

The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China

CHRISTOPHER REA

Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2015

xvi + 335 pp. \$70.00, £51.95

ISBN 978-0-520-28384-8 doi:10.1017/S0305741016001399

In *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*, Christopher Rea “explores from a new perspective a chapter in the history of the Chinese language” (p. x). Such a claim begs the question: if this is a new chapter, what, then, was written in the old chapter? The answer reveals something of a rhetorical sleight of hand in that the old chapter has largely been left unwritten. English language histories of Chinese humour often contain predictable references to collections of old jokes or to works such as *The Journey to the West* and *The Scholars*. Even discussions of humour in Republican China tend to cover familiar ground: Lao She, Lu Xun and, more recently, Lin Yutang, with an occasional foray into the cartoons of Feng Zikai or the crosstalk (*xiangsheng*) of performance artists such as Hou Baolin. But *The Age of Irreverence* shows that there is much territory left to explore. Rea provides a map to a diverse comedic terrain between the late Qing dynasty and the Year of Humour (1933) that is richly populated with “whimsical poets, vaudevilian entrepreneurs, renowned revilers, twee essayists, winking farceurs, and self-promoting jokesters” (pp. 14–15).

Each chapter in *The Age of Irreverence* is differently titled in Chinese and English, with five of the Chinese titles anchored by characters that were used at one time to denote comedy or humour in Chinese. Chapter one introduces the historical and theoretical study of humour and laughter and provides a broad overview of the cultural and political issues that preoccupied the Chinese people throughout the time covered in the study. The chapter is titled both “Breaking into Laughter” and “失笑” (*shixiao*), which also means to break into laughter, unless it is read literally: to lose laughter. *The Age of Irreverence* culminates with chapter six where all of the varieties of humour play a role in “The invention of humor” (in English) during the “The Year of Humor” (*youmo nian*) when the legacy of irreverence toward convention and authority gave way to a more comic spirit. The “Epilogue” is also titled “笑死” (*xiaosi*), which combines the characters for “laughter” and “death” and thereby encapsulates “the ambiguity of laughter and the varying interpretations it inspires” (p. 165).

The middle chapters introduce comic concepts whose meanings sometimes changed dramatically. Chapter two, “Jokes 笑話百出” (*xiaohu baichu*), may be the most comprehensive study of traditional Chinese jokes and the publication of joke books (many with titles announcing a “new history of laughter”) especially following the collapse of the Qing dynasty and the end of the imperial examination system. Chapter three, “Play 遊戲大觀” (*youxi daguan*), examines *youxi* (play or games), which became “a buzzword in print media in the late 1890s and spread to other parts of popular and visual culture” (p. 40). This is the book’s most wide-ranging chapter and the examples – cartoons, word games, comic periodicals, amusement halls – are varied, surprising and terrific. Chapter four, by contrast, titled “Mockery 罵人的藝術” (*maren de yishu*), investigates the art of cursing “as a rhetorical antidote to elitism” (p. 81) with an emphasis on one text, titled *Which Classic (He Dian)?* Chapter five, “Farce 滑稽魂” (*huajihun*), is similar to chapter three in its diversity of materials despite the focus on *huaji* as the most common term for humour. Chapter six enriches the arguments found in Qian Suoqiao’s edited

collection of essays in *The Cross-Cultural Legacy of Lin Yutang: Critical Perspectives* (Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California Berkeley, 2016).

Half of the 335-page book is back matter: two appendices (pp. 167–97), a list of abbreviations (p. 199) used in the chapter end notes (pp. 201–65), a glossary of names and titles in pinyin and Chinese (pp. 267–90), a bibliography (pp. 291–317) in Chinese, pinyin and English that is arranged by genre (periodicals, films, books and articles) and the index (pp. 319–35). The proportioning of the book, which the author alludes to in the acknowledgements, is not to the detriment of the study but to the benefit of the reader, who will find a chart of 116 Chinese humour collections (with year of publication, pinyin, Chinese and English titles, editors/authors, place of publication and publisher as well as notes) published between 1900 and 1937 (Appendix one), as well as a comprehensive bibliographic listing of editions and paratexts of *Which Classic?* (Appendix two). Readers will also find more than 600 endnotes, many of which are replete with citations and references that extend the research in multiple directions, including beyond Republican China.

Even though the primary artefacts and their social, historical and political contexts are specific to China – Qing dynasty joke books, Chinese portraiture and trick photography, the Chinese art of reviling, the list goes on and on – *The Age of Irreverence* is a very readable book with a wide appeal. Scholars of Republican China will find resources not used in more traditionally oriented historical or literary studies that investigate what went wrong in early modern China, and those who read the book from non-Chinese disciplinary perspectives – scholars of popular culture, linguistics, humour, comparative and cross cultural studies – will be pleased to discover so many examples of comic amusements that have heretofore received little scholarly attention. Thus, *The Age of Irreverence* is a helpful guide for future studies in poetics and rhetoric of laughter, and should emerge as a primary point of reference for discussions of humour in Republican China for quite some time.

JOE SAMPLE

samplej@uhd.edu

The Great Chinese Art Transfer: How so Much of China's Art Came to America

MICHAEL ST. CLAIR

Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016

xvii + 224 pp. £49.95

ISBN 978-1-61147-910-2 doi:10.1017/S0305741016001405

Michael St. Clair's *The Great Chinese Art Transfer: How So Much of China's Art Came to America* documents the unprecedented removal of art and antiquities from China in the late 19th to early 20th century, and the flow of this material to dealers, collectors and museums in the US. With China's economic, political and social upheaval at the end of the Qing dynasty, huge quantities of artefacts were transferred to richer countries in the West. Indeed, the Chinese Culture Relics Society estimates that more than ten million objects have left China since the middle of the 19th century. This vast removal was made possible both by the obvious huge differential in wealth between China and the US and the relative ease with which Westerners could acquire such material at this time. When China dissolved into chaos at the end of the Qing period, many impoverished elite families, desperate