BOOK REVIEW
Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath, eds., *Maoist Laughter* (Hong Kong University Press, 2019)

Chenshu Zhou, University of Pennsylvania

How should one laugh in Maoist China? What were appropriate objects towards which one could direct laughter? What were the ideological implications of laughter? This series of questions sits at the center of the volume *Maoist Laughter*, edited by Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath (HKU Press, 2019), with ten chapters contributed by scholars of modern Chinese literature, film, media, and popular culture and an introduction written by Ping Zhu. As Zhu notes in the introduction, due to the overwhelming portrayal of the Mao era as a period of political oppression, trauma, and suffering, the subject of laughter had failed to attract much scholarly attention before this volume. In response to this lacuna, *Maoist Laughter* unearths various kinds of laughter in the Mao era, making a major contribution to the study of humor in twentieth-century China. [1] The book demonstrates compellingly that laughter was central to the ideological reproduction of the PRC state. And yet, laughter carried lurking tensions and potential for excesses that threatened seamless subject-formation, thus calling for constant monitoring and the regulation of appropriate emotions.

Exploring diverse cultural genres from the Yan'an era to the Cultural Revolution, *Maoist Laughter* contributes to a burgeoning body of scholarship on Chinese socialist culture that has reshaped the English-language field of China studies in the past decade. It builds on the scholarly consensus that there is much to excavate about Mao-era culture, including its diversity, creativity, and grass-roots agency, which have been previously flattened by an uncritical, liberal notion of propaganda. Meanwhile, *Maoist Laughter* offers a unique framework that differs from both comprehensive approaches to Mao-era or Cultural Revolution culture and studies that focus on specific genres, such as literature, cinema, dance, theater, and museum exhibitions. By centering laughter, treated as a socially, culturally, and politically determined emotion that has broad, transmedial applications, *Maoist Laughter* finds a new vector for renewing questions of ideology, emotion, affect, social relations, and everyday life. It enriches existing understandings of Maoist emotions that have predominantly focused on intense somatic displays of pain, suffering, and hatred, emotions closely associated with class struggle. More broadly, *Maoist Laughter* brings Chinese socialism into dialogue with the sub-field known as history of emotions. As Emily Wilcox demonstrates in her chapter comparing the dance "Laundry Song" ("Xiyi ge," 1964) to post-WWII American television sitcoms, the ongoing definition of what is laughable and when it is appropriate to laugh is not unique to Mao-era China but constitutes a cross-cultural mode of governance.

Maoist Laughter organizes the individual chapters into three sections. "Utopian Laughter" features chapters by Ban Wang, Charles A. Laughlin, and Emily Wilcox, which discuss how laughter functions as a vehicle for bringing about the socialist utopia. In "Intermedial Laughter," Xiaoning Lu, Yun Zhu, and Li Guo explore the intermedial interactions between comedic performances and modern mass media. The last section "Laughter and Language," with chapters by John A. Crespi, Roy Chan, Ping Zhu, and Laurence Coderre, reveals how laughter is mediated and regulated at the semiotic level.

One important contribution *Maoist Laughter* makes to the field through its transmedial framing is the centering of comedic genres that have been largely neglected in scholarship either due to their perceived "low" status or the difficulty of locating them in relation to established disciplinary boundaries. In

addition to investigating the more familiar genres of fiction (Laughlin, Chan), film (Wang, Laughlin, and Yun Zhu), and cartoons (Crespi), *Maoist Laughter* foregrounds comedic performing arts that have rarely been studied in English-language scholarship despite their popularity among Chinese audiences. Chapters explore the northern comedic form *xiangsheng* (Lu and Coderre), the southern style *huajixi* – a folk art form from the Yangtze River Delta area (Ping Zhu), and the Suzhou storytelling form *pingtan* (Guo). Dance, though not a comedic genre, can also incorporate humorous elements as shown in Wilcox's case study of "Laundry Song." Across these chapters, the authors pay attention to the intricate interplay between the apparatus of humor and the negotiations of ideological and educational needs to show how practitioners strived to reform existing stage conventions to produce edifying laughter that served socialist state-building. One highlight of the book is the intermedial relationship between performing arts and modern technological media including film and radio. As the latter helped stage performances gain new audiences and achieve national circulation, questions arose regarding the translation of one medium to another. Lu, for example, investigates the cross-over experiment that resulted in the curious *xiangsheng* film *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream* (*Youyuan jingmeng*, 1956). Guo shows how the film *Li Shuangshuang* (1962) was adapted into, and localized through, *pingtan*. Film is also at the center of the intermedial interactions examined by Laughlin and Yun Zhu, both focusing on the adaptations of literary works into films. Because of the shifting political guidelines in the Mao era, adaptation proves to be an especially productive lens into Maoist culture as changing discourses are brought to light through comparisons between multiple versions of the same source text.

In addition to diversifying the study of Chinese socialist culture, the framework of laughter allows *Maoist Laughter* to direct attention from grand nationalist narratives to the everydayness of socialism – its manifestation as daily governance, interpersonal relationships, and individual behaviors. Whether in the mode of praising, satirizing, or somewhere in between, comedy thrives on the mundane and the contemporary while staying away from the sanctified subject of revolution.

Discussing Zhao Shuli's fiction, both Laughlin and Chan highlight the function of humor in delineating a dynamic rural social world. In "The Rhymes of Li Youcai"("Li Youcai banhua," 1943) and "The Marriage of Little Erhei" ("Xiao Erhei jiehun," 1943), two famous Yan'an period stories by Zhao, jokes, Chan shows, are daily expressions of the oppressed against social hierarchies, thus firmly locating ideological struggle in the everyday. For Laughlin, comedic elements in the 1958 film *Happily Ever After* (*Huahao yueyuan*), adapted from Zhao's *Sanliwan Village* (1955) complicate the Communist rural transformation on the ground and help situate the film for collective enjoyment.

Beyond materializing concrete everyday life worlds, humor is shown repeatedly in *Maoist Laughter* as a mediator of the tensions that arise in daily interactions between different social groups divided by ethnicity and language. The relationship between Han and ethnic minorities is the topic of Wang's and Wilcox's chapters: Wang discusses how in the film *Five Golden Flowers* (1959) laughter equalizes Han-ethnic relationships, contributing to the portrayal of a socialist utopia where different ethnic groups share a joyful life centering on labor; Wilcox, by contrast, reveals the unease with Tibetan rebelliousness behind a seemingly harmonious picture between PLA soldiers and Tibetan civilians portrayed in the dance "Laundry Song." Linguistic incomprehensibility constitutes another situation that calls for the regulating capacity of humor. In Ping Zhu's chapter, *huajixi* is shown as a comedic genre that precisely uses heteroglossia – the mingling of different regional and social dialects – to project a future socialist nation that overcomes divisive cacophony. For Laurence Coderre, Ma Ji's *xiangsheng* "Ode to Friendship" ("Youyi song"), which extolls Sino-African solidarity, cannot but reveal the limits of revolutionary language through jokes around the failures to translate between Chinese, English, and Swahili. In all these cases, humor may be said to be a coping mechanism, a way of managing potentially disruptive gaps that threaten the cohesion of national or international socialist projects.

Finally, comedy is particularly effective in zooming in on individual behavior, thus educating viewers on the desired characteristics of a proper socialist

subject. Xiaoning Lu shows how a "flawed character" is made a laughingstock and a target of criticism in the *xiangsheng* film *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream*. Yun Zhu observes the construction of a teachable socialist subject in the film adaptation of children's novella *The Secret of the Magic Gourd* (*Bao hulu de mimi*, 1963), which affirms socialist morals through the transformation of a young boy who is able to overcome his egotism and materialism. In his study of the pictorial *Cartoon* (*Manhua yuekan*) during its early years (1950-1952), John Crespi establishes a continuity between *Cartoon* and Republic-era, Shanghai-based illustrated magazines (*huabao*). While sharing formal and editorial similarities, *Cartoon* delineates a new socialist urban modernity and instructs readers on how they should inhabit this new space. Humorous affect, in these instances, is integral to the cultivation of a new citizenship, around which a moral consensus is developed through shared laughter.

The anthology format of *Maoist Laughter* effectively lends to an argument for the diversity of Maoist laughter, showing that the different modalities and social functions of laughter cannot be reduced to a simplistic picture and is best demonstrated through collective inquiry. Some of the chapters in the book in fact offer diverging interpretations. For example, whereas Wang reads inter-ethnic laughter as indication of ethnic harmony, Wilcox detects fears for ethnic conflicts beneath harmless everyday pranks. Whereas Ping Zhu relates *huajixi*'s exploration of linguistic diversity and hybridity to a confident vision of national unity, Coderre puts emphasis on the tenuousness of Sino-African solidarity exposed by untranslatability. Such dialogues across chapters are especially valuable in "revealing the diversity, complexity, dynamics, and inner contradictions in cultural production and reproduction of Mao's China" (3).

Since the publication of *Maoist Laughter*, more books on Chinese socialist culture have been published[2] and more dissertations are in the works. There is little doubt that the study of Chinese socialist culture is being pursued with unprecedented depth and specificity in the English-language academia. One question *Maoist Laughter* raises, which also has broad relevance for many researchers, has to do with terminology. How do the editors evoke the term "Maoist" as opposed to "Mao-era" or "socialist" in this book? Can these terms be used more or less interchangeably, or should we put more emphasis on their differences? I would also like to pose a few broad questions about directions of future research. Based on your experience working on *Maoist Laughter* and other projects, which aspects of Chinese socialist culture do you think demand more scholarly attention and why? Where do you see potential innovative frameworks emerge in this sub-field and how might we go beyond reiterating what has by now been well established, that socialist culture was complex, heterogenous, creative, and dynamic? To young scholars working on their dissertations or monographs on Chinese socialist culture, what advice might you give them for framing their arguments for a broad audience?

[1] Previous publications on this topic include Jessica M. Davis and Jocelyn Chey, eds., *Humor in Chinese Life and Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2013) and Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (University of California Press, 2015).

[2] Among others, see Jie Li, *Utopian Ruins: A Mermorial Museum of the Mao Era* (Duke University Press, 2020); Xiaoning Lu, *Moulding the Socialist Subject: Cinema and Chinese Modernity (1949–1966)* (Brill, 2020); Laurence Coderre, *Newborn Socialist Things: Materiality in Maoist China* (Duke University Press, 2021); and my own book *Cinema Off Screen: Moviegoing in Socialist China* (University of California Press, 2021).

Response

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How do the editors evoke the term "Maoist" as opposed to "Mao-era" or "socialist" in this book? Can these terms be used more or less interchangeably, or should we put more emphasis on their differences?

Our book uses these words interchangeably because it focuses on challenging the joint force of mainstream Chinese and Western representations of the Mao era that utilize these words as labels for "a gloomy period incompatible with laughter as a genuine expression of happiness and freedom," reducing the complex and diverse expressions of laughter during that period to merely "a weapon of defiance or a manifestation of the era's political failure" (introduction). However, other studies can choose to emphasize the important distinctions among these terms.

I would also like to pose a few broad questions about directions of future research. Based on your experience working on Maoist Laughter and other projects, which aspects of Chinese socialist culture do you think demand more scholarly attention and why? Where do you see potential innovative frameworks emerge in this sub-field and how might we go beyond reiterating what has by now been well established, that socialist culture was complex, heterogenous, creative, and dynamic? To young scholars working on their dissertations or monographs on Chinese socialist culture, what advice might you give them for framing their arguments for a broad audience?

We believe that today's remembrances of the Mao era constitute a subfield that deserves more scholarly attention. It demands the application of innovative frameworks and has the potential to attract a broader audience. Two thought-provoking works that come to mind are Li Jie's *Utopian Ruins* and the latter half of Chenshu Zhou's *Cinema Off Screen*, which serve as initiators of this subfield. The former presents an innovative approach of creating a "memorial museum-in-book-form" that curates existing textual, photographic, and cinematic records about the subaltern. The latter unearths significant new primary sources, focusing on viewers' memories of their experiences of going to the movies in the early PRC.

However, much work remains to be done in this subfield to help us comprehend the complex ambiguities embedded in these remembrances. Such endeavors would greatly contribute to our understanding of present-day Chinese society, where deep nostalgia and intense fear of a return to Maoist China coexist, and both can be easily triggered by perceived differences and similarities between the Maoist and post-Mao periods.