

HUMOUR AS A MODE OF COGNITION

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It is surprising how little has been written about humour in anthropology and how limited our understanding of this social phenomenon is. For post-modern anthropology, irony has been an attractive theme, of course, as it has been for linguistic pragmatics. In literary and cultural studies a recent outburst of interest in irony can be gleaned not only in new Caribbean and francophone studies, but also in Chinese studies (e.g. Chey and Milner 2011). There are, however, many more subtle and unverballed moments of the comic that infuse daily life. In Mulkay's (1988:1) words: "Humour is one of the few basic social phenomena which occur in all groups throughout the course of human history."¹ Rather than elaborating on the well-rehearsed functions of laughter and social control (e.g. Billig 2005), this chapter discusses a cognitive component of humour to date barely acknowledged.

Experiencing a situation as comic is both a very personal and very social event, infectious and uplifting at once. The comic can enhance, broaden and deepen human understanding in that it allows us to perceive a situation from more than a single point of view. This is why kings had fools (*der Hofnarr*) to tell the truth and at the same time generate the disarming smile. The comic does not merely reveal the known that cannot be said, like the Emperor wearing no clothes. It also provides a means of inquiry, or a mode of cognition, that makes it possible to dare to embark on an attempt at comprehending the unknowable.

When speaking of what their social world considers "unknowable", people often assume a humorous tone. To investigate the "unknowable" in a serious way would be inadequate, preposterous, even blasphemous, while a predilection for the comic goes with an appreciation for tensions and surprise, ambiguities, multiple perspectives and the awareness of a potentially complete annihilation of oneself. Some people, more than others, are drawn to know more about issues that are unknowable. They are driven towards questions for which commonly there are no answers, questions that tend to be addressed in the realm of "religion". Yet, as we will see, questions generally considered "religious in essence", need not be dealt with merely in religious institutions and theology. They have been addressed - in a humorous tone - in genres

as disparate as those of medieval grammar and wisdom literatures, African political speech and riddles, and an early Chinese historiographical work.

Redeeming laughter

Redeeming laughter was written in retirement by a sociologist, Peter Berger (1997), known for his “inimitable live tone and chuckle”², but it cannot be relegated to a specific discipline. Berger (1997:xxx) says he had to improvise as he went along. Philosophers had been of “only modest use”: he mentions Plato and Aristotle, Cicero, Erasmus, Descartes, Molière, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Bergson, touches on Pascal and Baudelaire, and among the more recent philosophers discusses Joachim Ritter, Francis Jeanson and Marie Collins Swabey.

Berger foregrounds the so-called incongruity theory, saying that the comic can “pop out” of what appears as an “ordinary box”, referring to *Doppelbödigkeit*: it can hint at another reality in a way that is unexpected. Hence the comic can be experienced as slightly threatening but has a “cognitive component” (*ibid.* 33-35) that resolves the tension.³ Berger builds here strongly on Swabey’s insight that recognition of the comic can enhance one’s intellectual capacities.⁴ This insight is key to the discussion that follows. The comic can widen one’s horizon of understanding (*ibid.*: 65-86, drawing on Schutz 1962: 207 ff. and Zijderveld 1976, 1982) or deepen it, particularly when one experiences the comic, like the sacred, as providing an entry into another “reality”. The experience of the comic is not merely an emotional process, Berger notes, it pertains also to the intellect. “The question is”, as he (*ibid.* 32) puts it, “just what this intellectual or cognitive contribution of the comic is.”

Berger poses the question succinctly but his answers are not entirely satisfactory. The limitations would appear to lie in his modernist understanding of humanity, which can be gleaned, for instance, from the structure of the book. In a modernist way Berger segregates “The anatomy of the comic” (Part I) from “Comic forms of expression” (Part II). This Cartesianism has him discuss biological and cultural aspects of humour in separate chapters: “The physiology and psychology of the comic” and “The social construction of the comic” in Part I, and different styles of expressing humour in Part II: benign humour, tragicomedy, wit and satire.

The third and final part of the book entitled “Toward a theology of the comic”, discusses holy fools, as known particularly from the Christian orthodox tradition, and

their “folly as redemption”. Experience of the comic is likened to moments of transcendence.⁵ Berger does not take recourse to the word “spirituality”, and he does not say that such experience tends to be relegated into the religious sphere, but his writing seems to gesture towards it. Importantly, he notes that being earnest as opposed to funny is typical of a modern sensibility. He describes the awareness of such a “distinctively modern comic sensibility” as “witty, sardonic, very much detached” (*ibid.* 215). Yet, in his view, the capacity for experiencing the comic is not merely a superficial and marginal aspect of human life. Quite the contrary: experiencing the comic is a profound human experience.

Berger ends with a comment on “faith”, and its contribution to cognition in that it introduces a new epistemological perspective on the everyday. Faith provides a different, “metaempirical” way, he says (*ibid.* 213), for comprehending the human condition. However, by calling it meta-empirical Berger hints at a perceived lack of empiricism among those living in faith. Once again he thereby demonstrates that he is a modernist. What if Berger had been less patronizing? With his seminal book on the experience of the comic he points in the right direction. However, we will depend on others to be guided deeper into the issues at stake.

To summarise, *Redeeming Laughter* is central to our discussion of word play as its author does not reduce the comic to a structural functionalist analysis but provides a rich and insightful account of the experience of the comic and the moments of incongruity that it produces. However, what if Berger (*ibid.* 33) had not reduced pre-modern, and particularly medieval, scholarship to the writings of few philosophers whom he brushed aside all too soon: “In classical and medieval philosophy, discussions of the comic are few and far between, and where they occur they tend to deal with the moral issue of laughter (usually in a pejorative mode)”. As for so many enlightened modernists, medieval scholarship is of the Dark Ages, and thoroughly misunderstood. Yet, as we will see in the following section, medieval scholarship, with its commitment to theology, commented on God, faith and the otherworldly with wit and profundity.

Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and word play

In her study of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus (seventh century CE), Vivien Law (1995) speaks of “word play” rather than “puns”. She does not explain why but one

can easily guess: in common parlance today puns are associated with nursery rhymes and political satire. In other words, even for the medievalist, the word pun conjures up certain modernist associations. Puns belong among the “art of memory”, which in medieval times consisted of very sophisticated techniques indeed (e.g. Carruthers 1990). In other words, puns are in a modernist’s mind associated with either ephemeral, superficial and childlike ways of having fun or celebrated as a mnemonic technique of bygone times that have been superseded by computer technology.

Vivien Law’s take on word play and puns is different. She guides us into a reading of a treatise that was brought to her attention as a historian of linguistics, because it presented itself as a Latin grammar. However, as the secondary literature on this treatise had already noted, it was a perplexing one. Some analysts doubted its author’s command of Latin, which, as they said, should not be surprising in view of his peripheral provenance: Ireland; others questioned his knowledge of grammar. Law took a different stance in that she took his voice at face value: “All we can do is to listen for hints from the author as to how to read his work. If their application provides a consistent reading, then we may be on the right track” (Law 1995:11). However, the reader soon notes that this leads to the question: “Which of his [Maro’s] statements are sincere, which tongue-in-cheek?” (*ibid.* 11). We learn of his playful predilection for wisdom by “simultaneously hinting at its presence and concealing its features” (*ibid.* 35).

By treating punning as “word play”, Law foregrounds the notion of play. In contrast to humour, play has received due attention in the anthropological literature. Huizinga’s (1955) *Homo Ludens* makes play to a basic human activity,⁶ and Bateson (1972) underlines that adult human beings, as well as children, have play in common with animals. Accordingly, all ritual activity could be framed as a form of play. Indeed, as Kapferer (2004:37-39) points out, we owe it to Victor Turner that ritual is today understood not merely as a social form that consolidates power relations and the Durkheimian “collective representations” but also as a form of action that provides a space for creativity and change. Rites are now seen as intervening “technically” with “self formation”, they are “pragmatically oriented” and both develop and exploit “particular symbolic formations”, so as to “shape human perception and thereby transform experience” (*ibid.*). Such insights, derived from an anthropological analysis of ritual, may apply to play and word play as well.

Word play then becomes comparable to the medieval commentaries on the “wound of Christ”, which, as Caroline Bynum (2011: 195-208, figures 44-48) shows, are manifest in paintings of the crucifixion, in stylized graphic emblems, in talismans and sculptures, woven into and printed onto textiles that were used in the context of birthing. The wound is here related to the death of Christ for the life of humanity and conveys the hope of resurrection, and the pain surrounding the processes of dying and birthing more generally. The wound of Christ is emblematic of the sorrows of the human condition and, in turning the slit of the wound from the horizontal to the vertical position, surely also of the joy of making life. The texts investigated, the drawings and sculptures, woven cloths and textile prints all seem to comment, from different angles, playfully, on the mystery of life as comprehended through the faith in the “wound of Christ”.

To call these titillating approximations of the mystery of life a form of “punning” comes across as irreverent to the modern reader. However, this seems to be precisely what motivated their artful creation. Likewise, [folk] etymologies and allegories of classical deities, which play on rhyme and figurative speech, today appear trivial if not banal. However, allegorical word play that was simultaneously revealing and concealing, presents itself as a way through which one could speak about these deities and the ineffable truths they stood for (Glenn Most, unpubl.).

This playfulness follows certain rules, as Law is able to demonstrate in regard of Virgilius’ exposition, with great sensitivity and scholarly knowledge of the period. As here discussion of this medieval text proceeds, the reader finds herself embroiled in a detective story that can rival Umberto Eco’s *Name of the Rose*, which coalesced around the loss of Aristotle’s second book of *Poetics* (that, fitting to the discussion here, was supposedly on laughter). The difference is that Law’s scholarly text is just as gripping and does not reproduce the usual modernist assumption about laughing in medieval times. We learn, for instance, that

Far from being mutually exclusive, ... various interpretations existed simultaneously, enriching the reader’s understanding with their interpenetrating levels of meaning (Law 1995:4).

The goal of the scholar was not to be reductionist and aim to find one correct interpretation through the exclusion of others. Rather, human understanding was thought to be enhanced, and deepened, through a multiplication of interpretations. Importantly, those multiple interpretations should not be seen as paralleling each other, but as interpenetrating and interlacing with each other. Virgilius' playful style leads us into an ever more complex and complicated world of thought experimentation, peppered with paradox hinting at the unfathomable.

What is this word play all about, and why is it relevant to the discussion of humour? The answer lies in the genre, with which Law eventually identifies this text. In this genre the voice alternates between tongue-in-cheek and matter-of-fact statements. It is brim-full with humorous word play. It plays on irony by stating the blatantly wrong and by overdoing what should be done, e.g. by over-quoting authoritative texts in number, and attribution of merit. Law traces the seemingly anomalous structural elements in this piece to those of the medieval genre of wisdom literature.

To a modernist, wisdom is an earnest and serious matter. If anything, wittiness might be humorous. Now Law tells us that Virgilius' parodies and word play belong in the genre of wisdom literature. This may remind us of Berger's question asking just what the cognitive contribution of the comic is. Berger's modernism had him discuss wittiness in Oscar Wilde, where language use becomes an intellectual game. Clearly, the wit and wittiness in this 19th century author is not to be confused with the wit that the medieval wisdom literature aimed to cultivate.

Wit in medieval times was about the comprehension of God and his world. Wisdom was not the one and only aspect of human perception and cognition that, as psychologists found (xxx), increases with age, while all other aspects decline (hearing, seeing, doing calculations, memorizing, etc.). Rather, wit referred to a faculty that could be enhanced through assiduous training. The conviction was that "the daily practice of reading brings with it an increase in the acuteness of one's intelligence" (Virgilius, cited in Law 1995:41). The incongruities that philosophers and other authors thinking about humour have identified as one of its defining features abound in the word play of the medieval wisdom literature. They sharpen one's wits.

Puzzlement is edifying

The idea that word play has a cognitive component is by no means limited to medieval Europe. James Fernandez (1980) who worked among the Fang in West Africa, however, speaks less of word play as a means for sharpening the acuity of anyone's wit, than of its ability to be "cosmogonic" in that it can "edify" the collectivity of the listeners. The word play that constituted the sermons of the Bwiti movement leaders, and also the riddles of the Fang and Kpelle more generally, would result in what he called "edification - an emergent sense of a larger meaningful whole" (Fernandez 1980:53).

The interpretive task, Fernandez suggested, consisted in providing context for the text. The meaning of the "subtle words" had to be inferred from their cultural embedding, and situational circumstance. The obligation to contextualize these words was much greater than textual interpretation generally requires, he maintained, because there is "a lack of expository and didactic aids". By speaking of "a lack" he evidently aimed to make himself understood by a modernist audience of Western anthropologists, anticipating that they would consider the Bwiti sermons "diffuse and spontaneous in the extreme" (*ibid.*). In his analysis, however, the sequence of images they evoked – body images, forest images, suspended things images, food images, and the like – linked together cultural experiences from a whole variety of different domains. The sermons were "cosmogonic", he explained, in so far as "a cosmological integrity is suggested if not made explicit" (*ibid.* 53-54).

Anyone who works on literary Chinese texts of Chinese antiquity will recognize the peculiarities of the interpretive task that Fernandez refers to when emphasizing that word meaning depends on context. However, the suggestion that the constitution of word meaning by this constant back and forth movement between text and context has a cosmogonic function has to my knowledge not been emphasized in Chinese studies. Yet it is instantly appealing. In particular, it provides purpose to the editors who compiled texts from different provenances, by juxtaposing them.

To explain in more detail the edification through puzzlement that these Bwiti movement sermons effected, Fernandez analyses the standard forms of word play in riddles. This word play connects the phenomena of the world in two ways, he says. They play on, first, the metaphoric relation of a word (which emphasizes similarity) and, second, its metonymic relation (which stresses contiguity). Thus, if the riddle is:

“long legs, sharp thighs, no neck, big eyes”, the feeling of edification in the answer “scissors” derives from finding a common structure, metaphor being transformed into metonym, such that human body parts and scissors belong to one world. The transformation of contiguities into similarities, and vice versa, is according to Fernandez, who reminds us here of Levi-Strauss (1966), “fundamentally edifying” (*ibid.* 49-50).

Nowadays, one hesitates to appreciate reasoning in terms of metaphors and metonyms because the people themselves do not use this framework (and its implied ontologies) to think and theorise about their verbal interactions. Yet, let us momentarily suspend judgement: if the comic arises from a sense of incongruity, then it is constitutive of the tension provoked by the riddle, which these processes of transformation into belonging to one world will resolve. The comic accordingly emerges as an intrinsic prerequisite for edification. This is a much more radical view of the comic and its relation to cognition than the medieval understanding fleshed out above. Rather than seeing in the comic merely a medium through which we can approximate ultimate mystery, we may think of the comic itself as constitutive of such ultimate mysteries.

The comic as intrinsically constitutive of edification throws an entirely different light on riddles with sexual innuendo. We might be inclined to put them off as “dirty jokes”,⁷ and so may have some medieval scholars in the Christian tradition, and with them, perhaps, perhaps not, Virgilius (Law says little on this). However, among the Fang and Kpelle, the riddles with sexual innuendo are really about the ultimate mystery of life, the union of man and woman. Fernandez notes this in his appraisal of Köngas Maranda’s work on riddles:

In a Durkheimian manner Köngas Maranda suggests that the final referent for riddles is to some basic aspect of human behavior – a kind of language in which a group talks of its most basic social action – the union of man and woman (1980:48).

With this in mind, let us return to medieval Europe and look at the sculpture of the 14th-15th century where three penises carry a vagina in procession (Bynum 2011:204). Clearly, it is a pun on the “Wound of Christ”. However, why is it so bawdy? Bynum

mentions “mockery of pilgrim hypocrisy” (*ibid.* 204) and notes that “it was quite possible for medieval devotees and critics to see – and use satirically - the sexual overtones of devotional objects” (*ibid.* 205). However, if we free ourselves from our prudishness and transpose Köngas Maranda’s insight into medieval Christendom, humour relating to sexual union takes on an entirely different value. Puns of the kind need not only be seen as objects of parody and satire, and ridicule that causes shame. Rather they are about an inquiry into an ultimate truth. To conclude with Fernandez: “All this [word play] is rarely done in a and explicit manner. ‘By indirections find directions out’.” (*ibid.* 50 check). Needless to say that this applies particularly to the ultimate mystery of human flourishing.

Shiji, chapter 105: beyond political satire

Equipped with the insights into humour of the modernist Peter Berger, the medievalist scholars Vivien Law and Caroline Bynum, and the Africanist anthropologists James Fernandez and Köngas Maranda, let us now revisit my published work on a Memoir included in the first dynastic history of China about an ancient Chinese physician, Chunyu Yi (Hsu 2010a). The text caught my attention because it seemed to me formulaic. At the time I took formulaic linguistic expression as a sign that the physician who wrote the case histories, Chunyu Yi, had a sense of being ‘systematic’ and that he was in so far ‘scientific’. In each case history he prognosticated whether the patient would die or not, and if he predicted recovery, he provided treatment. All the prognostications he reported on were correct, and all his treatments effective. Chunyu Yi seemed to reason according to a certain rationale and presented meticulous detail but I could not understand it. The study I embarked on was a sort of detective work for decoding an encrypted medical rationale in the twenty-five medical case histories that his Memoir contained.

I noted that certain linguistic expressions were recurrent and introduced specific themes, which I identified as relating to the names of the disorder, its cause and tactile qualities of pulse diagnostic investigation. The main argument of my published work was that in the first ten cases the names of the disorder were determined not so much by the cause of the disorder (as they are supposed to be in contemporary Western biomedicine), as by the tactile qualities that the physician felt when he examined the

pulse, *zhen mai*. I demonstrated in each of the ten cases that the different qualities of the *mai* that he identified correlated, in an additive fashion, with each of the constituent components in the name of a disorder.

The implications of my study are important for the design of health care, also today: we do not need to spend most of our energy on improving diagnostic devices for knowing what happened to a patient in the past. Rather, in line with studies of other medical anthropologists, my findings implied that in order to design strategies of treatment, it was of foremost importance to identify the potential that the present holds (among which the socially complex process of agreeing upon an illness “cause” may belong). By engaging in a tactile diagnostic practice and claiming that touch attends to the present, I argued that the ancient doctor Chunyu Yi adhered to a medical ideology to identify on what the present holds when aiming to provide medical treatment.

Why did I focus on cases 1-10? Their narrative structure and the medical rationale they contained was fairly consistent, furthermore, they clearly called for a humorous reading: cases 1-10 contained evident political satire. For instance, in eight out of ten cases, which concerned almost all the nobility of Qi, wine and women were mentioned as cause of the disorder. This pointed to debauchery at the court of the famous and once powerful kingdom of Qi in Eastern China. Considering that these medical case histories have been handed down to us today in a chapter of China’s first dynastic history, it was instantly clear to me that these case histories had been included in this work to bring across a political message, coded in a medical jargon.

Humour, I claim, in its various forms, is integral to several parts of this text; it may be situational or packaged into standard linguistic forms of word play. A careful reading of this word play can be used for text critical studies (see Hsu forthcoming), and makes it possible to reconfirm differences in narrative culture between cases 1-10 versus cases 11-25, the latter in all likelihood being edited by another editor than the former. This does not mean that cases 1-10 form a unity; they differ from one another in many ways that remain unexplained. Nevertheless, certain ordering features can be identified. For instance, they come in pairs: 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 9, 6 and 10, 7 and 8. Furthermore, all contain textual materials that can be shown to implicitly refer to the *yin yang* body as conceived in pre-dynastic feudal China, where sentiment and

distemper among the nobility may have been of foremost concern to the court physicians (Hsu 2008-09).

Thus, cases 1 and 2 discuss a disorder in the lower *yin* and upper *yang* parts of a bipartite *yin yang* body. In the extant *Shiji* text they are disorders of the liver and heart respectively. Cases 3 and 4 form another *yinyang* pair, referring to a disorder of excessive coldness and heat respectively, that results in a congealment and a heating of the bodily waters. Cases 6 and 10 also form a pair based on a pre-dynastic conception of the body, namely that a hard external form (*xing*) contains the elusive *qi* inside the body. Case 6 concerns a collapse of the form (*xing*), case 10 a *qi* amassment in the abdomen. In current Chinese medical terms, they concern a depletion (*xuzheng*) and repletion pattern (*shizheng*). The reading of these two cases is particularly difficult in their extant form, because they both are textual composites.

The cases that in my reading are most thoroughly infused with the comic are cases 7 and 8 and particularly, cases 5 and 9. Cases 7 and 8 form a pair in that they concern Qi nobility who die from constipation and diarrhea respectively. It took me a long time to realize this, but when the penny finally dropped, I had to smile while sitting at the desk. In fact, this humorous interpretation reassured me that I was right, as now these two cases matched in tone the surrounding ones. However, unlike the others, the narrative in cases 7 and 8 is repetitive and lacks the evocative imagery of the others. Moreover, cases 7 and 8 foreground divination methods for prognosticating death (as do the latter parts of cases 1 and 6), rather than reporting on successful treatment. In biomedical terms, cases 7 and 8 are about the digestive tract, rather than the urogenital system, although the anthropology of humour reminds us that for some people dirty jokes can be about both, pooh and sex.

Cases 5 and 9 form a pair too in that they allude to a gendered *yin yang* body, and the humorous aspects in these two cases will preoccupy us in the remainder of this chapter. I have discussed these two cases already (Hsu 2007), and interpreted moments in them as containing the political satire with which the second century BCE editor Sima Qian seems to have imbued all of the first ten cases (Hsu 2010a). However, in the course of writing this chapter, I realized that these two cases differ from the other eight in that humour infuses them in every aspect. To be sure, there is word play that one can trace to an editorially introduced parody, and I will discuss it, so my former reading was not entirely wrong. However, the many comic moments

that are constitutive of the two cases 5 and 9 would suggest that we are dealing here with an attempt to approximate an ultimate truth regarding the body politic, namely the fecundity of royalty.

Speaking tongue-in-cheek about the fecundity of royalty

To begin with, the cause of the disorder is in both cases 5 and 9 given as sweating. This naturally causes some consternation. Sweating is usually considered a symptom of a sickness, not its cause. To think of royalty dripping from sweat, like a peasant toiling his fields, creates an incongruity that certainly was meant to be comic. The activities royalty busied itself with were evidently hard work (*lao*), and indeed the expenditure of sexual energies has been categorized as labour, *lao*, throughout the history of Chinese medicine to the present day. Effecting sexual union is a rank-specific form of labour. The mood in which this is said is surely tongue-in-cheek. In Kōngas Maranda's words the text is here referring to an "ultimate mystery". It is as though truths of the kind can be cognized only in this tongue-in-cheek way.

In case 5, which concerns the queen dowager of Qi, the illness was caused by profuse sweating and a subsequent drying up due to an excessive exposure to *yang* and in case 9, the king of Jibei suffers from what one would call today a *yang* depletion, due to an excessive exposure to *yin*. These *yinyang* bodies were presumably 'sentimental bodies', as those recognized by pre-dynastic court physicians, and the excessive *yin* and *yang* exposures are likely to have been erotic indulgences with the opposite sex. However, in both cases, additional information relating to an ecological aetiology is given in the subsequent clause, after the one that gives profuse sweating as cause of the disorder. These two added clauses explain that the excessive *yang* the queen dowager suffered from arose from excessive exposure to sunlight and the king's excessive *yin* came from lying prostrate on the ground. The additional clause makes the reading of exposures to *yin* and *yang* as relating in a sentimental fashion to the opposite sex seem unlikely in the extant text (as these additional clauses speak of an ecologically delicate body, sensitive to sun light and to dampness in the ground, thereby emphasizing the ecological aspects of the cosmological *yang* heaven and *yin* earth, to which royalty would have exposed itself while dripping from sweat after sexual intercourse).

The disorder that the queen dowager suffered from is called *feng dan ke pao* and that of the king *feng jue*. We do not know what these terms designate but I have approximated them in translation as meaning, in the case of *dan ke pao* ‘fatigue/lassitude is visiting the bladder’ and in the case of *jue* ‘numbness’. Furthermore, both have the prefix *feng*, which means ‘wind’. I will return to the latter observation later but let me here dwell on *dan* and *jue*, as those terms are well-known names for disorders in the canonical medical literature. The word *dan* is a very old one, and refers to feelings of utter exhaustion and listlessness, and to a longing and lassitude that accompanies love sickness.⁸ The word *jue* is old too, and indicates a situation past one’s prime, an attenuation of one’s strength, or it refers to an ‘inversion’ of *yin* and *yang*. The terms *dan* and *jue* reconfirm – tongue-in-cheek – that royalty has overexerted itself and is in a state of utter exhaustion and impotent.

Likewise, the treatment that restored royalty back to health has a humorous note. The treatment can be read as being gender specific: the woman drinks a “tea”, the man a beer. The queen dowager recovers after drinking twice *huoji tang*, which, following Yamada Keiji (1998), I propose to translate as “a broth prepared through a careful regulation of fire”.⁹ The king of Jibei recovers after drinking a *yaojiu*, an alcoholic drink which presumably contained macerated, medicinal drugs. In antiquity only kings and sages had the privilege to drink *yaojiu*. We note that this medical treatment enhances the king’s royal status and social standing. The king had to drink three “stones” of it, which according to a commentator was very much but doable (3 x 20 litres?). Again, we note that medical treatment that involved such drinking no doubt demonstrated his masculinity. The final cure was to wash out the excessive *yin* that lodged in his body by means of urination. The king’s potency was thereby once again reconfirmed, as in my reading, he was loudly “roaring like a waterfall”. The humor in the recounting of the king of Jibei’s recovery is situational, and not contained in a linguistic demonstrable form. So, it is difficult to prove that my reading is correct and I am not indulging in dirty fantasies by mistranslating a corrupt passage, which all commentators of the last two thousand years interpreted in an entirely different way.

In summary, cases 5 and 9 stand out in that they are suffused with a subtle humor. First, we pointed to the tongue-in-cheek remarks regarding aetiology: sweating from physical labour. Second, we noted that the names of the disorders *dan* and *jue* both

underline the complete plight royalty experienced. Third, regarding the treatment, which was gender-specific - the woman was given a tea, the man alcohol - the king's treatment had a comic aspect as hyperbolically it enhanced his masculinity and royal rank. Evidently the two cases are thoroughly infused with the comic. Is this a parody of privilege? Yes, certainly it is, but not only. The tongue-in-cheek mood in which the plight of royalty is told is not merely a cynical comment on the feudal body politic in the wake of Empire building but reminds us also of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and Könga Marandas: humour is the requisite mode of cognition when it comes to a mystery of life as is the fecundity of royalty.

The prefix *feng* in the names of both disorders underlines this. Now, to any reader since medieval times, *feng* instantly evokes the idea of madness, irregularity and irresponsibility. This is indeed what this prefix may have evoked in many a reader, particularly in Late Imperial China. If a king suffered from a disorder that was wind-induced, surely this meant that he was out of his mind and his kingdom in disarray. However, in Chinese antiquity the term *feng* also connotes regularity and recurrent seasonal change. It refers to age-old custom, regional climate and local conduct. In the manuscript texts from Mawangdui and Zhangjiashan from the second century BCE rising heat in the *yang* brightness vessel (*yang ming zhi mai*) resulted in madness. So in these third and second century BCE medical texts madness was not primarily thought to be wind-induced.¹⁰

The concept of wind had yet another connotation. Roel Sterckx comments:

Perhaps the earliest occurrence of 'wind' expressing mutual attraction between male and female species occurs in a passage in the *Zuozhuan* ... Other texts link wind with the idea of "germination" (*meng* 萌), and present insects (*chong* 蟲) as the seminal essence of wind (Sterckx 2002:179).

So, the fecundity of royalty was here being likened to that of insects! From a cross-cultural perspective, it makes perfect sense that ancient Chinese royalty, just like an African village chief or a sultan of the Ottoman Empire, should be preoccupied with fecundity and the production of offspring (with the help of many

wives). This is a serious and prestigious matter, but instantiating the unequal standing between kings and insects was surely meant to conjure up an incongruity that is comic.

Making fun of medics: the editor's parody

Yet another humorous element is packed into cases 5 and 9 but it is of a different order. It comes across as a joke. In order to get the point, it needs to be sketched out in the following few paragraphs. It is about this prefix *feng*, which means wind. In case 5 the name of the disorder, *feng dan ke pao*, is made up of three constitutive nouns and in case 9 of two, *feng* and *jue*. According to the schema of the medical rationale I presented above, the three nouns in case 5 should correlate with three qualities of *mai* and the two nouns in case 9 with two qualities of *mai*. The qualities of *mai* I identified on the basis of text structural criteria are *fengqi*, *shi* and 'the opening of the major yin' in case 5, and *fengqi* and *zhuo* in case 9. In case 5 the *mai* feels *shi*, moist, and in case 9 it feels *zhuo*, murky. The *mai* that is moist (probably from perspiration) must have been indicative of the queen dowager's *dan* disorder of utter exhaustion and the *mai* that is murky presumably indicates the king's *jue* disorder, which, as established above, consists of an attenuation if not an inversion of his potency. In case 5, the moist is felt at a certain place, the opening of the major yin, and the *dan* disorder is lodging (*ke*) in a certain place, the bladder called *pao*. So, the 'opening of the major yin' probably correlates with *pao*, the bladder (this is a correlation that makes sense to anyone familiar with alchemical thought in China, where the major yin and the kidney/bladder both correlate with water and hence also with each other, but to make this connection, I had to prove two renowned Chinese scholars wrong).

The difficulties in textual exegesis are at this stage not yet over. The problem that now arises is that neither the pulse quality *shi*, moist, nor *zhuo*, murky, is a standard one in the Chinese medical literature, past or present. One could stop the analysis here and say everything is inconclusive and nothing more can be said with any reasonable certainty about this text. Or, one could argue, as I have done, that these pulse qualities were common medical terms in antiquity but fell into oblivion later in Imperial times. I showed with regard to all *mai* mentioned in cases 1-10 that the different *mai* have an iconic-indexical quality that they share with the disorders they indicate.

In cases 5 and 9 the disorders in question are *dan* and *jue*. In order to make the *mai* that feels moist, *shi* (presumably due to droplets of perspiration on the skin), stand in an iconic-indexical relation to the disorder *dan*, one has to surmise that physical labour, which caused sweating, resulted in lassitude and longing. Once one has made this connection, the reading is plausible: the quality of *mai* is moist from sweating and due to the activity that caused the sweating the patient is now in a state of listlessness and utter exhaustion. The relation between the moist and the lassitude is indexical-
iconic: both connote *yin* and immobility.

The pulse quality *zhuo*, which is given as a pulse quality in the extant text (not without causing puzzlement to the commentators), is a cosmological term, an opposite of *qing*, clear. The terms *zhuo* and *qing* are sometimes used in place of *yin* and *yang*.¹¹ We are here reminded that *jue* refers to an inversion of *yin* and *yang*, or an attenuation, in case 9, of *yang*. So, we can appreciate a possible indexical-iconic affinity between the pulse quality *zhuo* and the name of the disorder *jue*, in so far as both implicitly allude to a *yin yang* cosmology. So, by means of these sorts of learned medical considerations we may now conclude, after a lengthy step by step procedure, that a moist *mai* may indeed have indicated lassitude in the queen dowager and a murky one a state of complete numbness in the king.

However, when we look at the disorder name's prefix *feng* in cases 5 and 9, we find that it correlates in a very straightforward way with the pulse quality *fengqi*: a windy pulse indicates a wind-induced disorder. Vow, how simple! We have just been harnessing ourselves for yet another complicated exegesis and we find that *fengqi* indicates *feng*. This finding is a bit deflating. It surely must be a joke! It comes across as a parody of complicated scholarly medical reasoning. It is for this reason that I postulate that the prefix *feng* was added by an editor who used the term – not in the sense it has in medicine since medieval times – but in the sense it generally had in antiquity: fecundity.¹²

Perhaps, *dan ke pao* and *jue* were medical terms that a physician used and, perhaps, we should read the extant text in a humorous way and interpret the prefix *feng* in the disorders *feng dan ke pao* and *feng jue* as a tongue-in-cheek editorial addition? Accordingly, there would have been a primary document written by a scholarly medical doctor, and the prefix *feng* would have been added by a just as learned historian-cum-editor, say Sima Qian, whose word play made fun both of

royalty's preoccupation with fecundity and inflated medical reasoning. If this were so, another study on humour in the *Shiji* might be warranted that takes word play as text critical device (see Hsu forthcoming).

Discussion

Cases 1-10 in the *Shiji* chapter 105 gripped my imagination for over two decades. Every summer, as I came afresh to it, I saw more in it. Some people value in the humorous primarily the light-hearted and funny, but the comic contains within it a further going cognitive component. We need not deny that allusions to debauchery at court had an edge of political satire in cases 1-10 of Chunyu Yi's Memoir but Könga Maranda's insight draws attention to deeper aspects of humour. The sense of incongruity that they bring about often appear as the only way to approximate the ultimately unknowable.

We saw that Virgilius Maro Grammaticus' word play centers on matters so profound that it is difficult to fathom them. The wit and wisdom he seeks is infused with creation's mystery and, ultimately, God. Similarly, the imagery that the sermons of the Bwiti leaders evoked was playful and spontaneous, yet also cosmogonic, thereby providing a foundation for their movement. Finally, the riddles of the Fang and Kpelle inquire so often into the ultimate mystery of life that is the union of man and woman.

It is thanks to an anthropology of humour that I can rest assured that it is not a 'dirty mind' alone that lead me to interpret the case materials in Chunyu Yi's Memoir with sexual innuendo. On the one hand, it made it possible to highlight that they contain, apart from satire, deeper-going meanings of the humorous, on the other, it made me realize how many humorous readings, particularly of dirty jokes, are likely to cling to the surface if one does not consider the possibility that humour is a mode of cognition.

Appendix

[Case 5]

The queen dowager of the King of Qi fell ill. They summoned your servant, Yi. I entered [the palace] to examine the *mai*. I said: "A wind-induced condition caused by overexertion is visiting the bladder. One has difficulties with defecating and urinating,

and the urine is dark." Your servant, Yi, had her drink the broth [prepared by careful] regulation of fire. After drinking the first dose, she immediately could urinate and defecate. After drinking the second, the illness ceased. She urinated as before. The illness was contracted because while dripping with sweat, she went outside to dry up. In cases of drying up, having removed one's clothes, the sweat dries in the sunlight.

The means whereby I recognised the illness of the queen dowager of the King of Qi were that when your servant, Yi, examined her *mai*, and when I pressed onto the opening of the major *yin*, it was damp. In spite of this there was wind *qi*. The "Mai fa" says: "In cases where when as one sinks [into the *mai*], it is very firm, and when as one floats [on the surface of the *mai*], it is very tight, the host of the disorder resides in the kidneys." When I pressed onto the kidneys, it was the other way round. The *mai* was large, yet hurried. In cases when it is large, it is *qi* [coming] from the bladder. In cases when it is hurried, the interior has heat and the urine is dark.

[Case 9]

The King of Jibei fell ill. They summoned your servant, Yi. I examined his *mai*. I said: "A wind-induced numbness/inversion. The chest feels full." Forthwith, I prepared a drugged wine. After drinking three times twenty litres, the illness ceased. He contracted it from sweating and lying prostrate on the ground.

The means whereby I recognised the illness of the king of Jibei were that at the time when your servant, Yi, pressed onto his *mai*, it was wind *qi*. The *mai* [coming] from the heart was murky. According to the "Model of Disorders", if one excessively makes one's *yang* enter, then, while the *yang qi* is exhausted, the *yin qi* enters. If the *yin qi* enters and expands, then, while the cold *qi* ascends, the hot *qi* descends. Hence the chest feels full. As for the sweating and lying prostrate on the ground, when I pressed onto his *mai*, the *qi* was *yin*. In cases of *yin qi*, the illness must have entered and struck the interior. When one expels it, it reaches a degree of swishing water.

Endnotes

¹ Most authors writing on humour claim it is a uniquely human capacity, but ethological research on the Bonobo shows they play, smile and laugh (xxx), and more

theoretical reflections break down the boundaries between humans and animals (Ingold 2000).

² Os Guinness, see comment on the book's cover page.

³ We are reminded here, with Desmond Morris, that smiling is derived from a threatening grimace, i.e. a showing of one's teeth, to let the other know one's strength (the cognitive component), but only momentarily. Hence a smile is ultimately disarming.

⁴ Accordingly, she notes, "comic laughter" should be distinguished from other types of laughter (e.g. ridicule, embarrassment, etc.).

⁵ As for so many academics in old age, the prospect of death moves the mind. For a modernist colleague this can be embarrassing (see the rather bland comments on the cover page).

⁶ Huizinga (1955) outlines three basic features of play: All play is "voluntary"; is "not ordinary life"; has its "own course and meaning". Genuine play has formal characteristics: it creates order, endorses rules, and in its more developed forms is saturated with rhythm and harmony; it is done in a joyful mood, with the thrill of being "seized", "captivated", "enchanted", losing oneself in the game; yet it is only a sort of pretending and make belief; it is purposeless but significant. (Check for accuracy of quotation)

⁷ Mulkay (1988: 120) notes: " ... humor is often employed to deal with topics, such as sexuality, which are important, but which are also difficult to handle openly ..." (p. 120). As so many, he underlines the social function of dirty jokes (their use for transmitting information and shaping gender relations), but misses out on the point made here.

⁸ This latter meaning is given in the Book of Odes. The character *dan* is written with a heart radical nowadays, but before the 1st -2nd century CE the characters had no radicals.

⁹ Yamada (1998) considers *huoji tang* a proto-type I decoction, a precursor of the decoction used in contemporary Chinese medical treatment which is prepared by simmering over a carefully regulated fire. The first treatise on tea dates to the Tang dynasty; 'tea' has here rhetorical rather than referential meanings.

¹⁰ This argument draws on Shigehisa Kuriyama, Chen Hsiufen and Mark Lewis, as detailed in Hsu (2007).

¹¹ In contrast to the turbid-clear distinction that any medical doctor is familiar with since late Imperial times, where yang is clear and yin turbid or murky, in ancient China the murky was yang and the clear yin (Hsu 2010:135-38). Three idioms are given in inverted form in Hsu (2007:123), they should read: murky *yang* (*zhuo yang*) in paragraph four, *zhuo yin* (murky *yin*) and *qing yang* (clear *yang*) in paragraph five.

¹² A supercritical reader may note that in case 8 the constituent *feng* in the name of the disorder (which is *dongfeng*) also correlates in this simplistic manner with *fengqi* as pulse quality. However, here the connotations of *feng* are much the same as elsewhere in the medical canons. No fecundity is connoted.

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