Maoist Laughter

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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

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 zhisi* 領袖之死) offer visual and literary examples of the laugher 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 *huajixi* 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.

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]

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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 張諤 (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 suiyue," *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 魯韌 (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 laugher, 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 chuangzuo 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 周恩來 (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 sword[49]

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, Awaking 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, Awaking 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.

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