

Book review

(1) Gan, Wendy (2018). *Comic China: Representing Common Ground, 1890-1945*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

(2) Tam, King-fai & Wesoky, Sharon (eds.) (2018). *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China*. Singapore. Springer.

Humour is nowhere more under threat than in China, where nationalism is rampant, censorship rules and political correctness does not provide a healthy atmosphere in which it can flourish. In that country, as in other totalitarian states both past and present, humour that somehow manages to be published or circulated informally assumes great significance. As voice for the voiceless, it is the canary in the coal mine. In such circumstances, it is increasingly important for scholars and observers both inside and outside China to monitor and report developments in the application and delivery of humour. Since the publication of *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches* (Chey & Davis 2013) and *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture: Resistance and Control in Modern Times* (Davis & Chey 2014), two ground-breaking volumes on Chinese humour, it is encouraging to see how much more detailed work and in-depth research is being done. These two books cover several important aspects of Chinese humour and will be useful reference material for scholars who are interested in such diverse fields as linguistic pragmatics, cross-cultural communication, new media and political humour.

Opinions have always differed over how China should be viewed, whether as a threat or an opportunity: if as a threat, whether benign or hostile, if as an opportunity, whether for economic or cultural betterment. Since the Opium Wars of the 19th century exploded the sea defences of the Middle Kingdom – as China is often called – documentary and fictionalised reporting on China by European and American writers has accordingly fallen into one or the other of these camps. Wendy Gan, Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong, researches Western literary accounts of China. In her 2018 book *Comic China: Representing Common Ground*, she focuses on works with exclusive or extensive use of humour and reaches the surprising conclusion that humour can be used as a tool to moderate extreme views by establishing a sympathetic understanding of the circumstances of the “other”. In this way, the book is a valuable contribution to the study of cross-cultural humour, which all too often is concerned with laughing at others, or with laughing at oneself for the benefit of others rather than with the role that humour can play in establishing a “middle ground” on which cultural understanding may be built. Gan’s study covers the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th century (late Qing and Republican periods, to use terms usually applied to Chinese history studies), but its conclusions have contemporary and universal application.

Comic China includes five case studies. The first concerns some little-known late Victorian musical comedies on the London stage. Following the wild success of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*, set in Japan, the China-based dramas *San Toy* and *A Chinese Honeymoon* also had long runs during the 1890s. Drawing on Richard Dyer's 1992 account of Victorian musical theatre, Gan points out that these plays created sentimental Chinoiserie settings in which "Orientals" could be encountered by Westerners without the revulsion created elsewhere by "Yellow Peril" or Fu Manchu memes (pp. 24-26)

Gan's second case study concerns Ernest Bramah's *Kai Lung* series of novelettes, extraordinarily popular in the 1920s, characterised by what she calls "comfortable familiarity" because their characters and situations of the itinerant story-teller are so reminiscent of scenes in English life that they manage to create common ground between East and West (p. 37). The third study is of the travel accounts of American missionary Arthur Henderson Smith (1896) and British expatriate civil servant J.O.P. Bland (1909), both long-term residents in China in the Edwardian period. Their wry descriptions of travel and daily contrepemps are laced with humour and have the effect of ameliorating negativity towards an alien society that simultaneously attracted and repelled the expatriates. The next chapter concerns later travel writers such as Peter Fleming, Isabella Bird and Christopher Isherwood, whose light-hearted accounts of a topsy-turvy world are all covered here and may be typified by the American resident in colonial Shanghai, Elsie McCormick (1923). Some of her stories are written in the first person, as if by an American baby brought up by a Chinese amah with hilarious commentaries on local culture. The fifth and last chapter, which covers early 20th-century humour in China, also concerns the cosmopolitan city of Shanghai, as described by American journalist Emily Hahn (1938, 1942) in the late 1930s.

Gan prefaces her five case studies with an introduction that places her analysis in the theoretical context of cross-cultural communication and humour theory. She references Berger, who described the comic as "conjuring a separate world, different from the world of ordinary reality, operating by different rules" (Berger 1997: x) and draws on Bergson's (1910) *Laughter*, and Freud's (1905) *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. She also quotes Umberto Eco's (1984) essay "The frames of comic 'freedom'" to describe the potential of humour to "throw down barriers and open up new terrain for cross-cultural understanding" (p. 5). This type of conciliatory humour of course must be juxtaposed with aggressive humour that aggressively targets aliens and other cultures. It is deserving of greater study, particularly at this time of increasing nationalism and xenophobia. Referring to deteriorating relations between China and the United States in the present decade, Gan concludes, "[a]s we edge towards demonization, we need all the more to hold onto the human" (p. 134).

The papers collected in Tam & Wesoky's edited volume, *Not Just a Laughing Matter: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Humor in China* were originally presented at a conference in Hong Kong in 2013. They are grouped here in three sections, the first covering film and cartoons from the late 19th century up to the 1950s; the second, *xiangsheng* 相声 (a type of stand-up comedy often translated as "cross-talk") and political jokes and gender in Internet humour

in the People's Republic of China (PRC); and the third, topics relating to humour in Hong Kong. The introductory chapter by Tam & Wesoky posits that humour has only limited potential to support political resistance. It provides context for subsequent chapters by describing the evolution of humour modes ("technology") in China through the 20th century. Their conclusions about anti-establishment or proto-revolutionary humour would have benefited from reference to the extensive work that has been done more recently in this area since the early studies of Orwell (1970) and Benton (1988), both referenced here (pp. 2-3). The editors could also have paid more attention to corrections of basic grammar and style that make some chapters, and particularly the introduction, difficult for the reader to follow (for example, incorrect use of singular and plural forms of nouns and verbs).

I-Wei Wu in "Illustrating humor: Political cartoons on Late Qing constitutionalism" contributes a useful summary account of political cartoons in the late 19th century, the last decade of Imperial China, particularly cartoons covering the movement for constitutional reform. During this period, newspapers flourished and became powerful agents for change. Cartoons mocked government agencies and highlighted their absurdities and ineffectiveness. Laura Pozzi's chapter "Humor, war and politics in *San Mao Joins the Army*: A comparison between the comic strips (1946) and the film (1992)" writes about Zhang Leping's classic comic strip, published at the end of the Sino-Japanese War, and compares its humour with its later film adaptation, finding that the former served to moderate nationalistic propaganda while the latter was created under government anti-Japanese propaganda auspices. Xiaoning Lu in "Chinese film satire and its foreign connections in the People's Republic of China (1950-1957): Laughter without borders?" notes the extensive influence of the Soviet bloc on the development of comedy films in China during the 1950s. In the early period, Soviet comedies won acclaim in China while Chinese filmmakers struggled to gauge the limits of permitted "appropriate laughter".

In the second section, entitled "Joking in the PRC", David Moser recaps the history of *xiangsheng* in "Keeping the *ci* in *fengci*: A brief history of the Chinese verbal art of *xiangsheng*". It is a pity that he does not explain the meaning of the two words *ci* 刺 and *fengci* 讽刺 used in his chapter title. The former term *ci* means "words". The latter term serves as the Chinese equivalent of all three English terms "sarcasm", "irony" and "satire", which admittedly are often confused in English usage, let alone in Chinese. There is no explanation by Moser about which meaning he ascribes to *fengci*. As for *ci*, he relates this to *xiangsheng*, since he defines this as "verbal art". The failure to define terms as promised in the title is a missed opportunity for discussion of the classification of Chinese humour types. Moser could have expanded here on the excellent work of Steinmuller & Brandstadter (2016) in *Irony, Cynicism and the Chinese State*, which concerns the peculiar place of irony in a totalitarian state such as the PRC and shows the particular humour role of *xiangsheng* compared with the instances cited by Steinmuller & Brandstadter (2016). Moser published a much-quoted article on the "death" of *xiangsheng* in 2004. In this chapter, he does update that premature obituary and admits that there is still life in the art form, particularly with

the rise of the Internet in China and the cross-talk master Guo Degang, some of whose work is described and translated here (pp. 89-92).

Howard Choy in “Laughable leaders: A study of political jokes in Mainland China” describes an explosion of jokes about political leaders around the turn of the 20th/21st centuries and expands on the correlation between humour and political control, outlined by Xueliang Ding in his valuable chapters that conclude the volume *Humour in Chinese Life and Culture* (Davis & Chey 2014), and which forms the introduction to Ding’s (2017) book *Zhengzhi yu Zhongguo tersedede youmo* 政治與中國特色的幽默 (Politics and humour with special Chinese characteristics). Choy goes further than Ding by concluding that the circulation of jokes overall functions as a safety valve for the expression of dissatisfaction, thereby contributing to the maintenance of social order (p. 113). For readers whose humour research interests extend beyond the PRC, this study presents obvious parallels with the extensively researched humour of Stalinist Russia, which is unfortunately not referenced here.

Sharon Wesoky & Ping Le in “The politics of cynicism and neoliberal hegemony: Representation of gender in Chinese Internet humor” provide a nuanced discussion of the representation of gender in Internet humour. Whereas Ding (2017) allows the ridiculousness of the gap between propaganda and reality to speak for itself, Wesoky & Le probe more deeply into the drivers of jokes about gender. Some examples they quote are cynical commentary and some are didactic, in the sense that they highlight traditional moral values that are often ignored in an increasingly materialistic society. For example, one Internet joke (unsourced, undated) is based on the scenario of the sudden reappearance of Chairman Mao in contemporary society, leading immediately to a crackdown on corruption, to the “outing” of a million mistresses of senior officials, to all prostitutes abandoning their profession and various other signs of return to decency (p. 129).

The third section of *Not Just a Laughing Matter* is devoted to humour in Hong Kong. This is a welcome addition to the field of Chinese humour studies for several reasons. Firstly, all too often these assume a uniformity of thought, practice and policy throughout the country and do not give appropriate weight to local cultures and local dialects and languages. Secondly, Hong Kong uniquely is part of the PRC but remains a “Special Administrative Region” within it that, up to the present time, has a more liberal and open administration than elsewhere on the mainland, allowing greater freedom of speech and publication. It is also a great base from which to observe and comment on developments in other parts of China and to take those observations to the wider world.

This section comprises three studies, each in itself interesting, although the theoretical underpinning of some arguments could be strengthened. King-fai Tam in “Political jokes, caricatures and satire in Wong Tze-wah’s stand-up comedy” offers a critique of local stand-up Wong Tze-wah in the period leading up to the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. At that time, there was considerable licence for Hong Kong people to express openly their views on politics, but the public nevertheless seemed generally disinterested. Some people at the

time speculated that this was due to their preoccupation with money matters, but Wong presented his own three theories in 1997 in a performance entitled *Settling Accounts before the Autumn Harvest*. These were (1) the “As long as we keep quiet about it, nobody will remember it (the upcoming 1997 deadline)” theory; (2) the “AIDS” theory – that is, a general feeling of helplessness; and (3) the “It’ll all be fine in the end” theory (p. 141). Readers may like to review a video recording of this stage performance available from Wong’s website (in Cantonese).

The chapter by Foong Ha Yap, Ariel Shuk-ling Chan & Brian Lap-ming Wai entitled “Constructing political identities through characterization metaphor, humor and sarcasm: An analysis of the 2012 Legislative Council election debates in Hong Kong” looks at the use of sarcasm and metaphoric humour in the Hong Kong Legislative Council election debates of that year. In their election presentations, several candidates used metaphors to characterise their opponents. The authors’ analysis of their verbal indirectness strategies claims these enhanced their public standing by showing their adept use of humour. The argument here is based on Fauconnier & Turner’s (2002) Conceptual Blending framework. It should be noted here that while, in their chapter titles, Foong et al. refer to “sarcasm” and Tam in his earlier chapter refers to “satire”, none of the authors enlarges on the reason for their use of these terms and it is not clear whether they intend them to be differently understood.

The final chapter in the book, “‘Absurdity of life’: An interview with Michael Hui”, is a transcription of a 2013 interview with Hui, who is a Hong Kong comedian, by chapter author Karen Fang. Here Fang asked him about his early career in the movies, noting the decline in the local industry since 1997 and the increasing influence of mainland productions and probed the sources of his humour in his personal and professional life. This chapter will be valuable first-hand material for those studying Chinese and Hong Kong film history, although it does not contribute greatly to our understanding of his humour techniques. The use in the title of the phrase “Absurdity of life” would be taken by most readers to refer to Camus or Sartre, but there is no explanation provided in the chapter; rather, Hui states that the major influences on his humour style came from Charlie Chaplin (p. 176).

I recommend these two books to anyone seriously interested in Chinese humour studies. There is surely something for everyone in their wide coverage. There should also be some opportunities to apply elsewhere concepts such as humour’s middle ground role in cross-cultural understanding that have been developed here with particular reference to China. The studies of Hong Kong humour, valuable in themselves, also suggest the need for other studies of regional styles of Chinese humour.

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