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## Contextualizing Lin Yutang's Essay "On Humour": Introduction and Translation

Joseph C. Sample

The *Lunyu banyuekan* 論語半月刊 (Analects Fortnightly) first appeared in 1932 in Shanghai with the stated aim of promoting humour, and its instant success resulted in the following year being declared "The Year of Humour" in literary circles. The highly charged political climate of the time is discussed in detail by Qian Suoqiao in Chapter 10 of this volume, together with an account of the aims and objectives of the journal's chief editor, Lin Yutang 林語堂. In response to the barrage of criticism as well as excitement stirred up by his ideas about humour and his magazines, Lin published "Lun youmo" 論幽默 (On humour) in *Lunyu banyuekan* in two sections, on 16 January and 16 February 1934.<sup>1</sup> Of the many books, essays and articles that he wrote, Lin considered this text to be one of his best.

Admittedly, when analysed as a literary work, *Lun youmo* is subject to the criticism that it is too general and overly selective in its treatment of several thousand years of Chinese literature, and also to the socio-historical critique that Lin's overall argument about the importance of humour was somewhat irrelevant, considering the chaotic political and cultural atmosphere in which the text was written. When reading it, we must keep in mind that, in addition to definitions and explanations, we also find interpretation — of a country, a people, its past, present and, perhaps most importantly, its future. We find as well one man's genuine pride about and admiration of China, intermixed with his growing sense of fear and concern. Lin never claimed that the troubles and tragedies of society could be banished by a few moments of hilarity. Instead, he simply advocated a less acerbic type of humour — one that appealed to an individual's inherent sense of the comical — as an antidote to the mockery, bitterness and indignation that had become so prevalent at all levels of Chinese society.



**Figure 9.1** Lin Yutang with his wife, Lin Liao Tsuifeng, in China in the 1940s. Photograph courtesy of Hsiang Ju Lin (their daughter).

*Lun youmo* is situated between discourses, a mixture of old and new Chinese and Western thought and tradition. In this regard, the essay is useful both to people interested primarily in studies of world literatures but who may not be familiar with individuals such as the Eastern Jin dynasty poet Tao Qian 陶潛 (365–427 CE), and those immersed in social, historical and political research on China who may not be fully aware of the role Lin Yutang played in defining “revolutionary” literature. Lin clearly placed his literary work within what he believed to be the Daoist philosophical tradition, as opposed to Confucianism — which, rightly or wrongly, he credited with many of the faults and failings of contemporary society. Whether this assumption was justified may be gauged to some extent by two other chapters in this book, Chapter 4 by Weihe Xu on the place of humour in Confucianism and Chapter 5 by Shirley Chan on humour in the *Liezi*, a key Daoist text.

As far as humour theory is concerned, Lin preferred above other past writers and thinkers on this subject the English man of letters George Meredith (1828–1909), who delivered his famous “Essay on comedy and the uses of the Comic Spirit” as a lecture at the London Institution on 1 February 1877,<sup>2</sup> and later illustrated his theories with a deservedly popular novel, *The egoist* (1879).<sup>3</sup> Lin elevated the idea of humour to the level of Meredith’s famous Comic Spirit because he was trying to reinterpret Chinese culture *vis-à-vis* Western modernity. At the time when he was writing, there was no generally accepted Chinese word (or concept) for humour — although, as he describes,

there were terms for closely related concepts and feelings such as satire (*fengci* 諷刺) and the laughable (*huaqi* 滑稽). Lin proposed *youmo*, not only as an important neologism but also as a specialized and novel concept, following Meredith's views, of good-tempered humour and laughter. In fact, he offers it as a kind of transcendent or mediated position between tragedy and comedy that extends beyond the realm of literature. It is, he feels, the mark of a civilized nation.



**Figure 9.2** Lin Yutang and family — wife Lin Liao Tsuifeng, their son Richard Ming Lai and daughters Taiyi Lin Lai and Hsiang Ju Lin — on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, celebrated in 1975 in Hong Kong. Photograph courtesy of Hsiang Ju Lin.

In translating this work, I have included notes for most of the Chinese and Western literary works and authors mentioned in the text. Notes also proved necessary because Lin occasionally refers to texts

without mentioning any titles, such as in the opening section where he discusses “the ancient collection of three hundred anonymously written poems”, but does not state that he means the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of poetry). Beyond this, I have added other kinds of notes since the original text does not contain any bibliographic or in-text citations, and I also have added quotation marks around terms or entire phrases that have unique counterparts in English or special meanings in Chinese. For example, early in the text Lin mentions the “nine schools and one hundred philosophies”, which is actually a combination of two separate Chinese terms, and later in the same passage he describes people who saw through the “principles of love and its manifestation in conduct”. If I feel that such quoted material has a significant generic or historical implication, this is explained in notes; otherwise, I assume that readers can understand the meaning of the quoted material from the context of the given passage. For those interested in understanding more of Lin Yutang’s thought, his significance and his background, this chapter should be read in conjunction with that by Qian Suoqiao, which is fully referenced to other studies and biographical accounts of this remarkable figure, and his writings and times.

### “On humour”

by Lin Yutang

One excellent test of the civilization of a country . . . I take to be the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy; and the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter.

— George Meredith, “Essay on comedy”<sup>4</sup>

## Part I

Humour (*yomo* 幽默) is a part of life; therefore, when a culture develops to a certain extent, humorous literature will inevitably appear. With the development of intelligence those who have sufficient ability to cope with all kinds of issues will produce works of humour. In some cases humour emerges when those who are intelligent begin to be suspicious of human wisdom and begin to see human stupidity,

self-contradiction, stubborn bias and self-importance. The Persian astronomer and poet Omar Khayyam was of this sort.<sup>5</sup> In the ancient collection of three hundred anonymously written poems, a humorous attitude appears in the poem where the author was feeling the emptiness of life and singing:

You have carriages and horses  
 But you will not drive them.  
 You will drop off in death,  
 And another person will enjoy them.<sup>6</sup>

The words of the woman in the "Odes of Zheng" (*Zheng feng* 鄭風) who said, "Are there no men other than you who admire me?" also contain the idea and beauty of humour, which, as a reflective and unhurried manner, enables a person to be unrattled by sentimentalism and adversity.<sup>7</sup> When the top intellectuals appeared, such as Zhuangzi, humorous ideas and essays developed from their intellectual abilities to analyse political issues and convince emperors of their views and solutions. Zhuangzi, therefore, can be considered the father of Chinese humour. The Grand Historian claimed that the origin of Zhuangzi's *huaji* 滑稽 (the concept of the laughable) could be traced back to Laozi, with which we cannot disagree.<sup>8</sup> In the Warring States period, individuals who discussed political topics, such as Gui Guzi and Chunyu Kun, also possessed the ability to argue ludicrously.<sup>9</sup> At this time China's cultural and spiritual life was truly energetic as the "nine schools and one hundred philosophies" gradually emerged like a courtyard filling with the brightness of spring as strange and fantastic flowers burst forth with their unique scents and colours. In this free and open atmosphere, self-reflection and expressiveness appeared and individuals' thoughts walked separate paths as they thoroughly studied, probed and traced ideas to their very roots. If these ideas were sufficiently different, they would develop them, discovering their own paths. It was in this atmosphere that an "earnest" group and a "detached" group of thinkers were formed. Those who were willing to sacrifice their own lives for justice, such as Mozi, the literati who strove to become government officials, or people like Confucius, are all examples from the earnest group. Those who would not pluck out one of their own hairs to benefit others, such as Yang Zhu, or those who

resorted to obscurantism in seeing through the “principles of love and its manifestation in conduct”, such as Zhuangzi and Laozi, were all members of the detached group.<sup>10</sup> With the detached group, humour naturally appeared as their comments were uninhibited, their writing strokes sharp and their essays profound, promising and unconstrained by finer points of etiquette. Those who worked tirelessly, according to the detached group, were only laughable. The Confucians, who paid close attention to such conventions as the thickness of the wood on the inside and the outside of coffins and who insisted on mourning for a prescribed period of time after a family member’s death, could not keep out Zhuangzi’s boisterous laughter. Consequently, in the history of Chinese thought, Confucianism and Daoism became two major ideologies, representing an orthodox faction and a humorist faction. Later, because the Confucians advocated a hierarchical relationship between the emperor and his subjects, and because the emperors and Confucian scholars and sovereign leaders’ interests were shared, and they thus cooperated, the Confucian faction was able to suppress competing ideologies and to build a dominant position, which in turn paved the way for future Chinese pedants. Humour, however, is a way of looking at and criticizing human life, and it cannot be fully suppressed or destroyed despite the pressure of the ruler’s orthodox teachings. Furthermore, the fountainhead of Daoist thought is broad, and the spirit of Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s articles did not disappear even after so many dynasties of literary orthodoxy. Therefore, although philosophies after the mid-ancient period seemed inspired only by the Confucians’ orthodox teachings, in reality Confucianism and Daoism were two separate forces at work.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese people who were in power believed in Confucianism, and those who were not in power followed Daoism as they wandered in the woods, consigning themselves to nature, producing artwork related to nature and cultivating their personal character and affections. Chinese literatures, with the exception of the emperor’s court literature, all benefited from the humour of the Daoist philosophy. The court literature was not “real” literature in the sense that it was only used to manage affairs. Truly expressive Chinese literature, such as rhythmically chanted poetry, touches our souls most deeply and returns us to nature, and this type of literature belonged entirely to the humorous and liberal

Daoists. If China did not have this Daoist literature — if it only had the humourless Confucian orthodox precepts — then Chinese poetry would be so dull, and the Chinese people's souls so depressed.

Laozi and Zhuangzi were unquestionably of the detached faction, as seen in Zhuangzi's "The happiness of fish" (*Yu zhi le* 魚之樂), "Dreaming of a butterfly" (*Hudie zhi meng* 蝴蝶之夢), "Discourse on swords" (*Shuo jian zhi yu* 說劍之喻) and "The frog in the well and the sea turtle" (*Wa bie zhi yu* 蛙鰲之語), all of which are humorous. Laozi said [to Confucius]:

The men of whom you speak are dead, and their bones have already mouldered to dust. Only their words alone are still extant. I observe that the good merchant hides his treasures deeply as if he were poor, and the noble man of great virtue appears stupid. Put away your proud air and your many desires, your affection and exaggerated plans. All this is of no use to you. That is what I have to tell you, and that is all.<sup>12</sup>

It does not matter whether or not the Warring States period historian Sima Qian transmitted these facts correctly, because the strong scent of [Laozi's] contemptuous air makes it difficult for people to accept. Although we read Laozi's and Zhuangzi's writings to see how to conduct ourselves, we always come away feeling that they had too much sarcasm and too little affection. In terms of profoundness and depth, however, their "looking askance at the ways of the world" is assuredly an expression of the true "comic spirit". Laozi had a wry smile, and Zhuangzi's smile was unrestrained. The sound of Laozi's laughter was sharp, and the sound of Zhuangzi's laughter was boisterous. The detached group could have become cynical and disgusted with the world, but by arriving at cynicism and disgust, they would have lost an essential element of true humour. Qu Yuan and Jia Yi had very little humour for just this reason.<sup>13</sup> What is called *youmo*, then, is gentle and sincere, unbiased, and at the same time concerned with the destiny of humankind. This is what the West calls humour. Alert and trenchant satire is called *yuti* 鬱剔 (*wit*).<sup>14</sup> In retrospect, Confucius himself was gentle yet stern, reverent yet content. There was nothing that he desired and nothing that was necessary for him, as his ambiguous attitude towards right and wrong was approaching a genuinely humorous attitude.



The contrast between Confucius's humour and the Confucians' humourlessness is a most obvious fact. What I glean from Confucius is not his deference and solicitude, but his faith in leisurely living. Pedants adopt his deference and solicitude, but not his faith. What I love most is his humour during his time of failure, such as the Confucius who asked, "Am I a gourd that can tolerate hanging on the wall and go without food for days?" Not the young, arrogant and successful Confucius who had Shao Zhengmao killed. Pedants all love the Confucius who had Shao Zhengmao killed, not the humorous Confucius who agreed with Dian.<sup>15</sup> Even after Confucius died, Mencius was able to be very humorous, and his story "The boy who secretly climbed over a wall of his employer to meet with the employer's daughter" is something that even today's scholars would disdain telling.<sup>16</sup> The parable "The man from the State of Qi, his wife, and his concubine" is also quite satiric.<sup>17</sup> Mencius, however, is closer to wit, not humour, because his works have more reasoning and less feeling and, over time, all the Confucian scholars became more depraved and are now not deserving of discussion. Although the famous talent Han Fei did produce unique essays with intricate explanations, these are only examples of a college professor's style of humour in that they were calculated and lacking in spontaneity.<sup>18</sup> Finally, Dongfang Shuo and Mei Gao were the forebears of Chinese *huaji*, which is also not true humour.<sup>19</sup> After the Zhengshi reign period of the Cao Wei period [240–290 CE], Wang Bi and He Yan founded Spiritualism, and Daoism regained strength, which, when combined with the continued leadership of the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, thoroughly cleansed pedanticism and started a neo-Daoist movement.<sup>20</sup>

In this atmosphere, the Daoists' way of thinking accommodated the people's desire for self-expression, and the philosophy of the Zhou dynasty's Qin State excitedly changed like the flowers and trees turning from their glorious bloom at the height of summer to the seasoned depths of early autumn, emerging with an attitude of indifference to worldly gain and self-satisfaction.<sup>21</sup> This philosophical movement resulted in the cultivation of the mature humour of the great poet Tao Qian at the end of the Jin dynasty.<sup>22</sup> Tao Qian's "Reproving my sons" (*Ze zi* 責子) has an artistic, well-versed sense of humour. His nonchalant attitude and self-contentedness are not the same as the

unrestrained style of Zhuangzi, yet neither does he have Qu Yuan's grief and indignation. Tao Qian and Qu Yuan both had talents that were under-appreciated, but Tao Qian's "The return" (*Gui qu lai ci* 歸去來辭) does not have the sorrowful tone of Qu Yuan's "Divination" (*Bu ju* 卜居) or "The old fisherman" (*Yu fu* 漁父). Tao Qian and Zhuangzi similarly advocated the "recovery of our original nature", yet [Tao's] attitude towards admonishing social conventions does not have Zhuangzi's vigilant manner. Tao would not compromise his integrity just to earn a small salary in a dead-end job, but he pitied those who sacrificed their ideals in order to make a living. Zhuangzi, however, criticized those seeking official rank and pay as cattle confined to their pens and swine waiting to be slaughtered. Therefore, when Zhuangzi's indignant and boisterous laugh filtered down through the ages to Tao Qian, it merely turned into a mild smile. The reason that I say this is not that I want to put down Zhuangzi and praise Tao, it is only that I want to present the many different kinds of Chinese humour. Whereas Zhuangzi was the best at the humour of arguing and debating, Tao was the forebear of the humour of poeticizing self-satisfaction. Zhuangzi's is probably the humour of the *yang* and Tao Qian's is the humour of the *yin*. This difference originated in their differences in temperament and disposition. Today, the Chinese people do not understand humour's meaning, thinking that all humour should be satiric, and so this is why I have tried to provide examples of "leisurely" humour.

After Zhuangzi, the humour of arguing and debating was not to be seen because bold and unconstrained thinking was always suppressed by the orthodox views of the imperial powers. For 2000 years, everybody expressed views that coincided with the beliefs of the ancient sages and the literati merely performed ritual acrobatics at the Confucian temples. Thus the so-called uninhibited nature of Neo-Confucians' great works were actually rather routine and minor tricks, and their so-called intellectual superiority was just the same.<sup>23</sup> Throughout this time the court literati came to despise those who expressed novel ideas or whose conversations transcended their accepted opinions, accusing such individuals of being deceitful or rebelling against the Way and in some cases blaming them for overthrowing the country. According to Fan Ning, the crimes of the Spiritualists Wang Bi and He Yan exceeded those of China's [legendary tyrant] Jie Gui as the literati felt that,

because of these independent thinkers, virtue was obscured, elegance was taken prisoner, morality broke down and the central China plains were lost.<sup>24</sup> Wang favoured “pure conversations” (*qingtan* 清談), but after these were blamed as one of the omens for the perishing of the Jin dynasty, would anyone afterward dare to make detached statements? For 2000 years, the talented cherished “dreams of the literati” assisting the ruler in governing the empire and leading as dukes in governing the country and collecting taxes. Who among them would dare to write essays expressing their grief and indignation, let alone in their free time write works of satire — or even more so dare to be humorous? The literati always talked about virtue and morality. They tried to fool people by cheating themselves at the same time. They knew clearly that they lied to each other frequently, but they would not allow others to expose their hypocrisy. The propaganda of today’s politicians and the fighting factions has been just like the literati maintaining their serious expressions, only now warlords are actually destroying the country and the state’s high officials are the ones causing harm to our national cause. Reading this propaganda makes almost everyone yearn for Emperors Tang and Wu and the halcyon days of Yao and Shun.<sup>25</sup> When listening to the speeches of the government officials who extort money and the military men who traffic narcotics, it sounds as though they make Confucius and Duke Zhou ashamed and embarrass Xunzi and Mencius.<sup>26</sup> They could not even see who [it was that] Mencius ridiculed in his story of the wife crying in the courtyard when her husband returned home.<sup>27</sup> How would they spend their free time appreciating the humour of Mencius?

Humour, after all, is a part of life. We do not always understand the reasons for tears and laughter, but just because the court literati excluded such things from their own lives does not mean that they were successful in causing them to die out. Thus, in literary works, one cannot see the humour derived from discussing political topics, and one definitely can see relaxed humour or “humour to cheer one’s heart” in various poems. As for the men of letters’ occasional comical *hua*ji essays, such as “Farewell to poverty” (*Song qiong wen* 送窮文) by Han Yu and “Drive out the cats” (*Zhu mao wen* 逐貓文) by Li Yu, these were only amusements.<sup>28</sup> The literati simply cannot write true works of humour. In fact, it is only among the writers of the school of

Self-Expression that we find some very humorous literature, such as Ding An's "individualist talks", Zhonglang's "persistence discussions" and Zi Cai's "conversations about temptations".<sup>29</sup> Additionally, outside the realm of traditional literature the literati all read "Rustic words of a man from Eastern Qi" (*Qidong yeyu* 齊東野語)<sup>30</sup> and the novels about low-ranking officials, every one of which had humorous elements. And was humour present in the works of the Song dynasty storytellers, the operas of the Yuan dynasty, the legends of the Ming dynasty and the novels of the Qing dynasty? For example, the characters in *Water margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), Li Kui 李逵 and Lu Zhishen 魯智深 can at one moment make you cry or laugh — or cry and laugh — and then the next moment you are at a loss as to whether to laugh or cry.<sup>31</sup> This surpasses satiric criticism and reaches a condition of sympathetic humour. In *Journey to the west* (*Xiyouji* 西游記),<sup>32</sup> the monkey, the novice monk and Zhu Ba Jie, in addition to making us cheerful, definitely give us a feeling of enthusiastic sympathy, which is an essential element of humour. In *The scholars* (*Rulin waishi* 儒林外史),<sup>33</sup> almost every chapter presents a human sentiment of one truly familiar with the ways of the world and, in addition to humour, provides a mixture of satire as well. *Romance of the mirrored flowers* (*Jinghua yuan* 鏡花緣)<sup>34</sup> is about women and the sovereign world, and Yu Gu in *Travels of Lao Can* (*Lao Can youji* 老殘遊記)<sup>35</sup> also has many enlightening discussions on people's wisdom, which are not easily found in orthodox literature. To find China's truly humorous literature, one should look in the dramas, legends, novels and ditties, just as one should look in the dramas, legends, novels and ditties for the best Chinese poetry.

## Part II

Orthodox Chinese literature did not allow for humorous expression, so the Chinese people did not understand the nature of humour and its function. People often adopted a scornful attitude towards humour, and Confucian moralists even went so far as to assume an attitude of hatred or fear, because they believed that once a humorous writing style spread, life would lose its seriousness and orthodoxy would be overturned by sophistry. This orthodoxy is similar to the Confucian moralists' seeing women as being dangerous, exposing their

incomprehension of the function of sex in human life; or it is similar to their looking at the novel as the “minor way” of petty officials, exposing their incomprehension of imaginative literature.<sup>36</sup> As I have said repeatedly, humour is a part of human life. The Confucians were able to exclude humour from their memorial tablets, rhymed inscriptional verses and reports to the emperors, but they were not able to exclude humour from the lives of the people. Life will forever be filled with humour, just as life will always be filled with sadness, sexual desire and imagination — even the lives of those Confucian scholars who composed essays of utmost Confucian orthodoxy. Didn’t they also laugh and joke when they talked among friends? The only difference is that their essays lacked the enrichment of humour. Look again in Zhu Xi’s “Memoirs of illustrious ministers” to see all what literary men dared not write in books — but from time to time they did say things that were very rich in humour. Let us examine a few examples:

[Entry for Zhao Pu] Taizu wanted to put Fu Yanqing in charge of the army.<sup>37</sup> The king of Han often pleaded that because Yanqing’s fame and position were already great it was not proper to give him any more military power. The emperor, not listening to his advice, issued a proclamation. The king of Han, grabbing the proclamation, asked for an audience with the emperor. The emperor asked, “Why are you suspicious [of Fu Yanqing]? I have treated him with such kindness, how could he turn against me?” The king replied, “Your Honour, how is it that you were able to turn against Emperor Shi Zong?” The Emperor fell silent and the proclamation was discontinued.<sup>38</sup>

This has insight into human emotion and is the best kind of humour.

The Empress Dowager Zhao Xian was intelligent and wise and had managed and decided the great affairs of the state. When she fell seriously ill, Taizu served her medicine, never leaving her side. The empress dowager asked him, “Do you know why you are given all under the sky?” The emperor said: “This is all a blessing that my ancestors and you extended to me.” The empress said laughing, “Not really. It’s merely because the Chai clan had a child running the empire.”<sup>39</sup>

Everything Taizu said was the language of an orthodox Confucian “putting on appearances”. Yet the empress dowager was able to

obliterate Taizu's "meritorious founding of the dynasty", telling him that his rule over the empire was the result of the Chai clan's misfortune of having a child become emperor. These words and this kind of insight are really similar to George Bernard Shaw telling us of Napoleon's explanation of one of his great military victories — that it was entirely accomplished by his horse finding a shallow spot to cross a river.<sup>40</sup> Is not the best humour that which exposes the truth?

In terms of defining humour, there are the analyses of Plato, Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. Bergson fails to grasp the essence of humour, and Freud's definition is too specialized. My favourite discussion of humour is still the English novelist George Meredith's "Essay on comedy". He describes the Comic Spirit in a paragraph that is very difficult to translate [into Chinese]; nevertheless, I propose the following sketchy translation.<sup>41</sup>

If you believe that our civilization is founded in common-sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead . . . It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hood-winked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning shortsightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk — the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them followed by volleys of silvery laughter.<sup>42</sup> That is the Comic Spirit.<sup>43</sup>

The sound of this kind of laughter is genial and soft, and it starts with the soul's intuitive comprehension. Ridicule is selfish; but humour is sympathetic. Therefore, humour and vilification are not the same because vilification itself is lacking the intuitive comprehension of reason and is not able to be introspective. The emotions associated with humour are remote and detached, so humour produces laughter but not anger. Yet humour also is grounded in understanding and is able to infiltrate idealized concepts. Meredith said it well when he stated that perceiving the Comic Spirit enables us to experience the pleasure of shared sympathy. Those who vilify are desperate, their words are fiery and they only fear that observers will not sympathise with them. Humorists know that anyone with reason will sympathise with them, and because they all share the same feelings, the humorists will not resort to fiery language or wish to beat their opponents down. Everything they laugh at is their opponents' foolishness, so they only have to point that out. Clear-minded people will agree with this. Only those who do not understand humour need to be ridiculed.

Meredith's essay also makes many distinctions between humour and satire:

You may estimate your capacity for Comic perception by being able to detect the ridicule of them you love, without loving them less: and more by being able to see yourself somewhat ridiculous in dear eyes, and accepting the correction their image of you proposes . . .

If you detect the ridicule, and your kindness is chilled by it, you are slipping into the grasp of Satire.

If instead of falling foul of the ridiculous person with a satiric rod, to make him writhe and shriek aloud, you prefer to sting him under a semi-caress, by which he shall in his anguish be rendered dubious whether indeed anything has hurt him, you are an engine of Irony.

If you laugh all around him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours to your neighbour, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a spirit of Humour that is moving you.<sup>44</sup>

All that Meredith discusses about the essence of humour is revealing, yet I would still like to add a few sentences about the Chinese people's misunderstanding of humour. The influence of Chinese orthodoxy is so



great that it leads most Chinese people to think that humour is the same as "wisecracking satire".<sup>45</sup> When writing, people traditionally had to show concern for social conditions and hence they could only satirize affairs of the day. These satirical comments were then turned into essays.<sup>46</sup> Although humour and satire are close, humour does not have satire's directed purpose. All satire has a tendency to be vicious, but by removing the acridity and creating a more diluted mood satire can become humour. If you seek to write something humorous, however, you must first be emotionally detached from a situation and bring along a sense of Buddhist benevolence. Anger then will not flourish in your essay, and readers will get a sense of your indifference. Humour, after all, is a dispassionate, distant observer, which is why our laughter often brings tears and our tears bring laughter. Humorous essays are light, natural, unlike *yuti* essays, which dazzle, surprise, disrupt and defeat. Nor are humorous essays similar to witty essays, which start with a cunning, clever argument. A humorous essay is somewhere between smooth and courteous and vigorous and unrestrained. It is natural, careless about details and without ornamentation. When reading humorous essays, you cannot point out which sentences make you laugh, you can only read and allow the humour to awaken your spirit and comfort your heart. This is because humour is natural while wit is artificial. Humour is objective; *jijing* 機警 [literally, alert; sharp-witted; vigilant] is subjective. Humour is watered down; wit and satire are sharp and cutting. A transcendent understanding of worldly affairs gives one a "heart filled with happiness" and allows one to write in a relaxed style. Humour will appear automatically in articles that do not compromise with shameful, disgraceful and moralistic Confucian standards, beg for praise from the scholar-bureaucrats or curry the common people's favour.

### Part III

There are broad and narrow definitions of humour. In Western usage, the general definition of humour encompasses everything that makes people laugh, including even dirty jokes. (What are called humour magazines in the West publish mostly coarse jokes, and the literary style of these magazines is not very sophisticated. Magazines such as



the French-language *Sourire* and the English-language *Ballyhoo*, for example, are simply “intolerable to the eye”.) In precise definitions, humour is distinguished from wit, satire and ridicule, and although these all contain elements of laughter — bitter laughter, boisterous laughter, light laughter, giggling laughter — they are still all different. Laughter also contains every kind of purpose and attitude: some kinds of laughter are severe, some are gentle, some are spiteful, some are sympathetic, some are “a few words that induce a smile”, some are “based on one’s outlook on life”, and some are thoughtful and committed. The best humour is naturally that which simultaneously expresses a clever brilliance and abundant wisdom, such as the kind that Meredith said belongs in the “smile of the meeting of the hearts” category. Among every kind of style, this is the richest emotionally. Nevertheless, humour and its related styles all make people laugh just the same, so the nature of laughter and the techniques of humour are surely worth discussing.

Theories on laughter can be traced back to Aristotle and Plato. Kant’s theory by and large corresponds to Aristotle’s. This theory is called a “reaction to one’s expectations”, which occurs when one is feeling tense but then someone says something that eases the tension and thereupon the brain receives a feeling of levity and produces laughter. Kant said “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”.<sup>47</sup> Both wit and the precise definitions of humour can be explained in this way. Freud’s *Wit and its relation to the unconscious* has a good example:

In his distress a needy man borrowed twenty-five dollars from a wealthy acquaintance. The same day he was discovered by his creditor in a restaurant eating a dish of salmon with mayonnaise. The creditor reproached him in these words: “You borrow money from me and then order salmon with mayonnaise. Is that what you needed the money for?” “I don’t understand you,” responded the debtor. “When I don’t have money I can’t eat salmon with mayonnaise. When I have money I mustn’t eat it. Well then, when shall I ever eat salmon with mayonnaise?”<sup>48</sup>

The rich friend asked a question in a state of misdoubt. We are all sympathetic with the needy man, and we thought he must be embarrassed until we hear his answer — the tension then suddenly

dissipates. This is an example of our nerves producing laughter. There is another way of stating this. When laughing, we observe other people in embarrassing or unfortunate situations, or when they do something clumsy or foolish, it makes us feel that we are better than they are. Therefore, we laugh. If we see someone fall down, but we ourselves stand stable, we laugh. When you notice someone busy chasing fame and fortune, but you yourself are free from worldly desires, you can again laugh. But, if you know of an official who, like you, works in the capital and used to have the same rank as you, but has just obtained an advanced position and higher social status, you may feel jealous and therefore you do not laugh. If you see someone caught under a collapsed house and you will soon be affected, you cannot laugh because you will feel panic. Thus the origin of laughter is seeing through life's disgrace and misfortune where we are not involved, allowing our psyches to receive a kind of cheerful feeling. People read essays that admonish others for this same reason. When a person tells of a previous embarrassing experience, observers oftentimes cannot help but laugh. Naturally, those who are being laughed at may not be too pleased, and so their embarrassment might transform into humiliation and anger. The more that humour uses general references to humankind, the more it attains an element of sympathy because a listener will believe that he is not the target of the laughter, and even if it is directed at his social class, he may not be included among those referred to. The person being laughed at also does not feel that it is necessary that others chastise his personal characteristics or his social status. For example, when *Analects Fortnightly* scolds an official who works in the capital, the official is still able to read it and laugh. When we chide professors who "earn salaries by reviewing old things", they are able to endure this with a clear conscience because it is not at all threatening.<sup>49</sup> The more a two-sided argument involves specific individuals, such as the disagreements between Wang Jingwei and Wu Zhihui, the less humorous it is, since personal distress and ruthlessness are too easily added.<sup>50</sup> Otherwise, generally and indiscriminately satirizing society and people's lives has an emotional appeal that is naturally deeper and thus closer to the essence of humour.

The reaction to the unexpected is an element of every essay. (Related [to this], puns are the most superficial form of humour yet their natural,

quick-witted elements are truly fine. There is an art form to the sudden change in meaning due to a word's double meaning.) Such reactions are sometimes the results of an individual's ne'er-do-well attitude (see the previous joke) or because the people in the joke are rather thickheaded. Other reactions, however, are due to understanding the principle or reasons for something, and thus being able to see through human relationships. This type of unexpected reaction must begin with a clear, alert mind, for there is not a specific sequence that leads to the understanding, making it similar to Lady Gongsun wielding a sword: you will never know which movement she will take next because there is no set routine.<sup>51</sup> Those who are humorous are naturally quick-witted. For example, one time during a speech by [British Prime Minister] Lloyd George, a feminist activist stood up and said, "If you were my husband I would certainly poison you." George responded, "If I were your husband, I would certainly eat poison."<sup>52</sup> This is an instance of needing to act according to the circumstances. The story of the unattractive woman meeting with King Xuan of the State of Qi and of his taking her as a royal concubine is truly a little mischievous and is also a kind of humour.<sup>53</sup> Of course, one must be cautious because being mischievous and saying or doing unreasonable things can change a person's opinion and incur dislike. Good humour all begins with common sense. It unexpectedly appears and depends on people speaking their minds. When talking, people generally combine propriety with falsehood, and listening to them does not feel strange until someone righteously speaks the truth, which then causes everybody to laugh noisily. This brings to mind Freud's explanation that when inhibitions are suddenly released, like a horse released from its reins, our souls are naturally relaxed, enabling us to laugh. For this reason, humour can easily become obscene because obscene talk can also be used to relax inhibitions. In the appropriate environment, obscene talk is good and healthy for the psyche. According to my experience, when college professors and accomplished scholars get together to have a *tête-à-tête*, they always joke about their sex lives. So what is called obscene and improper is purely a matter of society's social customs. In some places you can discuss certain things that in other places you cannot. Social interaction in England's middle class can leave a speaker tongue-tied when compared with the social

interaction of the aristocracy. Generally, high and low classes are very open, and it is only the educated middle class that has many limitations. The English may approve of things that the French do not approve of. Or maybe the Chinese do not approve of things [of which] the English approve. The time period also makes a difference, as seventeenth-century England had many words that people would not dare to use. Shakespeare's time was also like this; yet this does not mean that people's minds today are necessarily purer than those of the people of Shakespeare's time because discussing sex actually has the benefit of adding subtlety to one's conversations. In a well-known Chinese example, Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 told King Wei of the State of Qi that if he [Chunyu] drank one cask of wine he could become drunk, and if he drank ten casks of wine he could become drunk.<sup>54</sup> King Wei responded, "If you drink one cask and you are already drunk, how is it that you are even able to drink ten?" Chunyu Kun replied that when he was in the presence of the emperor, drinking only one or two casks would make him drunk; if he was sitting in mixed company, holding hands without being reprimanded and staring [at a female partner] without inhibition, her earrings falling to the front and hairpins to the rear, he could then drink eight casks. And:

When the sun sets and the wine is gone,  
 We gather the cups and press close together.  
 Men and women share a mat,  
 Slippers and stockings mingled,  
 Cups and plates in disarray,  
 Candles in the hall extinguished,  
 The host asks me to stay and sends off the other guests,  
 The collar of my silk coat is unfastened,  
 There is a faint aroma of incense.  
 At this time I am happiest and can drink ten casks of wine.

Although this poem cannot be called salacious, the story itself is about the loss of inhibitions, and thus its humorous element could quite easily become obscene. In another example, when the emperor accused Zhang Chang of painting his wife's eyebrows, Zhang argued, "Isn't there much more between couples?"<sup>55</sup> This can also be considered humorous because it makes a reasonable argument disregarding the social taboos.

This type of explanation is close to *huaji*, and here are several other examples as further evidence. The famous German, Hermann Graf von Keyserling, invited writers from different countries to contribute articles to *The book of marriage*. George Bernard Shaw was asked to write his opinion on marriage, but instead wrote a letter stating, "No man dare write the truth about marriage while his wife lives." The book contains many long, thoughtful and meaningful arguments, and Keyserling added that sentence into the introduction.<sup>56</sup> In an example from China, according to legend someone once asked a Daoist about the secrets of living a long life. The Daoist said that if you can control your desire, do nothing extraordinary, eat simple meals, live with nature, keep away from delicacies and stay away from women, then you can live thousands of years. Someone then questioned what was the benefit of living a long life if it was so uninteresting? He would prefer a premature death. Such a response is quite reasonable. In the West there is a similar story. There once was a teacher who liked to drink. When he drank, he always got drunk. Therefore he had no students and was very poor. A person once kindly suggested to him, "You are so knowledgeable. Should you quit drinking, then you would surely have many students, right?" The teacher responded, "The reason I teach is so I can drink. If I stop drinking, why should I have students?"

From the previous jokes we clearly know the origin and disposition of our laughter, but these jokes are all quick-witted responses, which takes us back to wit and *huaji* because the laughter-producing principles in these examples are all the same. Composing a humorous sketch, then, is different from writing an aphorism or an epigram because the humour cannot be forced. Nowadays, in Western countries there are many humorous essays and just about every popular magazine has one or two humorous columns. These columns are light-hearted and they often use slang in commenting on current events, allowing the humour to enter deeply into the readers' hearts and minds, as seen, for example, in the works of Will Rogers.<sup>57</sup> Some essayists use writing styles that are really no different from the styles in popular magazine columns, such as Stephen Peacock's literary sketches, G. K. Chesterton's long commentaries and discussions on life or George Bernard Shaw's promotion of "isms".<sup>58</sup> Most of these essayists have lively writing styles and use a refreshing, natural approach as the dominant aspect of their writing. Their writing is not the same as a Chinese comedic

drama because the humour is not meant to be absurd. Their essays do not have the tone of a Confucian moralist, and the essays are not clownish either. The writing in these essays combines sobriety with humour, casually discussing society and life. Reading these types of essays does not make one feel pretentious or give one a reason to feel repelled. On the other hand, they can talk professionally when it comes to serious affairs. Because of fewer constraints, humorous essays allow for genuine feelings of joy, anger, sorrow and delight to be expressed. In short, in Western literature the humorous essay is by and large the most ingenious type of literary essay. Every person who writes humorous essays, in addition to having a lively writing style, must first possess a unique understanding that comes from observing life. Just as one can have a humorous attitude or a humorous outlook on life, those who write works of humour develop a certain style and express a mood which, regardless of the situation, enables them to put a pen to paper and produce interesting observations. Related to this is the common Chinese belief that to study poetry one needs to roam the landscape, observe people's lives and cultivate one's soul, not just study the four tones in classical Chinese or lecture on the technical problems of "wasp's waists" and "crane's knees".<sup>59</sup>

Consequently, we know that you cannot write humorous articles unless you have a profound understanding of life and a reflective outlook on life, and unless you are able to say reasonable things. 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 ultra-conservative. One situation will lead to the other and a false life and literature will emerge, resulting in a surface that speaks with fervour and indignation but a heart that is decrepit, outdated and mouldy, providing only 50 per cent warmth and sincerity and half a lifetime of numbness. It will also produce a state of mind that is temperamentally unpredictable, susceptible to sentimentality, morbidly sensitive, hysterical, megalomaniacal and wildly depressed. If *Analects Fortnightly* is able to summon the warring politicians to cut down on their fighting, swindling and deceitful propaganda, then our accomplishments will not be insignificant.<sup>60</sup>

