

Book Review

Davis, Jessica Milner (ed.) (2022). *Humour in Asian Cultures: Tradition and Context*. London and New York: Routledge.

Humour is the lubricant of individuals' lives and the flower of human civilisation that grows in different areas across the world. Interestingly, different civilisations produce flowers of different colours, which symbolises that the different civilisations in which humour is produced generate different perceptions and interpretations of humour. Moreover, it means that the influence of traditional cultures differs in each region, meaning that humour expressions vary significantly. Thus, humour is both universal and geographically unique, and this also applies to Asian humour. The book titled *Humour in Asian Cultures: Tradition and Context*, edited by Davis, provides an insight into the traditional Asian cultures and humour of China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and other Asian regions. It also examines how their traditional cultures have influenced and developed modern-day Asian humour. The book contains eleven chapters, each of which is written by a different author.

In the first chapter, Davis outlines the reasons for writing this book and also defines humour, as well as discusses the influences of traditional cultures of Asia. Davis points out that, although there is a wealth of literature examining cultural practices and cultural tastes, research exploring the use of traditional humour is lacking. Moreover, Davis emphasises that humour, if used correctly, can be a lubricant for communication between different cultures, although it can cause tension between the two parties if misinterpreted. She then introduces the definition and meaning of humour in Asian countries. For example, the Chinese humourist Lin Yutang was the first to coin the term “幽默 *you mo*” in the 1830s, which is a phonetic translation of the English word *humour* and an innovative term applied in Chinese culture. Davis argues that contemporary humour reflects the influence of traditional cultural values and practices, but that each individual is influenced by a different psycho-social culture. This means that, within the boundaries of its common cultural context, each nation has many individual differences.

In the second chapter, Shirley Chan demonstrates that humour can be used as rhetorical discourse to influence others and change their opinions and perspectives, by analysing the writings of the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius. She argues that Mencius' work was significantly influenced by the context in which he lived. Mencian humour (which is presented in *The Works of Mencius*) highlights societal issues whilst simultaneously fostering respectful, thoughtful, and truth-seeking dialogue. She argues her point from three standpoints, namely that Mencius criticises shortcomings and folly through satirical jokes, gives advice to the monarch about decision-making through humorous stories, and criticises the ideas of other philosophers of the time through humorous and witty examples. Subsequently, Shirley assumes that the pragmatics of humour in philosophical discourse are primarily concerned with its serious functions of persuasion and motivation. From Shirley's article, one can appreciate the clever combination of thought and humour of Mencius, the great philosopher of the Warring States period. They can also understand the influence that these traditional humorous stories have had on the lives of contemporary Chinese citizens.

The third chapter is written by Antonio Leggieri, who analyses humour in the Chinese Ming Dynasty *Huanben* novel *Guzhang Juechen*. This book is divided into four sections, namely *Feng* 風 (Wind), *Hua* 花 (Flowers), *Xue* 雪 (Snow) and *Yue* 月 (Moon). Each section contains ten chapters, all of which come together to tell a story. When discussing the humour and satire in the book, he analyses the stories in the Moon collection (which primarily involve satirical, high-powered characters as opposed to minor characters with airs of stupidity). Antonio Leggieri argues that, although the humour is not obvious, it can still be detected in the script of *Moon*. Moreover, he argues that the General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) (Attardo 2001) fails to explain the satirical humour of Wei Zhongxian (a famous Ming eunuch) in the episode, as the story does not rely on predictable scripted antagonism. Rather, it satirises various selected features of an existing script about a court eunuch, enabling the reader to construct a small GTVH-type script around two main features: as a eunuch and as a tyrannical usurper of imperial power. Antonio Leggieri also discusses the humour used in *Guzhang Juechen* from a micro- and macro- perspective. The micro aspect focuses primarily on the use of words in the book when he identifies verbal-visual humour (such as “虎” and “彪”, “方” and “万”). On the macro level, it clarifies that the book often borrows items from the ancients in order to narrate the story and convey both parody and satirical commentary. He also points out that register humour is used. Antonio Leggieri considers *Guzhang Juechen* a valuable resource for understanding how a softer kind of humour can be effectively developed. It is unquestionably one that transcends the jokes found in regular joke collections by meticulously weaving its humour and narration together.

In chapter four, Nengah Arnawa examines the linguistic features of traditional Balinese humour. She states that there are 718 native languages in Indonesia, with the Balinese language being spoken by approximately 3.3 million people. Moreover, as a dialect, it is a symbol of identity as well as social and tribal affiliation. In Bali, humour is largely determined by oral traditions of folk tales that contain a great deal of linguistic humour. Thus, Nengah Arnawa analyses the linguistic humour contents from four Balinese traditional folk discourses, namely *cecimpedan*, *bladbadan*, *wewangsalan* and *cecangkitan* or *raos ngémpélin*. Firstly, *cecimpedan* refers to children’s riddles in Balinese. Nengah Arnawa suggests that humour is triggered by the incongruity of logical contradictions in the cognitive semantic process in *cecimpedan*, and that people feel humoured by the entertaining atmosphere of the quiz game. Secondly, *bladbadan* is a form of sound play based on transposition, and consists of three elements, namely frame, denotative meaning and associative meaning. Nengah Arnawa describes *bladbadan* as being closely related to the wider context of speech, and therefore, it cannot be employed independently or out of context. This is in stark contrast to *cecimpedan*, in which humour is the result of logical errors. Thirdly, *wewangsalan* is a kind of rhyme that only has two lines, the first of which focuses on form and the second of which focuses on interpreting meaning. The rhyme in *wewangsalan* is formed by assonance and/or alliteration. Nengah Arnawa found that its interpretive meaning can be found in the humour of *wewangsalan*, although this depends on the harmony of rhyme. The last one is *cecangkitan*, and this involves a puzzle based on the ambiguity of meaning. The author points out that two aspects dominate *cecangkitan*, namely the variety of word forms and phonetic factors (polysemy and homonymy, respectively). Nengah Arnawa concludes that *cecimpedan*, *bladbadan*, *wewangsalan* and *cecangkitan/raos ngémpélin* are Balinese forms of humour that “are based on the semantic and lexical play” (p. 85). This has huge significance to Balinese culture and its inhabitants, while their sharp wit merits more recognition outside of their home country.

In chapter five, Makiko Takekuro (from Japan) examines the humour in the traditional rituals of Ishigaki Island in Japan. Makiko Takekuro considers this ritual to be “a poetic performance” (p. 90) that is ingrained in the sociohistorical environment of the neighbourhood. Thus, he employs “pluri-modality” (p. 91) (i.e. sound, language, body, thought, artefact, environment) to analyse this ritual performance humour. The cultural meanings of such poetic performances are often considered to be anchored in the context of the present, which is embedded in the replication of a ritual frame. This requires attention to be paid to verbal, gestural, and non-verbal elements as inherent aspects of pluri-modal poetics. Furthermore, Makiko Takekuro introduced the performance of *angama*, where there are two performance rules that must be considered, one of which is that the language of the performance should be Yaeyaman (although the performers’ voice is in a falsetto tone). In addition, the performers are expected to exercise as much of their intelligence and cunning as possible. He claims that humour in the *angama* ritual can be understood linguistically and as a component of the whole performance, while the audience’s participation in the imagined situation produces a special and enjoyable environment in which the humour can be enjoyed. He examined the differences between the ways in which adults and children respond to performance humour. Moreover, Makiko Takekuro found that the “think local, act local” feature is an obvious characteristic of the pluri-modal performance of banter. The humour in these performances is delivered by performers for audiences with similar backgrounds and who adhere to the same rules. In turn, this ultimately confirms and upholds regional identity and local cultural values.

Subsequently, in chapter six, Sachiko Kitazume discusses the famous Japanese cartoon artist Machiko Hasegawa, with a particular focus on *Sazae-san* and *Ijiwaru Baasan* (Granny Mischief). It is important to note that Sachiko Kitazume applies his own, self-developed “Twist theory” (Kitazume 2008, 2010) to analyse the culture and humour in these two cartoons. The “Twist theory” contends that a “twist” is at the heart of humour. The slight change, or “twist”, effectively turns a prototypical scenario into a ludicrous one. Laughter is produced by the dynamics of this abrupt change that is caused by a small modification. The examples from the cartoon *Sazae-san* and *Granny Mischief* explain this theory adequately. More importantly, Kitazume contends that these two popular Japanese cartoons reveal the traditional culture of the values of Confucius and Prince Shōtoku, as well as the conviction in “rewarding-good-and-punishing-evil” (p. 131), which are profoundly ingrained in Japanese society.

In chapter seven, M. W. Shores analyses another form of Japanese humour expression called *Makura* in *rakugo* 落語 (Japan’s traditional comic storytelling art). In *Makura*, warm-up languages are used to make audiences feel comfortable, to set the stage for upcoming tales, and prepare the audience for humour. Shores considers *Makura* to be a crucial part of *rakugo* as it bridges the gap between the past and the present. As *rakugo* is an old-fashion art with many traditional stories, *Makura*’s language is modified to ensure that stories set in the distant past remain fresh and current. Additionally, Shores identifies nine essential factors used in *Makura*: “feel out” the audience, break the ice, develop rapport, establish artistic authenticity, present topical material, tell *kobanashi* 小話, 小咄 (lit. short tales, make jokes), teach audiences about *rakugo* in the past and present, transport the audience to a different time/place, and establish a smooth transition into the *hondai* (i.e. stories proper). In his work, he further explains the nine elements in *Makura* examples, after which he concluded that *Makura* plays a significant role in modernisation and makes *rakugo* much more entertaining for the critical audiences of the modern world by serving as light-hearted, amusing, and accommodating prologues.

Chapter eight is written by HeeSun Kim and Barbara Plester and focuses predominantly on the issue of joking in Korean workplaces, which has been largely influenced by the

Confucian-based cultural context in Korea. Their study shows that humour in Korean workplaces is significantly influenced by Confucian culture, and this differs vastly from humour culture in the western context. The findings of this study suggest that workplace superiors can use humour more freely, whilst subordinates often refrain from using it as it could be considered improper and disrespectful, given that obedience is favoured by subordinates. Even though humour can save face in the workplace, the hierarchical dynamics and relationships between them must be carefully considered. Sometimes, superiors even try to save their own face by making fun of their lower subordinates. The authors argue that the efficiency of the face-saving strategy supports their claim that subordinates in Korean workplaces are constrained by politeness rules that limit their use of humour, particularly towards their superiors. This largely contrasts Western contexts, in which studies have found that humour can assist subordinates in contesting and challenging their supervisors and organisational decisions (Plester & Orams 2008). As for the honorifics used in workplace humour, the authors claim that honorifics are not always utilised as courteous behaviour but can be used as face-threatening humour in efforts to re-establish working connections. Thus, this article gives us new insight into organisational humour in Korean culture and politeness, as well as analyses the implications and pragmatic considerations for organisational relationships in Korean workplaces.

Subsequently, in chapter nine, Wei-Lin Melody Chang and Michael Haugh investigated Chinese traditional humour over time. Very few studies have examined conversational humour from a diachronic perspective. They suggest that there are differences between generations in their conventional humour, and thus they investigate the daily conversational humour of Taiwanese young people and older people. Moreover, they further explore it at different times in popular literary works. The results reveal that young generations prefer biting or harsh teasing, while older people tend to use jocular wordplay to produce a humorous conversation. Their study shows that conversational humour differs between generations and changes over time. Moreover, the study provides a relatively new approach to examining humour discourse. Nonetheless, it still remains to be seen whether the findings and strategy will hold up in more thorough empirical research.

In chapter ten, Ying Cao describes teasing as a crucial humour device in maintaining female friendships. She also analyses it in a famous Chinese reality TV show called *We Are Real Friends*. Ying Cao identifies three types of teasing in the reality television show, namely collaborative style of teasing, non-collaborative style of teasing, and the interaction of collaborative and non-collaborative teasing styles. From the examples presented by Ying Cao in the study, it seems that collaborative teasing can improve the sense of togetherness between women. Moreover, the findings differ from those of previous studies as it was found that the collaborative style of teasing occurred slightly less frequently among these four women than the non-collaborative teasing. Meanwhile, in this article, non-collaborative teasing is proposed to be a more competitive style of teasing that includes ritual teasing sequences performed by both the speaker and the targets. In addition, the mixing of these two styles of teasing creates a third type of teasing. However, the examples presented in this study only show a transition in style from non-collaborative to collaborative (with no reverse situations), and thus further investigations into this topic are required in future. In terms of teasing and identity, Ying Cao argues that teasing not only promotes women's friendships but also reduces traditional stereotypes of female identity. Hence, women's teasing should be further examined in humour and gender studies.

The chapter eleven, Marjorie K. M. Chan focuses on the Hong Kong TV series *Budong Sajiao de Nüren* (My Unfair Lady), in which *Sajiao* (to act cute, to be cutesy, to be flirtatious)

is interpreted through the humorous discourse of the characters. Interestingly, Chan first explains the traditional culture of using Chinese people's names. In ancient Chinese Dynasties (such as the Shang Dynasty and Tang Dynasty), people often avoided using the same words as the emperor's name, although this problem was solved by using near-synonyms and near-homophones. Besides that, the prevalence of homophones in the Chinese language lends itself to further applications in Chinese people's names, especially where (near-)homophony may have fortunate or unfavourable implications (Sung 1979). Therefore, an individual's name is not selected indiscriminately or haphazardly in Chinese culture. In line with this, Chan examines the names of six characters in this TV series in order to reveal their meanings and how they relate to the features and personality of the characters. Of all the humour-making devices used in the characters' humorous language, the author found that puns play a critical role in entertaining the audience, while teasing and hinting force the brain to cope with the linguistic difficulty of juggling different meanings concurrently. The female characters in this TV series face difficulties in establishing a work-life balance, while *Sajiao* represents them as being gentle and cute. However, they need to be stronger and more skilled at their workplaces than *sajiao*. Hence, this study has prompted a few other characters to emerge in the interplay of naming, gender, and *sajiao* performance. The study also examines how these factors pose difficulties for professional women in modern-day Hong Kong.

In conclusion, this book presents different types of Asian humour in a variety of Asian countries and regions, which provides us with an invaluable opportunity to recognise and appreciate colourful Asian humour and culture. It also serves as an excellent platform for the exchange of humour and culture, whilst it is also conducive to the preservation and dissemination of the art of humour in Asian countries.

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