# 6

# Shared Humour: Elitist Joking in *Shishuo xinyu*

## (A New Account of Tales of the World)

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To write about humour in *Shishuo xinyu* 世説新語 (A New Account of Tales of the World, hereafter *Shishuo*),[1] one must first examine the appropriateness of applying such a modern Western concept to a work compiled in medieval China. The Chinese term *youmo* 幽默, a transliteration of the English word "humour", has come to mean both anything that amuses or entertains and the various amused reactions to such stimuli. Did humour in either of these senses exist in ancient China? More specifically, can we tell whether early medieval Chinese people had humour and enjoyed it? Accepting the most general interpretation of humour as it is now understood helps avoid the pitfalls of theoretical arguments and provides a straightforward answer: if humour is what provides amusement and brings a shadow of a smile or provokes laughter, then it is indeed possible to talk about humour in this remarkable classical text, which is neither moralistic nor sentimental but rather full of humour. Since it was created and enjoyed in those times, then the answer to the questions posed above must be "Yes".

## Background and Origins

Over the centuries, *Shishuo* has been a very popular text, especially among Chinese literati — that is, the gentry or landowners from whom were drawn the officials in successive imperial governments. In the traditional division of classes or occupations, scholar-officials ranked highest, above farmers, craftsmen and merchants. The popularity of *Shishuo* spread outwards, particularly following the growing availability of writing materials — especially paper, which

was comparatively easy and cheap to produce in larger quantities using a method developed by Cai Lun 蔡倫 (50–121 CE).[2] Writing styles also became more diversified over the centuries, and affected the ways in which scholarship was conducted.[3] The act of putting pen or brush to paper had once been carefully guarded, only to be used for texts considered to be beneficial to statecraft and the edification of the mind — in other words, for historical and philosophical writing. Writing later branched off to include texts that amused and fascinated. Although the genre of *xiaoshuo* 小說 (fiction — literally "small talk"), under which *Shishuo* was traditionally classified, thus had humble origins; it may nevertheless have been of benefit to the ruler,[4] and by the time *Shishuo* itself appeared the genre had developed to serve many causes. *Shishuo*'s aims were aiding those who wished to polish the art of conversation, and simply providing enjoyment through amusing anecdotes and examples of clever repartee; it has always been regarded as amply fulfilling both.[5] The work has survived through more than a millennium and a half to the present day, not because it was on the reading list for the imperial civil examinations but because of its readers' affection and the pure enjoyment it afforded them.

The actual date of *Shishuo*'s compilation is not recorded. Fan Ziye argued that it was probably completed around 439–40 CE; Mather puts it around 430.[6] I, on the other hand, have extended the time of *Shishuo*'s compilation to 435; however, I agree that, given the many projects Liu Yiqing initiated and the fact that he and his literary aides could not have devoted themselves full time to the compilation of these works, it was probably completed about 439–40.[7] Judging by the fact that at least one edition known to us appeared in the same Liu Song dynasty (420–78) in which Liu Yiqing lived, it soon became popular, while imitations and commentaries began to appear within 80 years of his death.[8] The best commentary was written by Liu Jun 劉峻 (462–521), who incorporated the many sources on which *Shishuo* had relied and provided background for its often-cryptic entries, to the benefit of readers and scholars of later ages. New editions appeared in almost every dynasty from then on, often several in one period. The early editions before the age of printing were necessarily manuscripts. The earliest and only remnant of a hand-copied *Shishuo*, dated to the Tang dynasty, is in the possession of collectors in Japan. A photographic

edition of this fragment was taken back to China in the twentieth century. The earliest recorded printed edition is a Song edition printed in 1138, but it is no longer extant. The earliest surviving printed copy is also a Song edition: the Maeda edition, preserved in Japan. This edition contains a great number of errors, however, and therefore the modern Chinese edition — whose distant provenance is a Song-dynasty edition, which in turn was based on an edition of a century earlier — is considered better than the Maeda edition.[9]

After having circulated for a millennium, *Shishuo*'s popularity seems to have waned after the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), but it was revived with the publication in 1556 of an abridged edition entitled *Shishuo xinyu bu* 世説新語補 (Addended *Shishuo xinyu*), which combines the original text with entries of the same nature relating to later ages penned by others. This new edition became so popular that it threatened the continued existence of the original *Shishuo*. Fortunately, despite the popularity of this new edition, the original edition managed to survive into modern times. The inclusion of the original *Shishuo* in the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書, a collection copied under imperial decree in the eighteenth century, no doubt ensured this. It was not only popular throughout China; numerous imitations over the ages also appeared in other East Asian countries such as Japan and Korea. In Japan, seven imitations are reported by Qian Nanxiu,[10] while in Korea examples of works considered to have been written in the *Shishuo* genre include Lee In-ro's *Pahan jib* 破閒集 and Choe Ja's *Bohan jib* 補閒集.[11]

Although compiled in the fifth century, *Shishuo*'s sources are earlier: *Shishuo* is in fact a collection of anecdotes and quotations about historical figures dating mainly from the third and fourth centuries. Its pages reflect an important shift from orthodox Confucianism to Daoism in the outlook of the literati during this Wei–Jin period. Many of its personages espouse Daoist ideas or display these ideas in their behaviour, and it often illustrates a close link between Daoist thought and humour.[12] The compiler is traditionally given as Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–44), Prince of Linchuan in present-day Jiangxi Province, of the southern Liu Song (420–79) dynasty. However, later research has shown that it could have been compiled by scholars under his sponsorship.[13] The educated elite provided the audience for *Shishuo*. In most cases, no background is provided for the anecdotes and even full

names of the people referred to are not given, on the understanding that to refer to them by their official title, courtesy name or even nickname was sufficient to identify them to readers. This has made the text difficult for later readers, and even more so for readers from the West. The definitive English translation by Richard Mather, published in 1976, provides detailed explanations and references to assist English-speaking readers in understanding the text.

Liu Yiqing was enfeoffed as prince by his uncle, the first and founding emperor of the Liu Song dynasty,[14] and was thus trained to govern from a young age. However, we are told that he was also particularly interested in literature — though not really blessed with a gift for writing. In adulthood, he was entrusted by his cousin, a later emperor, with the task of controlling large areas of the state; being officially responsible for both political and military affairs, he would have been kept very busy. Bibliographical works covering the times in which he lived credit him with other voluminous works comprising hundreds of *juan* 卷 (chapters). All this has caused later scholars to call his authorship into doubt. The literary scholar Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) surmised that the real compilers of *Shishuo* were the literary aides mentioned in Liu's official biography.[15] Following this lead, I investigated the lives of his four aides/protégés, and have argued on the basis of their personalities and surviving fragments of their work that two of them — He Changyu 何長瑜 (d. c. 445) and Yuan Shu 袁淑 (408–53) — in fact exhibited the kind of open-mindedness and irreverence that also characterizes *Shishuo*, and were thus most likely involved in its compilation.[16]

*Shishuo* can loosely be described as a cross between an unofficial history, a biography and a gossip page. It embraces telling details about historical figures and events not important enough to have entered the pages of the official histories, but nevertheless interesting because such details reveal the deep psychology of these historical figures, affording insight into their interactions. The principal criterion for inclusion seems to have been that the material was of general interest. If that is so, then humour probably earned its inclusion in this way. Looked at from another angle, *Shishuo* is a book about human traits. This is made clear by the titles of the chapters, such as "The square and proper", "The

free and unrestrained" and "Stinginess and meanness", which seem to attempt to embody the entire spectrum of human characteristics. If *Shishuo* were indeed intended to cover all angles of human nature, it could not afford to leave out humour.

Sharing jokes among an in-group is naturally found in many cultures. A Greek manuscript entitled *Philogelos*, or "Laughter-lover", is dated not earlier than the tenth century CE; however, like *Shishuo*, it contains earlier material from as early as the third century.[17] This collection contains jokes made at the expense of intellectuals: the pedantic student, the lawyer, the doctor and the professor. Although it is not clear who the author or authors were, it is thought to have been created by the "lower urban classes".[18] The similarity between this work from the world of Greek Byzantium and *Shishuo* lies in both works having the educated or intellectuals as their subject. However, they differ in that the creators of *Shishuo* were themselves literati, rather than members of the lower urban classes. Evidently, however, gentlemen in the West — like the Chinese educated elite — read and enjoyed joke books from early times. A later example, from sixteenth-century England, is a compilation entitled *A hundred mery talys*, which circulated widely in England and is said to have been the product of a highly educated Humanist circle,[19] just as *Shishuo* was. It also shares similarities and differences with *Shishuo*. Derek Brewer has observed of the jesting in European Renaissance and early modern works like *A hundred mery talys* that "it promotes humour and harmony of the group who share it and its implications", and this seems to apply to *Shishuo*; however, his further comment proves quite opposite to what *Shishuo* stands for: "Traditionally jests tend to endorse popular prejudice, as with the universally practised ethnic joke, or almost equally universal anti-feminism in many forms, or mockery of physical handicaps."[20]

## *Shishuo* and Joke Books

*Shishuo* does not purport to be a jest book: humour is only a by-product of its *raison d'être*, which is to be a collection of elegant and interesting sayings and anecdotes. Also, the compilers of *Shishuo* were aiming at an elite group whose taste may well have been opposite to that

of the popular culture of the time. China certainly also had its jest books. Roughly two centuries before the compilation of *Shishuo*, there appeared a book entitled *Xiao lin* 笑林 (The forest of laughter). The reputed author, Handan Chun 邯鄲淳 (fl. c.220 CE), was a writer, calligrapher and specialist in Chinese written characters. When the Cao Wei dynasty was established (221), he was given the prestigious title of erudite (*boshi* 博士). His *Xiao lin*, originally in three *juan*, is no longer extant and only 29 of its entries are still preserved today.[21] The work has been described as a joke book and is clearly devoted to humour and laughter, as indicated by its title and the remaining contents, which seem to focus directly on exposing human folly and frailties. The main difference between this work and *Shishuo* is that the people who appear in the *Xiao lin* entries are commoners rather than the elite. The jokes are less subtle and more suited to popular taste. We can deduce, therefore, that it was compiled as a work for a popular or wider audience, whereas *Shishuo* was a work for the literati. There is no discernible link between the two.

We can only speculate about why *Shishuo* survived intact while *Xiao lin* was largely lost. The fate of a work in pre-modern China depended largely on the literati, who were not only the creators of texts but also their chief consumers. Texts not continually used by them were apt to disappear, and many did just that over the centuries. Elsewhere, I have argued that *Shishuo* survived because it incorporated many earlier texts and thus acted as a kind of storehouse for its own genre. Knowing nothing more about *Xiao lin* and its compiler, we cannot be sure it functioned in the same way. The extant fragments of *Xiao lin* have been culled from early reference books known as *leishu* 類書, a type of work unique to China. Works in this category were encyclopaedic, but differed from the Western concept of encyclopaedias in that they collected quotations from other books and arranged them under topics, rather than composing their own summaries of what was known about a topic. Consequently, these *leishu* are treasure houses of lost books. Scholars in the eighteenth century first started to cull snippets of lost books from *leishu*, and this work was continued sporadically in the nineteenth century. An illustrious twentieth-century scholar of this kind was Lu Xun, who culled fragments of many ancient works of fiction in his compilation *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, published after his death in the first edition of his complete works in 1938.

## Types of Humour in *Shishuo*

*Shishuo* was compiled and worked on the assumption that certain books and their contents were a commonality within the literati group; it could be enjoyed only by those who had studied and internalized the Confucian classics and official histories. It contains many in-jokes to be shared by these privileged readers, but also seemingly universal jokes that can be enjoyed by everyone. Certain jokes have a child confronting an adult, or a man a woman. Some passages ridicule human weakness, poking particular fun at country bumpkins in the way noted by Brewer. A number of jokes document a lack of reverence and respect for social status, and established behaviour and attitudes. The types of humour classified and illustrated below give an idea of the range in this work. Types do sometimes overlap, and one passage may represent several approaches to humour. Moreover, the humour may be situated in what people say as well as in their behaviour — sometimes in a combination of both.

### *Literati In-Group Jokes*

Literati in-group jokes are created by and for the literati. Their premise is that speaker and listener share knowledge of a body of literature and that, without any explanation or reminder by the "speaker" in the written joke, the "listener" (reader) will be able to recall the passages referenced and grasp the intended humour. For Chinese speakers and readers in the fifth and later centuries, this body of literature included the Confucian classics, especially the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of songs), *Shujing* 書經 (Book of history), *Chunqiu* 春秋 (Spring and autumn annals) and *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Commentary [on the annals] according to Master Zuo). All literati who hoped to be recommended for official positions were also expected to be familiar with two official histories: the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian) and *Han shu* 漢書 (Book of Han). Although students were not necessarily required to learn these by heart, they were expected to be familiar with the events and characters mentioned in them. Without this knowledge and a grasp of the archaic language in which it was couched, the audience would be unable to get the point of the jokes in *Shishuo*. This type of humour is so

characteristic of *Shishuo* that it recurs at least as a side aspect to many of the passages below.

In some cases, the humour arises simply from quoting classics appropriate to a certain situation:

> 簡文作撫軍時，嘗與桓宣武俱入朝，更相讓在前。宣武不得已而先之，因曰：「伯也執殳，為王前驅。」簡文曰：「所謂『無小無大，從公于邁』。」
>
> When Emperor Jianwen[22] was serving as Generalissimo Controlling the Army, he once came into the audience hall with Huan Wen. After the two had repeatedly yielded precedence to each other, Huan finally had no recourse but to go first. In so doing he said:
>
> "The earl grasps his spear
>
> And goes ahead as the king's fore-rider."
>
> Jianwen countered with:
>
> "There are no small and no great;
>
> All follow the duke in his travels."[23]

Understanding the archaic language of this joke may be just as difficult for Chinese readers not fluent in classical Chinese as for non-Chinese readers, although the English translation removes this barrier for some. Readers must also know who these two men were, and understand their relative standing in their own world. Emperor Jianwen, personal name Sima Yu [Ssu-ma Yü] 司馬昱 (320–72, reign period 372) had not yet ascended the throne at the time of this episode. He was then Prince of Kuaiji, representing the interests of the imperial house. Huan Wen (312–73), on the other hand, was a dominant minister in control of the army with ambitions of replacing the imperial house with his own. Their potential conflict lay somewhat beneath the surface, as in this episode the two are very cautious in dealing with each other. Huan Wen's quotation from the *Book of songs* expresses his respect as a feudal lord for the imperial house. In reply, Sima Yu quotes the same work to indicate his reluctance to take precedence over Huan Wen, since he wishes to follow Huan's leadership as "the duke" — a reference to the Duke of Zhou, a famous character from what was then already ancient history. The Duke of Zhou was the brother of King Wu, founder of the Zhou dynasty, serving as regent for his son King Cheng, still a minor when he succeeded to the throne. On the surface, the narrative seems

simply to be about someone of higher official position being courteous to his senior in age (Huan Wen was undoubtedly older than Sima Yu) and/or the senior in age being courteous to someone who holds a higher position; however, understanding the background politics reveals a deeper significance and underlying hostility. Since Huan Wen did not wish to expose his ambition openly, he chose a quotation to demonstrate his loyalty while Sima Yu chose a quotation that revealed — albeit subtly — his awareness of Huan's ambition. The story could not have failed to elicit knowing smiles from those who understood its nuances.

A similar story about two different people in the same situation has an opposite twist, so that instead of being self-deprecatory, their remarks are self-congratulatory:

> 王文度、范榮期俱為簡文所要。范年大而位小，王年小而位大。將前，更相推在前。既移久，王遂在范後。王因謂曰：「簸之揚之，穅秕在前。」范曰：「洮之汰之，沙礫在後。」
>
> Wang Tanzhi [Wang T'an-chih] and Fan Qi [Fan Ch'i] were once summoned simultaneously by Emperor Jianwen. Fan was older but lower in rank, while Wang was younger but higher in rank. As they were about to go in, each more and more insistently urged the other to go first.
>
> After this had gone on for some time, Wang finally ended up behind Fan, where he quipped, "Winnow it and toss it; the chaff and unripened kernels fall in front."[24] Fan retorted, "Sift it and wash it; the sand and gravel remain behind."[25]

The classical references are here used rather differently. First, the quotations are not exact but contain invented material; second, although modelled on the *Book of songs*, they use material from other classics. The clever composition of each two-line set is elegant enough to lead readers/listeners to think they might indeed be part of the classic 300 songs in the *Book of songs*. What is more, both of Fan's lines match Wang's completely in sound and sense. Although the writing of matching literary couplets was still in the future and had probably not yet begun, Chinese people have long appreciated clever line-matching in prose or poetry, and literati with a penchant for this art form would certainly have admired Fan's repartee.

When such repartee comes not from highly educated adults but from the mouths of children, there is an additional element of surprise and astonishment deriving from the difference in age. Here, humour acts as an equaliser. An outright and direct answer from a young person or a subordinate, when funny, is not simply acceptable to a superior; if successful, it may delight. Here is one good example from among many (an attractive aspect of the collection for young readers):

> 鍾毓、鍾會少有令譽。年十三，魏文帝聞之，語其父鍾繇曰：「可令二子來。」於是敕見。毓面有汗，帝曰：「卿面何以汗？」毓對曰：「戰戰惶惶，汗出如漿。」復問會：「卿何以不汗？」對曰：「戰戰慄慄，汗不敢出。」
>
> Zhong Yu [Chung Yü] and his younger brother Zhong Hui [Chung Hui] both enjoyed excellent reputations in their youth. When they were around thirteen years old, Emperor Wen of Wei heard of them and said to their father, Zhong You [Chung Yu], "You may bring your two sons to see me sometime."
>
> Accordingly an imperial audience was arranged for them. Yu's face was covered with sweat, and the emperor asked, "Why is your face sweating?"
>
> Yu replied:
>
> "Tremble, tremble, flutter, flutter;
>
> My sweat pours out like so much water."
>
> Turning to Hui, the emperor asked, "And why are you *not* sweating?"
>
> Hui replied:
>
> "Tremble, tremble, flutter, fall;
>
> My sweat can't even come at all."[26]

What does not quite come through in translation is that both boys' responses are in the archaic language and style of the *Book of songs*. Moreover, Zhong Yu's response rhymes and Zhong Hui's response follows the same format but varies it slightly in order to achieve rhyme for his lines as well. The elegance of the archaic language and the quick wit and ingenuity coming from two children are surprises that must provoke a smile in readers.

Quick-witted stylish repartee could also come from underlings and be equally funny:

> 習鑿齒、孫興公未相識，同在桓公坐。桓語孫「可與習參軍共語。」孫云：「『蠢爾蠻荊』，敢與大邦為讐？」習云：「『薄伐獫狁』，至于太原。」[27]
>
> Xi Zuochi [Hsi Tsuo-ch'ih] and Sun Chuo [Sun Ch'o] had not previously known each other. Both were present at a gathering of Huan Wen's staff. Huan said to Sun, "You may converse with my aide, Xi Zuochi."
>
> Sun began:
>
> "Stupid the southern boors of Jing
>
> Who dare oppose a mighty state."[28]
>
> Xi countered:
>
> "In punishing the northern hordes,
>
> Our troops have come to Taiyuan town."[29]

What needs to be known is that Sun Chuo was from the northern city of Taiyuan, while Xi Zuochi was from Xiangyang towards the south, in the region known from ancient times as Jing. In referring to northern hordes, the southerner Xi associates the northerner Sun with a ferocious and bellicose minority people from the north-west mentioned in the *Book of songs*. Since both quotations are from the *Book of songs*, this verbal battle between southerner and northerner is waged through the words of the classics.

Such use of well-chosen quotations by educated aides-de-camp is not so surprising, but in the mouths of slaves in disgrace its comic force is certainly stronger:

> 鄭玄家奴婢皆讀書。嘗使一婢，不稱旨，將撻之。方自陳說，玄怒，使人曳箸泥中。須臾，復有一婢來，問曰：「胡為乎泥中？」荅曰：「薄言往愬，逢彼之怒。」[30]
>
> In Zheng Xuan [Cheng Hsüan]'s household, the male and female slaves were literate. Once when Xuan was being waited on by a female slave, she failed to satisfy his wishes. He was on the point of flogging her, when she began making excuses for herself. In a rage, Xuan had her dragged through the mire. A moment later another female slave came by and asked in the *Song* "Shiwei":[31]
>
> "What are you doing in the mire?"
>
> She replied, from the *Song* "Bozhou":[32]
>
> "I went to him and pled my cause,
>
> But there met only with his wrath."

The fact that the slave girls are depicted as capable of quoting from the classic text is evidence of *Shishuo*'s relaxed attitude to social distinctions. It allows the collection to embrace a more extreme form of the humour, which is rooted in the incongruity between quoting the classics or imitating their pompous style and being immersed in everyday situations. This creates a strong contrast between the pompous and the mundane where the audience is amused by recognizing the sources and evaluating the new uses to which the speakers put them.

On a slightly different level, there are jokes not related to the classics but still qualifying as in-jokes of the literati. One kind is a quip deriding current fads among the literati themselves, such as the following, which concerns the eccentric scholar-official and artist Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c.344–406 CE), sometimes described as the father of Chinese painting:

> 人問顧長康：「何以不作洛生詠？」答曰：「何至作老婢聲！」
>
> Someone asked Gu Kaizhi [Ku K'ai-chih], "Why don't you ever chant poems in the manner of the scholars of Luoyang?"
>
> Gu replied, "Why should I make a noise like an old slave woman?"[33]

This entry does not actually quote lines from the classics, yet it is essential for the listener to know that the Luoyang scholars' chant, while very popular among the Jin literati, tended to be quite nasal. The joke is an in-group put-down that only insiders could really enjoy. They would also be aware that Gu himself was adept at in-group humour, evidenced not only in the above story but perhaps also in his most famous painting, "Admonitions of the instructress to the palace ladies" 女史箴图 (see Figure 6.1), which was created as an illustration to an account of the life of Jin dynasty Empress Jia (257–300).[34]

Another example appealing to in-group knowledge is the following:

> 高坐道人不作漢語，或問此意，簡文曰：「以簡應對之煩。」
>
> The monk Gaozuo [Kao-tso] did not speak Chinese. Someone inquired about the significance of this, and the future Emperor Jianwen replied, "It's to save himself the trouble of answering questions."[35]

**Figure 6.1** Painting of a palace lady by Gu Kaizhi 顧愷之 (c.344–406 CE). Detail from "Admonitions of the instructress to the palace ladies" 女史箴圖 (probably a copy dating from seventh or eighth century CE). Handscroll, ink and colour on silk. © The Trustees of the British Museum, reproduced in black and white with permission.

During the Eastern Jin dynasty, monks from India and Central Asia travelled to China to spread Buddhism. They were well received by the literati, who showed interest in their religion and thought, and they often attached themselves to local powerful men. Gaozuo, for example, often kept company with Chancellor Wang Dao (王導 276–339) and other notables in the Eastern Jin court. Conversation was one of the main activities in these gatherings, and it was inevitable that the monk would be bombarded with questions from inquisitive literati about his foreign looks and customs as well as about Buddhist thought. However, he was a native of the "western regions" (present-day Central Asia) and had not learned to speak Chinese as some of his fellow monks had done, and always communicated with Chinese scholars through interpreters. The future Emperor Jianwen amusingly attributed this to an ulterior but pragmatic motive — not wanting to be pestered with stupid questions. The joke cut both ways: against the monk and against the courtiers.

### *Universal Jokes*

Humour is known to be highly culture specific. However, I believe some items from *Shishuo* constitute humour that can be widely understood. They are based on human frailties and follies common to people of all races, religions and nationalities. Some present the less powerful — such as children, women and the socially inferior — snubbing the more powerful — adults, men and social superiors. These reflect universal instincts, not those culturally specific to China at any age or time. One such universal type of joke concerns the uncouth and unsophisticated — usually the laughing stock of those who consider themselves refined. In *Shishuo* I call these country bumpkin jokes, a type that Christie Davies has shown exists around the world.[36] *Shishuo* also has jokes that relate to interaction between adults and children; I have assigned these to the category of universal child-versus-adult jokes. By the same token, interaction between the sexes constitutes the category of man-versus-woman jokes; another may be termed the mavericks. In this category, the protagonists openly display irreverence, sometimes in self-defence against accusations of bizarre behaviour. The final category I identify is human foibles, which deals with the entire spectrum of human weaknesses. I will discuss these in order.

### *Country Bumpkin Jokes*

During the Wei and Jin dynasties (265–534 CE), a privileged few connected with the emperor vied to show off fabulously extravagant lifestyles. Many stories in *Shishuo* tell of the outrageous forms of such competitions in lavishness. At the juncture of Western and Eastern Jin dynasties, around 317, there was a great population shift from north to south China because the north was occupied by militarist non-Chinese regimes. People of the Eastern Jin dynasty south of the Yangtze River enjoyed an easier life than their northern neighbours because of the milder climate and more productive land, and prided themselves on also being more cultured. Northerners who had already reached the south and who adopted this more materialistic, perhaps more refined, southern culture were familiar with southern food and drink. Those who came later appeared relatively uninitiated. The following is one

of many *Shishuo* entries deriding these new arrivals, who were seen as unsophisticated members of the literati:

> 蔡司徒渡江，見彭蜞，大喜曰：「蟹有八足，加以二螯。」令烹之。既食，吐下委頓，方知非蟹。後向謝仁祖説此事，謝曰：「卿讀爾雅不熟，幾為勸學死。」
>
> When Cai Mo [Ts'ai Mo] crossed the Yangtze River, he saw a sand-crab, and was greatly delighted, crying out, "The edible crab has eight legs plus two claws." Whereupon he gave the order to have it boiled. But only after he had eaten it and subsequently vomited it up and been miserably sick did he realize it was not an edible crab.
>
> Later when he was speaking to Xie Shang [Hsieh Shang] about the incident, Xie said, "You didn't read the *Erya* thoroughly enough, and were nearly killed by your ancestor's 'Essay on exhortation to learning'."[37]

Cai Mo 蔡謨 (281–356) was a scholar and official of the Eastern Jin dynasty who came from present-day Henan province in the yellow loess region north of the Yangtze where seafood was probably seldom served. That is why, when he saw a sand crab, he remembered two lines from *Quanxue pian* 勸學篇 (Essay on exhortation to learning) by his revered ancestor Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132–92): "A crab has eight legs and two claws." Thus he mistook it to be an edible crab. However, the ancient word book *Erya*[38] says "a sand crab is like a crab but small". Although this *Shishuo* entry contains two quotations from the classics, the humour is based more on the northerner's lack of what southerners might have considered common knowledge of aquatic creatures. What is especially absurd about Cai Mo's behaviour is his bookish way of identifying the crab and his rashness in eating what he thought he had identified.

### *Child-Versus-Adult Jokes*

For anyone wishing to conduct research on children in old Chinese texts, *Shishuo* is a rich source.[39] Almost all its children are smart aleck types, perhaps because wit was so highly valued during the Wei–Jin period and the quick tongue of a precocious child was evidently highly appreciated. This may have been a reaction to the emphasis on detailed textual study that flourished in the preceding Eastern Han dynasty

(25–220 CE). Following the earlier example about the Zhong brothers' clever speeches at court, another entry about imperial precocity illustrates the general type:

> 晉明帝數歲，坐元帝榻上。有人從長安來，元帝問洛下消息，潸然流涕。明帝問何以致泣？具以東渡意告之。因問明帝：「汝意謂長安何如日遠？」答曰：「日遠。不聞人從日邊來，居然可知。」元帝異之。明日集羣臣宴會，告以此意，更重問之。乃答曰：「日近。」元帝失色，曰：「爾何故異昨日之言邪？」答曰：「舉目見日，不見長安。」
>
> When the Jin Emperor Ming (Sima Shao [Ssu-ma Shao], reigned 323–25) was only a few years old, he was sitting on the knees of his father, Emperor Yuan [reigned 317–23]. There was a man present who had come from Chang'an. Emperor Yuan (Sima Rui [Ssu-ma Jui]) was asking him news of Luoyang, sobbing all the while and letting his tears flow. Emperor Ming asked, "Why does it make you cry?" Emperor Yuan then told him the whole story of the eastward crossing of the Yangtze River and took the occasion to ask Emperor Ming, "In your opinion, how far away is Chang'an compared with the sun?"
>
> He replied, "The sun is farther away. Since I never heard of anyone coming here from the sun, we can know it for certain."
>
> Emperor Yuan marvelled at him. The next day he assembled all the ministers for a banquet to report this remark, and once more he asked the same question.
>
> This time Emperor Ming replied, "The sun is nearer." Emperor Yuan turned pale [and asked abruptly], "But why did you change from what you said yesterday?"
>
> He replied, "By just lifting your eyes you can see the sun, but [even if you lift your eyes] you can't see Chang'an."[40]

Emperor Yuan was a distant member of the imperial house of Jin, and Chang'an and Luoyang had been his home. In 311, China's northern neighbours, the Xiongnu, invaded northern China, took the Jin emperor prisoner and subsequently killed him around 317, bringing to an end what was later known as Western Jin. Emperor Yuan was at that juncture the Prince of Langye and a provincial governor stationed south of the Yangtze. Being the only surviving imperial prince, he was put on the throne as the founding emperor of the Eastern Jin dynasty. Since his empire now mainly comprised territory south of the Yangtze, he naturally missed his home in the north, which is why he wept when

talking to the traveller from Chang'an. While parents who have tried to show their children off to others can no doubt identify with the feelings of Emperor Yuan, they are unlikely to have offspring as gifted as the young Emperor Ming, who redeemed himself while saving face for his parent.

### *Man-Versus-Woman Jokes*

*Shishuo* is the earliest Chinese text to devote a whole chapter to women (with the exception of texts devoted solely to the edification of women, such as the *Lienü zhuan* (Biographies of exemplary women).[41] Entries about women in *Shishuo* can also be found in many other chapters as well and their humour reveals a surprisingly liberal and sympathetic attitude towards women. In fact, the fall from pre-eminence of Confucianism during the Wei–Jin period brought a relaxation of constraints on women, who seem to have enjoyed more freedom in speech and behaviour, witnessed by the following:

> 王夷甫雅尚玄遠，常嫉其婦貪濁，口未嘗言「錢」字。婦欲試之，令婢以錢遶牀，不得行。夷甫晨起，見錢閡行，呼婢曰：「舉卻阿堵物。」
>
> Wang Yan [Wang Yen] had always esteemed the Mysterious and Remote, and, being continually vexed by the avarice of his wife, Lady Guo, and by her worldly contamination, he never let the word "cash" pass his lips. Desiring to test him, his wife had a female slave surround his bed with cash, so that he could not walk past it. When Yan awoke in the morning and saw the cash obstructing the way, he called in the slave and said, "Get these objects out of here!"[42]

Lady Guo (d. c.300),[43] being a cousin of Empress Jia, the consort of Emperor Hui of Jin (reigned 290–306), used her influence to sell government positions and hence accumulated great wealth. Even her husband, Wang Yan (256–311),[44] a leading philosopher and powerful minister in his own right, could not curb her avarice. The phrase he coined to get around mentioning stuff that he despised — "these objects" — became a classic in Chinese culture: the colloquial term *aduwu* 阿堵物 (objects, things) entered the language as a synonym for money.

Humour could be drawn from complex interpersonal relations, as the following story shows:

> 諸葛令女，庾氏婦，既寡，誓云：「不復重出！」此女性甚正彊，無有登車理。恢既許江思玄婚，乃移家近之。初，誑女云：「宜徙。」於是家人一時去，獨留女在後。比其覺，已不復得出。江郎莫來，女哭詈彌甚，積日漸歇。江虧暝入宿，恆在對牀上。後觀其意轉帖，虧乃詐厭，良久不悟，聲氣轉急。女乃呼婢云：「喚江郎覺！」江於是躍來就之曰：「我自是天下男子，厭，何預卿事而見喚邪？既爾相關，不得不與人語。」女默然而慙，情義遂篤。
>
> Zhuge Hui [Chu-ko Hui]'s daughter, Wenbiao [Wen-piao], was the wife of Yu Hui [Yü Hui]. After she became a widow she vowed that she would never again leave her home in marriage. Now this girl's nature was extremely proper and firm, and there was no prospect of ever getting her to set foot again in a wedding carriage. But since Zhuge Hui had promised her in marriage to Jiang Bin [Chiang Pin], he moved the family to be near the Jiangs. At that time, tricking his daughter, he had announced, "It's time to move," whereupon all the members of the family left at once, leaving the daughter behind alone. When she woke up to what had happened, it was already too late for her to leave.
>
> When Jiang Bin came that evening the girl cried and carried on at great length, but after several days she gradually subsided. Jiang Bin then came in after dark to spend the night, but still remained on the opposite bed. Later, observing that her mood was growing calmer, Bin at length feigned a nightmare, not awaking for a long while as his cries and gasps became more and more agitated. Finally the girl called for her slave girl and said, "Call to Mr. Jiang and wake him up!"
>
> At this Jiang leaped up and came over to her, saying, "I myself am a man of the world.[45] What have my nightmares to do with you that I should be called [by you]? But since we have this mutual relationship, you can't very well avoid talking with me." The girl was silent and ashamed, and after this her feelings and attitude grew more and more affectionate.[46]

It is telling that instead of forcibly demanding his rights as a husband, Jiang Bin was patient enough to take pains to gain her acceptance gradually: he could be held up as a model for the SNAGs of the twenty-first century! This is a gentle humour that subtly conveys its moral under cover of a deception, mixing tears and laughter. Interestingly enough, the story also indicates that in fourth-century China the

parents of a widow did not insist that she remain chaste but on the contrary encouraged her to marry again; in fact, many similar stories can be found in *Shishuo* as well as elsewhere.[47] The concept of chastity for widows appears to have become more pervasive over time, as in later centuries widow celibacy was not only widely expected by the husband's family, but also considered an honour to the woman's natal family, which naturally led to pressure from relatives to comply.[48]

In the two passages above, the women are certainly not portrayed as submissive but they are nevertheless outwitted. The humour is at the women's expense and their aims are belittled and negated: the men seem to have won these particular rounds in the gender wars. There are, however, many instances of men losing:

> 許允婦是阮衛尉女，德如妹，奇醜。交禮竟，允無復入理，家人深以為憂。會允有客至，婦令婢視之，還答曰：「是桓郎。」桓郎者，桓範也。婦云：「無憂，桓必勸入。」桓果語許云：「阮家既嫁醜女與卿，故當有意，卿宜察之。」許便回入內。既見婦，即欲出。婦料其此出，無復入理，便捉裾停之。」許因謂曰：「婦有四德，卿有其幾？」婦曰：「新婦所乏唯容爾。然士有百行，君有幾？」許云：「皆備。」婦曰：「夫百行以德為首，君好色不好德，何謂皆備？」允有慚色，遂相敬重。
>
> Xu Yun [Hsü Yün]'s wife was the daughter of Ruan Gong [Juan Kung] and the younger sister of Ruan Kan [Juan K'an]. She was extraordinarily homely. After the marriage ceremony was over, Yun had no intention of ever entering her apartment again. The members of her family were very upset over this. It happened that Yun was having a guest come, and his wife had a female slave look to see who it was. She returned and reported, "It's Master Huan." Now "Master Huan" was Huan Fan.
>
> The wife said, "Then there's nothing to worry about. Huan will surely urge him to come to my apartment."
>
> As expected, Huan said to Xu, "Since the Ruan family gave you a homely daughter in marriage, they obviously did so with some purpose in mind. You would do well to look into it."
>
> Accordingly, Xu had a change of heart and entered his wife's apartment. But the moment he saw her he immediately wanted to leave again. His wife foresaw that if he went out this time there would be no further chance of his returning, so she seized his robe in an effort to detain him. Xu took the occasion to say to his wife, "A wife should have four virtues. How many of them do you have?"

> His wife answered, "Where your bride is deficient is only in her appearance. But a gentleman should have a hundred deeds. How many have you?"
>
> "I have them all."
>
> "Of those hundred deeds, virtue is the first. If you love sensual beauty, but don't love virtue, how can you say you have them all?"
>
> Yun looked ashamed and thereafter held her in respect and honour.[49]

It seems Xu Yun's wife knew that Huan was a trusted friend whose sensible advice would induce her new husband to enter her chamber again. Although the most obvious source of the humour here is the predicament of the ugly woman, she is also a smart woman who ends up having the last laugh when she outsmarts a smart man.

It may be that this turning of the tables was more amusing in its time precisely because it inverted the normal power structure, but it certainly contributes to the surprisingly modern feel of the *Shishuo.* It strikes at men's frequent failure to see the obvious, when women can show more common sense. Another entry dealing with forms of address between husband and wife shows just how far women could (jokingly) push this space created for them, as reflected in recorded humour of the time. In the Wei–Jin period, women used three types of second-person pronouns.[50] The two relevant to this story are *jun* 君, an honorific used by men among equals and also the usual term used by women to address their husbands; and *qing* 卿, a term used between two male friends on informal terms with each other. It was, of course, highly irregular for a woman to address her husband thus:

> 王安豐婦，常卿安豐。安豐曰：「婦人卿壻，於禮為不敬，後勿復爾。」婦曰：「親卿愛卿，是以卿卿；我不卿卿，誰當卿卿？」遂恆聽之。
>
> Wang Rong [Wang Jung]'s wife always addressed Rong with the familiar pronoun "you" [*qing*]. Rong said to her, "For a wife to address her husband as 'you' is disrespectful according to the rules of etiquette. Hereafter don't call me that again."
>
> His wife replied, "But I'm intimate with you and I love you, so I address you as 'you'. If *I* didn't address you as 'you', who else would address you as 'you'?" After that he always tolerated it.[51]

Wang Rong[52] was in fact a pre-eminent minister at court, yet in this story he was not able to enforce prescribed formal etiquette on his wife. This instance in particular, together with some others, is frequently cited by scholars as a sign that gender constraints did slacken during this period.[53]

In *Shishuo*, the relationship between man and woman is open and straightforward, and a woman is rarely made the object of a sexist joke. Sexual jokes are in fact remarkably absent and the following may be the only one that approaches being risqué — and, even so, the joke is placed in the privileged mouth of the emperor:

> 元帝皇子生，普賜羣臣。殷洪喬謝曰：「皇子誕育，普天同慶。臣無勳焉，而猥頒厚賚。」中宗笑曰：「此事豈可使卿有勳邪？」
>
> When Emperor Yuan's son was born, he made presentations all around to his ministers. In expressing his thanks, Yin Xian [Yin Hsien] said, "The birth of the imperial son is cause for the whole realm to rejoice together. But since your servant [myself] earned no merit in the matter, he doesn't presume to hope for such a generous gift."
>
> Laughing, the emperor said, "In a matter of this kind how could I have let you earn any merit?"[54]

### *Jokes About Mavericks*

Humour can also be a tool of self-defence as well as an expression of irreverence. In the time of *Shishuo*, some idea of the rights of the individual was gradually emerging and, accordingly, behaviour considered bizarre could actually be viewed as a sign of individualism. In the following passage, Liu Ling's humorous put-down of impertinent interference is in defence of his own freedom of action:

> 劉伶恆縱酒放達，或脫衣裸形在屋中，人見譏之。伶曰：「我以天地為棟宇，屋室為衣，諸君何為入我中？」
>
> On many occasions Liu Ling, under the influence of wine, would be completely free and uninhibited, sometimes taking off his clothes and sitting naked in his room. Once when some persons saw him and chided him for it, Ling retorted, "I take heaven and earth for my pillars and roof, and the rooms of my house for my pants and coat. What are you gentlemen doing in my pants?"[55]

Liu Ling (221–300) was one of the group leaning towards Daoist thinking that was later called the Seven Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, and was known for his iconoclasm and outlandish behaviour. His claim to take heaven and earth as his pillars and roof seems to derive from the Daoist idea of the integral relationship between humankind and the natural universe; it removes humanity from its small world of mundane existence in clothes, rooms and houses, and even towns and cities, to the context of the universe.[56] The *Daren xiansheng zhuan* 大人先生傳 (Biography of Master Great Man) by Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–63), Liu Ling's friend and a fellow member of the Seven Worthies,[57] is based on exactly the same idea, which is central to Daoism.[58] A parallel combination of liberation and humour may be found in the deliberately bizarre behaviour of early Christian Holy Fools, canonized in the Byzantine and Russian Orthodox churches.[59]

On a more mundane level, lack of proper interpersonal respect within the family can also be licensed by humour. In the next item, a nephew's lack of respect, shown in his criticism of his uncle, is as elegant as it is funny:

> 衛江州在尋陽，有知舊人投之，都不料理，唯餉「王不留行」一斤。此人得餉，便命駕。李弘範聞之曰：「家舅刻薄，乃復驅使草木。」
>
> While Wei Zhan [Wei Chan] was stationed in Xunyang, an old friend came to him for shelter (as a refugee from the North), but he did not provide for him at all,[60] except only to give him one catty [a measure] of the herb *wang-bu-liu-xing* 王不留行. After the man had gotten his present, he immediately ordered his carriage.
>
> When Wei's nephew, Li Chong [Li Ch'ung], heard about it, he remarked, "My maternal uncle is so penny-pinching that he even made plants and trees do his bidding."[61]

Old friends seeking refuge expected their host to provide a lifestyle comparable to the one they had been used to, and perhaps even monetary help. Hence the phrase "did not provide for him at all" suggests that Wei Zhan was distinctly lacking in hospitality, and moreover that even the unsatisfactory level of hospitality he did provide was time-limited. The name of the herb *wang-bu-liu-xing* means literally "the king does not stop you from going", a hint that Wei did not wish to offer hospitality indefinitely.

The following story turns on one of the literati being highly sarcastic about his own class. Making fun of books, he hints that the abundant collection he possesses in his mind/stomach has not helped him in any practical way. Books were revered in traditional Chinese culture and this reverence extended to those who read books — the literati. The fourth century BCE Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, however, was a pragmatist who believed that, unless it was accompanied by common sense, book learning was useless for the welfare of the common people. The *Shishuo* joke echoes a similar story in the *Zhuangzi*, in which a craftsman ridicules books.[62] Perhaps out of disillusionment, the present hero, He Long, also came to perceive the uselessness of books and the futile pursuits of the literati.

> 郝隆七月七日出日中仰臥。人問其故？答曰：「我曬書」。
>
> On the seventh day of the seventh month He Long [Ho Lung] went out in the sun and lay on his back. When people asked what he was doing, he replied, "I'm sunning my books."[63]

It was customary at the height of summer, on the seventh day of the seventh month, to bring one's winter bedding and clothes out into the sun to get rid of moisture accumulated during the colder months. People who owned books would, of course, take advantage of the hot weather to sun them as well. He Long, who was said to own no possessions but to have mastered a great deal of book learning, could therefore only sun the books he had learned and stored in his stomach. (Chinese people believe memory is stored in the stomach or heart, not in the brain.) The ironic humour turns on He Long laughing at himself for having nothing else worth sunning.

### *Jokes About Human Foibles*

The corrective purposes of satire, even if used gently, certainly have a place in *Shishuo.* When faults are to be found among the great, they are fair game for comment and ridicule, as in the following examples.

> 王丞相有幸妾姓雷，頗預政事納貨。蔡公謂之「雷尚書」。
>
> Chancellor Wang Dao [Wang Tao] had a favourite concubine, surnamed Lei, who used to interfere a good deal in matters of state and would accept bribes. Cai Mo used to refer to her as "President Lei".[64]

This is a satirical reference to the chancellor giving too much power to his concubine, highlighting the human frailty and folly common to powerful men (and women) across all cultures and times.

More unusual, perhaps, is the satirical image carefully depicted, line by line, stage by stage, to build a kind of caricature of useless rage in the following entry:

> 王藍田性急。嘗食雞子，以筯刺之，不得，便大怒，舉以擲地。雞子於地圓轉未止，仍下地以屐齒蹍之，又不得，瞋甚，復於地取內口中，齧破即吐之。
>
> Wang Shu was by nature short-tempered. Once while he was attempting to eat an egg he speared it with his chopstick, but could not get hold of it. Immediately flying into a great rage, he lifted it up and hurled it to the ground. The egg rolled around on the ground and had not yet come to rest when he got down on the ground and stamped on it with the teeth of his clogs, but again failed to get hold of it. Thoroughly infuriated, he lay on the ground and seized it in his mouth. After biting it to pieces he immediately spewed it out.[65]

This type of joke, with its almost slapstick topic and image, is rare in *Shishuo*. The visual humour easily crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries, and it can be enjoyed by anyone, anywhere without the need for commentary and background knowledge. The foible is indeed universal, even if the hero's agility is not. The Western parallels that come to mind are descriptions of performances by the skilled actors of sixteenth century Italian *commedia dell-arte*, based on a mime tradition as ancient as that in China.[66]

### *Jokes That are Lost in Translation*

It is common knowledge that explaining a joke destroys its value as humour. Some of the jokes in *Shishuo* require a great deal of explanation — and even then, readers from another culture may still not find them at all humorous. The humour of these entries can be classed as lost in translation — not merely on the grounds of language, but because they are jokes that depend upon more than superficial knowledge of an entrenched local concept. Similarly, jokes based on certain taboos simply lose their humour when conveyed to cultures without the same

taboo. To transfer jokes of this kind, it is necessary first to explain the social taboo to members of the target language and also to point out which words are taboo and why. After all this explaining, is the joke worth telling or translating? The emotional force was simply not there from the beginning. There are, of course, many such jokes in *Shishuo*. In order to allow readers to judge whether such humour is effectively lost forever, here is an example.

The Chinese had a strong taboo on using someone's official name: friends and acquaintances were expected to use a person's *zi* 字 or courtesy name. Therefore, the best way to insult someone was to utter to their face words that comprised their father's name or part of it. The skill of individuals who were prepared to do this, and do it well, became a much admired source of amusement.

> 鍾毓為黃門郎，有機警，在景王坐燕飲。時陳羣子玄伯、武周子元夏同在坐，共嘲毓。景王曰：「皐繇何如人？」對曰：「古之懿士。」顧謂玄伯、元夏曰：「君子周而不比，羣而不黨。」
>
> Zhong Yu served as a palace attendant and possessed a quick wit. One time he was present at a banquet in the house of Prince Jing [Ching] of Qin [Ch'in] (Sima Shi [Ssu-ma Shih]). At the time Chen Qun [Ch'en Ch'ün]'s son, Tai [T'ai], and Wu Zhou [Wu Chou]'s son, Gai [Kai], were with him among the company, and were both teasing Yu.
>
> Prince Jing said, "What sort of man was Gao You [Kao Yu 皐繇]?"
>
> Yu replied, "A virtuous knight of antiquity." Then, turning around, he said to Chen Tai and Wu Gai, "A gentleman is 'all-embracing and impartial'; he 'keeps company with all men, and joins no factions'."[67]

Zhong Yu's father's name You 繇 occurs in Prince Jing's question. However, the son's reply not only incorporates Prince Jing's father's name, Yi 懿 (meaning virtuous), but also includes Chen Tai's father's name, Qun 群 (meaning keeping company with others), and even Wu Kai's father's name, Zhou 周 (meaning all-embracing). While the story may no longer unleash the loud laughter of a joke that gets away with violating a taboo, it is still possible to admire the battle of wits and to acknowledge the one-upmanship involved in teasing all three of them in one sentence.

## Conclusion: The Humorous Techniques of *Shishuo*

Since *Shishuo* was not created principally as a humorous work, strictly speaking it cannot be regarded as characterized by certain techniques of humour. We can only observe that certain techniques do occur when the humour of some of its entries is analyzed.

A principal device giving rise to humour is incongruity: the contrast between the language used and the situation in which it is used. There are many examples of contrast between the solemn and weighty language of the classics and its use in mundane, even ridiculous, situations. Incongruity is also found in the verbal battles between adults and children, where children gain the upper hand and show up the immaturity and lack of clarity in their opponents' thinking. Literati in-group jokes provide the most obvious examples, but perhaps the ultimate example is the episode of the slave girl being dragged through the mire while quoting the classics to answer her female colleague's question (also quoted from the classics) about why she is being punished in this way.

Paradox also forms part of *Shishuo*'s humour, seen mostly in arguments put forward to win a debate, which fail under closer scrutiny to stand up to logic. The argument put forward by Emperor Yuan's son to justify his claim that the sun is closer than the city of Chang'an is clearly such a paradox, and it combines with the comedy of the clever child outdoing the adult to create a very funny story. Philosophically, *Shishuo* challenges logical thinking; it is even anti-logic in showing how easy it is to turn logic on its head. The humour stems from unexpected and sudden shifts in perspective, providing a surprise ending.

Although satire is often used — sometimes by the speakers of the jokes against others but also in retaliation against the speakers — the tone is not bitter or overly critical. *Shishuo* is pervaded by a gentle and detached irony, unlike the savage attacks of the Augustan satirists in the West. An excellent example of satirical rebuttal is the story of inhospitable Wei Chan being charged by his nephew with having made even plants and trees do his bidding.

Given this tone, it is not surprising that few of *Shishuo*'s jokes involve slapstick or visual jokes. The description of how Wang Shu dealt with his recalcitrant egg is a rare exception. Presumably the sensibilities of

the elite audience of the book precluded this kind of humour. Sexual and scatological jokes about the body are certainly not foreign to Chinese culture: joke books about the exploits of the Ming scholar/rascal Xu Wenchang 徐文長 (1523–93), for instance, are full of such humour.[68] Such jokes, however, are completely absent from *Shishuo* and would have been considered vulgar and not worthy of either the readers or the compilers of the work. As noted, the only faintly risqué joke — made by Emperor Yuan about Yin Xian's part in the birth of his son — is subtle and placed in the mouth of the all-powerful emperor.

Across the world, the common butt of jokes is a representative of an underclass or minority. Except for the story about new immigrants from the north and one or two others not quoted here, *Shishuo* is not guilty of such discrimination. In the ever-present competition between northerners and southerners, its episodes do not seem to favour one side or the other, as is demonstrated by the war of words between Xi Zuochi and Sun Chuo. Among the jokes about foreigners, the one about the monk Gaozuo from Central Asia portrays him as a man of superior intelligence who has outwitted his Chinese hosts. *Shishuo* does not laugh at minorities or the under-privileged, such as women, children and slaves. If anything, it laughs at the rich and powerful, the ministers, scholars and generals. This subversive power of humour is probably what Plato had in mind when he attributed to Socrates the view that the true essence of the ridiculous is ignorance in the weak who are thus unable to retaliate when ridiculed.[69]

Reflecting the society which gave birth to *Shishuo*, there is even an example of self-satirizing, a type of humour considered politically correct in today's modern world. The Wei–Jin period in which the people of these stories lived, down to the subsequent period of division when the work was compiled, was politically chaotic, with regimes changing rapidly. Because of the devastation of war and upheaval, old morality was discarded and old standards of behaviour were revised in order for people to survive. As a result, people were more open-minded and pragmatic, and this allowed humanity to shine through the shattered dogmas of old. It seems logical that *Shishuo*'s humour should be open-minded and lacking in prejudice. Even from the gender perspective, *Shishuo* is something of an equaliser. It laughs at women and belittles their efforts to be agents of change, but by the

same token it also laughs at men's blocked vision, self-righteousness and weaknesses. Through its humour, we even catch glimpses of many strong women with independent minds in the educated elite.

In a similar vein, *Shishuo* reveals an irreverent attitude towards authority and a disregard of rites and rituals. Its humour allows it to ignore the traditional social order of deferring to age and to the male, and to repeatedly portray women and children as having the upper hand in arguments. Gu Kaizhi deriding the popular Luoyang scholar's chant is a typically bold critique of a trend that was said to have been adopted by prestigious scholars and prime ministers. Li Chong's sarcasm about his maternal uncle's stinginess fearlessly crosses the line of propriety that required the younger generation to show respect for their elders. Wang Rong's wife refuses to stop calling him "dear" and directly challenges the propriety governing the husband-and-wife relationship. Evidently, even the atmosphere at the court of Emperor Yuan was so relaxed that he could joke about Yin Xian's declaration that he had done nothing to deserve a gift on the birth of the imperial prince. To include such a joke in a work that, if not actually compiled by an imperial prince, was at least compiled under his patronage, also indicates the liberal ambience of the age. While they are inspired by philosophical conviction, Liu Ling's actions and justifications for going naked must take the prize for ultimate irreverence. Satirical humour like this is confrontational because it questions and critiques the status quo.

Although there are jokes in *Shishuo* that can be appreciated by everybody, most of its humour was best shared by the in-group of literati who created these jokes and for whom neither explanation nor interpretation was necessary. This group and its inheritors have kept *Shishuo* alive for more than a millennium and a half, and their members — no longer limited to Chinese-literate audiences — have spread it to other East Asian countries and now all over the world.