4

The Classical Confucian Concepts of Human Emotion and Proper Humour

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In considering the Confucian concept of proper humour, this chapter makes three arguments. First, its rationale is the same as that underpinning Confucian regulation of human emotions, since humour was seen as deriving from a basic human passion, delight (*le* 樂). Second, the Confucian touchstone of propriety is "the mean", embodied by the Confucian Rites (*li* 禮).[1] Third, in accordance with the spirit of the Rites, proper humour should be moderate, private, tasteful, useful and benign.

The concept of proper humour is termed "classical Confucian" because it derives predominantly from the 13 Confucian classics (*shisan jing* 十三經). Although not necessarily identical with the views of the historical Confucius 孔子 (551–479 BCE), this concept nevertheless reflects the beliefs and value systems of a Confucian or Ruist (*rujia* 儒家)[2] world-view, rather than a Daoist, Moist, Legalist or Buddhist outlook. Strictly speaking, it is anachronistic to talk about ancient notions of humour, since even in the West such a concept did not really exist until the seventeenth century; in China it did not appear until the early 1930s, when the modern English term "humour" was transliterated into Chinese as *youmo* 幽默. Yet much of what we now call humour must have existed in Chinese antiquity, just as trees existed before the word *mu* 木 or *shu* 樹 was invented. Certainly special words were coined to designate such pleasurable experiences.

One of the earliest such terms was *xue* 謔 (joking), and terms for other kinds of the laughable include *guji* or *huaji* 滑稽 (the glib or laughable),[3] *xie* 諧 (jest), *ji* 譏 (to ridicule) and *chao* 嘲 (to deride). The ancient Chinese also developed etiquettes (often tacit) of laughter and joking. These inchoate ethics of mirth are reflected in the Confucian

classics, from which we can infer the Confucian concept of proper humour. It must be deduced because the ancient Chinese — albeit a humorous people[4] — hardly ever theorized their mirthful experiences. There was no Chinese equivalent of Plato's comments on laughter and the laughable in *Philebus*, of Aristotle's discussion of comedy in *Poetics* or of Cicero's treatise on the rhetoric of wit and jest in *De oratore*. The first Chinese essay on jesting appeared six centuries after Cicero, at the turn of the sixth century CE. Written by Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522), it forms Chapter 15 of *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (The literary mind and the carving of dragons).[5] Even this is descriptive or prescriptive rather than analytical. More theoretical Chinese discourse of humour would have to wait another millennium until the Ming–Qing period (1368–1911).[6] Forced by such reticence, we must extrapolate ancient Chinese thought on humour from a few scattered remarks on mirth or from recorded examples of conduct.

Early Confucian classics often enumerate basic human feelings. The shortest of these inventories consists of only *hao* 好 (like) and *wu* 惡 (dislike),[7] while the longest contains 11;[8] the usual number ranges from four to seven.[9] Almost all such lists include *xi* 喜 (joy), but many also include *le*, a passion born of joy (*le sheng yu xi* 樂生於喜),[10] usually rendered in English as "delight". Just as "delight" connotes feeling or giving great joy, *le* was regarded as one of the two strongest human emotions, the other being *ai* 哀 (grief).[11] And laughter was seen as a common expression of such joy and delight — for instance, "laughter is the sound of joy" (*xiao, xi sheng ye* 笑，喜聲也); "when people feel joy, they laugh" (*renqing xi ze xiao* 人情喜則笑); and "when their thoughts are moved by delight, they will laugh" (*si she le qi bi xiao* 思涉樂其必笑).[12] Hence joy and delight are mirthful pleasures. Had the modern concept of humour been available to the ancient Chinese, it would probably have been classified as a kind of mirthful amusement, since joking (*xue* 謔) was already conceptualized as a way of making sport (*xi* 戲) by using speech (*yan* 言) to express malice (*nue* 虐) and get a laugh.[13] In other words, *xue* was already treated as a delightful form of emotional expression.

The Classical Confucian Position on Human Emotion

Since mirthful amusement was regarded as an emotion, outlining the classical Confucian position on emotion will reveal the philosophical, ethical and political underpinnings for the Confucian concept of proper humour. Advocated by Confucius, his grandson Zi Si 子思 (c.483–402 BCE), Mencius 孟子 (390–305 BCE) and Xunzi 荀子 (340–245 BCE), this position has been greatly clarified by one of the pre-Qin (221–206 BCE) texts recently discovered at Guodian 郭店, entitled *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 (Human nature comes from the decree of Heaven; hereafter *XZMC*). Its alleged author, Zi Si, supposedly also wrote the *Zhongyong* 中庸 chapter in the *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites).[14] These two texts (*XZMC* and *Zhongyong*) cast especially valuable light on the conservative Confucian attitude towards emotion, which can be characterized succinctly as *containment through regulation*. As Confucius observed, "It is rare that people err because of self-restraint" 以約失之者鮮矣 (*Lunyu*, 4.23),[15] and he was also quoted as asserting the necessity of regulating one's life.[16] Xunzi similarly admonished that "although desires cannot be uprooted, we should seek to restrain them" 慾雖不可去，求可節也 (*Xunzi*, 243).

In ancient China, emotion (*qing* 情) was believed to be part and parcel of human nature (*xing* 性), as early usage of *qing* connoted basic instincts, exemplified in the *Liji*: "What are called human *qing*? Joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, dislike and desire. Humans are capable of these seven feelings without learning." 何謂人情？喜，怒，哀，懼，愛，惡，慾，七者弗學而能 (*Liji*, 164). In sources such as *Xunzi* and *Da Dai Liji* 大戴禮記 (The Book of Rites by Dai De), *xing* denotes *qing* and vice versa.[17] The *XZMC* construes this integral nature and the genesis of *qing* as follows:

> 喜怒哀悲之氣，性也。及其見於外，則物取之也 … 情生於性。The ethers of joy, anger, sorrow, and grief are human nature. When they are manifested outwardly, it is because they are brought out by [external] things . . . *Qing* issues from human nature. (*XZMC*, 134)

The implications here are radical and profound. First, since humans are emotional beings, their primeval, non-deliberative reactions to the outer world will be emotional as well as physical. Second, since emotion

is integral to humanity, without it we cannot be completely human. Third, since human nature is irreducible and bound to manifest itself, trying to eradicate emotion or forbid its expression is futile. Therefore, the Confucians believed in balancing physical (or psychological) tension with relaxation and in channelling emotion towards propriety through the Rites (*Liji*, 254, 272, 294). Constant suppression of emotion was seen as harmful to health and dangerous to society, since when pent-up emotions erupt they can disrupt personal or social life. This assumption underlies, for instance, Xunzi's repudiation of Mozi's 墨子 (468–376 BCE) opposition to music, since that is an indispensable means of guiding people to express their emotions properly in order to avoid social chaos (*Xunzi*, 214–17).

Just as humans are fundamentally emotional beings, the Confucian Way (*Rudao* 儒道) is fundamentally an emotive way (*qingdao* 情道), rooted in human nature. The syllogism behind the classical Confucian outlook on emotion (*qingdaoguan* 情道觀) can be constructed by rearranging statements from the *XZMC* and the *Zhongyong*: (a) following human nature is called the Way (*shuai xing zhi wei dao* 率性之謂道); (b) emotion [first] comes out of human nature (*qing chu yu xing* 情出於性); therefore, (c) the Way starts with emotion (*Dao shi yu qing* 道始於情).[18]

This does not mean that one should follow emotion wherever it leads, for the Confucians also believed in building the Way (*xiu dao* 修道) so that it ends in righteousness (*yi* 義).[19] Michael Puett aptly paraphrases: "*Qíng* . . . is how one would spontaneously respond to a situation, while *yì* is how one ought to respond."[20] Here, *yi* represents the aggregate of all that is good (*qunshan zhi jue ye* 群善之蕝也), or what refines human nature (*li xing zhe* 厲性者) (*XZMC*, 144). Hence the Confucian Way is ultimately a moral path that aims to elevate humankind from emotional being to moral being.

Depending on the view one takes of human nature, there are three major Confucian arguments against untrammelled emotion. First, if human nature is innately evil (as Xunzi contended), then blindly following emotion (or, worse, desire) will lead to social chaos and animalistic degeneration (*Xunzi*, 42). Second, if human nature is innately good (as Mencius maintained), one still should not follow emotion freely because external forces can corrupt original goodness

and pollute one's feelings. Finally, if human nature is inherently neither evil nor good (as deemed by Gaozi 告子, c.420–c.350 BCE),[21] there are still the dangers of either deficiency or excess in emotion. For classical Confucians, therefore, the wisest way of dealing with emotion was to *regulate* it by providing an adequate outlet and setting bounds to expression, thereby guiding it towards righteousness.

In the Confucian view, righteousness, propriety and the mean (*zhongyong*) are one and the same. Thus the *XZMC* uses *yí* 宜 (propriety) and *yì* 義 (righteousness) interchangeably;[22] the *Liji* defines righteousness as propriety (*yì zhe yí ye* 義者宜也) (376); and the *Baihu tong* 白虎通 (The comprehensive discourse on the classics in the White Tiger Hall) states that righteousness is proper, which means that judgements and decisions all attain the mean (*yi zhe yi ye, duan jue de zhong ye* 義者宜也，斷決得中也).[23] Therefore, the way to guide emotion towards righteousness is to make its expression proper or moderate, since going too far is just as bad as falling short (*guo you buji* 過猶不及) (*Lunyu*, 11.16). A popular analogy for the perfect balance between excess and deficiency is the precisely level (*ping* 平) arm of a steelyard (*heng* 衡).[24]

Confucius lamented that human attainment of constant moderation was rarely seen (*Lunyu*, 6.29), and that even when the wish was present, people could not achieve it for long unless they were sages (*Liji*, 370, 371, 372). This is particularly true of finding and keeping the mean of one's emotions, which was imperative for Confucians wishing to act properly since passion spurs action. As the *XZMC* observed, one would not act (*xing* 行) on one's will (*zhi* 志) until one's nature and heart/mind were pleased (*dai yue er hou xing* 待悦而後行).[25] This seems to say that propriety in action is determined by balance in passion.

Accordingly, before exhorting constant practice of moderation, the *Zhongyong* defines the mean in terms of basic human passions.[26] It posits two kinds of emotion, the not-yet-aroused (*weifa* 未發) and the aroused (*yifa* 已發) (recalling the *XZMC's* ethereal and manifest emotions). As a result, there are two kinds of emotional balance: the natural equilibrium (*zhong* 中) of not-yet-aroused emotions, and the harmony (*he* 和) of emotions aroused in due proportion through artificial rebalancing. The natural equilibrium is "the all-inclusive ground of existence of the universe as a cosmic whole" (*daben* 大本), while the human-made

harmony constitutes "the unimpeded path of the fullest attainment in the world of human experience" (*dadao* 達道).[27] This duality — echoing the *XZMC*'s suggestion that the Confucian (and humane) Way starts with emotion and ends in righteousness — implies that one key to adhering to the Way lies in constantly rebalancing aroused passions and their expressions: the lifelong task of building the Way, which is called education (*xiu dao zhi wei jiao* 修道之謂教) (*Liji*, 370).

The ultimate instrument of Confucian education is the Rites, which are all-encompassing guidelines for human conduct, embodying righteousness, propriety and the mean. The *Liji* declares, "Without the Rites, there would be no attainment of the Way, virtue, humaneness or righteousness." (*Dao de ren yi, fei li bu cheng* 道德仁義，非禮不成) Asked what represents the mean, Confucius replied, "It's the Rites, the Rites! The Rites make the mean." (*Li hu li! Fu li suo yi zhi zhong ye* 禮乎禮！夫禮所以制中也) (*Liji*, 14, 163, 164, 344, 352) He defined the sagely virtue of *ren* 仁 (humaneness) as the ability to discipline oneself so as never to do anything against the Rites (*Lunyu*, 12.1; cf. also 8.2). Hence to be righteous and proper in expressing one's (aroused) emotions is to rebalance them according to the Rites.

The intimate correlation between the Rites and emotion is not only because the Confucian Way was believed to start with emotion and end in righteousness, but also because the Rites were believed to be the substance of righteousness (*Li ye zhe, yi zhi shi ye* 禮也者，義之實也). It was even claimed that the sage kings had established the essence of righteousness and the order of the Rites so as to govern human emotion (*Shengren xiu yi zhi bing, li zhi xu, yi zhi renqing* 聖人脩義之柄，禮之序，以治人情) by ordering (*zhi* 治), regulating (*jie* 節), patterning (*wen* 文), adorning (*shi* 飾) and balancing (*ping* 平) it (*Liji*, 160, 164, 167). Although imposed from without, the Rites were never viewed as alien to humanity, since their invention was based on, or stemmed from, human emotion (*li zuo yu qing, li sheng yu qing* 禮作于情, 禮生于情) (*XZMC*, 151, 49n). Thus, being in accord with human nature, they can guide people to reach the Heavenly Way by following the general course of human emotion (*Suo yi da tiandao, shun renqing zhi dadou* 所以達天道, 順人情之大竇) (*Liji*, 167). An underlying assumption here is that anything against human nature is doomed to fail. Thus the Rites were regarded as the most effective instruments to civilize

and sublimate human nature; to regulate and discipline emotion; to order and harmonize the family, the state and the world; and to make people *junzi* 君子 (gentlemen).[28] Poem 52 in the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of songs) derides those who fail to observe the Rites as worse than rats and deserving an early death.[29]

The ethics and politics of this classical Confucian philosophy of rebalancing aroused emotions (*qingdao zhongyong guan* 情道中庸觀) are summarized by the *Liji* in the following way: the purpose for which the sage kings created the Rites and music (the harmoniser of emotions) was to teach people how to balance their likes and dislikes so as to return them to the rectitude of the human way (*jiang yi jiao min ping hao wu er fan rendao zhi zheng ye* 將以教民平好惡而反人道之正也) (*Liji*, 256). The initial formulation of the conservative position on emotion can now be expanded as *containment through regulation by constantly re-balancing emotional expressions on the scales of the Rites*. The same principle underlies the Confucian ethics of mirth.

The Confucian Concept of Proper Humour

Like all emotions, laughter and humour are indispensable and often irrepressible. The *Lunyu* records that, having heard that the late Gongshu Wenzi 公叔文子 had never laughed, Confucius asked one of Gongshu's retainers whether this was true. The latter replied that it was an exaggeration: in fact, his master had laughed, but only when he was delighted, so that nobody ever became weary of his laughter (*Le ran hou xiao, ren bu yan qi xiao* 樂然後笑，人不厭其笑). "So he was like that," Confucius responded. "But how could he be like that?" (*Qi ran, qi qi ran hu* 其然，豈其然乎) (*Lunyu*, 14.13). The incident is significant because, despite Confucius' palpable reservations, Gongshu Wenzi's apparent eccentricity later became a norm: that one should never be too free with laughter (*bu gou xiao* 不苟笑).[30] This was due to concern that frequent mirth would not only weary others but also give rise to undue familiarity (*xia* 狎 or *jin* 近), which would in time breed insolence (*jian* 簡 or *bu xun* 不遜).[31] As I have shown elsewhere, from a Confucian point of view this might eventually have dire sociopolitical consequences.[32]

Confucius's initial inquiry nevertheless evinces disbelief in the possibility of a mirthless life, while his final response betrays doubt

that laughter or smiling is always tractable. He, in fact, could not help breaking into a smile and teasing Zi You 子游 when he heard singing accompanied by stringed instruments in a little town in Zi You's charge. His impulsive mirth was apparently triggered by the incongruity he perceived in Zi You teaching high-brow music to his small-town rustics, which Confucius compared to using an ox-butchering knife to kill a chicken (*Lunyu* 17.4). Both traditional and modern commentators have noted that Confucius's humour may also have been prompted by subtle self-satire — he might have been doing much the same thing himself.[33]

Confucius's suspicion that the "funny ha-ha" is sometimes irresistible may also have stemmed from his observation of others' mirthful behaviour. The *Liji* recounts that Zi Lu 子路 (also known as You 由) burst into laughter at a man who one morning held a tearful sacrificial ceremony known as *daxiang* 大祥 to mark the beginning (twenty-fifth month) of the third and last year of the official three-year mourning period for his deceased parents, but was then heard singing in the evening (*Liji*, 45). Presumably, Zi Lu found the man's mood swing too dramatic to be proper, and so he laughed. This seems quite natural and justifiable.

Surprisingly, Confucius scolded him, "Oh, You 由! You'll never stop criticising others, will you? You do know that three years of mourning is a long time, don't you?" After Zi Lu left, Confucius told the others present that he didn't think that the singing mourner had done anything too improper. After all, as prescribed by the Rites, he could legitimately sing in a month's time.[34] Not only was Confucius in effect telling Zi Lu to give the bereaved man a break; he also implied that some amusement was necessary in order to maintain emotional balance. This view is articulated in another incident recorded in the *Liji*: Confucius asked Zi Gong 子貢[35] whether he had had a good time at a year-end sacrificial feast put on by the community to give thanks to the harvest gods. Zi Gong replied that he had found nothing at all delightful about the whole country getting drunk and running wild with jollity. In return, Confucius virtually called him a bore, telling him that he failed to understand that, after a year's hard work, people needed a day off to enjoy themselves with drinks and fun; more importantly, he also failed to grasp the political importance of this thanksgiving party.

To enlighten him, Confucius drew an analogy with how an archer maintains a good bow — by alternately tightening and relaxing its string (*Liji*, 294), suggesting how people can be properly governed.[36] Such psychological politics presupposes a necessary balance between tension and relaxation, both physical and psychological.

From balancing physical exertion or emotional strain with amusement, it is only a short step to balancing gravity with humour. This virtue is embodied by a gentleman alluded to in several of the 13 Confucian classics as an example of persistent learning and self-cultivation.[37] He is the hero of poem no. 55, "Qiyu" 淇澳 (Little bay of the Qi), in the *Shijing*, traditionally identified as Duke Wu of Wei 衛武公 (d. 758 BCE). The poem lauds him with the refrain, "Oh how grave and yet tolerant, / How magnificent and awe-inspiring! / So refined a gentleman, / For ever unforgettable!", but it concludes: "Oh, how magnanimous and amicable, / As he leans on the rail of his chariot. / Oh, how good he is at chaffing and joking, / But never crude or rude."[38]

Commenting on these lines, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 CE) wrote: "The virtues of the *junzi* include both tension and relaxation. Rather than being always grave and solemn, he sometimes chaffs and jokes as well." This means, as Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648 CE) later explained, that the poem's hero has attained the mean of tension and relaxation (*zhang chi de zhong* 張弛得中).[39] Both commentators thus justify the gentleman's humour by Confucius's strung-bow analogy — perhaps with Confucius' authority, since he also regarded the poem's hero as an exemplar of virtue.[40] It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer Confucius's own endorsement of the latter's good-natured and moderate humour. After all, Confucius himself used and appreciated humour. In any event, all of these provided later Confucians such as Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819), and semi-Confucians such as Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), with authoritative support for humour.[41]

That one can and ought to have fun does not mean that one should have it whenever or wherever one pleases. Although humour as an irreducible human passion is bound to express itself, its expression should be proper. This sense of propriety is most succinctly articulated in a story by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), in which a mother reprimands her constantly giggling daughter: "There is no-one

who does not laugh, but one must laugh at an appropriate time." (*Ren wang bu xiao, dan xu you shi* 人罔不笑，但須有時)[42] Indeed, the realization that there are appropriate times and places to pull a long face or to relax it, unless (as with unregulated emotions) undesirable consequences ensue, gave rise to some tacit precepts of proper humour for a gentleman.

First, public levity was taboo. As dictated by the Confucian politics of appearances, the Rites required the *junzi* to look grave and reverent in public.[43] Chapter 10 of the *Lunyu* provides ritualistic portrayals of Confucius's public deportment, such as the following:

On going through the outer gates to his lord's court, he drew himself in, as though the entrance was too small to admit him.

> When he stood, he did not occupy the centre of the gateway; when he walked, he did not step on the threshold.
>
> When he went past the station of his lord, his face took on a serious expression, his step became brisk, and his words seemed more laconic.
>
> When he lifted the hem of his robe to ascend the hall, he drew himself in, and stopped inhaling, as if he had no need to breathe.
>
> When he had come out and descended the first step, relaxing his expression, he seemed no longer to be tense.
>
> When he had reached the bottom of the steps he went forward with quickened steps as though he was gliding on wings.
>
> When he resumed his station, his bearing was respectful.[44]

Here before us is a reverent, punctilious, almost trembling Confucius.

On the other hand, Confucius could feel murderous towards those he thought had publicly insulted his lord with their humour and laughter. Allegedly, he once had some court jesters executed, and their severed limbs scattered, because they had performed their acts during a meeting between his lord and theirs.[45] Although modern scholars tend to dismiss this as fiction, the story illustrates the Confucian tendency to view *public* humour as inappropriate. It is quite conceivable that such open mirth would be repulsive to anyone who had internalized the Rites' prescriptions for public reverence and gravity (feelings that are as inimical to humour as fear and outrage).

There were exceptions to the rule, however, since a gentleman could employ humour at court to induce his lord to change his mind and mend his ways. Mencius, for instance, was noted for his forensic wit.[46] Courtly persuasion like this usually took the form of *jian* 諫 (admonition), *shui* 說 (persuasion) or *bian* 辯 (argumentation). Such public humour was tolerated in the Chinese tradition of indirect admonition — that is, *juejian* 譎諫 (crafty admonition) and *fengjian* 諷諫 (allegorical admonition) as opposed to *zhijian* 直諫 (direct admonition).[47] A crafty or allegorical admonisher resembles a court jester whose official responsibilities include warning his lord through laughter.[48] Though the jester might escape punishment if his humour displeased his lord, the gentleman admonisher could lose his head. Since, sadly, there was no guarantee that his jokes would work, he must always engage gingerly: "Be fearful, be careful, / As if approaching a ravine; / Fear and tremble, / As if treading on thin ice." (*Shijing*, no. 196)

Although humour is (generally) inappropriate in public, a Confucian gentleman could indeed lighten up in private. Despite the solemnity of traditional representations of the revered Teacher as shown in Figure 4.1, at home, or with his students for instance, a smiling Confucius often emerged. The *Lunyu* reports that he was informal at home (*Lunyu*, 10: 24), while Chapter 7 says that in his leisure hours he looked relaxed and amicable (*Lunyu*, 7.4). In so doing, he exemplified another ritual prescription that [when] at leisure, one should be mild (*yan ju gao wenwen* 燕居告溫溫) (*Liji*, 218, 219).

Mildness (*wen* 溫) here means gentleness (*rou* 柔).[49] This gentleness is not merely an attitude assumed by the *junzi* but, according to the Confucian classics, one of his basic qualities.[50] Thus, despite his grim demeanour in public, the *junzi* is actually gentle at heart. As another student of Confucius, Zi Xia 子夏, observed, one can feel this gentle-heartedness when one gets close to the *junzi* (*Lunyu*, 19.9), and his classmates would gladly testify that their teacher was just like this (*Lunyu*, 7.38).[51] Arguably, the *junzi*'s inherent amiability should dispose him to be affable and friendly. After all, a supreme Confucian virtue is *ren* (humaneness), which connotes human fellowship.[52] And the foundation of *ren* is gentleness and good-heartedness (*Wen liang zhe, ren yi zhi ben ye* 溫良者，仁義之本也) (*Liji*, 434).

Figure 4.1 "Portrait of the revered master Confucius teaching" (先師孔子行教像 *Xian shi Kongzi xing jiao xiang*) by Wu Daozi 吳道子 (c. 685 – 758 CE). Rubbing made in the first half of the twentieth century (1912 – 1945) from a Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911) stele located in Qufu, Shandong Province, China. Reproduced courtesy of the Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University.

Christoph Harbsmeier's insightful study of Confucius's humour demonstrates that an "atmosphere of intellectual friendship" pervaded Confucius's relationship with his students, giving rise to the "remarkable humane sensibility of Confucius's moral thinking", which

fostered both his humour and that of his students.[53] This seems to suggest that, while the Rites' emphasis on gravity and reverence curbed a gentleman's public humour, his intrinsic gentle-heartedness and amicability would encourage a genial private environment in which humour could flourish. Thus, with his students, Confucius was still a dignified teacher but more spontaneous, playful and even jocose than he was in public. Consider the following story:

> Zi Gong asked Confucius, "Do dead people have consciousness or not?" Confucius replied, "If I say they do, I'm afraid filial sons and obedient grandsons will send off the dead in ways that will impede the living. If I say they don't, I'm afraid unfilial sons and grandsons will discard their deceased parents without burial. Ci [Zi Gong], if you want to know whether or not the dead have consciousness, you'll find out when you die. It won't be too late then."[54]

But will Zi Gong be able to know anything when he's dead and done? Confucius's witty and brainteaser-like response is consistent with his "agnostic humanism",[55] which made him more interested in life than the afterlife (*Lunyu*, 11.12).

If one teases others, others will sooner or later tease back, even if they are one's most reverent students. This seems to have happened when Confucius was under siege in the town of Kuang. Yan Hui 顏回 fell behind; when he finally caught up, Confucius said, "I thought you were dead." Yan Hui responded, "Master, while you are alive, how would I dare to die?" (*Lunyu*, 11.23) Although traditional Chinese commentators tended to take this tit-for-tat seriously, as representing Yan Hui's eternal loyalty and utter respect for his teacher, modern readers may see a subtle humour exchanged here between teacher and student,[56] especially in the light of their close friendship. Yan Hui's sarcastic remark may even have been encouraged by Confucius's fondness for self-satire — hence this private tit-for-tat joke between them.

As Harbsmeier notes, much of Confucius's humour belongs to this kind of subtle self-irony, which can be detected even in his most cocky moments. Hearing Confucius say that he wanted to go and live among the barbarians, someone warned him, "Think about their crudity. What are you going to do about that?" Confucius replied, "You see, once a gentleman lives among them, what crudity will there be?" (*Lunyu*, 9.14).

This sounds very much like wishful thinking, since ridding the world of its crudity was precisely what he had so far failed to accomplish (*Lunyu*, 18.6); otherwise, he would not have had to travel from state to state or even consider fleeing the world, perhaps in a moment of despair (*Lunyu*, 5.7). In a much-recycled amusing story, moreover, a contemporary described Confucius as a homeless dog (*sangjia zhi gou* 喪家之狗), and when Zi Gong relayed this to Confucius he laughed heartily and said that appearances were not important, but to say he was like a homeless dog, "how true it is, how true it is!" (*Ran zai! Ran zai!* 然哉! 然哉!)[57] His mirthful appropriation of an apparent insult makes a good sense in the light of his active sense of humour and the fact that he actually left his home state of Lu in search of a ruler who would put his ideas of good government into practice, but to no avail. While this much-loved story may well be fictional, it is not necessarily untrue: some factual basis is indicated by *Lunyu*, 14.32, which seems to suggest that the historical Confucius was probably aware of the simile as well as its aptness. In any case, what is evident (for instance, *Lunyu*, 9.8, 9.13) is his capability and fondness for what today's psychologists call self-defeating humour.[58]

Although private mirth is permissible, one should not over-indulge, since intemperance would be as improper as a perpetual long face. The Rites advocate constant practice of the mean, but actually encourage more vigilance against excess than deficiency. The perception is that over-indulgence is more dangerous to a virtuous life than under-indulgence because humans are more prone to being carried away by desires and to indulging in, rather than refraining from, pleasures, thereby losing their senses more quickly. This approach has much in common with Western classical attitudes,[59] as seems to have been appreciated by early Jesuit missionaries to China who chose to portray Confucius in a Graeco-Roman classical setting in a seventeenth-century book on his life and thought (Figure 4.2).

The Confucian classics teem with warnings against immoderation. Confucius, for instance, commended "Guanju" 關雎 (Osprey's cry), the first poem in the *Shijing*, because it expressed delight without abandon and sorrow without (emotional) self-injury (*Le er bu yin, ai er bu shang* 樂而不淫，哀而不傷) (*Lunyu*, 3.20). On the other hand, he deemed three kinds of delight harmful: delight in extravagant amusements;

Figure 4.2 Image of Confucius, facing the title-page of *Lunyu* in *Confucius Sinarum philosophus*, 1687, a Latin translation of classical Confucian works, printed in Paris under special licence from King Louis XIV. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

delight in dissolute adventures; and delight in lavish feasting (*Le jiaole, le yiyou, le yanle* 樂驕樂，樂佚游，樂晏樂) (*Lunyu*, 16.5) — for such delights tend to go overboard easily. It is no accident that the *Liji* opens with these proscriptions: never become arrogant; never indulge desires; never gratify the will to the full; and never enjoy pleasures to

the extreme (*Ao bu ke zhang, yu bu ke zong, zhi bu ke man, le bu ke ji* 敖不可長，慾不可從，志不可滿，樂不可極) (*Liji*, 13). When Mencius said that Confucius never did anything immoderate (*Zhongni bu wei yishen zhe* 仲尼不為已甚者) (*Mengzi*, 4B: 10), the "anything" should include humour. It follows, then, that the second precept for proper humour is moderation, to which I will return later.

Although it confirms the Confucian wariness of excess, Mencius's assertion above is not entirely accurate, since in the *Lunyu* Confucius appears as a short-tempered and sometimes abusive man, prone to emotional outbursts and occasionally engaging in insulting humour.[60] He once declined Ru Bei's invitation to a meeting by lying that he was sick, but as soon as Ru Bei's messenger stepped out of the door, Confucius took up a lute and sang loudly so as to be heard (*Lunyu*, 17.20). Maybe there were good reasons for being rude,[61] but Confucius's humour here seems less exemplary than the legendary hero of "Qiyu", whose humour was "never crude or rude".[62]

The "Qiyu" poem is highly significant for studies of Chinese humour. Besides supplying later Confucians with powerful ammunition for their defence of humour, it is the earliest direct portrayal in Chinese literature of a sense of humour as a virtuous personality trait. More importantly, the poem's description of its hero as "Good at chaffing and joking, / But never crude or rude" (*Shan xi xue xi, bu wei nue xi* 善戲謔兮，不為虐兮) verbalizes the third Confucian precept for proper humour: it should be benign.

Ironically, this requirement seems to have stemmed from a deep-seated negativism in the early Chinese concept of joking, as is betrayed by the formation of the character *xue* 謔 = *ya*n 言 (speech) + *nue* 虐 (cruelty or malice). Such negativism is confirmed and reinforced by subsequent pejorative usage of *xue* and by its close association with negative emotions such as derision (*chao* 嘲), resentment (*yuan* 怨) and anger (*nu* 怒).[63] The inherent malice in humour is most vividly envisaged in a Chinese metaphor for hurtful jokes, *xiaozhongdao* 笑中刀 (dagger wrapped in laughter).[64] This perception of the embedded blades in joking seems to have prompted a desire for kinder and gentler jokes by extracting the innate spite of *xue*. In yearning for and extolling this kinder form of humour, "Qiyu" is very much in tune with a host of Confucian virtues, such as benevolence, moderation and unremitting self-refinement through ritual discipline.

As a result, "never crude or rude" became a dictum for proper humour, evidenced in dramaturgical treatises and prefaces or postscripts to the traditional Chinese joke books that flourished in late imperial China.[65] Discussing humour in drama, for instance, Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) recommended that one proper way to enhance the mirth of the sovereign and his subjects was through amiable humour (*yu zuo huansheng, yi chen shanxue* 欲佐歡聲，宜陳善謔).[66] Similarly, in his collection of jokes, *Gujin xiao* 古今笑 (The laughable of the past and the present), Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646) observed in a brief preface to a section on *yalang* 雅浪 (refined hilarity) that tasteful jokes never hurt feelings (*yaxue bu shang xin* 雅謔不傷心).[67] Later, in an appendix to his own joke collection, *Xiao dao* 笑倒 (Falling over with laughter), Chen Gaomo 陳皋謨 (fl. 1718) set forth ten kinds of taboo jokes, such as those that are insensitive, gossipy, embarrassing, etc., and topped his list with the "dagger wrapped in laughter".[68]

Li Yu 李漁 (1611–80) also warned against certain kinds of jokes in drama, foremost among them the salacious (*yinxie* 淫褻), because it was both crude and cruel. He advised that if the plot called for erotic humour, the proper way to present it was by "being 'good at chaffing and joking, / But never crude or rude'" (*shan xi xue xi, bu wei nue xi zhi fa* 善戲謔兮，不為虐兮之法). He not only quoted "Qiyu" but also alluded to Confucius's praise of the "Guanju" poem's balanced expression of delight without abandon when recommending that erotic but not lascivious humour could be produced by leaving juicy details unsaid or employing metaphors to let the audience's imagination do the dirty work.[69] Such techniques recall crafty remonstration (*juejian* 譎諫), instanced by a joke he cited as a model of appropriate dramatic humour:

> Owing to a severe drought, the king of Shu prohibited people from making wine (in order to save water). One day the police found equipment for distilling and arrested the owner. Just then, Jian Yong, one of the king's advisors, was accompanying the king on a tour and, noticing a man and a woman walking in the street, he said to the king, "Please have that man and that woman arrested, for they are about to start an affair." "How do you know?" asked the king. "Because they both have the equipment, just like the distilling equipment owner. That is how I know it." The king laughed and ordered the owner of the distilling equipment to be released.[70]

Such an indirect approach returns us to the precept of moderation, since Li Yu implies that lasciviousness results from licence. Feng Menglong even saw intemperate or immoderate humour as leading to cruelty:

> 謔浪，人所時有也。過則虐，虐則不堪，是故雅之為貴。
>
> Hilarious jokes are what people enjoy from time to time. But if they exceed bounds, they become cruel; if cruel, they become insufferable. This is why tasteful humour is most appreciated.[71]

This principle of moderation in humour also informed traditional Chinese dramaturgy. According to Li Yu, dramatic humour should never be pedantic or too vulgar, although the best kind approximates the common.[72] Here, he echoed Liu Xie's characterization of jests as a minor literary genre using as its medium the simple language of the common people (*WXDL*, 169). It seems that Li Yu also heeded the stipulation by Wang Jide 王驥德 (d. 1623) that humorous songs (*paixie zhi qu* 俳諧之曲) in drama:

> …… 著不得一個太文字，又著不得一句張打油句；須以俗為雅，而一語之出輒令人絕倒，乃妙。
>
> . . . must never use a single too literary word nor a single doggerel sentence. They should transform rusticity into elegance, so that as soon as they are sung, the audience will fall over with laughter. That is most admirable.[73]

Hence both of these critics saw proper dramatic humour as resulting not from a simple combination of the crude and the sophisticated but from moderation in refining crudity — a very different thing.

This delicately balanced synthesis is often characterized as *ya* 雅 (refined, tasteful or elegant). The definition given by Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BCE–18 CE) makes it clear that *ya* connoted propriety: "What is balanced and upright is tasteful, and what is excessive and wayward is licentious." (*Zhongzheng ze ya, duowa ze zheng* 中正則雅，多哇則鄭)[74] Even the Daoist thinker Ge Hong 葛洪 (284–364 CE) advocated proper humour as refined and risible, moderate and never hurtful (*ya er ke xiao, zhong er bu shang* 雅而可笑，中而不傷).[75] And repeated calls were made for *yaxue* 雅謔 (tasteful jokes), especially in the late Ming and early Qing periods (roughly the sixteenth to early eighteenth centuries), betraying a widespread concern about threats of rampant

hilarity and vulgarity then. This was a period of "lively controversy and intellectual diversity",[76] in which literati appreciation of humour peaked, but many jokes produced at the time were unpalatable and offended their collectors' Confucian sensibilities, alerting them to the danger to social order posed by unbridled levity. Hence the emergence of a more theoretical discourse of humour in dramaturgy and the hortatory prefaces to joke books in which authors contemplated the values of humour, proffered joke techniques and formulated taboos.[77]

Another aspect of such literary negativism towards humour is an abiding perception of its inferiority. Bias is patent in Liu Xie's definition of jesting as an expression of resentment or anger by means of a shallow language catering to the common people so as to amuse all to laughter (*ci qian hui su, jie yue xiao ye* 辭淺會俗，皆悅笑也). Owing to their base nature and crude medium, jests are susceptible to frivolity, abuse or indecency. Therefore, Liu Xie classified jesting as a minor genre like that of *xiaoshuo* 小說 (literally, small talk, or fiction), the lowest in the hierarchy of Chinese letters: while the other genres were valued as "silk and hemp", jokes (and riddles) were looked down upon as "straw and rush" (*WXDL*, 169, 170, 177).

This prejudice was reinforced by the low social status of professional jesters (*paiyou* 俳優 or *paichang* 俳倡), including court jesters. Despite enjoying imperial favour, the latter were essentially slaves — some were former prisoners of war or criminals, and some of them were also dwarves. Consequently, they were despised[78] and not to be associated with. Mei Gao 枚皐 (b. 153 BCE), a court poet noted for his jests, became ashamed of resembling and being treated like a jester (*zi hui lei chang* 自悔類倡 *jian shi ru chang* 見視如倡).[79] Hence advocating *yaxue* may well betray an inferiority complex, and the desire to elevate humour by refining its crudity into elegance may be based on the assumption that, although innate, the (base) nature of humour is transformable — just as human nature is.

The call for *yaxue* also shares much with an apologetic tradition that sought to justify humour from philosophical, psychological and pragmatic angles by stressing its irrepressibility, its indispensable role in emotional balance and its utility. Thus the last Confucian precept for proper humour is that it should be useful — or, stated more precisely, the benefits of humour depend on proper usage. This utilitarian defence first emerged in the reasons given by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? BCE)

for including biographies of *huaji* 滑稽 (humorists) in the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian). He believed that, as it was part of the Heavenly Way (*tiandao* 天道), humour was useful in resolving disputes through subtle and incisive words. His biographies of three court jesters in particular describe how they used jests to admonish their rulers to prevent stupidity, unkindness, misconduct, even political, military or diplomatic disasters, to help them to realize their hegemonic ambitions. "How can one not see," Sima Qian asked, "the greatness of what these jesters accomplished?" (*Qi bu yi wei zai* 豈不亦偉哉) For him, proper humour follows the great Way (*he yu dadao* 合於大道), and moderation (in humour, as in all things) is a virtue — as he suggested when describing how the jester Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 admonished King Wei of Qin 秦威王 against over-indulgence in drinking.[80]

It was Liu Xie, however, who was the first to articulate fully the utilitarian argument for humour. Besides mirth's value in assisting reconciliation, he pointed out another common use: to relieve fatigue. Yet he vehemently opposed humour for humour's sake (*kong xi huaji* 空戲滑稽), because frivolous jests might damage social mores. Morally useful humour, on the other hand, was endorsed, since by aiming at righteousness and rectitude it could help with current situations, give advice or admonition, rectify the wayward, and prevent or stop foolishness and violence. And he saw subtle satire (*weifeng* 微諷) as the main form of useful humour, since it could save a person or even a country from danger. In a concluding verse, he summarized the values of proper humour thus: "Righteous and opportune, / Jests (and riddles) help by giving satirical warnings." (*hui yi shi shi, po yi fengjie* 會義適時，頗益諷戒) (*WXDL*, 167–77)

Underpinning Liu Xie's argument is the belief that proper humour is used to instruct. He and Sima Qian both effectively agree that humour — whether seen as a peripheral genre of literature or as a means of moral, political or diplomatic persuasion — ought to be didactic. This accords with Confucianism, which attaches such importance to teaching (*jiao* 教), regarded as integral to moral education, that all writings are viewed as instructive vehicles of the Confucian Way. Therefore, Liu Xie pointed out, "as long as [humour] admonishes or warns, it is duly recorded in the *Liji*" (*gou ke zhen jie, zai yu Lidian* 苟可箴戒，載於禮典) (*WXDL*, 168).

This utilitarian didactic position was inherited and developed by Ming and Qing proponents of humour. In a preface to his joke collection *Xiao zan* 笑贊 (An accolade for humour), Zhao Nanxing 趙南星 (1550–1627) noted that not only could one divert oneself by reading or recalling jokes when feeling lonely or bored, but one could also use jokes to discuss Confucian principles and understand the ways of the world (*ke yi tan mingli, ke yi tong shigu* 可以談名理，可以通世故).[81] Similarly, Feng Menglong wrote that laughter could remove worries, pacify anger, smooth away troubles and resolve puzzlement (*po fan juan fen, yi nan jie huo* 破煩蠲忿，夷難解惑). Emphasising the didactic function of humour, he chastised "rotten Confucians" for opposing humour and recommended it as an efficacious remedy of their rottenness.[82] Furthermore, Li Yu regarded the best but most difficult kinds of humour as possessing *guanxi* 關係 (moral pertinence), saying that the laughable and humour should contain great lessons so as to make more pre-eminent the virtues of loyalty, filial piety, moral integrity and righteousness (*Xixiao huixie zhi chu, baohan jueda wenzhang, shi zhong xiao jie yi zhi xin, de ci yu xian* 嘻笑詼諧之處, 包含絕大文章，使忠孝節義之心，得此愈顯). In this way, humour is not merely humour but a convenient gate of dharma that ushers people to the Way (*ze kehun fei kehun, nai yin ren ru dao zhi fangbian famen* 則科諢非科諢，乃引人入道之方便法門).[83] Drawing on Mencius's philosophy (that human nature was originally good), Li Yu's contemporary Shi Chengjin 石成金 (b. 1659) even maintained that, like strong medicine, good satirical humour could help people see their waywardness and "recover their innate goodness" (*Renxing zhi tianliang dun fu* 人性之天良頓複).[84]

Shi Chengjin saw humour as capable of these profound effects because people, while averse to straight-faced homilies, were drawn to jokes: "they tend to fall asleep when listening to serious words, yet fear to fall behind in hearing a joke. This is an invariable fact about people nowadays" (*Zhengyan wen zhi yu shui, xiaohua ting zhi kong hou, jinren zhi hengqing* 正言聞之慾睡，笑話聽之恐後，今人之恆情).[85] Understanding the same pragmatics of audience psychology, Wang Jide and Li Yu had also stressed the utility of humour in drama since it could keep the audience awake and attentive. Li Yu had even likened dramatic humour to "ginseng soup" (*renshentang* 人參湯) — an attention tonic, so to speak.[86] Later, Wu Jianren 吳趼人 (1866–1910), the

author of *Ershinian mudu zhi guai xianzhuang* 二十年目睹之怪現狀 (An eyewitness account of strange things in the past 20 years), observed that "in terms of influencing people, grave words are not as powerful as humorous remarks: this is why jokes and fiction are in vogue" (*Qi suo yi ru ren zhe, zhuangci bu ru xieyu, gu xiaohua xiaoshuo shang yan* 其所以入人者，莊詞不如諧語，故笑話小說尚焉). He also recognized that jokes were a double-edged sword, since uncouth or malicious jokes (*e'xue* 惡謔) could corrupt morals.[87] In short, because it appeals to people's attention and because people are partial to it, humour can be a potent didactic tool.

Beyond the moral, the goals of Confucian didacticism also extended to the sociopolitical, thanks to the belief that learning and moral cultivation can bring about familial, social and universal order, peace and happiness (*Liji*, 436). For if every member of the human family became a virtuous person, there would be fewer causes of suffering, discontent or unrest. Guo Zizhang 郭子章 (1542–1618) was probably very sincere in his belief that useful and superior humour was concerned not only with teaching Confucian morals (*mingjiao* 名教) but also with helping to restore order to the world (*li luan* 理亂),[88] a distant echo of Liu Xie's earlier assertion that proper humour could help save the world from danger.

Conclusion

Proper humour, seen from the Confucian perspective, means a form of private, moderate, good-natured, tasteful and didactically useful mirth. This humour ethic stems from the belief that emotion is indispensable, and that unbridled passions are dangerous and must be expressed in a balanced way. It also stems from a profound concern for social morality, order and harmony.

There are intriguing similarities between the Confucian and ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of humour and civilized behaviour — their negativity towards laughter and the laughable, their rationales for regulating them, their justifications for jesting and their precepts for proper humour. The Greeks and Romans believed humour should be moderate, good-natured, urbane and useful in epistemological, psychological, oratorical or moral terms (since a concern about conduct

is essentially a moral one and all etiquettes are steeped in moral values).[89] Certainly there are many differences between the Chinese and the Greco-Roman views of humour, but it is thought-provoking (even comforting) to see that two peoples devoid of mutual knowledge and living in very different epochs shared surprisingly similar attitudes.

Perhaps such parallels have to do with what Karl Jaspers called the axial period, which human history entered between the ninth and the third centuries BCE. This was the era when wise human beings such as Confucius, Buddha, Jeremiah, Zarathustra and Plato lived, learned, thought, taught, and also laughed and joked. Leaving open the causes of the "axis of world history", since "no one can adequately comprehend what occurred here",[90] Jaspers suggested that we should nevertheless try to understand this wondrous period from all sides. This should surely include human commonalities such as a sense of humour. Different peoples laugh at different jokes, of course, but we all do laugh and crack jokes; we even make and laugh at the same kinds of jokes, if not the same jokes (give or take some specialized cultural knowledge).

Another human commonality is surely the *sense of propriety*, which at its best can transcend time, race and culture — we all have it, more or less. But what is deemed proper will differ from culture to culture and from time to time. In today's China, for instance, public humour coming from a statesman or a stateswoman hardly raises an eyebrow. In fact, a sense of humour has become so admirable a trait that everyone wishes to show it. Concepts of public and private, too, have altered since cyberspace became available to all: the internet seems a twilight zone where one can disclose (often under the cloak of anonymity or pseudonymity) the most private aspects of one's life in a global public park. The Chinese *seem* to have thrown most Confucian precepts for proper humour out the window — consider, for instance, Chinese humour websites where almost anything goes.[91] One might then ask whether there are any (implicit or explicit) precepts for proper humour in modern China. If so, what are they? How widely do they differ from Confucian tenets? What do the two approaches share in common (if anything)? How have the differences evolved? Clearly, answering these questions requires further research and analysis, to which this book is designed to contribute.