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Laughter and the Cosmopolitan Aesthetic in Lao She's 二馬 (Mr. Ma and Son)

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Volume 16 Issue 1 (March 2014) Article 6**Jeffrey Mather,****"Laughter and the Cosmopolitan Aesthetic in Lao She's 二马 (*Mr. Ma and Son*)"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss1/6>>

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Abstract: In his article "Laughter and the Cosmopolitan Aesthetic in Lao She's 二马 (*Mr. Ma and Son*)" Jeffrey Mather discusses Lao She's (pseudonym for Qingchun Shu 1899-1966) texts and their naturalist portrayals of social life in China during a tumultuous period. Lao She's most celebrated works include the 1937 novel 骆驼祥子 (*Rickshaw Boy*) and the 1958 play 茶馆 (*Teahouse*), both of which were made into films in China. *Rickshaw Boy* was translated into English in 1945 and became an international bestseller, making Lao She one of the first modern Chinese writers known in the West. Lao She wrote *Mr. Ma and Son* in London during the 1920s: the novel was first published in installments in 1929 in the prominent modernist literary magazine 小说月报 (*Fiction Monthly*). Set in London and drawing from a range of literary and popular sources, Lao She's novel engages with humor as a way to challenge distinctions between East and West and to present readers with the possibilities of a cosmopolitan literary aesthetic. While the novel points an accusatory finger through its satirical aims and along the way empowers a nationalist sense of self-defense seemingly, there is at the same time an ironic laughter that disrupts the rational integrity of the text, one that is spontaneous and slippery in its ambivalence.

Jeffrey MATHER

Laughter and the Cosmopolitan Aesthetic in Lao She's 二马 (*Mr. Ma and Son*)

Given that Lao She's most widely known works end in tragedy and offer a pessimistic portrayal of individuals struggling against harsh social realities, one might view his literary contributions alongside those of other realist writers of the period such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun. Recent critical evaluations of Lao She's novels and stories, however, have revealed another side to his writings, one less concerned with exposing social inequalities and more engaged with nascent cosmopolitan ideals. For example, in his examination of Lao She's short story 牺牲 (*Self Sacrifice*) Alexander Y.C. Huang describes Lao She as a Rushdie-like figure: a problematizer of the foreign, a cultural go-between, "history's bastard" (97). In examining this story, which depicts humorously Chinese people abroad and their struggles to adapt and perform cultural identities, Huang analyses how Lao She engages with "double-voicing" global and local perspectives as his characters negotiate foreign circumstances and fashion themselves as cosmopolitan cultural hybrids.

By examining Lao She's early novel *Mr. Ma and Son*, I explore how humor was a particularly enabling mode through which Lao She could explore with such emerging cosmopolitan notions. Along with prominent writers of the modern period including Lin Yutang, Shiqiu Liang, and Zhongshu Qian, Lao She was a key figure in China's humor writing movement. While China has long tradition of comedy in literature, the idea of "humor" took on a particular cosmopolitan meaning when Lin Yutang introduced the term 幽默 (*youmo*) — the phonetic approximation to the English word "humor" to the Chinese language in 1924. As one of China's most influential literary critics of the period, Lin's notion of *youmo* had a wide influence on modern Chinese literary production, particularly in Shanghai during the 1930s and culminating in the launching of his humor magazine 论语半月刊 (*Analects Fortnightly*) in 1932. As opposed to the word 滑稽 ("comedy" or "trying to be funny"), Lin has developed the idea of *youmo* in his essays to address China's modern condition.

Lao She's works provide insights into how humor writing developed as a translated and contested sensibility in Chinese literature. In his discussion of Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy*, John Diran Sohigian describes the context of 幽默注意 (humorism) and in particular the relationship between Lao She's novel and Henre Bergson's early twentieth-century theoretical writings on laughter in literature. In this context, Sohigian writes that humor was "emblematic of Chinese progressive modernity" (139). Suoqiao Qian discusses similarly the notion of humor in early twentieth-century Chinese literature as providing a middle way, "an aesthetic alternative" to Chinese modernity that drew from Western and Chinese sources. Therefore, while Lin looked to the present circumstances of Chinese modernity, he also sought to enrich the notion of humor "to reach a philosophical level by drawing on a re-interpretation of Chinese culture" (151). Lao She himself wrote on the topic in his 1935 essay "谈幽默" ("On Humor"), wherein he makes a distinction between humor and satire: "[Satire] must be said in an extremely sharp tongue, giving out a very strong freezing irony ... The satirist deliberately does not want us to be sympathetic to the people and things he describes ... The mentality of the satirist is as if he has seen through this world, so as to very cleverly attack the shortcomings of the mankind... While the heart of the humorist is warm, the heart of the satirist is cold; Therefore, satire is largely destructive ... A satirical play or novel must have a moral purpose ... Because of its moral objective, satire has to be sinister and merciless while humor is more tolerant and sympathetic" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine) (它必須用極銳利的口吻說出來，給人一種極強烈的冷嘲 ... 諷刺家故意的使我們不同情於他所描寫的人或事。諷刺家的心態好似是看透了這個世界，而去極巧妙的攻擊人類的短處 ... 幽默者的心是熱的，諷刺家的心是冷的；因此，諷刺多是破壞的 ... 諷刺因道德目的而必須毒辣不留情，幽默則寬泛一些，也就寬厚一些 [132]). While acknowledging that humor and satire are often hard to distinguish from each other, Lao She attempted to define broadly the humorist as both cosmopolitan in temperament and capable of self-scrutiny: "A humorous attitude ... is a discerning mentality that allows one to view worldly affairs like a traveler writing home from a foreign land who find everything interesting" (my translation) (所謂幽默的心態就是一視同仁的好笑的心態 ... 他一個幽默寫家對於世事，如入異國觀光，事事有趣 [233]). Further, a humorist is able to view "the shortcomings of mankind, but he also accepts them. Thus, everyone has laughable traits and he, himself, is no exception" (不但僅是看到，他還承認人類的缺欠；於是人人有可笑之處，他自己也非例外 [135-36]).

Early in his career Lao She explored these different comic modes. C.T. Hsia has noted that Lao She's 1936 novel 牛天赐传 (*Heavensent*) resembles the picaresque style of Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones* while David Der Wang points out that the form and conceit of the 1932 work 猫城记 (*Cat Country*) is reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (Hsia 180; Wang 136). It is worth noting that these novels would have been known to many Chinese readers since selections of works by Fielding and Swift, along with other works of Western literature, were translated into Chinese and published in the second volume of Yuxiu Sun's 欧美小说丛谈 (*Collected Talks on European and American Fiction*) in 1913 (see Gimpel 154).

Such cross-cultural influences expanded the global reach of Chinese literature and at the same time laid a challenge to those who held to a dogmatically political view of modern literature. In his study *Lao She and the Chinese Revolution* (1974) Ranbir Vohra argued that the idea of *youmo* expressed by Lao She and Lin Yutang was a direct challenge to the tenets of social realism expressed by Lu Xun and others: "Unlike Lu Xun who thinks humor is foreign to China ... Lao She does not overlook the fact that his humor is often tintured with satire. On the whole, humor does provide Lao She with a liberal and humane approach" (97). Therefore, as opposed to the realism and oppositional political aims of the May Fourth movement, Lao She and others advanced a view of Chinese modernity that was not only tolerant of, but also implicated with "the foreign." Building on Vohra's early study, Wang offers a compelling examination of Lao She's works and argues that his fiction challenged the orthodox realism of Lu Xun and May Fourth writers through an engagement with farcical and melodramatic discourses, and that these discourses are drawn from two, sometimes conflicting, influences: Dickens and Late Qing exposé drama. In the case of *Mr. Ma and Son*, however, Wang views the primary source as Shakespeare, suggesting that Ma Wei can be viewed as a tragic hero: in fact, a clown-like parody of Hamlet, "vulnerable as he is laughable" in his conflicted fight for patriotism (126).

Lao She's influences extended beyond the literary as his novel engaged with a range of popular texts. There can be little doubt, however, that Lao She's novel is a significant early experiment with the notion of *youmo* and is a work that in some ways anticipates later cosmopolitan fiction such as Zhongshu Qian's comic novel 围城 (*Fortress Besieged*). At a historical period when China was still suffering from colonialist incursions and humiliations, the laughter that the novel evokes is unsettling insofar as it is challenged May Fourth orthodoxy and as it was directed both at the self and other. The two Ma-s referred to in the title of the novel are the young and idealistic Ma Wei and his father Ma Zeren (Mr. Ma in the novel), a proud man of about fifty who maintains the futile aspiration to live the easy life of a government official. We learn that the Ma-s have arrived in London from Shanghai because they have taken over an antique shop after the death of Mr. Ma's brother who previously owned the business. Through the voice of an ironic and intrusive narrator, readers soon discover that the novel is commenting on China's troubled emergence into modernity: Ma Wei represents the impressionable and idealistic youth who emerged from the May Fourth movement while his father embodies the values of old China and its preoccupations with "face" and *sinecure*. The third major character is Li Zirong, a sensible and practical young clerk who runs a teashop: industrious and capable, but staying away from radical politics, Li comes to represent a possibly enabling position for modern China.

Mr. Ma and Son was written while Lao She worked as a lecturer of Chinese language at the School of Oriental Studies (later to become the School of Oriental and African Studies) at the University of London. While living overseas may have given him some critical perspective on his own country, it also exposed him to a world of ignorance and misunderstanding in the West. Lao She's novel satirically lashes out against demeaning depictions of China that were increasingly apparent and visible in popular culture. Some of Lao She's remarks address the history of British semi-colonial rule over China, such as in his description of the Reverend Evans who is described as having spent over twenty years in China and despite the fact that his spoken Chinese was poor he was a veritable walking encyclopedia about anything Chinese. Evans is someone "who loved the Chinese people" so much that "in the middle of the night when he couldn't get much sleep, he prayed to God that China would someday be colonized by the British; with burning tears in his eyes, he beseeched the Lord: If the Chinese don't let the British take over, then all of those masses of yellow-faced, black-haired souls will never make it to heaven!" (12). Lao She would have had personal experience with missionaries

since it was through missionary contacts that he gained the opportunity to travel to Britain. Once in Britain, he maintained a friendship with the missionary Clement Egerton and they eventually collaborated on the English translation of the Ming dynasty novel *金瓶梅* (*The Golden Lotus*).

Yet while mocking the so-called Western experts on China, Lao She was also interested in deriding the popular conceptions of China in Western countries and especially in Britain during this period. It was during the 1920s that London's Limehouse district became infamous for its supposedly degenerate opium dens and exotic residents and was made popular through many different works of film, drama, and fiction. There was the sensationalist fiction of Thomas Burke and his collection of stories *Limehouse Nights* (1916), out of which the story "The Chink and the Child" was later adapted by D.W. Griffith into the 1919 film *Broken Blossoms*. Also making use of the Limehouse district were Sax Rohmer's Dr. Fu-Manchu novels, the 1913 *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* and the 1915 *The Yellow Claw*, the latter of which was adapted into a film by René Plaissetty in 1921. On the stage, there was *Mr. Wu*, which like Rohmer's Fu Manchu novels depicted an educated Chinese villain in a melodramatic storyline. Widely successful, the play was adapted by Maurice Elvey and produced by the British production company Stoll Pictures in 1918 and MGM produced the Hollywood version (directed by William Nigh, starring Lon Chaney, and featuring Anna May Wong) in 1927.

These popular narratives each in their own way depicted a threatening and disruptive Chinese presence and we can consider these cultural representations of China and the Chinese as part of a larger historical trajectory going back to the late nineteenth century when China was viewed as a threat to Western powers. The term "Yellow Peril" is said to have been first used by emperor Wilhelm II at about the same time he commissioned a painting that depicted German and European powers setting out against the Asiatic threat (see Lyman 683-85) and descriptions of China's menacing position began to appear in newspapers and popular culture. In 1911, G.G. Rupert published *The Yellow Peril, or the Orient vs. the Occident as Viewed by Modern Statesmen and Ancient Prophets*, a work that drew from Biblical prophecy and predicted the invasion of the U.S. by "Oriental" races. As China's apparently vast and "infectious" population spread to the Western world, a number of countries — including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States — adopted anti-Chinese immigration policies. Jack London's 1910 science fiction short story "The Unparalleled Invasion" was a particularly disturbing variation of the theme. In London's story, European powers and the United States decimate China by dropping glass tubes carrying deadly microbes from airplanes onto the country. While China is ultimately destroyed, the action is viewed as a justified response to the danger of an overwhelming Chinese population.

Lao She's interest in subverting these discourses with humor appears early in *Mr. Ma and Son* when father and son try to find suitable place to rent rooms. We are introduced to the landlady, the widow Mrs. Wendall who has agreed to rent out to the Chinese tenants at the urging of their mutual acquaintance, the Reverend Evans. Mrs. Wendall prepares herself for the first meeting: "Now properly attired, she finally relaxed in the parlor, and glanced through De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* so that when the Chinese arrived she would have something to talk about with them" (42). The reference to De Quincey's autobiographical work and the way it is used by Mrs. Wendall as a frame of reference and indeed as a possible conversation starter is meant to expose the parochialism of British society, but at same time it offers a clever subversion of De Quincey's text and its Romantic Orientalist depiction of the East. De Quincey's nightmarish Malay, who appears unexpectedly in the remote English countryside later "runs amok" in the writer's opium-riddled mind and this epitomizes the indistinct and troubling nature of the Far Eastern "Other" in the British Romantic imagination. But unlike the Malay, who is described as an exotic conglomerate of Eastern excess, Mr. Ma and his son are relatively unassuming and attire themselves in Western-style suits. When she finally meets them, she is startled to discover that Mr. Ma and son are not the exotic Orientals that she expected: "She wondered why these two did not look as ghastly as the Chinese she'd seen in the movies. She couldn't shirk off the suspicion that perhaps they really weren't Chinese ... but then if not, then what were they?" (43).

As the story unfolds, we are introduced to the daughter of the house, Ms. Wendell, a young lady who is particularly disparaging and distrustful of the Chinese boarders and of Chinese people in general. Like her mother, the daughter's ideas of Chinese people have been formed through popular culture: she is as an avid movie watcher and on her first encounter with Ma Wei she describes to him

a scene from a recent film wherein an English swashbuckler defeats "a dozen snub-nosed yellow-faced Chinese" (49). She also warns her mother not to accept the tea offered by Ma Wei since it could contain poison. Here Lao She is referring to the Chinese villain playfully, a cultural construction that allowed Yellow Peril fantasies and anxieties to play out on the stage and on the screen. In her study "*Mr. Wu* and the Rearticulation of 'The Yellow Peril'," Wendy Gan examines the evolution of *Mr. Wu* making reference to Heidi Holder's work on imperial melodrama wherein Holder identifies the stage villain as a Europeanized native "who threatens the self by the very likeness of the self" (Holder qtd. in Gan 441). As both Mr. Wu (as depicted in the play and the film) and Fu Manchu (the sinister character in Rohmer's novels) have been educated at elite Western institutions and have an intimate knowledge of Western cultures, Gan views them in similar terms as figures who foreground anxieties about changing geopolitical realities: "Like Fu, Wu is familiar with the culture of the West; like Fu, he is sinister and alien, the 'essential' Oriental despite the veneer of Western knowledge" (447).

There are, however, slight differences in the ways these characters were portrayed and Gan points out that compared with Fu Manchu, the story of Mr. Wu is more concerned with middle-class domesticity. In the 1927 film *Mr. Wu*, Mr. Gregory, a British man, courts and is eventually compelled to marry a young Chinese woman, Nan Ping Wu, after an affair that leaves her pregnant. Mr. Wu is Nan Ping's father and after finding out about the planned marriage he is forced to make the apparently culturally-bound decision to kill his daughter in order to clear the family name of the shame associated with such a scandalous incident. After killing her with a sword at the family shrine, he seeks revenge against Mr. Gregory's family because he views them as responsible. He takes Gregory and his family captive and forces Gregory's mother to make the decision between forcing her daughter to be a prostitute and condemning her son to death. Mrs. Gregory attempts to sacrifice her own life and in another outrageously offensive representation of Chinese culture, Mr. Wu explains that it is customary for the family to bear the shame of such events. Eventually Mrs. Gregory frees herself by wresting a sword from Mr. Wu and kills him: "Unlike the shadowy world of Fu Manchu where the ordinary man on the street has barely an inkling of his plans, the threat of Mr. Wu is his very intimacy with and proximity to the British middle-class world" (Gan 447). It is worth noting that in the stage version of *Mr. Wu*, Mrs. Gregory puts poison in her own teacup after deciding that it would be better to die than to face Mr. Wu's advances. However, suspicious that his cup has been poisoned, Wu switches the cups and ends up drinking the poison himself.

It is difficult not to read *Mr. Ma and Son* in the context of *Mr. Wu* — not only because of the reference to a poisoned teacup — because both stories involve the entrance of Chinese men into the female world of British domesticity. Ma Wei ends up falling in love with Ms. Wendell despite her anti-Chinese views. He tries courting her by asking her to the movies and although she agrees to go out with him on occasion, his advances are ultimately unsuccessful. To add to the sense of comedy, Lao She doubles the romance: the older Ma falls in love with Mrs. Wendell and gains her favor by giving her an antique teapot, tending to the flowers in the garden, and complimenting profusely her dog. This relationship also fails as Mrs. Wendell is unable to accept the social stigma attached to a Chinese man marrying a British woman. By depicting these relationships as quotidian and rather commonplace, Lao She restages Chinese masculine desire humorously and deflates the predatory image of the Chinese villain stalking Western women.

If *Mr. Wu* provided a Yellow Peril archetype — the sinister, intelligent, and uncanny Other who represents the fearful effects of China's newly emerging global visibility — in D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms*, we are presented with an older stereotype: an effeminate and emasculated version of Chinese identity that is hopelessly romantic, idealistic, and lost in reverie. *Broken Blossoms* depicts the story of Huan Cheng (Richard Barthelmess), a Chinese opium-smoking merchant who, like the Ma-s in Lao She's novel, works in a London antique shop. Cheng falls in love with a young girl named Lucy (Lillian Gish), the illegitimate daughter of Battling Burrows (Donald Crisp), a brutal and abusive boxer. Hopeful that he can spread the peaceful principles of Buddhism in the West, Cheng is depicted as smoking opium and forlornly lounging around street corners. His love for Lucy is realized, but only for a short time. Soon after the two outcast lovers find solace together, Lucy's drunken father tears her away and ends up beating her to death. Cheng cannot rescue Lucy in time and after fatally shooting Burrows, he takes his own life. Despite the stereotypical representation of Cheng as an idealistic Eastern celestial, *Broken Blossoms* had a progressive appeal. In this film, it is the West rather than

China that is aggressive, dangerous, and destructive. In a reversal of Wu's filicide and this time it is the Western villain who kills his own daughter. *Broken Blossoms* has received ample attention in film studies with its claustrophobic setting and gritty realism, one can detect the emerging generic conventions of film noir and while some have regarded it as a sympathetic and favorable portrayal of China (see, e.g., Jones), others have interpreted it in much more critical terms as it masks the social reality of racism (see, e.g., Lesage).

Critical examinations of Lao She's works have tended to overlook these references to film and popular culture. In *Lao She in London* Anne Witchard examines the London contexts of Lao She's early writings, focusing primarily on the cultural and social climate of British modernism. In describing Lao She's collaboration with Egerton on the English translation of *Jin Ping Mei*, Witchard states that "devouring the newly published works of Conrad, Lawrence, Joyce, Huxley, and Woolf must have given Lao She tremendous confidence in what might be achieved in China's modern fiction" (75). Further, Witchard suggests that "[Mr. Ma and Son] bears comparison with Huxley's and Woolf's London novels of the period, *Antic Hay* (1923) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925)" (64). Indeed, reflecting on his novel, Lao She later commented on the influence of British writers, in particular Conrad, and how they prompted him to explore psychoanalysis and a more detailed descriptive style in his early works ("How" 372).

To go further in making comparisons between *Mr. Ma and Son* and the novels of Huxley, Lawrence, Joyce, and Woolf involves a high degree of speculation, but it would be safe to say that Lao She must have shared the British modernist concern about the status of literature in relation to emerging mass media and popular culture. Writing to a Shanghai audience, the world of cinema and film would have been hard for Lao She to ignore. *Mr. Ma and Son* was almost exclusively distributed in Shanghai, which also established China's first movie theater, the 250-seat Hongkew Cinema opened in 1908 (Cui 4). By 1929, there were 233 theaters in seven cities and Shanghai alone had 53 of these and a seating capacity of 37,110 (Cui 4). Given the popularity of movie watching in China during this period, Lao She's references to film and representations of China on the screen would have been known by many of his readers and thus the romance narratives of love between Chinese men and British women had a particular meaning and comical resonance.

Recent criticism challenges the view that the reception of films in China during this period was merely a consumption of Western culture and reveals that cinema was especially provocative in terms of how notions of transcultural identity were performed and explored (see, e.g., Xiang <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2225>>; Zhang <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2226>>). What makes Lao She's novel particularly cosmopolitan in sentiment is not so much the effort to satirically target Yellow Peril narratives or demeaning depictions of Chinese characters on the screen, but the ways in which the novel implicates all of the characters in the farcical storyline. In a particularly telling instance that speaks to the novel's blurred sense of self and other, Ma Wei faces himself in the mirror noting that his cleanly shaven face is more vigorous and heroic than before he had arrived in England: "He had often seen the movies where the hero would be in the middle of shaving when the villain would show up and start a fight. And after whipping the enemy he would calmly pick up his razor to go on shaving with a perfectly steady hand. Sometimes there would be a young girl in the scene, whom the hero would take into his arms and kiss, getting shaving cream on the girl's cheek. So for Ma shaving was more than a simple grooming routine; rather, it was associated with "manliness" (50). Ma is interpolated into a melodramatic hero and as the novel reaches its end we come to understand that his confused self-identity has contributed to his blind patriotism and eventual alienation. What begins in the novel as a stable form of satire — one that in some ways bolsters a sense of nationalism as it defends China against the discourses of imperialism and the Yellow Peril — turns in on itself examining the Chinese protagonist's narcissistic desire to be the actor on the screen.

The novel ends with ironical self-scrutiny as Ma Zeren decides to play a minor character in a film set partly in Shanghai and partly in London — one that recounts the love affair between a British man and Chinese woman and eventually leads to the family of the woman burying her alive after hearing about the relationship (the plot resembles that of *Mr. Wu*). Ma's complicity with the making of the film leads to a farcical scenario wherein patriotic Chinese students in London riot and throw bricks into the Ma-s' antique shop. On an allegorical level, the episode calls attention satirically to the irreconcilable patriotism of the "new" and the passive complicity of the "old" China, but in another sense Ma's

participation in the film foregrounds reflexively the novel's own engagement with the narrative of cross-cultural romance and the tropes of the overseas Chinese made popular by films.

In conclusion, one must concede that the notion of a cosmopolitan aesthetic is a very broad idea since late Qing reformist writers, early radical feminists, and May Fourth authors all projected various forms of cosmopolitan literary aesthetics in their works. However Lao She's novel reveals that humor writing during this time was particularly enabling for writers who worked in diverse and changing cultural and geographical contexts. Exemplifying the novel's influence on later writers, Ailing Zhang describes her return to Shanghai and an early memory of Lao She's novel *Mr. Ma and Son* in her biographical essay 私语 (Whispers): "At that time, Fiction Monthly was serializing Lao She's novel of Chinese émigrés in London, *Mr. Ma and Son*. We received the latest issue every month by post. My mother would sit on the Western-style toilet seat laughing and reading aloud, while I leaned against the doorframe laughing along with her. To this day, I still like *Mr. Ma and Son*, although Lao She's later novels *Divorce* and *Train* are much better" ("小说月报"上正登着老舍的 二马,杂志每月寄到了,我母亲坐在抽水马桶上看,一面笑,一面读出来,我靠在门框上策.所以到现在我还是喜欢 二马 虽然老舍后来的 离婚、火车全比 二马 好得多" [135]). Lao She himself appears to have agreed with Zhang's assessment that the novel was not "as good" as some of his other works and once spoke about *Mr. Ma and Son* in terms of its failure to render convincing characters and an overinvestment in allegorical themes. The novel is, according the author, at most "tolerable newspaper literature" and its only redemption is in its sense of humor, an element that saves "luckily" the characters from their patriotism, despicability, or narrow-mindedness ("How" 375). This notion of a redemptive humor that "luckily" intrudes upon the text implies that Lao She did not have full control and challenges us to consider the precarious, destabilizing effects which laughter can have on both writing and reading literature. While the novel points an accusatory finger through its satirical aims and along the way empowers a nationalistic sense of self-defense seemingly, there is at the same time an ironic laughter that disrupts the rational integrity of the text, one that is spontaneous and slippery in its ambivalence.

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