“Good Wood on Crowdpleasers”: Humour Publications in the Ming Wanli Period



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"Good Wood on Crowdpleasers": Humour Publications in the Ming Wanli Period iii

Abstract iii
Acknowledgements iv

Introduction ***- 1 -***
A Note on Style ..... - 5 -
0.1. Historical Background: The Wanli Publishing Scene ..... - 6 -
0.2. State of the Field ..... - 11 -
0.2.1. Research on Pre-modern Chinese Humour ..... - 13 -
0.2.2. Summary of the Two Major Contributions of this Dissertation ..... - 22 -
0.2.3. Anthologies, Humour Studies, and the "Joke" ..... - 24 -
0.2.4. Studies on Individual Compilations ..... - 29 -
0.3. Methodology 1: Terms and Timing ..... - 33 -
0.3.1. Timing Rationale: The Place of the Wanli Period in the History of Publishing ..... - 33 -
0.3.2. Terminology: What Constitutes a 'Humour Compilation'? ..... - 37 -
0.3.3. A Note on Primary Source Dates ..... - 43 -
0.4. Methodology 2: Paratextual Matters ..... - 46 -
0.4.1. Paratextual Materials in the Late-Ming Context ..... - 46 -
0.4.2. Working with Prefaces ..... - 52 -
0.4.3. Approaching Attributions ..... - 56 -
0.5. Overview of Chapters ..... - 58 -

Chapter 1 – The Landscape of Late-Ming Humour Publishing ***- 63 -***
1.1. Ming Humour Entries in Two Broad Varieties ..... - 64 -
1.1.1. Type 1: The 'Generic Voice' ..... - 64 -
1.1.2. Type 2: The 'Anecdotic Voice' ..... - 66 -
1.1.3. Overlaps and Otherwise ..... - 69 -
1.1.4. Compiling Approaches ..... - 71 -
1.2. Casualties of Categorisation ..... - 73 -
1.2.1. The "Lost Categories" of Ming Publication ..... - 73 -
1.2.2. Formulaic Titles ..... - 75 -
1.2.3. Prefatory Commonalities ..... - 78 -

Chapter 2 – "Good Wood on Crowdpleasers": Humour Sections in Wider Wanli Compilations ***- 83 -***
2.1. Introduction ..... - 83 -
2.2 Source Compilations ..... - 85 -
2.2.1. *Words in Six* 六語 ..... - 85 -
2.2.2. *Record of Tongue Flowers* 舌華錄 ..... - 87 -
2.2.3. *Compilation for the Augmentation of Knowledge* 益智編 ..... - 89 -
2.2.4. *Mr. Hu's Refined Compilations* 胡氏粹編 ..... - 92 -
2.3. A Publisher's Take on Publishing Humour – Hu Wenhuan ..... - 98 -
2.3.1. Preface to the "Refined Compilation of Jest Histories" ..... - 98 -
2.3.2. Hu Wenhuan's Two Guests: A Window on Reader Response ..... - 101 -
2.4. "Wasting Good Wood on Crowdpleasers 宍木媚世": Pre-emptive Defences of Humour ..... - 107 -
2.4.1. Appeals to the Grand Historian: "Words of Banter" 諔言 ..... - 110 -
2.4.2. Appeals to the *Shijing*: "Ne'er to excess" 不為虐 ..... - 117 -
2.5. Conclusions ..... - 123 -
2.5.1. Words versus Actions in the Publication of Humour ..... - 123 -
2.5.2. The "Refined Compilation of Jest Histories" Preface as a Parody of Humour Prefaces? - 126 -

Chapter 3 – A Wandering Persuader in Wanli: The Satirical Tradition of Aizi ***- 129 -***
3.1. Introduction ..... - 129 -
3.2. "Master Ai": The Basics ..... - 131 -
3.2.1. The Aizi Premise and Textual Borrowings ..... - 132 -
3.2.2. The Ming Readership of *Aizi* Compilations: Some Speculations ..... - 133 -
3.3. The *Aizi* 'Trilogy' ..... - 137 -
3.3.1. The Original *Aizi*: *Miscellaneous Stories* ..... - 138 -
3.2.2. The Ming *Aizi*s ..... - 142 -
Further Sayings of Master Ai 艾子後語 ..... - 142 -
Unofficial Sayings of Master Ai 艾子外語 ..... - 145 -

3.4. Warring States Material as a Ming Vehicle of Satire ... - 147 -
3.4.1. Aizi as a Ming Satirical Inheritance ... - 147 -
3.4.2. *Shiji*-style Remonstrative Humour in *Aizi* Compilations ... - 153 -
3.4.3. The Imagined 'Warring States World' and Ming Humour ... - 157 -
3.5. Aizi and Contested Late Imperial Appraisals of the Warring States World ... - 161 -
3.5.1. Naming Stratagems ... - 164 -
3.5.2. Master Ai, Amid the Sweep of the Waves 「艾子」 在波流之中 ... - 171 -
3.6. Conclusion ... - 182 -

Chapter 4 – Wanli Humour Compilations and the 'Dongpo vogue' ... ***- 184 -***
4.1. Introduction: The 'Dongpo vogue' of the Late Ming ... - 184 -
4.2. Su Shi in Humour Compilations ... - 187 -
4.2.1. Su Shi as Subject Matter ... - 189 -
4.2.2. Su Shi as Humour Originator ... - 191 -
4.3. Foyin the Monk and the *Record of Inquiry and Response Dialogues* 問答錄 ... - 194 -
4.3.1. Foyin in Humorous Literature ... - 194 -
4.3.2. The *Record of Inquiry and Response Dialogues* ... - 198 -
4.4. Attributions to Su Shi in Humour Publications ... - 201 -
4.4.1. Problematising Attributions: Ming Practices of Misonymy ... - 201 -
4.4.2. Publisher Zhao Kaimei on Su Shi's Place in Humour Publications ... - 208 -
4.5. Conclusion ... - 213 -

Chapter 5 – Conclusion ... ***- 217 -***
5.1. Summary ... - 217 -
5.2. Limitations ... - 220 -
5.3. Future Research Directions ... - 222 -
5.4. Concluding Remarks ... - 225 -

Selected Bibliography ... ***- 227 -***
Primary materials ... - 227 -
Secondary materials ... - 230 -

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Abstract

Joke and humour publications are a severely understudied area of the world of late-Ming book culture. Taking imprints from the Wanli reign period (1573–1620) as a starting point, this dissertation undertakes a preliminary investigation into late-Ming humour compilations. It looks at the publication of humour as a historical phenomenon, rather than from a literary standpoint, to see how this group of books fitted into the publishing and intellectual scene of their day. Towards this aim, the dissertation leans mostly upon the paratextual materials of humour publications, such as prefaces, titles and annotations. These were spaces in which compilers and publishers communed with their faceless, anticipated readership, and as such can be used to yield information about how these compilations were viewed on both sides. Experimenting by temporarily putting aside modern notions of "the joke" in favour of contemporaneous terms used by the publications themselves, the dissertation sketches the boundaries around a broader genre of 'humour compilations', thereby reconstructing a genre of publications that were connected in the eyes of Ming publishers and readers, yet has been obscured by subsequent systems of categorisation. It spotlights the ambivalence that surrounded humour as an appropriate topic for publication and the measures taken by compilers and publishers to counter such attitudes. The dissertation also sheds light upon how this group of texts identified with and drew upon precedents from previous dynasties and developed its own set of traditions through an in-depth look at the Ming sequels to the Aizi ("Master Ai") tradition of Warring States-themed humour, which originated in the Song period. A preliminary discussion on the 'Dongpo vogue' in late-Ming publishing reveals the omnipresence of Song dynasty literatus Su Shi in Ming humour publications while simultaneously demonstrating how this group of texts reflected and interacted with the fashions and concerns of the times.

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