# Guigen and Tianjin-Style Humor: Liu Yunruo's Editorial Practice in Beiyang Pictorial

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**Abstract:** This article examines how Liu Yunruo's editorial practice at Beiyang Pictorial (Beihua) contributed to the articulation of guigen (归哏), a locally grounded form of Tianjin-style humor. Drawing on periodical materials, Liu's fiction and essays, and contextual readings of modern humor discourse, it traces the interaction of crosstalk conventions, urban print culture, and translated comic writing. The 1929 April Fools' Day feature demonstrates how staged images, delayed disclosure, and reader expectations generated humor through the specific affordances of pictorial journalism. Rather than ranking Liu's humor against more philosophical formulations, the article argues that its social criticism and accessible amusement served the cultural needs of an urban readership. This case contributes to the study of modern Chinese popular literature by showing how editorial experimentation mediated between local performance traditions and modern mass-media forms.

**Keywords:** Liu Yunruo; Beiyang Pictorial; guigen (归哏); Tianjin-style humor; satire; pictorial journalism

## 1. Introduction

Beiyang Pictorial (hereinafter referred to as Beihua) was founded in Tianjin on July 7, 1926, and ceased publication on July 29, 1937 due to the outbreak of the Anti-Japanese War. The pictorial published a total of 1,587 issues, making it the longest-running and most frequently published comprehensive independent pictorial in the northern region during the Republic of China period, and can be regarded as a representative of the northern school of photographic pictorials. Together with Shanghai's Liangyou, it constitutes the northern and southern peaks of modern pictorials. Modern Chinese pictorials have gone through three stages of development: lithography, copperplate photography, and photogravure, and Beihua performed particularly well in the "copperplate era".

The influence of Beihua was mainly concentrated in the northern region, including Beijing, Tianjin, and major cities such as Hebei, Henan, Shandong, Inner Mongolia, and the three northeastern provinces. At the end of 1927, the sales of Beihua were about 8,400 copies. During the period when Liu Yunruo was the editor-in-chief, the sales rose steadily, reaching a peak of about 10,000 copies. Feng Wuyue, the founder of Beihua, was born in Panyu, Guangdong, and was born into a family of diplomats. He studied aviation and radio technology in Europe and the United States, and after returning to China, he was active in the photojournalism circle in the Beijing-Tianjin area. He made great contributions to the development of Beihua and participated in various aspects such as business management, reporting and editing. In particular, before the formal establishment of Beiyang Pictorial Press in June 1928, Feng Wuyue single-handedly led the operation and development of the newspaper. In early 1933, due to family changes, Feng Wuyue sold Beihua to Tan Linbei, the owner of Tongsheng Photo Studio in Tianjin. After Tan Linbei took over, although the characteristics of Beihua were maintained, the direction and style of the newspaper were still adjusted.

Bei Hua had five editors-in-chief, namely Zhang Xizi, Tong Yishan, Liu Yunruo, Wu Qiuchen and Zuo Xiaoqu. Each editor-in-chief brought his own characteristics, which influenced the positioning and style of Bei Hua, making it show different faces in different historical periods. With the slogan of "spreading current affairs, promoting art, and instilling common sense", Bei Hua combined the immediacy of news and the expressiveness of pictures, providing valuable graphic materials for studying the social and cultural atmosphere of Tianjin and the north from 1926 to 1937. As a popular cultural publication, Bei

Hua pays attention to the needs of modern citizen readers, focusing on entertainment and consumption, but compared with Liangyou, Bei Hua shows more distinct northern characteristics. For example, Bei Hua's enthusiasm for traditional drama and folk art (Liu, 1946), as well as the publication of northern martial arts and popular social romance novels, fully reflects Tianjin's unique cultural atmosphere and local characteristics.

Previous scholarship on Liu Yunruo and northern popular fiction has illuminated his narrative style and Tianjin cultural milieu (Zhang, 2001), while studies of crosstalk highlight the importance of local performance culture (Xue, 2007). These perspectives help explain the cultural background of his writing but leave room for closer attention to the pictorial as an active site of humorous production. The present reading therefore focuses on the mechanisms through which editorial layout, visual credibility, and delayed revelation invited readers to participate in the joke. This emphasis complements, rather than replaces, literary and regional accounts of Liu's work.

Materials and approach. The discussion concentrates on Liu's editorial tenure from July 1928 to April 1930, especially the 1929 April Fools' Day sequence (April 1, 4, and 30) and examples of topical commercial satire. It also considers the 1935 essay "The Humorous Gentleman's Disease" (Beiyang Pictorial, issue 1313), the 1929 "Chronicles of the story of big and small events" (issues 356 and 371), and novels discussed below, including Chunfeng Huimeng Ji and Changing Nests of the Phoenix. The approach combines historical contextualization, close reading, and comparison of editorial and fictional techniques.

This article asks how Liu Yunruo's work at Beiyang Pictorial helped shape the techniques and social functions of guigen (归哏), and how local comic performance interacted with modern humor discourse and translated literature. It argues that the pictorial was not merely a source of subject matter for later fiction: its combination of text, photographs, topical satire, and reader-oriented editorial experiments offered a practical setting in which local humor could be adapted to mass print. By reading editorial episodes alongside Liu's literary practice, the study contributes a media-centered explanation of Tianjin-style humor to scholarship on modern Chinese popular writing.

## 2. Beiyang Pictorial during Liu Yunruo's Period

### 2.1 Editorial Experience and the Development of Cultural Networks

Liu Yunruo's experience as the third editor-in-chief of Beiyang Pictorial (Beihua) from July 1928 to April 1930 constituted a crucial stage in his professional development and literary career. His appointment was facilitated by the sudden resignation of the previous editor-in-chief, Tong Yishan, as well as the recommendations of influential cultural figures such as Wu Qiuchen and Wang Xiaoyin. Having begun contributing to Beihua as early as May 1928, Liu gradually assumed greater editorial responsibilities and eventually became a central figure in the pictorial's development. Following the formal establishment of Beiyang Pictorial Press in June 1928, he gained greater autonomy in editorial planning, content selection, and publication management. His responsibilities extended beyond routine editing and proofreading to include the coordination of contributors, the formulation of editorial strategies, and the improvement of publication quality. According to Wu Yunxin, a veteran journalist in Tianjin who was closely associated with Beihua, Liu personally undertook much of the editing and proofreading work, demonstrating exceptional dedication and professional competence. This intensive editorial experience enabled him to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between content production, visual presentation, readership, and commercial operations, while also establishing his reputation within Tianjin's journalistic and cultural circles.

Beyond his editorial responsibilities, Liu Yunruo's tenure at Beihua enabled him to establish an extensive network of professional and cultural relationships. As one of Tianjin's influential comprehensive pictorial publications, Beihua brought together journalists, writers, artists, dramatists, and

other members of the urban cultural elite, providing Liu with opportunities to participate in the city's intellectual and artistic life. His interactions with figures such as Yuan Hanyun, Fang Dishan, Zhang Xigong, Wang Xiaoyin, Feng Wuyue, and Tang Lichang broadened his cultural horizons and strengthened his professional connections. Among these relationships, his association with Wang Xiaoyin was particularly significant. Wang's recommendation helped Liu obtain the position of editor-in-chief, while his guidance and influence contributed to Liu's early professional growth. Liu also promoted the pictorial's institutional and commercial development through cooperation with Shang Bao. In September 1928, the two publications launched a joint subscription initiative, and in early 1929, their cooperation led to the establishment of a copper-zinc plate-making institute, which improved the technical conditions for image reproduction. These initiatives reflected Liu's awareness of the importance of technological innovation, resource sharing, and market development in the publishing industry. Although disagreements within his professional circle (Liu, 1987), particularly those associated with Wang Xiaoyin's departure from Tianjin and Liu's own youthful temperament, eventually contributed to his resignation in 1930, his experience at Beihua had already equipped him with valuable editorial expertise, managerial capabilities, and cultural resources. After leaving the pictorial, he continued his publishing activities through the literary supplement Xianhuazhuang of Tianjin Business Daily and the establishment of Tianjin Business Daily Pictorial Weekly, demonstrating the lasting influence of his earlier editorial experience.

### 2.2 The Influence of Pictorial Journalism on Literary Creation

Liu Yunruo's work at Beiyang Pictorial not only shaped his professional identity but also provided an important foundation for his development as a popular novelist. Through his daily editorial responsibilities, he gained direct access to information about Tianjin's urban society, theatrical performances, entertainment industry, social relationships, and changing cultural practices. These observations became valuable sources of material for his subsequent literary production. His experience at Beihua was particularly important in developing the distinctive regional characteristics commonly associated with his fiction, often described as the "Tianjin flavor." One prominent expression of this characteristic was guigen, a form of Tianjin-style humor that reflected the rhythms of urban life, local speech, social customs, and the distinctive attitudes of city residents. The cultural environment of Beihua provided Liu with opportunities to observe these features closely and transform them into literary expression. His editorial work also strengthened his ability to select significant social events, organize narrative information, and identify the dramatic potential of everyday experiences. These skills were particularly relevant to the creation of popular social romance novels, which frequently combined emotional relationships with depictions of contemporary society. Liu's early writing experiments in Beihua, including The episodes of big and small events and its continuation, further reveal his exploration of narrative structures that connected multiple social incidents through characters' experiences and interpersonal relationships. This approach enabled him to incorporate a broad range of social observations into his fiction while maintaining the emotional and narrative continuity required by the novel form.

The relationship between Liu's journalistic experience and his literary imagination can be observed more specifically in works such as Changing Nests of the Phoenix and Chunfeng Huimeng Ji (*Spring Breeze Returns to Dreams*) (Liu, 1989). In Changing Nests of the Phoenix, Liu drew on information about contemporary cultural figures and social events that had appeared in Beihua, demonstrating how journalistic materials could be transformed into fictional narratives. For instance, the character Ren Xiaoyu has been associated with Xiao Songren, a revolutionary painter who attracted attention in Tianjin during the late 1920s. Liu's exposure to reports and special features concerning such figures provided him with concrete references for constructing fictional characters and developing narrative conflicts. His engagement with theatrical culture was similarly reflected in *Spring Breeze Returns to Dreams*, in which characters such as Guo Sichun and Zhu Meichun have been linked to well-known theatrical personalities

Luo Yingong and Cheng Yanqiu. However, Liu did not simply reproduce real individuals or journalistic accounts. Instead, he reworked these materials according to the demands of characterization, plot development, and artistic expression. Guo Sichun, for example, emerges as a multidimensional character whose role extends beyond that of a recognizable theatrical celebrity to become a guardian and witness within the emotional narrative involving Ru Lian and Lu Jinghuan. This transformation demonstrates Liu's ability to move beyond factual representation and employ fiction to explore the complexity of human relationships and social reputation. Similarly, his observations of the entertainment industry and the experiences of female performers informed works such as Red Apricots Affair and Powder, Ink, Zither and Pipa. His earlier writing and editorial practice thus provided both concrete subject matter and an evolving understanding of narrative technique. Although Liu's first long chapter-style novel, Chunfeng Huimeng Ji, was serialized in Tianfeng Daily in the spring of 1930, shortly before his departure from Beihua, the transition reflected the gradual development of literary abilities cultivated through journalism and publishing. Taken together, Liu Yunruo's experience at Beihua illustrates the close relationship between pictorial journalism and popular literature in modern Tianjin: the pictorial functioned not merely as a platform for reporting social events, but also as a cultural environment in which writers accumulated knowledge, developed professional networks, observed urban life, and transformed contemporary experience into literary imagination.

## 3. Liu Yunruo's Tianjin-style humor

Terminology requires a distinction between the broader comic resource and its local deployment. Gen (哏) refers here to the comic point or verbal device associated with crosstalk; guigen (归哏) is used in this article for Liu's Tianjin-inflected practice of bringing a social situation toward a humorous turn; and wanxiang guigen (万象归哏) names the expansive disposition of finding comic possibilities in varied aspects of life. These are working analytical distinctions, not claims that the three expressions constituted a fixed historical taxonomy. "Humor" denotes the broader modern literary discourse of comic sensibility, "comedy" the production of amusing incongruity, and "satire" humor directed toward recognizable social practices or contradictions. Their boundaries overlap in the cases examined here. The exact historical usage and etymology of guigen and wanxiang guigen require further primary-source verification.

### 3.1 Tianjin's Civic Culture and Liu Yunruo's Editorial Practice in Beihua

Liu Yunruo was the first and only editor-in-chief of Beihua who was a native of Tianjin, and his intimate understanding of the city's everyday life, local customs, and popular culture distinguished his editorial approach from those of his predecessors. This local background not only provided a solid foundation for his editorial work but also profoundly influenced his subsequent literary creation. Following the substantial completion of the Northern Expedition in June 1928, Tianjin entered a new historical phase as a "special city," accompanied by significant transformations in its social structure and cultural environment. Liu assumed editorial leadership of Beihua at this transitional moment and incorporated his observations of urban change into the publication's editorial planning. Through his sustained attention to local society, he constructed a distinctive and relatively autonomous representation of Tianjin, presenting the city not merely as a geographical setting but as a living cultural space shaped by ordinary citizens, everyday experiences, and local sensibilities. During his tenure, Liu demonstrated a particular interest in the civilian world, which, although not representative of the entirety of Tianjin culture, decisively shaped the publication's cultural orientation and modes of expression. This approach differed from the earlier editorial tendencies of Feng Wuyue and others, who envisioned Beihua as a modern urban publication emphasizing Western literature, emerging technologies, and refined cultural content, as well as those of Zhang Xizi and Wang Xiaoyin, whose interests leaned more toward traditional Chinese culture, antiques, poetry, and the social lives of cultural celebrities. Having received a modern secondary education while maintaining a certain grounding in classical poetry, Liu adopted a more

accessible and socially grounded perspective. He paid closer attention to the experiences, concerns, and everyday problems of ordinary citizens, thereby giving Beihua a more vivid atmosphere of urban life. His understanding of the pictorial as "reading materials for entertainment and leisure" reflected his belief that publications should engage readers through humor, familiarity, and the vitality of everyday experience rather than merely conforming to political expectations or elite cultural tastes. This editorial philosophy was manifested in his planning of sections such as "Tianjin Photo" and various special pages, which foregrounded local customs, civilian concerns, and the living environments of ordinary people. His attention extended particularly to disadvantaged groups (Xue, 2007), including women in relief institutions, demonstrating that his civic perspective involved not only an appreciation of popular life but also a degree of sympathy for marginalized members of society. By integrating these concerns into Beihua, Liu established a distinctive mode of urban representation that connected local cultural identity with popular readership and laid an important foundation for the development of his Tianjin-flavored fiction.

### 3.2 The Cultural Connotations and Literary Expression of Guigen as Tianjin-Style Humor

Liu Yunruo's distinctive editorial perspective was closely connected to his understanding of Tianjin's traditional crosstalk culture and the local civic mentality commonly associated with guigen. Rather than treating social difficulties, contradictions, and disturbing events solely as subjects of criticism or lamentation, Liu frequently approached them through humor, irony, and a playful attitude toward life. In this sense, guigen can be understood as a distinctive way of interpreting and responding to the world, transforming seemingly serious, absurd, or frustrating circumstances into occasions for laughter. This attitude reflects an important dimension of Tianjin's popular culture, in which humor functions not simply as entertainment but also as a means of negotiating everyday difficulties and expressing an open-minded, resilient, and self-aware approach to social life. Liu's familiarity with the city's crosstalk tradition provided a significant cultural resource for the development of this sensibility, which subsequently became a recognizable feature of his popular novels. In 1946, Jing Guxue, in the preface to Fenmo Zhengpa, characterized Liu's creative style as "naughty" and observed that he could "use ugliness as beauty." This assessment suggests a literary sensibility that departed from conventional aesthetic expectations and found expressive possibilities in the humorous transformation of the ordinary, the unconventional, and even the grotesque. Compared with the "neutral beauty" associated with Zhang Henshui, Liu's approach placed greater emphasis on playful irreverence and the humorous reinterpretation of social experience. Zhang Yuanqing likewise highlighted the influence of Tianjin citizens' cultural mentality of "looking for fun" on Liu's fiction, arguing that Liu satisfied readers' desire for amusement by rendering the world through guigen. This cultural affinity helps explain why his novels resonated with Tianjin readers and achieved considerable popularity during the 1930s and 1940s. Nevertheless, descriptions such as "naughtiness" and "looking for fun," although useful for identifying aspects of Liu's literary style, remain insufficient to explain the full expressive range and cultural significance of guigen. This article therefore interprets guigen through the concept of "Tianjin-style humor," emphasizing the relationship between its localized cultural origins and its modern literary expression. The term "humor," introduced into Chinese intellectual discourse through Lin Yutang's translation and interpretation, provides a conceptual framework for examining how a sensibility rooted in traditional Tianjin crosstalk could acquire broader modern cultural significance. Liu's creative practice thus reveals an interaction between local traditions and modern literary consciousness, rather than a simple continuation of folk entertainment. A comparable synthesis can also be observed in other modern Tianjin popular fiction writers, including Huanzhu Louzhu and Bai Yu, whose literary development was shaped by modern education and the New Culture Movement. Accordingly, guigen should be understood not merely as a regional comic technique but as a culturally situated form of modern humor through which local experience, popular aesthetics, and changing literary values intersected in the development of modern

Chinese popular fiction.

## 4. Liu Yunruo's Guigen and the Formation of Tianjin-Style Humor

Liu Yunruo's distinctive guigen style was shaped not only by his familiarity with Tianjin's crosstalk culture but also by the modern humor movement that emerged and gained prominence during the 1920s and 1930s.

The "Zhongshan" example is most revealing when read as a change in context rather than merely a list of products: a politically resonant name is repeated in commercial settings until its symbolic authority becomes a selling device. The comic mechanism depends on the reader recognizing the gap between public commemoration and routine consumption. This reading is an interpretation of the example discussed here, not proof of Liu's intention or of a specific audience response.

The April Fools' Day sequence also clarifies a mechanism of reader engagement. On April 1, the visual format and recognizable figures encouraged provisional belief; the April 4 disclosure then retrospectively converted apparent information into a joke; and the April 30 explanation invited readers to reconsider the production of the images themselves. The interval between publication and revelation was therefore part of the comic design. This may have encouraged repeat attention to the pictorial, although surviving evidence cited here does not permit a measurable claim about circulation or readers' actual psychological responses. What can be demonstrated is the editorial construction of a participatory reading position through the staged movement from credibility to surprise.

In conclusion, Liu Yunruo's guigen (归哏) is best understood as a form of Tianjin-style humor produced through the interaction of local crosstalk sensibilities, modern debates about humor, translated comic literature, and the editorial possibilities of Beiyang Pictorial. Its characteristic movement between amusement and social observation is particularly visible in the "Zhongshan" commercial example and the pictorial's 1929 April Fools' Day sequence. The latter shows how photographic credibility, timed disclosure, and readers' interpretive expectations could be organized into a comic event. Rather than treating Liu's accessible humor as intellectually inferior to the approaches associated with Lin Yutang or Lao She, this study emphasizes its different cultural work: it addressed everyday urban experience, made social incongruities legible, and cultivated proximity between editor and audience. Liu's editorial practice thus helps explain how a regional comic tradition could be reworked within modern illustrated journalism and subsequently inform the techniques of popular fiction. Further comparison of specific passages across surviving issues and novel editions would help establish the extent of direct textual transmission.

In 1935, Liu published "The Humorous Gentleman's Disease" in Beihua, demonstrating his continued interest in and support for humor at a time when the concept was increasingly subject to criticism in literary and artistic circles. As debates surrounding humor intensified, the term gradually lost some of its earlier prominence, while Lin Yutang's approach to humor also underwent changes. Nevertheless, Liu maintained that humor was an effective means of expressing temperament, arguing that "humor is a tool for expressing temperament. If you want to say something, you don't say it with a serious attitude, but with laughter, anger and scolding." This understanding corresponds closely to his guigen sensibility, which transformed serious social observations into humorous and accessible expressions. The differing reception of humor in popular literature and modern new literature therefore provides an important perspective for understanding the development of modern Chinese humor. Liu was not alone in defending this literary approach. Geng Xiao, a prominent writer of humorous fiction in Beijing during the 1930s and 1940s, also published "On Humor," arguing that Lin Yutang attracted criticism partly because his humor challenged the pretensions of scholars and officials. Lao She encountered similar disparagement. Geng's interpretation of humor as a combination of irony and comedy further illustrates the conceptual overlap between humor, satire, and amusement in the literary debates of the period. Within popular literature, the distinction between humor and funny had long remained unclear, partly because of the

terminology and aesthetic categories established through early translations of Western fiction. Although scholarship has frequently emphasized the influence of Lin Yutang's translated novels on modern new literature, their impact on popular fiction has received comparatively less attention. In fact, many northern popular writers of the 1930s and 1940s were familiar with these translated works and drew inspiration from their narrative techniques and comic sensibilities. In 1939, for example, Ye Leng observed that Bai Yu's martial arts fiction borrowed elements from the works of Alexandre Dumas and Cervantes. Liu Yunruo's own preface to Jiuyan Dengliplu likewise indicates his engagement with Western literary traditions, although the significance of this influence extends beyond the narrative techniques of writers such as Dickens. The comic sensibilities associated with Dickens and Washington Irving also offer a useful framework for understanding Liu's creative development. Lin Shu's translation of Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby under the title The Funny History, together with the classification of The Funny History and Irving's The Record of Clapping and Travels as "funny novels" in the 1914 reprint series of Lin's translated fiction published by the Commercial Press, demonstrates that the category of funny was used to describe humorous Western literature before humor became widely established as a literary concept in Chinese discourse. Lin Shu's comments on Dickens's vivid depiction of comic characters and Irving's ability to express sadness through amusing narratives further illuminate the aesthetic traditions available to Chinese readers. These elements are reflected in Liu's characterization and storytelling (Hu, 1924), which combined the conventions of traditional Chinese opera with the comic characterization associated with Dickens and the forms of self-concealment and indirect expression associated with Irving. Accordingly, Liu's guigen can be understood as the product of an interaction among Tianjin's local crosstalk tradition, the modern humor movement, and the comic elements of translated Western fiction. Unlike Lin Yutang's more refined, intellectual conception of humor, which emphasized rational reflection and philosophical insight, and Lao She's Beijing-style humor, which remained closely connected to the popular intellectual culture of the capital, Liu's style was more closely embedded in everyday civic life and the vernacular culture of the marketplace. Its apparent vulgarity was not merely a matter of stylistic simplicity; rather, it reflected Liu's recognition of and appreciation for ordinary citizens' experiences, tastes, and forms of entertainment. Through this synthesis of local popular culture and modern literary influences, guigen acquired a distinctive position in the development of modern Chinese popular fiction.

### 4.2 Guigen as Social Satire and Civic Entertainment in Beihua

Liu Yunruo's guigen was not simply a technique for producing laughter; it also functioned as a means of observing social contradictions, exposing contemporary absurdities, and providing psychological relief through entertainment. A notable example was the widespread use of the term "Zhongshan" in northern Chinese society after the Nanjing government assumed control of Beijing and Tianjin. During this period, the label appeared extensively in advertisements, posters, shop signs, and commercial products, including "Zhongshan cloth," "Zhongshan wool," "Zhongshan glasses," and "Zhongshan meals." By drawing attention to this phenomenon of indiscriminate "Zhongshanization," Liu employed a form of exaggerated realism that exposed the incongruity between political symbolism and everyday commercial practices. His satire relied not on overt condemnation but on rational restraint, selective presentation, and the filtering of emotional responses, allowing the absurdity of the situation to emerge through the details themselves (Zhang, 2009). This approach demonstrates that humor and satire were not necessarily opposing literary modes. As Lao She observed, although humor and satire could be distinguished analytically, they were difficult to separate entirely in practice. Writers who employed humor often possessed a strong sense of justice and did not refrain from criticizing wrongdoing; under conditions of social hardship, humor could therefore develop a distinctly satirical dimension. This relationship between amusement and criticism was particularly significant in Tianjin and northern China, where natural disasters, political instability, and social difficulties persisted despite the hopes generated by the

completion of the Northern Expedition. Liu closely observed the new problems emerging within society and transformed them into humorous narratives that allowed readers to recognize social contradictions without being overwhelmed by their seriousness. At the same time, the entertainment function of guigen remained essential. Tianjin's popular culture, especially crosstalk, placed considerable emphasis on laughter as a form of performance and social interaction. Such humor reflected both the local tradition of wit and the psychological needs of ordinary citizens living amid persistent hardship. When confronted with circumstances they could neither easily escape nor fundamentally change, people could obtain a degree of emotional relief by making light of their suffering. Liu understood this cultural mechanism and deliberately incorporated the comic techniques of crosstalk into his editorial practice, adapting them to the visual and textual characteristics of pictorial journalism. His work in Beihua thus connected social observation with popular entertainment, transforming the pictorial into a space where readers could simultaneously experience amusement and encounter the contradictions of contemporary urban life.

The pictorial's celebration of April Fools' Day in 1929 offers a particularly revealing example of Liu Yunruo's creative approach to civic entertainment. Although the introduction of this Western festival might initially appear to reflect the Europeanization of urban cultural practices, Liu's treatment of the occasion was closer to a creative adaptation of crosstalk techniques, using a Western cultural form to generate locally recognizable humor. On April 1, Beihua published a report about an alleged audition by the "Tianjin Newspaper Amateur Song and Dance Troupe," describing a group of newspaper celebrities performing in women's clothing and accompanying the story with photographs. By placing recognizable public figures in an unexpected and incongruous comic situation, the publication constructed a seemingly credible report that simultaneously invited and manipulated readers' expectations. The humor emerged from the tension between the apparent authenticity of the photographs and the implausibility of the reported event. On April 4, Beihua revealed that the story was fabricated, prompting readers to reconsider their initial interpretation and recognize the joke. On April 30, Liu further explained how the photographs had been produced and discussed the reasons behind the success of the exercise. This sequence transformed a single humorous incident into a sustained interaction among editor, publication, and readership. Rather than simply presenting a finished joke, Liu incorporated readers' assumptions and reactions into the comic performance itself, effectively positioning the editorial team as participants in an elaborate act of deception and revelation. The strategy also demonstrated the distinctive possibilities of pictorial journalism, in which photographs could lend apparent credibility to fictional narratives while simultaneously becoming instruments of visual comedy. Through the combination of staged imagery, fabricated news, delayed disclosure, and subsequent explanation, Liu adapted the performative structure of crosstalk to the medium of the pictorial. The April Fools' Day episode therefore illustrates how Beihua combined local humor, modern media techniques, and popular participation to create a distinctive form of urban entertainment. More broadly, Liu's editorial practice reveals that guigen operated on two interconnected levels: it offered readers immediate amusement while encouraging them to recognize the absurdities embedded in contemporary social and cultural life. Its capacity to entertain without abandoning social observation made it an effective expression of Tianjin's civic culture and an important characteristic of Liu Yunruo's literary and editorial style.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Liu Yunruo's "return to humor" reflects both the influence of modern humor trends in the 1920s and 1930s and the distinctive characteristics of his own literary practice. Although his works incorporate elements of modern humor, their reliance on jokes and sensory amusement often limits their intellectual depth and transcendental significance. Unlike the humor advocated by Lin Yutang and Lao She, which derives from an understanding of human nature and social realities, Liu's humor frequently emphasizes immediate entertainment and readerly pleasure. Nevertheless, this tendency should not be

understood merely as a literary limitation. Through self-deprecation, colloquial expression, and a deliberately approachable authorial persona, Liu dismantles the conventional hierarchy between author and reader. The exaggerated cartoon portrait and accompanying doggerel published in Beihua on July 7, 1929, exemplify this strategy, transforming the author from a distant cultural authority into an accessible figure of everyday amusement. Such an approach corresponded to the reading expectations of modern pictorial audiences and strengthened the connection between literary production and popular readership. Therefore, Liu Yunruo's humor occupies an ambivalent position between the vulgar and the modern: while it does not always achieve the reflective depth associated with more elevated conceptions of humor, it reveals how humor could function as a means of reshaping author–reader relations and adapting literary expression to the evolving culture of modern periodicals.

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