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Identifying Daoist Humour: Reading the *Liezi*

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About 20 years ago, an important article was published by Christoph Harbsmeier concerning the sense of humour displayed in some of the canonical texts of classical Chinese philosophy, such as the *Lunyu* 論語 (Confucius's *Analects*), the *Mengzi* 孟子 (Works of Mencius), the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策, the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.[1] Harbsmeier did not, however, include the Daoist text the *Liezi* 列子 in his discussion; nor has it since been addressed, despite the richness of its ironic devices and its vividly humorous character sketches. In this chapter, I focus on the various styles of *huaji* 滑稽[2] found in the *Liezi* that contribute to its humorous sensibilities, arguing that *huaji* does not differ in essence from what is now generally understood as humour in contemporary China. The *Liezi* helped establish a Daoist tradition of using wit and humour as didactic and critical tools for awakening the sensibilities of its audience to the falsity and ridiculousness of contemporary mundane events that they otherwise would have accepted as inevitable parts of human life.

It is well known that the English word "humour" was translated and introduced to Chinese readers by Lin Yutang 林語堂 in 1924 as *youmo* 幽默.[3] *You* 幽 denotes something dim, dark, quiet and weak that leads to a hidden deeper level, and *mo* 默 means silent and mute. This term thus indicates that the whole matter does not simply end with laughter, but invites reflection in order to penetrate the humanistic or philosophical realities involved.[4] Lin also suggested that humour possessed a philosophical perspective on matters such as the way of life, contentment and leisure, and the tolerance of vice and evil. Following Lin Yutang's introduction of the term *youmo* and its gradual adoption,

modern Chinese generally use this word to refer to sophisticated ways of conveying social and cultural values understood and shared by educated people.

The English word "humour", embracing all types of funniness, does not therefore have an exact Chinese equivalent. The older Chinese term *huaji* is the expression closest to it in meaning, and its long history certainly indicates that Chinese culture contains a rich tradition of wit, jokes and humour.[5] Compared with its modern connotations of farcicality or tomfoolery / pranks,[6] *huaji* was originally much broader in meaning. The characteristics of *huaji* can be recognized epistemologically in the two characters with which it is written: *hua* 滑 (also pronounced *gu*) means fluent, glib, subtle and smooth; *ji* 稽 means recrimination and discussion. In this sense, *huaji* is discourse intertwined with wit, subtlety and humour.[7] Some artistic forms traditionally attributed to the development of *huaji* include the later development of comedy and farce, or what was traditionally referred to as *paixie* 俳諧 during and before the Qin and Han periods. In *paixie*, the rich imagining and visualization of mythologies, folklore, fables and ancient writings were the sources used by authors to convey a philosophical argument.

Huaji was specially employed in argumentation in intellectual discourse, and the meaning of the term was set in the Warring States period in pre-Qin China, when society and culture were undergoing more rapid and drastic changes than ever before. The warfare and political crises that marked the period led to the flourishing of different schools of thought, responding to the need for solutions to sociopolitical issues. Thinkers, itinerant scholars and masters of different schools all came into contact with exponents of rival systems of thought and felt compelled to promote their own ideas. They had not only to face competition between the different schools, but also to convince the feudal lords or state rulers to embrace the political ideals they espoused. The way in which teachers and strategists presented or defended their ideas had therefore to be engaging, interesting and convincing, while aiming to provide solutions for social conflict. This indeed is what the Grand Historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? BCE) expressed at the beginning of the chapter *Huaji liezhuan* 滑稽列傳 (Collective biographies of the *huaji*-ists), when he explained the reason for including this particular category in his *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian):

> 天道恢恢，豈不大哉！談言微中，亦可以解紛。
>
> The Way of Heaven is grand and embracing! One can reduce conflict and disturbance by being circumspect yet at the same time pointed in speech.[8]

The *Huaji liezhuan* records episodes from the lives of three *huaji*-ists: Chunyu Kun 淳于髡, You Meng 優孟 and You Zhan 優旃 from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (722–221 BCE) and Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE). These humorists speak wittily and relevantly to persuade their lords to accept their advice. They know very well what to say, when to say it and how to speak convincingly.[9] Examining these examples of *huaji* expressed in the speech and/or writings of the *huaji*-ists, we see that their key technique is in fact euphemism, as direct criticism is mostly avoided despite the humorous tone of the arguments. Instead, the speakers present their views by drawing upon relevant stories, mythologies, anecdotes and allegorical tales. In the process, they may employ irony, satire, similes, metaphors and exaggeration. Readers are invited to connect their own situation or activity with that alluded to in the story being recounted. While the author does not limit the force of the argument by the use of such literary devices, members of the target audience are unconsciously seduced by the humorous sensibility of the story, which persuades them to identify their own situation as readers with the context of the anecdote.

The writing of the *Liezi*, together with that of the *Zhuangzi*, has been referred to as the period in which Daoism was developed. Unlike the *Daode jing* 道德經, a treatise attributed to Laozi 老子, the founder of Daoism, the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi* are both characterized by rich imagination and a *huaji* style in writing, so that they present their teachings under the guise of fable and story.[10] Sima Qian refers to Zhuangzi as a philosopher who criticized Confucian social conventions by being a *huaji*-ist.[11] And indeed, a large proportion of both the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi* is made up of legends, jokes, parables and allegorical tales, all laced with humour and paradox. Although the individual stories are short, pithy and philosophical, they evince a keen sense of dramatic effect — indeed, some appear fantastic and rather wildly imaginative. The *Zhuangzi*, which is attributed to Zhuang Zhou 莊周, was composed by several different hands under the general themes of living as part of nature and freeing oneself from society and its

conventions. As is the case with Laozi, it is hard to determine exactly when Zhuang Zhou lived, although it is commonly accepted, following Sima Qian, that he may have been a contemporary of Mencius (fourth century BCE).[12]

Very little is known of Liezi either. His full name was Lie Yukou 列禦寇, and it appears that he was living in Zheng 鄭 State in the early Warring States period — that is, some time in the fourth century BCE. Liezi figures prominently in the pages of the *Zhuangzi*, from which we learn that he could "ride upon the wind", indicating that he had supernatural powers or had been empowered by embodiment of the Way (*dao* 道), the constant, active force preceding and filling the universe.[13] In fact, both the *Liezi* and the *Zhuangzi* share some common themes and have some obvious analogies.[14] This chapter will focus on the book that appropriates the name of *Liezi*, although I will also refer to the *Zhuangzi* when it becomes relevant. As far as timing is concerned, while the predominant scholarly view is that the *Liezi* was written as late as 300 CE, it has also been argued that it could well have originated as early as the third century BCE.[15]

Thematically, the *Liezi* presents Daoist ideas and teachings that involve such matters as reconciliation with the vicissitudes of life, the value of spontaneity and effortlessness, the relationship between dream and reality, the acceptance and following of nature, the relativity of standards and the formation of cosmology.[16] Presenting these themes with humorous elements or components was a deliberate tactic to enable readers to share the perspective of the writer or writers in an effective and affective way. The humour appeals to readers' emotions as well as to their rationality, and its surprising twists of logic must help retain attention. The following is a brief examination of some of the principal rhetorical methods employed in the text of the *Liezi*. Although they include hyperbole, metaphor, recasting[17] and *reductio ad absurdum*, none defeats the fundamentally serious messages of the text; rather, they are emotionally appealing and effective ways of communicating the important philosophical messages of the author(s).

One of the most noticeable features of the *Liezi* is that the masters of rival schools, such as Confucius and Yang Zhu 楊朱, do not appear in the text as opponents of Daoism, but are recast as spokesmen for and devotees of Daoist teachings. While this could simply be taken as

examples of Daoist reconciliation with other schools, by putting Daoist theories into the mouths of their representatives, it was also intended to dramatize the powerful influence of Daoist ideas by presenting the two sages and others as converts. Further, by using a humorous style of anecdote and argumentation, the author(s) may in fact succeed in refuting such intellectual adversaries. As an example, we see in the *Liezi* that Confucius himself appears as one who preaches the Daoist attitude towards death:

> 子貢倦于學，告仲尼曰：“愿有所息，”仲尼曰：“生無所息。”子貢曰：“然則賜息于所乎？”仲尼曰：“有焉耳，望其壙，睪如也，宰如也，墳如也，鬲如也，則知所息矣。”子貢曰：“大哉死乎！君子息焉，小人伏焉。”仲尼曰：“賜！汝知之矣。人胥知生之樂，未知生之苦；知老之憊，未知老之佚；知死之惡，未知死之息也。[18]
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> Zigong grew weary of study, and told Confucius: “I want to find rest.” “There is no rest for the living.” “Then shall I never find it?” “You shall. Look forward to the lofty and domed mound of your tomb, and know where you shall find rest.” “Great is death! The gentleman finds rest in it, the petty man submits to it!” “Zigong, you have understood. All men understand the joy of being alive but not its misery; the weariness of growing old but not its ease; the ugliness of death but not its repose.”[19]

It is generally accepted that Confucius committed himself entirely to learning, and that he spent his whole life studying Zhou dynasty culture and self-cultivation. He described himself as one who was so fond of learning that he did not realize he was approaching old age.[20] However, the above conversation in the *Liezi* between Confucius and his disciple suggests that, to the contrary, both men had grown weary of study. When the disciple complains of its arduousness and wants to find some rest, the master, unexpectedly, does not criticize him. Instead, he explains that death is something one should look forward to in order to end this laborious process of learning! This ironically humorous conversation not only reverses the conventional image of Confucius as one who found joy only in education and learning, but it also shrewdly promotes the ecstatic Daoist acceptance of death.

The *Liezi* also argues that one should not be perplexed by outer form or judge with the eyes alone because the beauty and nobility that derives from the innermost heart when one avoids self-indulgence

is true natural beauty and as such is the most beautiful of all. In the extract below, the one who is presented as having learnt this lesson best from the Daoist teaching is Yang Zhu, and he ironically instructs his pupils:

> 楊朱過宋東之于逆旅。逆旅人有妾二人，其一人美，其一人惡；惡者貴而美者賤。楊子問其故。逆旅小子對曰：“其美者自美，吾不知其美也；其惡者自惡，吾不知其惡也。”楊子曰：“弟子記之！行賢而去自賢之行，安往而不愛哉！”
>
> When Yang Zhu was passing through Song, he spent the night at an inn. The innkeeper had two concubines, one beautiful and the other ugly. The ugly one he valued, the beautiful one he neglected. When Yang Zhu asked the reason, the fellow answered: “The beautiful one thinks herself beautiful, and I do not notice her beauty. The ugly one thinks herself ugly, and I do not notice her ugliness.” “Remember this, my disciples,” said Yang Zhu. “If you act nobly and banish from your mind the thought that you are noble, where can you go and not be loved!”[21]

The school of Yang Zhu (c. 350 BCE) is described as advocating full enjoyment during one's life. Its followers believed that life was short and one should not permit the least injury to the wholeness of the body for the sake of any external benefit, nor should one submit to moral conventions merely through an idle desire to win reputation and fame. The best way to preserve life and the natural order was through refusing any involvement in the struggle for wealth and power. In the *Liezi*, Yang Zhu's well-known aphorism of “not plucking one hair” is cited to explicate the Daoist belief that “all under Heaven will be in order when it is ruled with effortlessness”:

> 楊朱曰:“. . . 古之人損一毫利天下，不與也；悉天下奉一身，不取也。人人不損一毫，人人不利天下：天下治矣。”禽子問楊朱曰：“去子體之一毛，以濟一世，不汝為之乎？”楊子曰：“世因非一毛之所濟。”禽子曰：“假濟，為之乎？”楊子弗應。禽子出，語孟孫陽。孟孫陽曰：“子不達夫子之心，吾請言之。有侵苦肌膚獲萬金者，若為之夫？”曰：“為之。”孟孫陽曰：“有斷若一節得一國。子為之乎？”禽子默然有間。孟孫陽曰：“一毛微于肌膚，肌膚微于一節，省矣。然則積一毛以成肌膚，積肌膚以成一節。一毛固一體萬分中之一物，奈何輕之乎？”
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> Yang Zhu said, “. . . A man of ancient times, if he could have benefited the Empire by the loss of one hair, would not have given it; and if everything in the Empire had been offered to him alone,

> he would not have taken it. When no one would lose a hair, and no one would benefit the Empire, the Empire was in good order." Qin Guli asked Yang Zhu: "If you could help the whole world by sacrificing one hair of your body, would you do it?" "The world certainly will not be helped by one hair." "But supposing it did help, would you do it?" Yang Zhu did not answer him. When Qin Guli came out, he told Meng Sunyang who said, "You do not understand what is in my Master's mind. Let me explain. If you could win ten thousand pieces of gold by injuring your skin and flesh, would you do it?" "I would." "If you could gain a kingdom by cutting off one limb at the joint, would you do it?" Qin Guli was silent for a while. Meng Sunyang continued, "It is clear that one hair is a trifle compared with skin and flesh, and skin and flesh compared with one joint. However, enough hairs are worth as much as skin and flesh, enough skin and flesh as much as one joint. You cannot deny that one hair has its place among the myriad parts of the body; [so] how can one treat it lightly?"[22]

Here, the story about Yang Zhu is utilized by the compiler(s) (if not the original author) of the *Liezi* as an extreme example to advocate the Daoist ideal of freeing oneself from state office. The theme of this parable is not really advocating the hedonistic principle of pleasure. Rather, through Yang Zhu and his disciple's analogy, we are told that we should take seriously a minor act such as "plucking one hair", which seems insignificant but can so accumulate as to make one take one's own life lightly, and thus would not only cause injury to individuals' bodies but also create social disorder if everyone should compete in doing the same.

If readers remain critical of this Yang Zhu philosophy, which seems on the surface to be one of "self-centredness", the next argument presented in the same chapter might change that opinion, for in it the writer explains that our life — like that of all other species and things lying between heaven and earth — belongs to the world itself (i.e. to nature) and should thus be treated as a communal possession. Accordingly, one should avoid doing harm to one's own body.[23]

Preserving one's life by retiring from official life is, of course, a familiar Daoist theme. A chapter in the *Zhuangzi,* appearing under the name of Liezi and titled *Lie yukou*, runs as follows:

> 或聘於莊子，莊子應其使曰："子見夫犧牛乎？衣以文繡，食以芻叔，及其牽而入於太廟，雖欲為孤犢，其可得乎！"

> Some [ruler] having sent a message of invitation to him, Zhuangzi replied to the messenger, "Have you seen, Sir, a sacrificial ox? It is robed with ornamental embroidery, and feasted on fresh grass and beans. But when it is led into the grand ancestral temple, though it wished to be (again) a solitary calf, would that be possible for it?"[24]

Official service is generally regarded by Confucians as a solemn and noble pursuit. Yet here the *Zhuangzi* compares officials to sacrificial oxen and elsewhere (as we shall see below) to a sacred tortoise — that is, to things naturally rejected as life-models on account of their inevitable loss of life and freedom. The paradox is startling, as shown in the following passage, where we are told how Zhuangzi refused to take up office when he was approached by an emissary from the King of the powerful Chu State:

> "吾聞楚有神龜，死已三千歲矣，王巾笥而藏之廟堂之上。此龜者，寧其死為留骨而貴乎，寧其生而曳尾於塗中乎？"二大夫曰："寧生而曳尾塗中。"莊子曰："往矣！吾將曳尾於塗中。"
>
> "I have heard," said Zhuangzi, "that in your king's possession [there] is a sacred tortoise, dead these three thousand years, but still lying in the king's treasure chest. Now, were the tortoise to have his choice, would he die so as to leave his bones as relics to be treasured by men, or would he rather live and wag his tail in a mud pool?" "He would rather live and wag his tail in the mud pool," said the messenger. Whereupon Zhuangzi dismissed him, saying, "Please be gone. I want to wag my tail in the mud pool."[25]

This passage no doubt leaves a deep and lasting impression on readers' minds on account of Zhuangzi's humorous comparison of himself to the tortoise that would choose to live freely rather than be caged up in a box, even after death. While smiling ruefully at Zhuangzi's self-mocking metaphor, readers are more likely to be drawn into and convinced by the argumentation than they would be if the discourse were more direct and employed no such ironic literary devices.

In the *Liezi*, it is not just ordinary people or the masters of the different schools who convert to Daoism; there are also such ancient heroes and mythical figures as Huangdi (the Yellow Emperor) and the emperors Shun and Yu. This all-embracing approach gives the author(s) and readers more imaginative space, and delivers a greater impact by making it appear that the messages being taught have been

known by many famous figures down the ages. These figures are recast and described as having very human qualities and feelings. Some are transformed into ideal rulers — but only when they have been inspired by Daoist ideas of the effective and natural way of government. For instance, the Yellow Emperor is shown as having suffered physical weakness from exerting all his knowledge and strength to rule his people — "his ravaged flesh grew darkened and his dulled senses were stupefied" (焦然肌色皯，昏然五情爽惑).[26] After he changed his way of ruling to a natural and effortless Daoist way of action, however, the empire was better governed. Even more dramatically, the parable suggests that the Daoist way of ruling was in fact the reason the emperor himself became immortal, and we are told that he was so beloved that the people did not cease wailing for him for more than 200 years after he finally "ascended into the sky"![27] This possibly unintentionally humorous remark about the people's lengthy mourning for their departed emperor not only prompts readers to speculate that the Daoist way of ruling was excessively well received by his people, but also implies that his people lived very long lives since they continued wailing for more than 200 years.

Intentional comic irony and metaphor are used frequently in the *Liezi*. One example occurs in a story that begins with Mr Guo of Qi, who is very rich, telling Mr Xiang of Song, who is very poor, that stealing is in fact what made him rich. Just as readers are beginning to regard Mr Xiang as ridiculous because he tries to get rich by becoming a thief but is caught, the narrative continues, making it clear that Mr Guo's Way of stealing in fact means something else: it is the Daoist injunction to produce wealth by utilizing what is afforded by nature and Heaven. The irony deepens as the story continues, promoting the true Way of stealing, which is based on knowing what *should* be stolen and what *should not*; what is common property and what is private property:

> 齊之國樂大富，宋之向氏大貧；自宋之齊，請其術。國氏告之曰："吾善為盜。始吾為盜也，一年而給，二年而足，三年大壤。自此以往，施及州閭。"向氏大喜，喻其為盜之言，而不喻其為盜之道，遂踰垣鑿室，手目所及，亡不探也。未及時，以贓獲罪，沒其先居之財。向氏以國氏之謬己也，往而怨之。國氏曰："若為盜若何？"向氏言其狀。國氏曰："嘻！若失為盜之道至此乎？今將告若矣。吾聞天有時，地有利。吾盜天地之時利，云雨之滂潤，山

> 澤之產育，以生吾禾，殖吾稼，筑吾垣，建吾舍。陸盜禽獸，水盜魚鱉，亡非盜也。夫禾稼、土木、禽獸、魚鱉，皆天之所生，豈吾之所有？然吾盜天而亡殃。夫金玉珍寶穀帛財貨，人之所聚，豈天之所與？若盜之而獲罪，孰怨哉？”
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> Mr Guo of Qi was very rich. Mr Xiang of Song, who was very poor, travelled from Song to Qi to inquire about his methods. “I am good at stealing,” Mr Guo told him. “After I first became a thief, within a year I could keep myself, within two I was comfortable, within three I was flourishing, and ever since then I have been the benefactor of the whole neighbourhood.” Xiang was delighted; he understood from what Guo said that he was a thief, but misunderstood his Way of being a thief. So he climbed over walls and broke into houses, and grabbed anything in reach of his eye and hand. Before long, he was found guilty of possessing stolen goods, and lost his whole inheritance. Thinking that Guo had deceived him, he went to him to complain. “In what way have you been stealing?” Guo asked him. Xiang described what had happened. “Alas!” Guo said. “Have you erred so far from the true Way of stealing? Let me explain. I have heard it said: ‘Heaven has its season, earth has its benefits.’ I rob heaven and earth of their seasonal benefits, the clouds and rain of their irrigating floods, the mountains and marshes of their products, in order to grow my crops, plant my seed, raise my walls, build my house. I steal birds and animals from the land, fish and turtles from the water. All this is stealing; for crops and seed, clay and wood, birds and animals, fish and turtles, are all begotten by heaven, and how can they become my possessions? Yet I suffer no retribution for robbing heaven. On the other hand precious things such as gold and jade, and commodities such as grain and silk, are collected by men, and how can we claim that it is heaven which provides them? When you steal them, why should you resent being found guilty?”[28]

Metaphorical teaching with humorous irony is also employed in a fable about how a monkey keeper cheats his monkeys. This fable is not simply about the cleverness of the animal keeper. It can also be read as dry mockery of ordinary people who are driven by greed and self-interest, and who are thus too easily deceived by social rules imposed by the authorities:

> 宋有狙公者，愛狙，養之成群，能解狙之意；狙亦得公之心。損其家口，充狙之欲。俄而匱焉，將限其食。恐眾狙之不馴于己也，先誑之曰：“與若芧，朝三而暮四，足乎？”眾狙皆起而怒。俄而

> 曰：“與若芧，朝四而暮三，足乎？”眾狙皆伏而喜。物之以能鄙相籠，皆猶此也。聖人以智籠群愚，亦猶狙公之以智籠眾狙也。名實不虧，使其喜怒哉！
>
> There was a keeper of monkeys in [the kingdom of] Song who loved monkeys so much that he reared flocks of them. He could interpret the monkeys' thoughts, and the monkeys also caught what was in his mind. He made his own family go short in order to give the monkeys whatever they wanted. Before long he found himself in need, and decided to give them less to eat. Fearing that the monkeys would not submit to this tamely, he played a trick on them beforehand: "If I give you three chestnuts in the morning and four in the evening, will that be enough?" The monkeys all rose in a rage. "Will it be enough if I give you four in the morning and three in the evening?" The monkeys were all pleased and lay down again . . . The sage by his wisdom gets all the fools into his cage, just as the keeper did to the monkeys. Without taking anything away, in name or reality, he can either please them or enrage them![29]

In its exploration of important themes, the *Liezi* employs exaggeration and heightened contrast to depict limited human knowledge and values. Philosophical ideas are presented via bizarre and vivid anecdotes that lead readers to ruminate upon them while entering into the playful humour of the stories. One example is a tale about the value of mental "fasting" so as to achieve a state in which one no longer feels the obstruction of external things but develops the capacity to deal effortlessly with situations. This is illustrated in a story about practising archery on a cliff in order to overcome the innate human fear of danger. It describes how Liezi was confidently demonstrating his archery to Bohun Wuren, showing that he could perform very skilfully, and Bohun Wuren asked Liezi to fire his arrows from the top of a high mountain while treading a perilous cliff which overlooked an abyss 1000 feet deep. Liezi ascended the mountain and was asked to move forward to the edge. At this point, the story presents us with the comic figure of Liezi so terrified of falling off the cliff that he is not even able to stand on his own feet, let alone shoot his arrow:

> 御寇伏地，汗流至踵。
>
> Liezi lay on his face with the sweat streaming down to his heels . . . [30]

Responding to this picture of fear, Bohun Wuren draws out the moral for his readers:

> 夫至人者，上窺青天，下潛黃泉，揮斥八極。神氣不變。今汝怵然有恂目之志，爾于中也殆矣夫！
>
> The highest man peers at the blue sky above him, measures the Yellow Spring below him; tossed and hurled to the Eight Corners, his spirit and his breathing do not change. Now you tremble and would like to shut your eyes. Isn't there danger within you?[31]

Dream and reality are used in both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi* to demonstrate that illusion, personal beliefs and one's own world-view have a deep impact upon perceptual certainty. The *Liezi* also draws attention to the relative magnitude of time and space, arguing that ordinary human life exists in such arbitrary dimensions of space and duration that we should be ready to accept experience from very different perspectives, including living in our dreams as well as in reality. Once we liberate ourselves from temporo-spatially determined illusion, we will gain the true happiness that is not confined to any one particular perception. Liezi offers an example of the contrasting worth of dream and reality in a story where one is so diverted by the down-to-earth, comical situation that it is almost impossible to question the validity of the moral conclusion:

> 周之尹氏大治產，其下趣役者，侵晨昏而弗息。有老役夫，筋力竭矣，而使之彌勤。晝則呻呼而即事，夜則昏憊而熟寐。精神荒散，昔昔夢為國君。居人民之上，總一國之事。游燕宮觀，恣意所欲，其樂無經。覺則復役。人有慰喻其懃者，役夫曰："人生百年，晝夜各分。吾晝為仆虜，苦則苦矣；夜為人君，其樂無比。可所怨哉？"
>
> Mr Yin of Zhou ran a huge estate. The underlings who hurried to serve him never rested from dawn to dusk. There was an old servant with no more strength in his muscles, whom he drove all the harder. By day the servant went to work groaning, at night he slept soundly dulled by fatigue. Losing consciousness, every evening he dreamed that he was lord of the nation, enthroned above the people, with all affairs of state under his control. He gave himself up to whatever pleased him, excursions and banquets, palaces and spectacles; his joy was incomparable. Waking, he was a servant again. When someone condoled with him for having to work so hard, the servant said: "Man's term of life is a hundred years, divided between day and night. By day I am a bondman and my life is bitter indeed; but at night I become a prince, and my joy is comparable. Why should I complain?"[32]

It is generally recognized that the focus of Daoism is upon the individual in nature rather than the individual in society. Daoism holds that the goal of life for each of us is to find one's own personal adjustment to the rhythm of the natural (and supernatural) world, and thus to follow the Way (*dao*) of the universe. This is a highly abstract concept to communicate. As we have seen, the *Liezi* frequently resorts to metaphor to bring such high matters down to earth for its readers. A special case is the use of logical argumentation by analogy in *reductio ad absurdum*, which also entertains while it teaches. The following story sets out to show that by becoming unconscious and adapting to nature, humans can survive even in an environment in which it is impossible for other species to live, despite supposedly being adapted to it. The story presents a dream-like world, yet one that is wholly solid in its concrete and detailed observation — for example, describing the swimmer's lank hair as he walks along the bank. Such a technique manages to make the high ideal believable by reifying the absurdly impossible challenge:

> 孔子觀于呂梁，懸水三十仞，流沫三十里，黿鼉魚鱉之所不能游也。見一丈夫游之，以為有苦而欲死者也，使弟子并流而承之。數百步而出，被髮行歌，而游于棠行。孔子從而問之曰：“呂梁懸水三十仞，流沫三十里，黿鼉魚鱉所不能游，向吾見子道之，以為有苦而欲死者，使弟子并流將承子。子出而被髮行歌，吾以子為鬼也。察子則人也。請問蹈水有道乎？”曰：“亡，吾無道。吾始乎故，長乎性，成乎命，與齊俱入，與汩偕出，從水之道而不為私焉。此吾所以道之也。”
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> Confucius was looking at Lüliang waterfall. The water dropped two hundred feet, streaming foam for thirty miles; it was a place where fish and turtles and crocodiles could not swim, but he saw a man swimming there. Taking him for someone in trouble who wanted to die, he sent a disciple along the bank to pull him out. But after swimming a few hundred yards the man came out, and strolled along singing under the bank with his hair hanging down his back. Confucius proceeded to question him: "I thought you were a ghost, but now I can look you over I see you are human. May I ask whether you have a Way to tread in water?" "No, I have no Way. I began in what is native to me, grew up in what is nature to me, matured by trusting destiny. I enter the vortex with the inflow and leave with the outflow, follow the Way of the water instead of imposing a course of my own; this is how I tread it."[33]

We smile as we picture the discomfiture of the great sage who thought he was performing a meritorious act of saving a life.

This story is an example of teaching the Daoist precepts of adaptability to nature and natural response to the physical environment, but such adaptability and response also apply to human emotional reactions. These precepts directly contradict traditional Confucian teaching, which holds that virtue consists of expressing human emotions properly, in accordance with ritual codes and social conventions.[34] The Confucian virtues particularly point to our "feelings" towards our parents, and as such they have been considered the root of humanism. To the authors of the *Liezi*, on the other hand, human emotion was a natural and spontaneous response to the external environment. The following story is clearly intended as mockery of what would, in Confucian terms, be called proper human emotion:

> 燕人生於燕，長於楚，及老而還本國。過晉國，同行者誑之；指城曰：「此燕國之城。」其人愀然變容。指社曰：「此若里之社。」乃喟然而歎。指舍曰：「此若先人之廬。」乃涓然而泣。指壟曰：「此若先人之冢。」其人哭不自禁。同行者啞然大笑，曰：「予昔紿若，此晉國耳。」其人大慚。及至燕，真見燕國之城社，真見先人之廬冢，悲心更微。
>
> There was a man who was born in Yan but grew up in Chu, and in old age returned to his native country. While he was passing through the state of Jin his companions played a joke on him. They pointed out a city and told him: "This is the capital of Yan." He composed himself and looked solemn. Inside the city they pointed out a shrine: "This is the shrine of your quarter." He breathed a deep sigh. They pointed out a hut: "This was your father's cottage." His tears welled up. They pointed out a mound: "This is your father's tomb." He could not help weeping aloud. His companions roared with laughter: "We were teasing you. You are still only in Jin." The man was very embarrassed. When he reached Yan, and really saw the capital of Yan and the shrine of his quarter, really saw his father's cottage and tomb, he did not feel it so deeply.[35]

Significantly, the old man whose instinctive behaviour was to show solemnity and sorrow towards his birthplace and his father's tomb tended to lose such profound feelings after being fooled and embarrassed by others. Confucians, of course, upheld the idea that virtuous feelings should be continuously cultivated to the point at

which they were so unswerving that they were not easily removed or changed.[36] The fact that such changes in an old man's feelings could take place exposes the flimsiness of the cardinal Confucian virtue of filial piety. The outcome of the story not only has us laughing at the old man but also leads us to question whether human emotions are in fact truly escapable and unchangeable, and thus whether conventional values should really be set in stone and used to judge all moral standards, as Confucians advocated.

For their part, Daoists believed that one should rely not so much on human skill as upon the operations of the Way. Given this premise, it is not surprising to find the *Liezi* expressing a sarcastic and critical attitude towards human efforts to create and reproduce nature. This view produces in readers some darkly humorous and perhaps surprising judgements about the nature of human folly, even in the service of art, as in the following excerpt:

> 宋人有為其君以玉為楮葉者，三年而成。鋒殺莖柯，毫芒繁澤，亂之楮葉中，而不可別也。此人遂以巧食宋國。子列子聞之，曰："使天地之生物，三年而成一葉，則物之葉者寡矣。故聖人恃道化而不恃智巧。"
>
> There was once a man from Song who carved a mulberry leaf out of jade for his prince. It took him three years to complete; and it imitated nature so exquisitely that if it was put among real mulberry leaves its indentations, stalk, veins and lustre were indistinguishable from those of the rest. The man's skill won him a regular salary from the government of Song. When Liezi heard about this he commented: "If Heaven and Earth grew things so slowly that it took them three years to finish a leaf, there would not be many things with leaves. Therefore the sage trusts the transforming process of the Way, and puts no trust in cunning and skills."[37]

The examples I have discussed show how different devices in the *Liezi* — metaphor, exaggeration, hyperbole and *reductio ad absurdum* — all contribute to the humour throughout the text. Clearly, their use of surprising contrast and an ironic tone is designed to grasp the attention of readers and provoke reflection on the implications of what is being recounted. The spirit of the unconventional mind(s) of the author(s) captured in these devices provides amusement for readers as well as instruction in the tenets of Daoism. This is what contributes

to the *Liezi*'s effectiveness as a text that entertains while it teaches. It is true that not all the anecdotes appear to be humorous at first sight. This is because they depend, like all humour, on a great deal of "local knowledge" about assumptions, conventions and historical figures and places.[38] As Harbsmeier has noted, however, while jokes from a different culture and from a different time may not strike modern readers as uproariously funny, as long as we possess shared feelings of sympathy with the all-too-human figures of their narratives, we may begin to understand not only their humour but also their wisdom.[39]

The impact of Daoist humour is not confined to the ancient texts themselves: over the ages it has continued to provide direct authority for humour to teach ethical, moral and philosophical lessons. Thus this subtle and ironic humour has had a far-reaching effect on Chinese culture, and has provided inspiration to artists and writers in establishing some well-known styles of portraying comic characters and situations. While there is insufficient space here to illustrate this heritage, perhaps one example from modern times could be the well-known figure of Ah Q in Lu Xun's comic masterpiece *Ah Q zhengzhuan* 阿Q正傳 (The true story of Ah Q), originally published in 1921–22.[40] This story portrays someone unable to face up to reality who succeeds, ironically, through self-deception, highlighting the falsities and failings of his contemporary society. It might be going too far to suggest that Ah Q is a modern parable drawing on the *Liezi* tradition, but it certainly shares a similar kind of sardonic humour and could expect its audience to recognize and be influenced by such echoes. The popular Hong Kong comic, Old Master Q (*Lao Fuzi* 老夫子), likewise mocked social change and social problems in Hong Kong between the 1960s and the 1980s. More recent examples include the contemporary Taiwanese artist Tsai Chih-chung (Cai Zhizhong 蔡志忠 b. 1948), whose work includes cartoon versions of Daoist texts such as *Liezi*,[41] and the satirical artist Yue Minjun 岳敏君 (b. 1964), whose exaggeratedly grinning figures are famous internationally. Yue Minjun in particular belongs in the Daoist humour tradition of gently mocking contemporary society.[42] The full impact on later Chinese art and writing of teaching truth in this way through irony and humour remains an area that deserves further attention and evaluation.