

## Breaking into Laughter 失笑

In 1903, Wu Jianren, one of the most innovative and prolific Chinese writers of the early twentieth century, began serializing two works in the same issue of Yokohama's *New Fiction*, a leading literary journal of Chinese reformers in exile. The first, a novel, he entitled *A History of Pain*; the second, a series of jokes, he called *A New History of Laughter*.<sup>1</sup>

These two titles appeared at a moment when China's future was unclear. The Qing court was still reeling from an 1895 defeat in the Sino-Japanese War, an aborted reform movement in 1898, and, close on its heels, the Boxer Rebellion. Wu was among a group of educated men who might once have sought a position in the government bureaucracy but were now turning to literary and entrepreneurial pursuits for a living. In expressing their emotional state, many of these writers put anguish front and center. *A History of Pain* appeared at the front of the journal and *A New History of Laughter* at the back. Then there is the novel *The Travels of Lao Can*, which Wu's contemporary, Liu E, started writing that same year, and which begins as follows: "When a baby is born, he weeps, *wa-wa*; and when a man is old and dying, his family forms a circle around him and wail, *hao-t'ao*. Thus weeping is certainly that with which a man starts and finishes his life. In the interval, the quality of a man is measured by how much or little he weeps, for weeping is the expression of a spiritual nature." "The passionate weeper," as Liu styles himself, invites readers to join him in weeping.<sup>2</sup> Liu was invoking an age-old idea: that tears are a powerful vehicle of communion among humans, or even with the cosmos. In the legend of Meng Jiangnü, a northern peasant woman goes in search of her beloved husband, a corvée laborer on the Great Wall, only to

discover that he has died and been buried within it, and her weeping causes the wall to collapse.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural revolutionaries of the modern era spoke of tears as a vehicle of social empowerment. One catalytic moment was the May Fourth Movement of 1919, when students and other citizens of the Republic of China, infuriated at its poor treatment under the Treaty of Versailles, demanded radical changes to Chinese culture. In 1921, activist Zheng Zhenduo called for writers to reject the traditional focus on beauty and replace it with a “literature of blood and tears” that would accurately represent the sufferings of the Chinese people.<sup>4</sup>

In 1924, a popular Shanghai writer named Cheng Zhanlu published a response to the current literary trend: “A Delightful Story of Blood and Tears.” He noted, by way of introducing the piece: “People nowadays who write tragic love stories [*aiqing xiaoshuo*] always like to sprinkle them with words like blood and tears. But whether or not a story is sad is *not*, in fact, determined by the literal meaning of the words themselves. Today I’ve written a joyous story [*xiqing xiaoshuo*] and mixed in the word ‘blood’ eight times and the word ‘tears’ ten times. Based on the words themselves, it should be excruciating. But actually, this is a tale of not pain, but delight.” Sure enough, his story is awash with tears of joy. It begins: “The *blood*-like sun set slowly in the west. In an upstairs apartment two newlyweds were whispering sweet nothings to each other. Their *blood* cells were filled with a million of the deepest passions. As *blood* pulsed round and round in their veins, the husband said, ‘My darling.’”<sup>5</sup>

Cheng’s parody inverted an old cliché: if laughter is often a cover for tears, a writer can also use tears and blood to evoke laughter. “Selling tears,” the scholar-writer Qian Zhongshu later remarked, has been no less useful to writers “than the courtesan’s ploy of ‘selling smiles.’” Even the famed “debt of tears” owed by Lin Daiyu, the tragic heroine of the canonical Qing dynasty novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*, he said, was something of a bribe, one that used pathos as currency in an emotional transaction.<sup>6</sup>

The tears–laughter pairing has remained a conspicuous part of modern Chinese culture since Wu Jianren’s day, but it seems to have been a particular obsession during the early twentieth century. One of the best-selling novels of the 1930s, Zhang Henshui’s *Fate in Tears and Laughter* (1931), invoked it as a metaphor for the vicissitudes of life. A decade later, Lin Yutang’s polemical English-language book *Between Tears and Laughter* (1943, later translated into Chinese) used it as a symbol of intellectuals’ anguished frustration. Left-leaning, politically progressive films of the 1930s, such as Sun Yu’s *Daybreak* (1933), habitually represented the life of the urban lower classes as tragicomic melodrama.

Modern Chinese writers have invoked blood and tears even when cracking jokes. One of the most prolific fiction writers of the Republican era went by the

pen name Bao Tianxiao, or Embrace Heaven and Laugh. When he coauthored works with the writer Cold-Blooded, they combined their noms de plume into Cold Laughter, or Sneer. The 1914 joke book *Laughing Through Tears* tells of a “man of conscience” who moves his audiences by weeping at the beginning of each speech; the stimulant turns out to be raw ginger hidden in his handkerchief. *The Travels of Lao Can*, plaintive preface notwithstanding, offers a zesty picaresque tale, and generations of readers have found it to be a very funny book.<sup>7</sup>

The Chinese Communist Party turned displays of tears into a political ritual during the civil war of the late 1940s, and again during the Mao era, by organizing meetings at which the people would “speak bitterness” (*suku*) about hardship under the Nationalists. But a few early promoters of realism for ideological purposes became aware that tragic catharsis has its limits. In 1924, the celebrated writer Lu Xun wrote “The New-Year’s Sacrifice,” a short story about a peasant woman who has suffered the death of two husbands, the loss of a job, and the shock of having her young son eaten by a wolf. Xianglin’s wife goes around repeating her tale of woe to fellow villagers: “I was really stupid, really . . . I only knew that when it snows the wild beasts in the glen have nothing to eat and may come to the villages.”<sup>8</sup> At first, her story draws genuine tears and sympathetic sighs from her audience. After several retellings, however, their sympathy turns to indifference and eventually contempt. They mimic her self-reproaches and mock her to her face. Her son’s fate has not changed, but tragedy has collapsed under the weight of repetition.

Stories of trauma abound in contemporary scholarship on China. Michael Berry’s study *A History of Pain*, which takes its title from Wu Jianren’s novel, chronicles a litany of traumas that have impacted on modern China from without and within since the nineteenth century. David Der-wei Wang writes of a legacy of violence that has left modern Chinese literature haunted by “the monster that is history.”<sup>9</sup> Wang Ban, drawing on the German literary critic Walter Benjamin, has likened modern Chinese history to an accumulation of wreckage. Official responses to historical trauma, which subscribe to a narrative of revolutionary modernization, “stare at the bloody image for a stunned moment, and then turn away to weave a narrative in a hurry, [striving] to shape nonmeaning into meaning, the absurd into the tragic, the stagnant into the progressive, the horrific into the triumphant.” Writers who rejected this progressivist narrative, he continues, learned instead to “linger on such images a bit longer, collect more fragments from the wreckage, and archive them for criticism and reflection.”<sup>10</sup>

Another way of regarding history, as we saw with Wu Jianren’s *A History of Laughter*, is as an accumulation of jokes. Suffering does not always preempt laughter; it may even call for it. At the end of Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Rosalind exhorts the glib-tongued nobleman Biron to use his wit not to court her but to

cheer the sick and dying. Only this penance will convince her of his sincerity. He objects that “Mirth cannot move a soul in agony,” but Rosalind reminds him that

A jest’s prosperity lies in the ear  
Of him that hears it, never in the tongue  
Of him that makes it.  
(5.2.2804–5)

Chinese writers of the early twentieth century did not need a lover’s encouragement to seek humorous ways to minister to the citizens of a dying empire (or, later, a sickly republic). Many threw themselves into cheering everyone up with gusto, conceiving of uses for laughter besides the palliative. Jokes could inspire reform; playfulness could lead to new discoveries; mockery could shame the powerful into better behavior. Conversely, laughter could be a symptom of cultural illness. In one of Lu Xun’s most famous stories, “Diary of a Madman” (1918), the narrator raves about seeing daggers in men’s smiles in a China as hypocritical and murderous as Macbeth’s Scotland. Writers spoke of laughter and tears not merely as opposites but as symbols of a complex spectrum of feeling. They also wrote in a literary market increasingly subdivided by genre. This may be one reason why Wu Jianren wrote separate histories of laughter and pain, rather than just consigning laughter to a supporting role in a grand drama of historical trauma.

I use the word “laughter” in this book to denote a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviors ranging from amusement to buffoonery to derision. I am interested in when and why certain modes of laughter have become culturally endemic and, at times, propelled Chinese history in unexpected directions. Few would argue that China’s modern experience has been primarily jolly. But its wits and wags have arrested attention and influenced public sentiment. “Humorists fatten on trouble,” E. B. White noted, and in modern China there was plenty of that to go around.<sup>11</sup> Even poison, the pharmacologist Li Shizhen discovered in the sixteenth century, can induce laughter if prepared with the right recipe.<sup>12</sup> And modern Chinese writers and artists have been adept at comic alchemy, converting toxic politics into nourishment for cultures of mirth.

#### A HISTORY OF LOSS

*Shixiao* 失笑, the phrase appearing in this chapter’s title, means to give an inadvertent laugh, or to break into laughter. The word *xiao* 笑 itself has multiple possible meanings, as a verb (to laugh, to smile, to mock), as a modifier (laughable, ridiculous, derisive), and as a noun (laughter, smile, joke, jest). Chinese shares the semantic overlap of smile/laugh with Romance languages such as Latin, Italian, French, and Spanish, and even German (*lächeln*, to smile; *lachen*, to laugh), but not with English.<sup>13</sup> The graph 笑 is rooted in natural imagery. A love poem in the

*Classic of Poetry*, dating back more than twenty-six hundred years, likens a young woman's fetching smile to "peach flowers blossoming bewitchingly, shining with youthful radiance." The metaphor of the smile as a flower in bloom can be found in other languages too.<sup>14</sup>

Chinese characters, however, allow for a unique form of visual wordplay (more examples of which appear in chapter 3). During the Song dynasty (960–1279), the poet Su Shi once criticized the overly literal interpretations in fellow poet Wang Anshi's book *Chinese Characters Explained* with a riddle that alluded to an ancient form of the graph. "What's laughable about using bamboo to beat a dog?" (Put bamboo 竹 over dog 犬 and you get laughter 笑.)<sup>15</sup> Zhu Zhanji, who ruled as Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming dynasty, used a similar graphic pun in his 1427 painting *A Laugh* (see figure 1.1).<sup>16</sup>

*Shixiao*, to adopt a literal reading, could mean not to lose oneself to laughter but to lose laughter itself. In Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, a murder mystery set in a medieval Italian monastery leads to a copy of Aristotle's lost book on comedy. The murderer, who sees mirth as a metaphysical threat to the Benedictine order, has poisoned its pages so that readers laugh themselves to death. Discovered, he burns the book (in the process setting the entire library ablaze) so that the source of laughter is lost forever.<sup>17</sup>

In "A History of Laughter," a short story by the May Fourth writer Zhu Ziqing published around the same time as Cheng Zhanlu's parody, a young woman tells how her childhood penchant for hearty laughter eroded away.<sup>18</sup> She marries, and her laughter is suppressed by in-laws who demand that she conform to standards of ladylike propriety. The family falls on hard times and, step by step, her hearty laughter gives way to muted laughter, then silence, tears, and finally a numb inability to laugh or cry. Reaching abject middle age, she comes to resent the laughter of others.

The story makes an implicit call for women's liberation typical of socially progressive fiction of the 1920s. Readers responded with expressions of "inexpressible sorrow" and sympathy for the protagonist, calling her the oppressed "sacrificial object" of China's patriarchy, even as some blamed her for being too weak to cast off her slave mentality.<sup>19</sup> In this story, laughter is a pathetic foil to a broader social tragedy, and Zhu's history of laughter turns out to be about its disappearance.

In the 1930s, Zhu's story was anthologized in the influential *Compendium of China's New Literature*, making laughter's disappearance part of the modern Chinese literary canon.<sup>20</sup> Nor has the loss of laughter been purely fictional or metaphorical. When it appeared in 1902, the political reformer Liang Qichao's futuristic novel *The Future of New China* (discussed in chapter 3) was accompanied by playful commentaries; most later anthologies left them out, in doing so hiding Liang's participation in the bantering side of Chinese literary culture.



FIGURE 1.1. “A Laugh” (1427), a hanging scroll painted by Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming dynasty. Image courtesy of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 45-39.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, every schoolchild learned that the Old Society was a time of bitter suffering; the only people who laughed in that era's propagandistic depictions of the Old Society were evil capitalists and landlords. Any other past laughter became something to explain away. At best, as symbolized by the Party-lauded satire of Lu Xun, it testified to the resilience of the Chinese people, their ability to "make merry amidst their bitter lives" (*kuzhong zuole*), to allow themselves a "bitter smile" (*kuxiao*), or to mock their tormentors.

Various local forms of comic performance, such as Beijing- and Tianjin-based *xiangsheng* ("face-and-voice," often rendered as "comic cross-talk") and Shanghai farce (*huaji xi*), provided vibrant, bawdy, and often politically satirical entertainment in village marketplaces, city streets, teahouses, theaters, and, during the Republican era, on the radio as well. During the early days of the PRC, as part of the Party's rejection of elite culture in favor of popular folk traditions, scholars transcribed routines by old masters of Shanghai farce. Yet they were compelled to "clean them up" for political correctness. As the editor of Jiang Xiaoxiao's "Ah Guan from Shaoxing Rides the Train" explained in 1958, the play had originally made fun of country bumpkins, but, as peasants were now a venerated social class, he "realigned the satirical barb" to point at the son of a rustic rich man.<sup>21</sup>

In a very real sense, then, China's modern literary history is one of lost laughter. Yet, as many historians have pointed out, history is experienced differently than how it is later reconstructed as a series of events (contextualized with the benefit of historical hindsight) or transformed into myths to serve present agendas.<sup>22</sup> Histories of events tend to focus on the traumatic and the dramatic, rather than on everyday moments of communal amusement. The Old Society was a time of tears and sorrow—this is the bedrock myth on which the Communist Party after 1949 built its narrative of socialist progress. This book is a "new" history in part because the laughter of the preceding era tells a different story.

Breaking into laughter is, after all, an involuntary act. Doctors of early imperial China diagnosed excessively frequent or hearty laughter as being a symptom of mental illness, demon possession, food poisoning, poor circulation of the *qi*, or illness of the viscera. (A common prescription: stop laughing.) The Ming dynasty *Systematic Materia Medica* records pathological cases of involuntary, excessive laughter, including one woman who laughed uncontrollably for six months.<sup>23</sup> In late Qing and Republican China, people laughed in spite of authoritative voices claiming either that they should not laugh or, after the fact, that they did not laugh. What a person does with the "uninvited snicker," E. B. White wrote, with hyperbole that his contemporary Lin Yutang, then hailed as China's "Master of Humor," would appreciate, "decides his destiny."<sup>24</sup> Not a few Chinese writers invited snickers by parroting injunctions to gravity. Zhang Tianyi introduced his 1931 novel *Ghostland Diary*: "I have refrained from putting anything amusing, funny, or

irreverent in this diary. My attitude has been entirely serious, so I must request that you also—read it seriously.”<sup>25</sup>

Wu Jianren called his joke series a *new* history of laughter to distinguish it from old histories. The *Records of the Grand Historian*, a monumental work dating back more than two thousand years to the Han dynasty, contains an entire chapter on the humorous sayings of court wits. Song and Ming writers compiled at least three separate collections entitled *A History of Humor* (*Xie shi*). A Qing editor retitled one Ming joke collection *A History of Laughter from Ancient to Modern*. At least two more *Histories of Laughter* appeared in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup>

Wu Jianren’s title was not unique even in its own day. In the early twentieth century, Shanghai’s newspaper of record, the *Shun Pao*, carried dozens of “histories of laughter” (*xiaoshi*), including news items about public figures who had made fools of themselves, as well as jokes appearing in its literary supplement.<sup>27</sup> One 1915 item in the local news pages related a “new history of laughter” about a mother and daughter who made their living defrauding men by arranging marriage contracts and then absconding with the dowry money.<sup>28</sup> A 1918 abridged translation of Charles Dickens’s *The Pickwick Papers* was a *xiaoshi*. So was a 1920s novel called *The Ridiculous Miser*. So was a translated 1930s comic strip featuring American silent film comedian Harold Lloyd.<sup>29</sup>

Wu Jianren, in short, was borrowing a common trope, one that uses the word *history* loosely. The *Shun Pao* examples, to begin with, might be better called funny stories, absurd tales, or mock biographies rather than histories in the grand sense. *Xiaoshi* tended to emphasize the laughter rather than the history. If “history” refers to actual events, Wu Jianren’s claim is spurious at best, as only a few of its jokes claim to be true stories, rather than fictional contrivances. His *New History of Laughter* is also fragmentary, an assemblage of short narratives tenuously connected by general headings. And not all of them are new: Wu admits to retelling others’ jokes.

Literary historian Judith Zeitlin remarks of the various Chinese “histories” of the supernatural published between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that “the term ‘history’ in their titles seems only to indicate that these works are compilations on a specialized subject,” and that “in certain contexts, [it] may approach the earliest Greek meaning of *historia*—an ‘inquiry into’ or ‘an investigation of.’”<sup>30</sup> One preface to the late Ming collection *Expanded History of Humor* suggested that it could “expand not only humor, but also history; and not only history, but also the minds of those who read history.”<sup>31</sup> In the publishing industry when Wu Jianren was writing, “histories” of laughter tended to be humor compilations rather than theoretical investigations, which appeared under other designations, from informal chats (*zatan*) to formal discourses (*lun*).

The proliferation of Chinese “histories of laughter”—enabled by an expanding modern press—reveals, in a material sense, the coexistence of many histories

within History. Popular culture and print culture were shaped by an array of comedic impulses, from one-upping adversaries with humorous insults to playing with everyday objects and discovering fun in the mundane. While sometimes inspired by topical concerns, comic works of this period represent more than just sideways glances at recent traumas or the wreckage of history, since they also look ahead. In embracing, mocking, or making light of what is or what has been, comedy also invites expectation. The history of laughter is a history of, among other things, anticipation—of “wait till you hear this one” and “tell me another one.”

#### THE AGE OF IRREVERENCE

China’s Republican period was one of remarkable openness, a new climate of earnest searching and experimentation with roots in the exploratory culture of the late Qing.<sup>32</sup> Irreverence—meaning an insouciant attitude toward convention and authority—was one disposition driving the exploration. Breaking rules, disobeying authorities, making mischief, mocking intransigent behavior and thought, and pursuing fun all contributed to an atmosphere of cultural liberalization. Open contempt for the Manchu royal court fueled the 1911 revolution. Irreverence also helped to enable positivistic blue-sky thinking, as seen in a wave of futuristic science fantasy novels in the 1900s. Impudent humor, of course, is not the exclusive province of modernists or traditionalists, conservatives or radicals. Chinese writers and artists of the early twentieth century were equally irreverent in inveighing against the fads, excesses, and new sacred cows of the modern era.

The book outlines five of the most important comic trends of the early twentieth century, each identifiable by a key word or phrase: *xiaohua*, *youxi*, *maren*, *huaji*, and *youmo*. The English terms found in the chapter titles—jokes, play, mockery, farce, and humor—are not direct translations. They point in a general direction and give anchor to the individual chapters, which delve into the connotations of and often fluid interrelations between specific coordinates of the Chinese lexicon of the comic. With the exception of *maren*, which is always corrective or abusive, each of these words was used at one time to denote “comedy” or “humor” in the broad sense. Their meaning and currency changed during the twentieth century, sometimes profoundly. For a couple of decades, *youxi*, *huaji*, and *huixie* were the main terms for humor; in the 1930s, it was *huaji* and *youmo*. Each key word also had a narrower range of meanings, denoting a particular comedic form or intonation. *Huaji*, for example, had for hundreds of years meant simply humor or wit, but the Republican writer Xu Zhudai cultivated a *huaji* persona that was primarily farcical. *Huaji*, in other words, cannot be conflated with farce, though they overlap considerably in that writer’s work. Some terms accrued regional connotations, as *youxi* did in Shanghai. But in the publishing market of the day, all of

them granted comic license. They denoted an intention to be funny, created an expectation of amusement, and gave permission to laugh.

During the first four decades of the twentieth century, playfulness, derision, frivolity, profanity, absurdity, and other expressions of humor abounded in China's public sphere. One driver of the proliferation of funny stories, cartoons, parodies, curses, and other expressions of mirth was a fast-growing transnational Chinese-language publishing market. In 1872, China's first modern broadsheet, *Shun Pao*, began publication in Shanghai; by 1876, it had sales centers in a dozen Chinese cities, including Hong Kong, and a daily circulation in the high thousands.<sup>33</sup> By the mid-1900s daily circulation was around 20,000, and by 1930 it had reached around 150,000. At the turn of the century, a wave of new urban tabloid or "small" newspapers emerged—between 1897 and 1911 more than forty were published in Shanghai alone—offering readers an alternative source of entertainment and political commentary to "big" (and often more conservative) papers like the *Shun Pao*.<sup>34</sup> Between 1876 and 1937, more than three hundred publishing houses and bookshops set up operations on Fuzhou Road in Shanghai, the center of Chinese publishing.<sup>35</sup> By 1929, the southern province of Guangdong had more than two hundred periodicals and Jiangsu Province (on the Yangtze River) more than three hundred; by 1935, Shanghai had almost four hundred.<sup>36</sup>

The result of this rapid growth was incessant demand for copy with immediate appeal. Shanghai readers could seek instant gratification from an endless stream of tabloids, which went by titles such as *Laughter Stage* (1918), *Absurd World* (1926–27), *Absurd Laughter* (1927), *Shooting the Breeze* (1927), *Addle-Brained* (1927–28), *New Forest of Laughs* (1928), *New Laughter* (1928), and *Nonsense* (1929). At least two different newspapers called themselves *Chaplin* (1926; 1930) and *Really Happy* (1927; 1928) and three invoked a *Happy World* (1914; 1926–27; 1927).<sup>37</sup> Major dailies started carrying jokes, humorous poems and essays, and comic strips. The 1930s ushered in the heyday of the cartoon magazine and also saw many of China's top writers contributing to a new magazine specializing in literary humor.

Jokes (*xiaohua*), anthologized by literati for centuries, assumed new functions during the late Qing publishing boom, becoming staples of the entertainment press. A new class of professional writers accrued celebrity as joke tellers. Laugh-inducing or smile-inducing talk, as *xiaohua* might be translated more literally, differs from the Anglophone idea of the joke in that the funny events or anecdotes they relate sometimes purport to be true. This ambiguous claim on truth took on new meaning in the late Qing when the journalistic genre of the "joke novel" helped to establish the joke as a symbol of the blurry lines between the real and the fake in an age when old hierarchies were no longer to be trusted.

The early Republican period saw jokes spread through the entertainment press as space fillers and appear as features in periodicals ranging from major newspapers to literary journals based at universities. In subsequent decades, joke books

proliferated as stand-alone commodities. Chapter 2 examines the effects of jokes on modern media culture and vice versa. It also introduces an enduring presence in the Chinese history of laughter: voices warning of peril in an emerging culture that treated everything as mere grist for a new humor mill.

Around the turn of the century, writers and editors also began promoting an urban entertainment ethos of “play” (*youxi*) in magazines, tabloids, and humor columns. Writers wrote parodic verses and essays, whimsical commentaries, and fantastical novels that envisioned ideal futures for China. Artists invented new forms of visual wordplay, such as “comical characters” that contained hidden allegorical meanings, and wrote palindromic poems. Novelties such as zoetropes and peep shows competed for the attention and pocketbook of the man on the street. Around the turn of the century, one enterprising Frenchman set up a gramophone on a Shanghai street corner and charged listeners ten cents to listen to a record called “Laughing Foreigners,” offering money back to any listener who managed to suppress his or her laughter. Apparently few could, because by 1908, he had earned enough to found China’s first record company, Pathé Orient.<sup>38</sup> In the 1910s, amusement halls, called “playgrounds,” sprung up in cities like Shanghai and Singapore, drawing in crowds with fun-house mirrors. Photography studios offered trick portraits and Chinese filmmakers began making slapstick shorts with such titles as *The Difficult Couple*, *The Romantic Monk*, *Bicycle Smash-Up*, *Blind Man Catches a Thief*, and *Punter Plays Dead*.<sup>39</sup> Chapter 3 surveys this panorama of play, which ranged from word games for the classically educated to popular entertainments accessible for a nominal price.

Reformists and revolutionaries sometimes adopted a derisive tone in their efforts to exorcise the specter of Confucianism and throw off the Manchu yoke. Chapter 4 shows how China’s cultural and political future was contested through not just rational debate but also mudslinging battles and arguments shrill with sarcasm. Cursing was an ancient form of rhetoric, but the modern press broadcast private arguments to amuse a broad public audience. The political figure Wu Zihui and the writer Lu Xun became famous for their use of invective and inspired imitators. In 1926, during China’s “warlord period” when militarists carved much of China into personal fiefdoms, a professor of linguistics named Liu Fu, who was associated with the literary avant-garde, sparked controversy about the tone of public debate by republishing *Which Classic?*, a mid-Qing novel whose protagonists are all curse words, many using the character *gui* (ghost/devil). Through the story of this bizarre novel, its reception, and its celebrity promoters, chapter 4 traces how the politics of the humorous curse changed from the eve of the Opium Wars to the 1930s.

If being a modern writer was not all was fun and games, not all of them depended on breathless invective. Even as many leading cultural critics were cutting one another down to size in the late 1920s and early 1930s, popular writers of

a more entrepreneurial bent, particularly in Shanghai, were focusing on just being “funny” (*huaji*). They were preoccupied with the absurdities of urban life, such as hoaxes, and in particular scams and deceptions perpetrated in print media, such as plagiarism and bogus advertisements. Farce was particularly popular among writers like Xu Zhuodai who also worked as editors, actors, playwrights, filmmakers, radio broadcasters, and consumer product vendors. In their stories they celebrated practical jokes for fun and profit and often cast entrepreneurs like themselves as dynamic figures uniquely suited to navigating the pitfalls of modernity. Chapter 5 focuses on this cultural interest in everyday delusions, a world in which frauds, con women, and pranksters were not only welcome companions but even models of emulation.

Chapter 6 reveals how—possibly for the first time in Chinese history—humor itself became an object of reverence. *Youmo* (humor), a transliteration coined by the popular writer Lin Yutang, came to stand for a new comedic sensibility that sought to displace the irreverence of the early 1900s. In the 1930s, in his new Chinese-language humor magazine, *The Analects Fortnightly*, Lin popularized not only *youmo* but with it the notion that humor was a humanistic virtue that China (for all its preexisting comic traditions) lacked. The vogue for humor literature influenced scores of writers and continued for more than half a decade before being cut short by war. During that time, humor and laughter became the focus of unprecedented theorizing and polemical debate. What was humor? Did China need it? How could and should Chinese people laugh? (Or should they just smile?) Lin’s campaign to promote *youmo* as a moral ideal that would refine the individual and civilize the body politic left a legacy that outlasted the 1930s heyday of humor. So did, as I discuss in the epilogue, the cultures of laughter that preceded it.

Some of these cultures coalesced around personalities. Writers like Xu Zhuodai, Wu Zihui, and Lin Yutang might well have agreed with a comment by their seventeenth-century predecessor Li Yu: “Broadly speaking, everything I have written was intended to make people laugh.”<sup>40</sup> They tended to be gregarious and socialize widely. The cultures they promoted were not just imaginary communities, because participants were often friends, colleagues, and personal acquaintances. Their social lives often influenced their comedic rhetoric, the languages and modes of expression that constitute the primary focus of this book. This is why Lao She and Qian Zhongshu (whose major novel *Fortress Besieged* lies beyond its scope), to name just two writers famous for their humor, in chapter 6 cede center stage to humor itself.

Modern China’s comic cultures were influenced by global trends. Chinese doctors at the turn of the twentieth century, responding to Western ideas about physiology, began suggesting that their patients laugh more, rather than less.<sup>41</sup> Comedic novels, jokes, and poems were translated in large volumes. Comic strips—a turn-of-the-century departure from the single-panel caricature popularized by

London's *Punch*—became a new staple of print culture. Filmmakers drew on a global cinematic language and even packaged Chinese film comedies for foreign audiences. Vaudeville-style variety performance and amusement park machinery made its way to big cities. The phonograph record of “Laughing Foreigners” was being played on the streets of Shanghai around the same time that African American recording artist George W. Johnson’s “The Laughing Song” became a hit in America and Europe. That the sound of recorded laughter “never failed to draw grimaces, smirks, and guffaws” around the world suggests a broader convergence of technology and comic amusement.<sup>42</sup>

These global currents inspired Chinese intellectuals to reappraise their traditions, and to measure foreign imports against domestic standards. They circulated especially rapidly in cosmopolitan Shanghai, where there was also a lively foreign-language media. Between 1907 and 1913, translators introduced physiological interpretations of laughter from Denmark, America, and Japan; a Chinese version of Henri Bergson’s *Le Rire* appeared in 1921.<sup>43</sup> More translations and discussion followed in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1936, one critic even claimed that Charlie Chaplin’s performance style was quintessentially Chinese.

“Modern Chinese” humor of this period thus comprised a blend of influences—foreign and domestic, old and new. And China itself became an exporter of comedy. Chinese emigrants, foreign students, and exiles established Sinophone enterprises abroad in Japan, Europe, North America, and Southeast Asia, particularly newspapers and other periodicals, which featured comedic works. Some of the most outlandish anti-Manchu vitriol of the 1900s was printed in Paris, a hotbed of anarchist thought. Chinese-language film comedies made in the production centers of Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong circulated regionally since the 1920s. Soon thereafter, Lin Yutang put Chinese humor on the global radar with his prodigious and highly popular writings in English.

The conspicuousness of laughter inspired heated debates about literary aesthetics, moral values, and China’s broader cultural climate. Writers of the late Qing and Republican periods were highly ambivalent about laughter, celebrating its pleasures while deploring its social and political effects. They argued about the question of how art ought to respond to suffering. They realized that non-verbal gestures could enable ambiguity and evasion. As the prominent essayist Zhou Zuoren observed, “it is not for nothing your wise man in chatting will only say, ‘The weather today . . . ha ha ha,’ without elaborating further”—often it was easier just to “pass things off with a laugh.”<sup>44</sup> But they also appreciated the ways in which laughter created kinship and community rhetorically. It could put people in their place, but it could also amuse and endear.<sup>45</sup> A few critics insisted, to paraphrase Neil Postman’s study of American television culture, that the Chinese were amusing themselves to death.<sup>46</sup> These polemics tell part of the story of how irreverence has shaped, for better or worse, modern Chinese culture. In them we also see the

appearance of new theoretical concerns, notably quests to identify and define a “Chinese sense of humor.”

The comic cultures of this historical period, I argue, were too heterogeneous to be reducible to a cozy sense of humor defined by ethnicity or nationality. They crossed barriers between high and low, Chinese and foreign, and between genres and modes of cultural production as well. This book tries to capture their different textures as expressed in literature, film, cartoons, photographs, memoirs, advertisements, and other parts of popular culture. Chapters 2 and 3 offer a broad survey of print and popular culture; chapters 4, 5, and 6 give more detailed accounts of individual events, artists, and trends. While a study of this sort is inherently comparative, this one concentrates on making Chinese voices audible. It falls short of an exhaustive or exhausting survey of all Chinese humorists and comic genres, but it does offer a few ways to read Chinese cultural history across the grain. When upper-class ladies speak in novels of the imperial period like *Dream of the Red Chamber* they always “say it with a smile” (*xiaodao*). The late Ming novel *Jin Ping Mei*, composed by the “Scoffing Scholar of Lanling,” is a literary classic filled with jokes.<sup>47</sup> This book hopes to encourage further exploration of such antecedents, as well as of other key terms in the Chinese comic lexicon, such as *fengci* (satire), *huixie* (jocularly), *manhua* (cartoons and comics), and more recent neologisms. Extensive comparisons to other historical and cultural contexts also await future scholars.

While focusing on a period spanning about forty years, this book thus opens up genealogical threads that extend further in multiple directions. It chronicles changes in how Chinese people laughed, what they laughed at, and how they talked about laughter, as well as what drove those changes. Instead of following a single or linear chronology, it highlights how multiple cultures of humor changed and influenced one another over time. It shares with Vic Gatrell’s study of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century London an interest in the diversity of “subjects that people think it appropriate to laugh at; what kinds of people laugh; how cruelly, mockingly, or sardonically they laugh (or how sympathetically and generously); [and] how far they permit others to laugh.”<sup>48</sup> It is less concerned with extolling the virtues of Chinese comic traditions (and modern innovations) or defending them against their critics.

This new history of laughter contrasts with the usual portrait of late Qing and Republican China, focusing not on the angst, earnestness, drudgery, and political anger of that age, but on the wit, sarcasm, glee, and irreverence that made it bearable and even fun. It follows a new historical periodization, its turning points being not just the fall of the Qing dynasty or the clarion call of May Fourth’s literary revolutionaries but also the rise of the tabloid press in the late nineteenth century and a 1930s campaign to civilize China with humor. Its protagonists are whimsical poets, vaudevillian entrepreneurs, renowned revilers, twee essayists,

winking farceurs, and self-promoting jokesters. It is also a story about how leading cultural figures as diverse as Liang Qichao, Wu Jianren, Wu Zhihui, Lu Xun, Zhou Zuoren, Liang Shiqiu, Lao She, Lin Yutang, and even Mao Zedong invoked laughter in setting the tone of their various campaigns to transform China, even as they distanced themselves from its commoditized forms. It approaches laughter on its own terms and on the terms imposed on it.

The early twentieth century changed the way Chinese people talked about what's funny. Yet despite the dominance that *youmo* established in the 1930s as the new humor standard, strains of the old laughter can still be heard in China today.