Comedy and Cultural Entrepreneurship in Xu Zhuodai’s *Huaji Shanghai*†

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**What’s So Funny About Urban Mass Culture?**

A new culture of laughter was flourishing in 1920s Shanghai, propelled by urban migration and an increasingly diversified mass market for entertainment products. The publishing boom of the 1910s had already begun to expand the urban readership of commercial periodicals beyond classically trained literati, and newspapers and magazines increasingly catered to the more vernacular tastes of a class of “petty urbanites” (*xiao shimin*), city dwellers with modest levels of literacy and disposable income.¹ In contrast to the often cynical and nihilistic overtones of late-Qing “playful writings” (*youxi wenzi*), the *huaji*, or “funny,” aesthetic these consumers favored tended to be more gay than satirical. Though derided in its day as an inferior mode of laughter by cultural critics who favored *younuo* (humor) or *fengci* (satire), *huaji* deserves our attention as a robust cultural phenomenon that extended across multiple genres, from popular theater to mass-market literature and cinema.

Existing literary-cultural histories have told us of other Shanghais, notably the “Shanghai modern” of the New Sensationalists and Eileen

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¹ Perry Link (1981: 92) estimates that the publishing industry as a whole grew more than sixfold between 1910 and 1930. Alexander Des Forges (2007: 127) notes that the label *xiao shimin* was closely linked to petty urbanites’ consumption practices, “depend[ing] not primarily on their occupations, but rather on the kinds of housing they occupied, and, significantly, on the kinds of books and magazines they read.”
Chang (Lee 1999). Yet little has been written about Republican China’s comic cultures, or about how comic mechanisms have functioned within broader patterns of modern Chinese cultural production and consumption. The motif that has attracted most scholarly attention to date is “play” (youxi), which the literati who ran late-Qing Shanghai’s entertainment press elevated to cultlike status, imagining Shanghai as “China’s biggest playground” (Zhongguo jueda youxi zhi chang) (Yeh 2007: 204) even as actual “playgrounds” (youxi chang, or amusement halls) were springing up around the city. This paper explores “Huaji Shanghai,” an urban culture that inherited some of this playful ethos, but whose comic orientation cannot be adequately explained using the general rubric of “entertainment.” This culture claimed to entertain in a specific way—by making people laugh.

*Huaji* culture arose at a time when much popular writing began to shift from the textual sensibilities of the late Qing toward a multimedia and cross-genre outlook. This trend is exemplified by the life and works of Xu Zhuodai (1880–1958(?)), a remarkable figure whose obscurity since the Mao era is largely attributable to the same mix of political factors that doomed all “Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies” writers to “decadent” and “reactionary” status in the 1950s. Xu is notable as a representative of both a distinct comic sensibility and an increasingly prevalent mode of cultural practice that I term “cultural entrepreneurship,” a multifaceted approach to culture as business, embodied by inventive and entrepreneurial figures who actively engaged in multiple forms of cultural production, from fiction writing and translation to drama, filmmaking, radio broadcasting, and consumer product manufacturing.

The close affinity between comedy and cultural entrepreneurship in Xu’s career raises a question that is at once historical and theoretical: what is the relationship between comedy and cultural practice in an age of rapid media proliferation? Put another way, how might Shanghai’s increasingly diversified media environment have helped foster comic cultures? Drawing

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3 For accounts of Shanghai’s early amusement halls, see Meng 2006 and Zheng/Xu 1986: 105–125.
on the abundant remnants of Republican *huaji* culture—literary texts, stage plays, cartoons, films, advertisements, and reviews—I propose to reexamine the comedic value system of this generation of Shanghai readers, writers, audiences, and cultural professionals. I argue that Xu’s comic writings offered a metacommentary on new forms of cultural agency—some dubious—enabled by the diversification of Shanghai’s media environment. On the one hand, his “funny” take on modern media culture did what other affective modes could not: it revealed its susceptibility to deceptive manipulation in a way that was both critical and celebratory, rather than merely censorious. Yet Xu’s contribution was not simply that he found Shanghai funny, but that he showed how the city’s new modes of cultural agency had made it a funny place.

My primary goal, then, is to reveal the cultural value system of *Huaji* Shanghai. What were the aesthetics of the “funny”? Who and what shaped them? *Huaji* was born of a multimedia environment and thus deserves to be treated as a culture, rather than simply as a genre or subgenre of a particular creative form, such as fiction. Genre taxonomies often minimize laughter’s significance by treating it as a purely textual and genre-bound phenomenon; in contrast, I show how comic aesthetics influence, and are influenced by, broader, cross-genre cultural trends. In a publishing environment rife with plagiarism, for instance, *huaji* culture treated the text no longer just as a vehicle for conveying an aesthetic but also as a toy to be played with and manipulated. Cultural products became props in practical jokes, a form of play that bonded the writer-trickster and the duped reader. So intently did it focus on destabilizing expected reader-writer relationships that the laughter of *Huaji* Shanghai deserves to be appreciated as both a literary aesthetic and a cultural practice. In what follows, I delineate the defining features of this comic culture by exploring its dialectics of comedy and cultural agency.

In particular, I highlight three dimensions of this culture of laughter. First is its risible-critical attitude toward modern urban cultural practice,
which held up (for both admiration and mockery) the cultural entrepreneur as the paragon of the mass-media age. Both as a mode of imagination and as a culture, huaji continually foregrounded Shanghai's profusion (and confusion) of multiple forms of cultural production, including literature, drama, comics, print advertising, and film. It registered amusement at the "slippage" that occurs when an idea is translated from one medium to another, and delighted in the novelty value of and potential for cross-fertilization between new mass-media technologies. Commercial publishing and filmmaking, for example, were available in 1920s Shanghai as never before, leading cultural entrepreneurs to experiment with adapting existing aesthetics to new media, redefining those aesthetics in the process. Through parody, farce, and other modes of comic hybridization, huaji redefined Shanghai as a sphere of funny cultural practices.

Second, emerging in an era when weepie romances coexisted in the literary arena with militant "calls to arms," huaji laughter broadens our understanding of modern China's affective spectrum. Whereas "blood and tears" (xue he lei) best encapsulated the modern Chinese experience for May Fourth icons Mao Dun (1896–1981) and Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1958), Xu Zhuodai and countless others bent their literary, artistic, and cinematic talents toward making their China laughable. Temperament rather than subject matter was the crucial difference, because both modes addressed "serious" topics. Their cultural affinities are thus perhaps best understood as mutually imbricating "structures of feeling" (Williams 1977)—a framework employed by other scholars of the history of affectivity in China (notably Lee 2007b)—rather than as clashing genres, because funny, tragic, and sentimental modes continually overlapped with and referenced one another.

Third, huaji culture gives us a new perspective on the perennial issue of realism. One of the striking characteristics of the "funny" vision of Republican Shanghai is that it was expressed less through a mimetic attempt to represent social reality and measure people against it (i.e., "satire") than

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4 The May Fourth critic Zheng Zhenduo is often credited with advocating a "literature of blood and tears" (xue he lei de wenxue), but the phrase was in fact coined in 1921 by Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing) who, writing under the pen name Xidi, used the term to contrast his "serious" fiction with what he considered to be the "comfort" (anwei) writings of all Mandarin Duck authors. Mao Dun's essay is reprinted in Wei/Wu 1984: 1: 35.
through a mode that was cosmic and imaginative. This cosmos centered on the trickster, a quasi-mythic figure who reordered the world and the relationships of people within it, more often than not by employing the media tools of the cultural entrepreneur. The tone of this discourse was highly performative and farcical, a playful sensibility that used practical jokes to bond its urban community of readers and writers.

To illustrate these three dimensions of Huaji Shanghai, I highlight one of its most distinctive and frequently recurring comic motifs: the mechanism of the hoax (e’zuoj). In its various forms, including the scam, the swindle, and the practical joke, the hoax is a device that draws its target audience into an interactive relationship that follows a comic narrative arc from deception to revelation. In Xu’s stories, the hoax orders both the world of the text (as a comic aesthetic that targets fictional readers) and the world of Shanghai itself (as a comic practice that uses the text to trick real readers). In the next section, I briefly situate huaji culture within early twentieth-century dialectics of tears and laughter. I then profile the career and public persona of Xu Zhuodai, one of Republican Shanghai’s foremost comic practitioners and cultural entrepreneurs. The sections that follow analyze how Xu’s short stories use hoaxes to construct a funny urban culture at the textual level: first as a fictional motif that simulates the roles of cultural entrepreneur/trickster and duped reader, and second by perpetrating practical jokes on his actual readers. I argue in conclusion that the cultural entrepreneur’s efforts to recast Shanghai’s mass-media culture in comic terms compel us to understand laughter not just as affective consumption, but as a generative mode of cultural critique and imagination.

Writing Shanghai’s “Joyous Story of Blood and Tears”

The story of laughter in early twentieth-century China is inseparable from the politics of affect. An aspiring comic from that period would have to contend, for instance, with the discourse of “blood and tears,” which had enjoyed a prominent place in the Chinese literary field since at least the
turn of the twentieth century, when the Qing dynasty was on its last legs. At that time, a large group of educated men who would normally have sought a position in the government bureaucracy found that avenue closed off and turned to writing literature for a living. The general mood of their writings is captured in the much-quoted preface of Liu E’s 1903 novel, The Travels of Lao Can (Lao Can youji), which begins:

When a baby is born, he weeps, wa-wa; and when a man is old and dying, his family form a circle around him and wail, hao-t’ao. Thus weeping is certainly that with which a man starts and finishes his life. In the interval, the quality of a man is measured by his much or little weeping, for weeping is the expression of a spiritual nature. (Liu T’ieh-yün 1990: 1)

This discourse was renewed in more militant terms during the height of the 1919 May Fourth Movement, when the critic and activist Zheng Zhenduo famously called for a “literature of blood and tears” (xue he lei de wenxue) that would faithfully represent the sufferings of the Chinese people. C. T. Hsia (1961) later identified this fixation on realist representation of China’s afflictions as the Achilles’ heel of modern Chinese literature, an “obsession with China” that myopically viewed negative aspects of the human condition as being unique to the Chinese people.

Not everyone shared this obsession, however. Two decades after Liu E, a popular Shanghai writer named Cheng Zhanlu (1879–1943) published a story entitled “A Joyous Story of Blood and Tears” (Kexi de xuelei wenzhang, 1924), which begins with the following preface:

People nowadays who write tragic romances [aiqing xiaoshuo] always like to sprinkle their stories with words like blood and tears. But whether or not a story is sad is not, in fact, determined by the literal words themselves. Today I’ve written a joyous romance [xixiao xiaoshuo] and mixed in the word “blood” eight times and the word “tears” ten times. Based on the literal words, it should be excruciating. Who would have guessed it’s actually a story of delight and not pain?5

5 In vol. 1, no. 26 (Jan. 24, 1925) of Red Rose, Cheng published a companion piece entitled “A Painful Story of Happy Laughter” (Ketong de xixiao wenzhang).
Sure enough, the story mentions a “blood-colored” sunset, “tears of joy,” and the rapidly circulating “blood cells” of a pair of newlyweds. In making fun of sentimentalists, Cheng turns one of the oldest Chinese clichés about laughter on its head: if laughter is often a cover for tears, here tears are being invoked to make readers laugh.

Cheng was known in his day as a huaji specialist. English lacks a satisfactory equivalent to huaji (archaic: guji), the connotations of which have varied over time. In literature, it appears as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), when Sima Qian (c. 145–90 B.C.) included a chapter on “Biographies of Court Jesters” (Guji liezhuan) in his Records of the Grand Historian (Taishigong shiji). By using their verbal dexterity to confuse categories of right and wrong, these performers violated the basic Confucian tenet of the “rectification of names,” which held that names should match the inherent properties of things. This transgression could be tolerated, however, when they harnessed their linguistic powers for the benefit of the state, pointing out the ruler’s errors through clever, indirect remonstrance. From its earliest literary usage, then, huaji referred to a type of witty performance—and to the “slippery” (hua) performers themselves—the purpose of which was primarily didactic.

During the late Qing, huaji retained these associations with performance and showiness (if not didacticism), but it had also become a general signifier for all things “funny,” along with a constellation of other terms, including huixie (jocularity, humor), youxi (play), fengshi (later fengci, satire), and xiaohua (joke, humorous anecdote). During this period of cultural pessimism, laughter became an important literary and cultural commodity. Numerous newspapers, literary magazines, and cartoon periodicals sprung up with titles that advertised their humorous content, such as World at Play (Youxi shijie), Laughter (Xiaobao), China Laughter (Zhina xiaobao), and Funny World (Huaji shijie). Soon, however, the “funny” began to distinguish itself from the “playful” in significant ways.

For one, in the 1910s and 1920s, huaji coalesced into independent

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6 In his preface to the Guji liezhuan chapter, Sima Qian states: “Those adept at speech and argumentation make the false appear true and the true appear false, throwing the similar and the dissimilar into confusion” (yan bian jie de ren yan fei ruo shi, shuo shi ruo fei, yan luan yitong ye).
genres of fiction and drama. At the time, editors and authors had begun subdividing fiction according to subject matter, didactic purpose, and affective mode. As a marketing strategy, this sort of labeling was a handy way for editors to organize the contents of their periodicals and gave readers a convenient guide for reading and book buying based on their individual quwei, or “taste.” Wu Jianren coined the term “funny fiction” (huaji xiaoshuo) to advertise his novel New Investiture of the Gods (Xin fengshen zhuan), which began serialization in 1906 (Tang 1992: 69–70), and Lin Shu (1852–1924) and Wei Yi (1880–1932) rendered the title of their 1907 translation of Nicholas Nickleby as Huaji waishi (The unofficial history of a slippery character, 1907). For a while, the term huaji came to be so prevalent in the late-Qing entertainment press that it was almost a stand-in for “fiction” itself (Tang 1992: 34, cited in Lee 2007a: 59). The “Huaji Masters” (huaji dashi) of the 1920s and 1930s, however, were promoted and celebrated specifically for their comedic talents.

During the late 1910s, huaji drama (huaji xi) also emerged in Shanghai as a theatrical genre that might be termed “Shanghainese farce.” In terms of form, Shanghainese farce bears some resemblance to the better-known Northern-style “face-and-voice” (xiangsheng) stand-up comedy in that it often features a dialogue between a storyteller and a listener-interlocutor. Early Shanghainese farce was not purely verbal comedy, however: combining repartee (often, but not always, in Shanghai dialect) with slapstick elements and humorous facial expressions, huaji xi drew on diverse cultural influences, including the calls and ditties of street vendors, Chinese “one-man plays” (dujiao xi), and Westernized “civilized drama” (wenming xi), which was just being introduced to China by returned foreign students from Japan.

The term huaji continued to be used widely well beyond 1924, when the influential writer and public intellectual Lin Yutang began advocating youmo, a transliteration he coined to denote the Western concept “humor.” Drawing on George Meredith’s idea that laughter was an index

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7 The manifold meanings, connotations, and interpretations of the term quwei are discussed at length in Daruvala 2000 and Zhao 2005. Here I use the imperfect translation “taste” to indicate quwei’s strong associations with individual sensibility within the discursive context of Shanghai popular fiction magazines.

8 The origins of huaji xi are as contested as those of vaudeville in the United States. An academic summary and analysis of leading theories of origin can be found in Fan/Wei 1987: 309–340. Accounts by performers (including Xu Zhuodai) appear in Shanghai wenhua chubanshe 1958. For a more recent historical summary of the genre, see Qian 2006: 47–57.

9 See Lin 1924. Zhang Jian (2005) seems to be the first scholar to have noted that in 1906, Wang Guowei (1843–1931) coined a transliteration for humor, oumuya, twenty-two years before Lin Yutang came up with the more enduring youmo.
of a country’s civilization and cultural maturity, Lin contrasted the high-minded, tolerant smile of youmo to other forms of lowly and malicious laughter and made it his mission to elevate the Chinese sense of humanity through humor. Toward this end, in 1932 he founded the humor magazine The Analects Fortnightly (Lunyu banyuekan), whose extraordinary popularity during a peak year in periodical publishing prompted the press to declare 1933 the “Year of Humor” (Sohigian 2007: 137).

Lin campaigned to establish youmo as a humanistic cultural value against the purportedly mean-spirited laughter of fengci (satire), represented by the stalwart Lu Xun, and against huaji, which he regarded as an outmoded aesthetic. Lin called huaji “trying to be funny,” suggesting that it was forced and inauthentic; Lu Xun’s (1948 [1933]) attitude, however, was less dismissive. Noting that even the Japanese had glossed youmo as “sympathetic huaji [kokkei]” (youqing huaji), he claimed that huaji’s low status in the public consciousness was in fact due to its popular conflation with the “flippancy” (youhua) of China’s many superficial comedians. This indigenous form of humor could be authentic too, he suggested, but it had suffered from popular misuse. Lin himself later wrote of huaji and youmo as complementary forms of laughter in his seminal treatise, “On Humor” (Lun youmo, 1933), but other cultural critics, including Lao She, came to associate huaji with naoju, or farce, which they regarded as lowly and meaningless, even harmful. Implicit in these polemics was a bias toward a “progressive” Western value defined against a “backward” native foil. As for huaji practitioners themselves, they were too busy satisfying market demand to bother theorizing it. According to Fan Boqun, “virtually every single author of modern popular literature wrote huaji works, the only question being how much” (Fan/Kong 2003: 251). Well-known specialists in this mode included Zheng Yimei (1895–1992), Cheng Zhanlu, Geng Xiaodi (1907–1994), Gong Shaoqin (1879–1939), and Wu Shuangre (1884–1934). Of this group, the most outstanding promoter of the funny sensibility across Shanghai’s various cultural arenas was Xu Zhuodai.

Several times in this essay, Lin makes positive comments about writings he describes as “huaji youmo.”
The “Artisan of Laughter” Xu Zhuodai

Xu Zhuodai11 (fig. 1), a native of Suzhou, was a cultural pioneer in many respects. In 1904, he traveled as a foreign student to Japan, where he became one of the first Chinese to study physical education, a field closely tied to modernization discourses about bodily and national health. In Japan, he read Western fiction in Japanese translation,12 translated Japanese short stories and plays into Chinese, and learned ballroom dancing. Returning to Shanghai a few years later, he authored introductory textbooks on gymnastics and sports physiology and with his wife, Tang Jianwo, founded and ran two of the city’s first sports academies.13

A longtime theater enthusiast, Xu began studying acting at the Tongjian Academy (Tongjian xuexiao), a reformist drama school in the 1910s, and in 1911 started a regular column in the major newspaper Shibao advocating theater reform. In his theater career he evinced the same attention to craftsmanship that he would later apply to fiction and other cultural activities, once spending several months learning make-up techniques from a Japanese artist and even accompanying Ouyang Yuqian (1889–1962) to Japan in 1917 to study actor training. His own stage debut in a comic role was praised by Zheng Zhengqiu (1888–1935), who later became his drama and film collaborator.

During his theatrical career, Xu wrote at least thirty short huaji xi (all of which were staged by Zheng), reportedly more than any other playwright of the prewar period (Zheng 2005: 189; Tang 1992: 41). Xu was a born performer, and his exuberance beyond the stage to his own public persona. His contemporaries liked to say that “at age 43, he actually looked only 33, wrote stories which seemed written by a 23 year old, joked with the lightheartedness of someone 13, and, if he really tried, could make himself up and effectively imitate the speech and laughter of a 3 year old” (Link 1981: 163).

Though Xu has been typically classified as a “Mandarin Duck” writer, his varied activities brought him in contact with a more heterogeneous

11 Pronounced Xu Zhuonai in Wu dialect. The following biographical material is drawn primarily from four sources: Xu 1957 (originally serialized in Shanghai’s Xinmin bao in 1950); Zheng 2005: 187–194; Tang 1992: 147–71; and Tian 2000. The latter, a Peking University dissertation, is the most comprehensive study on Xu’s life and works to date.

12 Xu later also retranslated Western works from Japanese, including those by Tolstoy and Victor Hugo.

13 Jonathan Kolatch (1972: 6–7) writes that “the [Xus] were truly China’s first family of sports.” The sports academy that Xu founded in 1904 graduated more than 1,500 students before it closed in 1928. A girls’ sports academy founded...
set of cultural movers and shakers. In 1920, he joined the Masses Drama Society (Minzhong xishe), a short-lived theater group whose members included such familiar New Culture movement names as Zheng Zhenduo, Mao Dun, Xiong Foxi (1900–1965), and Xu’s young protégé Liu Bannong (1891–1934). Xu continued writing and translating plays well into his sixties, but his hopes that new drama could “broaden the minds of the people” diminished in the late 1920s, and he turned his efforts to fiction writing. He quickly gained a reputation for his funny stories, which his associates sought to ennoble by claiming them to be full of “truth” (zhennli) (Yan 1997: 36) and “philosophical meaning” (zheli) (Zhao 1926: 2). Considering the traditional multiple-chapter novel ill-suited to modern reading habits, Xu averred that the purpose of fiction was to represent realistic “slices of life,” and that the short story was best suited to this purpose. Interestingly, given the comic endings of many of his own works, he pointedly condemned the traditional “grand finale” ending and the general tendency of Chinese novelists to bend over backward to please their readers with happy plot resolutions (Xu 1923d). His boredom with the “If you want to know what happened next, please turn to the next chapter” formula for creating suspense led him to experiment with new methods of stimulating reader interest, including the hoaxes I discuss here.

Like P. T. Barnum or Li Yu, the early-Qing “comic specialist par excellence” (Hanan 1988: vii), Xu Zhuodai was an inventive and tireless self-promoter, adopting different comic alter egos at different stages of his career, many based on linguistic puns or contradictory double meanings. Born Xu Fulin, in the theater and film worlds he went by Xu Banmei (“half plum”), a visual pun on “plum” (mei), which was originally written as two dai 柱 characters (mei 萬). He later adopted the pen name Zhuodai as an aural Wu dialect pun on his sobriquet, Zhuyan (in Mandarin). The pairing of zhuo (literally “outstanding,” but also a homophone for “clumsy”) and dai (“stupid”) was at once self-deprecating and a covert hint that he was “above the common herd” (zhuo er bu qun). He also converted his
original name, Xu Fulin, into Zhuo Fuling, “Dim-witted Chaplin,” which
punned on Charlie Chaplin’s Chinese name, Zhuo Bielin, and alluded to
Xu’s own reputation as an “Oriental Charlie Chaplin.” His many other self-
administered titles included “Master of the Broken Chamberpot Studio”
(po yehu shi zhu) and “Half-Old Grandpa Xu” (banlao Xuye), a play on the
expression for an aging beauty who still retains her charm (banlao Xuniang).
In the 1940s, he and his second wife, Hua Duancen, set up a factory that
produced artificial soy sauce, and he adopted the pen name “Soy Sauce
Seller” (maiyou lang) (Xu 1947).
During the early stages of his fiction career, Xu was part of a wave
of theater reformers who experimented with adapting new drama to
the silver screen. In 1924, the same year that Lin Yutang coined the term
youmo, Xu and fellow dramatist Wang Zhongxian (1888–1937) cofounded
the Happy Film Company (Kaixin yingpian gongsì), which specialized in
funny shorts, such as Cupid’s Fertilizer (Aishen zhi feiliao, 1925) and
Strange Doctor (Guai yisheng, 1925) (fig. 2), starring Xu and Tang Jianwo.
Their timing would seem propitious, because the market for slapstick film
was well established, with the films of Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin
spawning local imitators, such as Zhang Shichuan’s The King of Comedy’s
Journey to Shanghai (Huaji dawang you Hu ji, 1922) (Zhang 2005: 13–14).
Xu and Wang, popularly known at the time as the “Laughter Artisan of the
Page” (wentan xiaojiang) and the “Laughter Artisan of the Stage” (wutai
xiaojiang), respectively, acted in more than two dozen of their own films,
but their foray into slapstick film coincided with a general shift in audience
tastes away from the “cinema of attractions” and toward narrative feature
film. By Xu’s account, the company folded because of poor reviews and
the low market price of funny shorts relative to “serious” feature films
(Rao 2005: 40–43). A second joint effort, the Candle Film Company (Lazhu
yingpian gongsì), met a similar demise.14 During his early filmmaking
career, however, Xu wrote China’s first book on film studies (Zhang 2004:
50), The Science of Shadowplay (Yingxi xue, 1924), as well as two other

14 Zheng Yimei (2005) recounts an anecdote about the inauguration
ceremony for this second film company that is indicative of the comic culture
shared by Xu and his associates. Several of Xu’s and Wang’s friends presented Xu
with a pair of oversized candles, which both resonated with the company name
and alluded to “lighting the big candles” (dian da lazhu), a Shanghainese slang
euphemism for a virgin prostitute’s first
night with a john. For a contemporary
gloss of this expression, see Wang/Xu
1935: 10–12.
books on filmmaking. He remained in demand as a screenwriter as late as 1940, when he was contracted to write a series of film screenplays based on one of his fictional characters, Li Ah Mao.

Xu’s writing career spanned half a century, from his earliest translations of Japanese literature while a foreign student in Japan, through a productive period of fiction writing from the late 1910s to the early 1940s, to memoir writing in the early 1950s. During these decades he served a series of brief editorships at periodicals and publishing organizations such as Shishi xinbao, Zhonghua shuju, Xin Shanghai, and Chenbao. Besides authoring textbooks, plays, and how-to books on filmmaking and radio broadcasting, he published fiction in numerous magazines and periodicals, including Shibao, The Story World (Xiaoshuo shijie), The Grand Magazine (Xiaoshuo daguan), The Scarlet Magazine (Hong zazhi), Red Rose (Hong meigui), The Masses (Dazhong), Wan hsiang (Wanxiang), and Tea Talk (Chahua). Most of his fictional works were short stories, many of which were republished in collections. He also published more than a dozen novels, a collection of parodic “new-style” poems, and several joke books.

Xu Zhuodai and Shanghai’s Cultural Entrepreneurs

Xu was a member of a class of cultural professionals who engaged in a wide variety of public cultural enterprises, continually redefining themselves and their environment. The emergence of these cultural entrepreneurs was preconditioned by the confluence of technological change, urban migration, and an emergent capitalist economy. Thanks to their acute sensitivity to the market and their remarkable willingness to experiment with new media—particularly film—the members of this largely unexamined community helped reinvent Shanghai’s cultural landscape by investing their capital and creativity in a wide range of cultural enterprises. This figure differed fundamentally from the traditional cultural icon of the “man of letters” (wenren) who disdained commerce and concerned himself exclusively with aesthetic and moral matters, as well as from the “cultural

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15 “Cultural entrepreneurship” resonates with Alexander Des Forges’s (2007: 16) conception of the “mediasphere”: “a form of cultural production consisting of (1) a visual and textual field characterized by the drive to expand without limit; (2) the simultaneous and regular appearance of the wide range of cultural products that make up this field . . . and (3) frequent connections and references between these cultural products across boundaries between different texts, genres, and media.”
worker” (wenhua gongzuozhe), the Mao-era model of an ideologically driven cultural laborer working within a state hierarchy.¹⁶

Republican Shanghai’s cultural entrepreneurs thus may be seen as symbolizing the epoch of cultural capitalism that stood between the bookish culturalism of the Qing dynasty and the ideological-bureaucratic cultural paradigm of the Mao era. They were business-minded professionals who founded schools,¹⁷ theater troupes, film companies, periodicals, and consumer product companies. Xu’s move from writing fiction to running a factory, for instance, recalls an earlier writer-industrialist, Chen Diexian (1879–1940), author of The Money Demon (Huangjin sui, 1913) and editor of Shanghai magazines such as Entertainment (Youxi bao), who, like Xu, had “a passion for the practice of literature, music, and art; and a passion for industrial invention and entrepreneurship” (Hanan 1999: 1). Huang Chuiju (1872–1931)—who employed Xu Zhuodai to write advertising copy for medicines in the 1910s (Cochran 2006: 52, 182n51)—had the opposite trajectory, first making his fortune marketing bogus “foreign” medicines to the consumer market before investing his capital in a cultural enterprise: 1920s Shanghai’s most spectacular amusement hall, The Great World (Da shijie). Zhu Shouju (dates unknown), the author of Tides of the Huangpu River (Xiepu chao, serialized 1916–1921), also wrote, directed, and produced silent films before reportedly changing careers again to work in the steel industry (Hetures 2005: 231).

Through their various roles as cultural mediators—translators, editors, educators, writers—these professionals were involved in the modernization discourses surrounding body and mind, industry and technology, ethics and morals, and artistic and literary form. Many were cosmopolitan, having traveled widely in China, studied abroad, and mastered foreign languages. Unlike May Fourth literary intellectuals who initially disdained working in cinema,¹⁸ they were enthusiastic experimenters with new technologies and mass media, adapting “civilized drama” to the screen and importing foreign hybrid forms, such as Japanese “chainlinked plays” (rensa-geki),

¹⁶ Shuyu Kong (2005: 11–36) notes the latter distinction in her chapter “Breaking Away: Writers as Cultural Entrepreneurs.” Xu Zhuodai’s huaji aesthetic and entrepreneurial spirit in many ways anticipated those of Wang Shuo, whom Kong aptly cites as a contemporary example of a Chinese cultural entrepreneur, dubbed an “entrepreneur writer” (zhizuo geihu) by his contemporaries (22).


¹⁸ Paul Pickowicz (1993: 296) writes: “May Fourth literary intellectuals simply refused to take the film medium seriously. In spite of their professed interest in bringing about a democratization of culture, a modern culture for the masses, they expressed nothing but contempt for the cinema and made no effort whatsoever to ‘bring’ the May Fourth movement to the film studios of Shanghai.” Only in the early 1930s did a progressive (and leftist) filmmaking movement begin to take root in Shanghai.
which alternated silent film with on-stage performance (Xu 1957: 119–121). As members of what was still predominantly a print-based culture, they also shaped local culture through creative use of visual media. In the early 1930s, for instance, Xu’s former filmmaking collaborator Wang Zhongxian and the illustrator Xu Xiaoxia (dates unknown) serialized illustrated explanations of 240 Shanghainese slang terms in the newspaper The Social Daily News (Shehui ribao). This entertaining and educational dictionary, which records changes in the local vernacular through both text and image, proved such a hit that it inspired a wave of imitations, including one by Xu in the 1940s.

Comic specialists played a unique role in this heterogeneous cultural arena by promoting an urban culture of exuberance and play. Laughter, of course, could be commoditized as readily as other affective modes. By making customers laugh, comics created and sustained a “community of sentiment” (Haiyan Lee 2001), albeit in a festive register. Whereas melodramatic romances such as Jade Pearl Spirit (Yuli hun, 1914) and Fate in Tears and Laughter (Tixiao yinyuan zhuan, 1929–1930) drew readers together by encouraging the notion that “we all cry, therefore we are all human” (ibid), huaji fiction appealed to a sense of affective kinship that emphasized the mischievous fun to be had as a participant in media-saturated Shanghai.

Besides validating urban readers’ consumption habits, Xu’s comic stories also envisioned (often with tongue in cheek) a new entrepreneurial model of cultural practice. Next, I discuss five stories that link comedy and cultural entrepreneurship by means of hoaxes that exploit common expectations of various print media. To explain how this comedy was “cultural” and not merely thematic, I examine the hoax first at the textual level and then at the metatextual level. Using literary practical jokes as both subject matter and practice, Xu’s stories exposed the benign deceptions that bonded cultural entrepreneurs and their customers in Huaji Shanghai. In the former, the hoax functioned as the central plot catalyst within the fictional world of the

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story; in the real world, the hoax positioned authors and readers as both observers of and participants in a mass media-facilitated practical joke. Far from merely “reflecting” the extratextual realities of a media world in flux, funny stories encouraged readers to appreciate that world’s absurdities as well as the virtuosity of its new culture-making subjects.

**Fictional Hoaxes as Public Spectacle: The Triumph of the Trickster**

Perry Link (1981: 158) has noted that Xu’s stories “drew heavily upon the device of abrupt surprise, every page turning the reader’s expectations upside down.” More often than not, these surprises result from the clever machinations of a single character. These protagonists include the actor Zhang Yuehen in “Opening Day Advertisement” (Kaimu guanggao, 1924), the poetess Qiu Suwen in “Woman’s Playthings” (Nüxing de wanwu, 1928), and Li Ah Mao in *The Unofficial Story of Li Ah Mao* (Li Amao waizhuan, 1941–1942). In the modern urban environment of these short stories, enterprising tricksters use commercial print media to trick readers for their own ends.

*Hoax as Publicity Stunt*

Xu and his fellow cultural entrepreneurs were obsessed with advertising. Their careers depended on self-promotion, of course, but they also saw the advertisement (guanggao) as a literary form rich in comic potential because of its capacity for deception. Indeed, some of the most frequent “space fillers” (bubai) in 1920s Mandarin Duck periodicals were parodic “funny advertisements” (huaji guanggao) that facetiously promoted everything from a lottery in which everyone wins to a “safe” car with no motor. The advertisement could deceive, but it gave good value if it got a laugh. In Xu’s short stories we find entrepreneurs advertising a variety of cultural products through both print and performance.

“Opening Day Advertisement” (1924) depicts an entrepreneurially minded actor who forges a community through a performance that

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19 I have yet to verify the date and location of the first publication of “Woman’s Playthings,” which is reprinted in Fan 1996: 51–57. Xu Zhongjia (2005: 206–207) dates the story to 1928 but does not identify the magazine in which it was published. “Opening Day Advertisement” is reprinted in Wei/Wu 1984: 2: 1149–1158.
caters to the expectations of two sensation-loving populations: news media professionals and the reading public. The story stars a talented but down-on-his-luck "new drama" actor, Zhang Yuehen, who, we are told, tends to choke at the crucial moment onstage, despite his talents. Now his friend has found him a good acting gig, and he is determined to prove his mettle.

The story is narrated in the third person, largely from the perspective of a bellhop at the Pacific Hotel, Jiang Jinbao, who has an overactive imagination because of his fondness for detective fiction and who hopes someday to become a detective himself. Zhang checks into the hotel the night before his new play opens at the neighboring Weiguang Theater. Having helped Zhang to his room, Jiang goes back to reading a novel, but he is soon interrupted by a summons to the front desk. A young woman, Yu Dezhu, has arrived looking for Zhang. She claims to be Zhang's recently divorced wife and says that she has come to see her ex-husband one last time at his request. Then she makes a request of her own: Zhang, she tells Jiang and the front-desk cashier, has a horrible temper. Could one of them please wait outside Zhang's room while she is meeting with him? If she yells, or if she fails to emerge within half an hour, they should come in and save her.

Jiang and the cashier take up their posts outside the room, and after thirty minutes pass with no word from Yu, the cashier summons the concierge and the manager. Upon entering the room they find Zhang, but no Miss Yu. Believing the cashier's eyewitness testimony that Yu did in fact enter the room, the manager notifies the police, and the news spreads that there has been a murder at the Pacific Hotel. The police and a reporter arrive, and the group bursts into the room together, only to discover Miss Yu Dezhu sitting in the room smiling at them. After a few minutes of their flustered questioning, she removes her wig and reveals herself to be none other than Zhang Yuehen. The manager and policeman become angry, but the reporter exclaims, "Marvelous! Wonderful! You're
a true talent!” (1924: np). To placate the others, Zhang tells them that he put on this show to get the public to acknowledge his makeup and acting skills. He goes on to happily answer their questions about how he pulled off the whole scheme. The story concludes:

As he finished speaking, Zhang Yuehen wore an expression of uncontainable delight. The young journalist who had been focusing on writing everything down stopped and said cheerfully, “This is no crime. In fact, this news item is even more remarkable than a crime. I’ve finally gotten some great material; the title will be ‘The Bizarre Incident at the Pacific Hotel.’” Zhang Yuehen’s friend Qian Yinghan distributed handbills on his behalf outside the door of the Pacific Hotel. On the handbill was written: “This is no crime. It’s Zhang Yuehen’s signature performance. Please go to Weiguang Theater tomorrow night to see his second act.”

In this comic conclusion, Zhang Yuehen’s explanation allows everyone in the assembled crowd to fully appreciate the remarkable public performance they have witnessed and participated in. Xu reminds his readers—and the fictional reader-character Jiang Jinbao—of the falsity of surface appearances but simultaneously encourages them to enjoy the show. Advertising is a deception, but it is a benign deception, as the media representative in the story tells us. The performer-trickster Zhang Yuehen obtains both the public approbation of his skill that he sought and the promise of a journalistic advertisement for the commercial performance to follow.

Woman Writer on Top: Miss Qiu Suwen

Hoax, spectacle, and print media come together even more closely in “Woman’s Playthings,” in which a writer manipulates a group of readers into unwittingly participating in mass performances. We are introduced to the public mystery surrounding Qiu Suwen, a female poet and artist who has created a sensation over the past three months with her poems and prose in the popular press and her installations at an art exhibition. Everyone wants to know: What does she look like? One day, an advertisement appears

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in the newspaper announcing that she is seeking a marriage partner.21 A total of 1,234 curious men respond, and she replies to each with a letter on which is printed a small photograph of a beautiful young woman, and asks him to meet her in a public park wearing a red flower on the front of his clothing. She will wear green. At the appointed time, 1,234 flowered hopefuls mill about the park, but they see no lady in green. The next day, each man receives an angry letter from Qiu accusing him of arranging a hoax and requesting that he “sever relations.” The bewildered men mail back apologies. She relents and arranges another meeting at a cinema. At the appointed time, the cinema is full of men too busy looking around the auditorium for their absent date to watch the film. The following day, a notice appears in the paper saying that Miss Qiu was in a car accident on her way to meet a friend the previous evening and is now in the hospital with minor injuries. “No wonder she didn’t show up,” the men think to themselves. In fact, the narrator informs us, Qiu Suwen had rented out the theater that evening and ended up making four hundred dollars from her suitors, which she used to take her girlfriends to Hangzhou. Wouldn’t the men be mad if they knew! When Miss Qiu returns to Shanghai she finds her mailbox stuffed with letters inquiring about her condition and asking for her address. She responds by giving the 1,234 men each other’s addresses, sending the fools on a final great run-around. At the end of the story, we learn Qiu Suwen’s true identity: she is a fifty-six-year-old widow with a grandson in university, and the young woman in the photo is her recently deceased granddaughter.

Several layers of this story draw our attention. Woman as trickster is a twist on the trendy “modern woman” (modeng nüxing) discourse of the 1920s and 1930s, in which male writers often negotiated changing gender norms by depicting women in traditionally “male” roles. To be sure, on one level, the story points to male anxieties about the new social power of women, a sentiment echoed in many stories and cartoons found in The Scarlet Magazine, Red Rose, and their peer publications (fig. 3). I would

21 Xu also makes use of the marriage solicitation setup in the final story in the Li Ah Mao series, “Seeking Lifelong Partner” (Zhengqiu zhongshen banliu) (Xu 1942b: 217–219).

Figure 3: A two-faced woman leads men to their doom on the cover of The Sunday, No. 48 (1923).
argue, however, that this story differs from the mainstream cautionary tales about “modern women,” such as Liu Xichun in Zhang Henshui’s novel *Shanghai Express* (Ping-Hu tongche, 1935). Xu’s sympathies clearly lie with his female protagonist, because he celebrates rather than condemns the manipulation that allows her to score a victory in the battle of the sexes and become the “woman on top.” Miss Qiu is a cultural entrepreneur who carefully crafts her image through a variety of media. She first fuels the public’s desire by creating an ideal of modern womanhood through her writings, paintings, letters, and the photograph. Having thus fashioned herself into a singular, disembodied spectacle, she then makes a physical spectacle out of the crowd of men.

The final revelation that the photograph is of Qiu Suwen’s deceased granddaughter would seem to be a concession to popular reader tastes for sentimentalism, but the turn to pathos has another meaning as well. This chain of hilarious hoaxes, Xu hints at the end, is Qiu Suwen’s way of coping with loss. She succeeds in other ways, too. She makes men look like fools, and by arranging for them to run into each other three times, she forces them to confront their own foolishness. She benefits financially, cheating the men of their money and sharing it with her girlfriends. Most important, however, by circulating her granddaughter’s photograph to a group of strangers, she both preserves the memory of her loved one and turns private grief into public joy. Neither retreating inward to self-pity nor flaunting her pain, her response to trauma is an outward turn toward comedy.

As Zhang Yingjin has noted, male writers and filmmakers often used the trope of an absent woman who must be constructed purely through text to configure Republican Shanghai in gendered terms. Zhang quotes Teresa de Lauretis: “The city is a text which tells the story of male desire by performing the absence of woman and by producing woman as text, as pure representation.”22 The difference in Xu’s narrative, again, is that the woman is in control as the articulating subject. Her advertisement lures

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22 Cited in Zhang 1996: 186. Zhang (ibid) adds that “woman is repeatedly inscribed as absent, as ultimately unattainable in narrative or in the city—‘repeatedly,’ because the more unattainable the goal appears, the stronger the (male) desire burns, and the more urgent the task of constructing the narrative/city becomes.”
readers into a written exchange, which leads them to a physical space in which they witness and participate in a spectacle. The process is then repeated. Miss Qiu's readers (i.e., Xu's fictional creations), who began as detached, aloof spectators, become the main "show" that Xu's real-life readers witness from their safe, detached vantage point. In both simulated roles and in real life, the writer appears as the trickster who controls the relationship, and readers are imagined as credible dupes.

Li Ah Mao's Miracle Cures (for Gullibility)

The Unofficial Story of Li Ah Mao, a twelve-part series that Xu wrote during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai (1937–1945), demonstrates convincingly that Huaji Shanghai was not a flash-in-the-pan fad of the early-Republican period. The stories are linked by a swindler named Li Ah Mao who uses inventive methods to obtain food and money for his poor friends, evincing an overarching thematic concern with survival in a precarious urban environment. If the title The Unofficial Story of Li Ah Mao brings to mind The True Story of Ah Q, Ah Mao, too, was a cultural icon, albeit with important differences that I expand on later. Whereas Ah Q's opportunism was yet another symptom of cultural backwardness, Ah Mao's marked him as a man of his times. In Xu's occupied Shanghai, opportunism was not self-destructive behavior, but a savvy mode of agency by which one could survive and succeed in the age of mass media.

By the time the first Li Ah Mao stories were published in 1941, Ah Mao was already more than a fictional character—he was a franchise. Like "Mr. Wang" (Wang Xiansheng), the titular protagonist of 1930s Shanghai's most popular cartoon strip who became the central character in at least a dozen live-action (as opposed to animated) films, Li Ah Mao had already made the leap from page to silver screen. Xu invented Ah Mao in the 1930s as an alter ego for a newspaper column in which he fielded any question readers put to him. The column proved so popular that he was approached by the Guohua Film Company (Guohua yingpian gongsi), which proposed

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23 Later in the war period, Xu wrote essays offering readers practical advice on nutrition and how to fill their bellies while saving money. See, for example, Xu 1944: 115–116; and Xu 1945: 113.
making a series of movies based on the character. At least three films were produced: *Li Ah Mao and Miss Tang* (Li Amao yu Tang Xiaojie, 1939), *Li Ah Mao and the Stiff Corpse* (Li Amao yu jiangshi, 1940) (fig. 4), and *Li Ah

Figure 4: Advertising poster for *Li Ah Mao and the Stiff Corpse* (1940).
Mao and Dongfang Shuo (Li Amao yu Dongfang Shuo, 1940). Each film was written by Xu and directed either separately or jointly by Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Xiaojiu (Zheng Zhengqiu’s son). These films fared much better at the box office than Xu’s own Kaixin productions. Li Ah Mao and Dongfang Shuo ranked as the sixth-highest-grossing film in the first half of 1940 (Rao 2005: 95), and one reviewer remarked that “every little kid knows the three words ‘Li Ah Mao’” (Tian 2000: 125). With an audience already in place, Li Ah Mao became one of Xu’s most popular literary creations.

Li Ah Mao, like his creator, was a showman. Drawing on his theater background, Xu wrote the first story in the series, “April Fool’s Day” (Yuren jie, 1941), like a play, with dialogue, parenthetical mood cues, stage directions, and sparse narration. In the story, Li Ah Mao arrives at the home of a husband and wife who are feuding over the husband’s love affair. Li tells them that he used to live in their house and asks them for a moment alone in the living room, in which he claims to have driven his own wife to suicide several years ago. After listening to his loud laments from the courtyard, the couple returns to the living room to discover that he has robbed them blind. His trick, however, also interrupts the wife’s suicide plans. She looks at the calendar and sees that the robber, with a theatrical flourish, has left a calling card with the name “Li Ah Mao” next to the date, April 1.

In “Please Exit through the Back Door” (Qing zou houmen chuqu, 1942), Ah Mao is approached by two recently unemployed friends, who ask him to save them from imminent poverty. Brother Ah Yang owns a flower shop, but in a time when people can barely afford rice, business has plummeted and he has been forced to close up shop. Brother Ah Ping’s barbershop, which shares a back door with Ah Yang’s shop, has been suffering similar difficulties. Ah Mao sets a get-rich-quick scheme in motion by taking out two advertisements in the newspaper, one saying that Ah Yang’s shop is selling a “fast-acting miracle hair-growth tonic” and the other saying that Ah Ping’s barbershop is selling the secret to a “new,
super-economical head-shaving method." After the advertisements appear, customers throng the front door of each shop, above which hangs a sign advertising its product. The narration continues:

Strange to say! Passersby on the street could all see for themselves that the men going in Brother Ah Yang's door were all bald. Clearly, they were going to buy hair tonic. Soon afterwards, they re-emerged one by one, each with a thick head of hair and holding in his hand a paper packet, which was of course the so-called miracle tonic. Wasn't it remarkable that not a single bald man could be found among all of the customers coming out of the shop? This news passed by word of mouth from one person to ten and from ten to a hundred until everyone had told their bald friends and family members to go buy tonic.

Across the street from Quick Blade Barber Shop at Number 71 Zhenjiang Road there happened to be a teahouse. On that day, patrons on both floors saw a cloth banner above the door to the barbershop with the words "Super-economical head-shaving method." As they watched, groups of men with wild and unkempt hair went in one after another. A moment later, each man emerged clean-shaven. Naturally, this astounding miracle startled many people. Word spread widely, and everyone went to find out what this super-economical head-shaving method was all about. (1942a: 209–210)

In fact, the narrator tells us, the explanation is "not worth a laugh." As each customer makes his purchase, he sees a sign on the wall: "Due to the large number of customers, please exit through the back door" (210). Purchasers of the shaving kit return home and open the packet to read the following secret formula: "Before bed, mix flour and glue into a paste in your hair. As you sleep at night, rats will come and eat your hair down to the nub" (210). Purchasers of the hair-growth tonic (which is in fact just a bag of fertilizer) return home to read: "Grass will grow if this powder is applied to soil, but not to stone. Should you find that this tonic does
not work on your head, it means your honorable head is made of rock. In that case, drill a few small holes in your skull and reapply. If that doesn’t work, transplanting fine rattan fibers onto your head might look pretty instead” (210).

The comedy of this piece draws on the traditional Chinese aesthetic of “raising a ruckus” (da nao) in a public space. (The most notorious ruckus- raiser in this tradition is Sun Wukong, the Monkey King in Journey to the West.) What is distinctive about this performance is the way in which it is “signed” and “staged” through multiple literary and dramatic conventions. By the Republican period, the print advertisement was a ubiquitous genre of writing in urban public spaces, and Xu’s readership would have been well familiar with the advertisements for “miracle cures” (qiyao) that frequently appeared in early Republican periodicals.26 Xu’s story also arranges the city as a performance space: storefronts become stages to a public audience of passersby and teahouse patrons. These two visual tricks are validated through the gossip mill, which helps the public internalize the print-based hoax.

As the most frequently recurring plot mechanism in Xu’s works, the hoax begs the question: Why would Xu choose to valorize the trickster-hero in modern society? Did his revival have some special contemporary relevance, or was Xu just rehashing a well-worn literary and theatrical gimmick? What was its affective appeal, beyond allowing readers to enjoy the schadenfreude of seeing others get duped?

Fan Boqun (1996: 1–7) and Tang Zhesheng (1992: 147–172), two scholars of late-Qing and early-Republican popular fiction, interpret Xu’s use of the hoax as part of a discourse of resistance against economic oppression and material scarcity. Though ambivalent about Li Ah Mao’s methods, both scholars find redemption in Xu’s articulation of a popular spirit of stoicism and resourcefulness. The hoax may also be interpreted in terms of Michel

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26 A famous example of deceptive medicinal advertising from this period is the Western-sounding product Ailuo bunaozhi (Ailuo Brain Tonic) developed by the “King of Advertising” (Guanggao dawang), Huang Chuiju. The importance of textual packaging is evident from Sherman Cohran’s summary of Huang’s marketing techniques: “He distributed the drug in bottles under a Chinese name . . . which sounded like a Chinese transliteration of a Western name, and he had China’s biggest publishing house, the Commercial Press, print instructions on the label in English. On the label and the outer paper wrapper he added, also in English, that the product was invented by Dr. T. C. Yale. Thus, on the outside, this medicine gave every indication of being Western” (Cohran 2000: 63). Like many traditional print genres, advertisements and “practical advice” (changshi) were frequently parodied in the early Republican period. See, for example, Chapter Three, “Funny Practical Advice” (Huaji changshi), in Li 1923.
de Certeau’s (1984: 37–38) concept of the “tactic,” which he defines as a practice that individuals use to create space for themselves within a larger structure of power that is determined by authority-building “strategies.” Whereas strategies require significant investments of resources that render them relatively inflexible, tactics, driven by expediency, are fluid and adaptable. The “guileful ruse” of the trickster, he says, is the “art of the weak” who take advantage of a temporary power vacuum to manipulate the system to their own ends. Though they themselves lack the power to overthrow the overarching social and political order, their acts of subversion enable the individual to resist assimilation by these larger institutions.

I find the “hoax-as-resistance” reading compelling for Li Ah Mao stories such as “Please Exit through the Back Door,” in which our hero schemes to enrich his downtrodden friends. It does not, however, fully explain the function of the hoax in “Woman’s Playthings,” whose protagonist is not portrayed as a weak subaltern. The resistance reading is also highly overdetermined in the context of Marxist-influenced PRC scholarship, which holds that the only redeeming literary works written before 1949 were those marked by a spirit of resistance against feudal oppression, the Guomindang, or the Japanese.

What these interpretations fail to account for is that the economy of the hoax is affective and aesthetic as well as political. We are not dealing with “realistic” characters in a real world, as the improbable speed of Miss Qiu’s letter writing makes clear. Nor do Qiu Suwen, Li Ah Mao, and Zhang Yuehen merely earn money and fill bellies. In addition, they aestheticize the experience of daily living and, in doing so, create comic “surplus” for Xu’s readers. In Trickster Makes This World, Lewis Hyde (1998: 17) writes that “the trickster myth derives creative intelligence from appetite. . . . Trickster starts out hungry, but before long he is master of the kind of creative deception that . . . is a prerequisite of art.” Li Ah Mao, in other words, is a culture hero who transcends the particular historical circumstances of the Shanghai from which he arose and lets us see city life in a new light. He
approaches the world as a “Mr. Fix-It” (jieju shi), a petty entrepreneur, even a Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, the huaji and zhentan (detective) genres of Republican fiction had a close mutual affinity, with both hoaxes and murder investigations leading the reader on a narrative arc from mystery to revelation and delight. This arc appears in the artful symmetry of the setup in “Please Exit through the Back Door” and in the comic justice that Qiu Suwen metes out to her gullible readers. Through their hoaxes, Li Ah Mao and Qiu Suwen transform the familiar and quotidian into the unexpected and delightful.

Xu’s comic arena was closely tied to his own various occupations, including writer, playwright, editor, actor, advertiser, and educator. In yet another Li Ah Mao story, “The Marketing Director” (Tuiguangbu zhuren, 1941), for instance, Ah Mao is hired to market books for a publisher and succeeds in doing so without spending a penny on advertising by anonymously publishing scathing reviews that stir up reader interest in his employer’s latest title, Socializing Techniques for Men and Women. The fictional hoax, then, represents the apex of a comedic reimagining of cultural agency in Shanghai, deriving its comic appeal, in part, from the author’s exploitation of the print medium—the cultural context he shares with his readers.

One ostensible moral lesson of these stories is that one should not believe everything one reads in the newspaper or sees in urban public spaces. But beyond this practical admonishment, Xu presents deception and trickery as a comic means to both material and affective ends. Xu’s protagonists use clever methods to get what they want, whether it is publicity (Zhang Yuehen), comic alleviation of personal grief (Qiu Suwen), or food and money for survival (Li Ah Mao). For readers of these stories, the success or failure of the trickster’s clever schemes is in some ways less important than the process of their execution. The two “cures” that constitute the double punch line in “Please Exit through the Back Door” complement, but are clearly supplementary to, the simple ingenuity of the

27 See Xinyu Dong’s essay in this issue for a comparative analysis of the fascination during this historical period with “the way things work,” which Dong identifies as an “operational aesthetic.”
main hoax. The revelation in “Opening Day Advertisement” that Miss Yu Dezhu and Zhang Yuehen are one in the same receives far less narrative space than the retelling of the details of how the stunt was carried out. By this measure, the hoax that Zhang pulls off is significant not as an isolated event, but as a story to be retold and circulated among a broader audience. *Huaji* comedy, in other words, is about more than just the punch line, because it arises from a hoax-driven process of cultural exchange and circulation. To better understand how Xu brought this process from the text to the reader, we have to look more closely at how laughter mediated its own material context.

**Playing Jokes on the Reader: Fiction as Performance**

In the previous section, I argued that Xu’s fictional hoaxes fashioned *Huaji* Shanghai in two interrelated ways. First, they simulated a comic relationship between cultural entrepreneur and reader. In Xu’s stories, readers found themselves typecast as suckers, even if they could regard their fictional selves from an ironic distance, secure in the assumption that they were the observers—rather than the targets—of these hoaxes. This was comic culture as a spectator sport. Second, by emphasizing ingenuity and technique, Xu privileged the process of comedic exchange over the results, affirming the intrinsic value of producing, circulating, and consuming comedy—in other words, valorizing the professional activities of cultural entrepreneurs like himself. These exchanges relied on the material context of commercial print media, as evinced by the centrality of readers, reporters, writers, and newspaper advertisements. Print media, in addition to being familiar subject matter to readers, also served as the hoaxster’s tool.

In this section, I highlight a second way in which Xu self-consciously emphasized what might be called the “hilarity of materiality”—that is, the interplay between the affective mode of laughter, the material form of commercial print media, and the agency of the cultural entrepreneur. Specifically, I examine two stories in which Xu unsettles the reader–writer
relationship and challenges the notion of literary creativity through play with a specific type of literary hoax: plagiarism (chaoxi). By making plagiarism both his comic subject and his practice, Xu uses hoaxes no longer as just fictional dramatizations but as a mechanism for creating a community of laughter through extratextual interaction between author and reader.

"The Fiction Material Wholesaler" (Xiaoshuo cailliao pifasuo, 1921) presents an imaginative dialogue about the extreme commercialization of literature during the early Republican era.28 Lit-Worker Deng (Deng Wengong),30 the protagonist, is a literary entrepreneur whose prosperous shop sells story ideas to meet the demand of the fiction market under the slogan “Advocating Art & Literature, Promoting Domestic Goods.” In each of the story's seven sections, Deng receives a customer who represents a particular threat to literature.

Tainted Fei (Fei Chunren), Lit-Worker's first customer, declares that he detests fiction but wants to submit a piece to a certain magazine's fiction competition, explaining: “I'm hard up for ten dollars, so I want to write a story. Thieving or fiction-writing—it's one or the other if I'm going to put ten bucks in my pocket” (1921: np). Handsome Xiao (Xiao Bolian),31 Lit-Worker's second customer, is pretending to be a novelist to impress a prostitute. He assures Lit-Worker: “I guarantee, once the story is finished, getting three or four lovers will be a piece of cake. What with publication royalties as well as stipends from my lovers—being a fiction writer is truly the best business! Fiction is more effective than any aphrodisiac.” Floozy Yang (Yang Lanwu),32 a female college student, wants a story about “pure love,” but she gets offended by the one Lit-Worker tells her about a girl who has an affair with a classmate and falls into dire straits, because it happens to match her own circumstances. Another customer, a storyteller, turns out to be looking for a story to record on a phonograph. A rich customer postures himself as the antithesis of the literary entrepreneur, declaring that he wants to write to improve society, but he insists on self-

28 My translation of this story is published in issue 76 of Renditions (Spring 2007). Other published translations of Xu's stories include “Cooper” (Gu, in Lyell 1994) and “Men's Depravity Exposed” (Chiluoluo de nanzhi choutai, in Wong 2003: 215-227).

29 “Wengong” carries the dual meanings of “literary worker” (wenxue gongren) and “good at literature” (gong yu wen). The epithet often applied to Xu Zhuodai by his contemporaries, “Laughter Artisan of the Page,” seems to suggest that he, too, was regarded as a skilled laborer engaged in a commercial trade.

30 The name Xiao Bolian is a double pun on xiao bailian, or “pretty boy,” and George Bernard Shaw's Chinese name, Xiao Bona.

31 Yang Lanwu's name is a pun on the phrase “Westernized moral depravity” (yang lanwu).
publishing his writings because he disdains the vulgar commercialism of the popular press. In short, all of Lit-Worker's customers come to his shop for the wrong reasons.

Lit-Worker's own self-contradictory position as a professed promoter of literary quality whose wholesaling further commodifies literature is an irony that 1920s readers would have well appreciated, given contemporary discourse about the proliferation of literary hacks (fig. 5). As each customer tries to haggle with him on price, Lit-Worker repeatedly insists on the quality of his product, saying that he sells only “first-class goods.” When Tainted Fei protests Lit-Worker's fee, saying that he can get cheaper material from a storyteller, Lit-Worker replies in annoyance, “How can you view my goods as being the same as that junk? My materials are all first-class, nothing like that type of commodity.” In fact, Lit-Worker's plot summaries are all derivative and cliché, populated with stock figures, such as “talents and beauties,” maids, adulterous butchers, and prostitutes, or pandering to contemporary tastes for sentimental wartime romance and exposés of student sexual mores.

Eventually, we discover that all of Lit-Worker's story ideas are plagiarized. As he is in the midst of relating a story to his seventh customer, Swallowtail (Yan Weisheng), Swallowtail suddenly interrupts him and completes the story for him:

Lit-Worker paled in amazement. “You know it already?”

“Of course I do!” Swallowtail replied, “How could you offer me this kind of material? This was published previously in Short Story Monthly” (Yueyue xiaoshuo).

Lit-Worker became flustered. “I had no idea. It's probably a coincidence.”


Lit-Worker's other customers burst in, rail about the humiliation they have
Figure 5: “The Author” churning out “product.” Red Rose. Vol. 2, issue 24 (1926).

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experienced, and force him to close shop. While condemning Lit-Worker’s “crime,” Swallowtail chides his fellow customers for being ignorant of stories already on the market. In tears, Lit-Worker defends himself:

“Gentlemen . . . things being as they are, there’s not much I can do. But my profession is providing materials wholesale, not manufacturing them myself. All wholesalers ever do is sell other people’s ready-made goods. It’s entirely up to the buyer to determine whether or not these goods have been previously used. If you like what you see, you buy it. As for plagiarizing, these days everybody is copying each other’s works and rushing them to press. Why pick on me? Furthermore, I’m a promoter of Chinese goods. I never use foreign goods. Aren’t those people who translate foreign fiction just plagiarizing? Why do you let them plagiarize and not me? Let’s face it: fiction writers these days are a thick-skinned bunch. Copying old works is a trifle in comparison. Some people have the audacity to lift a passage here and a section there and piece them together into a funny story (huaji xiaoshuo) to trick readers. Isn’t that even more absurd?”

At this point, Xu, the implied author, responds with a self-reflexive flourish: “Zhuodai comments: Uh oh! This Lit-Worker Deng is on a tirade and might get around to cursing me. I dare not write another line, so it’s time I lay down my pen.” The implication, of course, is that Xu himself has been plagiarizing and that the reader has been the target of a literary hoax.

At one level, this story is an imaginative commentary on the literary entrepreneur’s complicity in the rampant plagiarism in Shanghai, a side effect of its bloated and hypercompetitive publishing industry. Xu also makes asides on other contemporary issues, such as the “buy domestic” movement (cf. Gerth 2003). Yet implicit in Xu’s mockery is a question about the boundaries of literary creation: how do translation, plagiarism, or other literary refashionings differ qualitatively from original creation? Lit-Worker’s story ideas may not be purely original, but neither are they word-for-word reproductions. As he points out, as a wholesaler his job is merely to “sell other people’s ready-made goods.” What is the promise of commercial
Xu pushes the plagiarism theme further in “Plagiarist in Western Dress” (Yangzhuang de chaoxijia, 1923a). The story is prefaced by an address to the reader in which Xu recounts the trouble his editor, Shi Jiqun, faces trying to spot plagiarized manuscripts. He is amused by the thought that Shi trusts him too much and boldly asserts his own plagiarizing talents:

I have a special plagiarizing method that can pull the wool over the eyes of my editor and readers. . . . Fortunately, this special plagiarizing method of mine is extremely clever. I’ve just invented it, so no one will be able to detect it. This makes me even bolder and my skin even thicker, so I might as well announce directly to my editor and readers that this story of mine was plagiarized. . . . Having explained this to everyone up front, I’m going to skip the niceties, put pen to paper, and start plagiarizing straight away. (1923a: np)

The story that follows tells of a young foreigner named George who is enamored of one of his black slave girls, Melina. While George is away, the elderly nanny, Mrs. John, goes to his room and finds that the black slave girls have been playing ping pong and poker, and that the floor is covered with cigarette butts. She reprimands them for misbehaving and, after downing a glass of brandy, gets offended when the slave girls tell her that the brandy was being saved for Melina. She leaves, and when George returns and discovers Melina’s brandy has been consumed, Melina stops a potential tiff by saying that brandy gives her an upset stomach anyway and that she’d rather eat chocolate candy. She tells George that her mother and brother plan to buy her out of servitude soon, which makes George highly anxious. After a long discussion of her fate, during which George becomes increasingly unhappy, Melina reveals that she has actually already persuaded her mom and brother to let her stay, to which George responds
with tearful delight.

The story proper is followed by a commentary from Xu's ostensible target reader, Shi Jiqun, who exclaims, "So my old buddy is a plagiarist. I never knew!" but admits that he himself cannot detect any signs of plagiarism and concludes that the story is just a translation. At the end of his comments, he mentions in passing, "Some places in the story are underlined in black. These are foreign names, which we specially marked to prevent reader confusion." He suggests that Xu come clean in the next issue.

Sure enough, in the following issue of The Scarlet Magazine appears a piece entitled "Exposing Plagiarism" (Gaofa chaoxi, 1923b), written by Xu himself, in which Xu puts himself in the role of the critic in order to "expose" his own actions. He announces that he meant to put one over on Jiqun, but that Jiqun has seen through him. Now to the confession: the work was indeed plagiarized—not translated—and from a work that is neither new nor obscure. The source, in fact, is a hugely famous novel that every reader knows but none will be able to identify. To this piece Xu appended "A Small Dictionary for Exposure of Plagiarists" (Gaofa yong xiao zidian, 1923c), which contains a list of key words that the reader can use to unlock his plagiarizing technique and identify the source text, including:

- chocolate candy
- brandy
- ping pong
- play poker
- cigarette butts
- black slave girls
- Mrs. John
- Melina
- George
- dried chestnuts
- koumiss
- go
- play "racing go" and "dice and dominoes"
- melon seed shells
- maids
- Nannie Li
- Aroma
- Baoyu

The story, it turns out, is ripped off from Dream of the Red Chamber.35 Having revealed his trick, Xu congratulates himself and continues to taunt the reader:

35 For an English translation of the relevant chapter (ch. 19), see Cao 1973: 375–399.
Dear readers, you can take this dictionary and see for yourselves just how formidable my plagiarizing method is. . . I’ve insured myself with a western insurance company, retained a western lawyer, and hung up a western shop sign—am I going to be afraid of anyone exposing me? I might as well give it to you straight: this method of plagiarizing by putting on western dress wasn’t even my invention. I plagiarized that too. (1923c: np)

His inspiration, he goes on, was the jokes that appear in magazines nowadays, most of which are ripped off from the Qing dynasty joke book *The Expanded Treasury of Laughs* (Xiaolin guangji), reclothed, and passed off as new or foreign jokes. Thus, while flattering his own literary practice as “extremely clever,” “novel,” and “formidable,” Xu at the same time refuses to take full responsibility for his actions, pointing the finger at his unnamed predecessors.

The setup of the riddle draws on many stock storyteller conventions of engaging the reader’s attention, such as positing and answering rhetorical questions (“Dear readers, who do you suppose is this Plagiarist in Western Dress? He is none other than Yours Truly.”); simulating dialogue with the reader; and misleading the reader with the uncomprehending and credible testimony of a supposedly neutral third party who is in fact an accomplice. The hoax itself is intentionally transparent, flattering the reader’s smug self-assurance that he has seen through the ruse while stimulating his curiosity about how the scheme will play out. As in the *Li Ah Mao* stories, the process by which the hoax is constructed and executed is privileged over the result, because the result is predetermined—we know that the story is plagiarized because Xu told us so.

Xu Zhuodai’s hoax offered his readers a metacommentary on an increasingly prevalent form of cultural practice. For cultural producers and consumers in 1920s Shanghai, the rapid growth of the publishing industry had wrought a crisis of authorship. How to tell what had been written by whom? Because translation, plagiarism, and original creation increasingly blurred and conflated, paranoia became ingrained in this culture of editors,
readers, and writers. In the two plagiarism pieces discussed here, Xu's use of hoaxes to engage the reader goes beyond just providing a fictional reader or reading situation for him to identify with, as he does in "Woman's Playthings," "Opening Day Advertisement," and the Li Ah Mao stories. At the end of "The Fiction Material Wholesaler," but more thoroughly with "The Plagiarist in Western Dress," he uses the hoax to create a community with the tricky, funny cultural entrepreneur at the center. Copying others' works could not be completely dismissed—Xu and his colleagues relied on each other extensively for ideas. Indeed, playing practical jokes on the reader continued a practice of inside joking and tomfoolery that had been going on in the popular press for at least a decade. The hoax was thus neither an entirely new cultural practice nor an inherently funny one, because it was also employed without the same self-irony by more straight-faced literary practitioners. What distinguished the hoaxes of Huaji Shanghai was their use as a reflection on the comedic nature of cultural practice itself.

Conclusion

Republican Shanghai's culture of "funny" laughter compels us to reexamine the historical relationships between affective discourse and cultural practice in modern China. In the life and works of Xu Zhuodai, we find a cultural ethos that envisioned urban life as a sphere of communal fun and festivity enabled by the agency of the media-sawy cultural entrepreneur. Xu, like his fictional protagonists, embodied and celebrated a cultural agent who had the resourcefulness to exploit the manipulative potential of mass media and was creative enough to improvise novel ways of expanding its capacities. This occupational approach enabled him to generate insightful commentaries both about cultural production and about comedy itself.

Xu contributed to Chinese comic culture, I have argued, not simply by expressing amusement at what he saw in Shanghai's cultural sphere, but by creatively demonstrating how changing patterns of cultural production

36 We can gauge Xu's influence on his fellow writers by examining the frequency with which they borrowed his ideas during a short period (1922–1923) in the history of The Scarlet Magazine. Four issues after the last installment of Xu's parodic series "New Methods for Prohibitions and Exorcisms" (Zui xin jinyanshu, Issues 39–41), another writer wrote a sequel entitled "Supplemental New Methods for Prohibitions and Exorcisms" (Zui xin jinyanshu buyi, Issue 45). In Issue 47, Hu Jichen (1886–1938) wrote a pair of short stories playing on inversions of Xu's earlier works under the title "The Other Side of Mr. Xu's Fiction" (Xu jun xiaoshuo de fanmian, Issue 47), turning Xu's "It's a Small World" (Xiazhai de shijie, Issue 3) into "It's Not a Small World" (Bu xiazhai de shijie) and his "A Frantic New Year's Day" (Jixing de yuandan, Issue 28) into "A Slow-Paced New Year's Eve" (Manxing de chuxi). "Exposing Plagiarism" was soon followed by two short pieces on the plagiarism theme by other writers: Chi Hen's "A Jibe at Plagiarism" (Ci chaoxi wen, issue 34) and Gengku's "A Mock Petition in Defense of Plagiarists" (Ni chaoxijia bianyuan chengwen, issue 38).

37 For examples of author trickery from the 1910s, see Link 1981: 171.
and circulation had made it funny. The trickster-subject through which he reenvisioned Shanghai’s media world, the cultural entrepreneur, could exist only with an obligingly credible audience. S/he reigns as both the master of Shanghai’s cultural discourse and the banker of its affective economy, relying on the affective and monetary expenditure of the audience, who earns good value in the form of a funny show that teaches the workings of Shanghai’s cultural arena. Comedy is what makes Xu Zhadou’s stories more profoundly “cosmic” than that they simply belong to the clichéd “world of fiction.” The device of the hoax does not represent the world; it instead reorganizes it in comic terms at both textual (literary motif) and metatextual (cultural practice) levels. As an inventor of fictional tricksters and as a trickster himself, Xu thus approximates what Edith Kern calls the “quintessence of the absolute comic” who “transports us into worlds where imagination and make-believe triumph.”

Modern urban life was a joke to Xu Zhadou, but a joke of his own making, and he encouraged his readers and audiences to join in the fun.

The playfulness, inclusiveness, and reversals of huaji culture bring to mind Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984: 92) notion of carnival laughter—“the social consciousness of all the people”—but its cultural imaginary was not predicated on an opposition of high versus low or suppressed versus suppressor. This culture was not circumscribed within an exceptional period of social freedom condoned by the powers that be (a “cracking open the lid of the pressure cooker” so that the masses would be easier to subjugate for the rest of the year); nor did it offer only a symbolic gesture of rebellion. Rather, it celebrated the self-conscious agency of an eternal, almost mythical cultural archetype who inhabits a privileged subject position and temporal logic vis-à-vis “realistic” characters. In the context of modern Chinese literature, fictional protagonists such as Qiu Suwen and Li Ah Mao are unusual because they triumph more than they suffer. Rarely are they punished with comic justice; more often, the reader becomes the comic scapegoat. They are neither the oppressed commoners of May Fourth

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38 In 1918, for instance, a pair of May Fourth writers, Liu Bannong and Qian Xuantong (1887–1939), perpetrated the notorious “Wang Jingxuan” hoax to attract attention to their struggling literary magazine, La Jeunesse (Xin qingnian, aka New Youth). Perhaps significantly, Liu had been a literary and theatrical protégé of Xu Zhadou’s during the 1910s before his public “conversion” to the New Literature cause. For a detailed analysis of this hoax and its significance, see Hill 2008: 178–229.

39 Kern 1980: 208. Kern follows Baudelaire in distinguishing between “the absolute comic” and the “significative comic”: “the absolute comic, or farce, [is] highly creative from an artistic point of view, [while] the significative comic [is] mainly imitative and mimetic” (3).
critical realism nor the tragic heroines of Mandarin Duck melodramas. Like Xu himself, they are the agents who shape and reshape Shanghai’s cultural universe, implicating the reader in the ethically ambivalent spectacles they orchestrate to unsettle the social order. If Huaji Shanghai has a “lord of misrule,” it is the mischievous cultural entrepreneur who exerts a unifying power over a general population.

This funny sensibility was not limited to Xu, but rather was representative of a broader culture that appreciated mischievous practical jokes for fun and profit. We see, for example, a close resemblance between Xu’s emphasis on the craft of trickery and early film comedies such as Zheng Zhengqiu and Zhang Shichuan’s Laborer’s Love (Laogong zhi aiqing, 1922) in which an occupationally minded carpenter-turned-fruit seller uses the tools of his carpentry trade to bring down his tormentors and attain his desired object. Early issues of popular periodicals such as The Scarlet Magazine often featured cover illustrations depicting naughty children playing practical jokes, yet another indication of the infantile overtones of huaji culture (fig. 6). Such tomfoolery, of course, is acceptable and enjoyable only if participants suspend their grown-up moral sensibilities. Whereas Lu Xun wanted his readers to “save the children,” Xu Zhuodai (the 43-year-old who imitated a 3-year-old) and his associates encouraged theirs to actually be the children.

Xu was a foreign-educated intellectual like many of the May Fourth writers, but his gleeful laughter marks a distinct cultural gap from the latter’s urgent satire. The fantasy triumphs that Xu allows his readers to vicariously experience through his protagonists’ trickery seem to condone the sort of “psychological victory” that Lu Xun mocked and lamented through his most famous fictional character, Ah Q. For Lu Xun, self-indulgent laughter was a pernicious and debilitating social influence that exacerbated national problems; China needed only laughter that attacked its social, political, and spiritual problems head-on. Ah Mao, in contrast, appears as almost an anti-Ah Q whose persona begs the questions: what’s

40 For a detailed analysis of this film and of the “invention” of early Chinese film comedy, see the essay by Xinyu Dong in this issue. For comparative purposes, also see Zhang 2005: 89–117.
He later recounted, for instance, how Shanghai’s trickster-like entertainment hall entrepreneurs acquired land and competed through business practices that were downright fraudulent (Zheng/ Xu 1986: 105–125).

The novel was later adapted into a huaji xi (Tang 1992: 38).

the harm in enjoying a “psychological victory” now and then? Why not play tricks on each other if no one gets hurt? And why not lighten the pocketbooks of willing dupes when a friend’s welfare is at stake? Xu was by no means blind to Shanghai’s evils, but he allowed his readers to learn moral lessons at a lower cost than that which Lu Xun exacted from Ah Q. Whereas Lu Xun forced his readers to confront the horrible material consequences of fanciful imaginings, Xu Zhuodai’s self-reflexive approach encouraged readers to see the upside. Instead of calling for the annihilation of his object, he created laughable cultural entrepreneurs who affirmed the common man’s ability to survive, thrive, and even have fun in an adverse environment.

A deeper issue is at stake here regarding how cultures of laughter have been erased by the “serious” imperatives of modern Chinese literary and cultural historiography. We are already familiar with Ah Q’s genealogy (Foster 2006), but what would we find if we were to trace the genealogy of tricksters such as Ah Mao, or even of comic-cultural entrepreneurs such as Xu Zhuodai himself? Obvious resonances exist, for instance, between huaji culture and late-Qing “play” culture, though Xu’s comic vision differed greatly from the cynical jokes of his predecessors. To be sure, the hilarious self-aggrandizing deceptions perpetrated by corrupt officials in Li Baojia’s Officialdom Unmasked (Guanchang xianxing ji, 1903) and Wu Jianren’s Strange Events Witnessed over the Past Twenty Years (Ershinian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang, 1903–1909) share with the shenanigans of Li Ah Mao a common theme of trickery for profit. However, Xu’s works are devoid of his predecessors’ abject pessimism about the state of the nation, and we do not detect the sense of forced gaiety underlying many fin-de-siècle works (cf. Wang 1997: 183–251). Further, Xu’s cultural entrepreneurship was removed from the state, but still closely tied to the public sphere. Like Wu Jianren, he drew on multiple media sources to fashion a hybrid product, but unlike Wu, who became part of the scandal he attacked, Xu made no pretense of “exposing” or “castigating” the ethically dubious behavior he portrayed.
His celebration of clever tricks makes it clear that he was writing from and for a different culture than that of the late-Qing exposé writers, a culture in which fun and fantasy were possible because they were rooted in the entrepreneurial practices of a new media culture.

Looking in the other direction, we find no shortage of “funny” practices in the publishing industry of today’s China, in which spurious Harry Potters come out before the English version hits the shelves (Henningsen 2006), and when a best-selling novel such as Wolf Totem (Lang tuteng, 2004) spawns a whole creative industry of plagiarized and otherwise derivative knockoffs. Tricksters and hoaxsters have also found new life in the works of Wang Shuo (b. 1958), whose “hooligan literature” (pizi wenxue) in the 1990s spawned a cultural phenomenon that extended to TV series and films (Wang 1996: 261–286; Kong 2005: 11–36). The filmmaker Feng Xiaogang has also expanded his influence as a “cultural broker” in China’s cultural economy by leveraging his comic talents and cinematic celebrity across advertising and other mass media (Braester 2005). Shanghainese farce has experienced a resurgence on Shanghai radio and television in recent years (Qian 2006), and the declining cost of video editing and production has enabled Chinese Internet users to spoof (e’gao) anything and anyone in the new digital media environment of the twenty-first century. I conclude with these comparisons not to offer simplistic or ahistorical equivalences, but to point out that Xu Zhuodai’s Hua ji Shanghai may be seen as a forerunner to certain types of comic and cultural practice prevalent nowadays. “Funny” culture appears to be alive and well in contemporary China, and its various new manifestations deserve further scholarly attention.
### Glossary

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