

CHINESE WIT AND HUMOR.

BY ALFRED FORKE.

THE Chinese have a keen sense of the ludicrous. They like a good joke and make very good ones. We see more smiling faces in China than in most European countries. With ready wit a foreigner who has to deal with Chinese people may win his cause more easily than by long arguments.

Wit and humor in China are in substance very much like ours, a different local coloring in some instances being the sole difference. We even find the various kinds of jocularity to which we are accustomed. To prove this and at the same time acquaint my readers with this branch of Chinese literature, I propose to relate a number of humorous anecdotes as specimens of Chinese wit and quote a passage from a famous drama which will give some idea of Chinese humor.

Wit is not felt by all persons equally, not even in their own language and still less in a foreign idiom. So I am not quite certain whether my stories will appeal to the American sense of humor and elicit a smile. But even if I should fail, I hope that they will throw some new light on Chinese thought, manners and customs, and help to a better understanding of the oldest of all Oriental peoples.

Everybody knows what wit and humor are, yet a correct definition is very difficult. The views of those who have tried to solve the problem differ very much. Wit and humor are closely related, but they are usually distinct from, and even opposed to, each other.

Both are creations of our brain and have as their object the comical, which they produce artificially by some ingenious invention, which must be novel and unusual. There is an association of ideas and words that cause pleasure and surprise. Between these ideas there is such a discrepancy, they appear to us so incongruous, odd and queer that they excite laughter, an explosion breaking the mental tension in which the story has held us.

So far there is agreement between wit and humor. Now for the divergence: wit appeals more to our intellect, humor to our feeling. Wit is brief, sharp, sudden; humor is slow, meditative, kind and full of sympathy. Wit finds expression in certain words and phrases, humor takes its material from situations and characteristics.

Humor is usually joyful and optimistic, wit often pessimistic. Humor is in keeping with a phlegmatic temperament, it resigns itself cheerfully to all the small imperfections of life, putting up with the inevitable. Wit goes more easily with a choleric temper, it shows us all the discrepancies in life but leaves them as they are and does not attempt a solution.

Humorous contrast is not always surprising and not necessarily comical, but more lasting than wit, which has a strong momentary effect.

Chinese wit is best learned from jests and stories passing from mouth to mouth and sometimes collected. Such a collection is, for instance, the *Hsiao-lin kuang-chi*, in which the anecdotes are arranged according to the subject-matter under twelve headings. Nowadays one finds jokes occasionally in Chinese newspapers, but funny papers are still in their infancy.

We are going to base our division of the various kinds of wit and humor on the distinctions usually made: they are: *harmless jests, irony, satire* and *puns*. Of humor we have to consider two groups according as it deals with *external events and situations* or with *human character*.

Here we have to notice that the distinction cannot always be clearly drawn. One may be doubtful to which class a joke belongs, since it may contain elements of various groups. E. g., a pun can at the same time be ironical and refer to a comical situation. It is often hard to say whether something is to be conceived as wit or humor. Some critics hold that the ancients had no humor at all, which they claim is a product of modern times. On the other hand, Aristophanes is by some called a humorist. Swift is generally considered a satirist, but some take him for a humorist too. In many humorous works, as in *Don Quixote* of Cervantes, the comedies of Molière and Dickens's novels, wit and humor are blended. In *Don Quixote* they say that only the scenes with Sancho Pansa are humorous, and those in which Don Quixote is the hero, comical or satirical.

Let us now turn to the Chinese. I begin with two harmless

unpretentious jokes in which the discrepancy of ideas makes one laugh.

1. *Half-Killing.*

A rich man met a poor devil and said to him: "I shall give you a thousand dollars if you allow me to kill you as you stand there."

The poor man meditated a moment and then said: "Give me five hundred dollars, and then kill me half."

2. *Only Rice.*

A woman who was entertaining a paramour during the absence of her husband, was startled by hearing the latter knock at the door. She hurriedly bundled the man into a rice-sack which she concealed in a corner of the room; but when her husband came in, he caught sight of it and asked in a stern voice, "What have you got in that sack?" His wife was too terrified to answer, and after an awkward pause a voice from the sack was heard to say, "Only rice."

In contrast to the preceding mild and good-natured jokes, *irony* usually contains an indirect and covert attack, a derision of human weaknesses. It is a form of speech by which the speaker says something quite different from what he thinks. Under cover of words sounding perhaps quite innocent he expresses his dissent and disapprobation.

The next two stories will show this. The first is a joke played upon a simpleton, the second a gibe at an incompetent officer.

3. *Salt Ducks.*

A peasant came to the capital and was invited to dinner by a friend. Among other dishes there was also a plate with duck eggs boiled in brine. When he tasted them he said: "Is not this strange? How can these eggs be salty?" "Oh," replied his friend, "you do not know that here in Peking we have a special breed of salt ducks, and of course the eggs they lay must be salty too."

4. *The Target-God.*

There once was an officer who during a battle fought in the first ranks with the utmost courage, but the enemies were so strong that he was on the point of succumbing when suddenly an unknown person came to his assistance and turned the impending defeat into

victory. After the battle the officer prostrated himself before his savior to thank him for his help, and asked him: "Who are you, venerable god, to whose kindness I owe my life?" "I am the target-god," said the other, "and came here to save you."

"What has your humble servant done to be worthy of your mercy, that Your Divine Majesty should take the trouble to come to his rescue?" said the officer. The target-god replied: "I wished to show you my thankfulness for the kind consideration you always had for me when you were at target-practice, for not one of your arrows ever hit or wounded me."

Whereas irony contains an indirect attack, *satire* attacks directly disdaining the cover behind which irony conceals itself. It is the sharpest form of wit, often caustic and then called *sarcasm*. It ridicules mercilessly vices, faults and all kinds of abuses. Here are two examples:

5. *The Use of Books.*

There was a nurse with a baby that was always crying and refused to sleep. Suddenly a thought flashed upon her and she exclaimed: "Master, master, bring me a book." Her master inquired: "What do you want a book for?" and the nurse answered: "Whenever I see you taking a book, immediately afterward you are asleep."

6. *Bad Luck of a Doctor.*

There was a doctor who understood so little of his profession that every now and then he killed one of his patients. He had a son and a daughter. One day he had again sent the son of a family to the other world, and since this family was not at all satisfied, he gave them his own son in compensation. Subsequently, he had the misfortune of dispatching the daughter of a couple and was obliged to give them his own daughter, so that he remained alone with his wife. They felt very lonely and miserable, when again some one knocked at the door and asked for the doctor. He went out himself and inquired of the man for whom it was. The man said that it was for his wife. The poor doctor went back into his room, and, shedding tears, said to his wife: "I see it coming. There must be somebody who has cast an eye on you."

In the jokes so far dealt with the wit lies in one or more sentences. If it is contained in one or more words we speak of a *pun*.

The same word is used in two more or less incongruous meanings. To translate puns is very difficult, because a word may have two significations in one language but not in other languages. Therefore the translator must find something similar in his own language, that is, make a new pun himself. This has been done, for instance, with great success by Schlegel and Tieck in their German version of Shakespeare's plays. Many Chinese puns are untranslatable. I hope that the following stories may pass in English also:

7. *Too Low.*

In order to study a student had taken quarters in a monastery. On the morning of the first day he went out on a walk, and when he came back in the afternoon he told his servant to bring him a book. The boy brought him the Collection of the Masterpieces of Literature, but the student said, "Too low." Then the boy brought the History of the Han Dynasty, and again the student said, "Too low." The boy then brought the Anthology of the T'ang Poets, only to receive the same reply, "Too low." A priest in an adjoining room had overheard this and was very much astonished. He went over to the student's room and addressed him thus: "If a man thoroughly knows one of the three works mentioned, he may be considered a first-class scholar, why do you say 'Too low'?" The student replied: "I was just going to take a nap and therefore wanted a thick volume to place under my neck as a pillow."

8. *The Golden Ox.*

There was a district magistrate who had his birthday. The clerks and constables of his office having found out that he was born in a rat year, all of them subscribed money and made a rat of pure gold, which they gave him as a birthday present. The magistrate was highly pleased and said: "You have really had a capital idea, but you do not know that the birthday of the lady will also be in a few days." The clerks replied that they really did not know, but would be glad to learn under which animal the lady was born. "The lady," said the magistrate, "is only one year younger than I, and her heavenly sign is the ox."

The rest of my tales are more humorous than witty. We may divide them into two groups. The first group, of which I offer one specimen, gives us ludicrous *situations*; the second deals with ridiculous *characters*. Comic situations may be brought about by a

peculiar connection of circumstances, by accidents, mistakes or misunderstandings, and not so much by human actions. Such a funny situation is the basis of the following anecdote:

9. *An Invitation to Tea.*

It is the custom in China to offer tea to a caller. One day a visitor called on Mr. Wang, who had not a tea-leaf in his house. He sent his servant to borrow some from his neighbor, but the boy did not come back. Meanwhile his wife was preparing the boiling water, filling in more and more, until the kettle was full to overflow, but no tea was forthcoming. Finally the wife called her husband to come to the kitchen and said to him: "I am afraid that we will not be able to offer tea to our guest, but you might invite him to take a bath."

In the humor based on *characteristics*, human activity prevails and it is derived from the peculiar character of the actors, who amuse us by their folly and absurdity. Comic actions are in opposition to normal ideas. There is a great incongruity between the aims and the means employed. Here we meet the well-known comic characters which play the same role with us as in China.

Everybody knows the humble position of women in China. Nevertheless, they manage even in China to dominate in matrimony and make the husband their slave, who lives in constant fright of his tormentress. This incongruity of a being much stronger physically and mentally and yet governed by a much weaker one has a comic effect. There must be a great many *terrorized husbands* in China, for the stories in which they are laughed at are numerous. I select the following specimens:

9. *The Vine Trellis.*

A district magistrate was sitting in his court trying cases. When the chief clerk appeared and took his seat the magistrate perceived that his face was full of scratches, so he asked him: "What have you done with your face?" The man said: "Yesterday evening I was sitting under my vine trellis enjoying the cool breeze, when all at once a gust of wind overturned the trellis, which fell upon me and scratched my face."

The magistrate did not believe the story and said: "Evidently these are scratches of finger-nails. I am sure that you had a quarrel with your wife and were thus scratched by her. Is it not so?" The

clerk blushed all over and said, "Sir, you guessed right." "Is your wife such a dangerous person?" inquired the magistrate, "I shall avenge you, summoning your wife before my tribunal and giving her a good thrashing." Just while he was uttering these words his lady came rushing in from the background and said, "Whom are you going to beat?"

The magistrate hurriedly told his attendants: "The sitting is adjourned. Leave the hall quickly. My vine trellis may collapse at any moment."

10. *The Club of Henpecked Husbands.*

Ten gentlemen who were very much afraid of their wives, by whom they were ill treated at home, met by chance in a temple and resolved to form a club. They celebrated the event by a dinner, but when they were just enjoying themselves their ten wives appeared uninvited. Nine out of the ten husbands managed to escape, only one remained keeping his seat unmoved and apparently undisturbed by the abuse hurled against him by the enraged women. When they had left at last the nine men came forward and said: "We have not his courage, let us make him our chairman," but when they came near him they saw that it was impossible. The fright had been too much for the poor man, he had expired in the chair.

Ignorance and dulness are often ridiculed in China. Even teachers who as a rule enjoy the highest esteem, much more than in any foreign country, are not spared, as will be seen from the following anecdote:

11. *The Wrong Person Died.*

A gentleman's mother had died, and he asked a teacher to write a funeral sermon for her. The teacher copied a funeral sermon for a dead father from a collection of sermons and gave it to the man. But as soon as the man looked at it he said that there was a mistake. At the word "mistake" the teacher became very angry and said: "I tell you, Sir, this sermon is printed in a book, and not a single character can be wrong. If there is a mistake, it can only be that the wrong person died."

Boasters and braggarts are favorite comic figures and often intentionally caricatured by grotesque exaggerations of their fan-

faronades, a device very appropriate here and calculated to enhance the comic effect. Here is one instance.

12. *Boasting.*

Two travelers met and each told the other about the wonders of his country. The first said: "In my country there is a bath-tub which has room enough for more than a thousand people to bathe." The other man said: "That bath-tub is not so wonderful after all, but in my country we have a bamboo which grows straight to heaven, and, when it reaches heaven and cannot go farther, it bends and grows down to earth again. That is wonderful indeed."

The other traveler expressed some doubts saying: "How could there be so big a bamboo?" but the story-teller rejoined: "If it were not for our big bamboo, how could they make a hoop for your big bath-tub?"

In China we also find the fault directly opposite to boasting, namely *excessive modesty* which undertakes to minimize everything, even things which do not admit of it, and thus becomes ridiculous as in the following instance.

13. *The Common Moon.*

There was a man who when talking with others would always disparage his own things and call them common. One night he had invited a guest, and while they were drinking, unexpectedly the moon rose. The guest was full of enthusiasm and said, "I did not imagine that to-night in your house we should have such a splendid moon."

The host rose, saluted his guest and said: "I am overwhelmed by your kindness. This is only the common moon of my humble cottage."

Avarice seems to be a wide-spread vice in China and is made the butt of ridicule by the humorists. One of the best Chinese comedies entitled *The Slave who Guards His Money* shows us the dealings of a miser, who has many traits in common with *L'Avare* of Molière. I have two short stories on the same subject:

14. *The Drowning Miser.*

A miser fell into a river, and his son shouted: "Help, help; rescue my father, I shall pay a big reward." The drowning man

lifted his head out of the water and said, "Offer them half a dollar. If they want more, I do not care to be rescued."

15. *Rich and Poor.*

A rich man said to a poor fellow: "I possess a fortune of a hundred thousand dollars, do you know that?" The poor man replied: "That is nothing, I also have a hundred thousand." The rich man asked, "Where are your hundred thousand?" to which the other replied: "You have the money, but do not use it. I want to use it, but cannot. Is the final result not the same?"

Filial piety is considered the foundation of all Chinese virtue and therefore much more emphasized in China than with us. A peculiar conception of this cardinal virtue is held by the hero of the following story:

16. *The Filial Son.*

The father of a man was very sick, and the doctor told the son: "The case is almost hopeless. There is only one remedy left, if you are a filial son and agree to cut a piece of flesh from a limb, from which a medicine can be prepared. Perhaps this would touch Heaven and Earth and save your father's life."

The son said, "That is not difficult," took a knife and went out. It was a summer morning and rather warm, so he found a man sleeping almost naked in front of his house in the street. He went to him and tried to cut a piece of flesh from his leg. The man awoke and shrieked with pain, but the son waved his hand and said: "Don't make such a noise. Don't you know how excellent a deed it is to cut out a piece of flesh for the purpose of saving a father's life?"

A rich field of Chinese humor are novels and comedies. Chinese dramatic art reached its climax already under the Mongol dynasty in the fourteenth century. The religious-philosophical dramas of this time in which the doctrines of Buddhists and Taoists are satirized in a burlesque way are perhaps the most original production of Chinese dramatists. I am going to quote an episode of one of these plays, the *Tieh-kuai Li*, which illustrates the transmigration of souls.

A corrupt judge Yo-shou dies and is condemned by the King of Purgatory to be plunged into the cauldron of boiling oil, but is

saved by the Taoist Genus Lü Tung-pin, who converts him to Taoism. The following amusing scene takes place in Hell:

King of Hell: Reverend Master, I ought to have gone to meet you, and am ashamed of my lack of courtesy which is inexcusable.

Lü Tung-pin: I have to speak to you of a serious matter. What crime has Yo-shou committed that you inflict such a punishment on him?

King: You do not know that this abominable creature (pointing to Yo-shou), while being assistant-judge of the tribunal of Chêng-chou, sold justice and took bribes on every occasion. He is a miser, a monster of avarice, and must go into the cauldron.

Lü: Great king, imitate the virtue of God who likes to give life to all creatures. Though this man may be very greedy, still he is predestined for a religious life. Besides, he is converted now, he has pronounced the vows, and I make him my disciple. Out of regard for me join his soul to his body again and send him back to the world.

King: Let me see. (He looks out.) What a misfortune! The wife of Yo-shou has this very moment burned the body of her husband.

Lü: What can be done?

Yo-shou (aside): What infamy, what cruelty! Oh, my wife, you were in such a hurry to do away with my body? Could you not wait at least one day more?

Lü: You might substitute another body for his own. Great king, what do you think?

King: Very well. (Looks.) In the suburb of Chêng-chou there is a young butcher, dead for three days. His family name is Li. Strange thing, the warmth of his body is not yet quite gone. Venerable Immortal, I can cause the soul of Yo-shou to transmigrate into the body of the butcher. What is your idea? But I must tell you that the butcher is horribly ugly, he has blue eyes.

Lü: I accept. (To Yo-shou.) Yo-shou, your transmigration is under way. You see, your soul cannot be reunited to your body because your body does not exist any more. Your wife has burned it. But this mishap must not leave any unnecessary regrets in your mind. You will transmigrate into the body of a young butcher, who was not a handsome fellow. You will have blue eyes. But what does it matter? Have you not just now renounced all greed and voluptuousness? Yo-shou, remain always faithful to your vows; remember well my exhortations. Now, your new name will

be Li-shou, and your religious name Tieh-kuai. Go and leave the city of the dead.

(Yo-shou thanks Lü Tung-pin and quits Hell at once.) In the house of the butcher Li the dead body of his son is lying on a bed, and the entire family in an agony of grief is assembled around him, when suddenly the dead man comes to life again and sits up on his bed.

Yo-shou (astonished): My wife, sheriff, my son, where are you?

Father of the Butcher (in a frenzy of joy): Thanks to Heaven and Earth! My son has been resuscitated.

Yo-shou (with an angry tone): Silence. Go to the court, only there I do business. Has there ever been such a row! What impudence! They come even into my sleeping-room.

Father: I am your father, this is your wife. My son, do you not recognize me?

Yo-shou: Let me see, come nearer. . . . Truly, I do not recognize you.

Father: What strange language!

Wife of the Butcher: Li, my husband, you recognize me? You recognize your wife who loves you so dearly?

Yo-shou (with an irritated tone): Sheriff, turn all these people out.

Father: My son, come back to yourself.

Wife: Is it conceivable that he does not recognize his own wife?

Yo-shou: Oh, you deafen my ears. Let me meditate a moment. (Crosses his hands over his forehead and meditates.) Yes, now I remember the words of my liberator when I left Hell. My soul has transmigrated into the body of a butcher. The house where I find myself now is probably that in which he lived. What can I do to get out of it? (Aloud.) Listen; it is quite certain that just now I was dead, and it is equally certain that I am only half resuscitated. My soul is in my body, but my spirit is not. It remained in the Chêng-huang temple. I must go and fetch it.

Father: Daughter, give some incense-paper to your husband.

Wife (with animation): Yes, but in the state in which he is I do not want him to go alone to find his spirit.

Yo-shou (angrily): I shall go alone, I shall go alone. Don't you know that the spirits take to flight as soon as they behold a living being? They are extremely timid. You would frighten my spirit. (He rises, tries to walk, and falls backward.) Oh, this fall has killed me.

Father: My son, what are you thinking of? You know that you have one leg crooked. Wherefore do you attempt to walk?

Wife: Li, my husband, one cannot walk with one leg. Do you want your crutch?

Yo-shou: My crutch! (Aside.) Oh, my spiritual father, why did not I transmigrate into a more perfect body? In my former life, when I was judge at the tribunal, I had a crooked conscience, and now I am reborn in this world with a crooked leg. That is just retribution.

Father: Do you wish your crutch?

Yo-shou: Yes, bring it. (Yo-shou takes the crutch and begins to walk.)

Wife: Lean on me.

Yo-shou: No, no, go back. (Leaves the house.) Don't follow me, you would frighten my spirit.

Yo-shou walks back to his old home, but has great difficulty in finding it. At last he asks somebody.

Yo-shou (to a passer-by): Could you tell me where I live?

Passer-by: No.

Yo-shou: Do you know where the house of Yo-shou is?

Passer-by (showing the house): Here it is.

Yo-shou (surprised): How it has changed!

Passer-by: After the death of Yo-shou, Han-wei-kung, touched by the great qualities and virtues of this magistrate, wished to treat his widow with generosity. So he had his house painted and the pavillion behind decorated, and all the inhabitants were forbidden to enter there.

Yo-shou: Thank you. (Aside.) Touched by my virtues! I think, rather touched by the charms of my wife. Never mind. Let us enter.

Yo-shou reveals his identity to his people, but is claimed by the butcher and his daughter, who appear to fetch him back. Both women begin to quarrel, each claiming him as her husband, and finally go to court. But the case is settled by Lü Tung-pin, who arrives from Hell and takes his new disciple with him.

Among humorous novels the *Ching-hua yuan*, of which Giles in his *History of Chinese Literature* gives some extracts, ranks very high. Wit and humor constitute the spices in literature, and we must admit that the Chinese are not inferior to our writers in making a judicious use of this seasoning.