# Laughing Together: Yang Jiang's Reception of Jane Austen's Female Laughter

Dr. Alice Hiu Yan Cheung
Department of Literature and Cultural Studies
The Education University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR
ahycheung@eduhk.hk

***Abstract* — Yang Jiang wrote comedies when she stayed in Shanghai during the War of Resistance. Two extant plays, namely *As You Desire* and *Forging the Truth* caused a great sensation when they were staged in the 1940s. These two plays have long been regarded as comedies of manners while some Western scholars consider them as feminist comedies of manners; meanwhile, Yang Jiang's connection with Jane Austen, whose works are also regarded as being in the style of comedy of manners, is also noticed by some scholars. This article examines the female laughter, the critical element of feminist comedy of manners, in both writers' works and establishes a connection between two writers' works upon a generic ground.**

***Keywords — Yang Jiang, Jane Austen, comedy, comedy of manners, feminist comedy of manners, female laughter, May Fourth, wartime Shanghai***

## I. INTRODUCTION

During the War of Resistance, Yang Jiang 楊絳（1911-2016）and her husband Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 (1910-1998) were stranded in the occupied city - Shanghai, where Yang Jiang became a playwright. She wrote four plays in the 1940s: three comedies – *As You Desire* 稱心如意 (1943), *Forging the Truth* 弄真成假 (1943) and *Sporting with the World* 游戲人間 (1944) – and one tragedy – *Windswept Blossoms* 風絮 (1946), which was never staged. It was at this point that Yang Jiang, Yang's pen name, first appeared on the Chinese literary scene. [1] The comedies caused a sensation. Two of them, *As You Desire* and *Forging the Truth*, constitute the subject matter of the present research. However, *Sporting with the World* cannot be included, as Yang was dissatisfied with the work and destroyed the script after the play was staged, and so it is no longer extant.

Yang Jiang's comedies are widely discussed in the generic context of *fengsu xiju* 風俗喜劇, or comedies of manners, since Li Jianwu 李健吾 (1906-1982) connects her comedies with the genre. In addition to discussing such connection, some Western scholars brand Yang's comedies as "feminist comedies of manners". In light of this, the connection between Yang's comedies with Jane Austen's novels are established, as Austen's works have long been regarded as being in the style of comedy of manners.

The present research aims to establish a connection between Austen and Yang upon a generic ground, i.e. both writers' comic works belong to the feminist comedy of manners. The prominent feature of this genre is the subversiveness embedded within it. In the works of Austen, this is presented through the laughter of her female characters. Therefore, the questions which would be investigated are: Is it possible to find such a similar female laughter in Yang's comedies? If so, what matter that Yang subverts against in her comedies?

In this article, the laughter of the female characters in Austen's and Yang's works will be examined. Reception Theory is employed as the methodological framework that takes Yang Jiang as the focus of examination of the reader-writer relationship between her and Austen. Reception Theory highlights the importance of the role of the reader in this "writer-text-reader" relationship. It suggests that the appropriate evaluation of the essence of an artwork need not be its production or its inherent features, but rather the reader's consumption of and response to the work.[2]

## II. YANG JIANG AND HER FEMINIST COMDEDIES OF MANNERS

### *A. As You Desire and Forging the Truth*

*As You Desire* was premiered at the National Academy of Drama 國立戲劇專科學校 in January 1943. Then, under the direction of Huang Zuolin 黃佐臨 (1906-1994), it was performed by the Shanghai United Arts Theatre 上海聯藝劇團 at the Golden Capital Theatre 金都大戲院 for seventeen days in May of the same year.

*As You Desire* is a four-act play about a young girl, Junyu 君玉, whose parents have died, and who hence is forced to travel from Beijing to Shanghai in order to seek shelter with her maternal relatives. She comes first to her Uncle Zuyin's 祖蔭 household. Zuyin is a bank manager. The seemingly charitable gesture of offering refuge to Junyu turns out to have

[1] Yang Jiang was born Yang Jikang 楊季康.

[2] Reception Theory highlights the importance of the role of the reader in this "writer-text-reader" relationship. It suggests that the appropriate evaluation of the essence of an artwork need not be its production or its inherent features, but rather the reader's consumption of and response to the work. See Hans Robert Jauss. "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,* Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1982, pp.3-45.

been a plot by Zuyin's wife Lady Yin 蔭夫人, who wishes to recruit Junyu as Zuyin's secretary instead of the attractive Miss Lu whom Lady Yin suspects of having an affair with Zuyin. However, the couple dislike Junyu's rebellious attitude and decide to send her away to another uncle and aunt, Zuyi 祖貽 and Lady Yi 貽夫人. Similar conflicts happen when Junyu stayed at Zuyi's home, and she is sent away again to another uncle's and aunt's, Zumao 祖懋 and Lady Mao 懋夫人, home. Once again, she is disliked by her aunt. Finally, she is settled at the home of her childless Great Uncle Langzhai 朗齋 who is a wealthy man with an eccentric temperament. Since he has no children, Langzhai's inheritance is coveted by Junyu's uncles and aunts. Unexpectedly, Junyu, whose mother was Langzhai's favourite in the past, is doted upon by Langzhai. The ending indicates that the prospects for Junyu are promising: she becomes Langzhai's heir.

*As You Desire* was warmly received by the Shanghai audience, and Yang gained fame from the staging of the play. Yang Jiang was encouraged by the success of *As You Desire*. In a matter of a few months she had completed another comedy, *Forging the Truth* which was then mounted by the Tongmao company 同茂剧團 at the Golden Capital Theatre in October 1943, and it ran for thirty-two days.

*Forging the Truth* is a five-act play which begins with the intervention of a rich businessman, Zhang Xiangfu 張祥甫, in the relationship between his daughter, Wanru 婉如, and Dazhang 大璋, a dashing young man who claims to come from a prominent background and to be in possession of a doctoral degree awarded by an overseas institution. The drama in the play centres upon a deception employed by Dazhang, who is gradually revealed to be an impostor. Prior to making the acquaintance of Wanru, he has first of all made the acquaintance of Wanru's cousin, Yanhua 燕華. Dazhang then approaches Wanru and soon becomes her romantic interest. Yanhua is jealous of Wanru's good fortune. Believing that Dazhang is a rich man and viewing marriage to Dazhang as a means by which she may escape poverty and climb the social ladder, Yanhua decides to drive Dazhang away from Wanru. Taken in by the story concocted by Yanhua that Wanru is in love with him no more, Dazhang falls into Yanhua's trap and eventually elopes with her. The story ends with Dazhang and Yanhua's marriage, which Xiangfu has insisted upon and to which the couple, having used up their money, has reluctantly agreed. Since the wedding takes place in Dazhang's home, his real identity is revealed.

The sensation caused by *Forging the Truth* was even greater than that created by *As You Desire*. Yang's name appeared in newspaper advertisements, and actors expressed pride at having appeared in her plays. She became an important playwright in Shanghai.

### B. *Yang Jiang's Comedies as the Femist Comedies of Manners*

Li Jianwu is the first person to regard Yang's comedies as belonging to the genre of the comedy of manners. His commentary on Yang Jiang, as has already been mentioned, has been widely quoted and discussed by subsequent critics:

> If there is comedy in China, the authentic comedy of manners, the genuine Chinese comedy extracted from Chinese culture, I do not exaggerate in insisting that *Forging the Truth* represents the second milestone in the history of modern Chinese literature…The first milestone is widely accepted as belonging to Ding Xilin [丁西林 (1893 – 1974)] and the second, let me happily announce, belongs to Mme Yang Jiang [1].

Li Jianwu's description of Yang's comedies as *fengsu xiju*, or comedies of manners, sets the tone for this discourse on genre. As he does not provide any further elaboration of the genre, Chinese critics identify *fengsu xiju* as the comedy of manners and discuss Yang's comedies in the context of the genre: its plot concerning the daily life and intrigues of the middle classes; the witty dialogue; its featuring of the story of romance and marriage[3]. However, a critical generic quality of comedy of manners, namely subversive nature, is not touched upon in their discussion of her comedies.

Conversely, Western scholars notice the subversive nature of Yang Jiang's comedies and hence distinguish *fengsu xiju* from the genre of the comedy of manners. Amy D. Dooling considers that Yang's comedies belong to the genre known as the "feminist comedy of manners". Dooling does not provide any clear definition of the feminist comedy of manners; however, one will find that the female laughter present in Yang's comedies is highlighted and thoroughly explored in her discussion. This feature of Yang's works is interpreted by Dooling as an expression intended to convey Yang's subversion of the prevailing gender discourse[4]. Dooling's discussion undoubtedly illustrates the fact that female laughter is a prominent element of the feminist comedy of manners, which is extremely subversive in nature and which renders the feminist comedy of manners a much more subversive form of the genre than the general comedy of manners.

### C. *The Subversiveness of Female Laughter*

The potential of laughter to invert the position of superior and inferior has long been noticed. The laughter of women, whose position in society had long been subordinate, was seen as a threat to the upper class. To maintain the domestic, or, in a larger context, the social order, women were discouraged both from developing their comic sense and from giving vent to their laughter. If we survey the guidebooks on proper conduct in eighteenth-century Britain, it is clear that contemporary

---

[3] For the discussion of the generic qualities of comedy of manners, please see M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 11th ed. Stanford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015; T. B. L. Webster, "The Birth of Modern Comedy," *The Australian Humanities Research Centre Occasional Paper*, Issue 1, 1959; David L. Hirst, *Comedy of Manners.* London: Methuen, 1979; Andrew Stott, *Comedy.* New York: Routledge, 2005; George Meredith, "An essay on comedy," in *Comedy*, Wylie Sypher, Ed. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1980, pp.3-57.

[4] For Amy D. Dooling's discussion of Yang Jiang's comedies, please see Amy D. Dooling, "In search of laughter: Yang Jiang's feminist comedy," *Modern Chinese Literature*, Issue 8, 1994, pp. 41-66; Amy D. Dooling, *Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China.* New York: Palgrave MacMilan, 2005. Her idea of comedy of manners is agreed by John B. Weinstein in his thesis, see John B. Weinstein, "Directing laughter: modes of modern Chinese comedy," diss. Columbia University, 2002, in press.

writers took the view that wit was not one of the qualities thought to constitute the ideal of femininity; women, in order to be good companions of men, were taught to sigh with compassion more than to laugh.[5]

Female laughter was similarly not encouraged in China. In the eyes of the literati, historians and people in power, female laughter possessed a destructive potential which might bring disastrous consequences upon the country. In the historical record of the Western Zhou dynasty, King You 周幽王 tried many methods to amuse his queen, Baosi 褒姒 before finally achieving success by lighting warning beacons to deceive his nobles, who, believing that the capital was under attack, hastened to come to save the king. Baosi is described as being impressed and amused by this mischief. King You's continual lighting of the warning beacons eventually resulted in him losing the trust of the nobles, who did not respond to the warning beacons, even when the capital was under real attack, with the result that it was conquered by the enemy. In this way the subjugation of the Western Zhou was widely attributed to the laughter of Baosi. This story reveals the connection between female laughter and its destructive power which gradually becomes a cultural concept.[6]

Zhu Ziqing's 朱自清 (1898-1948) fiction "A History of Laughter" 笑的歷史 [2] can be read as a realistic account of how in the Chinese cultural context a woman is deprived of the right to laugh. The protagonist of the fiction, who loves to laugh, has been taught to restrain her laughter since she was small, and, after she is married, she is cautioned by her mother-in-law as well as by her husband against laughing, as they feel threatened when she laughs. Apparently, it is the subversive spirit embedded within female laughter which alerts people.

Regina Barreca asserts: "Any time that a woman breaks through a barrier set by society, she's making a feminist gesture of a sort, and every time a woman laughs, she's breaking through a barrier" [7]. Barreca's analysis of women's inclination to laugh at the conventions which they are taught to revere supports the idea of women's laughter being dangerous to authority: it reflects an attitude of refusing to take seriously matters that are meant to be serious.

## III. YANG JIANG AND JANE AUSTEN

According to Yang Jiang's own recollections she read a number of Western literary works during her stay in Oxford. Starting with Chaucer, the literary works which Yang read in Oxford are varied both in terms of their period and of their genre. Such an extensive reading list suggests that Austen's novels must also have been covered during this time. However, we may assume that Yang's reading experience of Austen's novels predated her arrival in Oxford. The subjects specified for her study of foreign literature at Tsinghua University included the category "English Novels"; thus Austen's novels were very possibly prescribed for her study at Tsinghua.[7] Another significant reference is from Ji Xianlin's 季羡林 (1911-2009) recollections of his student years in Tsinghua. Ji entered Tsinghua a year later than Qian Zhongshu and was also taught by Ye Gongchao 葉公超 (1904-1981), the teacher of Qian and Yang. Ji recollects that the textbook of Ye's class was *Pride and Prejudice* [4]. Therefore, Yang Jiang may well have come across Austen's work before she went to Oxford, probably at the missionary school and no later than the years during which she was studying at Tsinghua.[8]

Yang Jiang's great interest in Jane Austen is well-known. When Yang Jiang was asked by her biographer Wu Xuezhao 吳學昭 who her favourite writer was, Yang mentioned that Austen was one of her favourite [5]. In the 1950s Yang commenced research on the works of Jane Austen while she was working at the Institute of Literature, and hence "What is there in her? - comments on reading novels (Part Three)" 有甚麼好？- 讀小說漫論之三 – a critique of Austen's works – was published. In this critique Yang identifies Austen's comedic style as belonging to the category of the comedy of manners [6]. This serves as a starting-point from which the discussion of Yang's reception of Austen's style may be initiated.

Yang Jiang is not the only critic who notices the style of comedy of manners in Austen's novels. In fact, her works have long been discussed in the context of comedy of manners. It is because her novels deal with romance and matrimony, portraying society and its array of snobbish and cunning people who are mainly interested in money and property and who express themselves by means of witty dialogue[9]. If the female

[5] Audrey Bilger gives a thorough discussion of social perception of female laughter, please see Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998, pp.16-25. In addition, the subversiveness of laughter is extensively discussed by a number of scholars, please see Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1886, p.34; Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art.* New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953, p.339; Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries.* Chicago Chicago UP, 1960, p.49, pp.61-63.

[6] Some famous examples can demonstrate the fact that the connection between female laughter and the power of destruction has been cultivated as a cultural concept. For instance, the poem written by Li Yan'nian 李延年 (2nd century BC-87BC) of Han dynasty in which he depicts a beauty whose laughter can destroy a city - the poem is where the saying *Yixiao qingcheng* 一笑傾城 comes from; Song Yu's 宋玉（c.298BC – c.222BC）poem *A Poem of a Lecher* 登徒子好色賦 in which the power of the smile of a beauty can bewitch the men of two cities.

[7] For the life of Yang Jiang at Tsinghua University, please see Wu Xuezhao, *Listen to Yang Jiang's Recollections*. 聽楊絳談往事 Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 2008.

[8] In a school magazine published by the McTyeire School in Shanghai in 1933 some photos show that the students staged *Pride and Prejudice*. It serves as evidence that *Pride and Prejudice* was already popular in the missionary schools.

[9] For instance, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* regards Austen's works as belonging to the genre of the comedy of manners, see "Comedy of manners (narrative genre)," *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* (2014), n. pag. web, last accessed: 17 Dec. 2014; Katherine Metcalfe holds the same opinion, see B. C. Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage, vol.2, 1870-1940*. Oxon: Routledge, 2001, p. 80. The conception of "comedy" in the discussions of connecting Austen's novels with the genre is regarded comedy as a mode of writing. The idea of considering comedy as an attitude, tone and purpose inherent within the work can be found in Andrew Stott, *Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp.2-3; Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen.* Detroit:

laughter in her wok is added to the consideration, undoubtedly, it is not difficult to bring to light the fact that Austen's novels display the generic qualities of the feminist comedy of manners.

## IV. The Female Laughther in Yang's and Austen's Work

The laughter of the female protagonists of Yang Jiang's comedies, namely that of Junyu and Yanhua, bear striking resemblance with the laughter of two female characters of Austen's novels, that of Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Mary Crawford of *Mansfield Park* (1814). In addition to their laughter, these female characters of Austen also share similarities with Yang's heroines' "orphan girl situation". All of these female characters are orphans and are lodged or fostered in the homes of rich relatives. Therefore, they can all be said to be outsiders in a closed community. Facing the inferior situation, all of them, similarly, employ laughter as a weapon to protect themselves, subverting their inferior situations within their closed community, and also in order to overthrow the established code of the gender hierarchy.

### *A. Laughter as a Weapon*

The laughter of Elizabeth Bennet, bears similar qualities to that of Junyu. Firstly, it is clear that both of them use laughter to amuse themselves. Laughter employed in this way is a mode of behaviour which they may exploit in order to live with composure in an unfavourable situation and even at times to redefine it.

Elizabeth, who has grown up in Hertfordshire, is certainly not an outsider in the eyes of the neighbourhood. However, as a girl from a family on the periphery of the gentry class, Elizabeth is viewed as an outsider by the local aristocratic *milieu*. Elizabeth's outsider role is made apparent in several of the scenes in the novel. For instance, in the episode in which Elizabeth arrives at Netherfield to take care of the seriously ill Jane, her "weary ankles, dirty stockings, and a face glowing with the warmth of exercise"[10] after a three-mile walk to the mansion, first surprises and then disgusts most of the people in the breakfast-parlour. They then soon discover that the habits of this country girl are out of tune with their aristocratic standards of decorum. Just after Elizabeth has left the dining room, Miss Bingley commences to "abuse" Elizabeth openly, criticizing her as a lady with "no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty".

Confronted with the humiliation of being despised, Elizabeth uses laughter as a weapon. She consciously employs laughter as a weapon with which both to protect herself and to attack her enemies. She plainly declares that laughing at a person is a way to "plague and punish" him/her. In her first meeting with Darcy at the ball she clearly overhears Darcy's direct rejection of his friend's request to invite her to dance, as he regards her as a woman "slighted by other men". Elizabeth, however, does not allow herself to feel distressed by the insult but seizes control of the situation by telling the story "with great spirit among her friends; for she had a lively, playful disposition, which delighted in anything ridiculous" Her laughter is by no means the result of insensibility. Indeed, her later complaint to Colonel Fitzwilliam, accusing Darcy of dreadful manners on the occasion of her first encounter with him, illustrates that she had indeed felt humiliated. She chooses to laugh in that situation is a way to take the position to control and redefine the situation.

To Elizabeth, laughter also serves as her principal means of entertainment. Therefore, when she hears Miss Bingley's admiration of Darcy as a man having no deficiency to be laughed at, she cries out,

> Mr. Darcy is not to be laughed at! That is an uncommon advantage, and uncommon I hope it will continue, for it would be a great loss to *me* to have many such acquaintances. I dearly love a laugh.

In her words "I dearly love a laugh" Elizabeth thus plainly explains one of her critical attitudes towards life. This attitude of Elizabeth's can probably be traced back to her father's influence. Living as a satirist, Mr. Bennet teaches Elizabeth: "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?"

Laughing as an attitude to life for amusement is also demonstrated in Junyu's laughter throughout the play. In all the families she lives with, she finds causes for laughter, such as the hypocrisy and fake philanthropy of her hosts. Lady Yin's ulterior motive in asking Junyu to take the job as Zuyin's secretary is obvious: she wishes to avoid the possibility of an affair between Zuyin and his secretary. Lady Yin's hypocrisy induces in Junyu a repeated mockery of her aunt, and causes her to reject the job. Junyu finally announces to one and all the true reason for her aunt's wish for her to take the job: "Oh! Auntie, so you asked me to come because you were worried about uncle having a female secretary!" [11] , greatly embarrassing Lady Yin. Later, when Zuyin shows that he despises Junyu's father's Western-style paintings, disgusted by the nude girls in the pictures, and Lady Yin explains Zuyin's response, saying: "He's like that: he hates pictures of female nudes - they're too seductive", Junyu immediately responds: "As seductive as a female secretary?" Junyu's witty, playful language serves as a useful device to expose people's hypocrisy, and she readily finds amusement in every situation like this.

Junyu's wit is also exemplified by her conversation with Zuyi, who asks for Junyu's help in typing the manuscript of his book which is written in English. Junyu cannot help laughing because of her uncle's pseudo-Western style. Zuyi's

Wayne State UP, 1998, p.11; J. Middleton Murry, *The Problem of Style*. London: Oxford UP, 1965, pp.55-58.

[10] The text quoted from *Pride and Prejudice* in this article is from Jane Austen, *The Novels of Jane Austen, the Text Based on Collation of the Early Editions: Pride and Prejudice*, 3rd ed., vol. 2. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1923.

[11] Act 1 of *As You Desire* is translated by Christopher Rea (the title of the play is translated as *Heart's Desire*). The text quoted from this act is from Yang Jiang, "*Heart's Desire*: Act I," 稱心如意 (第一幕) Trans. Christopher Rea, *Renditions*, Issue 6, 2011, pp.15-33.

vanity and ignorance is apparently exposed through her witty words:

ZUYI. Are you good at English?
JUNYU. I don't think so.
ZUYI. Don't pretend to be modest - this is the Chinese habit.
JUNYU. I am not modest – I –I don't know what is Uncle's meaning of "good English".
ZUYI. You are right! You need to clarify the question first, and so you can give an accurate answer.
(Junyu laughs)
ZUYI. Oh, I am not joking. What are you laughing at?
JUNYU. I didn't laugh.[12]

Afterwards, Junyu enquires Zuyi about this issue of book-publishing. Zuyi tells her his struggle of writing is whether to write in classical Chinese or vernacular Chinese, as he thinks both approaches would possibly make him as the object of ridicule.

JUNYU. So, give it to a translator, and let him translate the book, one in classical Chinese and one in vernacular Chinese.
ZUYI. Exactly! What you said is so – so – so right. Indeed, this is what I am going to do.

What has been accused by Zuyi – people's practice of pretending and hypocrisy – and regarded as a "Chinese habit" is revealed as Zuyi's own habit – he also is a vain and hypocritical person, and this is exposed in the conversation into which he is insidiously led by Junyu. Seeing Zuyi's ignorance of his own shortcomings, Juyu, after Zuyi has left the room, cannot continue to type but just sits there and laughs. Such a kind of witty language intended to expose people's shortcomings and amuse the speaker herself is similar to that of Elizabeth who induces Darcy to admit his "vanity and pride", and when she successfully steers the conversation to her purpose, she "turned away to hide a smile". Laughter to Junyu, as well as to Elizabeth, is an expression of high spirits in every situation, good or otherwise.

Similar to Elizabeth, Junyu also uses laughter as a defence mechanism which lends her power to control and redefine an unfavourable situation. In a similarly inferior situation Junyu also employs laughter to relieve the stress of humiliation. After the discussion concerning Junyu's rebellious attitude and the negative impact which this might have upon their own daughter, Zuyin and Lady Yin suddenly decide against keeping Junyu in their family. Lady Yin slyly asks Junyu: "Really, Junyu, where are you staying tonight?", pretending that she has never intended that Junyu should stay at their home. Though surprised, Junyu immediately understands Lady Yin's trick and laughs: "Oh, (laugh) so Uncle won't be having me stay here". Junyu's response to the evident mistreatment is not to show anger but instead to laugh it off. Laughter is the most powerful resource available to Junyu to change an unfavourable situation.

Like Elizabeth, Junyu is not one to ignore the inferior situation in which she is trapped. When she finally meets her lover Binru 彬如, she tells him: "They just shunted me from here to there, from one family to another family. Every family dislikes me. I so regret ignoring your advice not to come to Shanghai". Finding no place to stay among the relatives' families, Junyu recognizes her own dreadful situation, and feels hurt and humiliated, but she does not indulge herself in feeling wretched. It is reminiscent of Mrs. Gardiner's comments to Elizabeth on her habit of solving problems: "You would have laughed yourself out of it sooner".

The most striking similarity which the protagonists share is the sadness behind their laughter. Since they realize their inferior situation, it is not easy for them to "laugh it off". Elizabeth finds it "… necessary to laugh, when she would rather have cried", and Junyu also explains her laughter as an alternative to tears.

While Junyu's laughter is mixed with different emotions connected with her subtle dissatisfaction with her surroundings, Yanhua's laughter is more complicated, for the latter's laughter does not appear as a forthright expression of merriment, but, as the expression of rage. Yanhua's laughter indicated in the stage directions is often described as a "sneer" and a bitter or sarcastic laugh. Even though sometimes her laughter appears cheerful and warm, the audience knows very well that this is just a pretence, as her expression swiftly changes to one of coldness. Her use of laughter is significantly more aggressive than that of Junyu and Elizabeth. It is not simply a weapon with which to protect herself, but rather something employed assertively in order to manipulate others. This serves as the basis upon which we may establish her kinship with a significant female villain of Austen's - Mary Crawford.

Mary Crawford shares the same background as the female protagonists of Yang. She also is an orphan and an intruder into the domestic circle. Laughter and an arch smile, her usual expressions, are employed as a means of getting what she wants. Her sometimes playful, sometimes wayward attitude is described by her lover Edmund as "ill humour".

One of many examples of this is the scene in which Mary compels Fanny to accept a necklace from her brother Henry. Fanny's insistence upon rejecting the gift induces Mary to employ laughter in the service of manipulation: she laughs in order to create a careless impression and to cover up the falsity of a story which she has just invented to deceive Fanny, finally saying: "To convince me that you suspect no trick and are as unsuspicious of compliment as I have always found you, take the necklace, and say no more about it"[13]. Consistent with such a style of intrigue, Mary also uses an arch, playful smile

[12] Act II, III and IV are translated by myself. The translation is based on Yang Jiang, *As You Desire*. 稱心如意 in *Yang Jiang Wenji. Wenlun Xiju Juan.* Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009, p. 196-293.

[13] The text quoted from *Mansfield Park* in this article is from Jane Austen, *The Novels of Jane Austen, the Text Based on Collation of the Early Editions: Mansfield Park*, 3rd ed., vol. 3. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1923.

at the beginning of her persuasive speech to convince Fanny to accept her brother's offer of marriage. Mary's aggression and ambition are thereby revealed. As the narrator comments, "Miss Crawford was not the slave of opportunity". Mary asserts: "I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing. If I lose the game, it shall not be from not striving for it".

Yanhua makes a similar declaration for herself: "When I set my mind to do something, I do it – sooner or later"[14]. Both in attempting to separate Wanru and Dazhang and in attempting to deceive Dazhang into marrying her, she employs smiles and laughter as tools of intrigue. She laughs and joks with Wanru, so as to give her the impression that she is willing to act as a messenger between Wanru and Dazhang, and then asks for Wanru's engagement ring as a token of the authenticity of the message. This is Yanhua's way of cheating Wanru into giving her the engagement ring. This ring is finally used by Yanhua as evidence that Wanru wishes to break off her engagement with Dazhang. When Dazhang is made desperate by Wanru's departure, Yanhua sneers to show her jealousy. Her jealous sneer is, in the eyes of Dazhang who actually also loves her, an act of seduction. The intrigue works, and Dazhang finally elopes with Yanhua. Yanhua accomplishes what she has sworn before: "Zhou Dazhang is mine. I must marry him". In this way laughter serves as a useful means by which Yanhua is able to manipulate people and achieve her ambition.

*B. The Refusal to be Rescued*

An offer of marriage from a rich and young man is in fact a rescue from an unfavourable situation. However, the female protagonists of Yang's comedies cannot hold back their laughter on receiving that offer of "rescue". That their laughter bursts out at this specific juncture not only reflects their subversion of patriarchy, but also Yang's reception of Austen's comic style. In Austen's works, her female characters exhibit the same attitude.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England women relied upon marriage to secure material and social advantages. Falling between these unequal systems, women were not allowed access to economic independence, and marriage was the only means by which they could achieve it. Furthermore, as Maaja A. Stewart suggests, women in this socio-economic situation were also without individual identity, which was only conferred upon them by men through marriage: "Every woman is an orphan who lacks social identity until she is 'adopted' by a husband", because "only men have the direct access to the economic and cultural resources that would support the necessary illusion of possible parity between nature, effort, and destiny" [7]. The anxiety arising from such circumstances, therefore, can also apply to financially independent women, such as the eponymous heroine of Austen's *Emma* (1815).

Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is certainly in need of economic rescue. Her family is on the verge of losing their property, and her portion of any inheritance will be very small. To her family, her cousin Mr. Collins, a clergyman with a stable income and the prospect of inheriting her father's property, would be the ideal candidate for marriage. Elizabeth, however, refuses Collins. When she hears Collins's foolish and arrogant proposal, she tries her very best to refrain from bursting into laughter, but seizes upon the only short pause in Collins's prolix speech to intercept and refuse him. It should be noticed that the subversiveness of Elizabeth is not only manifest in her refusal of material benefit, but also in her impulse to laugh. In the female ethical books of the early eighteenth century, laughter was something to be cautioned against: "When … the admirers were encouraged to make proposals, the ladies burst out into a loud laugh, wondered what the man could mean; they never dreamt of any thing more than common politeness" [8]. In the light of this, when Elizabeth, a poor girl who has the prospect of losing her home, refuses Collins's proposal, she subverts both a social code which prioritized material value and also contemporary standards of femininity.

The same kind of laughter is employed by Junyu when refusing her cousin Jingsun's 景荪 proposal of marriage. Despite the fact that Junyu has not shown any romantic interest in him, Jingsun still believes that Junyu is in love with him. His romantic fantasy makes him finally decide to abandon his fiancée Lingxian 令嫻 and ask Junyu to clarify their relationship:

JINGSUN. So, you have your difficulty. You think that - Of course you are good enough for me. But you may think that you are from a poor family, and therefore you don't want to flatter yourself to marry a man out of your league - I am just saying what you think, and that is definitely not my own thought - Anyway, great-uncle is going to adopt you as his granddaughter and so we are now on the same rank, right?

JUNYU. Really?

JINGSUN. Junyu, don't sacrifice yourself, and more importantly, your situation is going to change, you absolutely have no reason to sacrifice yourself. You always urge me to not upset Lingxian. But why don't you think in this way, how can I let myself upset you, make you suffer this kind of pain?

JUNYU. Me? I am upset and suffering? Because I don't dare to flatter myself to marry you? (laughs loudly)

JINGSUN. (staring at Junyu) Junyu!

JUNYU. (holds the laughter) My god! It is too funny! You think that I am in love with you! (laughs loudly)

Junyu might have tried to control her laughter for propriety's sake, but her playful disposition does not allow her to respond to Jingsun's arrogant confession without bursting into laughter. As much as Jingsun emphasizes that he does not mind Junyu's inferior rank and family background, it is obvious

[14] *Forging the Truth* is translated by Amy D. Dooling. The text quoted from this play in this arilce is from Yang Jiang, *Forging the Truth* 弄真成假 Trans. Amy D. Dooling, in *Writing Women in Modern China: The Revolutionary Years, 1936-1976*, Amy D Dooling, Ed. New York: Columbia UP, 2005, pp.112-177.

that he does indeed think Junyu not "good enough" for him. The prevailing assumption among the families is that a poor girl must set her cap at a rich man like Jingsun. Therefore Jingsun, in his romantic fantasy, takes upon himself the role of rescuer. This idea is also revealed in Collins's proposal to Elizabeth. Like Jingsun, Collins's disbelief in Elizabeth's refusal is a reflection of his perception of Elizabeth's poor situation. He tells Elizabeth that:

> You should take it into further consideration that in spite of your manifold attractions, it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may ever be made you. Your portion is unhappily so small that it will in all likelihood undo the effects of your loveliness and amiable qualifications. As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall choose to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females.

Collins imagines himself as rescuer of Elizabeth. His "situation in life" and his connection with the aristocratic family must seem more than ideal to a poor girl like Elizabeth. Both female characters cannot help but laugh at the arrogance of their suitors. The similarly comic gestures of the two suitors help to illustrate Yang's fidelity to Austen's aesthetic.

From the exaggeratedly formal address at the beginning to the points logically listed out as the arguments for the existence of this proposal of marriage, each sentence signifies the ridiculousness and insincerity of Collins's reasons for proposing, forming a contrast to his confession that he wishes to express "in the most animated language the violence of my affection". Similarly, the proposal of marriage by Guangzu 光祖, Yanhua's rich cousin who is a professor in the university, to Yanhua is executed in the same style. Both their prolix speeches start off with a ridiculous introduction, not at all resembling a romantic proposal of marriage. While Collins proposes the marriage as if discussing a business proposition with Elizabeth:

> Almost as soon as I entered the house I singled you out as the companion of my future life. But before I am run away with by my feelings on this subject, perhaps it will be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying - and moreover for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife, as I certainly did.

Guangzu starts his proposal as if discussing an academic issue:

GUANGZU. (suddenly sits down next to YANHUA): Yanhua, I have something to discuss with you.

YANHUA. (softly) What's about? So serious!

GUANGZU. You can't call it a serious matter – from the overall perspective of society, it's a very insignificant matter. But to the one or two people involved, however, it is a matter that concerns lifelong happiness, so one can't not see it as a very important matter, and one can't not discuss it very thoroughly.

More striking is their manner of listing out the points as arguments which in their belief are more than convincing for the women to agree to marry them. Collins arrogantly explains the reasons why Elizabeth must marry him:

> My reasons for marrying are, first, that I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, that I am convinced that it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly - which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, that it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness…

He still employs this style in counter-arguing, refusing to believe that Elizabeth is really rejecting him:

> You must give me leave to flatter myself, my dear cousin, that your refusal of my addresses are merely words of course. My reasons for believing it are briefly these: - It does not appear to me that my hand is unworthy your acceptance, or that the establishment I can offer would be any other than highly desirable…As I must therefore conclude that you are not serious in your rejection of me, I shall chuse to attribute it to your wish of increasing my love by suspense, according to the usual practice of elegant females.

For Guangzu, the strategy of point-listing is his way of proceeding with the discussion:

GUANGZU. …I'll lay the whole matter out very clearly for you. There are five points. The first point is, that is to say, the basic issue is whether or not this is worth discussing at all. In the past, when young ladies brought up the issue of marriage they would get embarrassed, and as for their own important event, they would get so flustered that they would let other people go and take care of it.

YANHUA. So, of course, it is worth talking about.

GUANGZU. But what we also have to carefully examine is - that is to say, the second point, that is, the problem itself – in other words, what we have to analyse now is, what is the issue?

YANHUA. What?

GUANGZU. Nowadays, some people oppose marriage. What we have to discuss is: Should a person get married or not? Some people say that the family is the root of all greed and a great many social ills – and that extortion and so forth starts with marriage. So, is marriage a good thing or not?

YANHUA. What?

GUANGZU. Of course it is obvious, so I might as well be frank. All men and women, no matter who they may be, need to get married. . .

YANHUA. Enough! I don't need to get married. If I ever fall in love with a man, I'll just run away with him.

GUANGZU. (nervously) Yanhua, we are merely discussing the issue – and I'm not finished – what I just said was the second point - let me first finish giving you the overall outline and then we can discuss the individual points one at a time. The third point is, why haven't I gotten married yet? There

are several reasons for this, and I'll tell you of them gradually. The fourth point is, can I get married right now? And there are two subpoints here: one is your perspective on this, the other is my perspective on this. The fifth point is the union of these two points, that is to say. . .

YANHUA. That is to say, I ought to marry you!

GUANGZU. Oh, Yanhua, I have never dared to utter that sentence. I always thought that - this - this - this thing called love is quite a marvellous thing that has to be painstakingly fostered. It can't be forced. That's why I have patiently waited for you, one year, two years, three years, even as much as five years or six years so that it could grow naturally. I just want it to grow. This brings us back to my third point . . .

Like Collins, after hearing Yanhua's refusal, Guangzu still focuses on proceeding with his discussion in such a manner: "Why? Yanhua? Oh, Yanhua, you just weren't even willing to finish listening to my third point. . . "

Given such a resemblance between Collins's proposal and Guangzu's, Yang's adoption of Austen's representation is evident. Yanhua's refusal of Guangzu's proposal, while she is living in refuge at the home of her uncle, is clearly the refusal of a rescue. Unlike Collins, Guangzu is not as arrogant as to take Yanhua's acceptance for granted; however, in the Yanhua's aunt's and uncle's minds, Guangzu is more than ideal for Yanhua, given the disparity of Guangzu's and Yanhua's backgrounds. In Xiangfu's conversation with his wife, he has a plan to match Guangzu with his own daughter Wanru. When Mrs. Zhang tells Xiangfu that Guangzu loves Yanhua, Xiangfu immediately says: "If he fancies Yanhua, how can he not fancy Wanru? Does a man who smokes Beauty brand cigarettes complain that Three Forts lack flavour?"[15] Yanhua's acceptance of Guangzu's offer would have been a chance for her to escape from an inferior situation. Nonetheless, she denies herself.

Though Yanhua, like Elizabeth, rejects the offer, the laughter evoked is different from that of Elizabeth. While Elizabeth cannot help feeling the ridiculousness and foolishness of the offer, Yanhua sneers, her feelings mingled with rage. Guangzu's proposal irritates Yanhua in that it casts light upon the oppression which she suffers and arouses her jealousy because of her unfair treatment in comparison with Wanru. When Guangzu discovers the fact that Yanhua secretly loves Dazhang, Yanhua's rage bursts out. One of the reasons for her anger is the Zhangs' idea that she is not good enough to have a husband like Dazhang. Guangzu's foolish proposal does not provide the same kind of amusement that Collins's does to Elizabeth, but instead elicits anger and bitterness.

A significant difference between Yanhua's and Elizabeth's laughter lies in the fact that Elizabeth's rejection of rescue does not mean that Elizabeth has the desire to reject the social institution of marriage, while Yanhua's does. Elizabeth's judgment of her sister's elopement displays her conventional outlook on marriage. Her refusal of an offer with secure material benefits is a rejection of the assumption that women are victims awaiting rescue, but not of the institution itself. Yanhua's laughter is much more subversive than Elizabeth's, for Yanhua subverts the marital institution per se. She asserts: "If ever I fall in love with a man, I'll just run away with him". From this perspective, Yanhua's laughter shares many more resemblances with that of Mary, who also objects to the very institution of marriage itself.

Mary does not believe in marriage. To her marriage is a deception. She shares her view with her sister:

> There is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in when they marry...when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves.

Although she observes that marriage is only "a manoeuvring business", as "everybody is taken in at some period or other", she prepares herself to get married, but only for advantage: "I do not like to have people throw themselves away; but everybody should marry as soon as they can do it to their advantage". The agenda of marrying for advantage makes Mary cast Tom Bertram as her original target because he is the eldest son, the future master of Mansfield Park.

Her later falling in love with Sir Bertram's second son Edmund is an incident beyond her expectation. As a result of her ambition to marry for material benefit, she tries her best to persuade Edmund to choose another, in her eyes, more honourable profession than that of clergyman, and she even has a wish that Tom would die soon and thus Edmund could replace his brother to inherit the property. Mary's concept of a romantic affair is that it is a field of battle on which she must triumph. This is one of the arguments she uses to persuade Fanny to accept Henry Crawford:

> Fanny, the glory of fixing one who has been shot at by so many; of having it in one's power to pay off the debts of one's sex! Oh, I am sure it is not in woman's nature to refuse such a triumph.

The same kind of outlook can also be found in Yanhua. Marriage to her is merely a means to gain material benefit. She tells Guangzu plainly that she loves Dazhang because Dazhang is rich, successful and handsome, making clear her opinion of romantic love, "Whatever it is they call unconditional love, I don't believe in it!" Another critical reason given for Yanhua's desire to marry Dazhang, as discussed above, is her jealousy of Wanru. The fact that the match approved by her aunt is to Guangzu, not to the more dashing, richer Dazhang, sharpens Yanhua's sense of inferiority and inequality. To Yanhua, the triangular love affair is not a purely romantic matter; rather, like Mary, she sees marriage in terms of a battle, triumph in which will prove that she is better than Wanru, thus subverting her inferior position.

The female characters' refusal of the offer of a "rescue" can also be interpreted as a refusal to be victimized. While Junyu's and Elizabeth's laughter can be identified as subversions of the gender hierarchy as well as of the socially accepted equation of marriage with economic advantage, Yanhua's and Mary's

[15] *Beauty* was a local product, while the *Three Forts* brand was imported from the West. Therefore in the popular belief of the 1940s Shanghai the latter was a higher quality brand than the former.

laughter is much more subversive in that it shows the characters' determination to take the right to discourse away from men and deliberately to employ marriage as a means of satisfying their own desires and achieving their ambitions.

## V. Conclusion

During the May Fourth period men were presented as both lovers and emancipators, and therefore rescuer.[16] Relationships were depicted in literature such a way that women were charmed by a lover's intelligence. Interestingly, the female protagonists who appear two decades later in Yang's comedies refuse to be rescued through the intervention of masculine characters. Their disgust of listening to the suitor's prolix, logical and least romantic proposal, or mockery of their lack of practical knowledge exhibit their strong individuality which is similarly manifested in Austen's female characters, such as Elizabeth and Mary discussed above.

Therefore, in her reception of Austen's comedic art as well as her subversive spirit, Yang craftily borrows literary resources from Austen's novels to not only write her own comedies but also deconstruct the May Fourth tenets and hence establish an anti-May Fourth discourse regarding the romantic fantasy between lovers and women's liberation. In light of this, the subversion in Yang's comedies is not only conducted in the context of gender hierarchy but also a larger context – the reflection of the social reform as well as her response to the national crisis of wartime. In Yang's comedies, her subversiveness is written through her intellectual vision. As a female intellectual, she does not only respond to the era in her role as a female, but also as an intellectual – she, in a sense, takes up the duty that the generations of Chinese intellectuals have been assigning to themselves.

In addition to the deconstruction of the mythology surrounding the May Fourth, Yang Jiang shares a vision with her audience – the power of laughter. Yang makes it clear in her afterword to the published plays that she deliberately employs laughter as a means of subversion, creating and giving expression to the spirit of resistance in the confined city of Shanghai:

> Though Shanghai was eventually occupied, the resistance against the Japanese in the cultural circle was never suppressed into oblivion. The theatrical scene was the prominent camp in this fight. Of course the industry, inevitably, was intervened in and oppressed in some ways; therefore it needed some less politically coloured plays to ease the tense atmosphere ... If the uncompromising spirit under the abuse of Japanese rule was regarded as a kind of revolt, the refusal of being frustrated as the sense of tenacity, the laughter provoked in these two comedies was hence an expression of our unbeatable confidence in that endless darkness, of our persistence of maintaining an optimistic spirit in that tough time [9].

Yang's afterword tells us that the war is indeed the playwright's real concern and the motivation behind her writing. As she was not allowed to make any direct reference to the war, the adoption of Austen's style of laughter allowed her the space in which to express her wartime concerns.

Yang Jiang does not only directly receive Austen's comedic art in her comedies but also transform the female laughter as to express her disillusionment of the "achievement" of May Fourth Movement. However, due to limitations on space, Yang's transformation of Austen's female laughter would not be included in this discussion.

[16] Such narratives, i.e those depicting this kind of relationship, are abundant in May Fourth literature, examples being *Regret for the Past* 傷逝 by Lu Xun 魯迅(1881-1936) and *The Greatest Event in Life* 終身大事 by Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962). And this kind of romantic relationship in reality can be observed in the common occurrence of relationships between teachers and students - the man acting as both lover and emancipator of the female student in this relationship. The story of Lu Xun and his student, Xu Guangping 許廣平 (1898 – 1968), who later became his wife, is one example.

## References


[1] Quoted in Meng Du, "A piece of writing about Yang Jiang," 關於楊絳的話 *Zazhi*, 10 May 1945, p.111.

[2] Zhu, Ziqing. " A History of Laughter," 笑的歷史 in *Zhu Ziqing Quanji*, vol.4. Zhu, Qiaosen, Ed. Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996, pp.80-91.

[3] Regina Barreca, *They Used to Call Me Snow White... But I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor*. New York: Viking, 1991, p.182.

[4] Ji Xianlin. "Some Recollections of Mr. Ye," 也談葉公超先生二三事 in *Ji Xianlin Huiyi Wenji*, vol. 3, Hu, Guangli and Zhigang Liang, Eds. Ha'erbin: Ha'erbin chubanshe, 2006. p.19.

[5] Wu Xuezhao, *Listen to Yang Jiang's Recollection*.聽楊絳談往事 Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 2008, pp.106-107.

[6] Yang Jiang, "What is there in her? - comments on reading novels (Part Three)," 有甚麼好？- 讀小說漫論之三 *Literary Review*, Issue 3, 1982, p.130.

[7] Maaja A Stewart, *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts.* Athens: Georgia UP, 1993, p.163.

[8] The citation is originally from Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*. Quoted from Audrey Bilger, *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998, p.122.

[9] Yang, Jiang, "Afterword to Two Comedies, 1982 Edition." 《喜劇兩種》一九八二年版後記 in *Yang Jiang Wenji. Wenlun Xiju Juan.* Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2009, p.382.