


About English-language Scholarship on Humor in Ancient Chinese Literature

Peina Zhuang  
*Sichuan University*

Lei Cheng  
*Sichuan University & Southwest Jiaotong University*

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**Peina Zhuang and Lei Cheng,**  
**"About English-language Scholarship on Humor in Ancient Chinese Literature"**  
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**Abstract:** In their article "About English-language Scholarship on Humor in Ancient Chinese Literature" Peina Zhuang and Lei Cheng present an overview of scholarship by English-language Sinologists on humor. Zhuang and Cheng argue that while English-language scholars have played a path-breaking role in making prominent an important aspect of ancient Chinese literature, their studies also display weaknesses including questionable choices of source material, decontextualized analysis, or even mistranslation. They posit that the study of humor in ancient Chinese literature ought to be performed in a contextual perspective including linguistics, literary history, society, politics, etc.

## Peina ZHUANG and Lei CHENG

### About English-language Scholarship on Humor in Ancient Chinese Literature

Although the phrase for humor (幽默) was introduced by Lin Yutang in the 1930s, the concept of humor has long existed in diverse forms in Chinese (see his *An Autobiography* 86). There are many outstanding texts Sinologists have produced throughout the years. For example, in his 1901 *A History of Chinese Literature* Herbert A. Giles devoted a section to wit and humor from classical Chinese texts. Giles wrote that "it is a novel of real life, and to omit, therefore, the ordinary frailties of mortals would be to produce an incomplete and inadequate picture" (433). Further examples include Henry W. Wells who in his 1971 *Traditional Chinese Humor: A Study in Art and Literature* covered humor in the genres of poetry, drama, and fictional narratives and Jon Kowallis's 1986 *Wit and Humor from Old Cathay* is a compilation of humorous anecdotes in ancient Chinese literary texts. What distinguishes Kowallis's book from other publications is the selection of original material from sources which go beyond texts by ancient philosophers. Further, in the 2001 *The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* Karin Myhre discussed the characteristics of humor in Chinese literature and it is the most detailed investigation of humor in Chinese literature in terms of source materials, as well as in terms of the time span covered. The 2011 *Humor in Chinese Life and Letters*, edited by Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis, is a two-volume collection of articles about various forms of humor from early times to the twentieth century (on the history of humor in Chinese literature see also Yue). Further important studies on humor in ancient Chinese literature include Alvin Kohen's "Humorous Anecdotes in Chinese Historical Texts," "David Knechtges's "Wit, Humor and Satire in Early Chinese Literature (to A.D.220)," Christoph Harbsmeier's "Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy" and "Confucius Ridens: Humor in the Analects," Weihe Xu's "The Confucian Politics of Appearance and Its Impact on Chinese Humor."

Although the terminology of humor was borrowed from the West, humor is diverse in Chinese literature as manifested by abundant expressions equivalent to the meaning of humor including 笑话 (joke), 戏谑 (jest), 滑稽 (buffoonery), and 嘲讽 (satire). The Chinese characters for humor did exist before Lin Yutang's introduction, but they meant nothing related to being funny in its first use in a poem by Qu Yuan (屈原), a Chinese poet from the pre-Qin period (221-206 BC). The term Qu Yuan wrote was 幽默 (humor) meaning "quiet." Further early uses of the idea include the term 戏谑 (jocosity) in the *诗经* (*Book of Songs*). Jin Li holds that "'Jocosity without harm to others' has been regarded as the origin and standard for humor in ancient China" (2; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by Zhuang and Cheng). Despite its presence, humor in Chinese literary history rarely attracts critical attention, and, what is more, most of the time it is not even seen as "genuine" literature in the Chinese tradition. Considering the fact that, in the past, the novel had not been classified as literature either, maybe we should not be surprised that literary texts with humor was not considered a genre *per se* in Chinese literary history. Although Giles's exploration of humor was important in that he introduced basic information about forms and authors and because he was the first English-language scholar who studied it. Myhre furthered Giles's efforts and presented a more elaborate analysis where humor appears as worthy subject in itself: "While other types of literature may be identified by formal generic characteristics or historical period, the boundaries of humorous literature are comparatively indistinct ... It was only in the Ming and Ch'ing periods, as popular literature became more acceptable and the audience for written versions of these age-old forms grew, that jokes and humorous drama and fiction were conscientiously collected, published and preserved ... The meanings associated with words for humor in ancient China mirror verbal methods of constructing jokes, the conceptual functioning of jokes and humor, and the social and cultural effects of joking, which can create both harmony and division" (132-35). This also implies that classics are classics not because of their existence in a time span, but because scholars (and readers) construct them as classics and hence the study and inclusion of humor in literature contributes to a wider construction of Chinese literary history.

Another aspect worth noticing in English-language analyses is the importance attached to the role of social, economic, and cultural factors in literature with humor in the Ming (1368-1644 AD) and Qing dynasties (1644-1912 AD). This resonates with Min Wang's observation that "The earliest literary history tends to expounds literature from the external social, economic, and cultural elements" (94). As a consequence, the analysis of humor, if separated from the historical course and external factors, will

become rather blurry and indistinct. The question of translation is a further important aspect of the study of humor because the linguistic turn in philosophy in the 1970s translation is no longer seen as a static process of rendition between two languages. Instead, as proposed by André Lefevere, the process of translation is related to the ideology and poetics, as well as the universe of discourse and the language upon which translators base their translations. Apart from their purpose of cultural communication, foreign language versions become important materials for academic research in the West. Thus for scholars who do not have access to the original version of Chinese literature for various reasons, the translated version presents the whole world of Chinese literature and is the basis for their research. This may explain partly why Confucius's analects have become a common text for research on humor in Chinese literature where selected passages from Confucius's work have been translated and interpreted over and over since the first English version came out in the seventeenth century. What is more, translation sometimes turned into a literary variation of the original. Literary variation means that a literary text that travels to a new environment will inevitably undergo "various extents of variations owing to the new positions in the new environment and its new usages" (114]). Thus the aspect of "variation" is particularly relevant owing to the linguistic, literary, and cultural differences between Chinese and Western languages including English as illustrated in Shunqing Cao's *比较文学学* (184-217) (Study of Comparative Literature). Traditional Chinese humor can be classified as "soft humor" featuring indirectness because it does not match the extent of aggressiveness and exaggerations displayed in Western humor: "Western humor, mostly, has the naturalness of depending on the plot and atmosphere coupled with philosophic words full of wit, while the Chinese humor often takes the form of a story by describing the contradiction between a person's words and deeds, or between beauty and ugliness with idiomatic expressions"(Yin38]).

Just like any reader the translator could also read humor into the text, thus causing a misreading. For instance, among the English versions of poems in the *Book of Songs*, one is translated in the following way: "On the tendrils long and short, / The water-mallows sway: / The lord sighs for the loved one, / Dreaming night and day" (Wells 53). Based on his translation, Wells believes that the poem presents "a sly comment on the unsuccessful attempts of a lord to seduce a peasant girl and that it is the part of the very essence of humor that it surprises us by showing the weaker in reality the stronger and to this extent, at least, sides with the underdog" (53). Without looking at the original Chinese text, one might be persuaded by this interpretation of the poem since it presents to readers a surprising situation of reversal, a conventional technique. That is, the superior party (the lord), who longs for the love of the beautiful girl in the end becomes the inferior party in the poem thus causing incongruity in readers' expectation. Incongruity is a central aspect in the study of humor and laughter first formulated by Aristotle and then developed by Kant and Schopenhauer the latter of whom assumed that the cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation and laugh itself is just an expression of this incongruity (see, e.g., Attardo; see also Latta). Incongruity concentrates on the effect of surprise, of turning an expectation into nothing. This is why in the above version, "the point of view is taken, however, not so much from moral grounds as from the humorist's quest for surprise"(Wells 52). We submit that everything is reasonable based on the above version of translation and a straightforward example of the theory of incongruity in the study of humor. But a glimpse into other translated versions of the poem may give readers a different idea not of humor, but of the original poem in general. For instance, Yuanchong Xu renders the male of the poem into a young man who is wooing and similar renditions of the man in the poem can be found in other versions such as by Burton Watson, Xianyi Yang, and Rongpei Wang where the lord is changed to a man in general and love as that of a young couple (Xu qtd. in Li 16). What we see here is an interesting case of variation in which the variation of the poetic image in the adopted version of the poem leads the researcher into a misreading of humor in the poem. That is, Wells, for example, finds humor in the translation of the work, but not in the original work itself. A suggestion might be that one should refer to as many translated versions as possible, since every translation is a form of "afterlife" of the original one, thus uncovering it from its own perspective in order to have a thorough understanding of the text.

Although one can refer to translated versions, some scholars may attempt the translation of the original anew. According to the perspective of dynamic/functional equivalence developed by Eugene A. Nida, one should attempt to reproduce the function of humor in translation. However, we hold that

one should first consider "foreignization" over "domestication" by which we mean to strive for the reproduction of the ideational and interpersonal function in the context of the original text, i.e., the objective ought to be to present how the humor in the original work functions. An ideal translated text could thus "produce pleasure and a sense of superiority and reduce the friction between people and smooth the conflicts" (Crook 38) in the literary text. A translation of foreignization may cause comprehension difficulties for the target readership, but the translator can compensate by notes of explanation. Thus, the way of "moving the reader towards the writer" (Munday 147) can help readers better understand the matter concerned. In addition, some improper tendencies should be overcome. One such tendency is to trace elements of humor following the Western genre classification of poetry, novel, prose and drama, as exemplified by Wells's *Traditional Chinese Humor: A Study in Art and Literature*. Wells divides the part on literature into three subparts: humor in poetry, drama, and in narratives. Well's approach has the advantage that Western readers get a clear and organized picture of the topic. But problems may arise as the Chinese tradition has its own classification going back to ancient literary theory. In ancient China, the genres were divided into different kinds according to the various understandings of the literati (scholar bureaucrats of imperial China). There is, for instance, the four-class eight-kind classification by Pi Cao in his *Discourse on Literature* or the ten-kind classification by Lu Ji in *A Poetic Exposition on Literature*. The latter systems distinguishes between 诗 (*shi*, poem), 赋 (*fu*, poetic exposition), 碑 (*bei*, Nestorian stele inscription), 诔 (*lei*, threnody [mourning poem]), 铭 (*ming*, inscription), 箴 (*zhen*, admonition), 颂 (*song*, ode), 论 (*lun*, essay), 奏 (*zhou*, memorial to the throne), and 说 (*shui*, persuasion).

The application of the genre used in such style resembles cutting one's feet to fit into a shoe and could lead to the following deficiencies. For one, many genres in ancient China are nowhere to be found in the genres of poem, drama, and narratives, etc., or at least do not fit into any one of them completely. Some may have the attributes of more than one genre, while others may not fit into any of them. This may have the effect that Western scholars leave out important historical materials of humor in their study of ancient Chinese literature. For instance, the genre *fu* in ancient Chinese literature constitutes an important genre of literary thought. Besides *shi* poetry for singing, it is another kind of genre which has the attributes of poetry. Similar to prose in its form, *shi* has the rhythm and rhyme scheme of a poem, thus somewhat between the genre of poetry and prose or poetry and narratives. The translation of *fu* further demonstrates the uniqueness of this genre if seen from Western perspective: *fu* has been translated as "enumeration" (Hawkes), as "rhyme-prose" (Burton), and as "poetic exposition" (Owen qtd. in Cheng 54). Examples of humor in *fu* include Song Yu's (宋玉) texts (319-298 BC) who wrote that sages have great ambitions and good conduct and stand detached from and being inscrutable to the vulgar, hence achieving a sense of superiority (see Liu). In Western literature we find this kind of sardonic humor in Thomas Hobbes's work who wrote that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our formerly; for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present disorder" (Hobbes qtd. in Kline 422). Here the poet achieves a sudden glory by deeming himself spiritually superior to the others, the king included. Thus, if one tries to adopt the four-genre classification for the study of ancient Chinese literature, one probably ends up leaving such materials behind. Or one may be in a dilemma trying to put a concrete piece of material under a certain genre since some jokes or funny stories come up in different kinds of texts be it drama, poetry, or prose narratives. Hence it is inappropriate to classify jokes under one genre and with regard to classical Chinese genres, a feasible solution could be research on the basis of related works in a chronological order combined with an analysis of the social and cultural background. Alternatively, such an analysis could be arranged under the type of topics such as humor on marriage, remonstrance, death, and education, etc., as found in *幽默笔记* (Notes on Humor). Yet another approach could be based on types of humor, comparable to Jerry Farber's approach who divides humor into derisive humor, emphatic humor, counter-restriction humor, etc.

Another misguided tendency is to decontextualize the literary texts which are humorous or include humor and this may lead to the possibility that in the Western translator's/scholar's perception something interesting or bizarre may equal humor as can be seen from the following lines in Well's analysis of *离骚* ("Encountering Sorrow") by Yuan Qu: "It is hard to believe that even in the early stages of

Chinese poetry a poet could shower himself with flowers without a gleam of amusement or that a man in such a period could have assumed himself to be a woman, his sovereign to be a mistress and showered her with an extreme erotic imagery without a trace of smile. It is clear that from the profuse rhetoric figure that the poet is as highly self-conscious in art as his imaged figure is self-conscious and self-pitying in life. With so many mirrors flashing at once, many variations in mood are not only plausible but probable" (71-72). Before illustrating the point of humor in the above example, a brief account of the poem is necessary here. It is a lyric poem composed by Qu, a poet and official in the Warring States period (475-221 BC), voicing the dark political reality at the time. It is also a strong protest of the poet against the king for not recognizing his talent and loyalty. Taking this background into consideration, it is not surprising to assume that "the works of the master poet, Qu Yuan, do not contain a single humorous line" (Knechtges 81). In the poem, the poet utilizes a variety of symbols as demonstrated by angelic herbs and the orchids for ornament to designate his high moral standards. Such lines, if seen isolated from the historical and cultural context of the poem, may seem at least unusual, bizarre, or at best interesting to a non-Chinese reader. The poem deviates from the orthodox ancient Chinese tradition under the Confucian code of ethics, for after all, humor is partly a matter of personal taste and judgment. Some may take an altogether different approach and argue that one can discard all background information including the cultural context and just focus on the text itself. However, such an approach does not fit in the tradition of Chinese literary thought and aesthetics. Classical Chinese aesthetics put much emphasis on combining subjective and objective aspects of a literary work: "context for humor in literature is the integration of the subject with the surrounding environment" (Yin 42). Thus, any humor seen in Chinese literary texts without due consideration and exploration of the cultural aspect is, at most, humor only in the reader's perception and it is not an inherent element in the text itself: the translator or scholar or reader thus reads humor into the text, but does not uncover humor in the text itself. According to Shaodang Yan, a work can be seen from two contextualizing viewpoints, namely the "certain culture type related to the literary text, that is, the cultural atmosphere including customs, living habits and values, etc., and the cognitive pattern of the creator in the field of culture, such as way of living, cognitive ability, and psychology, etc." (3). In this way, one can discover the real humor in Chinese classics and even gain a deeper understanding of humor and its status. As Kowallis put it, "it has been argued that none of this is humor for humor's sake since it all serves to prove a point and that the Chinese, an intensely 'practical' people, for millennia under the tutelage of moralistic monarchies and stuffy scholar-bureaucrats, have long since consigned purely humorous writings to categories the rough equivalent of 'smut' in the West, approving officially of nothing other than dry, formal essays and highly stylized verse" (1).

An example of the importance of contextualization is 本事诗 (Benshi poetry), a kind of poem to illustrate the circumstances under which a poem is composed and that emerged in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). Later, 本事词 (Benshi lyrical poetry) emerged and "Benshi" came to refer to "the plot or the details of the incident on which the composition of a literary work is based" (Wu, Heqing 42). Thus, with contextualization, the translator/scholars could also appreciate the additional lines at the end of some humorous texts, which have the purpose of teaching what Christoph Harbsmeier calls "tendency humor," but not the "disastrous tendency to distrust their readers' quickness of wit and ability to grasp the point of story" (298). It is likewise also not a coincidence that the first peak in humor in ancient Chinese literature appeared in the Wei (220-265 AD) and Jin dynasties (265-420 AD) as those works are closely related with the social disorder and the prevalence of metaphysical thought at that time. Thus, "a disorderly society is the fertile soil for the occurrence of humor" (Zhen 74). Further, a sense of narrow-mindedness is prominent in some scholarship in choosing the object of research. Some Chinese classics become researched repeatedly because although humorous elements may exist in the original text of this kind, it is proportionally small if seen as a whole. For example, Harbsmeier concludes that he "senses in Confucius a person who has and articulates what in Danish we call *lune*: a mild, subtle and very communicative form of humor which is certainly not inconsistent with mild irony, or with deep moral conviction" (161). Such insights are inspiring in presenting a different Confucius distinct from the usual Chinese perception of the familiar: a long-faced and serious sage talking in a didactic manner.

In conclusion, the above described scholarship on humor in Chinese literature remain useful attempts, but if put into perspective, they fall short of presenting a comprehensive picture of humor be-



cause texts such as the *Analects* are peripheral with regard to humor in ancient Chinese literature. When asked about humor in ancient Chinese literature, a Chinese scholar would first think of *something such as 笑府* (A Forest of Jokes) by Feng Menglong from the Qing Dynasty or some well-known fables. Hence we argue that instead of classical ancient texts such as the *Analects* it should be such texts we refer to which should occupy the central position in research despite the fact that "humor is rather latent and suppressed in Chinese literature. Humorous stories and verses and sayings abound, but laughter is kept out of poetry and belles letters, being relegated to popular literature, chap-books and so on" (Blyth qtd. in Knechtges 80). An extreme case of concentrating on specific texts comes to light in Knechtges's statement that "if humor is difficult to find in Chinese literature as a whole, it becomes a nearly impossible task in the early period, particularly up to the end of the Han Dynasty (A.D. 220)" (81).

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Author's profile: Peina Zhuang is working towards her PhD in comparative literature at Sichuan University. Zhuang's recent articles include "填补世界比较文学学科理论的空白—曹顺庆教授著 *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature* 评介" (Rev. of *The Variation Theory of Comparative Literature*. Shunqing Cao), *Foreign Literature Studies* (2014) and "On Research and Application of Variation Theory of Comparative Literature in China," *Cross-cultural Communication* (2014). E-mail: <[2013321030047@stu.scu.edu.cn](mailto:2013321030047@stu.scu.edu.cn)>

Author's profile: Lei Cheng is working towards her PhD in comparative literature at Sichuan University and teaches French literature at Southwest Jiaotong University. Cheng's recent articles include "'潇湘馆'里的'潇湘妃子'—《红楼梦》两个法译本中建筑专名的语义层级分析及其翻译策略选择" ("On the Analysis of Architecture Words in the Semantic Hierarchy and Translation Strategy of the Two French Versions of *Hong lou meng*," *Translations* (2011). E-mail: <[therese1015@home.swjtu.edu.cn](mailto:therese1015@home.swjtu.edu.cn)>