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Youmo and the Chinese Sense of Humour

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Humour in China

Was there no humour or general concept of humour in China before 1923? That was when the Chinese writer, translator and inventor Lin Yutang 林語堂 (1895–1976) claimed that "orthodox Chinese literature did not allow for humorous expression, so the Chinese people did not understand the nature of humor and its function".[1] While *youmo* 幽默 is now standard usage in everyday Chinese, having replaced other earlier neologisms, what has happened to the faculty of "humorous expression" and its social functions since then? Did they emerge under Lin's care and did they survive subsequent massive social changes intact, or were they suppressed or changed beyond recognition?[2]

Some scholars claim that humour was never absent from Chinese life and letters, referring in particular to the ancient term *huaji* 滑稽, which elsewhere in this book is variously translated as laughable, funny, just funny, and so on. If *huaji* and related terms such as laughter (*xiao* 笑) indicate humour, or are subsumed within the meaning of that term,[3] then they certainly provide evidence of humorous traditions in China that date back more than 2000 years. Setting aside the scope and meaning of *huaji* for the moment, let us examine the intellectual context within which Lin was working, particularly in the English language.

Humour is a slippery concept. In this book, the editors and authors adopt the widest possible interpretation in line with current humour scholarship. This avoids the danger of disagreements about definitions, but some discussion of terms is necessary before we engage with the evolving concept of humour in Chinese life and letters.

The *Shorter Oxford English dictionary* (SOED, 3rd ed., 1955) defines humour as "the faculty of observing what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject". This entry further states that humour is "less purely intellectual than wit and often allied to pathos". In English usage, humour frequently has a visual or non-verbal component. It can be silly or playful. Wit, by contrast, is defined in the same edition of the SOED as "quickness of intellect or liveliness of fancy, with capacity of apt expression", and has been greatly admired by European intellectuals over many centuries. References to wit appear in classic literary sources such as the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616), who made Polonius, his comically didactic and long-winded character in *Hamlet*, ironically instruct his charge that "brevity is the soul of wit";[4] and Samuel Johnson (1696–1772), who gave as his first definition of wit "powers of the mind; mental faculties; intellects", following this with six other related definitions, including "quickness of fancy" and "man of fancy or genius (real or supposed)".[5] European wit was certainly humorous, even if it made its intellectual appeal to the hearer or reader through literary technique rather than through what English speakers like to call "the funny bone" — that is, an instinctive reaction to something funny.

During the nineteenth century, the distinction between wit and humour seems to have become less marked on both sides of the Atlantic. The American humorist Mark Twain (1835–1910) noted to himself, "Wit & Humor — if any difference it is in *duration* — lightning & electric light. Same material, apparently; but one is vivid, brief, & can do damage — tother [the other] fools along & enjoys the elaboration."[6] This more catholic interpretation inspired Lionel Strachey (1864–1927), the American writer and translator (a cousin of the more famous Lytton Strachey), to translate and compile a compendium he called *The world's wit and humor*, in 15 volumes published in New York between 1905 and 1912. He drew distinctions between differing European traditions but did not extend his sampling into Asian languages, beyond Omar Khayyam whose work was well-known in translation.

Mark Twain's contemporary, the English poet and writer George Meredith (1828–1909), made an in-depth study of humour in European literature and philosophy. His work was influential around the world, including on Lin Yutang, inspiring him to introduce his new

perspective on humour to the Chinese literary consciousness and more broadly to Chinese society.

In his *Essay on comedy* (published in 1877, having been delivered in lecture form to the London Institute earlier that year) Meredith wrote, "To touch and kindle the mind through laughter, demands more than sprightliness, a most subtle delicacy."[7] It celebrated an English approach to humour in which comedy combined emotion with intellectual wit or incongruity — something he opposed to the great French concepts of *l'ésprit* or *le comique*, a pure comedy of the intellect. The latter reached its apotheosis in the vitalist philosophical writings of Henri Bergson, especially his book *Le rire* (which also began life as a lecture as early as 1884, and was finally published in 1900).[8] Meredith chose the terms "the Comic spirit" and "the Comic muse", personified as "the Comic", to indicate the distinction. In a very British Empire way, he also saw comedy as a tool to promote reason and civilization, and to control the excesses of government and factional groups in society.[9]

Adopting Meredith's definitional approach and applying it in the Chinese context, Lin Yutang concluded that *huaji* was not worthy to be dignified as work inspired by the Comic muse. Lin saw that Meredithian humour however could be a civilizing tool for the modernization of Chinese society, and proposed that if humour took root among the people, China could be a country where courtesy and common sense prevailed and where the excesses of corrupt government and overweening local officials would be kept in check. He was not thinking of promoting humour in the villages and factories; rather, his *youmo* humour was bourgeois, belonging essentially to the literate class.

Chinese discourse about humour in the 1930s divided into pro-British, French and German factions. Lin followed Meredith and Croce in preference to Bergson. He also set aside the psychoanalytic views of Sigmund Freud, as formulated in *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious* (1905) and *Humour* (1928). The "Continental" view of humour was espoused by other scholars, notably Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910–98). There was a highly charged political dimension to this discourse, reflecting the Nationalist government's[10] preoccupation with eradicating the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the 1930s. Humour is never fully comprehensible apart from its social and political context. This is particularly true in modern

China and has been for some time, as Qian Suoqiao makes evident in Chapter 10.[11] The political dimension of modern Chinese humour draws on ancient sources and rival ideologies. Lin Yutang, seeking a native heritage, linked it with the Daoist rather than the Confucian tradition, creating an artificial distinction between the two, which has lain at the heart of debates and misunderstandings of the nature of Chinese humour ever since.[12] During the Nationalist period, scholars blamed Confucianism for contemporary social problems, labelling it the ethical system of the establishment. Daoism, as they interpreted it, had historically been the vehicle for anti-establishment thinking. Since Daoism actually advocates disassociation from the grubbiness of officialdom, one might well ask why Lin proposed the use of humour to improve society. However, the destabilizing social changes of the 1920s and 1930s made him agree with Meredith that humour should have a didactic purpose — to correct the whims, ailments and "strange doctors" of the day — and he believed this made *youmo* essentially Daoist rather than Confucian. Such humour was clearly superior to the *huaji* funny stuff of dirty jokes, slapstick and nonsense — it was a serious matter of national importance.

It is also noteworthy that when Lin translated Meredith, he took the word "comedy" to refer to comedy on the stage and translated Meredith's Comic spirit as *paidiao* 俳調 (joking), the title of a chapter in the fifth-century *Shishuo xinyu* 世説新語 (A new account of tales of the world).[13] The performance aspect is central to Lin's philosophy of humour. Whether written, spoken or performed, the humour he proposed was to be targeted and was an active process rather than a passive response.

Translation added a further layer of complication. Meredith's purple prose presented challenges, and the English concept of humour is complex, varying in usage, purpose and definition, with many terms ranging from amusement and badinage to wisecracking and wit. Some have obvious equivalents in Chinese and others are more difficult to distinguish from one another.[14] Exact equivalents are *not* provided by terms such as *xue* 謔 (joking), *xie* 諧 or *guji* or *huaji* 滑稽 (glib or laughable), *ji* 譏 (to ridicule), *chao* 嘲 (derision) or *paidiao* (mentioned above).

Lin published his Meredith-inspired essay "On humour" in the magazine that he helped found in 1932, *Lunyu banyuekan* 論語半月刊 (Analects Fortnightly),[15] modelled on *Punch* and devoted, as that English magazine was, "to hold the balance fairly between the parties, to avoid fixed and bitter partisanships, to 'hit all round' as occasion seemed to demand, and to award praise where it appeared to be deserved".[16] The *Lunyu* aimed to take the middle road in support of freedom, the poor and the oppressed against abuses of political privilege. Lin wrote:

> Any country's culture, lifestyle, literature, or thought needs to be enriched by humour. If a people do not have this enrichment of humour, their culture will become more hypocritical with each passing day, their lives will be closer and closer to cheating, their thought pedantic and outdated, their literature increasingly withered and their spirit increasingly obstinate and ultraconservative.[17]

Since Meredith and Lin, understanding of humour has been liberalized greatly by scholarly investigation around the world. The general category is now seen as having many sub-categories, including jokes, wit, satire and many other forms of mirthful expression. Humour is known from recent brain research to involve not just cognition, but also emotional responses and a range of laughing responses. The experience of humour may extend to other species, such as the great apes and even rats.[18] Research in social psychology has shown that purposes, available forms of expression and circumstances all help determine what type of humour is used, indicating the importance of comparative studies. *Youmo* or "Daoist" humour with educational and improving intent, when seen in this context, obviously is only one of many types. Again, since individual psychological make-ups differ, as do societies and conventions, it follows that types of humour and styles of usage will vary from time to time and place to place. In order to study humour, an inclusive approach and the use of broad concepts and definitions are vital.

It is therefore instructive to consider the history of humour in China without insisting on a break between *huaji* and *youmo*, but rather by placing both in their proper positions in one long tradition. Little detailed study has been done on the earliest examples of humour in China, despite the fact that written collections of humour probably

predate comparable European works such as the Byzantine *Philogelos* (compiled around 400 CE).[19] Brief selections of the earliest *huaji* stories have been made available in translation.[20] I include them in the general category of humour rather than the sub-category of wit or *huaji*.

Humour in ancient China certainly extended beyond documented stories of *huaji.* In examining connections between humour and national (including ethnic) culture and history, it is important to remember that in former times literary records belonged to the elite and to those whose native language was Chinese (including all dialects) or who were educated to read Chinese, but that the elites were not the sole proprietors of humour. Humour must also have been then, as it is today, a tool of the oppressed and the underdog, not didactic but closer to the category of protest humour.[21] Voiceless and unrecorded ordinary people throughout history certainly had jokes and merriment, drew humorous graffiti and thumbed their noses at scholars and officials, even if very few of their quips and pranks were recorded for posterity. Reviewing the history of humour, we tend to over-estimate the importance of types favoured by the literati and the elites. In China, enormous differences persist today between ethnic and dialect groups, and between urban and rural populations, and no doubt these were even more pronounced in the past. Where Chinese dialect groups had orthographic tools to record their language, they preserved jokes and humour that record local perspectives, as demonstrated for example by Marjorie Chan's ongoing research[22] mining the rich lode of Cantonese-language humour in one of its modern expressions, the pop song. The ancient merriment and subaltern humour of other ethnic minorities in China has almost entirely lapsed into oblivion, and little work has been done to collect relevant historic materials. It is hoped that this book will stimulate more attention to this aspect of humour studies.

The Chineseness of Chinese Humour

This book has adopted liberal definitions of China and of Chinese, as well as of humour, because current political divisions are not paralleled by equal cultural divides. A few studies of Chinese humour have extended to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the Chinese diaspora generally, but further work is needed to establish whether the findings

of this book apply equally to these communities. Studies of attitudes to humour in Taiwan were pioneered by Chao-Chih Liao and have been followed by recent psychological studies.[23] In addition, as Weihe Xu notes in Chapter 4, important questions exist about differences in humour types and usages in the light of cross-cultural influences and parallels between China and other Confucian societies such as Korea and Vietnam. Indeed, China itself is a multi-ethnic nation and it is regrettable that we have not been able to include more material on the humour of the ethnic minorities. Other areas awaiting fuller treatment include humour in the contemporary novel, in poetry and on the stage; humour in art and architecture; and many earlier periods of literature. This book presents itself as a pioneering effort, not a definitive review.

Of the many types or forms of humour found in Chinese literature, in popular sayings and informal jokes, and in art and daily life, some are more prevalent than elsewhere, and such distinctions are worth noting. Language is the vehicle for preserving and communicating culture, and the Chinese language is a particularly apt vehicle to convey humour, being rich in homophones that have great potential for punning humour. A wide variety of puns are found in classical Chinese texts and also in contemporary spoken and written Chinese.

Two examples suffice to show the continuity of this tradition. In the eighth century, the Tang dynasty poet Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫 (772–842) wrote:

> 東邊日頭西邊雨，
> 道是無晴却有晴。
> The east is sunny and the west is raining,
> So it seems there is no fine weather and still fine weather.

Here Liu uses *qing* 晴 (fine weather) as a homophone for *qing* 情 (love, affection), so that the second line may also be read as "So it seems that there is no love but there is still love." The second example comes from the 1930s, when the Nationalist government embarked on a campaign to exterminate Communist bases in south China. It promulgated the slogan *Sha Zhu ba Mao* 殺朱罷毛, meaning "Kill (Marshal) Zhu (De) and eliminate Mao (Zedong)". The slogan was memorable because *Zhu* 朱 is a homophone for *zhu* 豬 (pig), *ba* 罷 is a homophone for *ba* 拔 (pull out) and *mao* 毛 is not only a surname but also means hair, so that the phrase can also mean "Kill the pig and pluck its hair".

Such verbal puns may be complemented by visual material, and while such reification in accompanying illustrations is by no means exclusive to Chinese humour, its prevalence is encouraged by the nature of the language itself. The widespread practice of blogging in contemporary China provides one example. A blogger posting under the name of Zhang Facai 張發財, who has published many visual puns, has one that is a picture of a clock face where all the numbers are 3 (see Figure 1.1). There is no accompanying text but the reader who verbalizes the picture will understand the visual pun on a current slogan used in official anti-pornography texts, *san dian quan kai* 三點全開 (three [vital] points in full view) — a reference to full-frontal nudity.[24]

Figure 1.1 Clock-face joke by Beijing graphic designer Zhang Facai 張發財. Black and white copy of image from Joel Martinsen, "Joke advertising", *Danwei*, 28 December 2008 (accessed 4 June 2009). Originally downloaded from a blog that later closed down: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_49b5a8160100bfds.html. Reproduced with the permission of the artist.

Another type of linguistic punning humour uniquely connected to the Chinese language is called in Chinese *xiehouyu* 歇後語 (sometimes translated as "a saying with the latter part suspended"). Only the first part of the saying is spoken, leaving the hearer to extrapolate the second part and interpret it as a pun for another word or phrase with a different meaning. This linguistic pattern resembles rhyming slang but

is different in both usage and intent. One theory about the origins of Cockney and other rhyming slang is that it is a secret language intended to deceive non-initiates.[25] While *xiehouyu* are certainly dependent upon cultural familiarity (as the examples below demonstrate), they do not share this secretive character. In fact, many are part of everyday Chinese vocabulary, while others are used as a humorous way of demonstrating the speaker's linguistic competence. Here are two examples:

> 外甥打燈籠：照舅（照舊）
>
> Keep to the same. (literal meaning: When a sister's son holds a lantern, he is to light up [the way] for his maternal uncle).

Here the speaker says "Sister's son holds a lantern" and the hearer intuits "Giving light to his uncle". The humour resides in the fact that in the second part of the saying *zhao* 照 has two meanings, "to light up" and "in accordance with", while *jiu* 舅 (maternal uncle) is a pun for *jiu* 舊 (former time).

> 老包染頭髮：越描越黑
>
> The more one works on it, the worse it becomes. (literal meaning: Old Bao is dyeing his hair and the more he touches it up, the darker it becomes.)

In this case, the spoken part is "Old Bao dyes his hair"; in the second part, while the word *hei* 黑 means dark or black, it also has the connotation of bad or evil, suggesting that the flaw becomes more and more evident. The person referred to in this saying is Bao Zheng 包拯, a high official of the Song dynasty who was famous for his sense of justice. He is the hero of many well-known operas and, significantly, in Peking Opera his face is painted black with a crescent-shaped white birthmark on his forehead, reflecting the close connection in the popular mind between his character and his black hair.

Because young people today are less familiar with classical sayings and historical allusions than the older generations were, *xiehouyu* are becoming less common. These proverb-forms can be found in many dialects, however, including Cantonese. Very likely their persistence in Cantonese culture is due to the continuing popularity of local opera and consequent general familiarity with the legends and historical plots. To give one example:

> 花旦生仔： 謝天謝地
>
> Thank God. (literal meaning: When the *fataan* 花旦 (heroine) gives birth to a son, she thanks Heaven and Earth.)

The *fataan* is the young female character in Cantonese Opera. In any plot that involves a mother giving birth, this naturally happens off-stage but immediately afterwards the actress will come to the front of the stage and bow, saying *Tse t'in tse tei!* 謝天謝地 (Thank Heaven and Earth), so these words are familiar to all opera aficionados.

While technical aspects of the Chinese language influence the mode or expression of humour, they do not affect its substance, nor are they responsible for any unique or absolutely different "Chinese" quality of humour. As Nagashima has noted in the case of Japanese linguistic punning,[26] other languages with similar characteristics evolve similar formats of humorous word play to share and enjoy. Nevertheless, these forms importantly derive from the nature of the language itself, not from any introduction of an accepted type of humour from the West. They are home-grown exemplars of a Chinese sense of humour, without essentially differing in their nature from other classes and types of linguistic puns.

Comparative humour studies reveal that different topics may be regarded as fit for humour, deriving from aspects of daily life that may be significant in one society but not elsewhere. C. T. Hsia noted in 1953 that Chinese people do not value privacy and idiosyncrasy as highly as most Europeans do. He acknowledged some politically incorrect realities of the time:

> The Chinese still retain a childish delight in taking notice of any physical and moral deviation from the norm; their fellow creatures, so unfortunate as to be physically deformed and disabled, are usually objects of ridicule. Thus the blind, the deaf, the hunchback, the bald, and the pock-faced are laughed at openly. This sense of ridicule is also directed against persons who claim to possess special knowledge or power or who live an abnormal existence: the doctor, the teacher, the magistrate, the monk.[27]

Hsia also referred to the Confucian principle that each should behave appropriately according to his or her station. He believed this gave rise to traditional and current jokes about cuckolds and henpecked

husbands. He noted the provincialism of humour, characteristic of rural communities where few people travelled outside their native districts, which elicited urban jokes about people from other provinces or language groups or country bumpkins.[28] The work of Christie Davies on bodies of popular jokes from cultures around the world has shown that such joke-types are common to most nations — jokes about sub-groups characterized by stupidity, filth, meanness, sexual availability, and so on.[29] There is nothing exclusively Chinese about them. It would be more surprising — as Davies points out in his methodological essay on studying humour, "The dog that didn't bark in the night" — *not* to find a particular category.[30]

As for laughter at the physically deformed and disabled, one is inescapably reminded of European precedents, ranging from the ubiquitous mediaeval and renaissance comic playlets at the expense of the blind and the lame to more contemporary examples of black humour, no doubt controversial but nevertheless widespread. The debate over taste and propriety in humour is as old as society itself. Context is all.

Understanding social context is essential in order to appreciate humour, and indeed motivates this book. Naturally humour has as many complexities as a society itself does. One of the earliest international scholars to study Chinese humour, Henry Wells, made the point that it could not be understood apart from its cultural context:

> Much of the finest Chinese humor is remarkably sophisticated and cultured, expression proceeding from a state of mind where delicate shades of thought and feeling are apprehended and amusement derived from incongruities within an advanced stage of society . . . The Chinese take humor seriously. It not only signifies happy surprise but happy intuition, a form of insight above or at least beyond logic . . . Even in the earliest recorded times, the Chinese people, whether in towns or in the countryside, appear both uncommonly humorous and urbane . . . The incongruity at the root of all humor lies peculiarly at the root and germ of Chinese humor . . . The refractions are peculiarly delicate, the emanations singularly subtle.[31]

Wells also wrote that, "As horizons in the twentieth century expand, pictures hitherto unfamiliar to the world at large are mounted on the walls."[32] While it is certainly true that Western horizons have expanded

to encompass some view of Chinese and Asian humour, and in particular easily accessible types such as comic action films (so-called "kung-fu movies"), which are universally appreciated, Chinese horizons have likewise expanded successively to include Japanese, Russian and European humour. At the same time, Chinese society itself has changed — sometimes convulsively so. As a result, new targets and new vehicles for humour have continuously been thrown up at many levels of society, drastically changing the face of the humour that this book attempts to study.

In the last few decades, psychologists and sociologists worldwide have turned their attention to the phenomenon of humour and, as noted earlier, comparative international studies are now being carried out in China and other "Confucian" societies into attitudes to humour. These include the use of humour in university teaching, its relationship to mental outlook, creativity and personality traits.[33] Attention is being given to conceptual issues in this cross-cultural research since it is important that studies of humour cover not only the various types and range of content of humour, but also its social uses and the connections between it and personality types, all of which benefit from using a cross-cultural perspective. Such studies accumulate firm empirical data about contemporary Chinese values and attitudes, including the relationship between humour and optimism, attitudes to laughter itself and the various uses of humour — for example, in advertising and in the classroom by both students and lecturers.

Such studies so far have covered humour styles and usage among the educated and more cosmopolitan elites in the countries concerned. More work clearly remains to be done in the rural areas of China, which despite increasing urbanization still account for a major proportion of the whole population today. Where research projects have included cross-cultural comparisons, however, they generally confirm (unsurprisingly, given the connections already noted between culture and humour) that there are significant differences between, for example, typical responses from China and Canada, and between Taiwan and Switzerland, in general attitudes to humour and in respondents' self-assessments of their use of humour in daily life. The authors speculate that these differences are not just matters of personality, but of culturally based differences at many levels, including different relations between

students and teachers, different gender expectations, and so on. It is here, perhaps, that the "Chineseness" of humour lies.

The History of Humour (*huaji* and *youmo*)

Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) as a system of understanding human physiology and treating human ailments can be traced back to the time of Confucius, *Kongzi* 孔子 or *Kongfuzi* 孔夫子 (551–479 BCE). Because TCM links emotions with bodily organs and functions, it describes humour as an emotional and natural part of the human make-up in a way that is deeply rooted in Chinese beliefs and culture. In setting out these theoretical and philosophical understandings of the place of humour and emotions generally in the physical make-up of humans, Chapter 3 by Rey Tiquia casts interesting light on the lost European tradition of the bodily humours. According to the ancient text known as the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經 (Inner canon of the Yellow Emperor), mentioned in the *Han shu* 漢書 (Book of Han), humour is physically located in the "endogenous heart".[34] Because the circulation of *qi* 氣[35] in the body is crucial to health and good humour, laughter can help unblock this circulation when needed. The parallels with Galen's "humorism" are striking, despite one principal difference: the way TCM conceives of and propounds the meridian *qi* circulation system. Such concepts are fundamental for the many who practise and consume TCM today, certainly in China and increasingly in the West. Tiquia also notes that TCM long ago linked humour, emotions and diseases with the seasons, anticipating modern Western medical understanding of affective disease patterns. Thus, from a very early date, TCM set boundaries for humour that have always influenced its expression and application. Importantly, TCM does not distinguish between high and low humour as beneficial stimuli, and thus embraces both *huaji* and *youmo* — both Confucian and Daoist approaches.

In any understanding of the cultural background to humour in China, it is difficult to under-estimate the importance of Confucius, thinker and social philosopher. From his time onwards, Chinese society had set rigid standards for proper behaviour and established moral imperatives. Inappropriate levity and laughter was frowned upon, especially after the tenth century under the influence of the

philosophical reforms commonly known as Neo-Confucianism. Accordingly, Chapter 4 by Weihe Xu underpins many others in this book by outlining the framework of the Confucian world-view and the proper conduct of a Chinese gentleman in relation to humour. Once again, significant parallels emerge with classical tradition in the West. Xu's later Chapter 8, discussing the ways in which humour is linked to character portrayal in the hugely influential mid-eighteenth-century novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the red chamber), shows how underlying beliefs in Confucian norms influenced literary and popular models of behaviour and how humour was used artistically to humanize a female paragon of virtue.

Despite this, Chinese social philosophy has never been uniform or unvarying. Daoism, deriving from the teaching of the possibly mythical Laozi 老子 and various Daoist canonical texts, including the *Liezi* 列子 (attributed to Lie Yukou 列圄寇 c. 400 BCE), represents an alternative view of life and propriety, and has a history that equals Confucianism in antiquity. Chapter 5, by Shirley Chan, describes the tradition of Daoist humour as distinctly more carefree than that circumscribed by Confucian conventions; it was often used for purposes of veiled social criticism, although going nowhere close to Lin Yutang's definition of didactic *youmo*. Chinese religious traditions also reveal links between Buddhist and Daoist tenets that influence the practice and expression of humour. The Zen use of humour to produce sudden enlightenment dates back to the ninth century. From this time on, jokes could be used to communicate religious truth to disciples at a level deeper (or perhaps higher) than intellectual understanding.[36]

From the time that Confucianism became the ideology of imperial rulers and governments, it was disseminated through the education and examination system, and provided both a tool for the rulers and a system restricting autocracy; however, it never represented the whole spectrum of Chinese humour, ranging from Confucian decorum to Daoist subversion. That the gulf separating these two conventions nevertheless could be, and was, bridged by humour is shown in collections of anecdotes about *huaji* wits who lived as early as the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE). They represent a type of palace humour encapsulated in dialogues between the ruler and court jesters, in which quick wit was necessary for survival in murky political waters. Several

scholars have noted the importance of the *Huaji liezhuan* 滑稽列傳 (Biographies of the *huaji*-ists)[37] contained in the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? BCE), a chronicle of history and the lives of notable figures since the founding of the Chinese empire by the legendary Yellow Emperor. It contains four biographies: those of Chunyu Kun 淳于髡, who lived in the state of Qi during the Warring States period (471–221 BCE); You Meng 優孟, jester to the court of King Zhuangwang of the state of Chu (reign period 613–591 BCE); You Zhan 優旃, jester to the court of the first Emperor of the Qin dynasty (676–652 BCE); and Dongfang Shuo 東方朔, who served in the court of Han Wudi (156–87 BCE).[38]

A biography of Dongfang Shuo is also included in the official history of the Han dynasty. From this comes an anecdote that illustrates the essence of *huaji* (it may have appeared much funnier to contemporaries than to modern readers because the social context was so different from ours). It is a levelling joke in which the emperor thinks he has ultimate authority and power but in fact is no more immune to being tricked than anyone else. As Kowallis points out, this story contains a moral: that filial piety ranks higher as a moral responsibility than do court rules.

The story concerns the origin of the Lantern Festival held on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year. When one of the emperor's palace women was unable to carry out her filial duty of visiting her parents after the New Year, she threatened to drown herself in a palace well. Dongfang decided to help her avoid this fate. He told the emperor that the Jade Emperor (king of the Daoist gods) had ordered the Fire God to burn down the capital on the sixteenth day. The emperor asked Dongfang what he should do to prevent this disaster. Dongfang suggested that since the Fire God loved red lanterns, the streets should be hung with them. This might distract the god from carrying out his wicked plan. The emperor followed his advice. Then, while everyone was out viewing the lanterns, the young lady was able to escape from the palace and pay her respects to her parents.[39]

The lives recorded by Sima Qian (and Ban Gu) are in effect those of the earliest individual humorists recorded in the Chinese literary corpus: the court jesters of those times. They certainly predate parallel records from the West,[40] and demonstrate the pragmatic use of humour

for didactic purposes or as a means for scholars to veil attacks on persons in privileged positions. Both of these are long-standing traditions in Chinese philosophy and history, and they are Daoist *youmo* as much as they are Confucian *huaji*.[41]

In its original context, *huaji* was a form of humour relating to sharpness of intellect — a desirable quality for court advisers and scholars and one having subversive potential. Subversive humour certainly exists in China as it does around the world. It is impressive that it managed to flourish even under the autocracy of the Han rulers. As noted by Lily Lee in Chapter 5, the oldest collection of jokes and witty stories in the world may well be the *Xiao lin* 笑林 (Forest of laughter), ascribed to Handan Chun 邯鄲淳, a native of Yingchuan in north-west China who lived during the Han dynasty in the second century CE. The complete collection is no longer extant, but a small number of stories were included in two tenth-century encyclopaedias, the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Imperial encyclopaedia) and the *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Taiping miscellany). These are sufficient to give some idea of the original contents. Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) noted in his *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shi lüe* 中國小説史略 (Brief history of Chinese fiction)[42] the importance of the *Xiao lin* and quoted its most famous joke. It is an example of jesting at the expense of a regional sub-group characterised by stupidity:

> 魯有挃長竿入城門者，初，堅执之不可入，橫执之亦不可入，計無所出。俄有老父曰，“吾非聖人，旦見事多矣，何不以鋸中裁而入！”遂依而裁之。
>
> In the land of Lu [present-day Shandong province] there was once a man who tried to enter a city gate while carrying a long pole. If held vertically, the pole was too high to make it under the gate; if held horizontally, the gate was too narrow to allow him to advance. Unable to think of any other way to get it through, the man was presently approached by an elderly gentleman, who announced: “Though sage I be none, I have witnessed many things in my lifetime. Pray, couldst thou not saw thine staff in half and then clear the limits of the portal with it in hand?” The man then acted accordingly and split his own pole in two![43]

Huaji wit was applied not only to rulers but also to the state-supported education system and to the often-problematic relationship

between teacher and student. Lily Lee recounts several such stories from the *Shishuo xinyu*, generally attributed to Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444 CE), another early collection of *huaji* and historical anecdotes.[44] Intellectual circles at this time were strongly influenced by Daoism, and several stories in the collection concerned well-known Daoists. The humour, however, is not Daoist in Lin Yutang's sense but rather served to consolidate in-circle relations between scholar/officials educated in the Confucian classics.

Although most early recorded Chinese literary humour tended to fall into the category of *huaji* wit that appealed to the literati, when in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) their social standing changed — with ethnic Chinese being relegated to subordinate roles and the Mongol rulers preferring to rely on allies and "Semuren" (Persians, Muslims and Christians) — recorded humour changed too. Culturally, there was increased use of vernacular language, particularly in novels and operas. Advances in printing technology helped to disseminate texts, while operas entertained, educated and instructed villagers and townsfolk in the same way as medieval miracle plays functioned in Europe. Comic drama blossomed, bequeathing scripts that demonstrate sophisticated use of a wide variety of comedic techniques, described in Chapter 7 on Yuan love-comedies, by Andy Shui-lung Fung and Zhan Hang-Lun. Stories from these operas, along with folk tales, popular jokes and other comic tales were also retailed in the market place by professional storytellers. The tradition, known as *shuo gu* 說鼓 or *shuo guzi* 說鼓子, of metrical recitation with accompaniment of drum and other instruments has continued up to the present day, particularly in the Yangzhou region.[45]

By the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when the market for printed books had expanded even further — especially in towns where small-scale industries developed and there was a growing educated middle class — the distinction between high and low comedy became further blurred. Collections of *huaji*, jokes and humorous stories flourished, distributed sometimes as money-spinning ventures, but often also with subversive intent. Author-collectors, including retired officials and unsuccessful examination candidates who were often veering away from orthodox Confucianism in the direction of subversive Daoism,

indulged in humorous writing and exacted revenge for grievances. Attacks were often veiled behind stereotypes and the identification of targets reveals as much about Ming society as the topics and named public figures in contemporary political jokes do about theirs.

Confucianism remained the official ideology of China for 2000 years, until the late nineteenth century, when intellectuals became convinced that the nation needed to modernize and began to regard Confucian teaching as supporting the status quo and inhibiting reform. Japanese and European ideas spread (in translation), and many students learned foreign languages and travelled overseas. Early in the twentieth century, the written language was reformed and came to approach the spoken language more closely, enabling literature and art to embrace a wider section of the community.

Nationalist (Republican) China proved an important transitional period for humour, including the "Year of Humour" declared by Lin Yutang in 1933.[46] The foreign colonial administration of Shanghai provided a sanctuary for scholars and writers, where they felt safe to poke fun or launch barbed humour at the follies and foibles of the old society and the corrupt administrations of officials and warlords. As literacy levels rose with the spread of modern education, appreciation of written humour spread to a wider audience. Newspapers and film opened up new media, including the advent of cartooning, combining verbal and visual humour. Aspects of these new media such as the work of early cartoonists are attracting increased attention in academic studies of humour in China.[47] In this era Japan, the Soviet Union and Western countries inspired and encouraged Chinese artists and writers to try new artistic forms of expression, including new approaches to wit and humour. Their success led to the government appropriating them for propaganda purposes, sometimes diluting or distorting the original free Daoist-type humour. One might say that they were conscripted for new Confucian-type uses. Also at this time Western theories of literature, aesthetics and humour inspired Chinese scholars, and lively debates ensued between the followers of Meredith — like Lin Yutang — and those of Bergson, like Qian Zhongshu and Lao She 老舍 (original name Shu Qingchun 舒慶春, 1899–1966).[48]

Another major influence on the expression of humour in the Republican period was the rise of the Chinese film industry, presenting

new opportunities for both verbal and visual humour. A rich tradition of comic film drama arose, reflected for instance in the emergence in the 1990s of the "Happy-New-Year" movie.[49] Again, since the economic reforms of the 1980s in mainland China, the development of professional public relations has given rise to the technical preparation of propaganda, paralleling increasing use of propaganda by Western nations. Here humour — in the form of cartoons, slogans and officially disseminated jokes — was quickly identified as a useful sugar-coating for government propaganda, making it more memorable and easily digested. While Japan led the way in Asia, as Barak Kushner has shown,[50] China was not far behind. Chinese humour was sanctioned and promoted as propaganda aimed at the Japanese colonial power. More recently, the internet has added breadth and new forms to humour in Chinese society — especially parody in the form known as *e'gao* 惡搞.[51] Since China is reputed to have the world's greatest number of bloggers and mobile phones, it is not surprising that new forms of humour have also taken advantage of these new communication tools. Jokes and stories circulating in these media may often attack political phenomena or contribute to nationalist or chauvinist campaigns as the subversive power of humour exploits new forms.

Humour in China today is also reacting to and being transformed by trends towards commodification and commercialization. As part of the global community, young Chinese audiences respond to humour in advertising, just as their counterparts do elsewhere and with results very similar to those of other cultures around the world.[52] Local and state interests have followed this trend and promoted humour as a business enterprise. For instance, a museum of jokes opened recently in Wanrong, Shanxi province as a tourist business, displaying humorous sculptures and handcrafts, and selling joke books and other souvenirs.[53]

Humour Topics and Targets

C. T. Hsia referred to Chinese mentality being inspired by distrust of the use of brute force, as inculcated by Daoist principles, so that Chinese people admired *huaji* stories that demonstrated how quick and clever ideas got results while military and official demarches were fruitless. He quoted a story from the classic novel *San guo yanyi* 三國演義 (The

romance of the Three Kingdoms) about how General Zhuge Liang 諸葛亮 (181–234 CE) acquired an arsenal of arrows from his enemy by launching boats manned by straw men on a foggy night — the enemy shot at the phantom army and the arrows stuck fast in the straw figures.[54] This type of witty story is not unique to China, of course. The tales of Till Eulenspiegel, the medieval German trickster, and his nineteenth-century Czech parallel, the subversive Good Soldier Schweik, come to mind. European wit, like its Chinese counterpart, consists of verbal quickness and repartee. It is the special Chinese context — with its cultural assumptions, topics and targets — that characterizes such *huaji* stories, rather than any innately Chinese quality.

It is impossible to list all the other common butts of Chinese jokes without the benefit of further detailed research, so three examples are selected here. Firstly — and not surprisingly, given the potential for observations about hypocrisy and incongruity — many traditional jokes concern the role and habits of Buddhist and Daoist priests and monks, such as the following:

> A Daoist priest, who was walking through the burial ground of a prince's palace, was bewitched by a host of evil spirits. He obtained the help of a passer-by, who saw him safely home. Said the priest to his rescuer: "I am deeply indebted to you for rescuing me, but I have no means of rewarding you. Here is an amulet which will keep off evil spirits. I beg you to accept it with my best thanks."[55]

The preponderance of jokes against the religious in classic collections surely indicates not only their powerful status in society but also the inability of lay people to counter-attack in any other way when venal monks and abbots railed in their sermons against moral turpitude. Similar pressures, of course, produced the comic diatribes of Chaucer, Erasmus, Rabelais and Cervantes, among many others.

Another category of jokes, both old and new, concerns henpecked husbands. A story from Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1645), *Xiao fu* 笑府 (Treasurehouse of funny stories), illustrates men's difficulties in maintaining socially approved gender roles:

> A group of henpecked husbands met to discuss ways of asserting the authority of the husband and maintaining masculine dignity. To give them a good scare, a certain busybody came up to inform them: "Your wives have got wind of this. They're coming up here

> in a gang to give you fellows a good beating." Scared out of their senses, they all fled helter-skelter with the exception of one who just sat tight. People thought that he was the only one who was not afraid of his wife. A closer look revealed that he had already died of fright.[56]

Again, it is easy to find similar examples of jokes about henpecked husbands from other periods and other cultural traditions, including Jewish, British, Australian and Indian. Many cultures have ambivalent attitudes to gender roles and the taboos surrounding them.

Joking in China is not exempt from the use of ethnic or national stereotype characteristics. While a European joke may recount how Europe would be hell if Germans were the policemen, Swiss the lovers, English the cooks, Italians the bankers, and so on, similar geographical and racial out-groups provide butts for many similar Chinese jokes. One from the time of the 1911 Revolution asserted that Cantonese gave the money and Hunanese provided the army, but Zhejiang people became government officials. This highlighted how Chiang Kai-shek, a Zhejiang native, used many fellow provincials in his new government. Another joke says it is better to fight with people from Suzhou than to talk with people from Ningbo — it is generally held that Suzhou people talk quietly while those from Ningbo shout.[57] Such comic stereotypes demand the kind of collation and investigation afforded to collections in the West — a task that is, sadly, beyond the scope of the present volume.

Differences in style and content also reflect regional priorities and preoccupations. What is funny in Shanghai may be incomprehensible in Hong Kong or Taiwan, or in Overseas Chinese communities. While the differences are compounded by linguistic variation, as exemplified by the fact that Cantonese verbal puns simply do not make sense outside the Cantonese-speaking world, the gap is not simply linguistic. Absent cultural and/or local knowledge will affect the funniness of such regional jokes, in the same way it affects our ability to appreciate China's most ancient *huaji* collection, *Xiao lin*, because of the cultural gap that has occurred over time. Here, for instance, is a Taiwanese joke, the humour of which depends on knowing the names of Taiwanese political leaders in the 1980s. It will lose its significance entirely without this background knowledge:

> Deng Xiaoping (the architect of mainland China's economic reforms) is being interviewed about the current political situation in Taiwan.
>
> *Interviewer:* "Who is the current president of Taiwan?"
>
> *Deng (stalling for time):* "Wait a moment!" *Deng huir!* 等回兒 [sounds like the personal name of the actual president, Li Teng-Hui 李登輝].
>
> *Interviewer:* "And who do you think should be the next president?"
>
> *Deng (reaching for a cigarette):* "Whoever you like." *Suibian* 隨便 [sounds like Chen Shui-bian 陳水扁, who did become the next president].[58]

There are differences in the topics of humour that appeal to Chinese men and women, but these are probably neither more nor less than in the rest of the world. Many Chinese men, like Australians or Americans, appreciate crude jokes about sex and other taboo subjects. One literary example is a parody of the *San zi jing* 三字經 (Three-character classic), a text traditionally used to teach Confucian morality.[59] It plays on a *double entendre*, where the Chinese character *xing* 性 means both nature and sex (this may be difficult to convey in translation):

> 人之初 性本善 性相近 習相遠
>
> *Original text:* People at birth are naturally *xing* 性 good. Their natures *xing* are similar; their habits become different.
>
> *New reading:* At the beginning of life, sex *xing* is good. Basically all sex *xing* is the same, it depends how you do it.
>
> 苟不教 性乃遷 教之道 貴以專
>
> *Original text:* If neglected and not taught, nature *xing* deteriorates. The right way to teach it is with absolute concentration.
>
> *New reading:* If you do not practise it all the time, sex *xing* will leave you. The way of learning it is basically to do it with only one person.
>
> 昔孟母 擇鄰處 子不學 斷機杼
>
> *Original text:* Formerly the mother of Mencius chose her neighbourhood. When her child would not learn, she broke the shuttle *zhu* 杼 on her loom.
>
> *New reading:* Once the mother, Mrs Meng, chose her neighbour to avoid bad [sexual] influences. If you don't study hard, your tool *zhu* will become useless.[60]

To sum up, Chinese humour topics are generally similar to humour topics elsewhere, but when one turns to the psychology and sociology of humour and laughter interesting differences do emerge, deriving from Confucian social etiquette that requires adult persons to exercise self-discipline. For instance, smiling in company is not encouraged. People having their photos taken straighten their mouths so as to appear serious. On the other hand, Chinese people often laugh when a serious mistake is discovered, and will laugh even more if the situation seems life-threatening — for example, a driver might well laugh if a wheel was about to fall off his vehicle. This kind of laughter is used involuntarily to cover up embarrassment. It does not indicate enjoyment of discomfort or other people's misfortune, but in the European cultural tradition it seems misplaced and inappropriate. Studying it with modern psychological tools represents a challenge that is being addressed by scholars in cross-cultural collaboration.

Naturally, not all Chinese people have the same taste in humour. Humour is an integral part of personality, and some individuals have greater sensitivity to or predisposition for finding humorous situations than others. Such personality differences mean that in all cultures some people will enjoy humour more than others in any given situation. Outliers, such as the well-known blogger and *Time* Person of the Year 2006, Wang Xiaofeng 王小峰, maintain that Chinese people in general have no sense of humour. According to Wang, their laughter is either in obedience to command or social expectation, or it is involuntary, like a hiccup or a fart.[61] Wang's view is a minority one, perhaps simply intended to be provocative. As the psychological studies referred to earlier are starting to show, personality differences in China are in fact alive and well, even if there is still much to learn about them.

Humour Types and Modes

Since humour in China can be found in many forms, both literary and conversational, this book does not pretend to do more than scrape the surface of a rich lode. As in the West, humorous literature (in both the broad and narrow senses) has always (*pace* the efforts of Qian Zhongshu, Lao She and Lin Yutang) been regarded as of lesser value than serious literature. As early as the Yuan dynasty, it nevertheless

gave rise to specialized dramatic forms, such the theatrical comedy known as *xiangsheng* 相聲 (cross-talk) as well as to popular storytelling. Some of these forms might perhaps be called typically Chinese, but that claim must await appropriate cross-cultural studies. Another possibly unique humour mode is a tradition of amusing doggerel called *dayou shi* 打油詩, a Chinese literary game between friends where each picks up a thought or expression from the last and twists the meaning in an unexpected and therefore funny way.[62] Traditionally, scholar friends used *dayou shi* to cement relationships, and the practice is still widespread in the modern age, aided by the convenience of postings on blogs and websites. An anonymous example of *dayou shi* from a contemporary website goes as follows:

> "A" (in a female persona) writes:
> 打雷下雨狂风吹，心惊肉跳咋能睡？
> 老公短信送温情，独身一人自陶醉！
> Thunder and lightning and a wild wind blowing;
> Fearful and jumpy, how can I sleep?
> My old man sends me a love note;
> Left on my own, I become drunk.
>
> "B" responds:
> 陶醉之時人已睡，夢中輿夫來相會。
> 睜眼雨停陽光照，老公早在身邊醉。[63]
> By the time she is drunk, she is already asleep.
> In her dream she meets her husband.
> When she opens her eyes, the rain is over and the sun out.
> And her husband is there at her side, drunk.

Less formal doggerel rhymes known as *shunkouliu* 順口遛 — something like folk rhymes — are surely paralleled by comparable forms in other languages and cultures; nevertheless, China has an infinite variety, often targeting social or political phenomena. One example will suffice:

> 打麻將三天五天不睡，
> 喝茅台三瓶五瓶不醉，
> 干正事三年五年不會。

> He can play mahjong for three to five days without sleep,
> And drink three to five bottles of Maotai liquor without a hangover,
> But he can't do anything properly in three to five years.

The *xiangsheng*, a comedic performance type mentioned above, is a dramatic exchange — usually between two actors — that makes extensive use of puns and allusions.[64] Originating in the Ming dynasty, *xiangsheng* became very popular in the twentieth century. It provided a vehicle for satirizing contemporary follies. Colin Mackerras reports that *xiangsheng* performer Hou Baolin 侯寶林 (1917–93) and others said these were "works of comic nature which use satire and humour as their principal base. Their satirical content strikes home at contemporary malpractices and also often includes political satire."[65] Recognizing their popularity, the propaganda department of the Chinese Communist Party regulated content, banning subversive and critical materials and proposing topics designed to support ideological campaigns. From the 1960s Cultural Revolution period onwards, *xiangsheng* thus lost their cutting edge and the original actors were replaced in their old age by younger Party-trained artistes. Not surprisingly, the artform then became stale and lost its popular appeal.

In twentieth-century films, radio and TV, humour has often depended on linguistic plays on words and *double entendres*, to which the Chinese language lends itself admirably, as already noted. The introduction of foreign films such as Chaplin's silent comedies, Laurel and Hardy, and Disney cartoons, along with the translation into Chinese of foreign humorous texts, reshaped the boundaries of what might be imagined as humorous. As in Japan and elsewhere, avant-garde novels, poetry and art reached out to humour and nonsense to express and respond to the ambivalences of modern life.[66] Forms of humour introduced from the West, such as cartooning, comic strips and humorous columns in newspapers and magazines, spread rapidly throughout China. Political lampooning through caricatures became common from the Nationalist period onwards, often directed or inspired by Soviet models.[67]

Common visual jokes in China today include cartoons, posters and sculpture. Contemporary art often incorporates humorous comment on social attitudes, consumerism and the political system, as typified by the work of performance artist Han Bing 韓冰 (b. 1974), whose

"Walking the cabbage movement" 遛白菜運動, in which he pulled a Chinese cabbage on a lead around various public arenas including Beijing streets, highlighted the urban revolution in material culture where households now rank pedigree pets more highly than staple foodstuffs.[68] Visual jokes in architectural form also have a long history in China, particularly in classical gardens, where follies such as teahouses and garden features often use oddities of scale and placement to poke fun at establishment values.[69] Visual jokes are also found in art history, including paintings, drawings and crafts such as porcelain, from very early times. This again deserves a study of its own.

Humour Under Changing Social Conditions

Humour has long given a voice to political protest, in China as elsewhere. As is well known, subversive use of humour was commonplace in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union before the collapse of communism and studies of jokes from former Soviet-dominated countries show that underground jokes circulate among people who are not allowed to criticize publicly the government and ruling party.[70] Humour often turns against what Hsia calls "the powerful repressive forces of society"[71] in both a coping and a retaliatory fashion. Much Jewish humour falls into this category.[72] Although this topic has not yet been fully studied in China, Xue-liang Ding has pioneered the way and a forthcoming study addresses this aspect of humour, placing it in the context of relaxation of political control after a prolonged repression.[73] Ding's observations suggest that when censorship and social control were most rigid in China, humour could not be used at all; when some latitude is allowed, however, it seems to fulfil a need for self-expression and acknowledgement of unspoken truths.

Political controls were in fact gradually relaxed after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. In 2004, the SARS epidemic presented a challenge to the Chinese government's information policies and became an economic as well as a health crisis. A crop of jokes circulated on the internet. Here is one example:

> What the Party couldn't fix, SARS did: The Party couldn't stop extravagant banqueting but SARS did; the Party couldn't stop

> tourist travel using government funds but SARS did; the Party couldn't stop conferencing in scenic spots, but SARS did; the Party couldn't stop officials handing out false information, but SARS did; the Party couldn't stop prostitution but SARS did.[74]

Humour is risky in any situation where politics is highly charged, in China as elsewhere. In 2004, a Taiwan blogger published a "Happy anti-Bian guide", listing a hundred ways in which then President Chen Shui-bian might be deposed. All proposals were clearly jokes, many absolutely ridiculous; however, official attention focused on one suggestion that homemade bombs could be put on remote-controlled, miniature-model airplanes and directed at the presidential office. This was no joke to the police, who summoned the blogger for interrogation.[75]

Since humour belongs to the elites as well as the underdogs, it has always served to reinforce elite bonds, as in the case of the *Shishuo xinyu*, discussed by Lee. Members of the ruling classes may express their humour in a more relaxed way than common people, confident they themselves will be immune from criticism. Zhou, Mao and other political leaders did use humour, even in official meetings. The following anecdote was recorded during Zhou Enlai's meeting with the long-winded US envoy Henry Kissinger in 1972:

> *Kissinger:* I think the Prime Minister notices that I am especially inhibited in his presence right now.
>
> *Zhou Enlai:* Why?
>
> *Kissinger:* Because I read his remarks to the press that I am the only man who can talk to him for a half hour without saying anything.
>
> *Zhou Enlai:* I think I said one hour and a half.[76]

Although neither political jokes nor social satire are unique to China, the severity of repercussions they may incur underlines the continuing marginality of humour as a mode of discourse.[77] Admittedly, over recent years the CCP has relaxed censorship so that artists and writers have lost some fear of retribution if they cross agenda boundaries, either explicit or hidden. New forms of broad, gentle humour such as that of Lin Yutang are emerging in newspapers, television programs and writing, both fiction and non-fiction. It has become possible to critique social behaviour in general, as well as the interaction between social

norms and political control. There are still, however, limits to freedom of expression and on some topics caution still prevails. In his regular column in the popular *Qingnian bao* 青年報 (Youth daily), the writer Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952–97) poured scorn on the attitude prevalent in China which assumed that only one side of any debate could be correct,[78] recounting what he called a well-known Western joke about a missionary who was captured by cannibals, trussed and roasted over an open fire. The missionary noticed that he was only roasting on one side and not the other and called out to his captors, "Turn me over, otherwise one side will be too well done and the other side will still be raw." Wang continued:

> The moral is: If you are not afraid to become a kebab, then there is nothing to stop you making jokes. But most of the savages who hear (you) do not laugh: there must be a certain level of civilization before people understand this kind of humour — and for this reason the disciples of humour get eaten by those with no taste and no sensibility.

Conclusion

Is there such a thing as a Chinese sense of humour? Clearly, humour and wit are appreciated and have flourished for centuries, continuing to thrive while adapting to profound changes. Although particular topics and formats may be more common and there are definite regional differences, the essence of humour in China is the same as elsewhere. It is neither Daoist nor Confucian. The frailty of humankind and the gap between expectations and reality are basic human dilemmas for all peoples. Rather than speaking of a peculiarly Chinese sense of humour, it may be useful to speak of humour "with Chinese characteristics". To do so would be to borrow a familiar contemporary Chinese political term and adapt it for the purposes of studying humorous ambiguity, irony and wit. "Socialism with Chinese characteristics" was an official term applied to policies developed by Deng Xiaoping to combine a market economy with political socialism.[79]

Social conventions about when, where, with whom and under what circumstances humour may be introduced are one significant area of difference in sense and style of humour between cultures. The uses

and abuses of humour differ, as does the individual perception of the importance and relevance of humour in daily life. Globalization and increased communication with the outside world, especially via the internet, have internationalized forms of humour in China as elsewhere, but have not affected social conventions to the same degree. Differences remain. Comparative humour between China and other countries certainly needs better understanding and analysis. In terms of accessing Chinese humour by non-Chinese literate audiences, the need for translation — particularly of literary jokes and humorous writing — adds a level of difficulty (as well as itself contributing many examples of unintended funniness). What is most evident from our work preparing this book is that there is a continuous line of development from "classical" Chinese humour to the present day, so that many aspects of contemporary humour — and indeed contemporary society — can only be appreciated if they are seen in their historical and philosophical contexts.

This line of development now connects with other national and global types of humour but culture-specific themes persist (jokes about henpecked husbands originating from ancient joke books, for instance, have not died off but now circulate on the internet) and some themes have been dropped (such as jokes about randy monks, no longer relevant in today's secular society). New material is constantly added and old material discarded; international jokes are revised and localized; new formats invented, rediscovered, transformed. New media replace old, but humour — whether *huaji* or *youmo* — continues to evolve its vital role for Chinese culture.