

Humour in Chinese Life and Culture

Resistance and Control in Modern Times

Edited by

Jessica Milner Davis and Jocelyn Chey

A Companion Volume to

Humour in Chinese Life and Letters: Classical and Traditional Approaches



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Humour and its cultural context

Introduction and overview

Jessica Milner Davis

Recognizing humour is easy enough (with the help of appropriate cultural knowledge) but, as many scholars have found, pinning down a general definition is extremely difficult. Any definition “at once isolates an essence and provides an idealised form” of the thing to be defined¹—and there is no essence of humour susceptible of easy definition. If there were, imposing any idealized form would still be impossible. In every culture, including that of contemporary China, the range of structures and media used to create humour and the modalities and messages conveyed are unlimited.

Humour can, of course, be classified in many ways—for instance, by medium of communication, by style (such as farcical versus tragi-comical) or by formal structure (for instance, mime versus stand-up comedy). Categories in verbal humour range from jokes, quips, puns and comic anecdotes to full-scale novels. Visual humour embraces caricature, cartoons (single frames, strips, captioned and uncaptioned and so on) as well as pictorial pastiche, a hugely varied category united only by its technique of appropriating and recontextualizing other material. There are even sensory jokes such as pranks, tickling and olfactory jokes.² Different humorous styles³ or “flavours” can run the gamut from warm and sunny to black and bitter, from carefree nonsense to biting satire—too wide a range to help with general definition. Many instances of humour combine several different formal and stylistic features. Categorization by topic or content is also far too diverse, although often useful, as it unites different formats and styles according to particular themes. Many themes in humour are universal—for instance, sex, trickster tales, political satire, joking about stupidity, mothers-in-law and so on.

“Humour” in the modern sense of the word embraces all these complex phenomena and more. The word now extends beyond humorous creations to people’s cognitive and emotive responses to them,⁴ and even to behavioural

traits in daily use of humour. Paradoxically, in broadening its meaning, humour has become bound up with the personal, whether in taste, use, transmission or creation. Dictionaries, whose publishing histories necessarily reflect earlier, narrower meanings, struggle to cope with such very recent usages.⁵ Given these difficulties, this chapter avoids any single definition and leaves individual approaches and usage to be clarified in later chapters. However, from these various accounts of humour in contemporary China, one thing clearly emerges: as for other cultures, the modern use of the term “humour” in China is connected with the concept of the individual.

Etymology and modernity

The English etymology of humour provides some useful background to this connection. The word shares its Latin root (*umor*, a liquid) with related Romance language words such as modern French *humeur* (mood, temperament). In Mediaeval Latin, it indicated the bodily fluids or “humours” that determined a person’s characteristic disposition (as in sanguine, or choleric).⁶ Being well-balanced in one’s humours suggested enjoying moderate laughter rather than moping in melancholy.⁷ However, by the mid-nineteenth century the English “humour” specifically indicated the ability to see the funny side of things, thus developing into the notion of having a “sense of humour”. A self-deprecating form of “good humour” marked out a well-mannered English person; it was different from being too cleverly witty (the French *esprit*).⁸ How humour came to be seen as highly desirable in Anglo-Saxon cultures has been documented by Daniel Wickberg, who concludes that it was “the horror of being named as lacking a sense of humour that . . . defined the value of its opposite”.⁹

Possessing a sense of humour implies the ability to laugh at oneself, and thus the connotation of “good-tempered” still attaches to humour in modern usage. This trait was particularly prized by Gordon Allport in his 1930s investigation of the modern individual, and Wickberg notes that the new personality psychology “was in opposition to the mechanistic empirical study of particular attributes common in the academic psychology of the 1920s and 1930s”.¹⁰ For Allport, humour was a hallmark of the modern sense of individual identity, enabling a degree of self-insight and control—perhaps even liberation—from life’s mechanical programming.

The theme of humour as modernizing in both concept and practice recurs throughout this book. As in many other languages, the Chinese term “humour”

(*youno* 幽默) is a loan-word, a neologism dating from interaction with the English language—thus indicative of a novel concept. While several authors note that this creates some linguistic confusion, newness has undoubtedly assisted the word to function as a convenient catch-all term in the age of the internet and internationally spoken English. In the companion volume to this book, Jocelyn Chey, Qian Suoqiao and Joseph Sample outlined the process by which “humour” became *youno* in today’s Chinese-speaking societies.¹¹ Significantly, *youno* implies more gentleness than the older indigenous term *huaji* 滑稽 (“laughable” or “funny”).¹² The same distinction occurs in Japanese terminology, where *yūmoa* ユーモア now denotes kindly, gentle laughter in the Dickensian sense, while *kokkei* 滑稽 (Chinese *huaji*) means comic(al) and another old laughter-related term, *warai* 笑い (Chinese “laugh”), connotes even broader funniness.¹³ A newcomer in both cultures, the concept of “humour” is necessarily bound up with the idea of modernity and adaptation to new ways and values.

Accordingly, in Chapter 2, Diran Sohigian explores the way in which 1930s economic development in Shanghai imposed the constraints of both clock and mechanization over daily life—pressures against which the new humour, reflected in literary writing of the time, could fight back. Marjorie Chan and Jocelyn Chey focus on Cantonese pop culture’s appropriation of humour in 1960s Hong Kong in Chapter 5, also responding to Westernizing influences. Later chapters explore humour’s constructive functioning today in the serious world of work: for Guo-Hai Chen in Chapter 9, its positive role in teaching; and for Heather Crawford in Chapter 8, humorous advertising that appeals to youth audiences across cultural divides. Even the modern Chinese state finds humour useful—for instance, in providing the social benefits of pleasurable relaxation. State-sanctioned market forces in the 1990s evolved a distinctive style of comic film for the Chinese (lunar) New Year holidays. Remarkably successful in both commercial and artistic terms, this development is recounted in Chapter 6 by Xu Ying and her father, Xu Zhongquan, whose acting career was bound up with these modernizing comedy roles.

Modernity and tradition

For all its present sense of modernity, humour is scarcely a new phenomenon in China. Behind the use of humour in today’s classrooms lies a hallowed tradition of joking in Daoist ethical discourse, discussed by Shirley Chan and Lily Lee in Chapters 5 and 6 of the companion volume to this book. Even the modern

Western notion of valuing a good sense of humour is prefigured by Confucian teachings about the appropriate use of humour. Weihe Xu found an “inchoate ethics of mirth” in early Chinese writings, identifying the “proper” kind of humour consonant with Confucian virtue. It should be “never crude or rude” (*bu wei nue xi* 不為虐兮).¹⁴ The Confucian rites (*li* 禮) acted as a civilizing agency in the Warring States period (c. 475–221 BCE). Prescribing correct behaviour from cradle to grave, they distinguished cultivated persons from the untutored. Such traditional attitudes to public decorum are ingrained in Chinese culture and form a necessary background to any study of humour in Chinese life. Equally significant is the continuing importance of good humour in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) for restoring balance to emotional and seasonal variations in mood and health, another topic covered in the companion volume to this book (in Chapters 2 and 3).

The figure of the witty jester speaking truth to authority was likewise born long before the age of the internet, already being celebrated in the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE). Biographies of four *huaji*-ists (“witty men”) appear in one of the earliest Chinese historical works, *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Historian), written between 109 and 91 BCE.¹⁵ These four were famous for cloaking unpalatable advice to autocratic rulers in clever word-play and jokes, undoubtedly risking loss of favour, if not of life. They long predate any jesters named in Western courts.¹⁶

Many Chinese terms for humour have only approximate English equivalents, such as the distinction between *fengci* 讽刺 (satire) and *weifeng* 微讽 (subtle satire), or popular forms like *xiangsheng* 相声 (a “cross-talk” dramatic form) and *e'gao* 恶搞 (spoofing or parody), the subject of Chapter 7 by Christopher Rea. Some traditional literary forms, like *dayou shi* 打油诗 (a game where friends pick up a thought or expression from each other and twist the meaning unexpectedly), are simply unique. Reviewing classical terms like *xue* 謔 (joking), *ji*譏 (ridicule), *chao* 嘲 (derision), *paidiao* 俳諧 (joking) or even the closely related *xie* 谐, *guji* and *huaji* 滑稽 (funny or laughable), Jocelyn Chey notes in Chapter 1 of the companion volume to this book that her translations are inexact matches.¹⁷ As for many other languages, developing a Chinese humour-related word-map is an important future task, building on work already commenced.¹⁸ Despite the terminological difficulties, the present studies show that a pragmatic but sensitive approach will serve a useful purpose.

Some long-established forms of humour in China seem quite familiar to the outsider, such as those discussed in the companion volume: the jester-figure,

verbal punning, joke-books and tall stories,¹⁹ comic operas and humorous novels. Here, equally familiar but more recent creations are addressed, such as comic films, pop-songs and cartooning (*manhua* 漫画). But familiarity can be superficial—understanding *manhua*, for example, often depends on Chinese artistic, historical or political references, as John Lent and Xu Ying illustrate in Chapter 4. In Chapter 7, Christopher Rea shows that the same is true for many internet compilations, evidenced by the April 2009 cartoon blog by Bimuyu 比目鱼 (“Flounder”) (see Figure 7.2 in Chapter 7). Even in these contemporary forms, linguistic and cultural knowledge unlocks the humour. Here, as in the companion volume, the authors have taken pains to spell out such “knowledge resources”²⁰ behind the humour they discuss.

Humour and self

Humour can, of course, be used gently or aggressively, and for good or ill. In Western terminology, *fun*, *humour* and *nonsense* are perceived as being more benevolent—“laughing with”—than *satire*, *cynicism*, *sarcasm* and *irony*, which carry connotations of bad-humoured “laughing at” (*wit* is more neutral).²¹ Even without full documentation of such polarities in Chinese terminology, both traditional and modern Chinese approaches to humour clearly distinguish between approved “good humour” and disapproved “bad humour”. In China, as elsewhere, attitudes and tastes in humour differ, depending on circumstance and personal preferences.

Some differences are historically documented. Diran Sohigian’s chapter describes the sharply clashing views of modern *youmo*’s two major advocates in the 1930s—writer Lin Yutang 林语堂 (林語堂 1895–1976) and novelist Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书 (錢鍾書 1910–98). Although both used the term *youmo*, the first saw a path to public and private improvement through gentle Allportian humour, while the second favoured social correction through harder-edged ridicule. Significantly, the opposing camps relied on very different humour theorists: Lin enshrined English belles-lettrist George Meredith (1828–1909) while Qian channelled French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941), whose emphasis on the power of the machine in modern life resonated with the coastal urban industrialization of China. Although both men thought that humour, rightly understood, would assist China’s evolution, political realities engulfed their efforts. Meredithian Lin settled in the United States, while Qian and his

family, who remained in China, suffered during the Cultural Revolution, despite the author's celebrated status.²²

As well as differing in their preferences for humorists and styles of humour, people also vary in their use of humour in daily life. Psychologists regard appreciation of humour as a personality trait, and also as an innate way of coping. Several behavioural "humour styles" are distinguished, some linked to better mental and physical health outcomes than others—although research conclusions remain tentative.²³ One significant variable, known as gelotophobia, is a person's aversion to or fear of being laughed at; another, katagelasticism, is their delight in laughing at others—concepts discussed in the context of contemporary China in Chapter 10 by a collaborative team from Taiwan and Switzerland.

Establishing the validity of such psychological traits in non-Western cultures is a relatively recent activity. The methodological challenges of this approach were explored in pioneering work by Ruch and Forabosco, comparing responses to humour by Italian and German subjects, and by Ofra and Baruch Nevo with Janie Leong Siew Yin in Singapore, Israel and America.²⁴ Chapter 10 discusses the need for such investigations to take account of broad cultural variables such as those identified by Geert Hofstede—power distance, individualism versus collectivism and short-term versus long-term orientation²⁵—concluding that instruments and methods used to compare humour across cultures should incorporate not only scientific principles of standardization and falsifiability but also informed, intuitive knowledge of each culture. Another useful tool is Shalom Schwartz's set of cultural values,²⁶ used to underpin the findings of Heather Crawford's chapter on humorous advertising. Here, tests on three samples of the same internet-savvy generation, in Shanghai, Sydney and Los Angeles revealed many common attitudes, including appreciation of humorous aspects of *shanzhai* 山寨 (imitation, or "knock-off", products).²⁷ The same sensitivities characterize Guo-Hai Chen's study discussed in Chapter 9 of this volume, investigating Chinese student and teacher opinions about the positive role of humour in teaching. Such findings and insights connect the cultural context of humour studies with personality psychology.

While experiencing humour is unsettling for some individuals—for instance, po-faced schoolteachers, pompous bosses and diffident government officials—for many others it is the breath of freedom. It allows one to play with the normally clear distinction between serious and non-serious, providing momentary relief from being serious.²⁸ Christie Davies describes humour as

playing with deviance and rule-breaking, including in logic.²⁹ The worldwide modern emphasis on individual self-expression suggests that China, like other nations, can expect increasing demand for humour. Evidence presented in this book demonstrates its economic importance in pop songs, films, cartoons and novels, its irrepressible vitality in modern *e'gao* culture, and its increasing appeal in classrooms, marketing and social networking. Just as businesses and professions adapt to emerging tastes, so the modern state must accommodate humour, and this is certainly occurring in today's China, with some interesting consequences, which are discussed below.

Laughter and civilization

If civilization is designed to promote social harmony and restrict aggression, then laughter and humour constitute a two-edged sword. Humour can bind together, relieve individual and group tensions, allow truth to be spoken in difficult circumstances and even assist survival,³⁰ but it can also exclude, ridicule, hurt by shaming and speak dangerously unwanted truths. We can laugh *with*, but also laugh *at*, someone. Given such disruptive potential, it is not surprising that societies should develop conventions and rules about humour designed to channel its expression and impact, including legal and political controls, and China is no exception. These externally imposed controls can be enforced or withdrawn by fiat. But they are not as deep-seated as—and should not be mistaken for—internalized cultural constraints that also limit playful rule-breaking. Variations in control conventions about humour between one culture and another (for instance, between Japan, Korea and China) suggest that these do not precisely align with the broad cultural values identified by Hofstede or Schwartz. Since this is so, it is helpful to conceptualize and categorize humour conventions, not just at institutional and individual levels, but also at the cultural level.

Cultural evolution theorist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) saw laughter and joking as one example of the trajectory along which all civilizations progress in developing rules about politeness and proper social behaviour. This is the process whereby people “seek to suppress in themselves every characteristic they feel to be ‘animal’”.³¹ Animals rend their food, humans eat neatly with implements; animals roar, humans modulate speech; animals defecate openly, people designate privies; and so on. Although principally concerned with European development, Elias called for more investigation of non-Western cultures,³² noting that Chinese culture had long ago developed complex rituals for things like food

preparation, service and consumption. Knives—connected with aggression and wounding—were banished to the kitchen, replaced with delicate chopsticks. He also instanced control of laughter:³³

A process of civilization cut back laughter [in Europe] to a moderate level as it had done long before in the East, with Chinese, Japanese and other societies. Wherever such a process goes far enough, the ‘overboard’ forms of laughter [*überschwenglicheren Formen des Lachens*] disappear. Only children and the poorer classes laugh boisterously with their whole bodies.

Indeed, as recent studies in European cultural history confirm, from Renaissance times to the nineteenth century, books of *courtoisie* (manners) stipulated that laughter should be regulated in polite society.³⁴ This is, after all, behaviour in which we open our mouths, bare our teeth and make loud noises—and maybe even fall about clutching our stomachs.³⁵ Since the stimuli of such behaviour also need regulation, Western manners have tended to approve witty, self-deprecating (good) humour and disapprove crude, aggressive put-downs (bad) humour, culminating perhaps in the contemporary phenomenon of “political correctness”, deplored racial jibes, jokes about disability and so on.³⁶

Naturally, such distinctions also characterize cultures such as China and Japan where the feelings of shame and delicacy that drive the civilizing process have long dictated approved forms of self-expression. One behavioural restriction long found in East Asian cultures prevented showing the teeth when smiling or laughing. For the 2008 Beijing Olympics, for instance, volunteers were trained how to smile openly when welcoming foreign visitors (see Plate 1.1).³⁷ The Japanese custom that women should cover their mouths with the palm of one hand to avoid being seen to laugh has proved that such codes may evolve over time, as Shōkichi Oda notes. Modern generations “laugh more frequently and more happily . . . It is perhaps thirty years too late for anyone to observe this distinctive hand gesture on the part of Japanese women.”³⁸ However, a compensatory cultural convention continues to mark out special times and/or places in Japan where people can laugh openly (*warai no ba* 笑いの場, “laughter places, or containers”).³⁹ These are both times (such as cherry blossom-viewing time, when public laughing and drinking are approved) and locations (real or virtual—for instance, TV shows and comedy theatres). Laughter-place conventions also concern who is present in a conversation, who signals the introduction of humour and what form it may take. For instance, mockery of one’s superiors is debarred even when safely “contained”.⁴⁰

In comparison, Korean culture has a long-standing tradition of open, biting mockery of the ruling classes in both business and politics, despite intermittent attempts by offended parties to impose sanctions.⁴¹ Since political satire has flourished even under repressive governments in Korea while remaining absent from modern democratic Japan, this aspect of humour-control is not a reflection of political systems. Not surprisingly, given these restrictions, Japanese culture is more permissive of innocent punning and word-play (*share* 酒落 in Japanese)—although, unlike Chinese auditors, those in Japan expect advance signalling.⁴² Such rules about humour help to avoid embarrassment and offence. Although—as in the case of Japanese women’s laughter—they can evolve slowly over time, they point to the continuing existence of different group norms and preferences in different cultures, and perhaps also subcultures.

Modern taste-cultures of humour

Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) employed a finer-grained lens than Elias to note that subcultures within any given culture include those of taste and aesthetic preference (highbrow versus lowbrow). Connected to social hierarchies and individual aspirations, their nature is part of any society’s cultural knowledge.⁴³ A pioneering 1997–98 study by Giselinde Kuipers in the Netherlands—a society that prides itself on being “classless”—identified two distinctive tastes in “good” humour, differing about whether it should be “sociable or confrontational, hard or civilized, artistic or relaxed”.⁴⁴ Group-preferences varied about appreciating and telling jokes (Dutch *mops*), watching certain types of TV comedy shows and preferences for stand-up comedians (reflecting both content and style of humour).

In today’s China, such humour taste-cultures are likely to reflect regional politico-economic development and cultural knowledge, including language (dialect and ethnic background), educational level, personal aspirations and preferences. One example of such a subculture was the audience for the witty but lowbrow pop singers in 1960s Hong Kong, whose songs are discussed in Chapter 5 by Marjorie Chan and Jocelyn Chey. Such a taste-culture may overlap the broader demographic of the “Happy New Year” film-market, discussed in Chapter 6, and perhaps also the continuing audience for the derivative nationalistic comic stereotypes analyzed by Barak Kushner in Chapter 3. Cyber-media spoofing may point to another distinctive taste-culture, but further research is needed to identify the full contemporary range.

Framing in humour

One important factor in humour taste-culture is clarity of signalling, which is clearly more important in some cultural contexts than others, both Eastern and Western. Irony, for instance, is well tolerated in British and Australian cultures but not in the United States, where its typical straight-faced delivery seems puzzling, and perhaps inconsiderate. A clear play-frame helps humour to cross boundaries, whether within a culture or between different cultures. Laughter-containers, titles, introductory statements, even physical frames of cartoons or spoof videos, are all valuable indicators. Although some formulaic structures such as jokes are easily recognizable, visual performative humour tends to be more clearly framed than verbal humour, and often travels better.

Humorous intent is also clarified by humour's internal use of stylization or endistancing from reality. Exaggerated caricatures, cartoon-like figures, stock characters and easily recognizable comedy plots indicate playfulness by simplifying complex reality. The same effect is achieved in verbal humour by patterning and rhythm—for instance in the nonsense-rhymes popular in China as well as the West.⁴⁵ Rapid patter songs, like those of Gilbert and Sullivan⁴⁶ and Lenny Bruce,⁴⁷ also play with tempi, matching verbal and musical patterns to intensify the artificiality. As Diran Sohigian describes below, this nexus between manipulating time and creating humour was well understood by Henri Bergson, who saw laughter as enabling the personal detachment needed to escape the mechanical rule of the clock.

Stylizing images in time as well as space is achieved on screen by animation, and on stage by mime, an old tradition in China. Mime can be appreciated without knowledge of Chinese language, and Peking Opera companies touring overseas favour one famous episode, a scene from *Sanchakou* 三岔口 (The cross-roads).^{*48} This involves a comic sword-fight in complete darkness where the humour derives partly from the actors' skilful control of space and timing, and partly from the incongruity of actors groping blindly in imaginary darkness and just missing each other, while the audience enjoys a clear view of the dangerous sword-play.

Messages in humour

Even with the assistance of a clear frame and stylized patterning, humour may fail—sometimes quite seriously. Two high-risk categories are parody and satire.

The first assumes an audience's familiarity with the model being parodied (this is not always the case), while in satire, the seriousness of the message may overwhelm the humour. Unsurprisingly, these two genres—along with personal invective—are the types of humour most often named in legislative controls, as discussed below. Clues to non-seriousness are also easily overlooked in historical texts, especially by overly respectful scholars. In Chinese scholarship, for instance, both Daoist texts and the famous eighteenth-century novel *Honglou meng* 紅樓夢 (*Dream of the red chamber*) have suffered this fate,⁴⁹ in the West, so have the humorous paintings of Dutch master Jan Steen (1626–79).⁵⁰

Tastes change over time, of course. Consider a 1930s headline attributed to the *Chicago Times*: “Nut Screws Washer and Bolts”.⁵¹ The story concerned a lunatic asylum escapee encountering a laundress and raping her. The laconic sentence signals humour with a clearly recognizable pattern: four repetitive puns on tool-names (nut = lunatic, screws = having sex, washer = washerwoman and bolts = escapes). This unsympathetic joke has been attributed to an inexperienced journalist trying to be concise,⁵² but then (as now) headlines were controlled by sub-editors, meaning that the callousness of a clever headline linked to a sad story must have been approved by someone. Regarded as “mirth-provoking” (see source-note above) in the 1960s, the headline would never be used in today’s American press. Changed cultural attitudes have rendered taboo public references like this to a madman and his victim—“unmentionables” that trigger both organizational and self-censorship.⁵³

Self-censorship occurs when humorists choose to respect group tastes and audience circumstances. Organizational censorship can also respond in this way, but more likely occurs for authoritarian or political reasons, because humour’s subversive mockery is considered undesirable. Perversely, such censorship renders humour a forbidden delight (as with schoolchildren’s jokes about their teachers), suggesting that many regimes and organizations do themselves no favours by repressing humour. Christopher Rea’s chapter details a case in point—*Caonima zhi ge* 草泥马之歌 (*Grass-mud horse song*).⁵⁴ This extended obscenity pun in response to the promulgation of internet controls in 2009 resisted all efforts at suppression. Playing on President Hu Jintao’s promotion of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会, where *hexie* is a pun for “river crabs”), the term “harmonization” (*hexiehua* 和谐化) became a cynical euphemism for internet censorship. Controls now include the installation of official “net nannies” to remove posts and dismantle offending websites,⁵⁵ requirements to register for domain access and more covert measures. These are not cultural matters of taste

and politeness, but rather reflect the interaction between humour and politics—a topic deserving of some further discussion.

Humour and politics

Given the importance of individual self-concept for modernity and the role of humour in self-expression, humour is becoming increasingly salient to the modern state. It is useful but also threatening. Joking *against* rule-makers is often more attractive to humorists than joking *for* them—it offers greater personal satisfaction and peer-entertainment. Even when a state attempts to deploy humour for its own purposes, such as communication and propaganda, there is a risk from its ambivalent nature and, as noted above, attempts to control it are liable to backfire.

State-commissioned humour is scarcely novel in China, as illustrated by John Lent and Xu Ying's account in this volume of early twentieth century cartoonists working during wartime and Maoist years when art "served the masses". These senior Chinese cartoonists reveal tension between personal artistic integrity and Party-approved themes and topics, and explain the bitterness of much of their humour, appropriate enough to appalling contemporary events. Another perspective is added by Barak Kushner's Chapter 3, exploring mutual insult and comic stereotyping between China and Japan. Matching his earlier study of Japanese wartime anti-Chinese humour⁵⁶ with new work on images and concepts used on the Chinese side, he reveals how durable these are, still shaping children's entertainment half a century later. Nonetheless, as Kushner remarks, contemporary attitudes to such propaganda are not simple: familiar stereotypes can exist in common with a nuanced awareness of self versus officialdom, resulting in a sense of one humanity mutually confronting fear and distrust. Paradoxically, negative humour may sometimes reach across cultural divides as well as reinforce them.⁵⁷

Humour that is truly political critiques the hypocrisy of an entire political system rather than mocking individual politicians' human failings.⁵⁸ It reacts to efforts to ban open political discourse about corruption and failures of government—strongly contested grounds in China. From the vivacity of political jokes and internet postings that constantly surface, it seems that China has more political than cultural controls on this kind of humour—unlike Japan. As X. L. Ding's concluding chapter suggests, the spread of such jokes in spite of censorship may function as an index of a culture's political evolution.

Since political joking is also an accurate indicator of what is salient to ordinary people, it undoubtedly holds additional interest for the authorities. In 2010, the economic suffering of ordinary Chinese people lacking privileged social access was reflected in a proliferation of jokes, especially in social media. By year's end, the phenomenon drew comment from international business commentators. The *Financial Times* translated one joke: "Can't afford to be born because a caesarean costs fifty thousand yuan; can't afford to study because schools cost at least thirty thousand yuan; can't afford to live anywhere because each square metre is at least twenty thousand yuan; can't afford to get sick because pharmaceutical profits are at least ten-fold; can't afford to die because cremation costs at least thirty thousand yuan."⁵⁹ Perhaps this ironic critique and others like it were noted by the leadership: Premier Wen Jiabao's opening address to the 2011 National People's Congress—although short on practical remedies—referred to the problem at unexpected length.⁶⁰

Whether or not they profit from information conveyed in such anonymous jokes, Party officials and cadres do enjoy and share them. In an Eastern European context, Christie Davies notes that "even the supporters of a harsh regime enjoy playing with jokes and taking time off from *compulsory conformity*".⁶¹ The views of some China commentators notwithstanding,⁶² these jokes are unlikely to constitute a strategy of active or effective opposition: the history of World War II and the Cold War demonstrates that powers are overturned by economic and military forces, rather than by internal political joking. The effect is more likely "to defuse discontent and to divert the joke-tellers away from serious political action against their rulers . . . the existence of these pleasing safety valves may even help to prevent an explosion".⁶³ Certainly this was the belief of the repressive Prussian regime in the mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁴ Mass-marketing of *Berliner Witz* (clever Berlin humour) in cheap illustrated joke-books and in music-halls was deliberately undertaken as a *Luftloch* (air-hole) to allow "venting" by both the political elite and the economically depressed workers. As a bonus, the system facilitated monitoring who was saying what—and this is possibly an advantage to governments in many countries today.

The official attitude of the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party to humour today is similarly ambivalent. They do tolerate considerable ironic comment on Maoist themes and images. A 2011 *Foreign Policy* report noted the ubiquitous mocking use in online responses to reports of disasters and corruption of the "newly repurposed old Maoist catchphrase, perhaps angry or resigned, but above all, ironically knowing: 'Our thanks to the nation'".⁶⁵ Several

respected schools of contemporary Chinese art—best known internationally through the work of Ai Weiwei 艾未未 (b. 1957)—are characterized by humour and satire. Despite its 1990s critique of blocked change post-1989, the Cynical Realism school is mostly well tolerated. Exemplified by the work of artist and sculptor Yue Minjun 岳敏君 (b. 1962), one of whose laughing figure sculptures—exhibited in Vancouver in 2009—decorates this book’s cover, the style has been summed up as “meaninglessness with a mocking attitude”.⁶⁶ “Political Pop” (so called both in China and overseas) deliberately appropriates old themes and images, and art critic Luo Fei 罗菲 (b. 1982) describes it as “a game in which you use Communist symbols and brands”.⁶⁷ Few subjects in China are now exempt from artistic irony—even Mao himself, his “features, his fashion choices, and his *Little Red Book* (*Mao Zhuxi yulu* 毛主席语录 [Quotations from Chairman Mao])”.⁶⁸

One ironically recontextualized semi-mythical hero is Lei Feng 雷锋 (d. 1962 in an accident), the honest soldier whom Mao held up as a model “hero of the people”. Lei’s life of selfless service is commemorated each year on “Learn from Lei Feng Day” (5 March). Internationally known photographic artist Dai Xiang 戴翔 (b. 1978) composed *Xin Lei Feng gushi* 新雷锋故事 (*The new story of Lei Feng*, 2007), twelve photographs showing the obedient soldier posed in incongruous modern-day situations.⁶⁹ First displayed in a 2008 Beijing Academic Exhibition of Contemporary Chinese Photography, the series gained popularity during Dai’s Beijing retrospective in 2010. Adapting familiar images promoting the hero in times past, including during the Cultural Revolution (see Plate 1.2), Dai’s reinterpretations of him as an icon in today’s consumer society are marked by an enigmatic humour (see Plate 1.3). They have inspired discussion about the meaning of “serving the people” in this age of self-promotion, but also many comic offshoots—including a spoof microblog by Lei Feng’s persona as a worker in a modern office responding to current scandals.⁷⁰

The explosion of such spoofs drew comment in 2012 from Hu Xijin 胡锡进, editor-in-chief of the *Global Times* (a newspaper often noted for its ultra-nationalist views), in his personal blog. He acknowledged them uncomfortably as an inevitable reaction to inflated propaganda. Significantly, he thought such growing consumer sophistication should be taken into account:

The louder the volume of the government campaign to study Lei Feng, the more such spoofs will be enthusiastically circulated online. This is the sigh-inducing balance of contemporary China’s public debate. When I see such Photoshop images, my heart just feels uncomfortable. But I know that the fact that such photographs appear is a sign of China’s progress.⁷¹

Old ways must adapt, and it seems humour as personal critique must be accommodated by the modern Chinese state.

Playfully adapted, images from the Maoist era can now convey modern messages such as public health information. In 2007, *Beijing chenbao* (北京晨报 *Beijing Morning News*) sparked public interest with a report that a poster captioned *Tongzhimen chong a!* 同志们冲啊 (Comrades, flush!) was being used to encourage toilet hygiene (see Plate 1.4).⁷² Here, the uplifting exhortation and its accompanying Cultural Revolution image of the heroic trio of worker, peasant and soldier are incongruously relocated, with new practical instructions, to the tiled wall of a public toilet. In true Bakhtinian fashion, values are inverted from inspirational heroic struggle to the practical concerns of the lower bodily strata. The humour is enhanced by a succinct verbal pun: *chong a* 冲啊 has the dual meaning of “forward/*en avant*” (the old poster’s original meaning, urging troops to advance valiantly) and “flush” (as in flushing toilets or sluicing a channel). Since both exhortations actually align with official policies, there is a further layer of irony to the joking appropriation.

At the same time, as already noted for web-postings like the “Grass-mud horse”, humour frequently becomes the subject of official censorship—and sometimes protective self-censorship. This is not always wholly effective, since organized attempts to stamp humour out enhance its attraction and often gain unwanted publicity. A case in point is a short video posted during the weekend before the 2011 Chinese New Year on the website of Hutoon, a Beijing-based studio established in 2005 by animation artist Pisan 皮三 (Wang Bo 王波, b. 1971).⁷³ *Tu nian heka 2011* 兔年贺卡 2011 (*Greeting card for the Year of the Rabbit 2011*)* was well signalled as cartoon humour intended for the artist’s fans at a traditionally festive time of year. Its theme and soundtrack referenced a well-known children’s rhyme about rabbits, invoking idyllic images of humanized rabbit family-life:

*Xiao bai tu, bai you bai,
liang zhi erduo shuqilai,
ai chi lobo he qingcai,
bengbeng tiaotiao zhen ke’ai.*
Little white rabbit, white as white,
[Your] two ears sticking up,
[You] love eating radishes and greens,
Bounding up and down, [you are] really cute.

小白兔，白又白，
两只耳朵竖起来，
爱吃萝卜和青菜，
蹦蹦跳跳真可爱。

However, within this fairytale setting the video depicts the rabbits' exploitation by aggressive tiger overlords (2010 was the Year of the Tiger), with re-enactment of several actual scandals. The charming lyric gradually morphs into much uglier language (see below).⁷⁴ Unsurprisingly, fans noted that by Monday the video had been "harmonized", with its disappearance drawing international media attention.⁷⁵

Pisan's distinctive cartooning style employs rounded, simplified child-figures, recalling the popular American "children's" TV series *South Park*, enjoyed by adults for its witty social satire.⁷⁶ Both feature violent and transgressive episodes on the part of children or animals rather than adults. In *Greeting card*, these sequences are brief, dreamlike and highly stylized, framed as the narration of a small boy's storybook; however, their graphic quality borders on adult manga (see angry rabbit-face in Plate 1.5). The tigers, moreover, are not traditional baddies but a hypocritical master-race badged with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policy, such as the banner in their home cave reading, "Serve the rabbits. Build a harmonious forest". (This combines the Maoist slogan, "Serve the people", with the contemporary "harmonious society" admonition.) When the gentle rabbits revolt, growing fangs and exterminating their bullies, humour seems to have evaporated, although the storybook text ends with the conventional line about living happily ever after:

<i>Xiao bai tu, bai you bai,</i>	小白兔，白又白，
<i>Liang ke menya shuqilai,</i>	两颗门牙竖起来，
<i>Bu yao bi wo hongle yan,</i>	不要逼我红了眼，
<i>Jile wo yao ren zhen lihai.</i>	急了我咬人真利害。
Little white rabbit, white as white,	
[My] two front teeth sticking up,	
Do not force me to get angry,	
When I'm pushed I bite savagely.	

As the cartoon-world dissolves back into the real world, the final screen scrolls the words, "Tunian daole: tuzi jile hai yao ren na! 兔年到了：兔子急了还咬人呐！" (The Year of the Rabbit has arrived: When rabbits are pushed, even they will bite!). Such bleak satire borders on the political.

According to its creator, *Greeting card* was not intended as political satire, but rather as relief for fans' pent-up feelings. Pisan described his video as a kind of therapeutic "fairytale" that "could actually take place in many places, as long as there are people feeling unhappy ... I felt this past year was really depressing, so

I wanted to create this thing for fun.”⁷⁷ It may indeed have served this purpose, but was clearly perceived by some as going way beyond humorous venting. Regardless of authorial intention, it is difficult to ignore the satirical comment in the ambiguous ending, linking fable and present times to a predicted future. Perhaps it was this aspect rather than rehashing of scandals that proved provocative. A recent Harvard working paper on cases of media censorship in China suggests that the chief trigger for suppression is not necessarily criticism, but any implied invitation to concerted action.⁷⁸ If this was suspected in *Greeting card*, then neither humour nor fantasy provides any defence, and the publicity resulting from “harmonization” might well be seen as the lesser of two evils. What is important is that such suppression is not a reflection of any innately cultural constraint on humour—as politicians might prefer to believe—but simply one instance of external organizational control that might be relaxed under different political circumstances. The ambivalent and fascinating interactions between humour and politics merit further study, not just in China but around the world.

Codifying cultural conventions about humour

While legal and political controls on the expression of humour can easily be altered, culturally embedded conventions are less amenable to change. They set out parameters within which individual differences arise from behavioural traits in humour use and personal preference in humour taste-culture. Their existence is most evident to an outsider, since when they are contravened, the would-be humorist quickly learns that a boundary has been crossed, even if offence is not taken. Despite the challenge presented by quantitative measurement, I would argue that cross-cultural studies of humour should take account of such cultural variation, so will attempt some analysis and categorization.

Reflecting on examples discussed in this book, I suggest four possible categories of shaping factors:

1. the context in which one should retail and respond to humour (occasion, location, nature of the event and so on)
2. the person/s with whom it is properly—or improperly—exchanged
3. the choice of topic, theme or target
4. the ways in which humour can be used interpersonally (aggressively, supportively and so on).

The first two might be termed environmental factors and the last two instrumental, although they likely interact. Culture-specific codes involving these factors may constrain any aspect of humour: its medium (oral, written, visual, enacted), structure (joke/s, mimicry, leg-pull, repartee/insult, story, comedy), topics (such as sex, mother-in-law, religion, butts, obscenity, politics), flavour or style (nonsense, slapstick, sentimental/romantic, satiric), as well as its purpose or intention.

For environmental factors, the most important is likely to be *formality of the context*. Apart from entertaining oneself, humorous exchange occurs as part of a wider social occasion, ranging from the decidedly informal (such as encounters on the street, relaxation-time or entertainment) to more formal events in the workplace, class, library, church or museum, ceremonies such as prize-givings, openings or product launches, and so on. Cultural conventions about formal and semi-formal occasions range from least formal in New World countries through more formal in Europe, to most rigidly prescribed, as in China and Japan. Influenced by Irish habits, Australians and New Zealanders tolerate humour even at church funerals, and certainly in most workplace situations, where there is also considerable latitude about who initiates it, regardless of the purpose or nature of the group.⁷⁹

On *group composition*, cultures vary greatly, as noted earlier. Some even require codified “joking relationships” to exist before parties may properly exchange humour.⁸⁰ In general, who is present is probably the most significant of the human environmental factors. Strongly hierarchical societies like Japan (and to some extent China) require much greater formality when the circle extends beyond immediate family and friends, and joking in the presence of superiors will often constrain a group, unless the most senior member initiates.⁸¹ Because awkwardness in interpersonal relations is difficult to resolve in Japanese culture, the presence of strangers automatically favours seriousness.⁸² Even English-speaking countries differ from each other in norms about joking with strangers and superiors. In Australia, joking in every possible context is emblematic of being Australian (that is, not British).⁸³ It is particularly meted out to new arrivals from the United Kingdom. Their discomfort reveals a cultural disconnect involving more than preferred styles of humour, since unexpected irony is appreciated in both countries. As mentioned previously, in contrast, American culture is indeed more uncomfortable with unexpected irony and ambiguity, preferring clearer Japanese-style signalling.⁸⁴

Cultural variations also appear in *contexts that positively require laughter*. Mostly, these are informal events common to all cultures (such as watching TV, visiting a comedy club or laughing at the boss's bad jokes), but formal occasions also occur. These include Japanese *warai-no-ba* (times and places) previously discussed, Western inversion festivals like Mardi Gras (indulgence before the beginning of Lent), April Fools' Day (the first day of April, a relic of the mediaeval Feast of Fools) and the celebratory "roast" (send-up) of a business leader (an American custom now spreading to other English-speaking countries). Social events associated with alcohol also generally permit laughter. The impact of this positive obligation to *be amused* deserves consideration when humour and its effects are studied.

Environmental factors such as occasions or persons present often combine with topics (an instrumental factor), forming a humour-code like the British tradition of not telling "blue jokes" (about sex) in front of ladies or children. Almost vanished in today's more casual Britain, this still prevails in many American circles. Mockery of leaders "in club" or in public is probably another matter of acculturation, although this should be treated with some caution, given widespread temptation to claim cultural rationales for political control. Nevertheless, the exclusion of Japan's leadership as a target of humour—either public or private—probably does reflect a cultural preference for avoiding interpersonal aggression and disrespect, since the dearth of modern Japanese political satire is certainly not owing to formal censorship (as in the past).⁸⁵ It is, of course, possible that this humour-code might change over time—as noted above in the context of hiding smiles. At least one commentator anticipated this, remarking on the popularity between 2006 and 2010 of an innovative TV show by comedian Ōta Hikari, imagining himself as prime minister.⁸⁶ In China, however, the ongoing vitality of satirical political joking—despite a history of censorship—indicates a humour code more akin to Korean predilection for satire, and present restraints are justified by governmental imperatives, not self-imposed by the public on the basis of ingrained Confucian cultural taboos.

To consider the instrumental factor of *how humour is used*, the concepts of literary style need to be combined with Martin's four behavioural "humour styles" of daily use. Literary styles lie between the two poles of simple playfulness and deeply serious satirical purpose; Martin's styles are either aggressive or supportive. Combining these varieties suggests a short-list of instrumental criteria:

1. Is the humour used to include or to exclude others?
2. Is it used for instruction (even spiritual insight)⁸⁷ or simply for amusement?
3. Is it used to heal or wound self and/or others?
4. Is it used to criticize (life or others); if so, how serious is its message?

Cultural differences in the extent of permission for these four purposes are certainly reflected in modern legal systems. Some have developed laws to control defamatory or vilifying speech (including joking), that—intentionally or not—causes personal harm.⁸⁸ Some, like Australian copyright law, privilege parody and satire, asserting the cultural value of irreverence.⁸⁹ Beyond legal breach, giving offence via humour is highly dependent on culture. Australians are acculturated to surprisingly crude jokes about such things as vomit (reflecting the strength of Australian-brewed beer and a juvenile culture of excessive alcohol consumption).⁹⁰ A unique body of colourful expressions (such as “technicolour yawn”, “chunder in the Great Pacific Sea”) out of context can prove quite shocking. In an Australian context (for instance, a “pub” or drinking house), their shock value is apposite and very funny, although even Australians may find that the topic palls with over-exposure.

In contrast, Australians find the Asian propensity to react to impending disaster with nervous laughter incongruous.⁹¹ The inappropriateness of mixing the two is excoriated in an iconic Australian cartoon drawn by Stan Cross (1888–1977) for *Smiths Weekly*, and published on 29 July 1933. It shows one (Australian) construction worker dangling precariously from scaffolding while a second man clings on to his descending trousers, laughing fit to bust. The caption reads: “For gorsake, stop laughing: this is serious!”⁹² The pragmatic Australian response to Chinese disaster-covering laughter would be, “That’s not funny: get on and fix the problem.” As one recent study has pointed out (discussing the Chinese imperial smile), laughing and smiling have always been more enigmatic than other emotive signalling, even capable of masking all emotion.⁹³ Importantly, this behaviour does not equate in any way with European *Schadenfreude* or pleasure in suffering caused to others (whether by one’s own negligence or by accident). As in Japan, laughter covers embarrassment and avoids the need for humble apologies that can be more readily uttered in other cultures.

The primary purpose of this book and its companion volume is to illuminate cultural assumptions in Chinese society about what is proper and enjoyable about laughter and humour. In the process, similarities and dissimilarities with laughter conventions in other cultures are highlighted. These may be nationally

or regionally distinctive forms and modes of humour, or they may be cultural group codes developed to corral this pleasing but risky behaviour, but finally they will be matters of individual taste-culture, personality and daily behaviour. All deserve investigation.

While much remains to be done, the studies collected here show that Chinese humour possesses exceptional vitality, despite—or perhaps because of—historical disasters and challenges. Its study and enjoyment deserve an inquiring mind. Bakhtin observed that “Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning, [it is] one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole . . . [in it] the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint.”⁹⁴ Although essentially playful, humour carries traces of age-old rituals designed to restore meaning and balance by celebrating the inversion of logic and order. While there is no disputing differences in taste and culture, we can at least take pains to learn from each other’s habits of humour.

Notes

Preface

1. Giselinde Kuipers, "The sociology of humor", in *Primer of humor research*, p. 387.
2. For currently available compilations, see Chapter 1 by Jocelyn Chey in the companion volume to this book.

Chapter 1 Humour and its cultural context

1. Conal Condren, "Satire and definition", p. 375. Many humour scholars acknowledge the problem (for instance, Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic theories of humor*, p. 3).
2. As an example, the 1989 English National Opera production of Prokofiev's *The love of three oranges* provided the audience with scratch-and-sniff cards matching the on-stage action with an appropriate odour—correctly, until "dog poo" hilariously replaced the anticipated "rose petals".
3. Multidisciplinary usage in humour studies creates special challenges with regard to terminology. For example, literary critical names for styles and genres of written and performed humour (satire, farce, black humour, parody, burlesque and so on) are widely applied to non-literary humorous communications. But many styles are subjective, often prompted by the performer's or reader's interpretation of a humorous script. Moreover, the term "style of humour" is also used in psychology to describe individual differences in behavioural patterns of using humour in everyday life (see discussion in Ursula Beerman and Willibald Ruch, "How virtuous is humor? Evidence from everyday behavior", pp. 398–9). In this book, "style of humour" is used in both senses depending on context: here as literary style, but in Chapter 9 for example as behavioural style.
4. Functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) brain research demonstrates both affective and cognitive responses to humour—see Chapter 2 by Jessica Milner Davis in the companion volume to this book.
5. See Conal Condren, Jessica Milner Davis, Sally McCausland and Robert Phiddian, "Defining parody and satire: Australian copyright law and its new exception, Part 1: Why US law and dictionaries are unsound sources", pp. 286–9.

6. For a history of the concept, see Noga Arikha, *Passions and tempers: A history of the humours*.
7. See Chapter 2 by Jessica Milner Davis and Chapter 3 by Rey Tiquia on humoral medicine traditions in China and the West in the companion volume to this book.
8. For differences between French and English concepts of humour, see Paul Gifford, “Humor and the French mind: Towards a reciprocal definition”.
9. Daniel Wickberg, *The senses of humor: Self and laughter in modern America*, p. 85.
10. Daniel Wickberg, *The senses of humor*, p. 102 (referring principally to Gordon W. Allport, *Personality: A psychological interpretation*).
11. See also Note 47 to Chapter 2 of this volume by Diran Sohigian, quoting his “Contagion of laughter: The rise of the humor phenomenon in Shanghai in the 1930s”, pp. 145–6.
12. The distinction is further discussed in Chapters 2 and 9 of this volume.
13. J. Milner Davis, Introduction to *Understanding humor in Japan*, p. 8 (the author is indebted to Marguerite Wells for assistance with Japanese terminology and scripts). Gifford notes that, even in French, “humour” is a neologism (“Humor and the French mind”, pp. 538–9).
14. *Maoshi zhushu*, p. 84, quoted by Weihe Xu in Chapter 4 in the companion volume to this book.
15. Chapter 1 in the companion volume to this book describes them: Chunyu Kun 淳于髡 (471–221 BCE), You Meng 優孟, jester to the court of King Zhuangwang (reigned 613–591 BCE), You Zhan 優旃, jester to the court of the first Emperor of the Qin dynasty (676–652 BCE) and Dongfang Shuo 東方說, who served in the court of Han Wudi (156–87 BCE). See also Chapter 4 on Confucian humour by Weihe Xu in the same volume.
16. Noted by Beatrice Otto, *Fools are everywhere: The court jester around the world*, pp. xx, 280.
17. For this, and examples of *dayou shi*, see Chapter 1 of the companion volume to this book.
18. For instance, Paolo Santangelo, “Functions of laugh and smile in their Chinese pre-modern representation: A preliminary survey”, in P. Santangelo, ed., *Laughing in Chinese*.
19. The earliest text long predates the Byzantine (tenth-century CE) *Philogelos*; see note 25 to Chapter 3 in this volume, and Chapter 1 of the companion volume to this book.
20. So termed by Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic theories of humor*, pp. 222–9.
21. Ursula Beerman and Willibald Ruch, “How virtuous is humor?”, p. 398.
22. His fame is now revived. On Lin Yutang and his school, see also Chapter 10 by Qian Suoqiao and Chapter 9 by Joseph Sample in the companion volume to this book.
23. For an overview of the current state of research, see Rod A. Martin, *The psychology of humor: An integrative approach*, pp. 275–6, 305–7 and 331–3.
24. Willibald Ruch and Giovannantonio Forabosco, “A cross-cultural study of humor appreciation: Italy and Germany”; Ofra Nevo, Baruch Nevo and Janie Leong Siew Yin, “Singaporean humor: A cross-cultural, cross-gender comparison”.

25. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*.
26. Shalom H. Schwartz, “A theory of cultural values and some implications for work”.
27. See Chapter 7 by Christopher Rea for the etymology of *shanzhai* and its links with *e'gao* culture.
28. Wallace Chafe, *The importance of not being earnest: The feeling behind laughter and humor*.
29. Christie Davies, “Translating English into English in jokes and humour”, in Delia Chiaro, ed., *Translation, humour and literature*, 1: 69.
30. For World War II survival humour, see John Morreall, “Humor in the Holocaust: Its critical, cohesive, and coping functions” (Internet Source (IS) Bibliography); and Nathaniel Hong, “Mow ‘em all down Grandma: The ‘weapon’ of humor in two Danish World War II occupation scrapbooks”.
31. Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process: The history of manners*, p. 120.
32. Norbert Elias, *The civilizing process*, pp. 121–2.
33. Michael Schröter, “‘Wer lacht, kann nicht bessen’: Ein unveröffentlichter *Essay on laughter* von Norbert Elias”, pp. 861–2, quoting from Elias’s unpublished essay, my translation.
34. See studies collected in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A cultural history of humour: From antiquity to the present day*; also Lord Chesterfield’s well-known instructions to his son—for instance, *The letters of Phillip Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield*, 1, p. 120.
35. Paradoxically, comparable animal behaviour is less convulsive—chimpanzees “pant laugh” and rats “squeak laugh”. See Marina Davila Ross, Michael Owren and Elke Zimmermann, “Reconstructing the evolution of laughter in great apes and humans”; and Jaak Panksepp and Jeff Burgdorf, “‘Laughing’ rats and the evolutionary antecedents of human joy?” Elias’s belief that laughter is a disabling mechanism for aggression is now shared by evolutionary biologists: see Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson, “The evolution and functions of laughter and humor: A synthetic approach”.
36. Paul Lewis, “Humor and political correctness”.
37. For photos of a class in training, see Justin Jin, Felix features (Internet Sources [IS] Bibliography).
38. Shōkichi Oda, “Laughter and the traditional Japanese smile”, in J. Milner Davis, ed., *Understanding humor in Japan*, p. 24.
39. Marguerite Wells, *Japanese humour*, pp. 106–8, 154, where she traces the term to Ōta Masao, writing in 1938 about theatres as laughter places, and to Oda Shōkichi, writing more generally in 1986.
40. Marguerite Wells, “Satire and constraint in Japanese culture”, in J. Milner Davis, ed., *Understanding humor in Japan*, pp. 204–5.
41. D.T., “Satire in South Korea: Sneaky tricksters, unite!”, *The Economist*, 16 January 2012 (IS Bibliography), and Choe Sang-Hun, “By lampooning leaders, talk show channels young people’s anger”, *New York Times*, 1 November 2011 (IS Bibliography). On the historical tradition, see Chun Shin-Yong, ed., *Humour in Korean literature*, pp. 11–12, and Oh-Kon Cho, *Traditional Korean theater* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press,

- 1988), on traditional satirical masked dance-dramas, restaged in the 1970s and 1980s folk revival movement to comment on contemporary politics.
42. Heiyō Nagashima, “*Sha-re*: A widely accepted form of Japanese wordplay”, in J. Milner Davis, ed., *Understanding humor in Japan*, p. 78. See Chapter 1 by Jocelyn Chey in the companion volume to this book for some characteristic forms of Chinese punning.
 43. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*.
 44. Giselinde Kuipers, *Good humor, bad taste: A sociology of the joke*, p. 98; the two styles are summarized at pp. 79–90.
 45. See Guido Vitale, *Chinese folklore: Pekinese rhymes* (orig. edn. Beijing, 1896; repub. Hong Kong: Vetch and Lee, 1972), for examples of popular nineteenth-century nonsense rhymes.
 46. English librettist William S. Gilbert (1836–1911) and composer Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900).
 47. American satirist Leonard Alfred Schneider (1925–66), who composed, played and sang his own works; he was convicted in 1964 of publishing an obscenity but posthumously pardoned.
 48. This opera is part of a long series collectively titled *Yangjia Jiang* 杨家将 (Yang Family Generals), about a Song dynasty military family's exploits, drawn from the eponymous novel by sixteenth-century author Xiong Damu 熊大木. Titles marked with an asterisk, as here, are listed in the Audiovisual Sources (AV) Bibliography.
 49. See chapters by Shirley Chan and Weihe Xu respectively in the companion to this volume.
 50. Mariet Westermann, “How was Jan Steen funny? Strategies and functions of comic painting in the seventeenth century”, in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A cultural history of humour*.
 51. Earle Tempel, ed., *Humor in the headlines: A comprehensive collection of witty, mirth-provoking headlines from the newspapers of the United States and other English-speaking countries*, pp. 16, 133. Such sexual double-entendres were traditional in Victorian music halls and early twentieth-century American burlesque.
 52. Walter Redfern, *Calembours, ou les puns et les autres, traduit de l'intraduisible*, p. 199.
 53. Christie Davies, “Undertaking the comparative study of humor”, in Victor Raskin, ed., *The primer of humor research*, p. 167.
 54. See Christopher Rea's chapter for text and translation.
 55. For instance, the mascots Jingjing 警警 and Chacha 察察 (punning on *jingcha* 警察, police), installed on 22 January 2006 as official “site guardians” on internet portals by the Internet Surveillance Division of the Shenzhen Public Security Bureau, Guangdong Province. See Xiao Qiang, “Image of internet police: Jingjing and Chacha online”, *China Digital Times*, 22 January 2006 (IS Bibliography); and Chapter 7 in this volume, especially note 37.
 56. Barak Kushner, “Laughter as materiel: The mobilization of comedy in Japan's fifteen-year war”.

57. Viewing these stereotyped images reportedly employed as toilet bowls in a Harbin hotel urinal (Cal Widdall, "Spotted on Weibo: 'Yasukuni shrine' urinals in Harbin" (IS Bibliography) suggests, however, that negative reinforcement often outweighs any positive affect.
58. Christie Davies, "Undertaking the comparative study of humor", pp. 167–8.
59. Jamil Anderlini, "Beijing's housing price fury goes viral", *Financial Times*, 23 December 2010 (IS Bibliography).
60. "China's Premier Wen Jiabao targets 'social stability'", *BBC News*, 5 March 2011 (IS Bibliography).
61. Christie Davies, "Humour is not a strategy in war", pp. 398–9 (author's italics).
62. Eric Abrahamsen, "Irony is good" (IS Bibliography).
63. Christie Davies, "Humour is not a strategy in war", p. 399.
64. Mary Lee Townsend, "Humour and the public sphere in nineteenth-century Germany", in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, eds., *A cultural history of humour*, p. 201.
65. Eric Abrahamsen, "Irony is good".
66. R. Orion Martin, "Revisiting Political Pop and Cynical Realism: Discussion with Luo Fei" (IS Bibliography). In Yue Minjun's former online gallery (IS Bibliography), the artist commented, "Laughter is a moment when our mind refuses to reason". There is also a literary School of Cynical Realism.
67. Luo Fei, in R. Orion Martin, "Revisiting Political Pop and Cynical Realism" (IS Bibliography).
68. Elizabeth Keenan, "China's art explosion", in *The big bang: Guide look [sic]: Selected works from the White Rabbit Collection*, p. 9.
69. See "What if Lei Feng served today?", *Beijing Today*, 26 March 2010 (IS Bibliography).
70. Jeremy Goldkorn, "Lei Feng in the age of the microblog", *Danwei*, 5 March 2012 (IS Bibliography).
71. Hu Xijin, personal blog (IS Bibliography), translated by Jeremy Goldkorn, "Lei Feng in the age of the microblog" (IS Bibliography).
72. Joel Martensen, "Comrades, flush!", 16 May 2007 (IS Bibliography).
73. See <http://www.hutoon.com> (accessed 17 August 2011, site later inoperative). Hutoon's clients included Motorola and China Central Television. The protagonist of Pisan's 2005 video, *Blow up the school*, a naughty boy named Kuangkuang ("speech bubble") with a permanently bleeding nose, became a cult figure for fans, especially after attempts to erase the video from the Chinese internet.
74. For instance, the sale of melamine-tainted baby milk: see Tania Branigan, "Censors delete Chinese cartoon that takes swipes at public scandals", *The Guardian*, 25 January 2011 (IS Bibliography). Lyric translated here and below by Jocelyn Chey.
75. For an outline and interview with Pisan and others, see Stephen McDonell, "Interview with Wang Bo (Pi San) and Jeremy Goldkorn" (IS Bibliography).
76. Created in 1997 by Trey Parker and Matt Stone for the US TV network, Comedy Central; new series commenced in 2011.

77. China Real Time Report, "Director of gory rabbit revolt video 'Just venting'", *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 January 2011 (IS Bibliography).
78. Gary King, Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts, "How censorship in China allows government criticism but silences collective expression" (IS Bibliography).
79. For New Zealand studies, see Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, "*Having a laugh at work: How humour contributes to workplace culture*"; and Janet Holmes and Meredith Marra, "*Over the edge? Subversive humor between colleagues and friends*".
80. For anthropological research on this topic, see Mahadev Apte, *Humor and laughter: An anthropological approach*.
81. See Chapter 1 in the companion volume to this book on Chinese leaders willing to do this.
82. Makiko Takekuro, "Conversational jokes in Japanese and English", in J. Milner Davis, ed., *Understanding humor in Japan*, pp. 94–6.
83. J. Milner Davis, "'Aussie' humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual", in Fran de Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick, eds., *Serious frolic: Essays on Australian humour*, pp. 38–9.
84. Witness American fantasy writer Jack Dann admitting to difficulty in coping with Australian humour, even after ten years in Australia, quoted in Jessica Milner Davis, "'Taking the mickey': A brave Australian tradition", *The Fine Print*, 4 August 2007, p. 24 (IS Bibliography).
85. See Marguerite Wells, "Satire and constraint in Japanese culture", pp. 205–7. Censorship was highly efficient at times like the Kansai Reform period (1787–93).
86. Norimitsu Onishi, "Pushing the boundaries of political satire in Japan", *The New York Times*, 12 August, 2006 (IS Bibliography). "*Ōta Hikari no watashti ga sōri daijin ni nattara . . . hisho Tanaka* (Ōta Hikari: If I were Prime Minister . . . Secretary Tanaka)", by *manzai* (cross-talk) partners Ōta Hikari and Tanaka Yūji, first aired on the Nippon Television Network on 7 April 2006. It ended in 2010, but its website remains popular: <http://www.ntv.co.jp/souri> (accessed 14 August 2012). The show's formula was complex, fully engaged with politics, but also educational as well as satirical.
87. For religious attitudes to spiritual humour, see Richard Gardner, "Humor and religion", and Richard Gardner and Scott Davis, "Humor and religion: Humor and religion in East Asian context", in *Encyclopedia of religion*, pp. 4194–205 and 4205–10 respectively.
88. For American law on humour, see Laura E. Little, "Just a joke: Defamatory humor and incongruity's promise" (IS Bibliography).
89. Conal Condren et al., "Defining parody and satire", pp. 273–4.
90. Christie Davies, *The mirth of nations*, pp. 92–100.
91. See Chapter 1 by Jocelyn Chey in the companion volume to this book.
92. Cartoon in Vane Lindsay, *Stop laughing: The life and work of Stan Cross 1888–1977*, pp. 1, 48.
93. Erhard Rosner, "The smiling emperor: Facial gestures in Chinese historiography", in Paolo Santangelo, ed., *Laughing in Chinese*, pp. 294, 304–8. Elena de Rossi Filibeck

notes contemporary Tibetan laughter in order to avoid discomforting others in her chapter in the same book.

94. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, p. 66.

Chapter 2 The phantom of the clock

1. Editions used: Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, “Shuo xiao 说笑” (Talking and laughing), in *Qian Zhongshu sanwen* 钱钟书散文 (*Selected essays of Qian Zhongshu*). All translations here are the author’s. A complete translation by Christopher G. Rea is: “On laughter”, in *Humans, beasts, and ghosts: Stories and essays*. For *Wei cheng* (*Fortress besieged*), unless otherwise noted, see Qian Zhongshu, *Fortress besieged*, trans. Jeanne Kelly and Nathan Mao (hereafter *FB*) with romanization of names and terms changed to the *pinyin* system. The Chinese text used is Qian Zhongshu 钱钟书, *Wei cheng* 围城 (hereafter *Wei cheng*). Full details of all works are in the Bibliography.
2. See Christopher G. Rea and Nicolai Volland, “Comic visions of modern China: Introduction”, pp. 5–6.
3. For Bergsonian influence on Lao She, see Diran John Sohigian, “Contagion of laughter: The rise of the humor phenomenon in Shanghai in the 1930s”, pp. 155–7.
4. The 1923 “great debate between science and life”, also known as the “debate between science and metaphysics”, is discussed in more detail below.
5. Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic* at: <http://biblio.org/gutenberg/etext03/laemc10.txt> (IS Bibliography); also *Time and free will: An essay on the immediate data of consciousness*.
6. See Diran John Sohigian, “Contagion of laughter”, pp. 137–63; and Qian Suoqiao’s Chapter 10 in the companion volume to this book.
7. This biographical sketch is based on Ronald Egan, “Introduction”, in *Limited views: Essays on ideas and letters by Qian Zhongshu*, pp. 1–26.
8. Wu Xuezao 吴学昭, “Yang Jiang: he Qian Zhongshu bing fei yi jian zhong qing 杨绛：和钱钟书并非一见钟情” (*Yang Jiang: With Qian Zhongshu it was not love at first sight*) (IS Bibliography). Yang’s recommended book was authored by Josephine A. Jackson MD and Helen M. Salisbury (New York: Century, 1922).
9. Ronald Egan, “Introduction”, p. 3. The Sino-British Boxer indemnity scholarship program, announced in 1925, was similar to the American program, both funded from indemnities paid to the Western allies and Japan after the 1900 suppression of the anti-foreign “Boxers”. In 1907, Theodore Roosevelt had approved part of the funds accorded to the United States being used to fund scholarships for Chinese students.
10. Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A. D. Stefanowska, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century*, p. 619.
11. “Apropos of the ‘Shanghai Man’” and “Shuo xiao” (“Talking and laughing”) are discussed below.
12. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 26.
13. Henri Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 23.

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