

Manchu bannerman, Ransmeier deploys them to great effect. Similarly, her reconstruction in chapter 8 of the interviews that the young woman researcher Zhou Shuzhao conducted with jailed traffickers in the late 1920s and 1930s is difficult to put down.

Across two regimes and widely varying personal situations, *Sold People* offers range, depth, and insight into the many types of people whose lives were altered by trafficking. *Sold People: Traffickers and Family Life in North China* is an extraordinary piece of work, exhibiting mastery both of historical material and of narrative.

The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China. By CHRISTOPHER REA. Oakland: University of California Press, 2015. xvi + 335 pp. \$70.00 (hardcover)

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Christopher Rea borrows the title of his study of humor in late Qing and Republican-era Chinese literary and popular culture in part from historian Neil Harris's description of the skeptical attitude towards authority prevalent in pre-Civil War American popular culture, a posture he sees reflected in turn of the twentieth-century China. The other half of the title, "a new history of laughter," is borrowed from a series of jokes serialized by prolific author Wu Jianren in early twentieth-century China, a counterpart to his novel *A History of Pain*. The title also signals a juxtaposition with the prominent English-language body of research that gazes into the abyss of trauma and pain categorizing a wide swath of modern Chinese literature, among them Michael Berry's *A History of Pain* and David Wang's *The Monster That is History*. This is a *new* history, because laughter has been in many respects expurgated from standard Chinese literary histories. The author uses "history," meanwhile, in a more classical sense of the Greek *history* or the Chinese *shi* as used in the publishing industry of early twentieth-century Shanghai, denoting "an 'inquiry into' or an 'investigation of'" (8) rather than a blow-by-blow chronicle. This dynamic and pluralistic examination of laughter explores multiple "cultures of humor" (14) that occupied an ever-evolving field of cultural production.

Through re-examination of a familiar set of authors and texts—Liang Qichao 梁啟超, Wu Jianren 吳趸人 and Lu Xun 魯迅, to name a few luminaries—Rea highlights the critical role laughter played in the first decades of the twentieth century, bringing to light one more aspect of the polygeneric pastiche of late Qing and Republican cultural field. In holding these well-known works up at a different angle, Rea succeeds in elucidating the humorous aspect of what other scholars have called utopian, dystopian, science-fiction, science-fantasy, social commentary, and others. For example, Rea convincingly argues that the science-fictional "futuristic conceits" (49) of Liang Qichao's *Future of New China* (Xin Zhongguo weilai ji 新中國未來記) and Wu Jianren's *New Story of the Stone* (Wu Jianren's *New Story of the Stone* Xin shitou ji 新石頭記) could be subsumed in the category of play just as reasonably as they can be read as science fiction.

In the five principle chapters of the book, Rea explores five aspects of laughter. The title of each chapter is derived from an English translation of a Chinese term germane to the subject: jokes (*xiaohua* 笑話), play (*youxi* 遊戲), mockery (*maren* 罵人), farce

(*huaji* 滑稽), and humor (*yomo* 幽默). Each of these features analysis of fictional narratives, public invective, trick photography, cinema, stage performances, essays, and a number of other forms and media. The author does not attempt to explain why things are funny, or to lay bare an authentic and distinctly Chinese species of humor on the dissection table, but rather enumerates the features, functions, and forms that laughter took in late Qing and Republican China.

The introductory chapter, “Breaking into Laughter” (*shixiao* 失笑), introduces the study of laughter as an otherwise lost or unnoticed feature of modern literary studies. Chapter 2, “Jokes,” examines the interplay between jokes and modern media culture, establishing the argument that jokes and other forms of humor served as both commodified forms in the commercial presses and beacons for socio-political reform. In some instances, Rea argues that jokes served a role similar to that of poetry in pre-modern fiction, reinforcing broader themes. Chapter 3, “Play,” (*youxi*) examines a wide range of diversions in print media and available more broadly in the public sphere, giving extensive examples of uses of the term, variously translatable as amusement, recreation, games, sports, playing, frolicking or having fun, (41) from rebuses, word-play and comics to trick photography and amusement parks. Chapter 4, “Mockery,” is an examination of invective, which demonstrates in part that swearing, like laughter, serves a number of social functions. In part, “Social progressives appreciated the democracy of cursing as a rhetorical antidote to elitism” (81). Chapter 5, “Farce,” (*huaji*), delves into “cultural interest in everyday delusions, a world in which frauds, con women, and pranksters were not only welcome companions but even models of emulation.” The culture of “funny Shanghai” was a realm of middle-class urban play and consumption that in many ways rejected the “abusive tone of tabloids and highbrow literary journals” (107). The author posits that in the late Qing cultural milieu, *huaji* was nearly synonymous with fiction. Chapter 6, “The Invention of Humor,” examines how the transliterated term *yomo* was a focal point for a debate on the history and role of humor in Chinese culture and politics. The transliterated term seems to have begged an explanation, whereas other terms appeared transparent because they were “native.” This chapter highlights the paradoxical (because it was a view held by so many clearly humorous writers), and rather commonplace notion that humor was one of many deficient or completely absent intellectual traits contributing to China’s national ailment. Humor and farce were in part differentiated by class concerns, where left wing writers saw humor as elitist and duplicitous. The epilogue suggests ways in which the study could be expanded thematically and projected into the socialist and post-Mao eras; throughout Rea’s study, one can see early twentieth-century predecessors of the hooligan anti-heroes of Wang Shuo 王朔 and Feng Xiaogang 馮小剛, and this is duly noted in his conclusion. *The Age of Irreverence* also features two appendices—a comprehensive list of humor collections, and a list of editions and paratexts of *Which Classic?* (*He dian* 和典).

Each chapter explores semantic valences and historical precedents for modern forms of humor whenever relevant. The chapter on jokes, for example, presents an etymological study of terms closely associated with *xiaohua*, differentiating the form as a narrative that elicits laughter or mirth and may actually be based on a true story (Rea argues that the English “joke,” on the other hand, is always assumed to be fictitious). These etymological studies also illustrate historical parallels and continuities. Again, in the chapter on jokes, Rea reminds readers of the ubiquitous Warring States foil, the “man from

Song” appearing in texts like the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 and *Mencius*, and goes on to identify the late Ming as a high point in joke publication. These definitions thus indicate how classical letters were imbricated in the “new” cultural field of turn of the twentieth-century China, reshaped by industrial technologies and urban modernity, but in many cases still present despite moments of political “rupture.” Other genres and forms were also recycled and re-purposed, including satirical re-workings of Du Fu’s 杜甫 poetry memorializing a streetwalker, rhapsodies (*fu* 賦) on social ills like opium addiction, and satirical discourses (*lun* 論 or *shuo* 說) on the scientific expertise of opium addicts (52–53).

As Rea trenchantly observes, laughter is not necessarily an expression of levity; it may also serve to signal social position, mask fear or betray feelings of cynicism and defeat. The term laughter “denote[s] a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviors ranging from amusement to buffoonery to derision” (4). For example, Lu Xun’s melancholic mourner, Xianglin Sao 祥林嫂, becomes an object of laughter as a “tragedy [that] has collapsed under the weight of repetition” (3). The laughter of the villagers in “The New Year’s Sacrifice” is a dismissive attempt to exorcise the abject trauma of loss. Rea examines “uses of laughter besides the palliative,” as exhortations to reform, or manifestations of cultural dis-ease, as “symbols of a complex spectrum of feeling” (4). In the case of China’s long twentieth century, laughter also often expressed ennui and political anxiety in the face of an overdetermined national crisis. Much of the laughter Rea explores is gallows humor, turning to jocularity in the face of the mental and physical depredations of the era. Chapter 4 features an extended reading of the ribald and profane mid-Qing novel, *Which Classic?* (*He dian*), the conditions of its reproduction and the various debates that sprang from its early twentieth-century revival and its role in the vernacular language movement. Also of interest in chapter 4 is Rea’s demonstration that the scatological invective of “renowned reviler (*mingma* 名罵)” Wu Zhihui 吳稚暉 was more than mere profane bombast: Wu was initially at the center of the language reform movement. All of this seems perhaps to say that if you gaze into a wound until it gazes back at you, you might just find yourself laughing back at it ... or shouting vile profanities into it.

Rea demonstrates that writing eliciting laughter at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century was furthermore often bilingual or translingual, exploring imbalances in political and linguistic power and the role of English as a language of cosmopolitan modernity. Rea’s study delves deep into visual culture, especially political cartoons, which often functioned as visual rebuses based on Chinese characters and homophones in the language—for example, political cartoons depicting Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 as a monkey or gibbon (*yuan* 猿) were commonplace. Beyond print culture, the author also offers analysis of amusement parks and trick photography, demonstrating that distorting mirrors and novelty photos were part of the urban landscape of casual entertainment, but were also imbued with salient socio-political and economic meanings. This study extends to the stage and silver screen as well, examining the various performance genres (themselves amalgamations of existing stage forms) which were reproduced serially and marked by carnivalesque inversions put to comical use in semi-colonial China’s urban landscape.

Rea highlights the role of humor in an early twentieth-century iteration of convergence culture, wherein themes and images bled over from one media to another as material and cultural capital. The trans-lingual recirculation of jokes was part and parcel of colonial modernity. These various “texts,” from page to stage and cinema, explored the dilemmas

and pitfalls of modern urban life, especially Shanghai, as a place of opportunity for flâneurs, hucksters, and other cheats, and the opportunity to commodify “images,” even the image of one’s self. They were part of a landscape of socio-political inversions and play that blended newly available technologies with pre-modern media and forms. Jokes and their ilk were commodities of which authors sought to claim ownership; they were produced and reproduced in the popular presses, which Rea identifies as part of a global phenomenon. At the same time, laughter and other forms of play were also beacons to socio-political reform.

The Age of Irreverence is a must-read for scholars of modern East Asian cultural studies, and it would be an excellent addition to graduate seminars or upper-level undergraduate courses on the subject. Scholars of silly walks, jocularly, and facetiousness would also find the book captivating, whereas those who do not get jokes should not get this book.

There are very few arguments in this book that I take issue with, and the scholarship is lucid, original and compelling. I wrote a whole paragraph about one minor point that I wish the author had explained more, decided I was merely being pedantic in order to prove that I was paying attention and had something critical to say (because that’s what you do at this point in a review), and I deleted it. Instead, I wrote down the title of the primary source alongside a long list of other texts Rea has piqued my interest in so I can go read them myself. Continuing with minor quibbles, I will now reveal my incomplete understanding of the economics of proofreading and typesetting: I was confused as to the logic behind when *hanzi* appeared in the text, and where it was determined that pinyin would suffice, or that characters would instead be given in the endnotes. I wish the economics of academic book publication would allow every book to include *hanzi* right there on the page in all instances where it is germane, and I wish I understood them better (the economics, not the characters. On second thought, the characters too).

A World Trimmed with Fur: Wild Things, Pristine Places, and the Natural Fringes of Qing Rule. By JONATHAN SCHLESINGER. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. ix + 271 pp.

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In the 1980s American scholarship on Chinese history moved towards a “China-centered” approach, one that advocated a study of China’s past from the angle of the country’s own culture, institutions, and historical path. The rift at the time had come as a response to the Western-centered reading of Chinese history.¹ In the 1990s there emerged yet another wave of interpretation, which historians have called “New Qing

¹The China-centered approach continues to be relevant today: Paul Cohen’s *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press), which at the time of its appearance in 1982 was a prelude to this new interpretation, was republished twenty-eight years later in 2010.