventions. Weinstein and Dong point out the successful appropriation of foreign genres, and protagonists in the films discussed by Szeto and Ng travel across physical boundaries, showing us that humor arises from interactions between different languages and cultures, be they Shanghainese and Cantonese, or Chinese and English. Comedy thus emerges as a highly flexible and adaptable genre that joins rather than separates different audiences from different backgrounds.

The six essays in this volume cover only a fraction of a translingual

and multinational modern Chinese comic universe. Fiction, cinema, spoken drama, comic strips, animation, radio, folk songs, the Internet, and performance traditions such as *xiangsheng*, *huaji xi*, and opera are but a few of the rich fields awaiting further exploration. Mainland China and Hong Kong, both represented here, also constitute only part of the geopolitical map of Chinese comedy, which also includes Taiwan, Singapore, and overseas Chinese communities. Although the essays assembled here delve into both diachronic and spatial dimensions of modern Chinese laughter, much more work is needed to fully reconstruct the genealogy of Chinese comedy.

The observations in this introduction and in the essays that follow ultimately raise a broader question: what would a history of modern Chinese literature and culture look like if written from the vantage point of laughter and humor? The complexity of the issues discussed here should make it clear that comedy is more than a footnote to the history of modern Chinese literature, and that to treat it merely as an adjunct or supplement to the standard curriculum would be to undervalue the breadth and depth of comic imaginings in modern China. The essays in this issue reveal lineages in comic writing and filmmaking that stretch from the late Qing up to today, lineages that call for a more radical shift in perspective. Almost thirty years ago, revisionist historiography inspired more thoughtful appraisals of the long critically-despised Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies fiction and demonstrated that the heterogeneous language and subject matter of that “popular” literature resist the binary of high versus low literatures (Link 1981). Similarly, recent reappraisals of modernist writing from the 1930s (e.g., Lee 1999) indicate the instability of genre definitions and moralistic judgments about the legitimacy of cultural creation. In just this vein, it may finally be time to devote much more attention to the rich body of comedy in twentieth-century China. It is our sincere hope that this issue will serve as a starting point for inquiries into comedy, humor, and laughter in modern Chinese literature and culture.



The idea of this special issue sprung from a panel on “Making Light of the Modern: Hoaxes and Jokes in Modern Chinese Literature and Film,” which was presented at the 2007 Association of Asian Studies Annual Meeting in Boston. Two of the original papers (Dong and Rea) appear here, and we would like to thank Michael Hill and Paize Keulemans for sharing their ideas with us in Boston, even though both decided, each for his own reasons, not to submit their papers to this special issue. The contributors who joined us as the special issue grew present exciting and stimulating research that throws new light not just on comedy in modern China, but on the complex landscape of modern Chinese literature and culture in general. We would also like to express our gratitude to Kirk Denton for having the vision to see “Comic Visions” through to publication. We believe that much more can and should be said about Chinese comedy, not least to keep at bay the dreaded horse’s whinny.

