

[The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China, by Christopher Rea \[book review\]](#)

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Abstract:

Review of Christopher Rea. *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. xvi, 335 pp. Hardcover \$70.00, ISBN 978-0-520-28384-8.

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Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

impersonators described in this book to operate. There was in fact a lively cat-and-mouse game ongoing between official regulators and a wide range of illegal entrepreneurs: clerical racketeers, granary stock embezzlers, salt smugglers and customs evaders, and so on. McNicholas opens up a whole new chapter to this story, in the process throwing into even greater light the boundaries of Qing state capacity and probing its soft borders.

Beyond its lively crime narratives, this book is full of detailed close analysis of the social and political implications of each type of fraudulent activity, and of the interest orientation of each group of participants. It is a book with ideas. One of the most provocative of these comes in a later chapter in which the author traces the history of statutes in the imperial code from the early empire through Qing, then more finely through the revisions of the eighteenth century. He argues that the trend of the longer history was to ever more closely concentrate on the “political” character of these crimes; it was not so much the frauds committed on the general population that infuriated the state as it was the gall of individuals who sought to falsely appropriate (and thus demean) proper state authority. Then over the eighteenth century, McNicholas argues, the clarity of this trend became more obscure, as a “tension” emerged between the state’s efforts to police its own legitimacy and its perceived need to manage an increasingly robust and complex private economy; with this set of assumptions, the protection of private scam victims itself became a greater judicial concern. Prosperity had problems of its own.

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Christopher Rea. *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015. xvi, 335 pp. Hardcover \$70.00, ISBN 978-0-520-28384-8.

Conventional understanding of China’s early modern era is full of serious concerns over imperial China’s “inferiority” in terms of politics, military, and culture. Presenting an insightful alternative to this paradigmatic narrative of tears and blood, Professor Christopher Rea’s book, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*, shows how laughter was a crucial

component in the overarching themes of modernity and revolution during the turn of the twentieth century. Such distinctive contributions have been well recognized by its receipt of the 2017 Joseph Levenson Post-1900 Book Prize as well as in other book reviews. As a scholar of premodern Chinese literary culture, I discuss in this review two themes that intrigue me the most in this monograph. One regards “a history of laughter” in China: the book’s approach to the topic of laughter in the Chinese tradition; the other regards the question of “what makes it new”: the reevaluation and debate of laughter’s role in China’s cultural heritage.

To start with, I would like to highlight several merits of Rea’s approach to laughter in China. As the first monograph on the comic culture of early twentieth-century China, the book deals with a topic that is difficult to conceptualize. Laughter embodies a wide spectrum of subcategories, many of which overlap or contradict with each other in one way or another. To induce laughter, one can be joking, sarcastic, or ironic; caricaturing or eccentric; ludicrous or judicious. As Rea notes, the main interest of the book is historical rather than theoretical: it focuses on “when and why certain modes of laughter have become culturally endemic” (p. 4). Therefore, attempts to theorize Chinese laughter would be distracting from the objectives of the book and Rea provides a good example of exploring the cultural issues behind laughter’s wide categorical labels without compromising its conceptual complexities. In this sense, this book is both about humor and not about humor. It is about humor because to general English readers in the West for whom “China is not usually thought of as a funny place,”¹ this book shows that not only is China a place full of laughter but also a place where the diversity and sophistication of literary genres and media representations of humor is phenomenal. At the same time, this book is not about (trying to define a Chinese sense of) humor because, to readers familiar with modern Chinese literature, the book’s key objective is not to explain why these materials triggered laughter. Rather, through the dialectical lens of the comic culture, the book presents a refreshing narrative of early modern Chinese intellectuals’ subversion to the authority of powerful social-cultural norms which they deemed as lagging forces that hindered China’s transition into a modern nation.

That said, readers who expect to find a theorization of Chinese humor might be somewhat dissatisfied, but it should not prevent them from gaining perspective and insights on laughter in early Republican China. These insights, scattered throughout the book, do not confine themselves within Chinese boundaries but tell a global story of Chinese laughter. For instance, Rea views China’s early twentieth-century joke boom as a “part of a global phenomenon” (p. 31). And he shows that some of the humor periodicals based in China spread as far as England and North America within a few years of their debut (p. 32). Additionally, Rea’s global approach is also demonstrated in the

seamless employment of seminal western theories on humor and laughter in the Chinese context. These theoretical insights range from classic superiority theory dating back to Plato and Aristotle (p. 80) to twentieth-century philosopher Ted Cohen's scattered insights (p. 21). They do not lead to a systematic theory on laughter in China, yet they suffice to illuminate laughter's role and function in the early Republican Chinese contexts.

The book is organized in a loosely chronological order, from late-Qing writer Wu Jianren 吳趸人 to the influential intellectual Lin Yutang 林語堂 in the 1930s. Rea divides the diverse topic of laughter into six chapters and an epilogue by assigning key Chinese terms excerpted from primary sources as conceptual anchors for each chapter. Rather than resulting in a consistent framework or model, the approach to each chapter varies as demanded by the subject. Except for the introductory chapter 1, some chapters center on a representative figure (Wu Jianren in chapter 2; Xu Zhuodai 徐卓呆 in chapter 5; Lin Yutang in chapter 6) while others present an ensemble of various humor promoters and comic genres under specific themes (chapters 3 and 4).

Chapter 1, "Breaking into Laughter 失笑," introduces the background of the existing historical narratives of China's early Republican period, ones of trauma and loss, on which a new history of mirth is to be staged in this book.

Chapter 2, "Jokes 笑話百出," centers around joke-teller Wu Jianren and the rising popularity of joke books. Instead of defining "joke" in English, Rea's emphasis here focuses on the Chinese notion of "*xiaohua* 笑話 (literally, laughter-inducing words)." Rea notes how the Chinese term relates to and differs from words like "joke" or "anecdote" in English and observes that it is during the 1910s that humor collections began to advertise their contents as *xiaohua*, while the earlier ones use more traditional titles like "cracking a smile (*qiyan* 啟顏)" or "clapping (*fuzhang* 撫掌)" (p. 21).

Chapter 3, "Play 遊戲大觀," presents a wide range of "playful" genres and is the longest chapter in the book. From Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 science fiction writing of China's future (pp. 44-45) to the image-distorting "ha-ha mirror" in Shanghai (p. 65), the richness of this chapter leaves the impression that it could stand alone as a single volume on the concept of "*youxi* 遊戲." Among the diverse subcategories discussed in the chapter, it would help to draw a clearer distinction between *youxi* as literary playful modes and *youxi* as play/game in the entertainment industry.

Chapter 4, "Mockery 罵人的藝術," traces how cursing and reviling, the most vulgar modes of criticizing that used to be deemed distasteful by educated literati in serious writing, became appealing rhetoric among early Republican intellectuals in their response to the ridicules of their period. Focusing on the reprinting and readership of *Which Classics?* (*He dian* 何典), an obscure mid-Qing novel that was rediscovered and became popular in the Republican period, Rea demonstrates that the appeal of these irreverent mockery modes

lies precisely in its strong anti-Confucian rhetoric (p. 89). To the republican intellectuals, this vulgar and rootless language became an antidote to the old order that had been plaguing the new republic. One aspect I would expect more analysis of is the possible role of invective language in the “*baihua* 白話 (vernacular language)” language reform.

Chapter 5, “Farce 滑稽魂,” discusses the “funniness” in short stories, stage arts, and films by focusing on writer and playwright Xu Zhuodai’s 徐卓呆 work. One important feature of Xu’s farcical stories and plays, as Rea emphasizes in this chapter, is hoax. Rea’s narrative builds a connection between the urban culture of Shanghai and the popularity of the Xu Zhuodai’s hoax stories. Xu’s brand of humor, however, is also made famous by his parodic approach to Chinese classical literature. And many of these tricks, one may argue, could also be under the category of “literary playfulness” in chapter 3.

Chapter 6, “The Invention of Humor 幽默年,” brings the story of Chinese laughter in the early Republican period to a climax by introducing the 1930s debate over humor’s definition and role in Chinese culture. Lin Yutang, at the center of the debate, argues that no native terminology in Chinese could connote the exact same sense of humor and insists his invention of the term *youmo* for humor. Rea successfully presents the militant voices of humor’s place in the Chinese culture during the 1930s controversies. However, a more critical analysis of these early Republican intellectuals’ attitudes would help to demonstrate the circumstances that gave rise to these controversies. Some of the opinions voiced by these writers seem full of biased and radical sentiments against tradition and cultural heritage. For instance, left-wing writer Han Shiheng 韓待桁 claimed that the Chinese nation “lacked a compatible philosophy, going through life with long faces, capable of only selfish, arrogant laughter and joking about sex” (p. 150). What are the occasions or contexts in which they made these comments? Does their retrospective assessment of humor’s place in premodern China emerge as a defense against Western prejudices (as Rea argues) or more out of their revolution-oriented ideology?

The more general question arising from reading the book regards the word “new” in its title: what is new in this history of laughter in China, and moreover, what is the old history of laughter in China? Alluding to the title of Wu Jianren’s 1903 collection of jokes, *A New History of Laughter (Xin xiaoshi 新笑史)*, Rea’s new history sharply contrasts with the old history of the period that focuses on “the angst, earnestness, drudgery, and political anger” (p. 14). But to readers familiar with modern Chinese literature, it comes with little surprise that early Republican intellectuals would brand the comic culture as a “new” one, along with the May Fourth movement slogans such as “New Literature (*xin wenxue* 新文學),” “New Culture (*xin wenhua* 新文化),” and so forth. In a certain sense, Rea’s book is a new history of early Republican China through the lens of laughter more than it is a new history of laughter in China.

Indeed, the early Republican intellectuals' discourses on the comic culture, diverse and varied as they are, collectively depict a rupture between laughter in imperial China and the new culture of humor in the Republican era. Additionally, the change in media and the rise of tabloid press is also significant during this period. With these voices and shifts as evidence, Rea observes that with Lin Yutang's coining of the word *youmo*, it is during the 1930s that "possibly for the first time in Chinese history humor itself becomes an object of reverence" (p. 12).

But readers of premodern Chinese literature may wonder, what about the comic culture recorded in the *A New Account of Tales of the World* (*Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語) during the Six Dynasties, or the literati culture that elevates banter in storytelling and literary writing during the Tang and Song dynasties? The problem, however, with these general observations about laughter in China lies in that we do not seem to understand laughter in the Chinese tradition, particularly in premodern China, very well: there has not yet been an (old) history of laughter in China. Laughter remains a marginalized topic in scholarship of Chinese culture, both within China and abroad.² The lack of research in the topic does not mean that laughter was not prominent in Chinese literary, religious, and political cultures. Nevertheless, the notion of laughter in Chinese premodern tradition begs more critical attention from scholars across the world.

Humor is universal, but it is conditioned by cultural and historical factors. Such simple rules are often ignored in stereotypical views over Chinese reputation of humorless drudgery. Similarly, common Chinese audiences often find it difficult to understand the prominent industry of American stand-up comedies. In addition to the well-recognized contributions Rea's book makes to the scholarly world, I would like to highlight at last its efforts in breaking the cultural barriers that have prevented the appreciation of humor from a different culture. By virtue of precise and lively translations, meticulous survey of primary sources, and mastery of joke-telling narratives, Rea's book is a good source for both serious inquiries and fun.

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NOTES

1. Ian Johnson. *Finding a Rich Vein of Humor in China's Past*. *The New York Times*, November 16, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/17/world/asia/china-humor-christopher-rea.html?_r=0.

2. The topic of laughter in premodern China started to receive welcoming scholarly attention recently. Noticeable publications include: Giulia Baccini's dissertation, titled *The Forest of Laughs (Xiaolin): Mapping the Offspring of Self-aware Literature in Ancient China*, in

which she has an annotated translation of China's earliest joke collection *Xiaolin* 笑林 as well as Pi-ching Hsu's *Feng Menglong's Treasury of Laughs: A Seventeenth-Century Anthology of Traditional Chinese Humour* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).



Margaret E. Roberts. *Censored: Distraction and Diversion Inside China's Great Firewall*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018. xii, 271 pp. Hardcover \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-691-17886-8.

With over seven hundred million internet users, China's netizens would seem to be all but ungovernable.¹ Viral outrage and scalable coordination should alarm a government whose actions are still guided by memories of the events of 1989. Yet as Margaret Roberts relates in her new monograph, information management in China is so effective that in 2015, even a young professional engaged in feminist activism, despite having studied in the United States and regularly using a VPN, remained completely unaware that five activists had been detained in Beijing for their plans to protest sexual harassment.

Rather than self-censorship, this anecdote suggests that the secret of authoritarian control lies in insulating activists from their audience. Roberts marshals considerable evidence in support of this proposition, showing that first-hand experience with censorship seems not to have a chilling effect, while minor inconveniences (such as the Great Firewall) are enough to divert online traffic away from sensitive areas. She terms this strategy "friction," and pairs it with "flooding," in which coordinated waves of information, either in newspapers or from an army of paid posters, distract citizens from bad news. These tools of censorship are less likely to incite a backlash than fear-based deterrence, and might even escape the notice of the censored population.

Like Roberts, I have noticed the subtle power of these methods in my own daily life. I frequently use Baidu or the Chinese version of Bing rather than connect over VPN to use Google, and I sometimes substitute other news sources for the New York Times when in China. Yet I wonder if Roberts goes too far in arguing against the importance of self-censorship. Although many Chinese criticize the government online, politics is still a taboo topic of conversation. Social sanctioning could play a powerful role in limiting speech, even when state persecution is unlikely. Furthermore, closed restaurants, sealed side entrances to my building, and a friendly visit from the police during this spring's Two Meetings provided small but meaningful reminders of state power