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**Humor and Politics under Mao**

Ever since Benjamin Schwartz’s ground-breaking *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (1952), research on Mao, Maoism, and Chinese communism has become increasingly important. Julia Lovell, historian and author of *Maoism: A Global History*, states that Maoism is “one of the most significant and complicated political forces in the modern world,” since Maoism “not only unlocks the contemporary history of China, but is also a key influence on global insurgency, insubordination and intolerance across the last eighty years.”[1] Robert J. Alexander’s remarkable studies of Maoism from a global perspective (*International Maoism in the Developing World* [1999] and *Maoism in the Developed World* [2001]) bear witness to the study of Maoism in previously less noticed areas, such as the spiritual power of Mao’s *Little Red Book* (Alexander C. Cook’s *Mao’s Little Red Book: A Global History* [2014]); local religions in China, ethnic relations, and the management of natural disasters (Jeremy Brown and Matthew Johnson’s edited collection *Maoism at the Grassroots: Everyday Life in China’s Era of High Socialism* [2015]); and academe’s interest in Mao and Maoism in general (my *Maoist Moments: Local Actors, Global History, 1960s-1970s* [2020]). Maoism’s impact on literature, culture, and the arts is a prominent component of these books, with Mao’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” (1942) featuring prominently.

*Maoist Laughter* distinguishes itself by its unique focus on the twin themes of trauma and negativity within a framework provided by laughter and humor studies. As Ping Zhu explains: “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.’ 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” (p. 4). *Maoist Laughter* thus adds a necessary antidote to the many portrayals of Mao’s era as miserable, tortuous, and laughterless. In line with the Chinese idiom *yu jiao yu le*, which means “educating via entertaining,” *Maoist Laughter* draws out the social, cultural, and political ramifications of laughter’s place within Maoist education and indoctrination.

The first section, “Utopian Laughter,” includes three chapters. By citing the concept of “eulogistic comedy” in the analysis of *Five Golden Flowers*, a 1959 film, Ban Wang suggests that in addition to satire, a “eulogistic laughter projects a utopian
vista for community and society” and “attests to an alternative aesthetic of socialist laughter” that in turn promotes collective laughter, popular passions, joy, and enthusiasm, and instills unity by forging a new but robust personality and national identity (p. 20). Ethnic unity between Hans and Tibetans as well as soldier-civilian harmony in the 1964 military dance work “Laundry Song” is the topic in Emily Wilcox’s chapter. Wilcox invokes the theoretical framework of Mary Douglas’s “joke pattern”: “whereas jokes are inherently disruptive of social hierarchies, rites by definition support them” (p. 67). Wilcox demonstrates the hidden agendas and multiple layers of meanings that exist in this work. As a “joke site,” “Laundry Song” reinforced dominant social patterns and ideals.

Charles A. Laughlin makes a similar comparison between textual sources and images with Zhao Shuli’s novel Sanliwan Village (1957) and its film adaptation, Happily Ever After (1958). Laughlin focuses on romantic entanglements and comedic elements, such as physical humor, exaggeration, wordplay, and plot confrontations, all of which are framed by scenes regarding major political and economic changes in terms of land reform, the transition from mutual-aid groups to agricultural cooperatives, reluctance among the peasants, arranged marriages, and more.

Authors in the second section, “Intermedial Laughter,” explore cross-media presentations. Xiaoning Lu examines the inter-media connection between traditional oral performing arts (Xiangsheng) and film, focusing on the 1956 production of “Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream” (Youyuansheng). Lu suggests that comic filmmaking demonstrates that “Maoist arts are by no means monotonous propagandist pieces; on the contrary, laughter under Mao was innovative and experimental” (p. 74). Yun Zhu examines The Magic Gourd (1958), Zhang Tianyi’s novella for children, and its film adaptation by Yang Xiaozhong. Zhang was a novelist and humorist during the republican era, who turned to children’s stories after 1949. The Magic Gourd tells of a boy who finds a gourd that can fulfill his wishes in exchange for a promise of secrecy. Even though the boy’s dream is unfulfilled, audiences identify with the boy’s “unsocialist” desires. By focusing on the nuanced deployment of laughter, Zhu looks at how it relieves the stress between satire and exaltment without challenging the socialist-realist model. Li Guo’s chapter looks at the adaptation of Li Shuangshuang, both a popular story and a film, into pingtan (a performing art in Shanghai-Suzhou dialect) in 1964. Guo illustrates “how humor in new pingtan tales negotiated and reconstructed ideals of nascent personal, social, and political identities in the Maoist era, and how pingtan underwent a transformation that resulted in new categorization, aesthetic enrichment, and political reconfiguration” (p. 105).

The last section sheds light on the relationship between laughter and language. Rather than viewing laughter in a vocalization format, Ping Zhu proposes “to view laughter as a popular language” that reveals the discursive nature and complexity of laughter in Mao’s era (pp. 14-15). John A. Crespi opens the section with a study of the Maoist visual language. Crespi explores Cartoon magazine in its first two years of publication (between June 1950 and August 1952), when the magazine was deployed to lampoon US forces during the Korean War. By borrowing two terms from W. J. T. Mitchell, “imagetext” and “pictorial turn,” Crespi explores “how, during its first two years of publication, Cartoon’s artists and editors used imagetext strategies of the satire pictorial to turn their magazine into an apparatus for converting consumerist urban play into a form of socialist urban play integrated with the political and educational goals of the socialist mass campaign” (p. 127). Cartoon was the descendent of Huabao, which was born in the republican era and based in Shanghai. The socialist successors of this magazine adapted its visual language and reformulated them in line with the political and educational goals of mass mobilization. Roy Chan shows that Zhao Shuli’s Yan’an era fiction demonstrates an ironic meta-
pragmatic awareness of language use. Zhu’s chapter challenges rigid views of Maoist language by examining the successful reintegration of huajixi (folk comedy based in Shanghai) against the backdrop of the Chinese Communist Party’s linguistic reform of the 1950s. Zhu’s chapter shows how a regional dialect evolved into an embodiment of the heteroglossic Maoist language, part of a process that moved from the decentralization of language toward its centralization.

The last chapter, by Laurence Coderre, analyzes the 1973 “Ode to Friendship” by the xiangsheng master Ma Jia. “Ode to Friendship” highlighted the support supplied by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for the construction of the Tanzania-Zambia Railway. “Ode to Friendship” aimed to promote internationalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism by making use of two themes: linguistic failure and nonsense, a translingual mismatch between Chinese, English, and Swahili. Coderre argues that the piece as a whole is an exercise in the comedic instrumentalization of linguistic failure. This constitutes, Coderre continues, a remarkably delicate undertaking, and one that is largely unsuccessful. As much as “Ode to Friendship” attempts to harness the power of exoticized “nonsense” and miscommunication as part of a broader, internationalist project, it also operates as a constant reminder that even the language of the proletarian cultural revolution had its limits (p. 181).

Maoist Laughter traverses the complex connections between laughter and political culture among historical studies of Maoism, modern Chinese language, literature, film, and art, with contributions from established scholars. Lu, for example, recently published Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity: 1949-1966 (2020). Crespi is a renowned scholar of modern Chinese literature and visual culture, in particular Manhua (cartoon) studies. In 2020, Crespi published a monograph titled Manhua Modernity: Chinese Culture and the Pictorial Turn.

The extensive use of academic and specialized terminology means that this volume may not attract a large readership. The book, nonetheless, is essential reading for scholars of Chinese film and literature during the early years of the PRC to understand the interconnected relations between romance and revolution. The ten chapters depict how China’s humorists, such as writers, directors, and folklore performing artists, adapted their respective media and generated laughter to suit the political stances and values of the new socialist republic. From this perspective, the volume is highly successful. A clear definition of “Maoist,” however, would have been helpful, although in fairness this is a common limitation in most works with “Maoist” or “Maoism” in their titles. In this volume, the editors label most everything as “Maoist” that takes place during Mao’s reign, which, by the standards used by the contributors, began during the Yan’an era of the early 1940s. Zhu, for example, states that “Maoist linguists also viewed language as socially typifying, yet they decisively shifted the linguistic focus from written language to spoken language,” relying on Gao Mingkai’s division of language from speech and theorization of dialect as endowed class attributes (p. 172). The volume’s editors suggest that “in this sense, Gao’s linguistic theory can be regarded as the most systematic Mao-era theory of the heteroglossia,” thereby equating “Maoist” with the “Mao era” (p. 173). Key differences exist, nonetheless,
between a “Maoist linguist” and a “linguist during Mao’s era.”

Note


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