Exploration of Chinese humor: Historical review, empirical findings, and critical reflections

XIAO DONG YUE

Abstract

Humor was first documented around 2,500 BC in China when the first Chinese poetry and literary books appeared. Zhuangzi, a co-founder of Taoism, is recognized as the very first humorist in China. Chinese humor has been mostly characterized by joke-telling and funny show-performing. Humor has been traditionally given little respect in Chinese culture mainly due to the Confucian emphasis on keeping proper manners of social interactions. Confucius once ordered to execute humorists for having “improper performance” before dignitaries in 500 BC. The term humor was translated by Mr. Lin Yu-tang in 1920s and it has been increasingly popular in China. During the “Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976), however, humorists of various kinds were all criticized and even prosecuted. Since 1980s, humor got rehabilitated as an important element of creativity, personal charisma and social harmony. Important as it is, humor has rarely been studied in China. Of the few studies conducted, it was shown that (1) humor was not valued by the Chinese even though they all enjoyed it; (2) humor was often considered the least important factor in ratio to creativity, and ideal Chinese personality.

Keywords: Chinese humor; Chinese culture; Confucianism; Huaji.

1. Origin and development of humor in China

1.1. Huaji — The earliest Chinese term for humor

Humor was first documented around in China around 2,500 B.C. when the first Chinese poetry and literary books appeared. The early type of Chinese humor
was in the form of riddles or jokes (Liao 2001: 30), which originated from four sources: commoners’ jokes (笑話), pre-Qin (prior to 221 B.C.) parables (寓言), huaji play (滑稽戲), and Qing-yan anthology (清言集) (Chen 1985: 1). Kao (1974: xviii) considered huaji the earliest Chinese term that stands for ‘humor’, and further defined the concept of huaji in which “the character hua means ‘smoothen,’ or ‘slippery’; and the character ji, meaning ‘to check’ (to see if it tallies), or a ‘trick,’ is perfect pun for the character chi, which means ‘chicken’” (Kao 1974: xviii).

More specifically, Chen (1985) argued that huaji should best encompass the meaning of youmo (幽默) (humor in Chinese) and should have five different kinds: mean, obscene, witty, ironic (sarcastic), and humorous. Liao (2003) questioned this definition and remarked that huaji is not equivalent to youmo for the high class behavior, in which youmo contains more wisdom and elegance than huaji. However, she also admitted that the ancient word huaji embraced the basic elements of modern humor such as funny action, ridiculous speech and witty thought (Liao 2003).

Huaji was first used by the ancient poet-patriot Qu Yuan (屈原 343–290 B.C.) in his best-known work, Chu Ci (楚辞). In this master piece of ancient Chinese literature, Qu Yuan used huaji to characterize “a smoothen and ingratiating manner with the prince which he obviously did not possess” (Kao 1974: xix). Incidentally, Qu Yuan also used youmo in Chu Ci, but to express “tranquility of life and mind.”

Since then, huaji was more referred to the “humor in the palace” and huaji play became an interaction between the king and his professional comedians (Huang 2002). Those early comic actors were good at finding the right time to speak the right words in the right way and were influential to help king to solve conflicts (Liao 2003). The most renowned huaji player in ancient China was actually Shuo Dongfang (東方朔), who was living in the Western Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–8 A.D.). He was famous for hiding phrases in prose and was thus regarded as the “Master of Humor” by historians (Chen 1985).

1.2. Pai shuo — The earliest form of Chinese humor

Besides huaji, commoners’ jokes shaped the earliest forms of humor in Chinese history as well. The earliest Chinese jokes were called pai shuo (俳說 meaning small talks) (Liao 2001: 5) and were part of literature rather than the pure jokes (Chen 1985: 2). The first Chinese book collecting jokes was called Xiao-lin (笑林), which literally means a forest of jokes. It was written by Handan Chun
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(邯鄲淳 around 221) in the late Han dynasty (漢朝 221–265). Following this, 93 other joke books were published during the entire period of imperial China (221 B.C.–1911) (Chen 1985). Among them, numerous pai shuo were re-paragraphed or re-cycled dynasty after dynasty (Liao 2001: 34). Guo Zi-zhang (郭子章), a scholar in Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), proposed that pai shuo jokes could be divided into two kinds: the kou-xie-shan-bian (口諧善辯 wit and quip) and tan-yan-wei-zhong (談言微中 indirect and relevant talk) (Chen 1985). The former is purely for having fun while the latter is for advising in a pleasant speech and bringing peace in a moment. Later, Zhao Nan-xing (趙南星), a scholar in Qing Dynasty (清朝 1644–1911), argued that jokes should make people happy, widen their worldview, and transfer knowledge. Zhao also proposed that jokes should serve to entertain readers and to beautify writings (Chen 1985).

1.3. Youmo — The earliest Chinese translation for humor

(1) Youmo (幽默) was specifically referred to humor in 1923 when Lin Yu-tang (林語堂 1895–1976), a well-known Western educated scholar, published an article in the literary supplement of the Beijing Morning Post (北京晨報) (Kao 1974: xxii). In this article, Lin advocated the use of humor in Chinese society and defined it as expressing wit, irony and funniness in the West. Later in his life, Lin argued (1974) that youmo meant more than huaji in Chinese language and could better denote the meaning of humor. Generally, humor is naturally appreciable verbal behavior making people smile thoughtfully whereas huaji is intentionally despicable behavior acting in front of people to win laughter (Liao 2003).

Lin also differentiated thoughtful smile (會心微笑) from hilarious laughter (開懷大笑) (Lin 1974: 289), in which the former means to laugh thoughtfully while the latter means to laugh wholeheartedly. Lin argued that “smile of the meeting of the hearts” sophisticated while the American humor of belly laugh was shallow (Kao 1974). Lin (1971: 62) also divided humor into masculine and feminine—the masculine humor was characterized by Zhuangzi’s (莊子 369–228 B.C., also spelled as Chuang Tzu) humor which was wild, grand, and strenuous, the feminine humor was characterized by Tao Yuan-ming’s (陶淵明 365–427) humor which was mature, gracious, poetic. In short, to laugh warmly but not wildly, is what Lin recommended for the Chinese.

To promote humor in China, Lin set up a magazine in 1930s named Lun-yu Decadaily (論語旬刊) to publish various articles and jokes about humor in
China and overseas. Though the magazine did not last for long (10 years), the concept did sell pervasively and huaji referring to verbal humor has become less popular since then (Liao 2003). Eventually, Chinese people have given up using the traditional term of huaji in favor of using the modern term youmo.

1.4. Major forms and techniques of humor in Chinese history

Over 3,000 years, Chinese humor has evolved greatly. As shown in Table 1, Chinese humor started as either comic acts/shows or dramas to entertain upper class people or satire prose for intellectuals to look for fun in life. The earliest professional comedians in China were called pai you, a kind of huaji player. They were supported by autocratic families and their role was to make people laugh by telling jokes, dancing, and performing funny acts. They were first seriously recorded in Qian Sima’s (司馬遷 145–80 B.C.) “Records of History” as Huaji Actors (《史記﹒滑稽列傳》). During these nine hundred years, the pai you have formed the essential characteristics of Chinese, which gradually evolved into comic drama (喜劇), witty talk show (詼諧表演) and cross-talk (相聲) nowadays.

As to the satires, they started as jokes, idioms, proverbs, fables, parables. As written forms of humor, they were mostly confined to people of literacy and have become increasingly more popular as illiteracy decreased in China. Duan (1924: 4, 49) divided Chinese jokes into three kinds: humorous jokes (幽默笑話), sarcastic jokes (嘲諷笑話), and bunter jokes (詼諧笑話). Specifically, the humorous jokes serve to kindly criticize people’s wrongdoings; the sarcastic jokes serve to express hostility; and the bunter jokes serve to trigger laughter. Chen argued that Chinese jokes in imperial times included five types: mean, obscene, witty, ironic, and humorous (1985: 80–119). The mean jokes ridicule clumsiness, vulgarity, mistakes, repetition, parody; the obscene jokes express morality over some taboo topics and are usually for low-class people; the witty jokes are “quickly grasping the relevant part” or divergent thinking”; the ironic jokes express cynicism; and humorous jokes express wit and sarcasm. Chen also argued that in ancient times, jokes mainly served to advising the rulers wisely (Chen 1985).

With regard to modern humor, three new forms of humor have evolved in China: jerk humor, cold humor, and non-sense humor. The jerk humor (痞子幽默) first appeared in Mainland China in early 1980s as rebellious expression to the orthodox thinking and teaching in China. Self bragging as it appears initially, jerk humor is characterized by cynical and sarcastic deprecation of the self and others. It was championed by Wang Shuo (王朔), a popular unortho-
dox writer in Mainland China who pioneered *jerk literature* (痞子文學) in 1980s. It has since become widely appreciated and used by young people in Mainland China and Taiwan as well (Liao 2001). Cold humor first appeared in Taiwan in 1970 as a variation of black humor in the West (Liao 2001). It is characterized by expression of dry, harsh, bitter cynicism or deprecation against social or societal hierocracies or inequality. Compared with black humor, cold humor incorporates much Taiwanese and Chinese cultural values, taboos, and events. Non-sense humor (無厘頭幽默) first appeared in south
China but thrived in Hong Kong in early 1980s. It is characterized by cute and malicious self-entertaining wit or sarcasm. Non-sense humor was championed by the famous Hong Kong actor, Stephen Chow (周星馳), who acted non-sense humorously in most of the movies he played or directed.

As to techniques of Chinese humor during imperial times, they were diverse, elegant, and literarily creative, especially for intellectuals. These techniques mainly took the forms of riddles, wordplays, banters, quips, herbal names, and poems (see Table 2). Particularly worth mentioning is the humor shown by herbal names and utterance. They are culturally confined, conveying witty, ironic or sarcastic messages which are highly perceptive and insightful.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Techniques</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jia yu (佳語)</td>
<td>Humor by good utterances and remarks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ya nue (雅語)</td>
<td>Humor by elegant banters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jing ju (警句)</td>
<td>Humor by witty warning sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xi nue (戲謔)</td>
<td>Humor by playful sarcasm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zi xi (字戲)</td>
<td>Humor by wordplay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yao ming shi (藥名詩)</td>
<td>Humor by herbal names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yu xi (語戲)</td>
<td>Humor by utterance play</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qu shi (趣詩)</td>
<td>Humor by interesting poems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min dui (敏對)</td>
<td>Humor by quips</td>
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<tr>
<td>Qu lian (趣聯)</td>
<td>Humor by interesting couplets</td>
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**2. Philosophical attitudes to humor in China**

2.1. *The Taoist attitude to humor*

To study Chinese humor, one needs to study the philosophical origins of humor in Chinese culture as China is famous as a philosophical nation, so even Chinese humor must have its philosophy (Yao 1989). As Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are the three most important philosophical schools in China and have profoundly influenced Chinese ways of thinking, we need to study their attitudes to humor accordingly.

Confucius, Laozi (老子 also spelled as Lao Tzu), and Zhuangzi were the three most influential philosophers in Chinese history (Yao 1989:3). Liao argued that Taoist literature was generally humorous while Confucian literature was quite dry and serious (2001: 59). Lin Yu-tang argued that Laozi and Zhuangzi, the two co-founders of Taoism, were the ancestors of Chinese humor (Liao 2001: 88). He argued that:
Laozi, the antagonist of Confucius, must be regarded as the true comic spirit of China, and Zhuangzi, his follower and inventor of a great many libelous stories about Confucius, may be regarded as the most intelligent humorist of China. (Kao 1974: xxxiii)

Furthermore, Lin compared the styles of humor between the two great philosophers as the following: “Laozi’s laughter was dry and small, sounding low through his thin beard, while Zhuangzi, often broke out into boisterous laughter” (Kao 1974: xxxiv).

To paraphrase what Lin stated, Laozi is more of a humorist whose humor is characterized by wit, insightfulness, and seriousness. Zhuangzi, in contrast, is more of a comedian whose humor is characterized by sarcasms, trickery, and playfulness. What they had in common is a genuine appreciation for conflicts and paradoxes in life. They also shared a passion for laughter, even though they smiled in quite different manners.

2.2. The Confucian attitude to humor

Confucius’ (孔子 551–479 B.C.) attitude to humor was quite ambivalent though he himself was quite humorous (Lin 1971; Chen 1985; Liao 2001; Wang 2002). As Lin pointed out, Confucius “had a humorous attitude toward life, (he) was warm but serious, respectful but easy, frugal and modest” (1994: 6). However, Confucians are not serious. Mencius (孟子 372–289 B.C.), though full of sarcastic wit, was not humorous either. Kao (1974) proposed to divide all Chinese philosophers into two schools:

on one hand, the Confucianists with the Great Sage himself, the Second Sage Mencius, and the Confucian disciples of all ages; on the other hand, the Taoist school, rooted in Laozi the “Old Boy,” flowering in Zhuangzi, and bearing fruit in Liezi, and Hanfeizi. Confucianism, with its precept of the moral man, has molded the serious thoughts and habits of the Chinese gentleman for all times; The Taoists have taken care of him in his off moments. Being resigned to nature, the Taoist can see in his limitations; being the perennial outsider, he can afford to relax and laugh. (Kao 1974: 3)

2.3. The Buddhist attitude to humor

Buddhist attitude to humor is different from Taoism and Confucianism. The philosophy of Buddhism is inclined to regard humor as the result of a sudden
grasp of insight. In Buddhism, enlightenment has been described as the core spirit, and there are times along every pilgrim’s path when he or she suspects the whole deal is one big joke (Hyers 1989), therefore laughing is served as getting closer to enlightened.

Typically, the Buddha is known to have a good sense of humor. The same applies to many great Buddhist gurus and thinkers after him (Hyers 1989). The Laughing Buddha, or Maitreya (彌勒佛), is perhaps the best visual indicator that Buddhism encourages humor. “Maitreya” means “the loving one.” He is associated with good luck, friendliness and prosperity. The so-called “Laughing Buddha” (大肚笑佛) is a Chinese representation of Maitreya. Rubbing the Laughing Buddha’s fat tummy is thus supposed to bring prosperity.

To summarize what has been described above, Confucius was genuinely humorous to life but not to his attitudes to life. This paradoxical irony has profoundly influenced how later generations of Confucianists valued humor: on one hand, they needed and could appreciate humor as to laugh was a given and gifted need of humans; on the other hand, they all tried to despise humor as it was regarded as an act of uneducated and uncivilized man. Alternatively, the Taoism values humor as an attempt of having witty, peaceful and harmonious interaction with the nature, whereas the Confucianism devalued humor as it might underline the five cardinal relations in human interactions (Bond 1996). And Buddhism encourages humor as a symbol of lighting up. This is well summarized in Table 3.

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<th></th>
<th>Taoism</th>
<th>Confucianism</th>
<th>Buddhism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Humor helps to promote emotional tranquility.</td>
<td>Humor is despised as it sets no standards for proper behaviors.</td>
<td>Humor is encouraged as the spirit of enlightenment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughter is only natural and enables one to merge with nature.</td>
<td>Too much laughter destroys one’s will and spirit.</td>
<td>Laughter is linked with good luck, friendliness and prosperity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comics &amp; satires</td>
<td>Comics and satires ought to be encouraged for the sake of fostering self contentment.</td>
<td>Comics and satires are not serious and ought to be despised.</td>
<td>Comics and satires are regarded as the way of self-refinement for the reason of tolerance and endurance.</td>
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3. Prejudice against humor in Chinese culture

3.1. Confucian puritanism — the Chinese cultural bias against humor

Though humor has a long history in China, humor has not been much valued in Chinese culture (Chen 1985; Liao 2001; Nevo et al. 2001; Shi 1996; Yue et al. 2006). Humor and satire were regarded as inferior forms of aesthetic expression following Confucian conservatism and formality and were thus devalued for centuries (Feinberg 1971). According to Lin (Kao 1974), the Confucian Puritanism was chiefly responsible for the lack of respect for humor in China. Lin Yu-tang argued that:

There is, however, a peculiar twist which prevented the output of Chinese humorous literature from being as prolific as it should have been. That is, Confucian Puritanism. Confucian decorum put a damper on light, humorous writing, as well as on all imaginative literature, except poetry. Drama and the novel were despised as unworthy of a respectable scholar’s occupation. This puritanical, austere public attitude has persisted to this day. (Kao 1974: xxxi)

Following Lin Yu-tang’s reasoning, I propose that Confucian puritanical bias against humor was mainly reflected in the following four aspects: the Confucius’s personal bias against humor, the Confucian requirements for gentlemen, the Confucian doctrine for moderation, and the Confucian orthodox literary writings. A detailed description is provided in the Table 4. As such, they have formed an ethical prejudice against humor for social functioning which has led Chinese intellectuals, for thousands of years, to despise humor as an act of immaturity and informality for educated people.

For thousands of years, Chinese intellectuals simply did not want to admit that entertainment was the major function of humor (Liao 2001: 18) and humorous writings have been considered as unorthodox as they might tarnish the solemnity of classics (Kao 1974). Liu Xie (劉勰 465–522), a scholar in early Jin Dynasty (晉朝 265–316), argued that commoners’ jokes triggered smile only and would be unworthy as they promoted no morality. As a result, no humorous writings were ever included in the Hall of Great and Good Taste (Kao 1974: xvii), and they could only be found in such unorthodox writings as Ping-hua (平話 ordinary talks) of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Chuan-qi (傳奇 legends) of the Ming Dynasty (明朝 1368–1644) and Xiao-shuo (小說 novels) of the Qing Dynasty (清朝 1644–1911) (Lin 1971: 63). Chinese people played homophonic wordplay seriously (Liao 2001). Most ironical of all, Lin Yu-tang, the humor master in
China, proposed that educated people should be humorous in writing but serious in behavior (文章可幽默，做人要认真) (Liao 2001).

In short, under the influence of Confucian Puritanism, humor has been considered a show of intellectual and political shallowness and is equated with social informality, impropriety, and immaturity.

### 3.2. Literary inquisition — The ancient Chinese political prosecution of humor

Apart from Confucian Puritanism, literary inquisition (文字狱) is also responsible for the Chinese cultural disregard for humor. Literary inquisition refers to an unjust charge that rulers in the Chinese history used to persecute intellectuals (Goodrich 1935). The emperor and his entourage deliberately imprisoned writers for having used or abused words and sentences for expressing negative or hostile political, ethical or ideological implications. It stemmed from the imperial fear or anxiety over the writer’s likely disrespect for the intelligence, integrity, and capability of the ruling kings or emperors in Chinese history. Emperor Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇 250–210 B.C.), the very first emperor in China, was the first one to exercise literary inquisition to prosecute people who

<table>
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<th>Table 4. The Confucian puritanical bias against humor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Confucian values</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Confucius’s Jia Valley Principle (夹谷原则)</td>
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<td>The Confucian advocacy for Gentlemen (君子之道)</td>
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<td>The Confucian doctrine for moderation (中庸之道)</td>
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<td>The Confucian orthodox literary writings (經世之學)</td>
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dared to produce dissident opinions (Goodrich 1935). Specifically, he ordered to have some 400 scholars buried alive for their writings which were untimely or unorthodox to his ruling. This is known as the “burning of the books and burial of the scholars” (焚書坑儒, 213 B.C.) and has set a very bad example for instituting dictatorial control over dissent opinions.

Since then, Chinese emperors followed his suit to charge against people who dared to use essays, poems, novels, comics, satires or plays to air their anger or resistance against their ruling. The literary inquisition reached in a climax in the last two dynasties in China, the Ming dynasty and the Qing dynasty, during which thousands of people, educated or otherwise, were directly ordered to be prosecuted by the ruling emperors. As a result, jokes and comics were severely monitored and censored in formal interactions such that Chinese intellectuals could not laugh readily as the emperors might not want them to laugh readily (Liao 2001: 24). Moreover, in Chinese classics, humor is regarded as being facetious and deserves little attention (Chen 1985, Shi 1996).

3.3. Communist puritanism — The modern Chinese political prejudice against humor

After the downfall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, humor experienced a brief renaissance in China for about 20 years. This is the time that Lin Yu-tang and others could openly and actively promote all kinds of humor and jokes in China. However, since late 1930s, humor was under tighter political scrutiny and news censoring for maintaining moral purity in China, to which Lin was particularly frustrated. Decades later, he thus reflected:

The recognition of the role of humor in general Chinese writing, and as an element of style, is what fought for by founding and editing the first Chinese humor magazine, the Analects, some twelve years ago. I ran right into the Kuomintang (Nationalists, the ruling party of China in 1930–40s) rulers who are still very serious, and also right into the communist and leftist writers, who, encumbered with youth’s crabbed sense of responsibility to reshape the universe along Marxist lines, rather looked askance at a joke . . . . In desperation, I had to show them that humor was something considered quite proper by foreigners, and therefore ‘modern’. (Lin, 1974: xxxi)

After the communist takeover in 1949, however, the Chinese government has restricted the use of humor so as to “praise” (歌頌) rather than to “satirize” (諷刺) (Moser 2004). Few dissent voices dared point out the obvious problem,
namely that “praise” is not very funny. Comic literature was mostly equated to “political poison” during the Anti-Rightists Movement (反右運動) in 1959–1960. During the Cultural Revolution (文化大革命) in 1966–1976, humor virtually ceased to develop in China (Yue et al. 2006). It had become merely a tool of indoctrination and had been proved to be particularly fragile and unsustainable during this period (Moser 2004). All these are intended to keep people’s minds, young or old, intact from the feudal or bourgeois influence and to keep the moral purity for socialist new China. In the late 1970’s, following the end of the Cultural Revolution, humor re-experienced a renaissance as performers were again given free rein to exercise their creative power. This time the satirists had a safe and officially-sanctioned target: the Gang of Four (四人幫, the four most notorious radicals during the Cultural Revolution) and the excessive zealotry of the decade that had just ended. Jokes about the Gang of Four had been circulating publicly, and cross-talk performers were even free to show off their imitation skills to viciously parody politicians’ dialectical accents (Moser 2004). As a result, humor has thrived rapidly in China in the past two decades though there were some residual calls against humor for keeping moral purity.

Empirical evidence of Cultural bias against humor in Chinese societies

First of all, empirical studies of humor in Mainland Chinese have been really rare and sporadic. Of those few studies conducted, most works have been discussed on the linguistic and lexical criteria, to deepen people’s understanding of pragmatic effects of verbal humor in everyday life (Wang 2002; Zhou and Lu 2005; Liu 2006); or on the pedagogic criteria, to facilitate educator’s optimization of humor as an effective teaching method (Li 1995; Tang 1999; Chen 2006).

Nonetheless, Taiwan is an exception where some consistent empirical researches have been conducted. Liao (1997, 1998, 2001, 2003) reported that in Taiwan, university students generally considered themselves to be non-humorous compared with Americans. Jokes were intended to substitute unpleasant direct reprimand in the society (Liao 1998: 352), loud laughter would make people feel nervous and uncomfortable (Liao 2001: 187), self-deprecation was not for survival, but to avoid offending the listener (Liao 1997: 214), and Chinese culture pattern permits men to guffaw more than women (Liao 2003). Ho and Lin (2001) sampled 1039 junior high school Taiwanese students and found a significant stress-moderating effect of sense of humor to perceived life stress and physical-mental health. There appeared to a positive correlation between situational humor production, humorous coping skills and anxiety, insomnia and social dysfunction.
Additionally, Chen and Martin (2005) reported that Chinese students were generally less humorous than their Canadian counterparts and used less humor to cope with stress. Nonetheless, Chinese male students did use more coping humor than female students. Yue and his colleagues (Rudowicz and Yue 2000, 2003; Rudowicz 2003) found that Chinese undergraduates in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan did not value humor as an important contributing factor to creativity. Nevo et al. (2001) found that Singaporean Chinese students used fewer sexual jokes compared with American students and cared more for humorless jokes, which suggested that Singaporean Chinese students placed more emphasis on conventional behavior and living style. This finding is consistent with Castell and Goldstein’s finding (1976) that Hong Kong students preferred jokes with wise and conservative content, whereas U.S. students preferred jokes with sexual and aggressive content. Taken together, these findings suggest that humor is still very much lowly regarded and valued even though it might be highly appreciated.

Most recently, Yue et al. (2006) surveyed 178 undergraduates from Inner Mongolia Normal University and discovered that: (1) humor was ranked among the least important factors in relation to ideal Chinese personality; (2) humor was considered non-significant to some high creativity occupations; and (3) humor was represented mostly by comedians. These findings further confirm that Chinese students’ cultural bias against humor and that Chinese students were still inclined to take humor very much as an act of low taste, improper manners, social informalities, and personal immaturity.

4. Critical reflections of Chinese humor

Based on the preceding paragraphs, I would like to conclude by presenting the following critical arguments. First of all, I would argue that Chinese people have been humorous for as long as the civilization is. As rightly pointed out by Kao, “the Chinese are both a funny and humorous people and they do many fantastic and contrary things” (1974: xxix). So Chinese people never lack humor and have been highly productive and creative with humor production and comprehension. Unfortunately, due to various cultural, sociological, and political reasons, Chinese people have been highly cautious, conservative, and critical with humor appreciation. To account for this, Confucianism is culturally responsible while the extreme feudal dictatorial ruling is politically responsible.
Secondly, I would argue that though the Chinese character of *youmo* was translated from the Western word *humor*, the characters of humor have thrived in Chinese society for a long time, either in its narrow sense or in its broad sense (Ruch 1998). Since *youmo* was coined by Lin to refer to humor (Kao 1974), many Chinese took it as a dispositional character of the Western influence (Liao, 2003). Actually, the Chinese humor, over the past 2000 years, has evolved along three lines of tradition: (1) pai you – drama – witty show; (2) parable – folk jokes – political jokes; (3) folk rhymes – poems – novels (Chen 1982). This evolution of Chinese humor not only witnesses humor as one element of the comic and denotes it as a smiling attitude towards life, but also fit exactly for the Western broad sense of humor and be treated as a neutral term to stand for wit, irony, quip, sarcasm, wisecrack, non-sense, self-deprecation and so on. According to Chen (1982), Chinese jokes, from its very beginning, tried to express both “denial humor” (critical of reality) and “complimentary humor” (complimentary of reality), which is different from the “pure humor” expressed by Western jokes (just making people laugh).

Thirdly, I would argue that Chinese humor tends to differ from the Western humor in that it can be more subtle and delicate. Chen (1982) argued that Chinese humor production emphasized very much on “expressive subtleness and appreciative delicacy.” As such, Chinese jokes tend to be highly dialectic and aesthetic. Lin (Kao 1974) argued that Chinese humorists, best represented by Su Dong-po (蘇東坡 1037–1101), have been highly witty for their humorous expressions. Therefore, Lin preferred “thoughtful smile” (smile of the meeting of the hearts) to “hilarious laughter” (belly laughter). Alternatively, “thoughtful humor” best captures Chinese humor as Chinese people, for thousands of years, have learned to laugh very carefully and insightfully.

Fourthly, I would argue that Chinese people do value humor though they may not be fully aware of it. Judge Wu once remarked that “Whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, Chinese people are humorously serious” (quoted in Kao 1974: xviii). Being humorously serious, Chinese people often become quite serious and mysterious (Guo 1996; Shi 1996). As an illustration, I found in my recent study that as lowly as humor was valued among Chinese undergraduates, they actually listed all positive descriptors about what humor stood for (Yue et al. 2006) and the ranking of these positive factors associated with humor are relatively higher than negative factors (see Table 5). Alternatively, though the Chinese undergraduates devalued humor as a component of ideal personality and creativity, they did value humor as a composite character of self-refinement.
Last but not the least, I would argue that Chinese people need to find ways to enhance and express humor. Studies conducted in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong showed that Chinese undergraduates all considered themselves to be non-humorous and did want to become more humorous (Chen and Martin 2005; Liao 1998, 2001; Rudowicz and Yue 2002, 2003; Yue et al. 2006). More efforts, academic or otherwise, need to be made to promote humor as an effective way of enhancing one’s mental health, creativity, and self actualization. Wells (1971) defines humor as anything that triggers people to laugh or smile: wit, irony, non-sense, and sarcasm. Chinese people need to laugh and ridicule as much as they can (Chen 1982; Liao 1998). Chinese students would rate more favorably teachers who used humor in teaching (Chen and Martin 2006).

Humor is among the most desirable personality trait (Grotjahn 1957; Kuiper et al. 1993; Kuiper and Martin 1998) and ought to be enhanced for personal and societal empowerment (Yue et al. 2006). As what’s best humor for the Chinese, I want to finish this paper by quoting what Lin said about Chinese humor:

Thoughtful humor, however, is based on the perception of human errors, incongruities, cant, and hypocrisy, which admittedly are shared by all of us. The comic spirit is that human understanding which, being higher than academic intelligence, rises above the confusion and self-deception of our common notions, and points its finger at life’s sham, futility, and follies. (Lin 1974: PAGE #)

Table 5. Top 10 factors associated with sense of humor by Chinese undergraduates (source Yue et al. 2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pleasant character</td>
<td>9.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broad knowledge</td>
<td>8.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>7.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appropriate response</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimism</td>
<td>6.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressiveness</td>
<td>5.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulation</td>
<td>4.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quick wit</td>
<td>4.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associative thinking</td>
<td>4.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun-making</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>61.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The City University of Hong Kong
Notes

Correspondence address: ssxdyue@cityu.edu.hk

* It is not accurate to say youmo was the earliest Chinese translation for humor. The word “humor” was first translated into Chinese as Oumuya (歐穆亞) by Wang Guo-wei (王國維, 1827–1927), a Chinese master in Qing Dynasty and further reinforced by Lin Yu-tang. However, youmo is more widely accepted and officially used than Oumuya. So in this paper, we would like to consider youmo as the earliest Chinese translation for humor.

Lin Yu-tang entered St. John University in Shanghai in 1914, later studied at Harvard University and eventually earned his Ph.D in linguistics at Leipzig University in Germany.

Su Dong-po was a well-known essayist, poet, calligrapher, humorist, and politician in the mid Song Dynasty. He was most well known for having “an incorrigible, propensity for cracking jokes at the expense of his enemies, friends, and himself” (Lin Yu-tang 1974).

References


Exploration of Chinese humor


