

Maoist Laughter

Edited by Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang, and Jason McGrath

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Joking after Rebellion

Performing Tibetan-Han Relations in the Chinese Military Dance “Laundry Song” (1964)

Emily Wilcox

The Tibetan uprising of 1959 and its subsequent suppression by PRC military forces is not a funny event, no matter the perspective from which it is observed. Some estimate that eighty-seven thousand Tibetans lost their lives in the struggle,¹ and the Dalai Lama’s escape left much of the Tibetan population permanently estranged from its spiritual leadership. The events shattered Sino-Indian relations, challenged Chinese Communist Party legitimacy, and inflamed long-lasting Tibetan nationalism that would threaten PRC stability into the twenty-first century. Given the seriousness of this event, what could be gained by making light of it through humor? Who might stand to benefit from such a joke, and who would be the butt of it?

In her 1970 theory of the joke pattern, social anthropologist Mary Douglas argued that in most societies particular situations call for jokes, even though the situations themselves are not humorous. What makes a joke possible, she posited, is the presence of a “joke pattern” within the social structure, or a situation in which “a dominant pattern of relations is challenged by another.”² According to Douglas, jokes appear and are recognized when they offer a symbolic expression of a submerged pattern in the social structure, a pattern that exists but is not accepted or dominant. “A joke is a play upon form,” Douglas writes. “It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another which in some way was hidden in the first.”³ In the aftermath of the 1959 Tibetan rebellion, such a structure would seem to exist in PRC popular culture and thus call for humor, according to Douglas’s idea of the joke pattern. The dominant or accepted pattern was that the PRC had exerted control over Tibet through its military intervention and that the Tibetan people had ultimately accepted, and even welcomed, PRC leadership, leading to a stable situation in Tibet. The hidden pattern, meanwhile, was that control had not been fully achieved, Tibetans had

1. Alex McKay, “Tibetan Uprising,” in *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*, vol. 5, ed. Karen Christensen and David Levinson (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2006), 489–91.

2. Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” in *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2001 [1970]), 152.

3. Douglas, 150.

not accepted or welcomed the new situation, and the potential for rebellion thus remained.

According to Douglas's model, a joke structure should have existed in China during the early 1960s around relations between Tibetans, the PRC state, and the Han-dominated People's Liberation Army (PLA) military teams then stationed in Tibet. Whether such a joke could be expressed, however, is another question. Part of Douglas's argument is that social structures not only produce joke patterns; they also determine whether these patterns can be expressed. "There are jokes which can be perceived clearly enough by all present but which are rejected at once," Douglas writes.⁴ The reason for this rejection, she argues, is that social controls make the joke impermissible: "Social requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper, or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge."⁵ Would it be permissible in the PRC during the years immediately after the Tibetan uprising to make—or laugh at—a joke suggesting that Tibetans may not, in fact, be under control? Investigating this question would offer insight into how the 1959 Tibetan uprising was represented in PRC popular culture. Additionally, and more relevant to the themes of this volume, it would tell us something about the broader social parameters of public humor in Maoist China.

The Tibet Military Area Political Department Cultural Work Troupe's dance piece "Laundry Song" ("Xiyi ge" 洗衣歌), premiered at the PLA's Third All-Military Arts Festival in Beijing in the spring of 1964, offers a case in which to explore this question.⁶ Four and a half minutes in length and featuring eight performers, "Laundry Song" depicts a playful story in which a group of Tibetan civilian women trick a male Han PLA squad leader into allowing them to wash a basket of laundry that he was planning to wash for his fellow soldiers. After the squad leader realizes what has happened, he returns the favor by carrying the women's water buckets (Figure 3.1). An instant success at the Festival, "Laundry Song" was studied by other ensembles and quickly became one of the most popular and widely performed works in the Maoist dance repertoire.⁷

The standard interpretation of "Laundry Song" in PRC dance scholarship is that it employed the narrative structure of a hoax or trick (*pian* 騙) to innovatively express two long-standing themes in Chinese socialist culture: *minzu tuanjie* 民族團結 (ethnic solidarity) and *junmin yushui-qing* 軍民魚水情 (closeness between soldiers and civilians).⁸ In other words, critics have interpreted the humorous

4. Douglas, 152.

5. Douglas, 152.

6. This work has no connection to Wen Yiduo's 聞一多 1925 poem of the same name.

7. Huang Xianglin, "Zuoye xingchen, yiran shanshuo: yi 'Xiyi ge' de bianzhezhe" *Xizang yishu yanjiu*, no. 3 (1991): 52–54.

8. See, for example, "Xiyi ge," in *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao zuopin shangxi*, ed. Jia Ainlin (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004), 43–44; Liu Min, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wudao shi* (Beijing: Jiefangjun wenyi chubanshe, 2011), 197–99.



Figure 3.1: Stage photograph of the dance “Laundry Song” (“*Xiyi ge*”), originally published in the magazine *Zhongguo sheying* (Chinese photography) in 1964.

plotline within the piece as a straightforward expression of the dominant accepted social pattern at the time regarding the Tibetan uprising—that relations between PLA soldiers and Tibetan civilians in the years after the uprising were harmonious and stable. The song lyrics used in the work also support this interpretation. A closer look at contemporary and retrospective writings about the piece, however, suggest that audiences may have also responded to expressions of the hidden or submerged pattern embedded in the work’s choreography.⁹ According to these testimonials, it was the unpredictable and rebellious quality of the Tibetan characters’ behavior that sparked the greatest interest among audiences. One critic writes, for example, that audiences “couldn’t help but laugh” (*qingbuzijin de……xiao qilai* 情不自禁地……笑起來) at the part when the Tibetan women splash water at the PLA

9. *Choreography* is a term used in dance studies to refer to meaningful movement. As Susan Foster writes, “Choreography challenges the dichotomization of verbal and nonverbal cultural practices by asserting the thought-filledness of movement and the theoretical potential of bodily action.” See “Choreographies of Gender,” *Signs* 24, no. 1 (1998): 28.

squad leader to keep him from getting to his laundry basket.¹⁰ Unlike the song lyrics, which articulated the gratitude Tibetan civilians purportedly felt toward the PLA, this interactive choreography showed Tibetan civilians being unruly and fooling the PLA squad leader to get what they want. The fact that audiences and critics alike responded to this choreography—audiences by laughing and critics by writing about their laughter—suggests that the joke pattern it expressed was to some extent permitted in the Maoist public sphere, both in live spectatorship and in print media.

Although the choreography of “Laundry Song” may have produced laughter by exploiting a hidden joke pattern, such laughter was permissible because the work as a whole reinforced dominant societal ideals. In this sense, the humor in “Laundry Song” can be compared to that in post-WWII popular culture in the United States, in which jokes about sensitive social issues typically reinforced, rather than challenged, dominant societal ideals. Much like contemporaneous American television sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957) and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963), “Laundry Song” and works like it offered funny entertainment that nevertheless reinforced the basic stories—typically fantasies—upon which an idealized form of national identity was constructed. As American cinema scholar Saul Austerlitz writes, “Sitcoms reflected America, but the mirrors they used could warp and bend reality into intriguing new patterns. Television could reflect not the America that was but the American that we wanted.”¹¹ Rather than being unique to Maoist China, the socially conformist humor of “Laundry Song” was common to a broader pattern of international post-WWII mass entertainment culture.

Extending this comparison yet further, the central plotline of “Laundry Song” can be placed in dialogue with a popular film structure that emerged in the United States during the civil rights era. Reflecting similar majoritarian anxieties about the destabilizing potential of interracial (in the Han-Tibetan case, interethnic) violence, a genre emerged that sociologist Hernán Vera and literary scholar Andrew Gordon call the “interracial buddy film.”¹² While seeming to take up controversial social issues, such films actually reinforce the fantasies of the dominant group. In the US context, Vera and Gordon argue, they “reassure the white audience of the fundamental decency and tolerance of the white self.”¹³ Ultimately, through its combination of sentimentality, humor, and the fantasy of mutual self-sacrifice, “Laundry Song” presents for China’s majority Han audience something ideologically similar to the US interracial buddy film. In this sense, it fulfills the function of the joke in Douglas’s terms by way of what she calls a “joke rite”—an expression with the symbolic structure of a joke that nevertheless upholds dominant values and hierarchies.

10. Quan Sheng, “Xiyi ge,” *Wudao*, no. 4 (1964): 17. All translations from Chinese are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.

11. Saul Austerlitz, *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2014), 2.

12. Hernan Vera and Andrew Gordon, *Screen Savivors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

13. Vera and Gordon, 89.

“Laundry Song” and Its Historical Context

Although “Laundry Song” was premiered five years after the Tibetan uprising and does not directly address the uprising in any of its content, the implied connection between the dance and this historical event can be established by examining the ensemble that created “Laundry Song” and the overall context of the work’s creation and popularization. The Tibet Military District’s Political Department’s Cultural Work Troupe (Xizang junqu zhengzhibu wengongtuan 西藏軍區政治部文工團, hereafter “Tibet Troupe”) that created “Laundry Song” was established on February 10, 1952, less than one year after Tibet came officially under PRC sovereignty through the Seventeen-Point Agreement of May 23, 1951.¹⁴ Most of the troupe’s members had trekked into and across Tibet from Qinghai and Sichuan in 1950 as part of cultural work troupes attached to the PLA Eighteenth Army sent in by the PRC to secure Tibet. Traversing rugged terrain from east and northeast, the army built mountain roads as it marched, and cultural work troupes provided artistic performances to offer ideological guidance and keep up soldiers’ spirits. Through interactions with Tibetan communities, troupe members did their best to study and draw inspiration from local music and performance styles in their music, dance, and theatrical productions.¹⁵

From its origins in the Nanchang Uprising in 1927, through its work during the early land reform campaigns, the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the Chinese Civil War, the PLA military arts tradition grew into a form of nationwide popular culture by the early PRC period. Because the performing arts were seen as an essential component of military strategy and a tool of social transformation necessary to the promotion of CCP politics, every area that had a PLA presence also had military arts ensembles, known as cultural work troupes (*wengongtuan* 文工團).¹⁶ By December of 1951, there were over sixty-four thousand people working in PLA-affiliated cultural work troupes across China.¹⁷ Thus, PLA performing arts made up a significant part of Maoist culture. With the professionalization of these groups during the 1950s, the number of people working in PLA performing arts was reduced, and emphasis shifted to increasing artistic quality and innovation. The First and Second All-Military Arts Festivals, held in Beijing in 1952 and 1959, respectively, were designed to elevate artistic standards and encourage new creation.¹⁸

Because it was too busy building roads and tending to local rebellion, the Tibet Troupe was unable to attend either the 1952 or the 1959 festivals.¹⁹ The 1959 festival, held from June 1 to July 19, took place less than three months after armed combat

14. Liu Min, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wudao shi*, 577; Melvin Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, And the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

15. Liu Zhiqun, “Zhonghua renmin gongheguo shiqi de Xizang wenyi,” *Xizang yishu yanjiu*, no. 2 (2002): 37.

16. For a recent study of the role of drama troupes in this history, see Brian DeMare, *Mao’s Cultural Army: Drama Troupes in China’s Rural Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

17. Liu Min, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wudao shi*, 148.

18. Liu Min, 149, 165–69.

19. Liu Min, 197.

had exploded in Lhasa, after a popular uprising incited by rumors that PRC officials intended to abduct the Dalai Lama.²⁰ The troupe had remained in Lhasa through the uprising and subsequent PLA military intervention, during which its members served in combat zones by delivering ammunition, carrying stretchers, and tending to injured PLA soldiers.²¹ On April 16, 1959, the troupe performed a show outside the Potala Palace on Lhasa's People's Square, as part of an event celebrating the progress of the PLA Military Control Committee in Lhasa and calling for final suppression of the ongoing rebellion activities in other areas of Tibet.²² Two days after the 1959 festival ended in Beijing, major PLA ensembles from around the country were sent to Gansu, Tibet, and the Chamdo Region to assist soldiers sent to quell rebellions.²³ According to historian Tsering Shakya, the PLA only fully secured control of Tibet in 1960.²⁴

During the next few years, the Tibet Troupe continued to travel around Tibet servicing PLA military bases and border patrol stations. In addition to the suppression of the 1959 uprising, it also participated in Tibetan social reforms of the early 1960s and the Sino-Indian border war of 1962. It was the Troupe's responsibility to continuously create new artistic works reflecting these contemporary events. Among the notable works they created in this period are "Hu Hanzhao" (胡漢釗), "Red Khata" ("Hongse de hada" 紅色的哈達), "A Slave's Fate" ("Nuli de mingyun" 奴隸的命運), "Qamdo Folk Dance" ("Changdu minjian wu" 昌都民間舞), and "Heroic Sentries of the Frontier Defense" ("Bianfang yingxiong shao" 邊防英雄哨).²⁵ Humor seems to have played a role in at least some of these works, such as a *xiangsheng* (comedic cross talk) act titled "Learning Tibetan" ("Xue Zanghua" 學藏話).²⁶ From the titles of these works, it is clear that they adapted common Maoist themes and genres to the Tibet context.

In the summer of 1963, the Tibet Troupe took on the task of educating Chinese populations living outside Tibet, via performance, about the 1959 uprising. On July 12, 1963, the troupe held public performances of a newly created six-act play on this topic, "Snowy Mountains Face the Sun" ("Xueshan chao yang" 雪山朝陽), for audiences in Beijing.²⁷ The play drew on the troupe's direct experiences of the uprisings, as well as their years of work promoting CCP perspectives on Tibetan politics. The earliest iteration of the play appeared in the spring of 1959 as a living newspaper drama (*huobao ju* 活報劇—a type of impromptu theater used to disseminate

20. For an overview of this incident, see Tsering Shakya, *The Dragon in the Land of Snows: A History of Modern Tibet Since 1947* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 185–211.

21. "Huoyue zai shijie wuji shang de wenyi qingqibing," *Guangming ribao*, July 13, 1963.

22. "Xizang renmin yongyuan zhongyu zuguo" *Renmin ribao*, April 16, 1959.

23. Liu Min, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wudao shi*, 580.

24. Shakya, *Dragon in the Land of Snows*, 208.

25. "Huoyue zai shijie wuji shang de wenyi qingqibing."

26. "Buwei fengxue pashan sheshui jingchange dao haifang bianfang xunhui yanchu" *Renmin ribao*, March 15, 1963.

27. "Xizang junqu zhengzhibu wengongtuan zai Jing gongyan huaju *Xueshan chao yang*," *Guangming ribao*, July 13, 1963.

information about current events) and was revised and edited over subsequent years into a concert stage production.²⁸

Chinese-language reviews of the play were quite positive, highlighting its educational value and overall effectiveness at conveying historical events in a lively and memorable way. Critics lauded the production's detailed portrayal of events leading up to the uprising, in particular the strategies allegedly used by Tibetan elites to manipulate the situation and incite rebellion in an effort to maintain their own privileged status. According to one viewer, the play showed the inherent problems of leaving wealthy elites in control of Tibet during the early years of PRC rule, by "denouncing the absurd fallacy that wolves and lambs can 'peacefully coexist.'"²⁹ Another reviewer appreciated the vivid depiction of villains in the story, such as Kalon Surkhang Wangchen Gelek, a high-level member of the local Tibetan government.³⁰ Both reviewers claimed this showed that local leaders would not "voluntarily exit the historical stage" and that it had therefore been necessary to "respond with the same harshness."³¹ Both the play and its reception thus positioned the Tibet Troupe as a source for reflections on life in contemporary Tibet and especially on events surrounding the Tibetan uprising.

Creation of "Laundry Song" began just after this tour. Toward the end of 1963, the Tibet Troupe started preparing a new gala for the PLA's Third All-Military Arts Festival scheduled to take place in Beijing the following summer. Among the new works to be created was a song and dance piece called "Laundry Song" on the theme of military-civilian relations. Li Junchen 李俊琛 (b. 1936), an experienced female Han dancer and choreographer, was assigned lead creator, and Luo Nianyi 羅念一 (b. 1932), an experienced male Han composer, was assigned to write the music.³² Li and Luo had joined PLA work in 1949, and both had by 1963 already been stationed in Tibet for over ten years.³³ The eight dancers assigned to the piece were all of Han ethnicity, although each had at least ten years of performing experience, also mainly in Tibet.³⁴ Bai Zhen, a Tibetan woman who played in the troupe's music ensemble, helped with the Tibetan lyrics for the work, and several troupe leaders, including Zhu Liu, Dong Rong, and Zhang Junfei, contributed other elements.³⁵

28. "Xizang junqu."

29. Deng Zhiyi, "Xizang renmin fanshen de shishi: ping huaju *Xueshan chao yang*," *Guangming ribao*, August 15, 1963. The "wolves" here were meant to refer to the Tibetan elites and the "lambs" to the common Tibetan people.

30. Chen Gang, "*Xueshan chao yang* fang guanghui: ping laizi Xizang fanying pingpan douzheng de huaju," *Renmin ribao*, October 27, 1963.

31. Deng, "Xizang renmin fanshen de shishi"; Chen Gang, "*Xueshan chao yang*."

32. Huang Xianglin, "Zuoye xingchen, yiran shanshuo," 52.

33. "Li Junchen," in *Zhongguo wudao jia da cidian*, ed. Feng Shuangbai et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2006), 178; Wang Jian, "A! Lanse de Yaluzangbu jiang: ji zuoqujia Luo Nianyi," *Renmin yinyue*, no. 6 (1985): 26–28.

34. The performers names were Tan Li, Huang Yuru, Yu Dehua, Zhao Bangling, Zhou Lingxi, Huang Xianglin, Bai Dehui, and Peng Dexiang. The performers who played the roles of PLA squad leader and trickster Zhuoga were husband and wife. Huang Xianglin, "Zuoye xingchen, yiran shanshuo," 52–53.

35. Li Junchen, "Xiyi ge' de chengong ningjuzhe zhongren de xinxiue," *Xizang yishu yanjiu*, no. 1 (2008): 34–37.

As depicted in a 1964 film recording, the dance work “Laundry Song” opens when seven women dancers representing Tibetan civilians enter in a line and sing as they carry water baskets over their shoulders.³⁶ Their left arms swing in coordination with their lightly bouncing feet, suggesting a stylized version of a Tibetan folk dance rhythm. A fast-paced tune comes from the Chinese orchestra as their song lyrics, in Mandarin punctuated with lines of Tibetan, set the scene: “The warm sun transforms snowy mountains / The Yarlung Tsangpo River water shimmers with golden light. . . . The PLA has arrived in our home / *We have entered the path of happiness, how fortunate.*”³⁷ Suddenly, the women notice something and stop singing. “Hey! The squad leader is doing laundry!” one shouts in Mandarin, pointing. Apparently hatching a plan, the women exchange whispers and then run off. As the music changes to a military tune, a male dancer playing the PLA squad leader bounds energetically on stage, grinning, with a basket of laundry on one shoulder. While the squad leader is setting down his laundry, the women begin to play a trick on the squad leader. One of them, called “Little Zhoigar,” sneaks up behind him. She shouts suddenly, kneels to the ground, wincing, and grasps her ankle in apparent pain. The squad leader abandons his laundry and runs over to help her. “Zhoigar, let’s go to the clinic!” he says, to which she responds, “No, I want to go see the amah!”³⁸ He helps her up and, with the squad leader supporting Zhoigar, the two walk off in the direction of the amah. Zhoigar looks back, gesturing for her friends to grab the laundry.

A long dance sequence ensues as the remaining women take advantage of the squad leader’s departure to wash his laundry in the river. By creatively melding everyday work movements with Tibetan tap dance (*tita wu* 踢踏舞) elements and work calls, the dancers present a vigorous and percussive “clothes-washing” sequence in which they mime actions such as soaking, rubbing, and trampling the clothes with their bare feet in the river, singing as they work.³⁹ The lyrics used in this sequence were the ones typically cited in printed musical scores for “Laundry Song” at the time:

Eh—Who helped us change our lives? *Hey!*⁴⁰ Who helped us become liberated? *Hey!* It’s our dear one, the PLA; it’s the emancipator, the CCP. Eh—Who helped us build public roads? *Hey!* Who helped us erect bridges? *Hey!* It’s our dear one, the PLA; it’s the emancipator, the CCP. Eh—Who helped us harvest highland barley? *Hey!* Who helped us build new houses? *Hey!* It’s our dear one, the PLA; it’s the emancipator, the CCP. Eh—Has our life completely changed? *Hey!* Is our happy

36. *Xuri dong sheng* (Beijing: August First Film Studio, 1964), 06:00–10:20. For online access to this film in its entirety, see http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XNDc0Nzc1MjQ0.html.

37. *Xuri dong sheng*, 06:00–06:34. Tibetan lyrics rendered in italics.

38. *Xuri dong sheng*, 06:34–06:57. This exchange takes place in Mandarin.

39. “Xiyi ge,” in *Zhongguo minzu minjian wudao zuopin shangxi*, ed. Jia Anlin (Shanghai: Shanghai yinyue chubanshe, 2004), 44; Quan, “Xiyi ge,” 18.

40. The lyrics are in Mandarin except for those in italics, which were in Tibetan. The phrase translated here as “Hey!” was a Tibetan work call transliterated into Mandarin as “*Alaheisi*.”

song without borders? *Hey!* Thank our dear one, the PLA; thank the emancipator, the CCP.

Refrain: *Wash, wash, quickly wash—Hey! Wash, wash, quickly wash—Hey! Wash, wash, quickly wash—Hey! Wash, wash, quickly wash—Hey! We have entered the path of happiness, how fortunate. Army and civilians are one family; help our dear one wash, wash clothes, eh.*⁴¹

Throughout this sequence, the dancers move and sing in unison with facial expressions of joy and good humor.⁴² They appear to be having fun, regardless of what is presumably hard work with bare hands and feet in ice cold water. Finally, the squad leader returns to find them washing his clothes. When he runs toward them, the women splash him, creating the scene that audiences found so funny. Then, Zhoigar grabs the laundry, and the squad leader chases her off stage. The other women congratulate themselves on the trick and then also exit, after which the squad leader returns carrying water buckets on a shoulder pole. He says to the audience, “Hah, they still want to trick me!” A woman calls from off stage, “The buckets have disappeared!” after which the squad leader shouts, “The buckets are right here!” The dance closes in a high-spirited mood, with the squad leader skipping off carrying the water buckets and the women singing and dancing in a trail behind him.⁴³

Reception and the Joke Pattern

The contemporary response to “Laundry Song” in Chinese-language print media was extremely positive. Although it was among more than 380 new works of music, dance, folk art, and acrobatics presented by eighteen PLA-affiliated ensembles at the 1964 festival,⁴⁴ the piece apparently stood out, as it was mentioned frequently by name in reviews and featured prominently in festival photo spreads published in major newspapers.⁴⁵ According to PLA records, two hundred people lined up to study “Laundry Song” within two days of its debut, and members of the Tibet Troupe remained in Beijing for a month after the festival to teach and advise groups who wanted to adopt the piece into their repertoires.⁴⁶ When the August First Film Studio created two color film documentaries later that summer to record and increase the nationwide visibility of important new creations presented at the festival, “Laundry Song” was among the twenty-two works selected for inclusion.⁴⁷

41. Li Junchen and Luo Nianyi, “Xiyi ge,” *Gequ*, no. 6 (1964): 9–11.

42. *Xuri dong sheng*, 06:58–09:00.

43. *Xuri dong sheng*, 09:01–10:20. Quoted dialogue in Mandarin.

44. Zhou Zemin and Cheng Peng, “Xin shidai gewu yishu de fengshou: ji Jiefang jun di san jie wenyi huiyan,” *Renmin ribao*, May 10, 1964.

45. See, for example, the photo spread in Luo Mingyang, “Zhenfenrenxin de zhandou gewu,” *Guangming ribao*, April 23, 1964.

46. Liu Min, *Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun wudao shi*, 199.

47. “Di san jie quanjun wenyi huiyan wudao jiemu shezhi liang bu caise jilupian,” *Guangming ribao*, July 27, 1964; Long Yinpei, “Wudao yishu geminghua de bangyang: tuijian wudao yingpian *Xuri dong sheng Dong feng wanli*,” *Renmin ribao*, May 10, 1964.

Thematically, “Laundry Song” did not represent a major departure from established PLA performance repertoires. It belonged to one of the most common categories of PLA performance of all time: works celebrating *junmin yu-shuiqing* 軍民魚水情 (the close relationship between soldiers and civilians).⁴⁸ The metaphor used in this phrase, “the closeness of fish in water” (*yu-shuiqing*), refers to Mao Zedong’s famous idea that the relationship between the military and the people should be like that of a fish to the ocean in which it swims. This view implied not only an emotional closeness and affection but also practical dependence. As intellectual historian Stuart Schram put it, “Without the ‘ocean’ of mass sympathy and support, the ‘fish’ of the revolutionary army would die helplessly.”⁴⁹ Applied to the context of post-1959 Tibet, the “fish in water” metaphor meant that the PLA relied on the Tibetan civilians for survival. In the context of “Laundry Song,” this theme was best expressed through the group clothes-washing scene, in which the Tibetan civilians wash the clothes of the PLA soldiers and sing a song praising the PLA’s involvement in Tibetan civilian life. In the song lyrics, the Tibetan characters describe how the PLA has helped them in nonmilitary affairs such as transforming the social system, building new material infrastructure, and carrying out tasks like farming and house construction.

Despite the relevance of the clothes washing scene and its accompanying song lyrics to the work’s overall theme, contemporary critics paid little attention to these elements in their reviews. The only writer to specifically mention the song lyrics did so in a negative fashion, concluding that “a stronger connection between the song, dance, and content” was one of few aspects of the piece that “still had room for improvement.”⁵⁰ Instead, what received attention was the behavior of the Tibetan characters, in particular, their interactions with the PLA squad leader and their scheme to trick him. In a summary of the piece published in *Wudao* (Dance), “Laundry Song” choreographer Li Junchen explained, “[The women] prepared to help [the squad leader] wash, but according to past experience, they knew he wouldn’t allow them to do so. Therefore, they discussed a counterstrategy.”⁵¹ Another writer, Quan Sheng, argued that this component of the work was what set it apart from the many other works on the theme of soldier-civilian relations. Quan wrote,

Expressing soldier-civilian relationships is already an old theme. . . . However, the choreographer for ‘Laundry Song’ didn’t fall into the old pattern. Instead, the work broke fresh ground and found a brand new way of handling this theme, by selecting a random small act from daily life. This is what gave the work its moving power.

48. All major Chinese newspapers referred to this phrase in their reviews of “Laundry Song” at the time. See, for example, “Zhang jianwu tuichenchuxin,” *Jiefangjun bao*, April 21, 1964; “Biaoxian xin shidai, chuangzao xin fengge,” *Guangming ribao*, April 23, 1964; “Jiefang jun wenyi huiyan you yi pi zai jing gongyan,” *Renmin ribao*, April 26, 1964.

49. Stuart Schram, *The Thought of Mao Tse-Tung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 47.

50. Quan, “Xiyi ge,” 18.

51. Li Junchen, “Xiyi ge,” *Wudao*, no. 5 (1964): 36.

The girls know the soldier won't leave his laundry for them to wash, so they are forced to trick him."⁵²

When interpreting the meaning of this act, writers emphasized the desire of the Tibetan women to help the PLA soldier. For example, Quan wrote, "The fact that they take any situation as an opportunity to do something nice for the PLA more effectively shows the military-civilian bond."⁵³ In another essay for *Wudao*, Li linked the story depicted in "Laundry Song" to other "heroic acts" she had personally witnessed Tibetan civilians perform on behalf of the PLA. Recalling examples from her twelve years of living in Tibet, she described a time when local Tibetans jumped into an icy river to help pull out a PLA vehicle stuck in the ice, and another time when elderly Tibetan women set up a "tea station" for soldiers on their way back from a particularly remote border defense station. Such acts, she wrote, gave her confidence that the Tibetan people were supporting her and other PLA soldiers and that therefore they would be victorious.⁵⁴

This focus on the agency and intention of the Tibetan characters supported the dominant theme of soldier-civilian harmony. However, it also made possible the expression and reception of the joke structure—namely, the hidden idea that circumstances in Tibet might still be unstable. From the selection of scenes represented in contemporary published photographs and Chinese-language media reviews, it is clear that two points in "Laundry Song" attracted special attention from audiences: (1) when Zhoigar pretends to twist her ankle and (2) when the women splash the squad leader. Neither of these actions is expressed in the work's lyrics or spoken dialogue. Rather, they are conveyed through movement and thus belong to the choreographic register of representation. In the first case, Zhoigar falls to the ground, winces, and grabs her ankle, then looks back and waves at her friends as she limps away. In the second case, the women move forward and swat their hands up from the imagined water level toward the squad leader, after which he wipes his face with his apron. These choreographic moments express the joke pattern because although they present no danger within the narrative, they nevertheless show Tibetan civilians acting in ways that are unpredictable, surprising, and rebellious. Most important, these actions are what allow Tibetan civilians to gain power in relation to a PLA representative within the context of the story. For audiences at the time, these moments were funny because they invoked the submerged pattern in post-1959 China regarding Tibet—that despite the PLA's successful suppression of the uprising, there may still be the potential for further rebellion.

To see the possibility of this interpretation, it is helpful to place "Laundry Song" in conversation with the Tibet Troupe's earlier productions. The sequence in which Zhoigar pretends to hurt her ankle to distract the squad leader and cause

52. Quan, "Xiyi ge," 17.

53. Quan, 17.

54. Li Junchen, "Han Zang renmin qing si hai," *Wudao*, no. 4 (1964): 14.

him to leave his laundry by the riverside makes light of a submerged concern that Tibetan civilians might use deceit against the PLA or the CCP government. This concern accords with the representation of history presented in the troupe's 1963 play "Snowy Mountains Face the Sun" (discussed above), which depicted the 1959 uprising as a result of treachery on the part of Tibetan elites, who had allegedly been "two-faced."⁵⁵ Even though, in the context of "Laundry Song," Zhoigar and her friends are tricking the squad leader in order to help him, this action still presents the symbolic structure of deceit and therefore resonates with the submerged idea that produces the joke pattern. One critic gestured at this relationship by using a military reference to describe Zhoigar's trick, calling it "a 'luring the enemy away from its base' strategy."⁵⁶ Part of what makes Zhoigar's trick reference the joke pattern is that, like any hoax, it is not just about deceit; it also sets up an unequal power relationship. Explaining the definition of a hoax, Rodney Marks and Jessica Milner Davis write, "The hoax and the prank indulge the spirit of fun but combine it with a power game, as the hoaxer pushes to see just how far the audience can be strung along."⁵⁷ In this case, the audience of the hoax is the PLA squad leader. In "Laundry Song," the encounter between the Tibetan women and the squad leader is friendly and jovial. However, their encounter also represents a power struggle because the basic goals of the women and the squad leader are contradictory. As another critic pointed out, "the central conflict in the piece is that one side wants to wash, and the other side won't allow them to wash."⁵⁸ Ultimately, by playing a trick on the squad leader, the Tibetan women get the upper hand.

The sequence in which the women splash the squad leader is the funniest part of the piece—when audiences "couldn't help but laugh"—because it has no logical purpose in the plot and is thus completely egregious, rebellion for rebellion's sake. By this point in the narrative the Tibetan women have already achieved their goal of washing the squad leader's laundry. This sequence was typically explained, according to the "fish in water" metaphor, as an expression of the close relationship between the women and the squad leader. The caption to a photo of "Laundry Song" published in the *People's Liberation Army Daily*, for example, began, "Tibetan girls love 'jinzhumami 金珠瑪米' [the PLA] and leave nothing untried in their effort to wash the soldiers' clothes."⁵⁹ Li, the choreographer, explained at the time that they added this splashing scene specifically to enhance the sense of friendliness between the women and the squad leader. In a 1964 essay, she writes, "When we presented an early version, people said they understood [the plot] but the relationship between the Tibetan people and the military seemed unduly constrained or ill at ease,

55. Chen Gang, "Xueshan chao yang fang guanghui."

56. Quan, "Xiyi ge," 17.

57. Rodney Marks and Jessica Milner Davis, "Hoax and Prank," in *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, ed. Salvatore Attardo (New York: Sage, 2014), 339.

58. Ngawang Dhondup, "Cong wudao 'Xiyi ge' chuanguo he biaoyan shoufa zhong jiejian shenme," *Xizang yishu yanjiu*, no. 1 (2001): 15–18.

59. "Zhan ge jian wu tuichenchuxin." See also Quan, "Xiyi ge," 17.

not close enough. . . . Then we thought of having them splash him. This worked immediately.”⁶⁰ According to this explanation, the splashing scene serves to ease potential tension by showing that the Tibetan civilians and PLA squad leader are so comfortable with one another that they can play around and tease one another like old friends.

This explanation makes sense in terms of how “Laundry Song” should be read in light of the dominant PRC narrative about soldier-civilian relations in Tibet five years after the uprising. However, when Li wrote again about “Laundry Song” two decades later, she gave a slightly different account, one that suggests multiple readings of this scene were possible. In her later essay, Li recalls that the splashing scene had at one point been quite controversial. She writes, “Some people criticized it, saying it was not serious and it distorted and defamed military-civilian relations, breaking the [PLA’s] Three-Eight working style.”⁶¹ This suggests that responses to the splashing scene in “Laundry Song” were not as straightforward as the standard “fish in water” interpretation allows. As is often the case with the best humor, the splashing scene could be read in multiple ways, at least one of which puts it outside the confines of social acceptability. A little further and the work would have been out of bounds, a little less and it would have appeared stiff and boring. This ambiguity, and the hidden meaning it contained, is what made the scene humorous for audiences in 1960s China, whose laughter signaled that the joke pattern had been triggered.

Utopic Visions and the Joke Rite

Maoist China is well known for being a time and place in which popular media produced idealized pictures of reality depicting the nation not as it was but as it hoped to be. This pattern, however, is neither unique to Maoist China nor to the socialist world more generally. It also appeared during the same period in US popular entertainment culture, which often depicted unrealistic images of American life that helped reinforce dominant social norms. Although they represent quite disparate artistic mediums and social contexts, Cold War-era US sitcoms and the PLA dance work “Laundry Song” are comparable in that both were aimed at mass audiences and both used humor to fulfill fantasies and assuage concerns of the dominant social group. According to literary scholar Heidi Kim, post-WWII US sitcoms depicted “aspirational white middle-class American family life” and employed false depictions of homogeneity and stability to “address a larger social unease about

60. Li Junchen, “Han Zang renmin qing si hai,” 14.

61. Li Junchen, “Junmin yushuiqing Han Zang qing si hai,” in *Wudao wuju chuanguo jingyan wenji* (Beijing: Renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1985), 196–200. The “Three-Eight working style” (*san ba zuofeng* 三八作风) is a PLA slogan that refers to three Mao quotes (“firm and correct political orientation,” “persevering and simple style of work,” and “flexible tactics and strategy”) and four two-character adverbs (“united,” “alert,” “earnest,” and “lively”). Daniel Leese, *Mao Cult: Rhetoric and Ritual in China’s Cultural Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 287.

the growing numbers of new faces in the nation and women in the workforce, . . . as well as Cold War impositions of conformity.”⁶² Without a doubt, much about the content, format, and mechanisms of production and distribution of post-WWII US television sitcoms was different from those of Mao-era PLA performing arts. However, a comparison between these mediums is useful in that it helps illuminate the ways in which humor can result from the exploitation of a joke pattern without generating social or political transgression.⁶³

What makes “Laundry Song” similar to post-WWII US sitcoms is that both stimulate humor through their engagement with joke patterns, but their ultimate social impact is less as a “joke” and more as a “joke rite” in Douglas’s framework. According to Douglas, what differentiates a joke from a rite is the impact each has on the social order. Whereas jokes are inherently disruptive of social hierarchies, rites by definition support them. She writes,

From the physical to the personal, to the social, to the cosmic, great rituals create unity in experience. They assert hierarchy and order. In doing so, they affirm the value of the symbolic patterning of the universe. Each level of patterning is validated and enriched by association with the rest. But jokes have the opposite effect. They connect widely differing fields, but the connection destroys hierarchy and order. They do not affirm the dominant values, but denigrate and devalue. Essentially a joke is an anti-rite.⁶⁴

In Douglas’s notion of the “joke rite,” the full structure and experience of the joke exists, but it directs attention at some aspect of the social structure other than the one being immediately addressed by the rite. In this way, the joke can still be disruptive, just not of the specific hierarchical relationship or fundamental social order that the rite as a whole is supporting. Overall, the joke exists, but it operates as a rite because it still upholds the existing social order.

In the case of post-WWII US sitcoms like *I Love Lucy* and *Leave It to Beaver*, humor introduced forms of everyday instability without fundamentally challenging the social order that both shows more broadly served to validate and uphold. That is, while they generated humor by showing wives and children who rebel, both nevertheless reinforced the sanctity of domestic life organized around the dominant ideal of the hierarchically structured American nuclear family. In *I Love Lucy*, a show about a housewife who wishes to be a movie star, jokes constantly gesture at the flouted dreams that lie beyond conventional family life. Although Lucy and Desi

62. Heidi Kim, *Invisible Subjects: Asian America in Postwar Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–8.

63. While the United States also had military entertainment programs organized through the United Service Organization and Special Services, these programs were nowhere near as extensive as those of the PLA, nor did they have an equivalent status in mainstream US culture. Kara Dixon Vuic, “Recreation” in *Encyclopedia of Military Science*, ed. G. Kurt Piehler (New York: Sage, 2013), 1194–97; Meredith H. Lair, *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

64. Douglas, “Jokes,” 154–55.

often fight and Lucy sometimes gets jobs, their relationship remains unquestioned, as does the premise that Lucy's dreams are basically ridiculous.⁶⁵ Similarly, *Leave It to Beaver* makes light of the fact that children can be disobedient, sometimes with the help of mothers and siblings, and that fathers can overreact. Yet the show always returns to the basic idea of the soundness and stability of parental authority, especially fatherly authority, as the foundation for family life and, more broadly, American society.⁶⁶

Whereas the post-WWII US sitcom reinforced the dominant ideal of middle-class domestic life at a time when many of its viewers were concerned about social conformity and women in the workforce, Chinese PLA performance works such as "Laundry Song" reinforced the dominant value of PLA control in Tibet at a time when many of its viewers were concerned about lingering unrest and instability. Although PLA performance was a mainstream cultural phenomenon in China during the early 1960s, one of its most important audiences was members of the PLA, considered one of the three most important groups in Chinese society at the time.⁶⁷ As mentioned above, divisions of the PLA from across China had been sent into Tibet during the 1950s and the years immediately after the 1959 uprising. Thus, many PLA audiences would have either had personal experience in Tibet or faced the possibility of being sent there in the event that rebellions reignited or grew more serious. As historical anthropologist Carole McGranahan has documented, civilian units of Tibetan resistance fighters, some supported by the US CIA, carried out active military operations in Tibetan areas of China and in the Tibetan exile community until 1974.⁶⁸ Although for diverse reasons these operations failed to be officially recognized by the Tibetan, US, or PRC governments, servicemen and women in the PLA would have been the most likely to have experienced them personally and, as the public face of the PRC in Tibet, to have been its targets. Furthermore, because of the embeddedness of the PLA in Chinese society at the time, this would affect not only PLA soldiers but also their families and extended communities.

Within this context, the theme of mutual aid at the heart of "Laundry Song" was important both for upholding the PLA's mission of promoting PRC control in Tibet and for easing the concerns of PLA soldiers, which may have included fears about personal safety and distrust of the Tibetan civilians they would have to rely on if sent to Tibet. As mentioned earlier, "Laundry Song" was not only about soldier-civilian relations but also about interethnic dynamics, in this case mainly relations between Han and Tibetans in Tibet. Since interethnic division and distrust had been an important factor that led to the Tibetan uprising, the uprising indicated that ethnic relations in Tibet were not as harmonious as depicted in the official

65. Austerlitz, *Sitcom*, 7–24.

66. Austerlitz, 53–56.

67. In the Maoist phrase for the three crucial groups in revolutionary society—"workers, peasants, and soldiers"—"soldiers" referred to members of the PLA.

68. Carole McGranahan, *Arrested Histories: Tibet, the CIA, and Memories of a Forgotten War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

narratives. Thus, the joke structure that produced the humor in “Laundry Song” derived not just from hidden concerns about the possibility of ongoing rebellion in Tibet but also concerns about the mismatch between a social reality of interethnic distrust and violence and a national identity premised on interethnic harmony and egalitarianism. During the civil rights movement in the United States, which coincided with the Maoist period in China, white Americans were faced with similar reminders that the United States, a country that claimed to promote freedom and equality, was not living up to these ideals in reality. The dynamics of race relations in the United States during the civil rights era thus produced similar joke structures to those that existed in China around Han-Tibetan relations after the 1959 uprising. A type of US Hollywood film, known as the “interracial buddy film,” was similar to “Laundry Song” in that it used themes of friendship and mutual aid to sooth concerns about these social problems.⁶⁹ Like “Laundry Song,” which was directed primarily at the majority Han, the interracial buddy film was directed mainly at majority-white American audiences. The film that established this pattern, according to Vera and Gordon, was *The Defiant Ones* (1958), a story that famously ended with a black man sacrificing his own safety out of concern for his white friend.⁷⁰ As novelist James Baldwin pointed out, the film’s ending served “to reassure white people, to make them know they are not hated.”⁷¹ Although it seemed to celebrate care and concern between black and white Americans, the film’s ultimate effect was to reinforce the dominant white narrative that relations between racial groups in the United States were harmonious and required no change.

One way that Hollywood interracial buddy films presented utopian visions of American society that paralleled those presented about Chinese society in “Laundry Song” is through their reduction of complex structural and historical violence to a problem that can be resolved through positive relationships between individuals. “If we can only be friends and recognize that we are all really the same inside, then racism will vanish with handshakes and hugs,” Vera and Gordon summarize.⁷² With its tone of friendly laughter and plot structure based on a premise of friendly mutual aid, “Laundry Song” similarly reduces the complexity of Tibetan-Han relations to personal relationships and individual attitudes. Just as this message in the interracial buddy film serves ultimately to minimize the real concerns of the civil rights movement, the message in “Laundry Song” similarly minimizes the real concerns of those involved in the Tibetan uprising. The point here is not to compare the struggles of black Americans during the civil rights era with those of Chinese Tibetans during or after the 1959 Tibetan uprising. Rather, it is to use cross-cultural comparison to shed light on the social and ideological operations of humor in post-WWII popular culture. Rather than regarding the cultural production of Maoist China as

69. Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*.

70. Vera and Gordon, 154–58.

71. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial), 599.

72. Vera and Gordon, *Screen Saviors*, 163.

fundamentally different or alien to that of the Western capitalist world, it is helpful to see parallels that highlight shared issues. One such parallel is the use of humor in popular culture in a way that simultaneously exploits the joke structure while functioning ideologically as a joke rite.

Although it pokes fun at the hidden structure of continued Tibetan rebellion and potential PLA endangerment, “Laundry Song” is a joke rite because its overall message upholds the dominant narrative that China is ethnically unified and that conditions in Tibet are stable. One of the ways “Laundry Song” presents this overall message is by depicting both sides of the Han-Tibetan and PLA-civilian relationship as essentially harmless. On the Tibetan civilian side, there is a group of young, unarmed, and ultimately well-meaning women, who are so trusting of the PLA squad leader that they follow him into camp barefoot. On the other side, there is a PLA squad leader who, rather than being a combat officer, is head of the camp’s kitchen staff.⁷³ The threat of violence by the PLA toward Tibetan civilians is defused by the fact that the squad leader is characterized as gullible and naïve, and the numbers are stacked in favor of the Tibetans, with seven Tibetan women confronting one Han man. These details all contribute to the overall impact of the dance. Had the piece instead featured armed PLA combat soldiers and Kampa resistance fighters, or a group of PLA soldiers and one Tibetan woman, the effect of the choreography might have been very different. However, because “Laundry Song” stages interactions between a PLA soldier and Tibetan civilians as friendly, fun, and harmless, its overall impact defuses the very element of fear or discomfort that also makes the joke structure in the work funny. In other words, like the humor of a post-WWII US sitcom or interracial buddy film, the humor in “Laundry Song” is permissible because it is not threatening to the broader social order. Audiences can take pleasure in seeing a scenario they know to be potentially dangerous play out in an innocuous fashion that ends with a reinforcement of the status quo. As with Lucy’s jobs, Beaver’s antics, and the interracial friendship in *The Defiant Ones*, Zhoigar’s hoax and the women’s splashing in “Laundry Song” are just dangerous enough to be funny, but nothing more. For this reason, such humor ultimately undermines the potential for social critique or disruption that the underlying joke structure itself might otherwise have possessed. Such works bring people together through laughter while further reinforcing the intended audience’s identification with dominant social patterns and ideals.

73. Reviews of the piece consistently describe him as a *chuishi banzhang* 炊事班長 (head of kitchen squad). Li Junchen, “Xiyi ge,” 36.