

Review:

Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*. University of California Press. 2015. 335 pages.

Arthur Asa Berger*

This book may be a new history of Chinese humor but what Rea shows in this beautifully written and scholarly text is that the Chinese have been irreverent for a long, long time. The book is 335 pages long, but the text is 165 pages. So there are two parts to the book: Rea's history of humor in China and then 200 pages of scholarly apparatus, which deals with topics such as "Selected Chinese Humor Collections," editions and paratexts of an important text, *Which Classic*, a glossary of names and titles used in the book, an extensive bibliography and sixty pages of notes. These notes are extremely interesting. He uses them to expand upon topics he deals with found in the first part of the book

He focuses upon the 1890s to the 1930s in China, though he does have a brief discussion in his epilogue of more recent Chinese humor. What you discover when you read this book is that there is a long tradition of "irreverence" in China and there were countless Chinese humorists who provided the Chinese public with many different kinds of humor, from jokes to comic novels. Rea's first chapter, "Breaking Into Laughter," sets the stage for his discussion of humor in China. He defines laughter as "a broad spectrum of attitudes and behaviors ranging from amusement to buffoonery and derision." He points out that "China's modern literary history is one of lost laughter," by which he means that literary scholars have neglected Chinese humor because they didn't think humor is important or worth bothering with.

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Rea explains that his 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.” This typology of kinds of humor, which also lists humor as a kind of humor, strikes me as a bit odd, but that may be because we are dealing with imperfect translations into English of trends in Chinese humor. Classification systems are always problematic, but Rea feels that they work for him so I won’t quibble about whether, for example, play is a form of humor. He uses the term “play” to deal with “a culture of amusement involving experimentation with literary form and modern devices” such as “parodic essays, humorous poems and stories, puzzles, cartoons, caricatures and novelty photographs.” Play seems to represent an attitude that fostered the kinds of humor he writes about.

Not only does Rea discuss the humorists and different kinds of humor found in China, during the age of irreverence, but here and there he offers examples of Chinese humor, both verbal and visual—some of which are rather crude and vulgar and many of which may not strike Westerners as funny (and maybe many Chinese as well). Here’s one of the best jokes in the book:

A man who preferred peace and quiet had the misfortune to live between two blacksmiths. Day and night their racket pummeled his ears, leaving him miserable. He was often heard to remark, “If those two were to move someday, I’d happily pay them in thanks. One day, the blacksmiths came to him together and said “We’re both ready to move and have come to take you up on your offer of compensation.” He asked when they planned to move, and they said “Tomorrow.” Delighted, he promptly paid them a handsome sum. After treating them to a drink, he asked “And where will you two be moving to?” They replied: “He’s moving to my place, and I’m moving to his.”

As an example of crude humor, Rea discusses a couplet in a Chinese publication, the *Analects*, which was based on a news report that the government in Guangdong would be collecting a special levy on feces and urine:

Since antiquity, no one has ever imposed a tax on shit,
But now, the only thing exempt for levies is farts.

There are numerous other places in which Rea talks about various humor texts but doesn’t offer examples of them.

Reading about humor isn't as much fun as reading humorous texts, so a history of any kind of humor has a problem to overcome. It can be tedious. Rea has managed to write a very scholarly but nevertheless interesting and even entertaining book about a subject of considerable importance that has been neglected by literary scholars. If there are a billion Chinese people in the world (and they have a sense of humor the way people everywhere have) it is useful to be able to read about how the Chinese sense of humor and different kinds of Chinese humor that have evolved since the thirties and what this humor reflects about Chinese character, culture and society.