

Book Review

Santangelo, Paulo (ed.). 2012. *Laughing in Chinese*. Rome: Aracne Editrice. 472pp. €26. ISBN 97888 548 46203.

This book of 15 papers is divided into four parts: humor in Chinese and Japanese literary works, examples of comic literature, the moral involvement of humor, and the psychology of humor. Santangelo provides a substantial introduction to smiles and laughter in the Chinese context and also to the papers in his book (pp. 5–28). This structure lends itself to a description and analysis of smiling and laughing as both social acts and as manifestations of states of mind. An identifiable theme is the interrelationship between social acts (the sociology, culture or politics of situation) and manifest states of mind (the psychology of the individuals involved in the situation).

One consequence of this theme is the appeal the book must hold for a wide audience. Inevitably, the book raises a host of philosophical questions. Those for analytic philosophers include questions about the classification of humor and laughter. A variety of *xiao* 笑 (smiling and laughing) in Chinese are described in the first three papers (pp. 29–209), indicating the richness of Chinese language expressions and high cultural context. Equally, continental philosophers will find much in this book to challenge their theories on the nature of human existence and meaning. Political scientists will find relevance in the interplay of sociological and psychological concepts as these concepts relate to national governance. It will be difficult for anyone to resist some of Santangelo's wry political asides, such as "It is no mere chance that no jest book was included in the corpus of the *Sikuquanshu* 四庫全書 compiled between 1772 and 1782. Anyway, the 'Analects' report that a master 'never laughs [*sic*] unless he is happy' 樂然後笑 (*Lunyu*, 14:13)" (p. 6). Another example, "Scheming officials who are able to avoid troubles thanks to their cunning solutions are described [with humour and irony] in Li Hang (2:99–101) and Ye Nanyan (葉南岩, 3:227–29)" (p. 10). As we might expect from a lead author, Santangelo documents the use of humor as a counterpoise to the intense use made of Chinese classics in public administration in China: these include the Confucian Classics which were "not only the basis for moral behavior and respectable social image, but also the key for the preparation of an official career and thus they implied pedagogical methods, criteria of selecting scholars, socialization and internalization channels" (p. 18). A "parodic work" [Li Zhi's *Punctuated and Annotated Jest Book on "The Four Books"*] is an example of "subversive literature attempting to create comic effects by ridiculing orthodox rules and canons" (p. 18).

The book falls into two distinct categories: eight papers concern smiling and laughing in Chinese, relating well to the book's title, while the rest do not particularly do so. We will review here the most meritorious papers on smiling and laughing in Chinese that caught our attention, without disparagement to the others.

Seven papers provide exceptionally good access to historic Chinese cultures. One is the paper by Taiwanese-American scholar Hsu Pi-ching entitled "Feng Menglong's *Treasury of Laughs*: A Humorous Reflection on Self and Society in Ming China". This builds upon previous work by the same author (noted on p. 11). A related work by Hsu is *Beyond Eroticism: A Historian's Reading of Humor in Feng Menglong's Child's Folly* (Hsu 2006). If you know nothing about the late Ming period (1368–1644), this chapter will provide you with significant insight in a most agreeable manner. The *Treasury* contains 700-odd jokes written in simple classical Chinese. Hsu gives some English translations with her commentary. Jest-books have a tradition in China that dates to at least the Three Kingdoms period, AD 220–265 (p. 261). As Hsu says of the late Ming *Treasury*, "In quick strokes the jokes present vivid, albeit hyperbolic pictures of people in dozens of lines of work, showcase social customs and conventions, and provide literary descriptions of the foods, drinks, clothing, utensils, footwear, carriages, and furniture that Ming people used in their daily lives" (pp. 255–256).

Hsu's reference to Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1984) is fortuitous, for there are new trends emerging in Bakhtinian scholarship and this reference suggests a new line of enquiry which could well embrace China (p. 256). Although Hsu does not make much of her reference to Bakhtin's concept of induced "carnival laughter", it is resurrected when we read specific jokes later. While the significance of carnival is many-faceted in Bakhtin, it exemplifies the unity of humanity's universal embeddedness and also the potential of individual truth to contribute to that whole. A recent collected volume on Bakhtin includes two papers which relate to Hsu's contribution (in White and Peters 2011). The first, "Too Serious: Learning, Schools, and Bakhtin's Carnival" by Timothy J. Lensmire, shows why laughter ought to be a part of the educational experience, whilst the second, by Jayne White, develops the theme of aesthetics in relation to the practice of educational assessment. The positive depictions of people that Hsu captures in her paper bring us the historical reality of the late Ming. Carnal love, filial piety, fraternal affection, friendship and loyalty stand in contrast to the incongruous tensions of late Ming society which heralded, if not the arrival of a new age, at least the departure of the old.

The paper by Rudolf Pfister deserves considerable attention. Entitled "Attitudes towards laughter and euphoria in Medieval Chinese Daoist texts", the section on advice against too much laughing, by its negative stance, enables us to

penetrate some fundamental aspects of Daoist literature. For example, the relationships between nourishing life, medicine, and the interdependence of thought and damage to the physical body (see pp. 336–345). For anyone interested in the Chinese character and attitudes of today, this chapter is a valuable history lesson. Pfister’s scepticism allows us to be comfortable with our modern inclinations and attitudes whilst at the same time permitting the truth within Daoist thought to emerge. The passages selected for analysis are both entertaining and instructive. Consider his comment on a section from a Middle Scripture of uncertain origin, “It is difficult to see, how this last assertion should convince us. But we can now better appreciate the self-regulatory means which are thought to guarantee less damage: ‘To empty the heart means to somehow lose the mental contents, things, which occupy one’s feelings and thought . . .’” (p. 339).

Elena De Rossi Fibleck highlights the role of humor in political situations in her contribution, “The meaning of laughter and smiling in traditional Tibetan Society”. Fibleck gives diverse evidence to support her conclusion that Tibetan culture embraces the smile and laughter in a significant way. Humor is a fundamental element of Tibetan culture and expresses itself even in social structure: “Both within the so called traditional age and in the modern one, the ‘smile manifestation’ in the life and attitude of Tibetan people can derive from their life style linked to the Buddhist vision of being” (p. 381). One story (retold from Laird 2006) indicates the social and political significance of a covert gesture. When the Communist Party official inspects the village he is served beer by the village headman: “As the headman popped a bottle of beer and bent low to serve his new masters, he managed to glance up at me and winked. The spirit of Tibet was still alive, and his smile, his honesty, and his jaunty attitude – despite the despair and the humiliation he had lived through – were the only evidence I needed to see that” (p. 380). Characteristically, a gesture which physically is minor, is perceived as carrying a substantial burden of meaning and (in this instance) political significance. The story is reminiscent of Deng Rong’s account of how laughter defeated another official who sought to influence the family of Deng Xiaoping into making serious criticism of Deng Xiaoping (Deng 2002 408–409).

Finally, we recommend this book most warmly. It deserves a place in both academic and public libraries. As indicated above, its appeal is at both the academic and human levels. Its scholarship is high but unobtrusive. Its subject matter will appeal to everyone, while specialists from many academic disciplines will likely find the book an entree to new thought in their specializations. For further information about laughing and smiling in traditional Chinese cultures, we suggest referring also to studies collected in two recent books edited by Jocelyn Chey and Jessica Milner Davis (2011, 2013).

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