INTRODUCTION

In 1906, a postcard was sent via the Chinese Imperial Post to a certain "Hirst" in York, England.[1] Its authors, who sign off as Ginnie and Hughie, draw attention to the postcard's origins as a "Chinese postcard" by referring to the two delightful hand-drawn figures of Chinese ladies in Manchu dress with dainty bound feet, declaring, "Isn't it funny!" "Funny" is itself a funny word. Do the authors mean the postcard is amusing, the representation of these oddly dressed women with bound feet a sign that China is a novel place? Or do they mean that there is something queer about this deviation from the natural? Are these strange women with tiny feet supposed to be exotically charming or slightly disturbing? Their recourse to "funniness" in the face of alien difference begs these questions: Why do we smile, laugh or make a joke when confronted with a world that operates differently from what we know and expect? What happens when our idea of the alien other is inflected with laughter? The second half of the postcard, where they reminisce about shared "happy times" at Eldwick and the recollection of one of the authors receiving a fright by sitting on a frog, prompts yet other questions: Are there ways to laugh together as Ginnie, Hughie, and Hirst appear to over that memory of the frog, instead of at each other? Can the kind of laughter and experience that bind Ginnie and Hughie across the seas to Hirst also bind them across cultures and ethnicity to the funny Chinese ladies with bound feet?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I would like to step back to the late eighteenth century, to a period when various European nations such as Great Britain and the Netherlands were in the business of sending diplomatic missions to China in the hope of gaining better terms of trade.
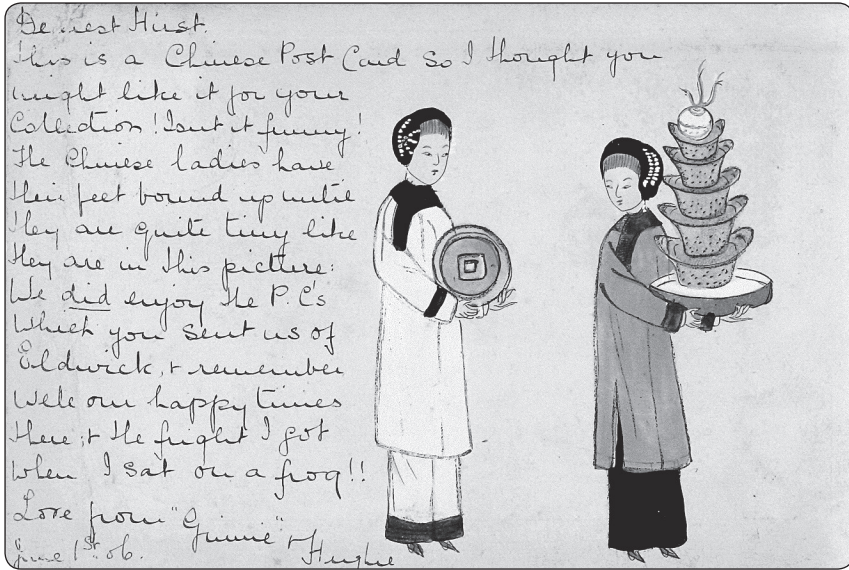
Figure I.1. A Chinese Postcard: "Isn't It Funny!" (Author's collection.)

In 1795, a Dutch East India embassy to the Qianlong Emperor arrived in Peking in time to celebrate his sixtieth year on the throne. The embassy had been proposed by a merchant, André Everard van Braam Houckgeest, who was eager to capitalize on Lord George Macartney's failed mission two years earlier. Macartney had notoriously refused to perform the ceremonial prostrations of the kowtow during his audience with the Emperor and, though a compromise was eventually agreed on, his obstinacy had caused tension and cast a shadow on the business negotiations he had hoped to engage in with the Chinese. The Dutch, in distinct contrast, subscribed to all the ceremonial forms of the Qing court, presumably in the hope that compliance would win favor.

In *Travels in China* (published in 1804), John Barrow, a member of Macartney's retinue, soundly berates the Dutch for having humiliated themselves for nothing.[2] The opening chapter is a testy defense of the Macartney embassy and a spirited attack on the Dutch approach. Acquiescing to court ritual wrought no benefits to the Dutch, as the Emperor granted them no trade concessions and merely dismissed them with presents and a letter (which Barrow quotes in full as evidence of Manchu imperial haughtiness). He also pointedly recalls one of Van Braam's anecdotes to drive home the embarrassing abasement of the Dutch and the overweening pride of the Emperor. The story involves Van Braam's audience with the Emperor:

> Being rather corpulent, and not very expert in performing the Chinese ceremony at their public introduction, his hat happened to fall on the ground, upon which, the old Emperor began to laugh. "Thus," says he, "I received a mark of distinction and predilection, such as never Embassador was honoured with before."[3]

Barrow's description suggests that Van Braam is a fool. Not only is he "corpulent" and clumsy in his prostrations; Van Braam is simpleminded enough to think the Emperor's laughter at his expense is a mark of honor.[4] Reading Barrow, one imagines an aloof Emperor disdainfully amused by the ineptitude of a groveling Dutchman. If one of the struggles of Macartney's embassy had been to create an equitable relationship between Britain and the Manchu Empire, then the Emperor's laugh is a reminder that Macartney's task was impossible. For as Barrow intimates, it seems that to the Emperor Europeans were nothing more than novel tributaries at best and objects of comedy at worst.

Van Braam's own telling reveals a much more nuanced encounter. The Emperor laughs not once, but twice. The first laugh is much as Barrow has reported.[5] There is also the added comedy of the Chinese Second Minister picking up Van Braam's hat and helpfully putting it back on for him. Amused, the Emperor asks if Van Braam understands Chinese and Van Braam answers in Chinese—"Poton" (bù dǒng; 不懂)—that he does not. This unexpected reply provokes yet another hearty laugh and piques the interest of the Emperor. Van Braam has caught his eye and it is the Emperor's look of kindness and curiosity that follows the Dutchman back to his seat, which is then described as "a mark of the highest predilection."[6]

Reading Van Braam's account, one sees an attempt to connect over the gulf of alien ritual and foreign language using wit and humor. The Emperor's interaction with Van Braam would have been a species of "soothing questions" asked of his guests, as laid out in the section on audiences in the Qing manual on guest ritual.[7] Van Braam's paradoxical answer not only amounts to a "whimsical" response to a formulaic step encoded in imperial protocol but also short-circuits the process by eliminating the need for a translator and other mediators.[8] His "Poton" is spoken directly to and heard by the Emperor, and the resulting second laugh of the Emperor is not the laugh of a superior being but one of surprised delight. It is a sign that a personal connection, cutting through rank and the barriers of language, can indeed be made. Van Braam has thus moved from someone submitting himself inexpertly and comically to an alien ceremony to creating a moment of engagement with the Emperor.

The two contrasting accounts of the Emperor's laugh capture what is the central tenet of my book: that what is presented as the simple, straightforward laugh of a presumed superior being at an inferior is, on closer scrutiny, actually a far more intricate negotiation of power relations. Much depends on who the speaker is; the locale of the speaker—whether he or she speaks from a place where the Chinese are in the minority or in the majority, in a position of weakness or strength; whether the joke is set up to be exclusive or inclusive, to protect the status quo or to challenge it. What is crucial here is an awareness of context and positioning in "the contact zone"—that fraught space of cross-cultural encounter that Mary Louise Pratt has done so much to illuminate and complicate.[9] As peoples from disparate locales and cultures establish relations, the asymmetries of power engender not only instances of outright domination but also complex and nuanced interactions that often can revise the basis for connection. In Barrow's desire to create indignation, his truncated retelling fixes the Qianlong Emperor as perpetually arrogant and lofty. But what seems fixed is actually mutable and, in another's telling, the Emperor's second laugh connotes something different, proof that a little light-hearted wit can be potentially transformative of relationships. Certain kinds of humor, when shared in a contact zone conceptualized as a fluid space of multidirectional exchange, can level the playing field.[10]

This flattening of hierarchies might seem, at first, counterintuitive. After all, a Hobbesian theory of laughter as an expression of superiority or "sudden glory" has quietly underscored an understanding of the Emperor's first laugh.[11] This is, as Barrow has presented it to us, a laugh of arrogance, dependent on an inferior object of ridicule, as well as a laugh intent on preserving the structural hierarchy of a Manchu Emperor receiving tribute from his lowly vassals and trading partners. This is also the kind of laughter that fuels much of the nineteenth-century creation of the comic "Chinaman,"[12] insistent on putting the Chinese in their place, though here the roles have been reversed. But comparing Barrow and Van Braam also reveals the limits of this approach in explaining the laughter that erupts at the racial other, because laughter as a manifestation of superiority cannot account for the Emperor's second laugh. An explication of the second laugh would be better served by reaching for the incongruity theory of humor, where laughter is the result of the mental resolution of the seemingly contradictory or nonsensical.[13] The comedy of Van Braam's response lies in the specular nature of his answer: it is incongruous to answer in a language Van Braam does not himself understand. Laughter in this case is an accolade for Van Braam's mental sleight of hand and as the Emperor laughs at the Dutchman's Chinese answer, we catch a glimpse of an altered social relation. Van Braam has drawn the Emperor into his incongruous puzzle of a reply and he has been rewarded with a laugh

and kind attention. They have connected, albeit briefly, on terms of Van Braam's own making.

It is this moment of the second laugh, with that hint of a shift in relation, that intrigues me the most. If Peter L. Berger is right in his delineation of the comic as conjuring "*a separate world,* different from the world of ordinary reality, operating by different rules," then Van Braam and the Emperor meet in a transient comic space where the potential for hierarchies to be reworked is present.[14] This is humor's subversive potential: in pointing out incongruities and inefficiencies in systems of thought and behavior, it challenges the status quo and encourages a reassessment of the norms. Or as Sean O'Casey puts it in his essay "The Power of Laughter," "[L]aughter is brought in to mock at things as they are so that they may topple down, and make room for better things to come."[15] This is not always what humor does. Humor, particularly in the form of jokes, can sometimes appear merely riddlelike, a matter of opposing scripts (in Salvatore Attardo's and Victor Raskin's terminology)[16] or geometric planes (in Arthur Koestler's) that meet at the point of a punch line and trigger a "psychic leap" to connect the two.[17] The relief theory of laughter that focuses on laughter as a form of release from the constrictions of social rules and inhibitions might seem, especially in Sigmund Freud's model of psychic hydraulics and vents as expounded in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* little more than the mere letting off of pent-up nervous energies.[18] Laughter derived from superiority and intent on disparagement can also be politically conservative, protecting hegemonic power by insisting on preserving social order through exclusion. Yet many forms bear some element of critique, even laughter that diminishes. Henri Bergson's theory, for example, imagines laughter as an attack on the rigid and inelastic in an effort to return to a more pliant and fluid state of living.[19] Comic debasement becomes a means to reach the ends of healing, restoration, and improvement. Indeed, the number of critics who see humor as embodying revolt and freedom are many. Freud, in a later essay on humor, sees it as "rebellious," a sign of the ego and the pleasure principle triumphant, "assert[ing] itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances."[20] Umberto Eco envisions humor as a "cold carnival," coolly drawing our attention to ill-fitting social frames, undermining "limits from inside."[21] Robert Torrance, writing of the comic hero, finds much of comedy's driving force in the "emancipation of the unconformable self."[22]

Humor, thus, has the potential to subvert and, in the case of the meeting of two culturally distinct peoples, it can throw down barriers and open up new terrain for cross-cultural understanding. I do not wish to overplay this, however. After the promise of Van Braam's encounter with the Emperor, Dutch hopes were, after all, disappointed. Such a fleeting connection made via a

momentary sojourn in a comic world may never amount to much, but it does remind us that there are forms of humor and laughter in cultural productions about Sino-West relations that repay closer investigation. Why? Because they sometimes reveal alternatives to the suspicions and misunderstandings that vex histories of cross-cultural encounters, alternatives that also hint at what humor and comedy are good at, namely, playful subversions that resolve harmoniously, providing new ways to imagine interacting with the alien other—alternatives that, at a specific point in time (given the right conditions), may actually take flight.

A LATENT HISTORY

In time, the Emperor's laugh was to be turned against him. As the British, in particular, surged ahead technologically and economically in the nineteenth century, it was China that increasingly appeared quaint and inept. With losses in the Opium Wars and more and more extraterritorial treaty ports opened up to foreign trade against its will, China was on the back foot, no longer the economic power dictating the terms of trade. With the entry of missionaries and travelers into the interior as well, neither was China to remain an alluring enigma, the magical land of ethereal people and curious flora and fauna pictured on delicate porcelain. The extent of the country's poverty and backwardness was soon broadcast through myriad publications to a readership curious about the flowery land of Cathay. In tandem with this sudden explosion of empirical data in the form of missionary records, ethnographies, and travel writing from China came an influx of Chinese laborers to America, Australia, and South Africa, providing evidence through their physical presence of the alien speech and ways of the Chinese. By the mid-nineteenth century, it was no longer a bumbling Dutchman who was the object of laughter but the Chinese themselves, exposed to the ridicule of the wider world. Witness in the pages of *Punch* during the Opium Wars the cartoon of the notably round-bellied mandarin dragged by a British tar by his pigtail[23] and the writers making fun of the toylike impracticalities of the Qing empire, suggesting that their war ships were made from cardboard and their firearms consisted of only firecrackers.[24] The Qing court, mired in its rituals, with its courtiers frequently kneeling and prostrating themselves, was also to become a stock comic image.[25] In America, Bret Harte's 1870 poem, "Plain Language from Truthful James" (commonly known as "The Heathen Chinee"), introduced the world to Ah Sin. Though meant as satirical, the poem was read as anti-Chinese and the illustrations by various hands to editions of this poem would make the image of a simpering, yet devious, Chinaman familiar.[26] Versions of Ah Sin would also become a staple on stage,

with Harte and the dramatic talents of the actor Charles T. Parsloe Jr. defining the "Chinese comic type in theatre."[27] The comic Chinaman—pigtailed, slant-eyed, scraping and bowing—had come of age.

Given the nineteenth-century history of China-West encounters and common perceptions of the Chinese broadly sketched above, the question of comic representations of China and the Chinese brings immediately to mind the grotesque and the stereotyped, with the laughter very much ranged against the Chinese. The topsy-turvy Chinese have for so long been viewed as fundamentally alien that imagining kinship and sameness may seem absurd. Yet the realities of encounter and the resulting representations of the foreign other are often far from straightforward, especially when humor is involved. While Edward Said's theorizations are undoubtedly seminal, the tendency for his ideas, when placed in less subtle hands, to become nothing but an unspoken Orientalism in all Western representations of the Near and Far East is an issue. Such reductive readings mask far more complicated dynamics. China herself is an anomaly within the case studies of Orientalism.[28] The stability of its civilization, the soundness of its social and political structures, its wealth and ability to produce such luxuries as silk and porcelain made China, especially in the early history of Sino-West interactions, an object of desire and envy. As David Porter has noted, in the early modern period there was a marked tendency to project an ideal of "primal groundedness and authority" onto China, resulting in "the persistent association of Chinese culture with a privileged form of representation, a utopian anticipation of absolute legibility in the face of inscrutable otherness."[29] Even as its reputation and credibility suffered in the nineteenth century, and as Western powers gained the upper hand in war and diplomacy, China was never fully colonized nor completely assimilated to a Eurocentric worldview.[30] Nor was an Anglo-American longing for a fair China of ease, poetry, and scholarly gentility ever fully repressed.[31]

This book is thus neither "an analysis (outraged or indulgent) of 'Western images' of China [nor] a plea for the restoration of Eastern identity."[32] In fact, I am more intrigued by the incipient humor that exists in the disjuncture between the Orientalist invention of "China" and her "brute reality."[33] If one of Said's concerns was with the dangerous consequences of Orientalist conceptions enacted on the physical ground of the Orient, I am, especially in the second half of the book, alert to the comic absurdities that emerge in this process. I do not take immediate umbrage at the comic hostility sometimes directed at the Chinese, but instead am curious about the circumstances and motivations of each example. Humor is multivalent and deeply context-dependent, and while there are clear examples of racist humor in a few of the works I consider, I do not automatically assume that my texts embody a haughty imperial gaze

or that the humor deployed is necessarily mocking and denigrating. Thus, in place of checking off Orientalist distortions calculated to dominate the other is my attention to the historical specificities of encounter, to the swirl of contradictory sentiments—anxiety, delight, contempt, desire, humiliation, amusement—that accompany each instance of cross-cultural engagement, and to the rhetorical and comic staging of "China" to readers. Cognizant of humor's waywardness as well as its leanings (in the form of comedy) toward harmony, I am more focused on the rhetorical constructions and deconstructions of superiority and the imaginative creation of new grounds for laughter across cultures and ethnicities.[34] This is, then, a book about a latent history of residual and emergent comic representations of China that features moments akin to the Emperor's second laugh. This is also a book that looks, appropriately, to oft-forgotten noncanonical and nonmodernist texts to lift this submerged narrative to the surface and let it breathe.[35]

DOMINANT DISCOURSES

China has always had its niche within modernism. Ezra Pound's encounter with Chinese poetry and the impact this had on his own poetics has generated a rich vein of scholarly work that continues to this day.[36] Bloomsbury's connection to the Far East has also been excavated in Patricia Laurence's exhaustive study, *Lily Briscoe's Chinese Eyes: Bloomsbury, Modernism, and China.*[37] As scholars have reached for other European modernists—Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin—and embraced historicism and the burgeoning technologies of the time, the story of China within canonical modernism has, in recent years, been reevaluated in interesting ways. Faint traces of China have become telling traces; China as Europe's civilizational other has become China as Europe's premonition of its future; primitive Chinese writing, once scorned, is now venerated as a medium for modern poetry.[38] The obsession with Chinese writing and the ideograph, in particular, has dominated accounts of China's function and importance within literary modernism. This rethinking of China's place within modernism has also been accompanied by an increasing awareness that the proper noun, China, requires that sign of ambiguity and irony—quotation marks—to highlight its invention via writing.[39] The "China" referenced and cited in modernist discourses is one refracted through a long chain of associations and stereotypes: China as stable and orderly; as bureaucratic, stagnant, and autocratic; as mysterious and exotic; as leisurely and learned; as recalcitrant and obstructionist. These ideas of China have become a productive source for creating a necessary other for theories of modernism and modernity. I do, however, diverge from modernist conceptions of China to explore a different coeval relation to China.

If we look away from modernist texts and turn our attention to popular fiction, the creation of China as an other is, yet again, a familiar pattern, though in a different register. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, geopolitical uncertainties were generating insecurities. For Britain, the leading power of the time, there were threats from Russia and a Germany on the rise. Japan was also rapidly modernizing and becoming a force to be reckoned with. By 1905, it had defeated China (1894–1895) and Russia (1904–1905), respectively, and over the course of the first half of the twentieth century would grow bolder in its imperial ambitions. China itself was a point of instability and danger. At moments, it was an empire on the edge of collapse as the Qing dynasty struggled, for example, with subduing the Taiping Rebellion. On other occasions, China was a menace, what with its increasing pursuit of modernization in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the immense scale of its population, and the spikes of antiforeigner violence that would climax in the Boxer Rebellion and the Siege of the Legations. The sheer numbers of China's population were a particular reminder of its massive potential, economically and militarily. It was a potential yet to be fully harnessed, considering the poor state of the Qing government, though the large-scale migrations of Chinese workers into America and other parts of the world had already brought intimations of the disruptions that the Chinese masses could wreak. It would take only a small leap in imagination to turn Chinese economic migration into a full-fledged military invasion and, in the pages of M. P. Shiel's *The Yellow Danger* (1898) and other like-minded writers, the terror of the Yellow Peril was thus introduced to the Anglo-American reading public. Fused with the lurid fears of opium dens, criminality, and miscegenation that had developed around the small Chinese community living in Limehouse in the East End of London, the discourse of the Yellow Peril would prove to be particularly long-lived. In 1911, Sax Rohmer would refine the tradition further, distilling the threat of the Far East into the shape of one nefarious individual—Dr. Fu Manchu—and, in doing so, ensuring that the Chinese would be associated with a malicious brand of super-villainy for decades.[40]

The turning of China into a bogeyman is a critical reminder that, in this period, this Far Eastern nation was a cause for much nervousness. Though the Qing dynasty and the Boxer Rebellion had now been consigned to the past, the new China of the 1920s was nationalistic and combative, keen to take back the extraterritorial treaty ports that had been given up to foreign powers. With no strong central government, rampaging warlords and their armies, opportunistic bandits, and rising antiforeigner sentiment, violence was liable to flare up quickly, putting the lives of many Westerners in danger. The confusion that gripped Nanking in 1928 as the Kuomintang swept

northward in their attempt to unify the country was indicative of the convulsions that could easily overtake foreigners in China. Old China Hands, as longtime foreign residents in China were called, were wont to maintain an impression of amused disdain, laughing off the absurdities of Chinese policies and the unaccountable ups and downs of civil wars and warlords by likening them to comic operas, but the laughter was becoming a touch brittle.[41]

Alongside this anxiety, however, as if in a parallel world, was the enacting of a different kind of relationship with China, one shaped by desire, imagination, pleasure, and a different kind of laughter—more amiable and inclusive. Given the dominance of the Yellow Peril in the popular culture landscape during the fin de siècle, it is hard to imagine that a mere year after *The Yellow Danger* a musical comedy set in China titled *San Toy, Or The Emperor's Own,* untouched by the taint of the Yellow Peril or the later horrors of the Boxer Rebellion, was breaking box-office records at London's West End. Existing side by side with the fear of the Orient was, thus, a hugely popular comic invocation of interracial harmony that, in parts, hearkened back to older traditions inspired by chinoiserie, while still acknowledging the contemporary presence of Britain in China. A trawl through the noncanonical does not merely yield a repetition of patterns and abstractions found within modernism. Nor is all on the popular culture front a mere variation of the Yellow Peril and Fu Manchu. Indeed, something quite different emerges and, in this case, what we find is a significant pocket that speaks of an alternative relationship to China, one unmarked by fear, intimidation, mockery but touched by the legacies of chinoiserie, comedy, and genial humor. This is a version of China that invites engagement, not merely as an abstract other that acts as a springboard for Eurocentric ideas about modernity—"China" as "a horizon of the very idea of horizons."[42]

The treatments of Anglo-American encounters with China in modernism and popular culture are premised on Chinese difference; this book, however, is concerned with finding consonance. I argue that, from the turn of the twentieth century through to the interwar period, we see a critical change in attitude toward China and the Chinese. Unlike the tendency in a few of the modernist appropriations that other, then ultimately efface China, the comic works I consider attempt to address and include China, to find the familiar amid differences. What drives this inclusivity is, at first, a residual affection for the Chinese other as shaped by chinoiserie. Chapters 1 and 2 thus concentrate on this influence in structuring perceptions of encounters with the Chinese, and I argue that the chinoiserie point of view is comic in its thrust and a potential means to bridge difference. If the opening two chapters are about imagining China from afar, focusing on texts written by authors who had little real contact with China, then the next three chap-

ters attend to the ways in which proximity alters representations and to the changed geopolitical and historical circumstances that affect and ameliorate real-life encounters with China. Being physically on the ground in China and relating to the Chinese was demanding and stressful, and for the increasing number of travelers and residents in China, a good sense of humor proved indispensable. That these endeavors to connect are flawed and also run the risk of negating China is real—Chapter 3, on Arthur Henderson Smith and J.O.P. Bland, demonstrates this. But the importance of these texts is in their recognition and admission (sometimes reluctant, sometimes freely given) of fondness for the Chinese, of Western vulnerability in a foreign land, and the resultant entertaining of the idea of parity between the Oriental and the Occidental. The shift into a more amiable mode of humor, particularly after World War I, is expressive of this new structure of feeling, the importance of which can be unearthed only by looking beyond the familiar canon of serious modernist texts and the Yellow Peril classics of popular fiction, by insisting that neglected works that trade in jocularity can potentially reshape our understanding of Western discourses about China. Lost within the chaff of lightweight entertainment is actually a seed that has the potential to grow into a significant alternative narrative.

A case in point is Chapter 1's examination of turn-of-the-twentieth-century musical comedy set in the Far East. A subgenre indebted to the success of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado,* the Oriental musical comedy burned brightly in the West End for a few decades before suffering the fate that many a popular cultural form has: oblivion. These musical comedies, however, are not just curious period pieces; they are also striking in their celebration of cross-cultural harmony. In their gilded world, East and West meet and interact with ease. This is partly escapist fantasy at work, but also the effects of chinoiserie and the comedic form. Chinoiserie casts a whimsical geniality over notions of China, sentiments that are most suited to a pleasant comedy. In the theater, the generic rules of comedy provide a useful frame for conceiving and structuring interactions between divergent groups. The cross-cultural encounter with the Orient is thus staged as a highly satisfactory one; this is a realm that can actually conceive of happy endings when meeting the Oriental in person. Given Yellow Peril fears and fantasies of seedy opium dens in Chinatown where crossing paths with the Chinese both thrills and repels, the musical comedy stage offers a radical message very much in keeping with the generic expectations of comedy: we can all get along.

Chapter 2 continues to confound the usual investment in Chinese alterity by focusing on a now little-known writer, Ernest Bramah, who was interested in exploiting for laughs the surprising recognizability of the Chinese. If Christopher Bush's argument that a version of "China" functions within European

modernism as a place that represents "something both radically other and uncomfortably familiar," then Bramah's China is a site that is both radically other and comfortably familiar.[43] His Kai Lung stories trade in common stereotypes of Chinese difference, only to thwart expectations and reassert sameness in a light-hearted fashion. Cleverly buried, for example, within the ornate and prolix English Bramah crafts to represent the difference of formal Chinese speech, are literary quotations and proverbs actually derived from English sources. The incongruity undermines constructs of essentialized otherness; we think Chinese sayings are quaintly foreign but then discover otherwise. Ultimately, Bramah's work encourages a sense of common feeling with the alien Chinese other, a dream of being Chinese, albeit one tinged with the nostalgia common to this period's modernist evocations of chinoiserie. These are ideas that very much go against the grain of the Yellow Peril, but that open up imaginative possibilities of cross-cultural linkages and affinities.

While musical comedies and Bramah could afford to imagine an ideal of harmonious understanding between cultures and happy endings from a safe distance, for the traveler and resident in China the difficulties of living in an alien environment could not be so easily elided. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine the comic negotiations of those who experienced the people and country of China far more intimately and personally. Chapter 3 studies two long-term residents, the missionary Arthur Henderson Smith and the former Maritime Customs officer J.O.P. Bland, who both deployed humor in their writings about China and the Chinese as a means to reorder and master a Chinese reality that often left the foreigner at a disadvantage. This is also a chapter that addresses humor that is less than complimentary to the Chinese. Its inclusion may seem at odds with the drift of the earlier chapters but I see this chapter as an important reevaluation of humor that may seem nothing more than racist put-downs. By studying the mechanics and rhetoric of the humor involved, I show that both Smith and Bland, in fact, write from positions of great insecurity and that superiority has to be actively constructed as a compensatory measure. Thus at the heart of their often objectionable comic reorderings is a backhanded recognition of the white man's fragile position in China. This admission of vulnerability, reluctantly acknowledged by Smith and Bland, will later prove to be, in the hands of other writers, a fruitful and transformative comic theme.

That Smith's and Bland's brand of humor was not the only way to envision the coming together of the Oriental and the Occidental is made clear in Chapter 4. While one might expect the Chinese to be the object of comedy in travel writing set in China, increasingly in the interwar period, it is the travel writer who is found to be comically lacking. The changing sources of laughter are telling of a new sensibility at work, one intriguingly marked by recurring

references to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* The allusions to Lewis Carroll's text not only highlight the oddness of China but also underline the traveler's increasing sense of vulnerability in a foreign land and the need to forge ties with the Chinese in new ways. Where Smith and Bland fail, these travel writers in China—W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood, Peter Fleming, Victor Purcell, and Elsie McCormick—succeed by enlarging the community of laughter to one shared with their Chinese counterparts.

The final chapter turns toward the practice of amiable humor and the making of a new kind of foreign resident in Shanghai (expatriates who were popularly called Shanghailanders) in the works of Friedrich Schiff and Ellen Thorbecke, Carl Crow, and Emily Hahn. Drawing on Stuart Tave's work on eighteenth-century comic theory, I argue that amiable humor is a more innocent and benevolent source of amusement, based on incongruity instead of ridicule as the trigger for laughter. This is no longer humor that laughs *at* but *with* its comic butts, and marks a decided shift from the imperialist Shanghailander to a new, more genial and open-minded figure. The standoffish and superior Shanghailander of old stuck firmly to his white enclaves, uninterested in learning the local language or engaging with the Chinese, apart from his servants.[44] The 1930s, however, saw a gradual sea change in Shanghai and the texts I examine in this chapter reveal a consistent attempt to create comic parity between self and other, foreigner and Chinese, transforming Occidental and Oriental into friends, neighbors, equals, and allies.

The archive of materials I work with tends toward the literary, with occasional forays into the visual world of cartoons and illustrations, particularly those that accompany the texts I examine. I have put aside filmic representations, seeing that the most relevant examples in the time period I work in are, more often than not, melodramatic and sentimental rather than comical. While I may occasionally touch on a few periodicals like *Punch,* for the most part I have left out ephemera such as tales in penny dreadfuls, magic-lantern slides, and music-hall ditties. The humor, if any, involved in such texts is usually of a conventional stripe—all pigtails and pidgin English—that leaves little of interest to be said. If the caricatures and stereotypes so essential to racist characterizations move toward closure and fixity, I seek out texts that, with some gentle, critical prodding, serve to open up discussion. Cross-cultural understanding is more often than not cross-cultural misunderstanding, but even in the morass that is the history of intercultural encounter—from the creation of crude racial stereotypes to imperial aggression and conflict—there is still some good amid the bad to be salvaged. I choose to see the good and build on it. In this spirit, I proceed.

One more matter: throughout the book my use of theories of humor is eclectic. I do not hold to any one theory as correct but utilize a range of them,

as and when appropriate. My concern is to use what is illuminating for a particular episode, not to dogmatically champion one over the other or to find an overarching theory to explain all kinds of humor. Humor is complex; my aim is to unravel and understand but also to respect its messiness, and to do so means to adopt a nonmonolithic approach. If there is one central theme, however, it is my search for kinds of humor that significantly alter social relationships by erasing boundaries and flattening hierarchies across cultural and ethnic lines. Anthropologists have termed such social relationships where humor is allowed "joking relationships" and have explored them in a great deal of depth, recognizing in preliterate societies the institutionalization of these relationships, as well as the less structured forms found in industrialized societies. With the latter, joking relationships have often been identified as being useful for maintaining group identity. Who is allowed to make a joke and whether a joke is accepted or rebuffed are ways to indicate inclusion or exclusion.[45] My use of the term here is meant to remind us that so much of humor is inevitably about constructing a playful relationship between two persons or among a group of people, be it in the hopes of social control, avoidance of conflict, reduction of tension, or promotion of social stability. Humor is always a social event and, given certain circumstances, it can become a vital means of questioning and reimagining hidebound social structures, especially as they affect the meeting of two dissimilar peoples.

Humor is also an infallible reminder of our common humanity: if we can share a laugh with those who are seemingly deeply foreign to us, we cannot then be that different. As Sean O'Casey reminds us, "However we may differ in color, in thought, in manners, in ideologies, we all laugh the same way; it is a golden chain binding us all together."[46] This book is thus about finding that golden chain, laying claim to those narratives where instead of the slightly nervous laughter of Ginnie and Hughie, pointing at the oddity of bound feet, we find them laughing comfortably along with two delicate Chinese ladies, the difference of their tiny feet forgotten.