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Chinese Humour as Reflected in Love-Theme Comedies of the Yuan Dynasty

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Since humour in China dates back to ancient times, it is naturally to be found in most periods and forms of Chinese art and literary texts, including scripts from classical Chinese drama. Of the latter, the most famous are the comedies from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). These pieces are known chiefly from surviving texts,[1] and although there is a strong performance tradition, there is little evidence about the precise circumstances of their original production. They represent an astonishing mastery of comic art that still remains popular.

In China, dramatic performances of what is usually called opera rather than drama date back more than a thousand years to at least the eighth century, and were closely associated with the imperial court. One important form is known as *zaju* 雜劇 (variety plays). In the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), *zaju* consisted of singing, dancing, music, comic elements and acrobatic performance, and were divided into three parts: an introduction that generally commented on contemporary affairs; the main story; and comic and acrobatic acts. The content of each part was quite separate. New forms of *zaju* emerged in the Southern Song dynasty (1127–79), while the original, renamed *yuanben* 原本, continued in its original form in the north during the Jin dynasty (1115–1274). When north and south China were reunited under the Yuan dynasty, the northern form became dominant and eventually replaced southern forms.

The Yuan dynasty saw many innovations in *zaju*, including a musical structure based on combining various tunes into sets. Some tunes were derived from folk music and some from older dramatic airs. There were seven sets commonly in use at this time. Flutes, clappers and drums were used for accompaniment. A complete drama was divided into

four *zhe* 折 (acts) and one *xiezi* 楔子 (prologue or interlude). Roughly, the four acts represented the commencement, development, climax and resolution of the plot. There was internal consistency of music and rhyme scheme in every *zhe* and each *zhe* was sung by either the male or female lead actor. Other characters usually had only spoken dialogue. The scripts of Yuan *zaju* consisted mainly of lyrics and spoken dialogue, with some brief directions for stage action.[2] Another innovation was greater use of vernacular language and the introduction of stock acting roles such as the female role (*dan* 旦), the male hero (*sheng* 生), the "painted-face" (*jing* 淨) and the clown (*chou* 丑). These were specialized roles played by both actors and actresses, where the specific name and social rank of the character varied from play to play (comparable roles would be those of the *commedia dell'arte* and stock characters such as the *ingénue* and the villain in Italian opera). The comic role of the *chou* is discussed below.

The subject matter of these opera plots expanded greatly to include not only stories based on history and legend but also others related to contemporary society, and in many of them comedy and humour play an important part. Readers not familiar with classical Chinese drama will nevertheless know something of comparable Western comedy, particularly the works of William Shakespeare. By drawing comparisons and distinctions with some types of comedy found in the Shakespearean canon and elsewhere, the comic techniques and humour found in this remarkable Yuan drama can be more easily understood in reasonably straightforward terms. Many comic techniques are in fact common to both these groups of plays, despite the gaps that separate them in time, geography, language and societal beliefs. Of course, there are also many differences as well as similarities.[3]

Despite China's long cultural and artistic history, it was not until the Yuan dynasty that drama reached its Golden Age, as both Shih Chung-wen and Colin Mackerras have noted in their studies of the Chinese theatre.[4] Popular ever since, the Yuan dramas are justly admired. Famous later dramatists of the early Ming dynasty, such as Li Kaixian 李開先 (1502–68) and Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616), each had private collections of over a thousand scripts. Unfortunately only about 250 complete works are still extant. One may well ask how many of these scripts truly belong to the genre of comedy, since there is no

clear-cut distinction between comedy and tragi-comedy in traditional Chinese drama. The best estimate is that, of the 250, no more than 30 are outright comedies. To facilitate comparison with Shakespearean comedy, discussion here is based on the following 13 love-theme comedies because, like Shakespearean comedy, these are humorous, have remained popular and are also very readable (although it needs to be borne in mind that these texts were written to be sung or declaimed).[5]

- Dai Shanfu 戴善甫, *Fengguang hao* 風光好 (Story of good scenery)
- Guan Hanqing 關漢卿, *Jinxian chi* 金線池 (The golden thread pond)
- Guan Hanqing, *Jiu fengchen* 救風塵 (Save the prostitute)
- Guan Hanqing, *Xie Tianxiang* 謝天香 (Maiden Xie Tianxiang)
- Guan Hanqing, *Yu jingtai* 玉鏡台 (Jade mirror-stand)
- Li Haogu 李好古, *Zhang sheng zhu hai* 張生煮海 (Scholar Zhang boiling up the sea)
- Shi Junbao 石君寶, *Jinqian ji* 金錢記 (The story of the coin)
- Shi Zizhang 石子章, *Zhu wu ting qin* 竹塢聽琴 (Listening to *qin* music in the bamboo hut)
- Wang Shifu 王實甫, *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The west chamber)
- Zhang Shouqing 張壽卿, *Hong li hua* 紅梨花 (Red pear flowers)
- Zheng Guangzu 鄭光祖, *Zhou Meixiang* 翳梅香 (Zhou Meixiang, the scholar maidservant)
- Anon, *Fu Jinding* 符金錠 (Maiden Fu Jinding)
- Anon, *Yuanyang bei* 鴛鴦被 (Quilt with mandarin duck pattern)

Chief among these is the perennially popular *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The west chamber), remade as a 1927 silent film, *Romance of the western chamber* (see poster in Figure 7.1) and remaining popular today on TV and in film.

In terms of comic technique, a principal device used in all these plays (and in others that are more serious in nature) to attract and hold the attention of their audiences is verbal wit. As Rex Gibson notes, English audiences of the Elizabethan period also seem to have loved word play and punning,[6] and such intellectual wittiness has always been considered an important characteristic of European high comedy. Since Greek and Roman times, high comedy traditionally has been distinguished from more visual or low comedy largely on this basis

Figure 7.1 Film poster by anonymous artist for the Minxin Film Company (Shanghai) 1927 silent movie, *Romance of the western chamber* 西廂記, directed by Hou Yao (1900–45), based on the Yuan drama *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 by Wang Shifu 王實甫. Black and white copy of PD-ART from Wikimedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Romance_of_the_Western_Chamber_poster.jpg (accessed 29 January 2010).

(although in contemporary times such a distinction is less clear-cut).[7] There is a significant difference between the Chinese and European theatrical traditions in this approach to the comic, as no distinction is traditionally made between high and low in Chinese comedy. In Yuan comedy, for example, humour is expressed quite freely in the action of the plot, through characterization and through being embedded in the comic language, without concern for issues of good taste or sentiment. Despite this, these pieces were regarded as literary achievements equal in status to tragedies or other serious dramas.

The use of poetry or verse-forms is also thought to distinguish high comedy from low comedy, and some scholars of Chinese comedy maintain that comedy is bound to use a particular style of language to achieve a particular generic effect — and thus that verse is more suited to high comedy and to tragedy.[8] Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834), however, believed that individual writers could achieve true poetry in either the comic or the tragic form,[9] and that each might select their own style and adjust the ratio of prose to verse in using comic language as they saw fit. This certainly reflects the practices of the classical Chinese comedy authors, and we conclude that in neither the East nor the West are there fixed rules or limits on the use of language — or indeed on any other dramatic techniques to achieve comic effect. We would agree with Coleridge's view[10] that the only true limitations are the imagination and creativity of the writer, operating within the bounds of theatrical practicality and good artistic taste.

Comic techniques used in Yuan love-theme comedies

Irony

As a component of verbal wit, irony must be singled out for discussion. Drama uses two kinds of irony: verbal and dramatic. Setting dramatic irony aside for later discussion, verbal irony involves saying one thing but meaning another, and naturally it is an effective and much-used tool of comedy,[11] arousing the audience's interest by setting them an amusing puzzle to resolve. It can also bear a subtler interpretation, however. Abrams points out that, as an act of communication, the true meaning of verbal irony may be directly opposite to the implied meaning, or the same speaker may speak the opposite (contradict himself or herself) within a short period of time.[12] As such, an ironic utterance need not necessarily be comic. One famous example is the highly serious and nuanced scene in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, where Mark Antony repeatedly calls Brutus "an honourable man" when he means quite the opposite.[13] Therefore, using irony as a reliable indicator of the comic can be dangerous. Nevertheless, it is an important tool for many comedy writers, including those of the Yuan period, who were particularly skilful in their use of verbal irony for humorous effect.

One excellent example comes from the famous comedy by Wang Shifu (1250–1307?), *Xixiang ji* (The west chamber). The plot of this comedy revolves around Scholar Zhang 張生, who is on his way to the capital to sit the national civil service examination. On the way he comes to a Buddhist monastery where he sees and falls in love with a beautiful young lady named Cui Yingying 崔鶯鶯. Yingying's mother has promised her to someone else, but by defeating some bandits Scholar Zhang gains approval to marry her. However, when Zhang departs for his examination, Yingying's mother tries to marry her off to her original suitor. Scholar Zhang returns just in time to prevent this and the two are finally married in a happy conclusion.[14] In a scene set during Zhang's absence, Yingying — a true comic heroine who would be at home in the work of Shakespeare — discovers her maid Hongniang 紅娘 bringing a love letter from Zhang. Keeping a straight face instead of rejoicing, Yingying scolds her as follows:

> 小賤人，這東西那里將來的？我是相國的小姐，誰敢將這簡帖來戲弄我！我幾曾慣看這等東西！告過夫人，打下你個小賤人下截來！
>
> You bad girl, where did you get this from? I am the daughter of the Prime Minister, how dare you bring me this rude letter and play tricks with me? If I were to tell Mama, she would break your leg![15]

Since earlier in the drama the audience has seen that Yingying is in fact in love with Scholar Zhang, they know very well that Yingying is saying one thing but meaning quite the opposite. Not surprisingly, Yingying's maid, Hongniang, is not scared at all and in response to the threat she cheekily replies: 我將這簡帖兒去夫人行出首去來 "Very well, I'll take this letter from Scholar Zhang to old Mama, and confess that it's my fault!"[16]

Immediately, of course, the situation reverses itself as it appears that Yingying and Zhang's secret love affair will be exposed, so that the original reversal is ironically compounded by the response. Yingying immediately softens, surrenders to Hongniang, and hastens to say that she was just joking. This allows Hongniang to win hands down by saying: 放手，看打下下截來！ "Hands off [the letter]; otherwise [Mama] will break your leg!"[17] This further twist, in which she plays back to her mistress the mistress's own threat, always makes the audience burst into laughter.

Comparing dramatic irony with verbal irony, the first is more embedded in the structure of events and plots. It appears when one whole scene, event or line of argument contrasts sharply with another and, like verbal irony, can be serious as well as humorous.[18] A typical dramatic — even tragic — example from Shakespeare is the sequence in *Macbeth* in which King Duncan's line about Macbeth — "He was a gentlemen on whom I built an absolute trust" — is followed immediately by Macbeth entering and starting to plot the murder of Duncan.[19] Here the ironic contrast is made visual by the sequence of actions, rather than being contained in the words spoken.

Exploiting this mechanism for comic effect is a common tool in Yuan comedy. *Jinqian ji* (The story of the coin) by Shi Junbao (1192–1276?), for example, is another comedy where the plot revolves around the conflicts between civil service careers and personal affections, involving marriage between rich and poor. In this play, Prefect Wang 王府尹 requests the scholar He Zhizhang 賀知章 to call on another scholar, Han Yi 韓翃, and on his behalf offer him a position as personal tutor to Wang's children. Zhizhang is reluctant to go: he believes he understands Han's temperament and views, since they have been good friends for many years, and he expects Han to turn down such a humble position on the spot. He therefore replies at once to the Prefect:

> 老相公所言之事不必去問。此人與眾不同，腹隱司馬之才，心似彌衡之傲，內心剛烈，外貌欠恭。今歲攛過卷子，早晚除授，怎肯與人做門館？
>
> Your Honour, there is no need for me to go. This man Han Yi is no ordinary person. His extraordinary talents are as high as the famous scholar Sima, and his temperament is as proud as the scholar Mi Han. He has a strong personality and shows no respect to anyone. He just took part in the civil examination this year, and I expect him to be offered a position as a senior civil servant and to be promoted sooner or later. How could he possibly accept the humble position of family tutor?[20]

It is only after Wang begs him repeatedly that He Zhizhang reluctantly agrees to try to persuade his friend. To his surprise, Han Yi agrees at once to be Prefect Wang's family tutor. The reason, however, soon appears — it is a secret love! The dramatic irony then lies in the fact that now He Zhizhang has succeeded in his task, he unhappily

feels obliged to lie to the Prefect about the process in order to conceal why consent was given so readily. In a splendidly funny scene, he ridiculously exaggerates his own skills of persuasion and oratory in order to explain how he overcame his friend's (non-existent) reluctance:

> 老相公，飛卿兄弟不肯做門館。小官磨了半截舌頭，才得依允。
>
> Your Honour, my brother Feiqing [飛卿, another name for Han Yi] did not agree at first. You should understand that it was only after I disposed of half of my tongue, and my saliva ran dry, that he reluctantly agreed to be your family tutor![21]

The contradictions between the characters' expectations and the actual outcomes, and between what Zhizhang says and what the audience knows to be true, create an illogical inconsistency between cause and effect to which the audience always responds with laughter.[22] Such comic effects on stage can be produced either by inconsistent behaviour or verbal responses, inconsistency in characters or situations, or by any combinations of these. In current Western humour theory, these would be described as incongruity effects.[23]

Another equally entertaining example comes from the comedy *Zhu wu ting qin* (Listening to *qin* music in the bamboo hut). Here the female lead is a beautiful Daoist nun named Zheng Cailuan 鄭彩鸞 who has fallen in love with the scholar Qin Xiuran 秦脩然. When Prefect Liang 梁府尹 wants to use her temple to offer hospitality to a friend, at first she strongly opposes the idea. However, before long she finds out that this friend is none other than the scholar Qin, who happens to have stolen her heart — of course she changes her mind. By that stage, it is she who has to persuade Liang (who has given up his original plan) to use the temple so that she can have her chance to meet the scholar. Here is how she does it:

> 〔梁州尹云〕姑姑，我一徑的來借你觀中淨房一間，安排酒肴，管待個客官。
>
> 〔正旦云〕相公，這的是祝壽的道院，外觀不雅，葷了鍋灶。
>
> 〔梁州尹云〕便葷了有誰知道？
>
> 〔正旦云〕做的個褻瀆麼，葷了灶不中用。
>
> 〔梁州尹〕真個不肯？
>
> 〔正旦云〕不可不可，跳出俺那七代先靈來，我也不肯。
>
> …

〔正旦扯正末衣服科云〕相公在這裡坐坐不妨事。

〔梁州尹云〕這裡是祝壽的道院，外觀不雅。

〔正旦云〕有誰知道？

〔梁州尹云〕葷了你那鍋灶，做的個褻瀆麼。

〔正旦云〕外邊有一個小鍋兒哩。

Prefect Liang: Dear (Daoist) Aunt, would you let me use a clean room in your temple to prepare good food and wine in order to show hospitality to a guest?

Female lead: Your honour, this temple is meant for ceremonies such as the ritual of longevity. I'm afraid a meat dish would defile our cooking stove and our tradition of being vegetarian!

Prefect Liang: Who would know about such defilement?

Female lead: Who would bear responsibility for such defilement? None of the cooking stoves or utensils could be used afterwards!

Prefect Liang: Is it really impossible?

Female lead: No, no! I would not agree to it even if seven generations of my ancestors came out from their graves to beg me!

. . .

Female lead (pulling the Prefect's cloak): Your honour is welcome to host your friend here if you wish!

Prefect Liang: This temple is meant for ceremonies such as the ritual of longevity, it would not be appropriate!

Female lead: Who would know?

Prefect Liang: Who would bear responsibility for such defilement? None of the cooking stoves or utensils could be used afterwards!

Female lead: There is a small pot outside [that can be used]![24]

These reversals of situation and relationship (pleading and rejecting roles being exchanged between the two characters) combine with a precise reversal of the direction of the dialogue and even reuse of the same words to produce a very strong comic effect. The mechanical techniques of reversal and repetition are among the most important identified by Henri Bergson (1854–1941) in his work *Le rire* (1901), which analyses the various theatrical devices found in farcical stage-comedies of that time.[25]

Many such examples of reversals in situation and dialogue are found in other Yuan comedies. The entire plot of *Jinxian chi* (The golden thread pond) is a comedy of errors and misunderstandings

between the male and female lovers and inconsistency on the part of the lovers themselves. At one point, for example, the female lead, Maiden Du Ruiniang 杜蕊娘, vows that she will never mention the name of the scholar Han Fuchen 韓輔臣 but repeatedly breaks her vow, to much laughter from the audience.[26] Another example comes from *Fengguang hao* (Story of good scenery), in which conflict arises from love affairs between lovers of different nationalities. Again, personal inconsistencies give rise to much of the comedy: Scholar Tao Gu 陶穀, for example, boasts during the day that he will not visit a brothel but at night succumbs to the temptation.[27] In the comedy *Xie Tianxiang*, the scholar Liu Yong 柳永 repeatedly tells people in the national capital that his good friend Prefect Qian 錢大尹 is trustworthy and reliable but is taken unawares when, as soon as Qian arrives in town, he takes Liu's own lover, Maiden Xie Tianxiang, as his concubine. Ironically, this is due to good intentions on Qian's part — but this motive is unknown to Liu.[28]

Repetition is also frequently used for comic effect, including repeating sentences with the same structure and repeating body movements or gestures.[29] Bergson draws an analogy between the pressure that builds from such repetitions and ironic contradictions in comedy and a steam engine — the hotter the steam, the greater the persuasiveness and the fun.[30] Although, as in Shakespeare, the few stage directions remaining in the texts of Yuan dramas do not give sufficient information to allow full and authentic reconstruction of the acting techniques used to deliver these techniques, even the bare texts of the comedies demonstrate their authors' mastery of these techniques.

Satire, Imagery and Malapropisms

As previous examples have shown, verbal irony becomes particularly amusing when characters are led to reveal their own weaknesses — often unconsciously. By contrast, when audiences see one actor deliberately and skilfully exposing the weaknesses of another, the comic effect is more satirical and mocking. While this is also enjoyable for the audience, it carries an overtone of intentional social and/or personal criticism, which is the defining characteristic of satire. In the love-theme comedies of the Yuan dynasty, the objects of such satirical

mockery can be categorized as either morally bad characters or simply as *huaji* 滑稽 (laughable) people.[31]

An extreme example appears in the comedy *Jiu fengchen* (Save the prostitute) by the famous playwright Guan Hanqing (1226–1302).[32] Zhou She 周舍 is undoubtedly a bad character and a villain, being the spoilt son of a local rich and influential man. The plot revolves around how the weak and seemingly helpless prostitute Song Yinzhang 宋引章 defeats this villain with help from her brave and clever female friend, Zhao Pan'er 趙盼兒. The author makes fun of Zhou in every way, presenting him as the target of strongly satiric language and effectively establishing an image of a totally base character. He is portrayed as a glutton, constantly eating and drinking, and thus becomes the focus for the extensive food references that characterize this dramatic text. There are 19 references to wine and food, 12 to rice and 19 to actions of eating, amounting to a total of 50 textual references to food and eating. Symbolic meanings as well as comic exaggeration are embedded in these food references, the imagery of which has the effect of thoroughly mocking Zhou.

From the other characters comes milder mockery and repeated use of ironic descriptors, such as the remarks by *Jiu fengchen*'s female lead, Zhao Pan'er. In Act 1, she says of Zhou She: 那廝雖穿著幾件虼蜋皮，人倫事曉得甚的 "Although Zhou She owns a few sets of expensive clothing, he knows nothing about being a human!"[33] In Act 2, Pan'er continues to use this very ironic tone, this time using animal imagery: 見的便似驢共狗…舔又舔不著 "He looks like a donkey or a dog . . . like a dog that cannot lick [water that is out of reach]."[34] Perhaps the playwright's harsh treatment of Zhou She is explained by the fact that during the Mongol Yuan dynasty there was widespread suffering among the people of Southern China due to shortages of food.[35]

Although Zhou She is clearly marked out as the butt of laughter and ridicule by all, a high point of laughter occurs when, in a conversation between him and a waiter in the inn, his own slip of the tongue foreshadows his eventual destiny — to end up in prison. This dialogue is worth quoting in full:

> 〔周舍云〕不問官妓私科子，只等有好的來你客店裡，你便來叫我。

〔小二云〕我知道。只是你腳頭亂，一時間那里尋你去?

〔周舍云〕你來粉房裡尋我。

〔小二云〕粉房裡沒有呵？

〔周舍云〕賭房裡來尋。

〔小二云〕賭房裡沒有呵？

〔周舍云〕牢房裡來尋。

Zhou She: When you see either private or public prostitutes come to the inn, inform me at once.

Waiter: I know. But your movements are hard to predict. Where can I expect to find you?

Zhou She: Look for me at the brothel!

Waiter: If you are not in the brothel?

Zhou She: Look for me at the gambling club!

Waiter: If you are not in the gambling club?

Zhou She: [In the] prison cell![36]

It is striking indeed that here the classical comedy of the Yuan dynasty prefigures modern psychoanalytic theory in its use of the slip of the tongue.[37] Another verbal technique identified from Western comedy is the malapropism. The term derives from Mrs Malaprop, a character in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The rivals* (1775), a woman who continually muddled words with similar sounds to great comic effect. More technically known as catachresis, the technique in fact predates Sheridan and is sometimes called Dogberryism[38] after the parallel character in Shakespeare's *Much ado about nothing* (1598). It is frequent in Yuan comedy.

Comic misunderstanding also affects plots. In *Fu Jinding* (Maiden Fu Jinding), for example, the villain Han Song 韓松 conspires to prevent the marriage between Zhao Kuangyi 趙匡義 and the beautiful maiden Fu Jinding by kidnapping her while she is travelling to the marriage hall. The villainous plan is discovered in time, however, and Zheng En 鄭恩, a warrior and good friend to Zhao Kuangyi, takes the place of the bride in the curtained wedding sedan chair. After the villain Han Song kidnaps the person he believes to be the bride, he is appalled to discover inside the closed chair a terrifying warrior instead of a beautiful girl. The hilarious dialogue that takes place between them culminates in a belated statement of the all too obvious:

〔韓松云〕我揭開這轎簾試看咱。〔做見鄭恩科〕
〔鄭恩云〕兀那韓松，你認的我麼？我是你公公哩！
〔韓松云〕原來不是小姐，可是這個大漢。

Han Song: Let me open the curtain to see my beauty . . . [Sees Zheng En inside; surprised]
Zheng En: You evil man, Han Song! Can't you recognize me? I am your grandfather!
Han Song: Alas! My mistress has disappeared! And it's a man instead![39]

It is easy to imagine the acting out of this denouement by fine comic actors, making the most of the fact that the audience is breathlessly waiting for the springing of the trap. Bergson would describe this as "the robber robbed" type of reversal achieved by "qui-pro-quo" (this taken for that).

Verse and Classical Poetry

In the European theatre — despite the views of Coleridge — comedy traditionally has been associated with prose rather than poetry, and with the use of low-status characters such as servants, clowns or drunkards. Such uneducated figures are, of course, more likely to speak in prose, although this is not always the case and neither is the reverse — significantly, serious and tragic characters such as Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello* and Edmond in *King Lear* actually speak many lines in prose. However, most of Shakespeare's comedies are in fact written in prose — including almost 90 per cent of *The merry wives of Windsor* and over half of *Twelfth night*, *As you like it* and *Much ado about nothing*.[40] Yuan playwrights made great use of verse and even long poems in their comedies, creating a lively and elevated atmosphere as we shall see.

The Yuan comedies *Yu jingtai* (Jade mirror-stand) and *Hong li hua* (Red pear flowers) both have opening poems to be declaimed, which not only serve to foreshadow the plot but also establish a pleasantly indulgent and humorous atmosphere for the audience and prepare them to expect amusement. *Yu jingtai*, which is about the romantic love between the scholar Wen Qiao 溫嶠 and his lover Liu Qianying 劉倩英, starts with the following poem:

不分君恩重，能憐玉鏡台。
花從仙禁出，酒自御廚來。
設席勞京尹，題詩屬上才。
遂令魚共水，由此得和諧。
Grateful to the kindness of the emperor,
Talent has been shown in the jade mirror-stand.
Beautiful flowers here come from the royal garden,
Good wine bottles are served from the royal kitchen.
The high officer from the capital treats us to a banquet,
The talented scholar writes an excellent poem.
From now on the fish and the water
May live in harmony for ever and ever.[41]

Later, in Act 4, the scholar Wen Qiao tries hard to impress his bride-to-be, Liu Qianying, by demonstrating his superior talents in an "ink brush and poetry competition". Thus, as well as the poem declaimed at the beginning of the play, several other poems are incorporated into the dramatic action. Poetry competitions of this kind in classical Chinese love stories resemble the legendary medieval tourneys between European knights, designed to win the favour of a noble lady — except that, as here, the duel can also be fought out between the sexes. The high-flown romantic comedy created by this battle of the wits recalls the famous verbal duels between Shakespearean characters such as Beatrice and Benedict in *All's well that ends well*, or Millamant and Mirabelle in *The way of the world*, the famous Restoration comedy by William Congreve (1670–1729). These are all comedies about and for an educated elite, an audience well versed in aesthetic matters and the delights of verbal contests.

Another duel using poetry comes from the comedy *Hong li hua*, where in Act 2 the scholar Zhao Ruzhou 趙汝州 meets a beautiful lady and they engage in a poetic dialogue as follows:

〔正旦唸詩科云〕本分天然白雪香，誰知今日卻濃妝。
鞦韆院落溶溶月，羞窺紅脂睡海棠。
〔趙汝州云〕妙妙妙，小生也做一首。
〔唸詩科云〕換卻冰肌玉骨膚，丹心吐出異香來。
武陵溪畔人休説，只恐夭桃不敢開。
Leading Actress [chanting her poem]:

She is a beauty by nature, fragrant and looking like natural white snow,

Why then does she try heavy makeup and shine even brighter today.

Full moon in a flowery garden with a swing,

She's afraid to be seen and her sleeping pose looks like a rosy red begonia flower.

Zhao Yuzhou: Good, good, good! Let me write a poem to respond. *[chanting his poem]:*

Like a beautiful lady, with icy skin and jade bones,

Her central petals are spreading exotic fragrance.

You people of Wuling River should tell no one,

Lest the peach blossom is unwilling to open.[42]

Both poems are written very correctly in accordance with the rules of classical poem composition. They are not in themselves humorous, but they lead to laughter because of Zhao's mistaken belief that he has met a ghost and not a beautiful lady. This turns the scene from romantic duel to outright comedy, which eventually produces laughter. Such very human foolishness is in ironic contrast to the formal chanting of serious poems, and once again it is easy to visualize how actors would exploit these transitions from high drama to low comedy. Like Shakespeare and Congreve,[43] the Yuan comedy playwrights saw the combining of poetry with comedy as appropriate and effective for their purposes. Despite the previously noted reservations of some Chinese scholars, good drama can and will exploit a mixture of all relevant elements, including the performance competency of the actors, to enhance its effects — whether those are comic or tragic.

Intellectual Wit

The importance of verbal duelling in Yuan comedy indicates that intellectual wit is one of its leading comic devices, involving the use of many different language skills. Driven by conscious intentionality on the part of the comic characters and comedians who use it, verbal wit is exemplified by contemporary stand-up comedians around the world. It combines intellectual word play with humorous performance

skills and requires expertise in both areas. As many critics have noted,[44] writers and audiences of Elizabethan comedy loved intellectual wit, and such techniques were also well developed in Yuan comedy. Sometimes the passages could be quite transgressive, introducing a powerful note of satirical criticism into the comedy. Take, for example, the following dialogue from *Xixiang ji* where the maid Hongniang mocks the villain Zheng Heng 鄭恆 (the English translation has been rendered very freely in an attempt to capture the satirical word play):

〔紅唱〕君瑞是個肖字，這壁著個立人，你是個木寸馬戶尸巾。

〔淨唱〕木寸馬戶尸巾，你道我是個村驢屌！（第四本，3:6）

Hongniang sings: Scholar Junrui is best described by the word "mart". To this I add a big "S" [in front]. As for you, "pid" and "pig" is the word, with "stu" in front.

Zheng Heng sings: "Pid" or "pig" together with "stu" in front. So you are saying that I am a "stupid pig"![45]

A more literal translation of the passage, which captures the scatological references, would run as follows:

Hongniang: Junrui is the character *qiao* 肖 (like, resemble) standing next to the character *ren* 人 (human). You are the characters *mu* 木 (wood), *cun* 寸 (inch), *ma* 馬 (horse), *hu* 戶 (household), *shi* 尸 (body) and *jin* 巾 (napkin)!

Zheng Heng: What? *Mu, cun, ma, hu, shi* and *jin*! You are really saying that I am *cun* 村 (village) *lu* 驢 (donkey) *diao* 屌 (penis)!

Another example comes from Act 2 of *Xie Tianxiang* where Prefect Qian, with a plot in mind, demands that the courtesan (often also called "sing-song girl")[46] Xie Tianxiang should sing the Song dynasty poet Liu Yong's famous song *Ding fengbo* 定風波 (Taming the storm). According to government regulations at the time, it was forbidden to mention in public the names of senior government officials or members of the royal family, but the first line of the song contains Qian's own name, *Ke* 可: 自春來慘綠愁紅，芳心事事可可 (Since spring, one regrets the green and feels depressed by the red; one's virtuous intentions are divided and uncertain *keke*). Qian planned this stratagem to trap Tianxiang into the forbidden action, aiming to prevent her from seeing her beloved scholar again. However, to his surprise she recognizes the trap and, while singing, carefully changes the words *keke* to *jiji* 已已

Figure 7.2 Two Peking Opera actors in a garden, Beijing, early 1930s. From *A Photographer in Old Peking*, p. 153. Photograph by Hedda Morrison, reproduced with permission.

(personal). Her demonstration of quick-wittedness on stage always pleases the audience enormously.[47] Such verbal duelling between the sexes requires parity of status for two paired actors, as in Figure 7.2, showing two young actors from the 1930s dressed in the traditional costumes of Peking Opera, a related form.

Puns, Double Entendres and Comic Relief

Puns[48] or *double entendres* are forms of intellectual wit that exploit the auditory effect of speaking and hearing. Because of this, they are particularly suitable for use in the live theatre, as opposed to texts written only for reading rather than performance. Such punning word plays are very common and very funny, because one sound in Chinese can represent many different words with entirely different meanings, giving plenty of scope for comic effects.[49] Rhetorical devices

in Yuan comedies frequently play with words having either the same or slightly different sounds as well as meanings. An example drawn from *Jiu fengchen* illustrates these points. In Act 1, after a heated debate with her girlfriend Zhao Pan'er, the prostitute Song Yinzhang 宋引章 is obviously unhappy and proceeds to make fun of her friend, saying: 今日也大姐，明日也大姐，出了一包兒膿 "I call you *dajie* [elder sister] today, tomorrow, and every day. I hope you'll have your own big *dajie* [big carbuncle]!"[50]

On another occasion, the villain of the comedy, Zhou She, says to the kindly Zhao Pan'er: 請姨姨吃些茶飯波 "Auntie, please enjoy some good food and drink some tea!" And Zhao Pan'er immediately replies: 你請我？家裡餓皮臉也揭了鍋兒底，窖子裡秋月不曾見過這等食 "Are you inviting me [to a meal]? There are many hungry people around you, and you seldom help them! I'm afraid it happens less frequently than a lunar eclipse or a full moon!"[51] The eclipse was commonly believed to be caused by a giant heavenly dog (*tian gou* 天狗) biting the moon, so because Zhou She is talking about food (*shi* 食) and eating, Zhao Pan'er mocks his customary selfishness by punning about the lunar eclipse (*yue shi* 月食).[52]

Clever puns also appear frequently in the comedy *Zhu wu ting qin*. In Act 2, for example, the female lead Zheng Cailuan 鄭彩鸞 says: 將那個包待制看成做水晶塔 "You are looking down on Bao Zheng 包拯 who is about to be appointed [to a senior official position] and [you] regard him as a crystal pagoda."[53] The pagoda is a Daoist or Buddhist tower also known as *foutu* or *futu* 浮圖. *Futu* sounds very similar to *hutu* 糊塗, which means stupid or mentally confused. Here Zheng uses the pun to mock Prefect Liang. Other interesting puns occur in a dialogue between Zheng Cailuan and the Prefect in Act 2 of the same drama:

> 〔正旦唱〕這絃向那市面上難尋，欲要呵，則除江心裡旋打。
>
> 〔梁尹云〕老夫說絃，她說江心裡旋打，可是魚。這的呵，老夫賢愚不辨。
>
> *Cailuan:* This string (*xuan* 絃) can hardly be found in the market place. If you really want it, you have to swish your net (*xuanda* 旋打) for it in the middle of the river.
>
> *Prefect Liang:* I say string (*xuan*) and she replies that I have to swish my net (*xuanda*) in the middle of the river, that is referring to fish

> (*yu* 魚) . . . Alas [she is making a pun and mocking me for] not being able to distinguish between *xuan* [a pun for "being smart" *xian* 賢] and *yu* [a pun for "being stupid" *yu* 愚]![54]

This is usually a prompt for much laughter from the audience, since they appreciate the verbal punning as well as the joking relationship between the two characters.

Common puns found in Yuan comedy include plays on words such as *yu* 魚 (fish) and *yu* 愚 (stupid), *xuan* 絃 (string) and *xian* 賢 (smart or virtuous man), *qing* 晴 (sunny day) and *qing* 情 (love affair). In comparison, studies have shown that puns in Shakespearean comedy tend to be short words with multiple meanings, such as light, dear, lie and kind, and pairs of homonyms such as heart/hart, sun/son, cousin/cozen (the relative/to trick).

Comic relief usually refers to comic scenes inserted into a serious drama to relieve tension with laughter, but the term also describes scenes of low comedy with knock-about farce inserted into a high or witty comedy, in which easily recognisable comic stereotypes such as clowns reduce a tense atmosphere by more physical comedy. This can also be achieved by introducing a low or scatological reference or pun into a high-flown dialogue. The well-known scene with the gravediggers in *Hamlet* (Act 5, Scene 1), the doorkeeper in *Macbeth* (Act 2, Scene 3), the prominence given to the sayings of the Fool in *King Lear* or those of the bawdy old Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*[55] are all good examples of this device. Similarly, puns as comic relief occur frequently in both serious and comic Yuan operas, including *Liangshi yinyuan* 兩世姻緣 (Marriage relationship after reincarnation), *Qujiang chi* 曲江池 (Long winding river pond) and *Baihua ting* 百花亭 (Pavilion of a hundred flowers), as well as the comedies *Zhou Meixiang* 縐梅香 and *Yuanyang bei* 鴛鴦被. Like many of the Shakespearean examples mentioned, these pieces actually belong to the genre of tragicomedy rather than to pure comedy. As already noted, the comedy of Yuan drama, like that of the Elizabethan stage, was not a "pure" genre along the lines of classical Western theory. It was — and remains — a highly successful "mixed" genre, employing a wide and effective variety of comic techniques across the entire spectrum of low to high comedy.

Conclusion

The techniques used by the authors of the Yuan comedies are very similar to those of Western comedy, naturally with some variations and differences in approach. Like Shakespeare, these men of genius had no hesitation is combining poetry with prose, but they also used many whole poems as well as excerpts from poems, literary allusions and quotations, all to great comic effect. The examples discussed above show that Yuan comedy playwrights were highly skilled in techniques such as verbal irony, dramatic irony, satirical comment, association of imagery with character, slips of the tongue, intellectual wit, puns and *double entendres*, and even scatological references. These techniques are certainly not unique to China. Their application in Yuan comedy remains insufficiently studied.

It is significant that the task of establishing a happy, humorous atmosphere in a Yuan romantic comedy tends to be evenly distributed between the characters, including both the leading roles and all the supporting ranks, as well as both male and female roles. Indeed, one could justifiably argue that many female characters in the Yuan comedies are simply better and more attractive people than their male counterparts, and that to a certain extent they exhibit the spirit of feminism even in that early and war-torn age. Comic relief, or broader comedy, is not confined to lower-class characters — although, as in Elizabethan comedy, the *chou* (clown) is common and significant. In the anonymous *Yuanyang bei*, for example, the Daoist nun is played as a *chou* role and her character is crucial to the deceptions and mistakes upon which the plot turns.

When the *chou* is found in a comedy with a court setting or as someone who serves in the retinue of nobility or the emperor, the role may function as a court jester or like a Shakespearean fool. One example occurs in Scene 2 of *Han gong qiu* 漢宮秋 (Autumn in the Han palace) by Ma Zhiyuan 馬致遠 (1250?–1324), where the *chou* plays an entertaining character called Chang Shi 常侍.[56] Ironic and witty professional jesters had been a feature of imperial court life in China from very early times, and were especially noted during the Han and Tang dynasties,[57] but Yuan comedies with contemporary settings reflected the customs of the Mongol government of the time, which did not include court jesters.

Since the jester-figure can be regarded as the ancestor of the *chou*, their relationship deserves more study than it has so far received.[58]

Just as classical European comedies such as the works of Molière and Congreve were multifunctional, providing social critique as well as entertainment, so their Chinese counterparts had outstanding educational value as well as being highly entertaining. These comedies are in fact "edutainments" — both enjoyable and educational, embodying subtle illustrations of themes relating to Confucianism and Daoism.[59] Contemporary audiences undoubtedly appreciated the topicality of the plots, which explored and reflected new views of life as well as the new language skills developed by the playwrights of these love-theme comedies. Readers of the time could both enjoy the plays at the theatre and read or review the texts at home in their leisure hours. During the Yuan dynasty, when many ordinary Chinese suffered under Mongol rule and endured both material hardship and political suppression, these playwrights provided enjoyment. They also explored social problems such as the roles and duties of females in society, the rise of new commercial forces and the fate of the Han Chinese imperial family, as well as more eternal themes such as the unpredictability of personal fame and glory.[60] While we do not know for certain how far contemporary audiences extended beyond the educated class, the popularity of the *zaju* both as drama and reading material continued without a break, so that they continued to reach a wide public and still do today. In fact the advent of television and video has brought them a whole new audience, and contemporary productions of leading comedies such as *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (based on the opera of the same name, already cited) are even available on YouTube. Whether reading these scripts or, for the more fortunate, witnessing them in performance, readers and audiences alike cannot but admire the optimism and positive attitude displayed by their inspiring lead characters in the face of hardship and difficulty of all kinds. As Coleridge observed, comedy at its best can achieve the heights of poetry: it is perhaps this above all which justifies their comparison with Shakespearean comedy.