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Chapter Author(s): Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey

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Preface

Preparing this volume has been a labour of love for the co-editors and an attempt to combine our specialized knowledge in two seemingly different fields — comedy and humour for Jessica Milner Davis and Chinese culture and history for Jocelyn Chey. Decades ago, in Sydney, we pursued doctoral studies in these quite separate fields. Then we went our separate ways — Jocelyn to Canberra, Beijing and Hong Kong, and Jessica to Bristol, Paris and America. In the first decade of a new century and having returned once more to Sydney, we came together at a conference of the Oriental Society of Australia and realized that before us was a project we seemed fated to undertake in partnership.

We are sincerely grateful to our co-authors for making this project possible. We thank them also for their patience while we explored what it meant to combine so many different perspectives, disciplines and periods (not to mention so many variants in spelling of proper names or fonts and styles for Chinese characters). Each author has endeavoured to make his or her own expertise accessible to the general reader without conceding scholarly values in the process, a difficult and time-consuming task. We believe the result is an excellent introduction to an important and much misunderstood topic, presented in a way we hope our readers will enjoy. This volume includes studies to illustrate some of the traditional concepts, themes and forms of humour in Chinese life and letters and a projected companion volume reflecting modern and contemporary approaches in preparation. Even within this scope, it has not been possible to address fully every topic and period (the contemporary art scene, for example, remains a significant omission), but we hope others will be inspired to fill such gaps.

We also hope this work will contribute to cross-cultural understanding. Humour is often dangerous, since — like many other

forms of human behaviours, both innate and learned — it may be used for both good and ill. While it is an important survival technique for those under personal stress or in subordinate positions, and an excellent adjunct to teaching and learning when well used, humour can also wound and exclude. Further, it represents a challenge to authority of all kinds. Different cultures and times have evolved a range of protocols and social conventions for channelling and containing humour-making and humour-appreciation. Every country — especially Australia — has its own approach to what it is possible for one to get away with in humour, when and with whom. In Australia, you can pretty much “take the mickey” out of anyone, almost at any time. When abroad, Australians quickly learn that this does not always work elsewhere and that humorous behaviour needs to be modified. Equally, people from more reserved cultures soon discover what to expect from Aussies in their own environment. A deeper awareness of such cultural differences can only enhance international understanding.

De gustibus non est disputandum: even when better understanding exists, personal differences in tastes and attitudes regarding humour will remain. But what these chapters show is that East and West have more in common when it comes to humour and laughter than is commonly thought. Beneath superficial differences in topics and styles of joking and comedy, or in public laughter and the shape of linguistic puns, this book reaffirms the commonality of human attitudes to enjoying (and censoring) humour. Such insights are, to us, a source of satisfaction. And we urge our readers always to remember *xue wu zhi jing* 學無止境 (there are no boundaries in study) — especially about humour.

We thank our families for their support and enthusiasm about this project and record our appreciation for expert assistance from colleagues in the East Asian Collection of Fisher Library at the University of Sydney, the Harvard-Yenching Library and the Chinese Department of the University of Cambridge Library; also from our Hong Kong University Press editorial team, Michael Duckworth, Dennis Cheung and Jessica Wang.

Jessica Milner Davis
Jocelyn Chey
Sydney, August 2011