

Chapter 4

Intermedial Laughter:

Hou Baolin and *xiangsheng dianying* in mid-1950s China*

Abstract

The first wave of film comedy in socialist China enjoyed only an ephemeral presence amidst the Hundred Flowers Campaign. This chapter turns attention to the intersection of and interaction between cinema and the traditional Chinese performing art of *xiangsheng* in the mid-1950s, seeking to tease out an innovative strand of comic filmmaking in the Mao era. Specifically, it takes as its case study the *xiangsheng dianying* (crosstalk film) of 1956, *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream* (*Youyuan jingmeng*), starring the well-known *xiangsheng* duo of Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru. Through an introduction of *xin xiangsheng*, a new type of *xiangsheng* created for the new Chinese society and a careful textual analysis of this particular *xiangsheng dianying*, the chapter illustrates that the interplay of *xiangsheng* and film, as seen in *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream*, transfigured each of the two media, increased much of the viewing pleasure of this film, and provided an understanding of the specificities of both *xiangsheng* and film. This rather ingenious experimentation of dynamical intermediality demonstrates that laughter under Mao could be innovative and experimental.

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Keywords: xiangsheng, crosstalk film, Hou Baolin, Guo Qiru, intermediality, film comedy,
Chinese socialist cinema

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Comedy film in the early Mao era is a site of negotiation and contestation. The ephemeral presence of satirical comedies in the Hundred Flowers period (1956-57) and the long-awaited re-emergence of the genre, albeit in the form of eulogistic comedies, in the early 1960s bespeak at once the challenge of producing socio-politically appropriate laughter and the unceasing popular yearning for it. Recent studies have explored the determinants of laughter's tortuous path to screen by paying great attention to the varied kinds of conflict and negotiation among film artists, audiences, critics, cultural administrators, and Party authorities.¹ They have also suggested, either implicitly or explicitly, that comedy film is formally heterogeneous, in its employment of local dialects and diverse cinematic styles, in its attempt to reconnect with the comedic tradition of pre-PRC Shanghai cinema, and in its engagement with regional performance traditions.²

Building upon these studies and shifting the analytical perspective from a diachronic inquiry into medium-specific questions to a synchronic consideration of the links and tensions between parallel cultural practices in the early Mao era, this chapter turns attention to the

¹See Ying Bao, "The Problematics of Comedy: New China Cinema and the Case of Lü Ban," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, vol. 20, no.2 (2008), 185-228. Li Daoxin, "Cansheng de tizhi yu jianbai de ren," *Dianying yishu*, no.5 (2012), 111-121; Zhuoyi Wang, *Revolutionary Cycles in Chinese Cinema, 1951-1979* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

² A notable example is Ying Bao's research on dialect comedy and its circulation. See Ying Bao, "National Cinema, Local Landscape, Trans-regional Adaptation: Dialect Comedy in the Early People's Republic of China," *Asian Cinema*, vol.21: no.1 (2010): 124-138.

intersection of and interaction between cinema and the traditional Chinese performing art of *xiangsheng* 相聲 in the mid-1950s, seeking to tease out an innovative strand of comic filmmaking in Mao's China. In particular, it takes as its case study the *xiangsheng dianying* 相聲電影 (crosstalk film) of 1956, *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream* (*Youyuan jingmeng*) 遊園驚夢, starring the well-known *xiangsheng* duo of Hou Baolin 侯寶林 and Guo Qiru 郭啟儒.³

Stranded between the worlds of *xiangsheng* and of film, and crossing the divide between fiction and documentary film, *Youyuan jingmeng*⁴ (dir. Shi Lan, 1956) has long been ignored, if not dismissed, by film scholars. *Xiangsheng* master Hou Baolin's involvement in cinema has received little mention in historical studies of *xiangsheng*⁵ and has been referred in many biographical essays merely as a minor interlude in his illustrious career.⁶ Yet the film *Youyuan jingmeng* deserves serious consideration for both historical and aesthetic reasons. At a time when Chinese comedy film was still in its germinal stage, this film expediently met audience demand for laughter and presented Hou Baolin as a *de facto* comedy film star. Through its attempt to popularize *xiangsheng* for a national audience, the film also unsettles the conventions of this traditional oral performing art, thus raising the ontological question of *xiangsheng*. *Youyuan jingmeng* reveals the tension between a modern visual technology and a traditional oral art, as well as giving a glimpse of the comic potential of an intermedial art form.

³ *Wandering in the Zoo, Awakening from a Dream* (*Youyuan jingmeng* 遊園驚夢) was directed by Shi Lan 石嵐 and produced by Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio 中央 (*Zhongyang xinwen jilu zhipian chang* 新聞紀錄製片廠) in 1956.

⁴ In order to preserve the pun contained in the original Chinese film title, I use the original title throughout this chapter.

⁵ This applies to both Chinese-language and English-language scholarship. Hou's involvement in cinema is only mentioned in passing in Shu-ying Tsau's article, "Xiangsheng and Its Star Performer Hou Baolin," the only English-language research paper on Hou Baolin.

⁶ The only exception is Huo Zhuang's essay "Hou Baolin yu dianying," which introduces Hou's screen roles and his contribution to film education.

Contrary to the conventional view that media boundary-crossing phenomena did not emerge until the 1990s when digital media and communication technologies started to proliferate, and that intermedia arts are symptomatic of global capital's overcoming of all geographical barriers in its circulation process and consequent flattening of the world,⁷ this film illustrates the fact that intermediality is closely linked to social and institutional practices and has its own particular historical audience. The unusual intermedial practice essential to the film *Youyuan jingmeng* shows that Maoist arts are by no means monotonous and propagandist pieces; on the contrary, laughter under Mao was innovative and experimental. However, such an experimental spirit was soon extinguished, since the daring formal innovation of *Youyuan jingmeng* was believed to be an "artistic exaggeration" inhibiting the production of meaningful laughter. In what follows, I first retrace the cultural and historical context that allowed dynamic interactions between *xiangsheng* and cinema, and then examine a particular set of generic and artistic negotiations involved in the production of intermedial laughter.

Hou Baolin and *Xin Xiangsheng* in the 1950s

Xiangsheng, commonly translated into English as either "crosstalk" or "comic dialogues,"⁸ is a popular oral performing art that relies heavily on performers' employment of

⁷ Most scholarship on intermediality either pays great attention to intermedial practices in the so-called "post-medium" condition or consciously situates itself within the "new media debate." See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Post-Medium Condition* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000); Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds., *Intermediality in Theatre and performance* (New York: Rodopi, 2006); Juha Herkman, Taisto Hujanen, and Paavo Oinonen, eds., *Intermediality and Media Change* (Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press, 2012).

⁸ The term "crosstalk" has been commonly adopted in Western media. This translation is problematic for its neglect of the tonal differences of "xiang," as suggested by Perry Link (see Link, 2010). "Comic dialogue" is not entirely accurate either, as this translation ignores the various performance forms of *xiangsheng*. The etymological root of *xiangsheng* 相聲 can be traced back to *xiangsheng* 像生, which means "look real" or "look alive," indicating the mimetic root of the art of *xiangsheng*. See Wang Jue, Wang Jingshou and Teng Tianxiang, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 1995), 52. For the sake of accuracy and emphasis, I use the original Chinese term *xiangsheng* throughout this chapter.

facial gestures and various voice techniques to entertain audiences. Subsumed under *quyi* 曲藝 (performed narrative arts),⁹ *xiangsheng* distinguishes itself from other *quyi* genres by its apt use of satire and social commentary.¹⁰ Although the origin of *xiangsheng* remains debatable,¹¹ it is commonly agreed that professional *xiangsheng* performers emerged in northern China in late imperial times.¹² During the Republican era, *xiangsheng* was mostly performed in open-air market places and tea houses in Beijing and Tianjin to audiences of illiterate lower-class people. The traditional *xiangsheng* repertoire covers a diversity of engaging topics, ranging from local customs and historical anecdotes through satires of the fool, the deceitful and the hypocritical, to various language games.

There are three different forms of *xiangsheng* performance depending on the number of performers involved. The dominant form is known as *duikou xiangsheng* 對口相聲 (cross talk). This involves two comedians—a *dougende* 逗眼的 (funny man) and a *penggende* 捧眼的 (straight man)—performing a comic dialogue before an audience. The other two forms are *dankou xiangsheng* 單口相聲 (comedian's monologue) and *qunhuo xiangsheng* 群口相聲

⁹ Synonymous with *shuochuang yishu* 說唱藝術 (narrated and chanted arts), the term *quyi* gained increasing currency during the 1950s. For instance, *Shuoshuo changchang* 說說唱唱 [Telling and Singing], a journal dedicated to the oral performing arts, lasted only from 1950 to 1955. It was succeeded by *Quyi* 曲藝 [Oral Performing Arts], which was founded in 1958 and continues to be published today. See also Vibeke Børdahl and Jette Ross, *Chinese Storytellers: Life and Art in the Yangzhou Tradition* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, 2002), 23.

¹⁰ Hou Baolin named satire as the first and most important element in the humor of a good *xiangsheng* piece. See Colin Mackerras, *The Performing Arts in Contemporary China* (London: Routledge, 1981), 103.

¹¹ Chinese scholars have traced the historical development of *xiangsheng* from various perspectives, such as Chinese comic art tradition, folk performing arts traditions and even the realist art tradition. See Hou Baolin, Wang Jingshou and Xue Baokun, *Quyi gailun* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1980), 176-180; as well as Shu-ying Tsau, "Xiangsheng and Its Star Performer Hou Baolin," *Chinoperl Papers*, vol.9, no.1 (1980): 32-79.

¹² Zhang Sanlu 张三祿 and Zhau Shaowen 朱绍文, who performed during the reigns of Xianfeng and Tongzhi, have been regarded as the pioneer professional performers of *xiangsheng*. See Wang Jue, Wang Jingshou and Teng Tianxiang, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi* (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 1995), 70.

(multi-comedian sketches), involving a single performer and three or more performers respectively.¹³ A typical *xiangsheng* piece is a coherent, self-contained routine with a fixed narrative or unifying main premise, and often incorporating wordplay, humorous anecdotes, tongue-twisters, quick and playful banter, and satire. Therefore *xiangsheng* professionals are required to master four voice-based skills—shuo 說 (speaking), xue 學 (imitating), dou 逗 (joking), and chang 唱 (singing)—and to masterfully align their physical appearances and facial expressions to fit their linguistic style.¹⁴ As these voice techniques are normally passed from master to disciple, the master's own idiosyncratic performance styles often mark the different schools of *xiangsheng*.

After the founding of the PRC, *xiangsheng* and a wide range of locally founded ballad-singing and story-telling arts were brought into the realm of culture. Before long the survival of *xiangsheng* faced a crisis caused by the apparent incongruence between the Communist Party's political demands and *xiangsheng*'s artistic tradition. In pre-liberation China, it was not uncommon for *xiangsheng* performers to use farce routines, crack obscene jokes, and poke fun at the authorities and at ordinary folk including country bumpkins, prostitutes, frail scholars and the handicapped to get a laugh from their audience.¹⁵ Such performance styles and content were deemed inappropriate in the newly founded PRC because of their vulgarity and divisive potential. When staged for a working-class audience, some previously popular traditional pieces now invited contempt and provoked censure due to their “unsound” elements.¹⁶ Despite

¹³ Hou Baolin, Wang Jingshou and Xue Baokun, *Quyì gailùn*, 215-226.

¹⁴ Zhang Qizhi, “Zhang Shouchen tan xiangsheng biaoyan de jingyan,” *Quyì*, no.4 (1957): 49.

¹⁵ Wang Liye. “Tan *xiangsheng* de jicheng he fazhan wenti,” *Quyì*, no.5 (1961): 40-43; see also Marja Kaikkonen, *Laughable Propaganda* (Stockholm: Institute of Oriental Languages, Stockholm University, 1990), 74; Hou Baolin, Wang Jingshou and Xue Baokun, *Quyì gailùn*, 98-99.

¹⁶ According to Yu Shide's memoir, at a *xiangsheng* performance staged in a print factory shortly after the liberation, two *xiangsheng* performers were booed off the stage because the workers found the jokes in their prologue quite insulting. It was said that some schools advised students not to listen to *xiangsheng* in order to avoid its pernicious effects. See Wang Jue, Wang Jingshou and Teng Tianxiang, *Zhongguo xiangsheng shi*, 221.

its elevated status as an officially recognized form of art, *xiangsheng* faced daunting challenges, particularly considering the external constraints now imposed on the use of satire. In his 1942 talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art, Mao Zedong clearly deterred writers and artists from using satire against “our rank of people”—the revolutionary masses—in order to avoid harmful effects.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, “against whom, and what, is the satire aimed?” became the overarching concern of *xiangsheng* performers in the new China. For the sake of preserving and rejuvenating this traditional performing art, it seemed imperative to create *xin xiangsheng* 新相聲, a new type of *xiangsheng* suitable for the new society. Two questions that had particular importance for the creation of *xin xiangsheng* were: 1) How to purify and modernize *xiangsheng* so as to make it qualify as “an educational weapon imbued with patriotic and democratic spirits”—a new role for *quyi* envisioned by the Party,¹⁸ and 2) How to broaden *xiangsheng*'s audience base, making it a nation-wide, rather than regional, popular performing art better serving the people? While some *xiangsheng* performers sank into pessimism, others responded proactively to these emerging challenges.

Hou Baoli 侯寶林 (1917-1993), one of China's leading *xiangsheng* performers, emerged as an important figure spearheading the modernization of *xiangsheng* at this historical juncture. Born in 1917, Hou grew up in poverty. At the age of twelve, he became an apprentice of a street opera singer and soon joined his master in marketplace performances. Four years later, in order to earn more money to sustain himself, Hou switched to *xiangsheng* and performed pieces which he had learnt from street *xiangsheng* performers.¹⁹ It was not until 1939 that he became an apprentice of established *xiangsheng* performers, first studying under

¹⁷ Mao Zedong, “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” in Kirk Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 480.

¹⁸ Zhou Enlai, “Guanyu xiqu gaige gongzuo de zhishi,” *Renmin yinyue*, no.4 (1951): 2.

¹⁹ In Republican China, street *xiangsheng* performers had higher earnings than opera singers, simply because the money made by the opera troupe had to be divided among a dozen singers and instrumentalists. See Shu-ying Tsau, “Xiangsheng and Its Star Performer Hou Baolin.”

Chang Baochen 常寶臣 and then under Zhu Kuoquan 朱闊泉. Thanks to his opera training, Hou was particularly adept at performing *liuhuo* 柳活: *xiangsheng* pieces containing imitation of opera or ballad singing.²⁰ In the 1940s, with their *liuhuo* pieces such as *A Chat on Operas* (Xiju zatan 戲劇雜談), *Selling Textiles* (*Mai butou* 賣布頭) and *Changing Professions* (*Gaihang* 改行), Hou and his *xiangsheng* partner Guo Qiru 郭啟儒 managed to gain a foothold into the established *xiangsheng* circle in Tianjin.²¹ Depicting street artistes' and vendors' daily struggles, these informative and entertaining pieces expressed a humanistic sympathy for the downtrodden. Hou's sensitivity toward vernacular languages used by people from different walks of life and his skilful singing of stylistically varied operas won him much accolades, and his use of clean, clear and fluent languages in *xiangsheng* has since become a distinctive trademark of his performance.

With a long-term interest in enhancing the artistic quality of *xiangsheng*, and perhaps more importantly, a sense of the urgent need for a rejuvenation of *xiangsheng* in the new China, Hou Baolin cooperated with the Party to reform *xiangsheng*, lifting it to a more enlightened level. Shortly after the liberation of Beijing in January, 1949, Hou started to perform a cleaned up version of *Marriage and Superstition* (*Hunyun yu mixin* 婚姻與迷信), which was to become one of the most highly-regarded pieces in his repertoire. In January 1950, with the support of respected writer Lao She 老舍 and distinguished linguists, Luo Changpei 羅常培, Lü Shuxiang 呂淑湘 and Wu Xiaoling 吳曉玲, Hou Baolin along with other leading *xiangsheng* performers including Sun Yukui 孫玉奎 and Chang Baoting 常寶霆 established the Group for the

²⁰ Liuhuo pieces occupy one seventh of Hou Baolin's repertoire and some of them, such as *Xiju yu fangyan* 戏剧与方言 (Operas and Dialects) and *Gaihang* 改行 (Changing Professions), are remembered as *xiangsheng* classics. See Hou Xin, "Hou Baolin de 'liuhuo'", in Hou Xin, ed., *Qizui bashe hou jia shier* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 192-210.

²¹ Hou Baolin, "Peiyang wo chengzhang de Tianjin," in Hou Xin, ed., *Qizui bashe hou jia shier*, 37.

Improvement of *Xiangsheng* (*xiangsheng gaijin xiaozu* 相聲改進小組) under the aegis of the Party.²² The Group set out to reform *xiangsheng* on several fronts: to create new pieces that would respond in a timely way to the Party's nationwide mass campaigns and sing the praises of the socialist system; to clean up the language of traditional *xiangsheng* pieces and remove vulgar, pornographic, or discriminatory content from the traditional *xiangsheng* repertoire; to conduct research on *xiangsheng* and its history; and to set up "literacy classes" for *xiangsheng* performers.²³ Between the founding of the PRC and the eruption of the Cultural Revolution, Hou's achievements in creating *xin xiangsheng* were remarkable: he arranged and amended sixteen traditional *xiangsheng* pieces and created further fifty-nine new pieces.²⁴

Thanks to the concerted effort made by *xiangsheng* professionals, writers, and cultural administrators, the early 1950s saw a wide dissemination of *xiangsheng*.²⁵ *Xiangsheng*'s versatility, short duration, and freedom from spatial constraint made it easy for the format to be integrated into political campaigns and mass mobilizations. For instance, during the Resist America, Aid Korea campaign in 1951, some *xiangsheng* performers volunteered to go to the Korean War front to entertain the soldiers and boost military morale.²⁶ The master Hou Baolin himself wrote two new *xiangsheng* pieces titled *The Henchman Syngman Rhee* (Gou tuizi Li Chengwan 狗腿子李承晚) and *The Portrait of President Truman* (Du lumen huaxiang 杜魯門畫像), satirizing the leaders of China's enemy countries.²⁷ Around 1955, in support of the

²² Liu Naichong, "Hou Baolin yu xin xiangsheng," in Hou Xin, ed., *Qizui bashe hou jia shier*, 124.

²³ Perry Link, "The Crocodile Bird: Xiangsheng in the Early 1950s," in Jeremy Brown and Paul Pickowicz, eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010), 213-215.

²⁴ Hou Xin, "Hou Baolin yisheng shuoguo duoshao duan xiangsheng," in Hou Xin, ed. *Qizui bashe Hou jia shier*, 156, 152-54.

²⁵ The fact that *xiangsheng* enjoyed more popularity than other forms of comedic art during this period also indicates how the development of the latter, for instance, satirical fiction and film comedy, was suppressed.

²⁶ See Marja Kaikkonen, *Laughable Propaganda*, 73.

²⁷ Hou Xin, "Hou Baolin yisheng shuoguo duoshao duan xiangsheng," 151-163.

CCP's nationwide promotion of Mandarin, Hou created another new piece titled *Mandarin and Dialects* (*Putonghua yu fangyan* 普通話與方言). *Xiangsheng*'s short length and use of colloquial language also enabled and encouraged amateur writers with limited schooling to create *xin xiangsheng*, albeit with varying degrees of artistic sophistication.²⁸ Nevertheless, only a small number of *xin xiangsheng* pieces made their way onto the stage, and even fewer proved appealing to audiences.²⁹ This had something to do with the new pieces' lack of technical subtlety and overall lacklustre quality, but was also related to the difficulty of breaking new ground in using satire to depict characters and social phenomena within the new China.

Noteworthy exceptions are *Buying Monkeys* (*Mai hou'er* 買猴兒) and *A Nightly Ride* (*Ye xing ji* 夜行記), which were created in 1954 and 1955 respectively amid a brief period of political relaxation right before the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957. Both pieces center on "flawed characters" in the new society, draw upon materials from daily life, and use lively colloquial languages. The former, written by He Chi 何遲 in 1954, is both funny and critical. It features an unforgettable department-store clerk named Ma Daha—each character in his name encoding a particular aspect of his character: "mamahuhu" (casual and careless), "dadalielie" (inattentive), and "xixihaha" (giggle and laugh). Among many mishaps caused by his negligence, the most hilarious occurs after he carelessly copies an urgent order to "buy 50 boxes of Monkey brand soaps from a north-eastern district in Tianjin" as "buy 50 monkeys in

²⁸ *Beijing wenyi* 北京文藝 [Beijing Literature and Arts], *Shuoshuo changchan* 說說唱唱 [Telling and Singing] and *Quyì* 曲藝 [Oral Performing Arts] were important platforms for *xiangsheng* pieces newly scripted by amateur writers.

²⁹ This is a common phenomenon across the *quyi* sphere. In 1953, four years into the reform of *quyi*, many performers in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and Nanjing still preferred old *quyi* pieces since the public did not like the new pieces and tickets to performances of modern *quyi* did not sell. See Wang Yaping. "Renzen jieshou wenxue yichang, nuli chuanguo youxiu zuopin," *Shuoshuo changchang*, no.10 (1953): 8.

north-east.”³⁰ The blunder sends a salesman off on a cross-country trip and motivates further exposure of the gullibility and carelessness of bureaucratic officials at all levels. This critical-realist *xiangsheng* piece enjoyed such great popularity that “Ma Daha” entered everyday language and became shorthand for a careless and irresponsible person.³¹ However, humor and satire featuring all kinds of “Ma Dahas” as “flawed characters” in the new society not only amused audiences but also led to *Buying Monkeys* being criticized as an “anti-Party” piece. In contrast, *A Nightly Ride* is a milder *xiangsheng* piece centering on a particular flawed character. Created by a group of amateur writers in 1955, it portrays a reckless young biker who repeatedly violates traffic rules and ignores all the kind advice offered to him. Toward the end of this piece, the young man’s obstinacy finally gets him into trouble. Riding his bike at night with a paper lantern instead of a headlight, the biker ends up in a ditch when he tries to avoid the traffic police. Demonstrating that satire can be used as a form of benign admonition, *A Nightly Ride* was performed by Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru at the Spring Festival Gala (Chuanjie da lianhuan 春節大聯歡) (see Fig.1)—the Chinese New Year’s Eve Gala documented by the Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio (Zhongyang xinwen jilu zhipian chang 中央新聞紀錄製片廠; hereafter CNDS) in 1956, and won popularity among a broader audience.³²

Producing Laughter between Film and *Xiangsheng*

³⁰ Marja Kaikkonen, *Laughable Propaganda*, 13. For a more detailed introduction to this piece and its reception, see Perry Link, “The Crocodile Bird: Xiangsheng in the Early 1950s,” 224-226.

³¹ Benkan jizhe, “Guanyu xiangsheng ‘Mai Hou’er’ de zhenglun,” *Wenyi bao*, no.10 (1956):12-13. Although *Buying Monkeys* was created in a relatively relaxed and open environment, its use of satire was controversial. Heated debates on this *xiangsheng* piece were published under the heading “How to Use the Weapon of Satire” in the 10th issue of *Wenyi bao* [Literary Gazette] in 1956.

³² This Spring Festival Gala was filmed by the Central Newsreel and Documentary Studio in the same year. It can be viewed at http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNjYzMDE4NDA=.html (accessed 11 August, 2016).

Pioneering the creation of “appropriate laughter” in Mao’s China, *xiangsheng* lent much inspiration to Chinese film artists’ experimentation with comedy. The most notable example is the Spring Comedy Society (Chuntian xiju she 春天喜劇社), the brainchild of film director Lü Ban 呂班³³ and successful *xiangsheng* writer He Chi. As an artistic group dedicated to the study and production of comedy, the Spring Comedy Society was the prime organization in bringing comedy to the silver screen. Immediately after its official establishment in May 1955, He Chi began scripting three comedy films, including *The Man Who Doesn’t Care about Trifles* (Buju xiaojie de ren 不拘小節的人).³⁴ Directed by Lü Ban and publicly released in 1956, the film *The Man Who Doesn’t Bother About Trifles* presents several disparate episodes, each of which ridicules a rising satirist’s uncivilized behavior. *Xiangsheng*’s influence on this film is evident at the levels of both content and narrative structure.

The other important collaboration between *xiangsheng* artists and filmmakers is the crosstalk-film project *Youyuan jingmeng* launched by CNDS in 1956. Before playing the lead role in *Youyuan jingmeng*, *xiangsheng* master Hou Baolin had already made a few appearances on screen, albeit in roles similar to his real-life character. In 1951 Hou made his screen debut in *Fang Zhenzhu* 方珍珠, a film adaptation of Lao She’s titular play. Centering on the eponymous heroine’s capricious fate, the film depicts the dramatic changes in the lives of a group of *quyi* professionals brought about by the triumph of the Chinese communist revolution, and calls for the building of a new *quyi* culture. Cast in the role of Bai Erli 白二立, a smooth-

³³ Lü Ban was the best-known comedy film director in the 1950s. During the Hundred Flowers Period, he made three satirical comedies: *Before the New Director Arrives* (Xin juzhang daolai zhiqian 新局長到來之前, 1956), *The Man Who Doesn’t Care about Trifles* (Buju xiaojie de ren 不拘小節的人, 1956) and *Unfinished Comedies* (Meiyou wancheng de xiju 沒有完成的喜劇 1957).

³⁴ Li Daoxin provides a detailed account of how the Spring Comedy Society was founded and then disbanded. Due to political, institutional and personal factors, both He Chi and Lü Ban were labelled as Rightists in 1957. See Li Daoxin, “Cansheng de tizhi yu jianbai de ren,” *Dianying yishu*, no.5 (2012), 111-121.

tongued and worldly *xiangsheng* performer, Hou performs some amusing low-brow *xiangsheng* pieces as required by the film narrative. Later he appeared in the 1951 documentary *The Portrait of President Truman*³⁵ and the aforementioned 1956 Spring Festival Gala.

Compared with the films mentioned above, *Youyuan jingmeng* is an unconventional work that collapses the boundaries between fiction and documentary, and between *xiangsheng* and film. Ostensibly, it captures the eponymous *xiangsheng* piece as performed by Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru in front of a movie camera instead of a live audience. But, upon a closer look, one finds that Shi Lan's film is neither a *xiangsheng* piece issued as a film nor a film adaptation of *xiangsheng*. It is a border-crossing film that brings two distinct media — *xiangsheng* and *film* — into dynamic and complex intermedial play. In addition, the film was unmistakably intended to be entertaining. Its title *Youyuan jingmeng* not only refers to the diegetic *xiangsheng* piece that satirizes a man who bends all kinds of rules during his visit to the newly opened Beijing Zoo (dongwu yuan 动物园). It also puns on the most famous scene, “youyuan jingmeng” 遊園驚夢 (Wandering in the Garden, Awakening from A Dream), from the 17th century playwright Tang Xianzhu's *The Peony Pavilion* (Mudan ting 牡丹亭), a classic love story that transcends life and death, time and space. The comic incongruity created by the intentional confusion of the titles of a comic routine/satirical film and a sentimental literary piece would certainly elicit a chuckle from the knowing viewer.

The film's innovative way of producing laughter needs to be understood within a broader framework that considers the interplay of institutional practices, ongoing trends in Chinese filmmaking and contingent factors. With the start of the first national Five-Year Plan in 1953,

³⁵ Made by the Shanghai Great Light Film Company, this film was intended to support the Chinese Volunteer's Army at the Korean War battlefield. Because Truman soon stepped down as president of the United States, the film was no longer considered sufficiently newsworthy to present to the public. See Hou Baolin, “Wo dengshang yinmu,” in Hou Xin, ed. *Qizui bashe Hou jia shier*, 70.

film production, screenplays and film theory became the three main targets of “film construction.” In view of the fact that both quantity and quality of film production in preceding years had hardly met the demands of the people, in December 1953 the State Council passed a “Resolution on Strengthening Film Production Work” (*Guanyu jiaoliang dianying zhipian gongzu de jueding* 關於加強電影制片工作的決定), which stressed that cinema is not only an instrument of education but also a form of mass entertainment. In accordance with the Resolution, the Ministry of Propaganda stipulated new guidelines for documentary filmmaking: “Newsreel and documentary filmmaking should report in a timely and truthful fashion our people’s achievements in socialist industrialization and socialist reforms across the nation and their contribution to the safeguarding of world peace; it should also make a long-term plan to film our motherland’s beautiful landscapes, scenic spots and relics, and important artifacts and antiques.”³⁶ In the same month, CNDS held a Film Creation Conference (*chuangzuo huiyi* 創作會議) to discuss various issues concerning documentary production. In his speech delivered at this conference, the vice-minister of Propaganda, Zhou Yan 周揚, reminded all attendees that while aiming to “raise the people’s socialist consciousness,” documentary filmmaking should aspire to high artistic quality.³⁷

In this context, film workers at CNDS began to explore new subject matter, documentary genres and film styles. Between 1953 and 1957, the studio was remarkably successful in diversifying documentary into various sub-genres, including the stage-arts documentary (*wutai yishu jilupian* 舞台藝術紀錄片).³⁸ It is worth noting that “stage-arts documentary” is not a

³⁶ Chen Bo, *Zhongguo dianying biannian jishi: zonggang juan, shang* (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2005), 388-89.

³⁷ Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo dianying chubanshe, 2005), 148.

³⁸ In addition to stage documentaries, there were landscape documentaries, sports documentaries and biographies, and critical documentaries. See Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi*. 163.

generic label exclusive to documentary film. The highly elusive term encompasses a wide range of film practices that involve stage arts, including film adaptation of stage performance. When used in its narrowest sense, it is synonymous with “opera film.” In fact, the decision by CNDS to further develop the stage-arts documentary was inspired by the sensational success of *Love Eterne* (Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山伯與祝英台), China’s first opera film in color, made by the Shanghai film studio in 1953.³⁹ Directed by San Hu 桑弧 and Huang Sha 黃沙 and starring the famous Zhejiang Yue Opera 越劇 actresses Yuan Xuefen 袁雪芬 and Fan Ruijuan 范瑞娟, the film *Love Eterne* integrates the Yue Opera, singing style and performance methods with current cinematic techniques, thereby transforming the conventions and appeal of traditional Chinese opera art into a part of cinematic attraction. As *Love Eterne* ushered in a wave of opera film production,⁴⁰ CNDS embarked on its own project of documenting a broad range of stage arts in order to inject entertainment into its documentary production. Between 1954 and 1956 the studio filmed a variety of stage performances, including local operas, folk dances, acrobatics, and even the Spring Festival Gala show.⁴¹ The reformed *xiangsheng* proved to be a good subject for this emerging documentary genre.

³⁹ The film won the Best Musical award at the 1954 Karlovy Vary international film festival in 1954. In 1957 it garnered first prize in the opera film category of the 1949-1955 Outstanding Film award sponsored by the Ministry of Culture.

⁴⁰ In the 1950s and early 1960s, multiple labels were given to opera films, including “opera art film” and “stage art documentary,” all highlighting questions of form and medium.

⁴¹ *Minjin wudao* 民間舞蹈 (Folk Dances 1954), *Zhongguo zaji yishu* 中國雜技藝術 (Chinese Acrobatics, 1954), *Chunjie da lianhuan* 春節大聯歡 (Spring Festival Gala, 1956) are some examples. See Shan Wanli, *Zhongguo jilu dianying shi*, 164. The questions of form and medium occupied a central position in discussion of the stage arts documentary in the 1950s. Some were dissatisfied with the drab, documentary style and wished filmmakers to employ the technological apparatus of cinema to make the stage performance more attractive, while others expressed concerns about the ontological status of cinema. For a detailed discussion of theoretical debates on opera films in the 1950s and early 1960s, as well as the opera film’s unique aesthetics, see Weihong Bao, “The Politics of Remediation: Mise-en-scène and the Subjunctive Body in Chinese Opera Film,” *The Opera Quarterly*, vol.26, no.2-3 (2010): 256-290.

In addition to cultural policies and filmmaking trends in the early 1950s, contingent factors played a part in actualizing *xiangsheng-dianying*. As Huo Zhuang 霍庄, a film director at the Beijing Film Studio, recalls, *Youyuan jingmeng* was launched as an emergency plan to help CNDS to fulfill its annual production quota. Under both time and political pressures, the head of the studio sought the help of Xie Tian 謝添, a multi-talented actor-screenwriter-director who had a knack for improvisation and a good knowledge of comedy.⁴² The result was the seemingly politically safe script of *Youyuan jingmeng* written by Xie Tian, Sang Fu 桑弧 and Yu Yanfu 於彥夫, which bears Xie's idiosyncratic mark in its spontaneous mix of such disparate elements such as the nimblest stage art, *xiangsheng*, the Beijing Zoo — one of the major attractions of China's capital, and literary allusion.

While all stage-arts documentaries deal to some extent with the relationship between film and other media, what distinguishes *Youyuan jingmeng* is its unrestrained formal experimentation. Rather than utilizing remediation, the representation of one medium through another, the film's appropriation of *xiangsheng* within its narrative clearly reconfigures both film and *xiangsheng*, and consequently engenders a unique comedic form characterized by an aesthetics of intermediality.

The aesthetic innovation of *Youyuan jingmeng* is manifested first and foremost in the numerous reflexive aspects of the film, which foreground the interaction and interplay of *xiangsheng* and cinema. Firstly, the film's overall structure corresponds to the formal conventions of *xiangsheng*: it starts with a stock, self-reflexive preamble, in which *xiangsheng* performers introduce various aspects of the art — in this case the “dianying-xiangsheng” (a comic film routine). This is followed by the main piece, which satirizes an inconsiderate advantage-taker who disobeys all regulations during his visit to the Beijing Zoo. Distinct from

⁴² Huo Zhuang, “Hou Baolin yu dianying,” *Dianying yishu*, no. 5(2006): 61.

conventional *xiangsheng* performance, this piece is “performed” visually: a short film starring Hou Baolin as the obnoxious visitor is literally “pulled” by Hou, the *dougedu*, onto the stage in order to carry on the performance. (Fig.2) The short film follows the satirized subject, a “flawed character” played by Hou during his tour of the zoo. Several comic episodes make it clear that this character is a brazen, shifty, and careless man: he plays all sorts of tricks to avoid buying a ticket for the zoo; he ignores all sorts of prohibitions such as “Do Not Feed the Animals” just to seek his fun; he pretentiously acts as a knowledgeable tour guide yet gives apparently misleading information about the zoo animals. The man’s inappropriate behaviors repeatedly make him a laughingstock and invite criticism from other visitors.

Of particular note is that the short film contains its own thematic doubling in the visitor’s own dream of his tour of the zoo. Incidents portrayed in this dream sequence appear to be plausible sequels to the previous episodes, but with direr consequences. Ignoring rules and regulations, this unsympathetic visitor clammers onto an artificial hill of rocks, but accidentally falls into a tiger enclosure. Toward the end of this dream sequence, an unextinguished cigarette butt in his pocket triggers a smoke alarm in an exhibition hall. The man takes a run and jumps into a lake at the zoo, only to find that he is about to become the prey of a crocodile which he has earlier poked with a stick. At this moment the character is startled out of his dream. The *xiangsheng* piece is then wrapped up by the two performers’ off-screen remarks that “[those most dangerous incidents in the zoo] only occurred in the dream.” After a fade-in shot reintroduces Hou Baolin and Guo Qiru on stage, they take a bow—a stage performance routine that at once signals the ending of their *xiangsheng* performance and the conclusion of the film.

Evidently, *Youyuan jingmeng* creates an effect of self-reflexivity via the structure of *mise en abyme*, the arrangement of compositional elements within multiple frames that imitate one another. The film *Youyuan jingmeng*, the *xiangsheng* performance “*Youyuan jingmeng*,” and the stand-alone film sequence “*youyuan jingmeng*” constitute a process of representation

within representation, with each part bearing a relation of similarity to the previous one that contains it. This *mise en abyme* structure is also an intermedial one, as the flow of the aforementioned narrative segments is broken down into different media components: film, *xiangsheng*, and film. With this structure, the film not only privileges the mediating process of film narrative, but also heightens our awareness of a particular art experience that is grounded in the multi-sensuality of cinema.

Secondly, the interplay between film and *xiangsheng* foregrounds the transfiguration of each of the two media. Transfiguration, according to the film theorist Ágnes Pethő, is a “process of which one medium is transposed as a ‘figure’ into the other, also acting as a figure of ‘in-betweenness’ that reflects on both the media involved in the process.”⁴³ Aside from the film structure, another salient example of transfiguration is the opening sequence of the film, which is also the prologue to the *xiangsheng* piece delivered by Guo Qiru and Hou Baolin. Performed in a theater-like setting, this dialogue follows the standard formula of a *xiangsheng* preamble: the two performers explicitly discuss various ingredients of their art and pretend that they are merely conversing about *xiangsheng* rather than performing the actual piece. In this specific preamble, Hou and Guo discuss the unique features of “dianying-xiangsheng 電影相聲.”

Guo: This time we’re performing *xiangsheng*.

Hou: The piece we’re performing is a piece of *dianying-xiangsheng*.

Guo: *Dianying-xiangsheng*?

Hou: Yeah. It’s different from *xiangsheng* performed on stage. Who is in our audience?

Guo: I don’t know.

Hou: What are their responses?

Guo: I don’t know that either.

⁴³ Ágnes Pethő, *Cinema and Intermediality: The Passion for the In-between* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 4.

Hou: You can have a guess.

Guo: There's no way that I can do that. I can't see anything.

Hou: Aha, that's why this is called *dianying-xiangsheng*.

Guo: All right.

Hou: It has advantages too.

Guo: What advantages?

Hou: The film is moving. The camera can be pulled closer or farther; it can zoom out or zoom in.

This dialogue not only builds a sense of familiarity and orients audience expectations. It also addresses the distinctiveness of *dianying-xiangsheng*: its cinematic mediality. When presenting traditional *xiangsheng* pieces, the performers rely heavily on their audience's immediate reactions to either set the rhythm of their performance or add improvisation so as to stir up laughter. By contrast, in *dianying-xiangsheng* the visual attraction of moving images compensates for the lack of audience participation and provides amusement alongside comic dialogues. In fact Hou, in the role of an expert on *dianying-xiangsheng*, quickly introduces the third, albeit invisible, actor in this "new branch" of *xiangsheng*: the medium of film. To showcase this new player's comic power, he directly calls the movie camera to move closer, to pull back, or to stay still. His commands yield comic results while also popularizing a basic knowledge of camera moves. For example, when the camera zooms out to a wide shot, Guo Qiru becomes so tiny that Hou has to pick him up from the ground and then places him on the podium in order to resume their performance. (Fig.3) Hou quips about the advantage of this metamorphosis to his partner, "No ticket needed to watch a movie next time." Guo answers with a quick retort, "Sure, and my wife will surely divorce me." From a witty conversation on the medium of film, a product of science, the *xiangsheng* duo quickly moves to the topic of the numerous applications and uses of science in daily life. The Beijing Zoo is brought up as a

pertinent example because staff members at the zoo employ scientific methods in animal care and management. The prologue thus segues into the main piece of this *dianying-xiangsheng*.

Despite retaining many features of traditional *xiangsheng* routines, the prologue mentioned above reconfigures *xiangsheng*, introducing visuality and mobility as its new constituents. While popularizing knowledge of film as a medium, this trans-configuration prompts the audience to rethink each performer's role. With the medium of film being transposed as itself a new *xiangsheng* actor, Hou's role can no longer be strictly defined as a *dougende*, in opposition to a *penggende*, but needs to be considered in terms of his involvement in the new, triangulated relationship.

The process of transfiguration also features prominently in the main piece of the *xiangsheng*. Although the stand-alone film sequence starring Hou Baolin delivers a satirical message that can also be found in many conventionally staged *xin xiangsheng* pieces, film performance, which is central to this visually articulated "main piece," poses an ontological challenge to the art of *xiangsheng*. As Marja Kaikkonen once keenly observed, *xiangsheng* is essentially an art of storytelling rather than a subgenre of theater.⁴⁴ Hence, it is primarily concerned with showcasing the performer's virtuosity rather than with the construction of fictive roles. The cinematic "articulation" of the actual *dianying-xiangsheng* piece, however, privileges film performance, considering that its narrative comprises a string of loosely connected episodes. Without a doubt, this considerably alters the signifying process of *xiangsheng*. For Hou Balin, being cast in a comic role instead of a narrator-like role for the first time posed a great challenge. To prepare himself for his screen role in *Youyuan jingmeng*, the *xiangsheng* master watched several satirical film comedies recently made in China and the Soviet Union and began to contemplate how to develop a comedy performance style that would suit the cultural taste of Chinese film audiences. He perceptively recognised the importance of

⁴⁴ Marja Kaikkonen, *Laughable Propaganda*, 7.

subtle performance to Chinese film comedy based on his understanding of medium specificities: “Compared with *xiangsheng*, a film script has fewer dialogues. Only careful performance can help bring out the full meaning of the script.”⁴⁵ In an article written for the film magazine *Masses Cinema* (Dazhong dianying 大眾電影) after the public screening of *Youyuan jingmeng*, Hou voiced dissatisfaction with his film performance as it had not brought out the “strong flavor” of satirical comedy.⁴⁶ Ironically, this self-criticism failed to take account of the allure of “in-betweenness.” Regardless of the maturity of his film performance, Hou’s presence not only signals the co-existence and dynamic interaction of two media systems within the film *Youyuan jingmeng*, it also becomes an important cinematic attraction in itself.

Despite its focus being shifted from story-telling to theatrical performance, the *dianying-xiangsheng* constantly makes the traditional art of *xiangsheng* perceptible. The two *xiangsheng* performers, who are now visually absent from the short film, carry on their comic dialogue in the film’s audio track. Complementing much of the visual sweep of the short film, their casual conversation simultaneously reminds us of the presence of *xiangsheng* and draws our attention to the film’s documentary style. On some occasions, the performers’ banter corresponds to the gaze of the third player, the camera, thus directing the viewer’s attention to a particular character on screen; on other occasions, their talk, much like an expository voice-over narration, working in conjunction with contemplative close-up shots of animals from all parts of the world and well-positioned long shots of newly built exhibition halls and a scenic lake, introduces to the viewer various attractions at the zoo. The medium of film, in its unique way, helps augment the *xiangsheng* duo’s ridicule of the obnoxious, petty-minded visitor. The use of a slapstick comedy staple (slipping on a banana skin) and the display of incongruences between the visual and the aural (the rule-bender’s brag about his knowledge of fearsome,

⁴⁵ Hou Baolin, “Wo yan Youyuan jingmeng,” *Dazhong dianying*, no.2 (1957):12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

predatory brown bears as opposed to the adorable image of cuddly pandas) inevitably makes it fun to “watch,” not just to “hear,” the *dianying-xiangsheng*.

Upon its release *Youyuan jingmeng* attracted large audiences and was a success at box office.⁴⁷ While its intermedial experimentation fascinated many audience members, its unrestrained film style invited ruminations on the limits of formalism, and in particular its effect of producing “meaningful laughter” in this satirical film. In 1957 *Masses Cinema* published two such audience letters. A viewer from Beijing pointed out in her letter that minor continuity mistakes and the use of a dream sequence in *Youyuan jingmeng* weakened the film’s satirical power and realistic significance.⁴⁸ Influenced by the then prevalent social discourse of “healthy laughter,” another viewer also found fault with the dream sequence. He not only raised doubts about the appropriateness of laughing at an uncivilized comrade who slips on a banana skin and nearly falls prey to a crocodile, but also suggested that artistic exaggerations employed in the dream sequence, detaching it from reality, significantly undermined this satirical film as a tool for education.⁴⁹ Before long, public discussion of *Youyuan jingment* was suppressed. With the unfolding of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, Lü Ban and He Chi, the main creators of Chinese film satire, were attacked as Rightists and film comedy projects were suspended. The formalist innovations of *Youyuan jingmen* were soon interpreted as “wasting film stock” and “squandering public money,” became evidence of film artists’ “frivolous attitude,”⁵⁰ and thereafter the film and its laughter vanished from public view.

Conclusion

⁴⁷ Huo Zhuang, “Hou Baolin yu dianying,” *Dianying yishu*, no.5(2006):61. See also audience letters published in the 3rd and 6th 1957 issues of *Masses Cinema*.

⁴⁸ Yu Wei, “*Youyuan jingmeng* zhong de meng,” *Dazhong dianying*, no.3 (1957):17.

⁴⁹ Qiu Yang, “Gai xiao, haishi bugai xiao? –dui yingpian *Youyuan jingmeng* jingmeng de yijian,” *Dazhong dianying*, no.6 (1957):16.

⁵⁰ Huo Zhang, “Hou Baolin yu dianying,” *Dianying yishu*, no.5(2006):61-62.

The first wave of Chinese film comedy in the early Mao era produced not only polyphonic laughter but also intermedial laughter. To an extent, the development of comedic film art in the mid-1950s benefited from the collaboration and cross-fertilization between *xiangsheng* and film. From the establishment of the Spring Comedy Society in 1955 to the production of *xiangsheng dianying* in 1956, well-established *xiangsheng* writers and performers made a considerable contribution to the production of cinematic laughter off-screen and on-screen. The film *Youyuan jingmeng* starring Hou Baolin offers a unique opportunity to examine the distinct comedic aesthetics brought about by the convergence of parallel pursuits of laughter in film and *xiangsheng* circles. Foregrounding the interplay of *xiangsheng* and film, *Youyuan jingmeng* transfigures each of the two media. Much of the viewing pleasure of this film comes from an understanding of the specificities of both *xiangsheng* and film, and from an appreciation of a rather ingenious experiment with dynamic intermediality. Temporarily unburdened by political obligations, this quasi-documentary fiction film daringly stretched artistic boundaries and elicited multi-layered and intermedial laughter. Its formalist innovation is a forceful manifestation of innovative and imaginative laughter under Mao.

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