

Maoist Laughter

Edited by Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath

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Introduction: The Study of Laughter in the Mao Era

Ping Zhu

The Study of Laughter

In the famous *xiangsheng* 相聲 (cross talk) “The Study of Laughter” (“Xiao de yanjiu” 笑的研究, 1958),¹ which had been performed by celebrated comedian duo Hou Baolin 侯寶林 and Guo Quanbao 郭全寶 since the late 1950s, Hou promotes *xiangsheng* as an art of laughter that can boost people’s physical well-being. Citing contemporary medical sciences and the Chinese proverb “A good laugh makes one younger” (*Xiaoyixiao, shaoyishao* 笑一笑，少一少), Hou claims that laughter can prolong life and enhance health; therefore, he proposes “laughter therapy” as a cure for physical diseases by exerting an exhilarating impact on the mind.

Although the idea of having a “*xiangsheng* department” in hospitals was meant as a whimsical joke, “The Study of Laughter” reveals many facets of the eminence of laughter in the Mao era (1949–1976).² Like this *xiangsheng* piece, the new socialist China also regarded laughter as one of its salient trademarks. The socialist zeitgeist, it is said, is manifest in a euphoric spirit in which people “bid farewell to the past and welcome the new life with laughter.”³ As the above *xiangsheng* suggests, the Mao era associated laughter with the notion of (ideological) health and even promoted “healthy laughter” (*jiankang de xiao* 健康的笑) under the auspices of socialism.⁴ While “The Study of Laughter” jokes about incorporating laughter in medical institutions, the Mao era indeed institutionalized laughter as a social practice and an ideological discourse. The study of laughter, as the title of the *xiangsheng* puts it,

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1. The Chinese character *xiao* 笑 can be translated as laughter, smile, giggle, chuckle, jester, mockery, ridicule, snigger, smirk, titter, and so on. This volume uses “laughter” as the translation of *xiao* in general. Specified forms of *xiao* are translated differently in the chapters of this volume.
 2. The official “Mao era” coincides with China’s socialist period from 1949 to 1976. However, since Mao Zedong became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party after the Zunyi Conference 遵義會議 in 1935, this volume includes the Yan’an Period (1935–1948) as the prelude of the Mao era.
 3. Feng Zi, “Tan juchang zhong de xiao,” *Juben*, no. Z1 (1961): 100.
 4. One of the most popular phrases used in Mao-era political writings is “cure the disease and save the person” (*zhibing jiuren* 治病救人), which referred to the ideological rectification process for anyone who did not align with the socialist ideas.

was a prominent area of inquiry during the Mao era that has been largely neglected until this study.

The Mao era has been viewed as an emblematic segment of twentieth-century China's history, which was fraught with violence, monstrosity, pain, trauma, and tragedies.⁵ After the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched a campaign to denounce any leftist mistakes made during the Mao years, giving rise to a wave of literary and cultural representations that depicted the Mao era as oppressive, puritanical, traumatic, and inhuman.⁶ Abroad, such grim impressions have been reinforced by personal memoirs written by the Chinese diaspora that portray, in an exuberant manner, the horror and cruelty of the Mao era.⁷ The combined force of these representations in China and abroad have cemented the perception that the Mao era was a gloomy period incompatible with laughter as a genuine expression of happiness and freedom and that laughter should be pitted against the Mao era as a weapon of defiance or a manifestation of the era's political failure.⁸ In this Hegelian process of negation, laughter has been sundered from the history of the Mao era and deployed as an expression of resistance. This epistemological paradigm has neglected the extensive, if not exhaustive, "study of laughter" that was undertaken during the Mao era; it has thus failed to examine the historical dimension of laughter and the laughable, as well as the relationship between politics and laughter in the Mao era.

From the vantage point of the twentieth-first century, a few scholars have started to extend humor studies to twentieth-century China. The 2013 coedited volume *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture* contains essays that explore different forms of humor in modern and postsocialist China, with passing mention of the Mao era.⁹ In *The Age of Irreverence* Christopher Rea has excavated a history of laughter in modern China (from the 1890s to the 1930s) that supplements the history of "blood and tears."¹⁰ A recent volume on political humor in China tells readers that

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5. The most recent representative scholarly works that portray the twentieth-century Chinese history in such terms include Yomi Braester's *Witness Against History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), David Der-wei Wang's *The Monster That Is History* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), Ban Wang's *Illuminations from the Past* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), Michael Berry's *A History of Pain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), and Frank Dikötter's *The Tragedy of Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
 6. For example, "scar literature" (*shanghen wenxue* 傷痕文學) was the literary representation of the post-Mao political discourse. The same political discourse is also represented in contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang's 張曉剛 (1958–) *Bloodline* (*Xueyuan* 血緣) series of paintings, which consistently feature the Mao-era family members with grim facial expressions.
 7. Many Western readers' knowledge of the Mao era comes from Chinese diaspora's memoirs, such as Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* (1991) and Anchee Min's *Red Azalea* (1994).
 8. Yue Minjun's 岳敏君 (1962–) paintings of the laughing men and Han Shaogong's (1953–) story "The Leader's Demise" (*Lingxiu zhi si* 領袖之死) offer visual and literary examples of the laughter as either defiance or political failure in the post-Mao era.
 9. Jessica M. Davis and Jocelyn Chey, eds., *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).
 10. Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

it is “not just a laughing matter,” but a rich field for critical inquiries.¹¹ As socialist China has lately attracted exponentially more scholarly attention, the Mao-era comedy is becoming a prominent area of critical inquiry. In 2014 Zhuoyi Wang, one of the editors of this volume, published *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema*, in which he discusses Maoist film comedies at length.¹² Ying Bao’s 2008 dissertation, “In Search of Laughter in Maoist China: Chinese Comedy Film, 1949–1966,” examines the heterogeneity of the production and reception of comedy film in the first seventeen years of the Mao era.¹³ Wang’s and Bao’s studies, in particular, reveal the complex ideological contestations and transmutations behind Maoist film comedies, which had hitherto been assumed to be a propaganda machinery of the Mao-era politics. However, their studies still cannot serve to relink laughter with the Mao era because their discussions of the Maoist film comedies demonstrate how laughter production was a difficult and even dangerous task during the Mao era. Even now many still consider the phrase “Maoist laughter” an oxymoron.

The Mao era was actually a period when laughter was not only ubiquitous but also bonded with political culture to an unprecedented degree. Spurred by dynamic political exigencies, many art forms sought to employ laughter as a more pliable form of political expression. During the Mao era, laughter assumed different modalities and served multiple social functions: it was a crucial social practice for the reproduction of socialist ideology, state-building, and subject-making, though it also had the potential to express unchecked excess or even resistance. Therefore, the art of laughter was carefully moderated and regulated for political ends during this period. For the same reason, a study of Maoist laughter is capable of revealing the diversity, complexity, dynamics, and inner contradictions in cultural production and reproduction of Mao’s China.

The Maoist period not only saw the flowering of film comedies in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, but also provided fertile soil for laughter in literature, theatre, dances, the visual arts, and various regional performance arts, including the aforementioned *xiangsheng*, Shanghainese *huaqixi* 滑稽戲 (farce), and the Suzhou performance art known as *pingtan* 評彈. In all these art forms, laughter was used to either highlight antagonisms or downplay differences; it could be used to expose and ridicule the class enemy, yet it could also ameliorate and conceal contradictions; it could be ritualistic or heartfelt, didactic or cathartic, communal or utopic. This versatile laughter in the Maoist period played a crucial role in aligning interiority with exteriority, in closing gaps between different social groups, in producing class identification, and in consolidating the newly founded nation-state.

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11. King-fai Tam and Sharon R. Wesoky, eds., *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China* (Singapore: Springer, 2018).
 12. Zhuoyi Wang, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951–1979* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Chapters 2 and 4 of Wang’s book are devoted to the discussions of Maoist film comedies produced in the late 1950s and between 1959 and 1963, respectively.
 13. Ying Bao, “In Search of Laughter in Maoist China: Chinese Comedy Film, 1949–1966” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2008).

“The study of laughter” in the Mao era, therefore, deserves more than a good laugh—it calls for serious scholarly attention. This volume is the first scholarly collection that offers an in-depth examination of the marriage of laughter and politics during the Mao era. The ten essays in this edited volume work in concert to offer groundbreaking insight into Maoist laughter at the intersection of politics and culture. By teasing out some of the most representative and interesting examples of the Mao-era politics of laughter in various genres and contexts, the essays in this volume examine the social, political, psychological, aesthetic, and linguistic models of laughter from a variety of theoretical perspectives, and aim to reveal the complex processes of cultural production and reproduction during the Maoist era.

Socialist Laughter

The study of laughter in the Mao era was predominately guided by Karl Marx’s discussion on comedy. In *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Marx asserts that the “final phase of world-historical form is its comedy.”¹⁴ Comedy emerges when the old historical force commits “a flagrant contradiction of universally recognized axioms” and reveals its nullity “to the whole world,” yet it “only imagines that it believes in itself, and asks that the world imagine this also.” By doing so, the old force in fact hides its own nature “under the appearance of an alien nature, and seek[s] its preservation in hypocrisy and sophistry.”¹⁵ The struggle between the old and new forces at this moment inevitably appears in the form of comedy, whose comic conflicts are representations of those laughable conflicts in life.

In Marx’s discussion, laughter is not only historical but also associated with ideological identification: tragic in nature, the old force’s futile struggles beget the superior laughter from those who identify with the new force. In the Mao era, the superior laughter was regarded as the embodiment of the socialist spirit, and the struggle between the old and the new forces was depicted as the struggle between “proletarian revolutionary optimism” and “bourgeois pessimism.”¹⁶

Therefore, in the Mao era, laughter was not simply regarded as a universal human vocalization but predominantly, in Mao Zedong’s famous words, a weapon to “unite and educate people, attack and annihilate enemies.”¹⁷ For this reason, laughter was not external to Maoist discourse; rather, it was an integral part that simultaneously helped to produce and was itself produced by ideological identifications in Maoist discourse. For the Maoists who were guided by the Marxist-Leninist aesthetic view, laughter is first an indicator of one’s class belonging (*jiejixing* 階級

14. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s “Philosophy of Right”*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O’Malley (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 134.

15. Marx, 134.

16. Fu Jizhong, “Wuchanjieji geming leguan zhuyi yu zichanjieji beiguan zhuyi de douzheng,” *Xueshu Yuekan*, no. 12 (1959): 33–37.

17. Mao Zedong, “Zai Yan’an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua,” in *Mao Zedong xuanji* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1991), 3:848.

性). One Maoist drama critic vividly illustrates this with the following examples: “The landlord would laugh if his dog bit a peasant, whereas we would want the dog killed. The young masters and mistresses would gloat when they see an old man slipping on a banana peel, whereas we would want to help him stand up.”¹⁸ Another Maoist film critic writes: “The audience’s ‘laughter’ is not a pure biological phenomenon; it is their expressed emotions, attitudes, and evaluations toward something. . . . If the characters’ actions do not reflect or even contradict people’s will, then their struggle can never become comedic conflicts. . . . ‘Laughter’ must have a class attribute.”¹⁹

Because of laughter’s class identification function, it drew considerable attention during the Mao era and was studied as an important component of the socialist ideological revolution. As a Maoist critic wrote in 1956, through laughter the audience would “not only feel happy and invigorated but also obtain a firmer faith in the beautiful communist ideals, and hate and repudiate more deeply the residues of old thoughts.”²⁰ Maoist cultural workers were dedicated to articulating and reforming human relations through laughter. Rigid distinctions were drawn between a peasant’s laughter and a landlord’s laughter, between the proletariat’s laughter and the bourgeois’ laughter, as well as between a comrade’s laughter and an enemy’s laughter. For example, the ideal socialist citizen’s laughter should be “exciting and healthy”; the laughter at the class enemy should be “contemptuous and ridiculing.”²¹ To borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion on taste, laughter is a “classified and classifying” practice during the Mao era.²² It was closely linked with the production of knowledge and experience in the socialist society, and was integrated into Maoist discourse that produced the complete system of human relationships in the Mao era.

Believing in the combative power of laughter, the Maoists projected the “subversive laughter” onto the capitalist United States. In 1956, *Knowledge of the World* (*Shijie zhishi* 世界知識) published an essay entitled “Subversive Laughter” (“Dianfuxing de xiao” 顛覆性的笑). It tells the story of seventy-two African American students in New Orleans who were forced to sit in the cramped compartment of “black-only” seats on a school bus, while one white student occupied the whole “white-only” compartment. After those African American students attempted to move to the white-only seats, they were driven out of the bus by a police officer, and they started to laugh subversively. In the end, the black girl who laughed first was arrested and charged with “incitement to rebellion.”²³ On the one hand, by attributing the subversive laughter to the oppressed racial group in the United States, Maoist cultural

18. Wu En, “Huajixi li de renwu xingge,” *Xijubao*, no. 8 (1959): 10.

19. Liao Zhenlong, “Shilun xiju de chongtu,” *Shanghai xiju*, no. Z1 (1961): 52.

20. Tian Gan, “Tan ‘xingfu’ de xiju fengge,” *Juben*, no. 4 (1956): 98.

21. Feng Zi, “Tan juchang zhong de xiao,” 100.

22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 114.

23. “Dianfuxing de xiao,” *Shijie zhishi*, no. 10 (1956): 20.

workers condemned capitalism as an old force and elevated the oppressed people as the new force; on the other hand, this story about the subversive laughter in the United States was able to arouse superior laughter among Mao-era readers, who were exempt from racial discrimination.

The Maoists were highly vigilant to the enemy's laughter. In the March 25, 1962 issue of the *New York Times*, the new US ambassador to Japan, Edwin Reischauer (1910–1990), was shown smiling in a photo while his wife received flowers from a Japanese girl.²⁴ In a commentary article titled “Laughter and Deceit” (“Xiao he pian” 笑和騙), published in *Qianxian* 前線 (*Frontier*) in September 1962, the Chinese author took issue with Reischauer's smile, writing: “Reischauer was using [his] smile to sell his ‘political philosophy’ in order to ‘close the gap with Japan.’ . . . Reischauer, who plays the ‘smile diplomacy,’ is like a penniless gambler. What else can we call him other than a swindler?”²⁵ Besides the personal attack, the author did not forget to have a good laugh at the US ambassador; he saw that the photo was captioned “Ambassador At Work” and joked about it: “It seems smiling is Reischauer's diplomatic work.”²⁶

The above example shows how laughter was interwoven with Cold War politics during the Mao era. The “enemy,” who was the capitalist United States here, could only laugh hypocritically or deceitfully as Marx suggests. By scrutinizing and repudiating the enemy's laughter, the Maoist commentator exerted a kind of “clinical gaze” at the person who laughs; the smile on Reischauer's face became an outer sign of his inner malaise resulting from his identification with the declining old force.

In contrast, the socialist citizen's laughter was often described as cheerful, hearty, genuine, and healthy. Such laughter was the outer manifestation of the socialist spirit, which was euphoric, rhapsodic, and optimistic. This is the same spirit that Mao Zedong lauded when he wrote at the beginning of the Great Leap Forward movement (1958–1960) that “people have never been so upbeat, energetic, and spirited.”²⁷ The ubiquity of such laughter worked both as a legitimation of the superiority of socialism and a force of appellation for socialist subjects. The Maoists wove laughter into the socialist enterprise and made it into a national practice. Laughter, it seems, was able to showcase the transcendental and sanguine socialist spirit, and thus the need for laughter only increased when reality became gloomier. Three nationwide “Galas of Laughter” (“Xiao de wanhui” 笑的晚會), for example, were held during 1961 and 1962, when China was recovering from the woes from the three years of famine after the Great Leap Forward.²⁸

24. A. M. Rosenthal, “Our Ambassador Closes the Gap with Japan,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1962, 234.

25. Xing Dong, “Xiao he pian,” *Qianxian*, no. 9 (1962): 25.

26. Rosenthal, “Our Ambassador.”

27. Mao Zedong, “Jieshao yige hezuoshe,” *Hongqi*, no. 1 (1958): 3.

28. The first “Gala of Laughter,” hosted by Beijing TV, was held on August 30, 1961. Owing to its huge success, Beijing TV produced two more “Galas of Laughter” in January 1962 and September 1962, and both were well received. The “Galas of Laughter” came to a halt as ultraleftist ideas began to dominate again by 1963. This effort to produce more laughter for Chinese people coincided with Mao's marginalization in the CCP between 1960 and 1963 due to the disastrous Great Leap Forward. However, this relatively open period for literature

In the Mao era, laughter became a versatile discourse that brought together the political, the personal, the aesthetic, the ethical, the affective, the physical, the aural, and the visual. The link between laughter as a bodily act and laughter as one's worldview can be supported by the neo-Confucian idea of "the unity of mind and action" (*zhixing heyi* 知行合一), though the Maoists were all supposed to be anti-Confucian.²⁹ The Confucian idea of *zhixing heyi* emphasizes the importance of practice, which dynamically and dialectically unites the mind and the actions of an individual. Laughter in the Mao era was viewed as a critical social practice that both hinged on and aimed at this mind-action unity. If laughter is a manifestation of a person's mind, fixing unhealthy laughter also fixes an unhealthy mind; conversely, an improved mind results in a healthier laughter. This view is consistent with the Marxist proposition that an ideological revolution should be a revolution not only in ideas but also in practice. The "laughter therapy" that is proposed in "The Study of Laughter," therefore, should not be merely understood as a joke but as a common strategy of ideological revolution in the Mao era.

The Genealogy of Maoist Laughter

Because laughter was closely intertwined with the production of Maoist discourse, it is possible to chart a genealogy of Maoist laughter following Michel Foucault's method of genealogy. The contributors in this volume view laughter as an integral part of Maoist discourse, the discursive system that helped constitute the knowledge system that informed people's thinking and feeling as well as the social soil in which identification, emotional responses, and general practices emerged.

Maoist laughter can be dated back to the Yan'an period (1935–1948). Yan'an literature and art following Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" was largely one big mass comedy. Guided by Mao's directive that "portrayal of the bright side should be the mainstream" (*yi xie guangming weizhu* 以寫光明為主), writers and artists opted for happy endings and comedic plots. However, it would be incorrect to say that satirical laughter had no place in Yan'an culture. Mao Zedong himself was an avid advocate of Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1937), whom he praised as the "great writer, great thinker, and great revolutionary" in his 1940 essay "On New Democracy" (*Xin minzhu zhuyi lun* 新民主主義論).³⁰ Since Lu Xun's revolutionary spirit was mostly manifest in his satirical writings (*zawen* 雜文), Yan'an was filled with the satirical laughter for a couple of years as writers and artists used satire as their revolutionary weapon. In February 1942 the Yan'an Art Association (*Yan'an*

and art came to a halt around 1963, when the ultraleftist CCP officials such as Ke Qingshi 柯慶施 and Zhang Chunqiao 張春橋 began to promote "representations of the thirteen years" (*daxie shisannian* 大寫十三年) to focus exclusively on the good deeds and people in the socialist construction since 1949.

29. "Zhixing heyi" was proposed by Wang Yangming (1472–1529) in the Ming dynasty. It is an important Confucian philosophical idea that emphasizes the interrelatedness of knowledge and action.

30. Mao Zedong, "Xin minzhuzhuyi lun," in *Mao Zedong xuanji*, 2:698.

meixie 延安美協) hosted a sensational Satire Art Exhibition (*Fengci huazhan* 諷刺畫展), featuring about sixty satirical cartoons created by three cartoonists, Hua Junwu 華君武 (1915–2010), Zhang E 張謬 (1910–1995), and Cai Ruohong 蔡若虹 (1910–2002). Their satirical cartoons criticized a wide range of social problems in Yan'an in hilarious fashion and solicited a great deal of laughter from the audience.³¹ Mao Zedong, too, viewed the Satire Art Exhibition and requested to meet with the three cartoonists. During the meeting, Mao approved their use of satire to criticize social problems, but suggested that the artists could create a contrasting cartoon showing the bright side of the communist-controlled areas next to the satirical cartoon.³² As Mao later elaborated in “Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art,” the Communists needed satire but should use it differently against enemies, the allies, and comrades.³³ Based on this, the writers and artists should create different forms of satirical laughter with different social functions.

The legitimacy of the Yan'an regime was consolidated not in satirical laughter but in other forms of laughter. After 1942, communist-controlled areas delved into a torrid New Yangge movement (*Xin yangge yundong* 新秧歌運動). The Communists transformed the northern folkdance *yangge* into a weapon of social mobilization and political advocacy. According to Ai Qing's 艾青 (1910–1996) depiction, people “sing, dance, and beat drums at the same time; their movements are powerful, their rhythms are strong, and their singing is loud, full of the laborers' health and joy.”³⁴ The New Yangge movement can be viewed as a jubilant mass movement that expanded and consolidated the communist base among local peasants through celebration and laughter. This humorous and joyful folklore spirit appeared in the literary works of Zhao Shuli 趙樹理 (1906–1970), who was regarded as one of the most successful writers during the Yan'an period.

This jubilant spirit of the early Yan'an period did not smoothly continue into the PRC period. After 1949, because of the PRC's sudden difficult international position, a sense of solemnity seized the socialist regime. Between 1949 and 1955 “lack of solemnity” (*quefa yansuxing* 缺乏嚴肅性) became a frequently used phrase in literary and art criticism. “Solemnity” was often used together with “militancy” (*zhandouxing* 戰鬥性) to describe ideological struggle and class struggle, which confined laughter with shackles. Comedic expressions, like other art forms, were required to undergo some heavy-handed reform, lest the laughter be deemed inappropriate and smothered by political order. For example, Su Guang 蘇光 (1918–1999), who was a senior cadre at *The People's Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報), wrote an article in 1954 to repudiate the “lack of solemnity” in Mi Gu's 米谷 (1918–1986) cartoon work *Seduction* (*Gouyin* 勾引), which depicted the US-France relationship as a sexual affair. Su criticized Mi for “vulgarizing the serious political subject” and “submerging

31. “Fengci huazhan' guanzhe yongyue,” *Jiefang ribao*, February 17, 1942.

32. Yang Jianmin, “Manhuajia Hua Junwu zai Yan'an de suiye,” *Dangshi bocai*, no. 11 (2011): 42.

33. Mao Zedong, “Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua,” 872.

34. Ai Qing, “Yanggeju de xingshi,” *Jiefang ribao*, June 26, 1942, 38.

the contradictions between nations, classes, and within the hostile camp . . . with the petite bourgeoisie's low tastes."³⁵ Such a satirical cartoon, in Su's point of view, was toxic because people's combative spirit would be diluted by laughter.

Su Guang's commentary reveals a crucial aspect of the Maoists' understanding of laughter: while the Maoists were not against laughter, they were against the kind of laughter that relieves and discharges. The "relief theory" has been a dominant model of humor and laughter in the West since the eighteenth century. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud argues that laughter releases any superfluous nervous energy that was summoned for a psychological task.³⁶ However, the "solemnity" requirement of the Mao era opposed the release of pent-up nervous energy, and demanded that energy be re-channeled into the militant spirit. This is reminiscent of Ban Wang's discussion of the Maoist culture's sublimation imperative in his 1997 book *The Sublime Figure of History*: in the Mao era libidinal energies were not repressed but rather converted "to serve culturally acceptable goals."³⁷

The aforementioned Mi Gu was the founding editor of *Cartoon* (*Manhua yuekan* 漫畫月刊, 1950–1960), the only publication of satirical art in the new PRC. *Cartoon* was revamped in 1953 in order to become "more satirical and more militant."³⁸ According to Hua Junwu, who was also an editor of *Cartoon*, this political prescription was often resisted by cartoon artists, who sought artistic autonomy. The work of those artists who strictly followed the political prescription would become formulaic and conceptual. In Hua's final proposal, he advocated a kind of laughter that was both therapeutic and enriching: "*Cartoon* is not merely for curing people's diseases; it is, more important, an exemplary work. It is a form of nutrition. . . . It is not enough to only have penicillin; we must work out, we must have vitamins and nutritious food."³⁹ Hua's proposal called for a kind of laughter that was both political and aesthetic. According to Hua, laughter not only cures people but also enriches and develops them. The later function of laughter in his proposition prefigured the notion of "healthy laughter" in the following years.

In the mid-1950s, as more of the Soviet Union's theory and practice of satirical art and literature were being introduced into China, Maoist cultural workers grasped the satirical laughter once again. Comedy-dramas, comedy films, and many traditional forms of the art of laughter, such as *xiangsheng*, *huajixi*, and *pingtan*, were revived and developed following the 1956 Hundred Flowers Campaign. However, this was a time fraught with contradictions, fluctuations, and repetitions. In his discussion of Chinese cinema between 1951 and 1979, Zhuoyi Wang has identified several "revolutionary cycles," which are demarcated by disruptive political

35. Su Guang, "Zhuyi zhengzhi fengcihua de zhandouxing he yansuxing," *Meishu*, no. 5 (1954): 18.

36. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1960).

37. Ban Wang, *The Sublime Figure of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 13.

38. Hua Junwu, "Tan gaiban hou de *Manhua*," *Meishu*, no. 5 (1954): 17.

39. Hua, 18.

movements every few years. These cycles can also be identified in other forms of Mao-era literature and art between the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, albeit with little variation. The prescription of “solemnity” never disappeared between these cycles, though it was subdued sometimes. For example, when director Lü Ban 呂班 (1913–1976) made the PRC’s first comedy film, *Before the New Director Arrives* (*Xin juzhang daolai zhiqian* 新局長到來之前), in 1956, he had to be wary of the rules on laughter. Lü confessed that he “did not dare to play gimmicks, exaggerate, or make people laugh too much” when he adapted the successful satirical drama into a film.⁴⁰ Lü’s comedy received mixed reviews. Some praised it: “In laughter, Chief Niu’s mask is torn into pieces, his dirty soul is shown nakedly in front of the audience”;⁴¹ some criticized it: “The sublime comedy is not merely pastime for laughter; it is always associated with important social and political problems, and it uses laughter to represent serious things.”⁴² When Zhang Ruifang 張瑞芳 (1918–2012) played the titular female lead in Lu Ren’s 魯軻 (1912–2002) 1962 film *Li Shuangshuang* 李雙雙, she was reminded by the director to restrain her comic performance lest the film be accused of “defiling the laboring class”; for example, Li Shuangshuang was advised not to open her mouth too wide while she laughed at other petty-minded peasants in the film.⁴³

Despite the continuing political imperative to regulate laughter, this was a period when laughter was creatively interwoven into the socialist discourse both politically and aesthetically. Compared with the Yan’an period, between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s China saw more serious study on laughter and more creative innovations in ways to mold laughter for the socialist cause. In a talk given at the Shanghai Film Studio symposium in January 1958, filmmaker and critic Chen Xihe 陳西禾 (1912–1983) emphasized that people needed “healthy, meaningful laughter” instead of nonsensical laughter.⁴⁴ The “healthy” and “meaningful” laughter was an aestheticized and more pliable version of the “solemn” and “militant” laughter of the early 1950s; it was also a result of painstaking negotiation between Maoist cultural workers and political officials. At the same time, the Maoists were still concerned about the social function of laughter and endeavored to regulate the economy of laughter in Maoist comedies. One Maoist comedy critic wrote:

The contents and effects of laughter are diverse. . . . No one promotes meaningless laughter. . . . There used to be unhealthy, nonsensical, and cheap laughter on our stage. To achieve these kinds of laughter, people resorted to vulgar tricks [such as making fun of characters’ biological defects]. What is unbearable is the physical torture added on top of the representation of characters’ biological defects—they are made to stumble, slap themselves, and pull faces to entertain the audience.⁴⁵

40. Lü Ban, “Tantan wo xinli de hua,” *Dazhong dianying*, no. 17 (1956): 7.

41. Fang Pu, “Ping fengci xiju yingpian *Xin juzhang daolai zhiqian*,” *Dazhong dianying*, no. 17 (1956): 3.

42. Fang Pu.

43. Wu Zhifei, “Yongyuan de Li Shuangshuang: Zhang Ruifang,” *Dang’an shikong*, no. 11 (2012): 20.

44. “Shangying chuanguo sixiang taolun dahui diandi,” *Dianying yishu*, no. 3 (1958): 10–11.

45. Feng Zi, “Tan juchang zhong de xiao,” 99.

“Laughter for laughter’s sake” (*weixiao er xiao* 為笑而笑) was regarded as a degenerate and even unethical form of bourgeois art. As another critic claimed, “One of the features of bourgeois comedy is that it makes fun of people’s physiological characteristics and appearances, because reactionary bourgeois comedy cannot poke fun at the ugliness of the backward, corrupt bourgeoisie class in society.”⁴⁶ The author continues,

One is not supposed to use laughter in comedy casually. The laughable cannot be equated with the comic. Laughter must be meaningful and represent certain social significance, only such laughter in comedy can be accepted by people and not be viewed as vulgar and base. The laughter in comedy is directly associated with aesthetic tendency. Through laughter, comedy should represent certain party principles, and represent an attitude toward life; it uses laughter to oppose or praise something in life; it tries to show people what is contemptible and ugly, and thus should be denied, and what is sublime and beautiful, and thus should be affirmed, so that people can establish a correct idea about life. Neither physiological depictions nor deliberately manufactured jokes can achieve these goals. One can only find healthy and meaningful laughter in the personalities of characters and the conflicts between those personalities.⁴⁷

Because laughter in comedy was thought to spring from personalities and their conflicts, it was ultimately a social practice that aimed at reforming people’s subjectivities, and consequently reforming society. Laughter was studied and regulated as a set of complex mechanisms—such as interpellation, categorization, transference, displacement, and sublimation—that were able to produce meanings, subjects, and the world in which the subjects interacted with each other.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), many forms of the art of laughter were suspended. Paul Clark convincingly demonstrates that different forms of entertainment persisted during this period in his 2008 book *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History*.⁴⁸ The older generation of Chinese might still have vivid memories of “big-character posters” (*dazibao* 大字報) and satirical cartoons widely used for violent struggle sessions during this period, which exacerbated the laughter’s function of classifying people and attacking enemies. As a result, Maoist laughter finally gave way to Maoist solemnity, and even Maoist tragedy. Toward the end of the Cultural Revolution, when people were gathered on the Tian’anmen Square on April 5, 1976, to mourn the death of the beloved Premier Zhou Enlai (1898–1976), the most famous poem they recited on the Square proclaimed the end of Maoist laughter:

I grieve, the ghosts howl
I cry, the wolves laugh

46. Fan Huaqun, “Tan xiju zhong de xiao,” *Shanghai xiju*, no. 2 (1961): 14–15.

47. Fan, 15.

48. Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Shedding tears, I mourn the hero
Eyebrows raised, I draw my sword⁴⁹

In this poem, the people of socialist China become the grieving, crying, and mourning subjects, and those who laugh are condemned as “wolves” (*chailang* 豺狼). The socialist laughter was lost when the heroes died, but the wolves were still laughing, a historical development that appeared to contradict Marx’s discussion of comedy. If the legitimacy of the Mao era was born in laughter, it was the end of laughter that brought about the end of this legitimacy. At this point, the Mao era was consigned to be the tragic (old) force of history, against which a new historical force would emerge in laughter.⁵⁰

Structure and Layout

The ten essays in this volume are divided into three sections: (1) “Utopian Laughter,” (2) “Intermedial Laughter,” and (3) “Laughter and Language.”

The utopian laughter is the embodiment of the Maoists’ confidence and faith in socialist ideals, a direct expression of the euphoric and rhapsodic socialist spirit, and an effective tool to reform social relations. Zygmunt Bauman asserts that socialism is an “active utopia,” one that is felt as an unfulfilled image of a “future and better world” requiring “an additional effort to be brought about” through organized collective endeavor.⁵¹ As the embodiment of the socialist utopia, laughter becomes a revolutionary apparatus that is inspiring, invigorating, and didactic, and can “exert enormous influence on the actual course of historical events.”⁵² The three essays in the first section analyze how laughter serves as a conduit for producing ideal socialist subjects, bringing about a better socialist life, building national unity, and constructing a collective dream during the Mao era.

In Chapter 1 Ban Wang takes the 1959 film *Five Golden Flowers* (*Wuduo jinhua* 五朵金花) as a case study, and contends that “eulogistic comedy” (*gesong xiju* 歌頌喜劇) propagates the principle of national unity in ethnic diversity by rallying popular passion and joy, and that a new comic aesthetic arose in Mao’s era from an understanding of the dignity of labor. Laughter, as Wang shows, is integral to the minority agenda of Mao’s China, as the new comedy challenges the shopworn dichotomy between the official and unofficial, the ethnic and the national, the

49. Tong Huaizhou, ed., *Tian’anmen shichao* (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1978), 11.

50. The laughter of the new historical force can be vividly perceived in the official editorial entitled “A Historic Meeting” (“Lishixing de huiyi” 歷史性的會議) published in three of the CCP’s mouthpieces, *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日報), *The Red Flag* (*Hongqi* 紅旗), and *People’s Liberation Army Daily* (*Jiefangjun ribao* 解放軍日報), on July 21, 1977. The editorial reads: “CCP’s Third Plenary Session of the Tenth Plenary Session has successfully concluded. Upon hearing this good news, millions of Chinese people have rallied together, played gongs and drums, set off firecrackers, and sincerely supported the resolutions adopted by the meeting. The whole party, army, and people of all ethnicities are immersed in joy.”

51. Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976), 17.

52. Bauman, *Socialism: The Active Utopia*, 16.

lighthearted and the serious. In the 1950s and 1960s, far from being in opposition to the official, the comic is to bridge the gap between ethnic diversity and the emergent nation-state in search of socialist identity in the international arena. Rather than defined by ethnicity and culture, film comedy encourages men and women's equal participation in socialist labor and the fun-filled ordinary life of love and work. Socialist comedies such as *Five Golden Flowers* depict an inclusive socialist utopia where different ethnic groups can live together and mingle without domination.

In Chapter 2 Charles A. Laughlin compares Zhao Shuli's novel *Sanliwan Village* (*Sanliwan* 三里灣, 1955) to its 1957 screen adaptation *Happily Ever After* (*Huahao yueyuan* 花好月圓, dir. Guo Wei), emphasizing how the work's humorous aspects are enhanced by the cinematic medium through lively performance, visual negotiations of social space and romantic tension. This chapter uses the problem of leisure under socialism as a point of departure, looking at Zhao Shuli's story both as a representation of emotionally rich social life in contemporary China and as an object of leisurely enjoyment by itself. Placing the film in the context of film comedies that emerged in the Hundred Flowers Campaign, it demonstrates how romantic tension can be used to humanize and ameliorate political struggle, marking a continuation of the debate on "revolution plus love" in late 1920s fiction.

Emily Wilcox's chapter focuses on the 1964 military dance work "Laundry Song" ("Xiyi ge" 洗衣歌), a popular representation of harmonious relations and solidarity between PLA soldiers and Tibetan civilians following the 1959 Tibetan uprising. In addition to the standard interpretation of "Laundry Song" as a work of socialist utopia celebrating Han-Tibetan and soldier-civilian harmony, Wilcox finds that the laughter sparked by some sections of its choreography suggests that multiple layers of meaning existed in this work, one of which stimulated concerns about the continued instability of Tibet in the wake of the 1959 uprising. Using anthropologist Mary Douglas' theorization of jokes and joke rites, "Laundry Song" can be read as simultaneously disconcerting and comforting. Although it plays into a joke structure present in Maoist society, "Laundry Song" ultimately reinforces dominant ideas and thus is not a joke but a joke rite in Douglas' terms.

The three case studies of intermedial Maoist laughter in the second section evince that art and entertainment in the Mao era was far from monotonous or homogeneous; rather, it was characterized by nuanced innovations, negotiation, and experiments. Applying the new concept of "intermediality" to the Mao-era culture allows us to discover how laughter is preserved, filtered, created, modified, rechanneled, and regulated through various forms of intermedial transformations. These processes not only manifest the interconnectedness of different cultural "texts" in Maoist discourse but also illustrate the continual aesthetic innovations of the Mao-era cultural workers despite the tensions produced by ambiguous and inconsistent party-state policies. Through the lens of intermedial laughter, we can get a glimpse of a precocious "intermedial turn" during the Mao era and feel the vitality of Maoist culture.

In Chapter 4 Xiaoning Lu examines the intersection of and interaction between cinema and the traditional Chinese performing art of *xiangsheng* in the mid-1950s, seeking to tease out an innovative strand of comic filmmaking in the Mao era. Specifically, Lu takes on the case study of a 1956 *xiangsheng dianying* 相聲電影 (cross-talk film), *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream* (*Youyuan jingmeng* 遊園驚夢), starring the well-known *xiangsheng* duo of Hou Baolin 侯寶林 and Guo Qiru 郭啟儒. Through an introduction of *xin xiangsheng* 新相聲, a new type of *xiangsheng* created for the new Chinese society, and a careful textual analysis of this particular *xiangsheng dianying*, this chapter illustrates that the interplay of *xiangsheng* and film, as seen in *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream*, transfigured each of the two media, increased much of the viewing pleasure of this film, and provided an understanding of the specificities of both *xiangsheng* and film. This rather ingenious experimentation of dynamical intermediality demonstrates that laughter under Mao could be innovative and experimental.

In Chapter 5 Yun Zhu aims to shed some light on the regulated yet not necessarily homogenized laughter of the pre-Cultural Revolution Maoist years. Her chapter examines the nuanced deployment of laughter in the popular children's novella *The Magic Gourd* (*Bao hulu de mimi* 寶葫蘆的秘密) by the literary humorist Zhang Tianyi 張天翼 (1906–1985) and its eponymous film adaptation by Yang Xiaozhong 楊小仲 (1899–1969). Contextualizing these texts both in the larger tradition of modern Chinese literature and culture and in the specific sociocultural milieu of the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Yun Zhu looks into how, without apparently challenging the dominant socialist-realist model, these two adaptations tactfully relieve the stress between the politically repudiated comic mode of “satire” (*fengci* 諷刺) and the purposefully promoted mode of “extolment” (*gesong* 歌頌). Whether intended or not, the keen relevance the texts bear to the political and economic hyperboles of the Maoist era adds further ambiguities and ironies to the already-layered laughter through these intermedial transformations.

Li Guo's chapter explores how humor in Maoist *pingtan* tales facilitated the vernacularization of the tastes and practices of popular culture, and revamped *pingtan* into an ideal media of socialist new comedy. Adaptations of *pingtan* tales through film, folk performances, and radio-broadcast songs facilitated the vernacularization of new notions of the self and the nation, generated intermedial laughter in various taste cultures and media territories, and instigated the individuals' negotiation and interaction with multivalent sociopolitical ideals. Guo argues that vernacularization of Maoist *pingtan*, which allowed multiple styles to bleed into this classic storytelling art, was a process of necessity and accommodation in Maoist China when revolutionary linguistic codes are transposed into traditional arts, as well as the shifting relationships between individuals and the nation-state community.

The last section offers theoretically informed insights into the relationship between laughter and language. Rather than viewing laughter as a universal human vocalization, we propose to view laughter as a popular language that is, in Bourdieu's

words, “both common to the different classes and capable of receiving different, even opposite, meanings in the particular, and sometimes antagonistic, uses that are made of it.”⁵³ By studying the discursive nature of laughter, we can better situate laughter in the Maoist discourse and reveal the complexity of the latter. The four essays in this section invite readers to recognize the discursive nature of Maoist laughter, be it visual, metapragmatic, heteroglossic, or translingual, and the extent to which laughter participates in the formation of Maoist discourse that produces power and knowledge.

This section opens with a study of the Maoist visual language. In Chapter 7 John A. Crespi revisits the early PRC cartoon by contextualizing this form of popular art within the media ecology of the illustrated magazine. Focusing on the first several years (1950–1952) of the satire pictorial *Cartoon*, Crespi questions the tendency to read early Mao-era cartoon art strictly in terms of Cold War binaries and argues instead for attention to cartoons as just one among many dynamically interrelated, heterogeneric elements constituting the print genre of the illustrated magazine (*huabao* 畫報). To a significant extent, *Cartoon* is a lineal descendent of Republican-era, Shanghai-based *huabao* whose varied imagetext contents encouraged forms of spectatorship historically linked to practices of urban consumerist play. The primary concern for the artists and editors of *Cartoon*, as Crespi argues, was adapting this existing visual language of print to promote active forms of socialist play aligned with the political and educational goals of mass mobilization.

Roy Chan points out in Chapter 8 that characters’ use of humor in Zhao Shuli’s Yan’an period fiction demonstrates an ironic metapragmatic awareness of language use; in turn, such humor critiques how ingrained speech conventions uphold social hierarchy. Laughter indexes the collapse of these conventions and stages the possibility of recalibrating language use as well as social relations toward a more egalitarian ideal. Zhao Shuli’s fictional humor is thus closely tied with revolutionary social transformation. Through the analysis of two stories, “The Rhymes of Li Youcai” (“Li Youcai banhua” 李有才板話) and “The Marriage of Little Erhei” (“Xiao Erhei jiehun” 小二黑結婚), this chapter uses a sociolinguistic approach to examine how Zhao Shuli’s fiction displays critical awareness of the pragmatic effects of language use through the use of humor, and how humor can unravel forms of social power embedded in speech conventions.

In Chapter 9, Ping Zhu examines how Shanghainese *huajixi* evolved during the Mao era and became the embodiment of the heteroglossic Maoist language during the nationwide language reform that started in the mid-1950s. The abundance of linguistic miscommunication, discordance, and dissonance that elicit laughter in *huajixi* signifies, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s term, the heteroglossia of language, resulted from the disassociation between language and intentions, language and thoughts, as well as language and expressions. As the content of *huajixi* had to undergo

53. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 194.

heavy-handed reform in the early years of PRC, its heteroglossic language remained relatively untouched. In fact, through curating the heteroglossia in *huajixi*, Maoist discourse showed its willingness to relativize and decenter language consciousness so as to continue the modernization of Chinese language that started in the early twentieth century.

In the last chapter, Laurence Coderre studies the 1973 *xiangsheng* piece, “Ode to Friendship” (“Youyi song” 友誼頌), which showcased the PRC’s current involvement in the building of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway, a project meant to free landlocked Zambia from its trade reliance on Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and South Africa. Coderre shows that “Ode to Friendship” sought to promote this involvement by exploiting the problems of translation that necessarily manifest themselves in the actual practice of global socialist revolution. This chapter focuses on moments of translingual (Chinese–English and Chinese–Swahili) mismatch in “Ode to Friendship” as comically productive instances when language falls intentionally short of revolutionary ideals in the very name of revolution. Coderre argues that the piece as a whole is an exercise in the careful negotiation, management, and instrumentalization of linguistic failure. As much as “Ode to Friendship” attempts to harness the power of nonsense and miscommunication, it also reminds us that even the language of socialist revolution has its limits.

Writing about the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Louis Althusser claims that a socialist country needs to accomplish a mass ideological revolution in addition to the political and economic revolutions.⁵⁴ Laughter, undoubtedly, played a prominent role in the mass ideological revolution in socialist China, and should not be regarded as antithetical to the Mao era. We hope this volume can finally restore Maoist laughter to its historical context and turn it into an important analytical tool for understanding Maoist subjects and Maoist culture.

54. Louis Althusser, “On the Cultural Revolution,” trans. Jason E. Smith, *Décalages* 1, no. 1 (2014): 6. The essay was originally published anonymously in French in 1966 and was attributed to Althusser.

The Revolutionary Metapragmatics of Laughter in Zhao Shuli's Fiction

Roy Chan

Literature from the Yan'an period and Mao era perhaps still suffers from the stereotypes that attach to socialist realist culture in general: ham-fisted hagiographies of revolutionaries, or panegyrics to tractors. As with most stereotypes, there lies a kernel of truth, but they otherwise illuminate very little. Literature written in the Yan'an period could actually be funny as well. In the case of Zhao Shuli's 趙樹理 (1906–1970) fiction, this humor was central to its aesthetic and political significance. An engaged textual consideration of humor in Zhao Shuli's fiction may contribute to a more productive understanding of literary production in the Yan'an period and how it was connected to ideals of radical democracy.

Sigmund Freud reminds us of two truths when it comes to the analysis of jokes: first, explaining how a joke operates extinguishes any pleasure one might gain from hearing it, and second, jokes often express displeasure against an unjust state of affairs.¹ As regards the first issue, any temporary suspension of humorous joy is well worth the insight an analysis reveals about the workings of the unconscious; much as an analysis of dreamwork uncovers repressed thoughts and desires, so do jokes give voice to unconscious anxieties unable to find proper expression. The second point reminds us that jokes rub against an uncomfortable truth about social frictions concealed beneath a veneer of polite convention. Jokes can serve as a heuristic to better understand not only the interior workings of the mind but also the exterior truth of social relations.

This chapter refrains from a psychoanalytic reading of jokes as yet another portal into the unconscious. Rather, it considers what happens when we think of humor under the frame of pragmatics and metapragmatics. Pragmatics focuses on language use in its social context. One aspect of pragmatic study, deixis, examines how verbal markers relate to a communicative configuration (in a dialogue, "I" refers to the speaker, "you" refers to the addressee). Pragmatics emphasizes language as a medium of communication among speakers interacting with each other.

1. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960), 24, 105.

Metapragmatics refers to a level of sociolinguistic function that determines the configuration of pragmatic conventions. For example, returning to the topic of deixis, when a Chinese speaker has to choose between using the second person pronouns of *ni* 你 or *nin* 您 to reflect the particular social relationship between speaker and addressee, the speaker demonstrates a metapragmatic awareness of the difference in relationship each pronoun entails.² A speaker's usage of an honorific pronoun may not be a transparent expression of deference, but instead a form of sarcasm. An everyday example might be an exasperated parent addressing a willful, stubborn child as "Your Majesty."³ The speaker's use of an honorific form to mock an errant child displays an ironic metapragmatic awareness because they are poking fun at the conventional relation between an honorific and its proper social addressee. The joke consists in the speaker's violation of a pragmatic convention of address.

Humor and jokes constitute an intriguing study for pragmatics because they often contest conventional and tacit understandings of social hierarchy. The wit that drives the humorous effect of jokes unravels seemingly natural forms of power, revealing them as contingent or unjustified. As jokes rarely exist in an asocial vacuum, they give witness to the complexity and minute vicissitudes of social relations usually involving a contested balance of power between speakers. Contemporary exhortations that comedians should strive to "punch up" rather than "punch down" acknowledge the commonsense view that humor can potentially bring genuine harm to those who are the butt of jokes, but also uplift and defend those who are socially vulnerable. Thus humor might actually express a hope of metapragmatically recalibrating social relationships and their associated linguistic markers that are perceived to be unfair.

Focusing on this pragmatic dimension of language proves helpful in thinking about early socialist literary experiments in China, many predating the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949. The literary debates that arose during the Yan'an period tried to recast literature in ways that would engage the masses of peasantry, many of whom were illiterate. As Wang Hui has observed, Yan'an thinkers were in search of new literary "national forms" that would offer a new vision of democracy. In turn, this vision would include the peasantry alongside urban educated intellectuals; artistic inspiration would derive from traditional rural

2. I am indebted to Boris Maslov's discussion of this point. See Boris Maslov, "Metapragmatics, *Toposforschung*, Marxist Stylistics: Three Extensions of Veselovsky's Historical Poetics," in *Persistent Forms: Explorations in Historical Poetics*, ed. Ilya Kliger and Boris Maslov (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), 134–35.

3. Lucien Brown notes how honorific address can be used to sarcastic and humorous effect in Korean television serials. See Lucien Brown, "'Mind Your Own Esteemed Business': Sarcastic Honorifics Use and Impoliteness in Korean TV Dramas," *Journal of Politeness Research* 9, no. 2 (2013): 159–86. For a discussion of metapragmatic function and metapragmatic discourse, see Michael Silverstein, "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed. J. A. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33–58. For the relationship between perceived irony and metapragmatic awareness, see Ksenia Shilikhina, "Metapragmatic Evaluation of Verbal Irony by Speakers of Russian and American English," *Research in Language* 10, no. 3 (2012): 302–5.

vernaculars.⁴ Authors sought to forge new national forms based on local, regional tastes that were at times mutually incomprehensible.⁵ The aim was to transform such isolated, local registers and synthesize them into “national” forms that could find ready acceptance among the masses. The question of “national forms” was not simply an issue of proper representation and discourse. Debates over form recognized literature’s pragmatic dimension; fiction was supposed to solicit certain kinds of social action among its readers and, moreover, fiction itself was a form of social action. The debate over such “forms” was not a pedantic exercise in more precise ways of literary categorization; it was pragmatically oriented toward discovering aesthetic forms that could entail revolutionary action.

Zhao Shuli’s fiction embodied the desire to create a new literature that would envision how radical democracy could be enacted by peasants themselves. His work featured extensive use of folk vernacular and rustic humor, a far cry from the literature of urban sophisticates. That his most well-known stories were written well before 1949 and depicted changes in local villages under Communist authority during the Yan’an period suggests that these tales serve as proleptic allegory: a vision of democracy that had yet to be fully established. Scholar He Guimei argues that Zhao’s use of rustic vernacular forms proposed an alternative literary modernity that transcended the limits of bourgeois urban individualism.⁶

Inspired by ideals of self-emancipation (*fanshen* 翻身), and cognizant of the real forces of tradition (or “feudalism”) in the countryside, Zhao narrated scenes of village life undergoing internal struggle and transformation against the background of civil war and invasion. The invisible forces of power, entrenched by generations-long convention and tradition, often constitute the real antagonists; his heroes battle against myriad obstacles that other villagers have long accepted as unchangeable. In this sense, his stories are less interested in defying the direct power of a state as they are in dislodging a more diffuse hegemony that holds people back.

Expressions of jokes, humor, and sarcasm in his tales are not just ornamental emblems of “rustic flavor”; they instead attempt to recast the pragmatic discourses of hierarchy in order to obtain an egalitarian, democratic ideal. Through humor and wit, his characters demonstrate their metapragmatic awareness of given societal conventions. The lifeworlds of his tales are microcosms of social conflict and

4. Wang Hui, “Local Forms, Vernacular Dialects, and the War of Resistance against Japan: The ‘National Forms’ Debate,” trans. Chris Berry, in *The Politics of Imagining East Asia*, ed. Theodore Hutters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), Kindle edition.

5. H. Wang, “Local Forms.”

6. He Guimei, “Zhao Shuli wenxue de xiandaixing wenti,” in *Zai jiedu: Dazhong Wenyi Yu Yishixingtai*, ed. Tang Xiaobing (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 88–90. She has recently expanded her research into a monograph. See He Guimei, *Zhao Shuli Wenxue Yu Xiangtu Zhongguo Xiandaixing* (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2016). By comparison, Western scholarship has not been as robust. As Daniel Vukovich notes, most fiction of this period is seen in the Western world as little more than political propaganda, bereft of complexity or nuance. See Vukovich, “Towards a Thick Description of Maoist Discourse: With Help from Zhao Shuli,” *Wenyi lilun yanjiu*, no. 6 (2012): 109.

resolution, populated by antagonistic figures struggling for power.⁷ What seem to be local instances of conflict are imbued with revolutionary significance under an ideological backdrop of radical national politics. The medium of this struggle is language itself; in the words of one scholar, “language use is a form of social action and, as such, is saturated with power relations as is social practice more generally.”⁸ What may appear as mere rustic storytelling in actuality stages language use as a weapon of struggle. Metapragmatic awareness in the form of humor does not simply rest in static laughter; laughter itself initiates a revolutionary process by which pragmatic conventions are themselves transformed.

The importance of language not merely as a medium of social struggle, but as the very terrain of such struggle, reveals language use as a form of political praxis. As Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov reminds us, language does not merely reflect social reality; it instead constitutes a material component of such reality.⁹ The different shades of a sign's meaning, and the conflict among them, reveal that the sign constitutes an arena of class struggle.¹⁰ Moreover, the emphasis on language as inter-subjective praxis in Zhao Shuli's stories would suggest that the ostensible Chinese Marxist rejection of John Dewey's pragmatism might not have been so absolute.¹¹ Zhao Shuli's stories unveil how ordinary language can become a form of political action, one that galvanizes democracy from below. His fiction's heavy emphasis on the dialogue between characters rather than narrative exposition suggests that the true object of mimesis is not merely social reality, but social discourse itself.

The following analysis will examine two of Zhao Shuli's most well-known Yan'an period stories: “The Rhymes of Li Youcai” (“Li Youcai banhua” 李有才板話) and “The Marriage of Little Erhei” (“Xiao Erhei jiehun” 小二黑結婚), both from 1943. Humor is deployed in both stories to highlight social contradictions and incongruities, and to contest received ideas of conventional power. As literary critic Zhou Yang noted in an early appreciation of Zhao Shuli's work, “the language of struggle and the language of everyday life are completely melded together.”¹² Linguist Marta Dynel, working off the theories of Jerry Suls, argues that jokes are

7. As He Guimei perceptively notes, revolutionary action in Zhao Shuli's stories is not typically fomented by external Communist agents but emerges immanently through the internal social tensions of the rural villages themselves. See He Guimei, “Zhao Shuli wenxue de xiandaixing wenti,” 104–6.

8. Michiel Leezenberg, “Power in Speech Actions,” in *Pragmatics of Speech Actions*, ed. Marina Sbisà and Ken Turner (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013), 287.

9. Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov, *Marksizm i filosofija iazyka* (Moscow: Labirint, 1993), 15.

10. Voloshinov, 28.

11. Jessica Ching-Sze Wang summarizes the negative views Chinese Marxists, including Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai, held toward Dewey. She notes that in “their desperate hope for a sweeping and all-embracing solution, they were drawn to the messianic message of Marx with its neat dualisms, simple categories, and promise of redemption.” See Jessica Wang, *John Dewey in China: To Teach and to Learn* (Ithaca: SUNY Press, 2007), 47–53. I thank Hongwei Thorn Chen for pushing me to explore the relationship between linguistic pragmatics and pragmatism.

12. Zhou Yang, “Lun Zhao Shuli de chuanguo,” in *Zhou Yang wenji*, ed. Luo Junce (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1984), 493. Zhou Yang originally published this essay in 1946.

structured according to the *incongruity-resolution* framework.¹³ According to this model, jokes revolve around a semantic “incongruity” perceived by the hearer, who then attempts to “resolve” this incongruity and make it conform to some unexpected kind of sense. The cognitive resolution produces the humorous effect. In Zhao Shuli’s fiction, jokes reveal moments when the collective can make visible the incongruous hypocrisies of conventional society. In sharing a joke and laughing together, the oppressed can express a joyful form of solidarity.

It is no accident that “incongruity” can have a social dimension as well; it can highlight a perceived inequity in social relations. And it does not take much work to swap “incongruity” and “resolution” for the Hegelian and Marxian notions of “contradiction” and “synthesis”; laughter is thus an allegorical revolution in miniature, an eruption that, if temporarily, reverses hierarchies. Zhao Shuli’s stories reveal how Marxian thought, particularly in its Maoist iteration, is given aesthetic dramatization. Verbal humor in Zhao Shuli carries two related perlocutionary effects, one immediate, the other eventual: the first is the eruption of laughter among the participants in the joke, and the second is the revolutionary transformation (*fanshen* 翻身) of the collective.¹⁴ The stories offer an ideological fantasy in which isolated instances of laughter can unfold into ultimate societal change.¹⁵

Revolutionary Hearsay: Reported Speech and Insurrection in “The Rhymes of Li Youcai”

In “The Rhymes of Li Youcai,” the town of *Yanjiashan* (Yan family mountain) has recently come under Communist rule. Despite being governed by an egalitarian authority, Yanjiashan is beset by deep inequality, cemented through generations by the Yan clan’s hegemony. The vast majority of peasants have lost their land to the Yans through foreclosure. The current landlord Yan Hengyuan has virtually absolute control over the town; his cronies and relatives occupy nearly all seats of local government. Ingrained for so long in Yanjiashan, this social hierarchy has left an indelible mark on the landscape. The richer inhabitants live toward the west end in two-story houses made with brick. The poorer inhabitants live on the east side, first in smaller houses, and finally in cave dwellings at the ash tree grove on the east end. As the narrator points out, while the land on which the dwellings sit is level, from

13. Marta Dynel, “Garden Paths, Red Lights, and Crossroads,” *Israeli Journal of Humor Research* 1, no. 1 (2012): 7. Jerry Suls cites research showing that the incongruity-resolution framework also obtains in an analysis of Chinese jokes. Jerry Suls, “Cognitive Processes in Humor Appreciation,” in *Handbook of Humor Research*, ed. Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1983), 47.

14. For a useful discussion of the distinctions between J. L. Austin’s categories of locution, illocution, and perlocution, see Marina Sbisà, “Locution, Illocution, and Perlocution,” in *Pragmatics of Speech Actions*, ed. Marina Sbisà and Ken Turner (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013), 25–75.

15. For an explanation of ideological fantasy, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 30–33.

an aerial view, one notices a steep vertical decline from west to east, a collection of rooftops that resemble a line graph detailing the inhabitants' economic status.¹⁶

Social hierarchy is apparent in the pragmatic use of names and monikers; those who live on the east end are referred by monikers that begin with "Old" (*lao* 老) or "Little" (*xiao* 小), regardless of their actual age, stature, or given names. The more privileged inhabitants on the west end are addressed by their official names and titles. Social hierarchy is cemented both in the physical landscape of the town and in the routine ways in which people address each other. The disparities of class privilege are inscribed in such overdetermined fashion that they constitute second nature. While some of the east enders grumble at the injustice of such a hierarchy, many others, like Old Qin, immediately acquiesce to an inborn sense of deference toward the rich.¹⁷ Class hierarchy has crept into everyday discursive pragmatics; the use of monikers like "Old" and "Little" for the poorer inhabitants is an example of nonreferential indexicality—what is being "indexed" goes beyond the addressee of reference (who is being spoken to), but also includes the social status of the addressee (the status of the person being spoken to).¹⁸

Li Youcai, a dispossessed herder, becomes the voice of dissent by composing rhymes that point to the injustices of the powerful. In laconic style, he mocks the pretensions of those on top. In the following verse, Li Youcai sends up the rigged township elections:

Mayor Yan Hengyuan covers the sky with one hand,
 Ever since there's been a mayor, he's had the job for years on end.
 Every year we cast our votes, they say it's to elect someone new,
 Whichever way we choose, it's always Yan Hengyuan.
 Why not just get a slab of wood and carve out your name,
 And when it's time to vote everyone can just press on the stamp,
 It'll save everyone the energy of writing in a name, and you won't have to change
 it for years on end,
 You can use it for centuries, with proper care you won't wear it out.¹⁹

Youcai points to an incongruity in the practice of formal democracy: if elections are free and allow for the frequent changing of governance through popular assent, why employ a kind of rubber stamp that produces the same result over and over again? Youcai points to the sham that is village "democracy"; his ironic advocacy for automated voting reveals how the voices of the disenfranchised are utterly ignored. The story thus highlights the gap between, on one hand, formal democracy and its reliance on seemingly transparent procedures, and on the other, an actual

16. Zhao Shuli, *Zhao Shuli wenji* (Beijing: Gongren chubanshe, 1980), 17. For an English translation of his major stories, consult Zhao Shuli, *Rhymes of Li Youcai and Other Stories*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980).

17. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 45.

18. For a good explanation of nonreferential indexicality, see Michael Lucey, *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide, and Proust* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 20–21.

19. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 18–19.

democratic culture and spirit that such procedures, when manipulated, abrogate.²⁰ The hegemonic powers instrumentalize such democratic procedures to induce resigned consent from the dominated.²¹

In a village where everything is tied up in hierarchy, Youcai's rhymes break through the din and openly mock the powerful. When villagers hear the rhymes, they break out in laughter, a temporary release of tension and frustration. Through their acts of laughter, they fulfill the immediate perlocutionary effect of such speech. But Youcai's rhymes are significant beyond their apparent irony. Because they are fashioned with a certain rhythmic prosody, they are easily memorized and transmitted from one hearer to another. Even more important than what the rhymes say is how they circulate among the villagers as a form of shareable discourse.

Modernist fiction highlights the use of free indirect discourse, narration that blurs the line between a third-person narrator and the thoughts and feelings of a character. Ann Bancroft has noted that such complex discourse can only exist in writing, and names it "represented speech."²² By contrast, Zhao Shuli's folk-inflected story centers on the use of simple *reported speech* as the central pragmatic device that holds the story, its characters, and its readers, together. As such reported speech travels from one to another, it accumulates the particular inflections of each speaker it has gone through, increasingly becoming a collective text. The jokes themselves do not semantically change, and the tellers are practicing a form of speech mimicry. But the relay of mimetic acts expands the pragmatic web of these jokes across the collective.

This pragmatic efficacy of Youcai's rhymes is even reflected in the narrator's relationship to them. In the narrator's only use of the first person, he states, "I wanted to discuss all these changes [occurring in the town], so I copied out a few of the rhymes [Youcai] composed during these changes in order to entertain all my readers, and the result is this little book."²³ The narrator frames his text in the simulated context of storytelling; much like the peasants who repeat Youcai's rhymes by word of mouth, so does he "copy out" (*chao* 抄) Youcai's rhymes for his readers' pleasure. Form recapitulates content; the story is itself an instance of hearsay. Through the narrator's intervention the diegetic world of Yanjiashan's inhabitants and the extradiegetic world of the story's readers are crucially intertwined. The

20. Ken Hirschkop seeks to rescue Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogism" from, among other treatments, an American liberal interpretation that would prize moderate deliberation and moral restraint. He argues that Bakhtin highlighted the need for a "democratic consciousness" that must accompany any operation of democratic procedures. See Ken Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34.

21. As Hirschkop writes, "the proponents of liberal democracy strive for a passive form of democratic consent, in which discouragement, fear, and resignation persuade the population that their best bet is to play by the rules." Hirschkop, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 35.

22. Ann Bancroft, "Where Epistemology, Style, and Grammar Meet Literary History: The Development of Represented Speech and Thought," in *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, ed. J. A. Lucy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 341.

23. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 20.

narrator functions as the pragmatic bridge between the two. Zhao Shuli's emphasis on the mimesis of speech acts paralleled his own stated wish that his stories were not simply for literate peasants to read by themselves. He also expected them to read his stories aloud to illiterate ones as well.²⁴ We readers ostensibly perform the perlocutionary acts of laughter, and we participate in the story's promise of radical democracy. While Li Youcai is the eponymous protagonist, one may argue that the real hero is his rhymes, speech acts that have the capability of circulating among people and uniting them in resistance. The story's depiction of these rhymes (*kuaiban* 快板) does not just serve the purposes of rustic ornamentation in accordance with a mass literary style; the *kuaiban* serve as the very medium of radical democracy.

The dissemination of Youcai's rhymes disrupts the logic of hierarchy inscribed so deeply in this society. These rhymes reveal the paradox of arbitrary intractability that attends to structures and signifiers of power, and they carve out a discursive space in which social scripts may be rewritten. What makes these acts of democracy radical is their attempt to address power imbalances that attend to both social status and language use associated with it. Radical democracy comprehends that under the seemingly transparent discourse of formal procedure lie entrenched inequities depending on who is utilizing such procedures. At one point, the town is instructed by the Communist leadership to run a land census in order to determine once and for all who owns what, and even more importantly, rectify inequities in land ownership. Sensing a direct threat to his power, Yan Hengyuan takes the lead and pulls together a group of cronies who go about flagrantly misreporting actual land holdings. Under the pretense of "objective" measurements, Yan Hengyuan and his gang instrumentalize scientific practice and discourse in order to enrich themselves. The only person who catches on to their cooked numbers is Youcai, who then disseminates a poem mocking their deceptive measurement. Only through hearing Youcai's rhyme do the peasants realize that Yan Hengyuan is scamming them. He ironically sends up the supposedly objective transparency of democratic procedures and empirical measurement. The rhymes make their way to the Yans' circle, and they banish Youcai from the village to prevent him from speaking.

Luckily for the peasants, Comrade Yang comes to the town from the county seat in order to investigate matters. Unnoticed and dismissed by the corrupt local leadership because of his shabby clothing, Comrade Yang refuses the indulgence of polite niceties offered by the inhabitants. Even his appellation of "comrade" disrupts the town's hierarchical system of address. While town leaders seek to project an image of stability and harmony, Comrade Yang detects discord and dissent from the rhymes the peasants recite. He brings Youcai back to the village and encourages the peasants to organize a union to act as a check against the Yans' power. Yan Hengyuan and his henchmen threaten the peasants with catastrophe, and so

24. Cited in He Guimei, "Zhao Shuli wenxue de xiandaixing wenti," in *Zai Jiedu: Dazhong wenyi yu yishixingtai*, ed. Tang Xiaobing (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2007), 98. Here He Guimei points out that such reading was meant to take place in a collective, social space.

Youcai is instructed to compose rhymes to inspire and rally them. Once the union is formed, new elections are held, and Yan Hengyuan and his associates are dislodged from their positions of power. Land that was foreclosed by the Yans is returned to the peasants. Youcai also regains lost land, and he cracks a joke in the midst of his jubilation:

Little Bao asked, "Why is Old Uncle [Youcai] so happy today?" Youcai said, "The old friend I haven't seen in fifteen years has returned today. Why wouldn't I be happy?" Little Ming thought for a moment and then asked, "Who are you talking about? Why can't I figure out who it is?" Youcai said, "Once I say it you'll get it! Wasn't it my three *mu* of land foreclosed on fifteen years ago?" As soon as he spoke everyone got it, and couldn't help but break out in laughter.²⁵

The story ends with the transformation of the power structure coupled with collective laughter as the peasants of Yanjiashan assume leadership of their community for the first time.

It is worth considering the extent to which Comrade Yang, as a representative of central authority, is the real change-maker that actually instigates the peasants' rebellion. Only through the agency of Comrade Yang does the ideological fantasy of turning laughter into revolution become a reality. But the story is at pains to depict Comrade Yang as inspired by the peasants' rhymes, in particular those of Youcai. Youcai instills laughter, and, inspired by his wit, Comrade Yang foments revolution. Put another way, Youcai embodies spontaneous rebellion (*stikhiinost'*), while Yang transforms such raw energy into conscious political action (*soznatel'nost'*), thus instantiating the narrative logic common to many socialist realist works.²⁶ The story portrays the linkage between Youcai and Comrade Yang as organic, and both figures are equally important to the making of revolution.

Revolution promises not merely the toppling of domination and the distribution of wealth; it also entails a remaking of everyday life whereby one's relationship to the world, and to others, is fundamentally transformed. As language constitutes the essential medium of intersubjective understanding and embodies in its own use the power relations among its speakers, revolution also hopes to remake language so that it may become a medium of expressing and experiencing equality. This is the radical hope of Zhao Shuli's literary enterprise: how might the humble, rustic verbal wit of uneducated, dispossessed peasants actually embody the very spirit of egalitarian democracy? Revolution entails a metapragmatic realignment between language and the social status of its users. Zhao Shuli's fiction suggests that a cultural praxis of democracy does not come from the outside; it is organically rooted in the vernacular discourse of the peasantry.

25. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 60–61.

26. For a discussion of this movement between "spontaneity" and "consciousness," see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 15.

Jokes in the Bedroom: Superstition, Sexuality, and the State in “The Marriage of Little Erhei”

“The Marriage of Little Erhei” depicts the struggle of a young couple to freely marry against the opposition of their parents.²⁷ Erhei’s father, Liu Xiude, who is known by his nickname Er Zhuge (“second Zhuge Liang,” the latter being a famous political strategist during the Three Kingdoms period), is a self-proclaimed diviner, and Qin’s mother, San Xiang (“Third Fairy”), promotes herself as a spirit medium. The story is bookended by pointed mockery of the parents’ belief in superstition. In the beginning, the narrator informs us that each parent is associated with a particular punch line. For Er Zhuge, it is the phrase “not fit for sowing” (*bu yi caizhong* 不宜採種), and for San Xiang, it is “the rice is overcooked” (*mi lan le* 米爛了). The narrator explains the origins of the punch lines. In the case of Er Zhuge, after a prolonged drought, heavy rains finally come and the peasants rush to plant seed. However, consulting his astrological manuals and almanacs, Er Zhuge decides that despite the rain it is not propitious to plant. By the time the astrologically appropriate day for sowing does arrive, the drought has returned and Er Zhuge has wasted a harvest. From that point on, peasants passing Er Zhuge cheekily ask him, “Is today fit for sowing?,” resulting in collective laughter (*dajia jiu xixihaha chuan wei xiaotan* 大家就嘻嘻哈哈傳為笑談).²⁸ As for San Xiang, while conducting a medium session for a client, she enters a trance and is ostensibly possessed by a spirit who then speaks through her in a rhythmic chant. Her daughter, Qin, is nine years old at the time and is preparing the evening meal of rice. Her mother’s bizarre chanting captures her attention, and she peeks at her mother from the kitchen, unsure of whom or what her mother has suddenly become. When the client briefly steps out to relieve himself, San Xiang immediately drops the numinous mask, switches back to ordinary speech, and scolds her daughter, “Take the rice off the fire now! The rice is overcooked!” (*kuai qu lao fan! mi lan le!* 快去撈飯！米爛了！) Her exclamation falls within earshot of the client, who realizes that the possession is a charade and tells the villagers, who treat it as a joke. Thereafter when they pass her by, they mockingly ask, “Have you overcooked the rice?”²⁹ By mimicking the moment in which San Xiang breaks character, the villagers reveal the falsity of how San Xiang’s oracular “I” bears numinous authority. This metapragmatic awareness of San Xiang’s superstitious nonsense undercuts her supposed power.

By associating these punch lines with the parents and narrating how they came about, the story reveals how the villagers themselves debunk the superstitious pretensions of Er Zhuge and San Xiang. In fact, as a result of being teased for his father’s superstitious beliefs Erhei, at the age of thirteen, rejects not just belief in

27. Cai Xiang notes how this rustic story bears the indelible traces of urban romantic popular fiction of the 1930s. See Cai Xiang, *Geming/xushu: Zhongguo shehuizhuyi wenxue wenhua xiangxiang, 1949–1966* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2010), 147–49.

28. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 1.

29. Zhao, 2.

the supernatural, but also his father's unquestioned authority. This story unravels unjustified authority on a number of fronts. In addition to the spiritual authority of traditional superstition, the story takes aim at the family tyranny that traps children in arranged marriages. Er Zhuge wishes to marry Erhei to a child bride he has adopted; San Xiangu tries to pawn Qin off to a rich widower. In case dealing with obstinate parents and a repressive belief system were not enough, both Erhei and Qin have to struggle against the local petty tyrants who, like the Yan clan in the previous story, hold a tight grip on the town.

San Xiangu emerges as a conspicuous target of mockery. She plays the role of unruly shrew who, despite her advanced years, indulges in makeup and clothing while surrounding herself with the attention of young men who come into town for occasional work. In fact, she set herself up as a medium precisely to gain a space of her own where she could socialize with men much younger than she. The narrator notes just how ridiculously garish San Xiangu has become; her wrinkled face slathered with makeup resembles "a pile of donkey shit covered all over with frost."³⁰ She strenuously opposes Qin's wish to marry the handsome Erhei for the selfish reason that, were she to become his mother-in-law, she would be unable to shamelessly flirt with him. The story thus depicts San Xiangu's desire as so perverse that it risks crossing the bounds of incest.

Both Er Zhuge and San Xiangu are ridiculed as hopelessly out of step with modernity. Their belief in superstition and their employment of such beliefs to actively oppose their children's marriage demonstrate the repressive nature of tradition. But San Xiangu exhibits yet another level of being "out of step" with modernity in her inability to exhibit an age-appropriate sexuality. While indulging in her own delusions of youthful desire, she inhibits her daughter from being able to enter healthy and productive conjugal relations with Erhei, a union that allegorically signifies the emergence of a new nationhood. The story's depiction of San Xiangu's perverse, selfish desire suggests that what is at issue is not simply the "freedom" of marriage, but the regulation of sexuality in order to meet the imperatives of modernity. The scathing mockery of San Xiangu serves to install a new regime of sexuality, one that entails its own restrictions.

When San Xiangu fails to dissuade Qin from marrying Erhei, she enters a spirit trance and adopts the speaking position of an oracular ghost, who then admonishes Qin. If Qin will not listen to her mother, surely she would listen to a vengeful ghost. "[She/the ghost] intoned that 'Marriage is preordained by Heaven; if you do not submit to Heaven's will, you will not live.' [Qin's father] knelt before her and begged for mercy, and the spirit directed him to immediately give Qin a beating. Qin heard this, and realized it was useless trying to talk sense to a mother who would pretend to be a ghost."³¹ Qin has a keen metapragmatic awareness of how her mother is feigning spirit possession, and rather than feel awed by the authority of the spirit

30. Zhao, 3.

31. Zhao, 8–9.

world, she thinks her mother is a joke.³² One is reminded of Dorothy who realizes that the “Wizard of Oz” is simply a small man operating a machine. However, San Xiang’s appeal to the spirits demonstrates just how much social hierarchy is dependent on irrational schemes for their legitimization.

The conflict between parents/spirits and children comes to a head when the petty tyrants of the town, in a pique of vengefulness, charge the young lovers with corruption and send them on to the district government office, hoping that the authorities there will punish them severely. Both Er Zhuge and San Xiang also come to the office, hoping that the authorities will dissuade the young couple from their wishes. San Xiang in particular sadistically delights in the idea that her own daughter will suffer from state sanction and makes herself up with extra gusto as she attempts to flirt with the officials and persuade them to punish her daughter.³³

However, both parents come up short; they, along with the petty tyrants, mistakenly believe that the officials at the district government office are typical bureaucrats and thus susceptible to flirtation, convention, and superstitious belief. But these officials are a new breed: gruff and blunt, they have no patience for polite niceties and instead embody the impartiality of the law (*fa* 法) that they defend. And they are certainly not afraid of wrathful spirits. The district government office is denoted by a one-character word throughout the story: *qu* 區, which denotes government office, or any space specified for a particular purpose. There is little physical description of the *qu*, and it seems that the *qu* is as much a symbolic space as it is a physical one: the *qu* is the place where all are equal before the law. Er Zhuge pleads his case for why Erhei must marry the child bride and peppers his entreaties with the phrase “I beg your mercy” (*endian endian* 恩典恩典) so as to show ceremonial deference.³⁴ The officials are completely unmoved by Er Zhuge’s obsequious formality and remind him of his son’s legal right to marry whom he wants.³⁵

San Xiang fares even worse. When she approaches the district head and attempts to flirt with him, he immediately ridicules her appearance, asking whether she even resembles a human anymore with her garish makeup.³⁶ A teenage girl, overlooking the situation, is so overcome with laughter that she runs out and tells all the locals what she has witnessed. Soon enough, a throng of women arrives to the yard outside the *qu* to take in the spectacle:

The neighboring women all ran to see [San Xiang], and they filled up half the yard and giggled. “Look at her! She’s forty-five years old!” “Look at those pants!” “And those shoes!” San Xiang had hardly blushed for most of her life, but now she could

32. Greg Urban discusses the use of “projective ‘I’” that occurs with speech associated with a speaker in a trance state. See Greg Urban, “The ‘I’ of Discourse,” in *Semiotics, Self, and Society*, ed. Benjamin Lee and Greg Urban (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter), 39–45.

33. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 13.

34. Zhao, 12.

35. Cai Xiang notes how the character of the district head in particular demonstrates how revolutionary politics infiltrates the private realms of emotion and intimacy. See Cai Xiang, *Geming/Xushu*, 148.

36. Zhao, *Zhao Shuli wenji*, 14.

hardly catch her breath as streams of sweat poured down her face. The messenger brought in Qin and scolded the onlookers: "What are you looking at? She's still a person, haven't you seen one before? Clear the way!" The crowd of women laughed out loud.³⁷

The litany of gossip and ridicule is such that San Xiang "was just about to dash her head against the wall and die."³⁸ Scolded by the officials inside the *qu*, taunted by the ladies standing outside the *qu*, San Xiang is filled with such shame that she finally relents, and not only allows her daughter's marriage to Erhei but reconsiders her own scandalous behavior. The official procedures of law are thus supplemented by acts of collective laughter that occur right beside them; both have the effect of disciplining subjects into compliance with a new, emancipatory regime. Law in and of itself cannot change social traditions; a democratic culture must also accompany it. After going back home, San Xiang peers into a mirror, and for the first time in thirty years, realizes just how out of step she has been and resolves to take off the makeup and become a proper mother to her soon-to-be-wed daughter.³⁹ She also abandons her practice of spirit possession.

Even after their nuptials and their parents' genuine transformation, Erhei and Qin still recall their parents' erstwhile opposition as a kind of joke they share between themselves:

Sometimes the couple would joke among themselves in their bedroom: Erhei would mimic the way San Xiang would go in a trance and intone that "Marriage is preordained by Heaven," and Qin would mimic the way Er Zhuge cried out, "I beg your mercy, but their fates do not match." Naughty children would overhear them by their window, and having themselves learned the two phrases, gave the two diviners new nicknames: San Xiang was called "Preordained marriage," and Er Zhuge was named "Fates don't match."⁴⁰

The story that began by assigning punch lines to the two characters now concludes by giving them new punch lines. The humor obtains not so much within the content of the speech, but in the humorous way in which Erhei and Qin mimic (*haoxue* 好學) their in-laws' silly mannerisms. The children standing outside reduplicate this act of mimicry, and it spreads throughout the village. Worth noting is how the happy couple indulges in their jokes within the intimate confines of their bedroom (*wofang* 臥房), thus suggesting how the eruption of laughter is metonymically correlated with the flowering of proper sexuality. The children are "naughty" (*taoqi* 淘氣) precisely because they are eavesdropping in the intimate banter of a couple within a space that should be private. But rather than hear sounds that would truly be scandalous, they instead hear jokes that advance the progressive values of the

37. Zhao, 14.

38. Zhao, 15.

39. Zhao, 16.

40. Zhao, 16.

community and are thus worthy of being shared. The reproductive logic represented by Erhei and Qin's nuptials is metonymically displaced onto the reproduction of their jokes/speech acts via the younger generation's propagation.

Greg Urban provocatively argues that a speaking subject's emergence as a cultural self occurs when a person learns to adopt a speaking persona.⁴¹ The "I" which we take to be an organic expression of interiority, or simply an indexical reference of who is speaking, is in fact something we learn and adopt. As we internalize this "I," we may also adopt the cultural beliefs that attend to this speaking subject. San Xiang, in her spirit possession (*xiashen* 下神), exhibits the way old, feudal culture has been passed on through the generations. Erhei and Qin, however, embody a new revolutionary culture. They "copy" their parents' speech and impersonate their elders, but only to subvert its meaning through irony. Superstitious spirits are transformed through irony into revolutionary spirit (*jingshen* 精神). And when the "naughty children" mimic the couple, they are also possessed by this same spirit. The story plays on a double meaning of the word *haoxue*; on a colloquial level it means to imitate so as to mock. But on another level it means to imitate so as to learn; in the children's mimicry of Qin and Erhei, they are literally voicing the spirit of a new culture.

While laughter is imbued with an emancipatory potential in Zhao Shuli's fiction, it certainly carries with it an illiberal temperament. After all, Erhei only abandons his belief in superstition after he is mercilessly teased about his father. San Xiang is so shamed into enacting "proper" sexual behavior that at one point she feels she would rather die than suffer more mortification. When social power and discourse converge so vividly in Zhao Shuli's stories, what obtains is not an innocuous "public sphere" of dialogue and mutual understanding; what Zhao presents is a constantly tumultuous state of struggle. Alongside the celebration of Erhei and Qin's freedom to marry is a darker puritanism that does not liberate sexuality as much as make it conform to a new ideological regime.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that the representations of democracy embodied in Zhao Shuli's fiction diverged, in significant ways, from the historic reality of revolution, land reform, and class struggle. The battles over redistribution were not waged simply with verbal wit, but coincided with a level of occasionally indiscriminate brutality that cast a long shadow over the founding ideals of the Communist movement. People did not just break out in laughter; they also broke out in eruptions of violence as well. However, I suggest that we see Zhao Shuli and other writers of the Yan'an period as earnest in their desire to imagine how democracy, culture, and

41. Urban, "The 'I' of Discourse," 48–50. Urban notes that the use of "I" covers a spectrum from, on one end, plain indexical reference, to, on the other, complete possession of a speaker by an external persona.

revolutionary struggle can come together. Zhao Shuli's stories sought to portray how rustic folk could forge bonds of democratic solidarity out of the quotidian raw material of their humor and wit. The desire to locate the sources of democratic culture from inside the world of the peasantry, and not from an elite vanguard, aligned well with the new political directions that the Yan'an period embodied.

Contributors

Roy Chan is an associate professor of Chinese in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures and is affiliated with the Department of Comparative Literature and the program in Russian, East European, and Eurasian studies at the University of Oregon. His research focuses on modern Chinese and Russian literatures. His first monograph is *The Edge of Knowing: Dreams, History, and Realism in Modern Chinese Literature* (2017). He is working on a second monograph, *A Reflection of Sovereignty: Transnational Figurations and Global Forms in Modern Chinese and Russian Literatures*.

Laurence Coderre is an assistant professor of East Asian studies at New York University. Coderre holds an AB and AM from Harvard University and a PhD in Chinese from the University of California, Berkeley. Before moving to NYU, she was a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Michigan's Lieberthal-Rogel Center for Chinese Studies. She has also received support from the Social Science Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Fulbright-Hays program. Coderre's work, which focuses on Chinese socialist and postsocialist cultural production, has appeared in the *Journal of Material Culture*, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, and *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, among other publications. Coderre is currently completing a book manuscript on media, materiality, and the commodity-form in the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

John A. Crespi is the Henry R. Luce Associate Professor of Chinese in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York. His research interests include performance and voice in modern and contemporary Chinese poetry, and the relationship between Chinese cartooning (*manhua*) and pictorial satire magazines during China's Republican and early socialist periods. He is the author of *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China* (2009).

Li Guo is an associate professor of Chinese (PhD University of Iowa, 2010) at the Utah State University. Her research interests include late imperial and modern women's literature, gender studies, film and visuality, animation studies, and popular narratives. She is the author of *Women's Tanci Fiction in Late Imperial and*

Early Twentieth-Century China (2015). Her articles have appeared in *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* (2011, 2014, 2017), *Modern China Studies* (2018), *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* (2014), *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2013, 2015), and *Film International* (2012, 2016). She has coedited special issues for the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* (2017), *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* (2014, 2017), and *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* (2013).

Charles A. Laughlin is Ellen Bayard Weedon Chair Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Virginia. He received his BA in Chinese language and literature from the University of Minnesota in 1988 and went on to complete a PhD in Chinese Literature at Columbia University in 1996. Laughlin's first book, *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience*, was published in 2002. He edited *Contested Modernities in Chinese Literature* (2005), and his book *The Literature of Leisure and Chinese Modernity* was published in April 2008. Laughlin has translated Chinese stories, articles, and poems for several collections, and his translations have appeared in *Modern Poetry in Translation* and in *Another Kind of Nation: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese Poetry, Pathlight* (edited by Zhang Er and Chen Dong) and *By the River: Seven Contemporary Chinese Novellas*.

Xiaoning Lu is a lecturer of modern Chinese culture and language at SOAS, University of London. Her research focuses on the relationship among the aesthetic, the affective, and the political in the making of modern Chinese identities. Her recent writing on Chinese cinema and culture has appeared in journals and edited collections including the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Surveillance in Asian Cinema: Under Eastern Eyes*, *Chinese Film Stars*, and *Words and Their Stories: Essays on Chinese Revolutionary Discourse*. She is currently completing a monograph entitled *Forces of Spectacle: Chinese Cinema and Socialist Modernity, 1949–1966*.

Jason McGrath is an associate professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, where he serves on the graduate faculties of Moving Image Studies, Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, and Asian Literatures, Cultures, and Media. He is the author of *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*, and his essays on Chinese film and media have appeared in various journals and anthologies. His current projects include a coedited anthology of translated Chinese film theory and criticism and a book manuscript entitled "Inscribing the Real: Realism and Convention in Chinese Cinema from the Silent Era to the Digital Age."

Ban Wang is William Haas Professor in Chinese Studies at Stanford University. He is the author of *The Sublime Figure of History* (1997), *Illuminations from the Past* (2004), and *Lishi yu jiyi (History and Memory)* (2004). His most recent publication is

the edited volume *Chinese Visions of World Order* (2017). He has written widely on Chinese literature, aesthetics, cinema, world politics, and intellectual history.

Zhuoyi Wang is an associate professor of East Asian languages and literatures and the coordinator of the Chinese program at Hamilton College. His scholarly and translation works have appeared in the *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, *Journal of Beijing Film Academy* (*Beijing dianyingxueyuan xuebao*), *Literature and Art Studies* (*Wenyi yanjiu*), *Berkshire Dictionary of Chinese Biography*, *China Review International*, and *Literature* (*Wenxue*). His scholarly book, entitled *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951–1979* (2014), comprehensively discusses how the cyclical development of Maoist revolutionary campaigns complicated and diversified the meanings of films.

Emily Wilcox is an assistant professor of modern Chinese studies in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan. She is a specialist in Asian performance culture, with a focus on dance in the People's Republic of China. Her research articles appear in the journals *positions: asia critique*, *Journal of Folklore Research*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Asian Theatre Journal*, *TDR: The Drama Review*, *Wudao Pinglun* (*The Dance Review*), and *Body and Society*. Her essays also appear in the books *Rethinking Dance History*, 2nd ed., *Queer Dance: Meanings and Makings*, *Chinese Dance: In the Vast Land and Beyond*, and *Chinese Modernity and the Individual Psyche*. Dr. Wilcox co-curated the 2017 exhibition “Chinese Dance: National Movements in a Revolutionary Age, 1945–1965” and cocreated the “Pioneers of Chinese Dance” digital archive, launched in 2016. She is the author of the book *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (University of California Press, 2018).

Ping Zhu is an associate professor of Chinese literature at the University of Oklahoma and deputy editor-in-chief of *Chinese Literature Today*. She is the author of *Gender and Subjectivities in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature and Culture* (2015). Her articles and translations have appeared in, among others, *Gender & History*, *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, *Visual Anthropology*, *Renditions*, and *Chinese Literature Today*.

Yun Zhu is an assistant professor of Chinese and Asian studies at Temple University in Philadelphia. Her research interests focus on Chinese literature and culture from the late Qing to the contemporary period and women's literature and film. Her scholarly essays have been published in peer-reviewed journals and edited books such as *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China*, *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*, *Kodex 6* (2016): *Transforming Book Culture in China, 1600–2016*, and *Intertexts: A Journal of Comparative and Theoretical Reflection*. Her book *Imagining Sisterhood in Modern Chinese Texts, 1890–1937* was published in 2017. She has also coauthored, with Tan Ye, *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Cinema* (2012).

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