CHINESE WIT & HUMOR

EDITED BY GEORGE KAO

INTRODUCTION BY LIN YUTANG

COWARD-McCANN, INC. NEW YORK

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To Maeching

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EDITOR'S NOTE

FOR the compilation of this anthology I owe much to Lin Yutang and Chi-Chen Wang. Dr. Lin really should take on the job himself, but instead he passed it to me along with many valuable suggestions. He did contribute an introduction, which adds to what he has so wisely said about Chinese humor in his own books. Also, if he had not made the Chinese reading public humor-conscious in the prewar days, there would hardly have been any sample of modern Chinese humorous writing to include in this book. Professor Wang of Columbia University generously let me use many of his unpublished translations from the Chinese classics. He gave me a number of the short items in the first section; the second section, consisting of excerpts from Chinese novels, is mainly his.

I am not one of those who insist on using their own and "new" translations where there are perfectly good translations available. And I found, to the delight of my editorial eye and scissors, good translations, already printed or out of print, of many of the things I wanted to put in this book. I relied on Legge and Giles not only for their sound scholarship but also because their English carries a quaint flavor that in each case suits the original and, so it seems to me, imparts an additional drollness. Pearl Buck's fine rendition of that robust passage from *Shui Hu Chuan* is so representative of the whole that I wish I could include more.

G. K.

EDITOR'S PREFACE

DURING the late unlamented war more than once I was confronted with the American editor who wanted something on Chinese humor, for a syndicated newspaper article, for a magazine piece, for radio dramatization, and even to fill a book. That the Chinese people possess a sense of humor somewhat akin to your own has been one of the minor American myths about China that never ceases to amaze. The difficult thing about this myth is that it is at once so true and so hard to prove. And yet, your editor demands to know, doesn't every news photo of a Chungking crowd display a sea of grinning faces? And doesn't this ability to laugh have a lot to do with sustaining the Chinese people in their long resistance against a grim, unsmiling enemy?

I suppose this American assumption is correct on both scores. Still it is a difficult job when it comes to telling a typical Chinese joke or retailing a particularly pointed anecdote that would serve to illustrate the part humor played in China's war effort and to amuse American readers, to boot. There is no wartime cartoon from a Chinese *Punch* that could be readily reproduced to inspire a sense of admiration in an ally's bosom and a smile on his lips, however faint and delayed.

There is, furthermore, a much more serious obstacle to the assignment. A Chinese could not understand why, of all the heroic and tragic things there are to write about in this war—things that can "make you want to sing and make you want to cry"—one should want to write about *humor*. Wartime, to the Chinese mind, is no time for comedy, and no Chinese in his right mind would care to buck against public opinion in this matter. In vain would you seek to show that it is being done in America: that American wartime reading taste runs to the lighter fare; that radio and movie comedians are given priorities to travel far and wide to do their part by trying to uplift troop "morale"; that the English, the Belgians, the Dutch, and even the Russians have all had their sense of humor written up to prove that they are jolly good allies. It would still be considered callous to laugh, or rather to

show that the Chinese laughed when they were really suffering, to "fiddle" while the good earth burned.

I mention this not in order to disprove the thesis that the Chinese are a humorous people, for I still want to produce this book, but to explain a basic difference in the American and the Chinese attitudes toward humor. This difference has been best summarized in the dictum of Judge John C. H. Wu, that "whereas Westerners are seriously humorous, the Chinese are humorously serious." The Chinese believe there is a time and place for everything and, by common consent, the War of Resistance and Reconstruction is not to be exploited for its humorous potentialities, even though there may have been such aplenty.

By common consent, as a matter of fact, the Chinese have for centuries assigned a definite time and place for humor in literature. It is, to put it negatively, not to be admitted in the Hall of Great and Good Taste. Since the Chinese conception of good government and the good society is based on rule by scholars, literature itself has been straitjacketed to include nothing but formalized and dehydrated essays and verses. Even drama and the novel, more likely productive of humor, have for so long been relegated to the literary ash can in China that their contemporary development has been seriously crippled, not to mention humorous writing *per se,* which was something unpracticed and unheard of until recent years.

Again I must be careful lest I should build up too good a case against Chinese humor. The Chinese have humor, as I believe all peoples do to a greater or lesser degree depending on the kind of weather they are used to and how good a breakfast they have packed in their belly. The Chinese, for reasons of their own, are a more irrepressible lot than a good many. That is what makes them seem like the Americans. Self-imposed conditions, however, have served rather effectively to cramp their literary and artistic expressions of this humor which they live and laugh by and possess in abundance.

In almost all essays on humor somewhere or other a definition is ventured. Perhaps at this point it devolves on me to offer a definition of the word "humor" as the Chinese understand it, or, maybe, a definition of the Chinese equivalent to the word "humor."

The Chinese term that readily comes to mind for "humor" is *huachi.* Literally, the character *hua* means "smoothe," or "slippery"; the character *chi,* meaning "to check" (to see if it tallies), or "a trick," is a perfect pun for the character *chi,* which means "chicken." An unscholarly translation of the word *huachi,* for which I shall be con-

demned, would therefore be "slick chick." After coming up with a little research, however, I find that the term *huachi* was first used by the ancient poet-patriot Chü Yuan (343–290 B.C.), a rather sad person, in the *Ch'u Tze* to characterize, according to his annotators, a "smoothe and ingratiating manner" with the prince which he obviously did not possess. Before Chü Yuan's time, during the Spring and Autumn Age (722–481 B.C.) celebrated by Confucius, the ruling princes were apparently highly unreasonable people and the only way to reason with them was to paint your face, put on a funny costume, and crack a few jokes, hoping they would see your point. If they didn't of course you might lose your head. In other words, court jesters were born, or "fools," as they are sometimes called, who in reality are not such fools as you might think. The term *huachi,* as it first came into use, was probably applied to these gentlemen, of whom the two most famous were Shunyu Kun and Tungfang Shuo.

In the classic *Shih Chi (Historical Records)* by Ssuma Chien, (140–80? B. C.), in which he wrote biographical sketches of ancient kings and the nobility, there appears a profile of Shunyu Kun in a series entitled *"Huachi Lieh Chuan,"* or "Biographies of Humor." These two anecdotes are told as illustrative of Shunyu Kun's life and deeds:

King Wei of the state of Ch'i led an indolent and dissipated life. He was so fond of the cup that he often indulged in all-night drinking, leaving state affairs in the hands of his ministers. As a result, his rule suffered neglect and chaos and the several princes concertedly invaded his land, threatening momentarily the existence of his state. Still, among those at his side, there was none who dared to speak up. It happened that King Wei loved to solve riddles, so Shunyu Kun came up and offered this riddle for his amusement. "There is a big bird in the land," said Shunyu Kun, "who stopped in the King's court. For three years this bird neither flew nor crowed. What manner of bird does Your Highness think this is?"

King Wei replied: "You know, this bird, once he takes flight, will pierce the sky; once he starts to crow he will awe all men!" So saying, the King summoned together the seventy-two magistrates in his realm and, then and there, singled out one for reward and another for punishment. Then he ordered out his troops to the astonishment of the several princes, who promptly returned to Ch'i all the invaded areas.

Another time, during the eighth year of King Wei's reign, the state of Ch'u dispatched a huge expedition against Ch'i. The King of Ch'i

ordered that Shunyu Kun be sent on a mission to the state of Chao for aid, to take with him as a gift one hundred catties of gold and ten teams of coach and four. Shunyu Kun looked up to the sky and laughed and laughed until he snapped the tassels on his cap. The King asked, "Sir, you think it's too little?"

"How dare I think that?" Kun said.

"Then how do you explain your outburst of laughter?" the King asked.

"Well, now," Shunyu Kun began, "your humble servant happened to come from the east and saw by the wayside a man praying for a good harvest from his fields. He had a leg of roast pork in one hand and a cup of wine in the other and mumbled the following wish: 'May the God bless me with big hampers heaped full of ripe grains and wagons loaded with hay!' Your humble servant had to laugh, seeing that he offered so little and desired so much."

Whereupon, King Wei of Ch'i increased his gift to a thousand pieces of yellow gold, ten pairs of white jade, and a hundred teams of coach and four. The state of Ch'u, upon wind of this, evacuated its troops overnight.

In the Age of the Warring Kingdoms (403–221 B. C.), which followed the Spring and Autumn Age, this trick of the court jesters was taken up by the scholars in order to make their rulers behave. Confucius, Mencius, and many of their disciples, who started the tradition of the scholar in government, all sought with varying degrees of success to make their moral teachings more palatable by clothing them in the guise of a parable or a fable. It was really more wit than humor, but it was the first time anything that came close to being funny was set down in Chinese writings, and it gives substance to the claim that the Chinese are "humorously serious."

The history of *huachi* since those days was somewhat lost under the weight of succeeding generations of orthodox literature. There was evidence that it had lost its original meaning or didactic purpose and become more and more a matter of conduct or fad on the part of scholars who lost out in the pursuit of government office; at the same time *huachi* came to be less and less expressed in writing and more and more in deeds. The great exception is, of course, in the drama and fiction of the Sung and Yuan dynasties (A. D. 960–1367), which represented living literature sprung from among the folk. These were never considered legitimate by the scholars and were allowed no room for

development, though the robust laughter that coursed through their pages rings true to this day.

The word *huachi* as I personally came to know it was always associated with jokes or with vaudeville comedy which has since expired but, unlike its American counterpart, has shown no signs of coming back. Pretty soon Hollywood was upon us in China, and the first thing you know the cinemas were using the elegant lines of Chü Yuan—*"T'u t'i huachi"*—to advertise the antics of Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone cops. Thus in my own mind (such is the power of progressive education!) the word *huachi* has always stood for slapstick, and not humor in its ancient Chinese or Greek sense. I did not get to read Chü Yuan until at a more advanced age and, since *hua* does mean "slippery," the slipping-on-the-banana-peel act for a long time epitomized humor to me. Not until much later was I able to share the sentiment of the dowager in a Gardner Rea cartoon who, watching the involuntary downfall of a hapless old gent, remarked: "That's the sort of comedy that leaves me cold."

Parenthetically, I should note that the Chinese, old and young, have always been much taken with the art of Charlie Chaplin in his silent days. Without belatedly embroidering on the theme that Chaplin is really a great tragedian, I can see why his brand of humor should have found ready response in Chinese audiences. Again citing the authority of Judge Wu, we can say that while the Westerners are better acquainted with the misery of being funny (Bob Hope), the Chinese are better acquainted with the fun of being miserable (Charlie Chaplin). Chinese humor, to a greater degree than that of any other people, sees the ludicrous in the pathos of life. It is the result of a philosophical reaction to adversity coupled with innate optimism about the future. If wartime China yielded any humor it was certainly nothing but symptomatic of the misery pervading the land.

To go back to our philological research on Chinese humor, I must now reluctantly part with our "slick chick," with which I did have some fun, and come to a more contemporary Chinese word, *yumeh*. The literal meaning of these two characters (*yu* means "charming in seclusion"; *meh* means "silent") cannot by any stretch of the imagination be associated with "humor" even in its most subtle sense. But if you repeat the Chinese word *yumeh* often enough you will see that it is just a slow-motion approximation of the sound of the English word "humor"; in other words, a new coinage in the Chinese language whose component characters are not supposed to mean anything at all.

In Chinese this trick of transliteration is often resorted to for the representation of a foreign name, or an idea foreign to the Chinese vocabulary. Thus, in the old days when Western literature was first introduced to China, translators were hard put to it to find an accurate Chinese equivalent for the word "inspiration," so they simply transliterated its syllables and coined a cumbersome new Chinese term, *yen-ssu-pi-li-shun,* which would have something to do with smoke if the Chinese characters were to be taken literally. Similarly, President Truman's Chinese name, Tu-lu-men, would be some kind of a door if you take it seriously rather than phonetically.

Anyway, the point is, there came a day when Chinese writers realized that, save for the obsolete and corrupted *huachi,* they had no word that could adequately convey the shades of meaning implicit in the English word "humor," as currently understood. Hence *yumeh* was coined, and it has since gained such currency that, unlike *yen-ssu-pi-li-shun,* it is widely accepted today and destined to remain as much a part of the Chinese language as "chop suey" is a part of Mr. Mencken's American language.

Yumeh first made its appearance in 1923 in the literary supplement of the Peking *Chen Pao,* proposed by a comparatively unknown young professor named Lin Yutang, who wrote several essays about humor and the lack of it in Chinese writing. Ten years later Lin Yutang started *The Analects* fortnightly in Shanghai for the expressed purpose of promoting this product called *yumeh.* For his trouble, Dr. Lin became all but *persona non grata* to the government hierarchy and earned the hearty contempt of the communist and left-wing writers. But he also succeeded in rallying around him a group of writers who had a good time writing *yumeh* articles, samples of which are reproduced in this anthology, and in gaining a huge public following who honored him with the title *Yumeh Ta Shih,* or The Humor Master.

What Lin and his followers sought to do, with varying degrees of success, in the pages of *The Analects* and of many other magazines that followed and imitated it right up to the outbreak of war in 1937, was to give humor for the first time its rightful place in Chinese literature. They were the first to admit that the Chinese are an extremely funny people. But humor in China, they claimed, is more in deeds than in words; it is more practiced than preached. As a result, too many ludicrous things in Chinese life and politics were simply laughed off and forgotten for want of a chronicler, too many of the high and mighty who cut a ridiculous figure in the eyes of the people

nevertheless got where they were because nobody dared laugh in their faces. The nation was in danger of losing its sense of humor, and *The Analects* was founded admittedly as a magazine "devoted to unconscious Chinese humor," to calling attention to the fact that the emperor was without clothes.

True to Chinese tradition, this conscious promotion and celebration of the role of humor had at its bottom a serious purpose. But the almost revolutionary concept which *The Analects* brought to Chinese popular literature, or journalism, was no less significant. For the first time the make-up of "humor" was looked into and analyzed, its presentation refined in both style and substance, and a more adult approach adopted toward the problem of what makes people laugh. No longer was it considered enough to assemble a shoddy collection of "laugh talks" and make your readers "hold their belly" in the American side-splitting sense or "spew the rice," as they would in appreciation of the efforts of a Chinese after-dinner speaker. Real humor in writing, now it was recognized, should be that which is capable of evoking what is known as the more meaningful *huei-hsin-ti-wei-hsiao,* or the "smile of the meeting of hearts." As to importation of Western examples, the *huachi* of Charlie Chaplin made way for the *yumeh* of *Punch* and *The New Yorker.*

If it is difficult to set up a national standard of humor it is much more so to establish an international standard whereby one nation's jokes would appear just as funny to citizens of another. The further one comes from the elementary appeal in humor the more restricted and provincial one is sure to become. After all, slipping-on-the-banana-peel speaks a universal language, whereas the weekly output of *The New Yorker,* so far from being intended for the old lady in Dubuque, produces its optimum enjoyment probably only in the area bounded by Madison Avenue and the East River, in the East Sixties.

The editor who sets out to export his native humor overseas, therefore, faces additional hazards. I can well sympathize with the English, for instance, who have been much maligned by unthinking Americans as a people with a peculiarly low humor content. Is this not because the English-speaking peoples are so nearly alike in manner and appearance that they have deprived one another of a most obvious source of humor, the outlandishness of the other fellow, and are constrained to appreciate humor at a more subtle level? If this is true, small wonder you can't make the average American appreciate a typically British reference to having "mulligatawny" in the jungles of Africa. It will be

as difficult to make an Englishman share all the hilarious associations evoked in this land by the mere mention of Brooklyn.

With Americans vis-à-vis Chinese humor, we have a different kind of problem. The Chinese, as I am aware, are generally regarded in this country as having a sense of humor. The problem is to prove it, and live up to it. But what makes the Americans think the Chinese humorous? Is it not because of the unconsciously accepted premise that we two peoples are widely different from each other? When the Chinese are so different and strange, coming from the opposite end of the earth, as it were, anything they do or say, the very way they look, may strike you Americans as funny. They may not be funny—Chinamen eating with chopsticks and talking in a "singsong" tone are a commonplace in China—but it is enough, and perfectly natural, that they are funny in American eyes.

Thus, on closer inspection, what passes as Chinese humor in this country is often not Chinese humor, but American humor about the Chinese. Living in a melting pot, you have a humorous stereotype for almost every race and nationality, the Chinese, the Scotch, the Italians, the Jews, the Negroes. Your jokes about them are entirely your own; any similarity with the respective native brands is purely coincidental. Willie Howard's mimicry of the Gallic *professeur* is American humor; the same can be said of Fred Allen's celestial sleuth, One Long Pan.

Ever since the beginning of the war in China I have heard this allegedly Chinese story going the rounds in this country. It was first attributed, I think, to Will Rogers, and in his *Pocket Book of Wartime Humor* Bennet Cerf retells it as the only entry in his Chinese department. A Chinese laundryman, Foo Ling shall we call him, has an American customer who comes in every day and gives him the gist of the day's war news. The first time he reports the casualty list as one hundred Chinese killed and five Japs dead. Foo Ling looks up from his ironing board with a bland expression and says, "Good!" Things go bad for the Chinese Army and one day the friend drops in with the distressing news that one thousand Chinese troops were reported killed against only a hundred Jap casualties. The Chinaman, inscrutable as ever, responds with "Good! Velly good!" Finally the American rushes in with the day's headlines announcing the worst news yet: ten thousand Chinese killed, fifteen hundred Japs dead; whereupon Foo Ling exclaims, "Wonderful!" "What's so wonderful about that?" the Amer-

ican demands to know. "Pretty soon no Japanese!" Foo Ling says with a broad grin.

A very good American story that is, and so is this one which I heard over a radio program at one stage of the war when the American public was constantly enjoined against waste. A distinguished Chinese visitor, it seems, was being shown around New York City. Of course, they had the dignitaries and the motorcycle escort and everything. Suddenly this caravan got caught in a traffic jam, and just as the car came to a stop near an apartment house a man and his wife on the third floor got to the end of a terrific argument. The wife hauled off and knocked her husband out the window and he landed headfirst in the garbage can on the sidewalk. The Chinese visitor solemnly took in this scene, turned to a member of his party, and said: "American housewives velly wasteful. That man good for ten years yet."

The American humorous conception of the Chinese is generally good-natured, although Chinese do get sensitive about the fact that they are invariably portrayed in newspaper cartoons and on the vaudeville stage as pigtailed characters mouthing Confucian-like epigrams and concealing hatchets in their sleeves. American stereotypes of other peoples are not always so kind and sometimes can be cruel. Once I had the pleasure of visiting the studio of the well-known photographer, Alexander Alland, who is a fond portrayer of the polyglot American scene, and there were present Americans representing a great many nationalities and racial strains. It turned out to be a joke-swapping evening, in which everybody contributed with zest until somebody told one about a "Polack" which, by the way, I thought rather funny. Quite unexpectedly, it precipitated a heated debate among those present on the kind of stereotypes that might hurt racial relations, and the party broke up in a mirthless mood. Without investigating into this dire consequence of innocent humor, I do believe that it is entirely possible for many recipients of American humor about the Chinese to confuse it with Chinese humor itself.

Again, because the Chinese are expected to act differently and to go by a different, if not contrary, set of values, Americans are likely to be unduly impressed when they discover some points of similarity between the two peoples. This, I think, is another reason that accounts for the American myth according to which the Chinese have a great sense of humor "just like our own." When some professional promoters of international good will happen to be told some Chinese jokes that they readily recognize they exclaim: "Look, the Chinese laugh at