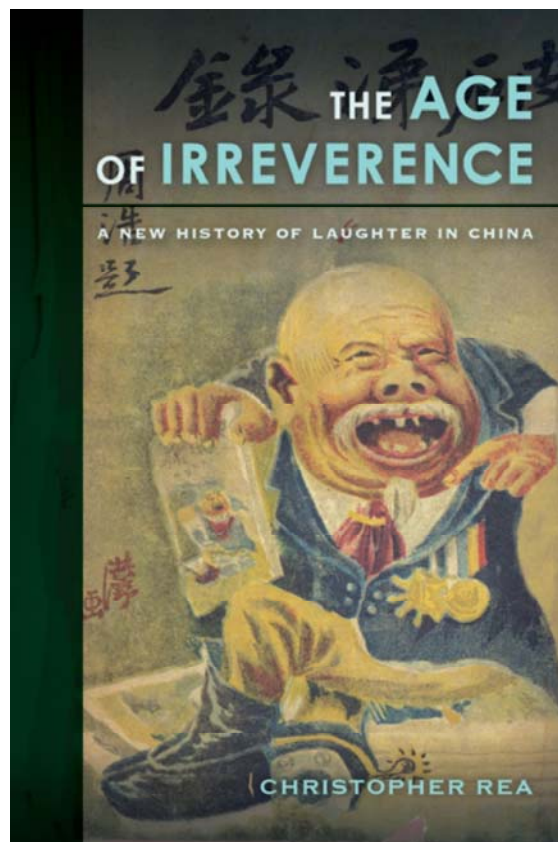


From the Year of the Ape to the Year of the Monkey

Posted on 2 March 2016 by Christopher Rea

Christopher Rea is Associate Professor of Asian Studies and Director of the Centre for Chinese Research at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China* (California, 2015), the editor of *China's Literary Cosmopolitans: Qian Zhongshu, Yang Jiang, and the World of Letters* (Brill, 2015) and *Humans, Beasts, and Ghosts: Stories and Essays by Qian Zhongshu* (Columbia, 2011), and coeditor, with Nicolai Volland, of *The Business of Culture: Cultural Entrepreneurs in China and Southeast Asia, 1900-60* (foreword by Wang Gungwu) (UBC Press, 2015). — *The Editors*



The Age of Irreverence began to take shape in 2012, when I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW). I had long been curious about why so many Chinese writers of the early twentieth century seem to have experienced China's entry into the modern era as being comedic. In my study, I wanted to recover the laughter of a traumatic age that, in later histories, had been drowned out by laments and calls to arms.

The following excerpt is from chapter three of *The Age of Irreverence*, which discusses how 'play' 遊戲 became an umbrella term for comedy and entertainment in China from roughly the late 1890s to the mid-1920s. *Youxi* denoted a broad variety of amusements, including word games, puns, palindromic poems, lantern riddles, jokes, drinking songs, athletic activities, magic tricks, and trick photographs. But in the newspapers it was most closely associated with humorous allegories and, as I discuss below, parody. On 1 January 1916, Yuan Shikai 袁世凱, who in 1912 had strong-armed Sun Yat-sen out of the way to become president of China's new republic, planned to accede to the throne as its emperor. In the event, the coronation was put off, the Empire of China collapsed within three months, and Yuan himself died that June. A century ago, cartoonists, punning on Yuan's surname, routinely caricatured him as an ape 猿 (pronounced *yuan*). May we see less political folly in this *Year of the Monkey*. — *Christopher Rea*

China's Serial Parodists

In the 1910s and 1920s, writers in China's entertainment market parodied anything and everything. Novelists wrote picaresque sequels to such vernacular classics as *Investiture of the Gods*, *Journey to the West*, and *Flowers in the Mirror*, filling them with humorous anachronisms and incongruities resulting from encounters between tradition and modernity. Poets and essayists parodied selections from canonical works such as the *Book of Change*, the epic poem *Li Sao*, the *Four Books*, and the *Five Classics*. Short parodies often used formulaic title prefixes like "A play on . . ." (戲), "In imitation of . . ." (擬), "In playful imitation of . . ." (戲擬), and "Mimicking . . ." (仿).

Du Fu's "Meeting Li Guinian in the South," for example, would be immediately recognizable to any schoolchild familiar with *Three Hundred Tang Poems*:

岐王宅裡尋常見	<i>In King Qi's Manor I often saw you,</i>
崔九堂前幾度聞	<i>In Cui the Ninth's Hall I frequently heard you sing;</i>
正是江南好風景	<i>Now amidst the lovely scenery of the south,</i>
落花時節又逢君	<i>In the season of falling blossoms we meet again.</i>

The poem expresses Du Fu's surprise and regret at finding a talented court musician singing for his supper in exile, having been driven south by an eighth-century rebellion. In 1918, a contributor to the cartoon monthly *Shanghai Puck* "mimicked" (仿) the Poet-Immortal's verse as follows:

野雞	<i>"Streetwalker"</i>
貴州路口尋常見	<i>On the corner of Guizhou Road we often met,</i>
樓外樓頭幾度聞	<i>In Fantasy Mansion I frequently heard your voice;</i>
馬路排班怕巡捕	<i>Your street pimp fears the policeman on the beat,</i>
青蓮閣下又逢君	<i>At Green Lotus Pavilion we meet again.</i>

Parodists renewed a comedic form dating back to the Tang dynasty by writing short mock-biographies of Rice Moth, Layabout, Crab with a Human Face (rapacious officials, like crabs, "walk sideways," or run amuck), Mr. Yes-Man, Mr. Cuckold, Miss Pockmarked, and Kowtowing Parasite. They composed rhapsodies (賦) to opium addicts, streetwalkers, magistrates, beards, revolution, fake coeds, and the streets of the foreign concessions, as well as celebrations (賀) and encomia (贊) of things like fires and poverty. They parodied speeches, advertisements, confessions, petitions, orders, handbills, notices, policies, regulations, resolutions, discourses, explications, sutras, memorials to the throne, and conference minutes. We have an exchange of letters between the Queue and the Beard and Eyebrows. We have a eulogy for a chamber pot. We have "Research on Why Men Have Beards and Women Don't," "A Telegram from the Thunder God to His Mother Resigning His Post," and "A Public Notice from the King of Whoring Prohibiting Playboys from Skipping Debts." One "travelogue" consists of a head louse and a foot louse discussing the perils they experienced journeying over the landscape of a body. Another records a trip to sleep.

Enterprising editors resold parodies (as they did jokes) by packaging them in compendia. Li Dingyi's *The Comic Spirit* (1919) [FIGURE BELOW], for example, collects work by more than four dozen authors (some, like Li, the Pacifier of the Barbarians, are identifiable by their pen names), sorting them into six categories: essays, poems and lyrics, practical advice, fiction, stories, and news. Poems and lyrics include topical verse making fun of runts, beanpoles, fatties, the pockmarked, mutes, blind men, hunchbacks, the deaf, the paralyzed, old relics of the Qing, wearers of Western suits, fiction writers, bureaucrats, compradors, and journalists.

The Comic Spirit (1919), edited by Li Dingyi 李定夷





A delightful "Discourse" (*Junshuo* 論說) in *The True Record* 真相畫報 (Feb. 1913)



Essays include **discourses** (*Jun* 論 or *shuo* 說) [FIGURE ABOVE] that use systematic logic to develop a preposterous proposition. "The Opium Addict as Master of the Sciences," for example, ticks off reasons why the consummate Sick Man of Asia is an expert in all fields of modern learning. Commerce: he sends money overseas. Phonics: listen to him take drags and exhale smoke. Chemistry: he processes raw opium into a smokable paste. Gymnastics: his bowed posture can be measured with his straight pipe. Philosophy: he lies peacefully and lets his mind wander. Ethics: the scene of his wife, concubines, and children chatting nonchalantly as he lies passed out on the couch is one of domestic harmony. And so on through optics, medicine, hygiene, electrical engineering, and metaphysics. The piece is one of innumerable humorous literary testimonials to China's failure to modernize. Other discourses follow a similar pattern of reinterpreting a modern imperative—science, education, constitutional democracy, equality of the sexes—through an indigenous trope.

Funny practical advice includes parodies of a familiar advertising genre: the cure for the common ailment. "Cure for Toothache" reads: "A toothache can make eating and drinking extremely inconvenient. It can even make it difficult to sleep at night. Try putting three live poisonous centipedes in your mouth and keeping them there for an hour. The pain will stop immediately. Should centipedes not be available you can achieve similar results by applying a bottle of high-grade morphine to the affected area." Other prescriptions follow the same formula: an expression of sympathy followed by the precise dosage of a lethal cure. Child with runny nose? Pour molten tin into nostrils and when it sets the snot will stop. Scabies? Dunk head in boiling oil to kill the bugs and eradicate the illness. Stutterer? Sew mouth shut. Sore throat? Cut out windpipe. Unsightly cripple? Cut off legs at knees, attach steel poles, put on wheels, and hire assistant to push. Every remedy is touted as simple, new, scientific, and efficacious.

These parodies bring the reader up short by flagrantly violating ethical taboos. They also obliquely reveal the democratization and commercialization of knowledge that newspapers were then facilitating in areas like medicine. Pharmaceutical companies were aggressive advertisers; self-medicating advice columns were common in newspapers like *Shun Pao*, and Western medicines threatened the livelihoods of Chinese herbalists and pharmacologists. These parodists' attitude toward new words (like *mafei* for morphine), ideas, and categories of knowledge tended to be facetious and skeptical, though rarely expressing the outright hostility leveled at new politicians by China's cartoonists.



President Yuan Shikai 袁世凱 as an ape (yuan 猿)
"weaving the cabinet" of the Republic of China with a shuttle of "intimates," in *Civil Rights Daily* 民權報 (14 Aug. 1912)

Copyright

This website and the *China Story Yearbook* are open-access materials published under a Creative Commons 3.0 Unported license.

We encourage the widespread circulation of the material published on this website. While all content may be used and copied, we request that you credit The China Story Project and provide a link to:

www.TheChinaStory.org.

We occasionally publish images from other websites; we do this under the terms of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act; if you are a rights owner and object to our use of an image, please let us know via our [contact page](#).



Australian Centre on China in the World 中华全球研究中心/中華全球研究中心