

Book review

Christopher Rea, *The Age of Irreverence: A New History of Laughter in China*, Oakland (CA), University of California Press, 2015, pp 335 + xvi. ISBN: 9780520283848

Few people outside China are familiar with the history of Chinese humour in what Rea calls the “age of irreverence” from the last years of the Qing dynasty through the early years of the Republic founded by Sun Yat-sen in 1911 until the 1930s. It petered out with the beginning of the calamitous war with Imperial Japan in 1937. Curiously some of the earliest collectors of Chinese jokes had been Japanese anthropologists and folklorists working for the colonial government in the island of Taiwan seized from China in 1895 after China had been defeated in the First Sino-Japanese War. The Japanese rulers sought to use humour as a way of understanding and dominating their Chinese colonial subjects.

The early twentieth century in China was an important period for both the production and the study of humour. Scholars produced anthologies of jokes from earlier centuries and began to analyse them and to try to uncover the essence of what made their humour Chinese. It was an important time and Christopher Rea has written an important book.

Many of the jokes in these collections that had been compiled by scholars and published with commentaries will be familiar to outsiders. There are jokes about stupid rustics, skillful swindlers and hen-pecked husbands. The Chinese seem to have been particularly fond of jokes about the men they called “wife-fearers”, perhaps because such men failed to conform to the traditional hierarchical ordering of the sexes. Chinese humour in general displays a considerable degree of misogyny:

A hen-pecked husband who has been beaten by his wife tried to hide himself under the bed. The wife said: ‘Come out quick!’ The man said: “When a great man says No, he means it”. (p. 34)

As might be expected from an age of irreverence, early 20th century humour in China elevated mockery. Older hitherto obscure works ridiculing Confucian kowtowing and greedy officialdom were now revived and given a new popularity. In the last years of the Qing dynasty there were obscene attacks on the Empress Dowager. Political ridicule remained strong under the new Republic. Rea also deals in detail with farce, slapstick and even practical jokes, with comic periodicals and comedy in films. There was an explosion of humour and it is striking to notice at this time the influence of British comedies of manners. Urbane civilised peoples understand each other. Yet there was always present the drive to create a humour that was authentically Chinese.

Humour survived the war of 1937–45 and even under Mao Zedong “in theory the Party embraced laughter” (p. 160). But in practice the hegemony of a totalitarian ideology severely hampered the production of creative humour. The Red Guards and the Cultural Revolution practically killed it off. The only public humour to survive at this time was a humour that attacked and humiliated those defined as enemies of the people whether Buddhist monks or

Party officials who had fallen out of favour. It was a typically punitive socialist humour (Davies 2014) quite at odds with the earlier genial laughter of the bourgeoisie. During this time even the hall of ha-ha mirrors in Shanghai's Great World amusement hall was closed lest the mirrors "would make the proletariat 'forget their class consciousness'" (p. 162). It was a world in which even the irreverence of distorting mirrors was forbidden. Chinese humour now retreated to the freedom of capitalist Hong Kong, John Stuart Mill's other island, then under the benign rule of the British.

Irreverence returned to China at the end of the 1970s after Mao's death in 1976, when the Gang of Four became a target for officially approved public derision. Decades of popular resentment were now expressed through scornful humour. Although this is outside the scope of Rea's book, I would like to draw attention to the irreverent humour of Chinese visual artists, painters, sculptors and the assemblers of collage and *objets trouvés* (Davies 2012). Ai Wei Wei is the best known of these but there are many others. There has been a real efflorescence of visual humour.

The Chinese have a reputation of being a deferential and serious-minded people; certainly that is the thrust of the Confucian ethic. This makes it all the more welcome that Christopher Rea has written a book celebrating the irreverent side of their humour and particularly that of the early years of the twentieth century.

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References

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