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## The pragmatics of verbal and non-verbal humour in Li Kaixian's Yixiaosan

### [La pragmatica dell'umorismo verbale e non verbale in Yixiaosan di Li Kaixian]

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#### ABSTRACT

**IT** La breve raccolta Yi Xiao San 一笑散 (Si dissolve con una risata) del drammaturgo e bibliofilo cinese Li Kaixian 李?\_先 (1502-1568) comprendeva originariamente sei scene; oggi sono a noi disponibili solo due di queste, intitolate rispettivamente Da Yachan 打???U (Meditazione muta) e Yuanlin wumeng ?@林午?? (Sognare nel giardino a mezzogiorno). Messe insieme, queste due scene ammontano ad appena 4500 caratteri, e tuttavia costituiscono un prezioso oggetto di ricerca per uno studio sulla pragmatica del genere yuanben 院本 (farsa) di epoca Ming 明 (1368-1644). Le due parti di questo studio si concentrano ciascuna su una singola scena. La prima parte analizza Da Yachan e la pragmatica della comunicazione verbale e non verbale, informata dal modo in cui questi personaggi parlano e si comportano, nonché dal loro egocentrismo linguistico. Nella seconda parte, l'articolo analizza Yuanlin wumeng e la questione della parodia intertestuale, in cui Li Wa ??娃 e Cui Yingying 崔?L?L, due personaggi provenienti da due celebri racconti della dinastia Tang 唐 (618-907), sono utilizzati a fini comici. Lo studio si concentra anche sul modo in cui l'opera fu accolta e valutata dai contemporanei del suo autore. In conclusione, il saggio riflette sulla funzione della comunicazione implicita nel generare umorismo.

**Parole chiave:** Li Kaixian, Yuanben, teatro cinese, comunicazione non verbale, intertestualità

**EN** Chinese dramatist and bibliophile Li Kaixian's (1502-1568) short farces Yi Xiao San (Everything dispels with a laugh) included originally six acts, of which only two survive today, titled Da Yachan (Mute meditation) and Yuanlin wumeng (Noontime dream in the garden grove), respectively. Although when put together, these two scenes amount to barely 4500 characters, they can serve as an ideal research object for a study in the pragmatics of Ming-era drama. Each part of this study concentrates on a single scene. The first part of this paper analyses Da Yachan and the pragmatics of verbal and non-verbal communication, informed by the way these characters speak and behave, as well as their egocentrism. In the second part, this paper analyses Yuanlin wumeng and the question of intertextual parody, where Li Wa and Cui Yingying, two characters coming from two famous tales of the Tang dynasty, are employed for comical purposes. The study concentrates also on how the play was received and evaluated by its author's contemporaries. In the conclusion, this paper reflects on the function of communication without words and meaning beyond words.

**Keywords:** Li Kaixian, Yuanben, Chinese theatre, nonverbal communication, intertextuality

## 1. Introduction: on Li Kaixian and Yi Xiao San

中麓子塵事應酬之暇，古書講讀之餘，戲為六院本，總名之曰一笑散。一、打啞禪，二：園林午夢；其四乃攬道場、喬坐衙、昏廝迷，並改竄三枝花大鬧土地堂。借觀者眾，從而失之。失者無及，其存者恐久而亦如失者矣。遂刻之以木，印以楮，裝釘數十本，藏之巾笥。有時取玩，或者童子扮之，以代百尺掃愁之帚而千交鈎詩之鈎。更因雕工貧甚，願減價售技。自念古人遇歲荒，乃以興造事濟貧。諺又有【油貴點燈，米貴齋僧】之說，遂以二院本付之，不然刻不及此。

*I, Zhongluzi, when not attending to mundane things, and after reading and lecturing on the ancient books, wrote six yuanben plays, and gave them the collective name of Yi Xiao San. The first play is called Da Yachan, and the second one is called Yuanlin wumeng. The remaining four are called Jiao Daochang, Qiao Zuoya, Hun Simi, Jing Gai Cuan Sanji Hua Danao Tudi Tang. I have lent them to a multitude of people [who wanted] to read them, and thus I lost them. I did not have a way to recopy the lost scripts, and I was afraid that the surviving ones would eventually end up just like the other ones. Therefore, I have carved them on wood, printed them on paper, and hardbound tenths of copies, to preserve them wrapped in silk. Sometimes I take a copy and amuse myself [by reading it], or order my servants to stage it, in order to replace the broom which sweeps away my worries for a hundred chi [i.e., wine], or the book that a thousand fathers used to fish for poetry [i.e., wine, again]. Besides, since the carvers were extremely poor, they thought of selling their craft by lowering their prices. I also thought that when the ancients encountered lean years, they also resorted to helping the poor by starting construction projects. There is a proverb that goes "When the oil is expensive, light the lamp; when the rice is expensive, gather the monks." Therefore I gave the carvers these two yuanben to print, and in another context I would not have done so.<sup>1</sup>*

Li Kaixian 李開先 (1502-1568) was a Chinese man of letters, imperial official, and bibliophile; his major contribution to academia is his collection of edited Yuan-era 元 (1271-1368) plays, called *Gaiding Yuanxian Chuanqi* 改定元賢傳奇 (Revised Plays by Yuan Masters). He also wrote two of his own *chuanqi* 傳奇 (southern-style dramas), a number of *sanqu* 散曲 (arias, mostly rhyming long poems detached from any theatrical work), and an anthology of six *yuanben* 院本 (entertainment quarter dramas) collectively called *Yi Xiao San* 一笑散 (Everything dispels with a laugh, after the name of a traditional remedy against pruritus or toothache, hereafter YXS). As he himself wrote in the preface for YXS, he had decided to let these six *yuanben* circulate among his friends, and as a result, four of them were lost. It has to be noted however, that the author's belittling of his own text might be part of the work's fictionality. In other words, Li Kaixian's remarks about the work's modesty might aim to create a

<sup>1</sup>Preface to *Yi Xiao San* 一笑散, my translation. Taken from *Li Kaixian Quanjì*, p.857. Another version of this preface in English can be found in Tan, *Containment*, p.211.

certain emotional response in his intended audience, which, prepared for the worst, might be pleasantly surprised by the quality of the two scripts.

The two plays available to us today are called Da Yachan 打啞禪 (Cracking a Silent Zen Meditation), and Yuanlin wumeng 園林午夢 (A Noontime Dream in the Garden Grove), and they constitute the object of this paper. Both scripts consist of short, single-scene plays, based on the repetition of a simple scheme; moreover their language is relatively easy to understand, and based (as one would expect) more on the vernacular of the time than on the classical language. The synopsis of Da Yachan can be summarised as follows:

演老和尚與屠夫打啞彈,彼此強作理解,實則顛倒是非。

*An old monk and a butcher engage in a session of silent Buddhist meditation (a kind of call-and-response practice which is performed entirely with silent gestures), in which both of them try to force their own interpretation, what happens in reality is that they end up confounding the meanings of what they are trying to communicate.<sup>2</sup>*

And this is the synopsis for Yuanlin wumeng:

一漁翁在園林中午睡, 夢見崔鶯鶯、紅娘與李亞仙、秋桂鬥嘴, 各論貴賤而貴賤難分構思極簡, 情節類兒戲。劇品評: “詞甚寂寥, 無足取也”。

*A fisherman falls asleep during the noontime in his grove garden, and he dreams of the characters Cui Yingying, her servant Hongniang, Li Yaxian, and her servant Qiugui, who engage in an argument; each of them tries to argue about being better than the other, but it is difficult to declare a winner. Its concept is extremely elementary, and its plot resembles a children's play. In the text “Jupin” 劇品 the play is described as follows: “Its wording does not really go anywhere, it is not worth reading”.<sup>3</sup>*

As for the genre it belongs to, we encounter some unsolved questions as well. Virtually all the studies on yuanben mention Tao Zongyi's 陶宗儀 (1329-1410) Nancun chuogeng lu 南村辮耕錄 (Notes upon coming back from the countryside) and his definition of this particular type of play:

<sup>2</sup> Wang Senran, *Jumu*, p. 182, my translation.

<sup>3</sup> Wang Senran, *Jumu*, p. 774, my translation. The work Jupin 劇品 briefly mentioned here is a collection of reviews of theatrical works, written by statesman Qi Biaoqia 祁彪佳 (1602-1645), on which we will briefly come back later.

唐有傳奇，宋有戲曲、唱譚、詞說，金有院本、雜劇、諸公調。院本，雜劇，其實一也。國朝，院本、雜劇、始釐而二之。

*“In the Tang dynasty, we had operas called chuanqi, in the Song times we called them xiqu, changhun, and cishuo, in the Jin times yuanben, zaju, zhugongdiao. Yuanben was actually the same thing as zaju. Only in the current dynasty, one has seen a slight difference between the two”*.<sup>4</sup>

This definition concerns mainly the genre in its early stages in the Jin金 dynasty (1115-1234), and at the moment we do not have sufficient textual evidence to witness an evolution of the genre, since none of the yuanben texts from the Jin dynasty has survived in complete form, only their titles remain. However, in the early days of the Ming dynasty, Prince Zhu Quan 朱權 (1378-1448) noted that yuanben would be best described as skits performed in the entertainment quarters; one might infer that some of these skits revolved around love stories. Yuanben represents historically a moment of transition from the zaju 雜劇 (another polysemous name, meaning different things in different epochs, but for convenience let us stick to its literal translation of variety play, a genre involving both songs and spoken dialogues) of the Song 宋 dynasty (960-1279) to the zaju of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. The early works belonging to this genre have all been lost, but Tao Zongyi tells us that there used to be no less than eleven major subgenres, and he lists more than six hundred titles. Moreover, Xia Tingzhi 夏庭芝 (1316-1370), in a statement echoing that of Tao Zongyi, wrote that in the Jin dynasty, zaju and yuanben were one and the same thing, and in the Yuan dynasty they became two distinct genres (jin ze zaju, yuanben he er wei yi, zhi wochao nai fen yuanben, zaju er wei er 金則雜劇、院本合而為一，至我朝乃分院本、雜劇而為二).<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that, later on, the term zaju became simply an umbrella term to define short plays in general.

Li Kaixian's two plays can be ascribed to the variety that Tao Zongyi calls Shuanchu yanduan 拴搯艷段 (Binding Interludes, because they may as well serve as interludes which bind two scenes from a more complicated main play). My reason for affirming this is that in Wu Mei's research, Tao himself is quoted as defining this kind of interludes as yanduan 焰段 (blazing interludes literally), because just like a flame, they are easy to ignite and easy to put out. Wu Mei also notices that, in works of this kind, there is no space for zhugongdiao 諸宮調 (prosimetric medley), although some zhugongdiao items are to be

<sup>4</sup> *Nancun*, Juan 25, my translation.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Li Xiusheng, *Dacidian*, 491-492, my translation.

erroneously found in Tao Zongyi's list of Shuanchu Yanduan: a review of the existing literature on the topic suffices to affirm that yuanben and its surrounding concepts have rather fluid definitions.

This article will focus on Li Kaixian's two surviving yuanben plays, by presenting them both singularly and as part of the same collection. In the first part I will rely on the now well-known humour theory of scripts opposition, first theorised by Victor Raskin in 1985, in order to explain Da Yachan; according to Raskin, jokes are formed when two opposing scripts (that is to say the semantic fields and the images that a single word evokes) come into contact and overlap. It is almost an automated process for us to imagine a Buddhist monk and suddenly think of chastity, shaved head, abstention from meat, sutras and so on: all these images constitute the script of the word monk. At the same time, when we think of a butcher, our mind automatically goes to slaughterhouses, disembowelment, cured meats, and so forth. The play Da Yachan shows how these two naturally opposed scripts can come into contact, and how the contrast between them generates humour. With Yuanlin wumeng, the question of how humour is generated becomes more complex, since intertextual elements come into play. This second section of the article draws from various theories of parody and intertextuality in order to explain the intertextual correlations between the characters presented here and their canonical images in their respective plays. The appearance of the term pragmatics in the title can be easily justified: if we consider valid the simple definition of pragmatics as the study of meaning deriving from the way language is used, then we can see the whole of YXS as a way for Li Kaixian to utilize stock characters and themes to generate new meaning.

## 2. Da Yachan and the problem of failed communication

The first scene that we analyse here is Da Yachan, a singular encounter between a monk named Zhenru 真如 (literally Absolute Truth), his disciple Piekong 撇空 (literally He who casts aside the void), and a butcher named Jia Buren 賈不仁 (literally Jia the merciless one). The monk and the butcher are the protagonists of a wordless dialogue which takes place after Zhenru announces to give ten liang 兩 (in total approximately 500 grams) of gold to someone who replies correctly to a session of mute meditation, a sectarian practice in which two participants communicate with gestures. Surprisingly, Jia Buren is awarded the prize, only for the monk Piekong to interrogate his master and the butcher separately, thus revealing (for the audience/readers, but not for the protagonists) the huge snowball-like misunderstanding. Rather than retranslating all the scene in the same way as it was written, I believe it is better to analyse the eighteen acts of the meditation, and what they mean for the two participants. The reader "watches" the full meditation scene, with the gestures alternating between the two characters, before each of them gives independently his interpretation of the whole session. The two characters' perspectives do not alternate in the original play as they do here, thus forcing the reader to go back and

reread the abbot's intended meaning every time the butcher comes up with his own version, for heightened contrast:<sup>6</sup>

<p>The monk Zhenru extends a finger.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 一佛出世。 <i>The first thing Buddha did was come into the world.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 寺中有一個豬要賣。 <i>There is a pig in the temple, and I wish to sell it.</i></p>
<p>The butcher Jia extends two fingers.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 二菩薩來涅槃。 <i>The second thing Buddha did was reach Nirvana.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 還個二百個好錢。 <i>It can be sold for a good two hundred strings of cash.</i></p>
<p>Zhenru extends three fingers.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 佛、法、僧為三寶。 <i>The Buddha, the Law, and the Monks are the Untouchable Trinity.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 寺中一闍三個豬都要賣，零買二百錢一個。 <i>I would like to sell all three pigs in the temple, and they can be sold for two hundred strings of cash each.</i></p>
<p>Jia extends five fingers.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 達摩傳流五祖。 <i>These are the five venerable fathers of the doctrine.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 總買少不得計些便宜，還他五百好錢。 <i>As for the total price, we could make a little discount, a good five hundred strings of cash.</i></p>
<p>Zhenru nods.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 我點頭知來意。 <i>I nod to signal my understanding.</i></p> <p>For Jia: (no explanation)</p>
<p>Jia points a finger at the monk and another one at himself.</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 無人無我。 <i>The maxim "The others do not exist, and neither do I".</i></p> <p>For Jia: 平的過你心，就平的過我心。 <i>If it is good for you, then it is good for me.</i></p>
<p>Zhenru opens his eyes wide</p>	<p>For Zhenru: 彌勒佛掌教。</p>

<sup>6</sup> The silent meditation scene starts and ends smoothly, with Zhenru and Jia Buren responding to each other's gestures in a flawless way. Piekong is the one interrogating the master, and then the butcher, about the meaning of the gestures, therefore exposing the misunderstanding between the two. An analysis (in Italian) of the play can be found in Leggieri, 2020, and a full annotated translation can be found in Idema, Lee and West (2023: 1-19).

	<p><i>(Look at) The venerable Matreya!</i></p> <p>For Jia: 出家人跟著討豬錢不成的，我眼下就要。</p> <p><i>Monks should not talk any more about money for pigs, I would like the money now before my eyes.</i></p>
Jia touches his beard	<p>For Zhenru: 彌勒佛入定之後，此心瞭然不覺。</p> <p><i>After Maitreya gets into trance, he does not feel anything, and everything is clear to him.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 師傅，然後就來。</p> <p><i>Master, I will give you the money later.</i> [A pun on the homophony between <i>ran</i> 然 (part of <i>ranhou</i> 然後, <i>later</i>) and <i>ran</i> 鬚 (<i>beard</i>).]</p>
Zhenru extends ten fingers and closes his fists three times.	<p>For Zhenru: 生之徒十有三。</p> <p><i>Three on ten are the companions of life.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 今天十二，我到十三日就要豬錢。</p> <p><i>Today is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the month, I would like the money for the pig no later than on the 13<sup>th</sup>.</i></p>
Jia imitates him.	<p>For Zhenru: 死之徒亦十有三。</p> <p><i>Three on ten are the companions of death as well.</i> [This and the previous sentence are two almost verbatim quotes from the fiftieth chapter of the Daodejing 道德經. Ames and Hall (2003:155) translate this passage as “One in three are the companions of life, one in three are the companions of death”].</p> <p>For Jia: 到十三日就與你。</p> <p><i>On the 13<sup>th</sup> you will receive it.</i></p>
Zhenru beats his hands on the ground twice.	<p>For Zhenru: 無明業火按拿不下。</p> <p><i>The sacred fire of doctrine is impossible to grasp.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 獨在寺中餒了一場，賣與世人使用把這兩榔頭饒了牠罷。</p> <p><i>The pig has lived in the monastery, so when you give it to the people of the world, please spare him those two hammer bits.</i></p>
Jia indicates the sky twice.	<p>For Zhenru: 空即是色，色即是空。</p>

	<p><i>The immaterial is the material, the material is the immaterial.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 我對天盟誓，若打牠一榔頭，我就不是個人。</p> <p><i>I swear to the Heavens, I will not be worthy of being called a man if I hit him with the hammer once!</i></p>
Zhenru touches his hips twice.	<p>For Zhenru: 二戒貪嗔好殺。</p> <p><i>Renounce greediness and the killing of other beings.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 把那兩個腰子送來，與山僧解饞。</p> <p><i>Could you please save for us the two kidneys of the pig?</i></p>
Jia hugs himself repeatedly	<p>For Zhenru: 不好殺之人，十八尊羅漢輪流轉過來。</p> <p><i>The people who do not kill other beings are the reincarnation of the eighteen venerable Arhats.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 休說是這兩個腰子，就是這副豬腸都抖擻與你罷。</p> <p><i>Not only the kidneys, I can give you the bowels of the pig as well.</i></p>
Zhenru extends three fingers and closes his hand into a fist, and Jia indicates him.	<p>For Zhenru: 三教歸一，佛門最長。</p> <p><i>The three teachings are one, and the door to Buddhism is the widest.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 你師傅平日認的三個婦人，只有一個好的。</p> <p><i>Your master knows three married women, but only one of them is good.</i></p>
Zhenru indicates the city wall and sits on the ground, and Jia does the same.	<p>For Zhenru: 如來夜半搖城苦行，林中端坐。</p> <p><i>Buddha practices asceticism in the middle of the night in the city, before sitting in meditation in the forest.</i></p> <p>For Jia: 你師傅吃了豬腸和腰子，保暖生閒事，把這從城牆上引過來，地下同坐著，任意所為罷。</p> <p><i>Your master, well fed from the pig's intestines and kidneys, and well dressed, might have other cravings, and so he could call that woman from the city walls, they would sit on the ground and do whatever they please.</i></p>



We can begin our discussion by stating briefly how this play has been read and analysed in the past. The majority of the secondary literature on this piece comes from Mainland China, and already during the Ming dynasty the collection attracted some criticism: for example, writer and bureaucrat Shen Defu 沈德府 (1578-1642) saw the work as “too superficial, good only for a laugh” (tai qianbo, jin ke gong xiaoxue 太淺薄，僅可供笑諢).<sup>7</sup> More recently, and as one of the few comments coming from the western world, Idema dismissed briefly this single play as boring reading.<sup>8</sup>

What are we dealing with here? It is an extended instance of failed communication, originating from an initial misunderstanding that leads the two participants further and further apart from each other. Our case here relies heavily on what has been defined as the egocentrism of the speaker, even though neither Zhenru nor Jia Buren actually speaks during the scene. Already in the beginning of the play, Li Kaixian shows us the unidimensional nature of his characters. The opening songs that they sing when they enter the stage help us prove this point, this is monk Zhenru's opening song:

衲衣·杖藜·念彼觀音力·本來無樹是菩提·六祖傳真祕·禮拜當陽，皈依彌勒，誦華嚴求  
懺悔·怎知·就裡·忍事波羅密·

*A monk's robe, a walking stick,  
and the power of mindfulness of Guanyin.  
Originally no tree is a Bodhi.  
The Six Patriarchs transmit the true secret.  
We take a service to the Buddha,  
we convert and come back to Maitreya,  
we recite the Avataṃsakasūtra to seek repentance.  
Without knowing one's true intention,  
we put up with adversity and reach the other shore.*

This is Jia Buren's opening song:

為屠日久·繩兒繫足，擔兒攔頭·肥豬買在家闌後·喜笑歌謳·把快刀連屠二口·看皮錢睇  
定雙眸·燒生肉·將來下酒·滿飲數十甌·

*I have been a butcher for a long time,  
I take a rope and tie the feet,  
I take a shoulder pole to block the head,  
I buy a fat pig and keep it idle at home,  
and then sing and laugh with it.  
I kill it with two bits of a fast blade.  
I look at the copper cash with both my pupils,  
I roast the meat, then I drink some wine,  
consuming happily dozens of cups.*

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Jiang Lihua 姜麗華, “Dutuo”, 55.

<sup>8</sup> Idema, “Yuan-pen”, 64.

As we can see, they express themselves in a lexicon which is both monothematic and rich in specific expressions. On the one hand, the monk never uses anything different than sectarian terms, and he mostly paraphrases (or even misquotes in some cases) the sacred scriptures of Buddhism. On the other hand, the butcher goes on describing how he usually treats the pigs that he buys, from breeding to butchering to consuming their meat with wine. Li Kaixian foreshadows the incommunicability between two parallel worlds which can never meet. Both parts are, in fact, both unwilling and unable to even conceive and consider the counterpart's vision of the world; quite the opposite, they both interpret the other person's gestures as completely integrated into their own vision. This may represent a parody of the Buddhist clergy, as pointed out by Idema, or its objective may be the interpretative principle of the scriptures which was propagated since the 4th Century BC in an appended and verbalized comment to the Yijing 易經 (The Book of Changes), which stresses the importance of perspective: “[In the interpretation of the Dao] a benevolent person who sees it will say that it is benevolent; a wise person who sees it will say that it is wise” (renzhe jian ren zhizhe jian zhi 仁者見仁智者見智).<sup>9</sup>

Our attention should focus on the fact that yuanben scenes, conventionally staged as opening act or intervals inside much longer dramatic operas, might be defined as meta-theatrical genre; such yuanben pieces as *The Battling Quacks* or *The Immortals* are located precisely inside other pieces of work, and therefore they constitute a sort of theatre within theatre. By this, we mean that the characters in the main play recite another story in which they interpret other roles. In our case, the meta-theatrical nature of the scene is already there, without the need of a longer story to encapsulate a shorter one. The middle part of the scene is constituted by a long action (the mute meditation which actions are simply described in the script, without any dialogue) in which the old monk and the butcher remain one in front of the other and engage in a wordless interaction, while they reply one another with a series of intricate gestures; in this passage we can witness a brief moment of “acting” within the main scene, in which, theoretically, the two characters are dialoguing on an even base. In reality, each of them interprets the other's gestures according to his own identity.

In addition, previous yuanben texts, not only those belonging to the Shuanchu Yanduan variety, had usually five main roles, as explained by Xia Tingzhi: fujing 副淨 (the main comical role, who could also be referred to as canjun 參軍, i.e. He who joins the army), fumo 副末 (the supporting role, also called canghu 蒼鶻, dark falcon, because he could fling himself at the main role in the same way as falcons do with smaller birds), moni 末泥 (usually the role of an old man) yinxi 引戲 (literally the one who introduces the play, but mostly one who is in service of the moni), and zhuanggu 裝孤 (usually portraying an official or a bureaucrat). They were also characterized by a prominent physicality, and in some

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<sup>9</sup> Gu, *Theories of reading*, 2.

instances they even featured a wooden stick called *kegua* 磕瓜, with which the *fumo* would usually beat the *fujing* after he pronounced particularly bold or lewd lines. This physical quality is completely absent in our episode, and the easy laughter generated by beats and slaps is replaced by a more sophisticated humour which, by taking as strength point what is not said, is collocated halfway between verbal and non-verbal communication. As we have seen, the text has been interpreted as a satire of the Buddhist clergymen's ignorance and stiffness, and here we suggested another interpretation, connected with subjectivity and egocentrism in deciphering the scriptures. Therefore, in the interpretation of gestures, a monk sees the doctrine of Buddha, whereas a butcher cannot see anything but pigs, bowels and abattoir tools.

The verbal and physical contrasts featured in the older *yuanben* texts here do not appear at all, quite the opposite, the confrontation happens in an indirect way; following the silent discussion between the characters, *Piekong*, who is a *chou* 丑 (traditionally a sort of clownesque role), becomes the supporting role of the two characters.

The reading may indeed be boring, because Li Kaixian has first silenced and then deconstructed the crucial moment of the play (the exchange of comical lines) which constitutes the foundation of the whole genre. We can for the moment put aside the effective ridiculousness of the scene and observe how Li Kaixian foresaw for his characters a structure which reminds us of the Bergsonian snowball: a small mistake gives rise to increasingly bigger mistakes, like a snowball which grows bigger as it continues rolling down a hill. The small misunderstanding at the beginning is the pointed finger, which indicates Buddha coming into the world, and is understood as representing a pig; from that moment on, one character produces a series of increasingly obscure references to the doctrine, the other character interprets them in an increasingly worldly and concrete manner, creating even bigger contrasts between the two interpretations. For the purpose of a more complete understanding of the scene, we cannot overlook the violation, on the butcher's side, of some monastic taboos: in rapid succession he mentions killing and consuming animals, dealing with money, and sexual activity. Obviously, all of these moments undergo the negative influence of the deconstructed structure of the text, and thus we first find ourselves observing an obscure and sectarian rite, then a series of references to Buddhist doctrine, and then the "key" to interpret the scene in its entirety in the words of the butcher. It is possible to imagine the eighteen actions of the silent meditation as eighteen "question-answer" jokes, in which questions are separated from the answers, and although this undoubtedly influences the liveliness of the scene, it highlights even more the variety of humour featured here, founded upon the perception of a situation or of an event in two contexts which are incompatible with each other.

Some studies on the narrative modalities of the humoristic texts can help us analyse the nature of this text with more precision, and still our case reverberates in an intriguing way with the now

canonical script opposition theory.<sup>10</sup> The deconstruction of the silent meditation can be seen as a prototypical humorous text, and its two participants represent the two contrasting scripts which, by coming into contact with each other, oppose each other. When we consider a script as a group of information which, through free association, surrounds or is evoked by a certain word, we can see how each of the two main characters represents precisely a group of ideas and concepts deriving from, and connected with, their figures and their roles. Specifically, the monk revolves around a hypothetical “Buddhism” script, and the butcher around a “butchering” script. The silent scene satisfies both prerequisites to be considered as a joke, since it is fully compatible with two overlapping and theoretically opposed scripts. Oring informs us that the incongruity between what we oppose in a joke must be appropriate, meaning that the opposing scripts must have at least one contact point for the overlap to happen: in *Da Yachan* the common point is represented by the mono-dimensionality of both characters, and their tendency to ascribe everything that they witness in the external world to their system of beliefs and habits.

The hypothesis formulated by Jiang is that this play is a nonconventional type of *dutuo ju* 度脫劇 (deliverance play or redemption play), in which, rather than having a redeemer and a redeemed as characters in the play, the listener/reader is the one to be enlightened by it. If we want to continue with a similar interpretation, and involve the audience/receiver as active “actor” in the interpretive process, then it is possible to present *Da Yachan* as an exposition (obviously more extreme and longer) of the way most jokes work, in which the receiver of the play can observe from a close distance an opposition between different scripts. In a nonconventional manner, a silent narrative is analysed from two viewpoints, causing a more disruptive effect which becomes entertaining because of the open contrast between two macro-scripts. However, it is necessary to underline the metaphorical downward motion, presented in the narrative and functional to our interpretation of the two scripts: the scene would have lost most of its efficacy if the butcher were the first character to interpret the meditation.

### 3. Yuanlin Wumeng and intertextual parody

漁磯有錢難去買，漁夫體輕賣。漁船柳內橫，漁網江邊曬，漁村不容名利客。

*A fishing jetty is hard to buy, even if you have the money: no fisherman will sell it lightly.*

*My fishing boat lies athwart within the willow trees, the fishing nets dry in the sun along the river's edge:*

*A fishing village has no room for any who scheme for fame and profit.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> For the narrative modalities of the humoristic texts, see Attardo, *Humorous Texts*, and Ermida, *Comic Narratives*. For a summary of Raskin's script opposition theory, see *Comic Narratives*, 84-90.

<sup>11</sup> Translation taken from Wang, *Western Wing*, 300.

Judging by these opening words, Li Kaixian is employing the same trick at the beginning of the second scene. A fisherman with a passion for reading is introduced with a song which emphasizes his profession (the character *yu* 漁, fishing, appears in every line) and thus states his identity. The whole dream scene is brought about by a casual remark that this unnamed fisherman makes before falling asleep:

適才因見案上有崔鶯鶯、李亞仙二傳，仔細看來他兩個也差不多，難分貴賤，怎定低昂！

*I found the two tales of Oriole and Li Wa on my table, and when I read them carefully, the two seemed roughly the same. If it's impossible to tell who's the more noble, then how can one determine who's the lower of the two?*

This comment spurs the main verbal debate between Li Wa and Cui Yingying (whose name has been often translated as Oriole in the English versions of her tale), each accompanied by her servant girl, and which ends quite abruptly when the dreamer is awakened by the sound of a ceremonial bell (*shegu* 社鼓). He then promises to renounce the vanity of the world in order to reach a perfect state in which his dreams would not bother him any longer. This renouncement of the world may make the play seem cyclical in its connection with the Buddhist themes that we have witnessed with the first scene; however, judging by the mentioning of the parable of the yellow millet (a famous Taoist allegory) in the fisherman's closing line, the state of enlightenment that he would like to attain seems more Taoist than Buddhist in nature, if not even syncretic. As has been noticed elsewhere (Liu 1988: 124), "Chan is a synthesis of Buddhism and philosophical Daoism, it is not always possible to distinguish Chan and Daoism," and "the fisherman is a conventional Daoist symbol of withdrawal from society and return to nature." This conclusion brings the play to an ideal full cycle, back to Chan Buddhism, which seems to have been discarded at the end of *Da Yachan*. The previous play, in fact, concluded with a rather hopeless comment by the monk Piekong, after he realized the butcher had gotten the monk's silent message all wrong: Everything in this world has been turned upside down into such a state, what I see in front of my eyes is so trivial that I cannot even bear to look at it (*shishi diandao mei ruci, yanqian suosui bukan guan* 世事顛倒每如此，眼前瑣碎不堪觀).

By reading the author's postface, as well as the supplementary gloss written by Li Kaixian's disciple Cui Yuanji 崔元吉 (?-?), we can suppose that the whole play was intended to have some hidden meaning and purpose, and its writer's concern was not only "to make people laugh," but also to provide the audience with some substance below the laughter. In Cui Yuanji's words, the main idea behind these two scenes was that any dispute on what is right and wrong, together with any endless search of fame and profit "at the end of the day is just a dream" (*daotou dou shi meng* 到頭都是夢) and this trait is mostly visible in this last scene. Although Li Kaixian wrote these plays after his retirement, it has been speculated

that he was still bothered and worried by what was happening in the rest of the empire (invasions and crises), and his arias written in the same period seem to confirm this hypothesis. Therefore, he may have resorted to composing yuanben and long poems in search of some temporary solace. If we wish to humour this supposition, it becomes then meaningful that he chose to represent the main characters as fishermen and monks, characters who traditionally are depicted as not interested in the fetters of official life, and who at the end of the scene vow to remove themselves even farther from mundanity. The fisherman makes for an interesting parallel with the butcher in the previous scene: both characters never betray their role by saying or even conceiving anything slightly outside of their semantic fields, they are interested mainly in much earthier aspects of life, and do not show any apparent propension for abstract thinking. Accordingly, the two “battling” women may mirror the monks in the first scene. We would be jumping into (the wrong) conclusions if we simply saw the scenes as a contrast between the “high” and “low” culture. Li Kaixian chooses instead to represent monks and literary characters as childish and unidimensional figures, while the “lowly” figures end up being the ones with a positive role. For all we know, clowns and rogues were already the standard roles for yuanben representations, and he introduced characters belonging to the aforementioned “star system” as a counterweight to the unnamed fisherman.

It is interesting to notice that, in their respective stories, both Li Wa and Yingying were the cause of their male partners' fall into disgrace, while their male counterparts helped define the archetypal character of the young talent who squanders his family's fortune out of love. Nonetheless, at least in Li Wa's case, the talented young scholar (in later versions renamed Zheng Yuanhe 鄭元和), after hitting rock bottom and being even rejected by his father, is also saved by the woman, passes the exam to become an official, and eventually marries her. Li Kaixian removes completely the redemptive portion of the plot from the dispute; similarly, he does not pay attention to the fact that in Cui Yingying's original story, student Zhang 張 fails the imperial exam after bidding farewell to her:

明旦而張行。明年文戰不勝，張遂止於京。

*The next morning at dawn, Zhang set out. The following year, not having been successful in the literary competition, Zhang stayed in the capital.*<sup>12</sup>

He also pays no attention to the fact that in the later play Xixiang Ji 西廂記 (Story of The Western Wing, XIII Century) the couple does in fact end up as husband and wife, and student Zhang finally is promoted to a high position. In light of these considerations, we can affirm that Li Kaixian's perspective was already beyond the pursuit of fame and status that the male characters of the two tales set to follow. The redemption that he hints at is instead diametrically opposite: to renounce the world.

<sup>12</sup> Translated by Owen *Anthology*, 545.

We have to consider the two original stories, and the place they have in the history of Chinese literature. Ming Dong Gu indicates the tale of Yingying is a work that analyses the female psyche within the traditional Confucian society and is the first epistolary work in the history of Chinese fiction. Therefore, one is almost forced to pay attention to the intertextual factor of the play. The presence of intertextuality in humorous texts has been discussed, among others, by Attardo. In his short but nonetheless insightful discussion, Attardo points out how by resorting to intertextuality for humorous purposes, an author can “economize” on his/her lines by creating only a single instance, for example a single line, since all the other instances are virtually present in the mind of the reader/listener. This is surely the case of Yuanlin wumeng, where two original texts of a more sophisticated nature, and not only “written to amuse the reader”, are reused and evoked in the mind of the reader for humorous purposes, in a case of intertextual parody. Li Kaixian has no need to introduce the characters, their names alone being more than enough to evoke their respective stories in our minds. At the same time, when they argue with one another, such lines as

*(Oriole speaks:) You tricked Zheng Yuanhe into dropping his riding crop from his horse.*

*(Li Wa speaks:) You enticed Zhang Junrui to strum his zither under the moon.*

refer to well-known scenes in the plot, and therefore need no further elaboration, being more than sufficient for the reader to recognise.

If, on the contrary, we did not consider the intertextual factor, the scene would appear rather bland: inside a fisherman's dream, two women insult each other. Therefore, in order to better understand this scene, we can benefit from the theories of intertextuality and parody as presented by Bakhtin; our point of departure is Bakhtin's idea that parody serves as a critique on the “one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word”, and aims at exposing something that is already implicit in the text and carrying it into a different level of explicitness. Bakhtin's focus is on the dynamic discourse, rather than on the static language, and he is aware that parody is the tool which destroys the sanitized literary plane of one-sidedness. The grief of Li Wa and Cui Yingying is only implicit (and, when it is there, it is expressed only according to propriety) in their traditional one-sided representation, and it is given free rein in Li Kaixian's short piece, where their stories are used for them to vent at each other, and become well-rounded characters once more. We can pair Attardo's study with Marszalek's inquiry into humour in longer narratives and its creation by means of disrupted elements. These single elements have to be put together, in order to build a comic effect in a more macroscopic and sophisticated way. The comic factor of the scene is undoubtedly represented by the ruthless dialogue between two heroines of the classical Chinese narrative tradition, and as we have just observed, their names alone evoke in the reader's mind the fictional subworlds and the plots in which they appear. While this recall is certainly not enough to cause a humorous result (and indeed Attardo himself warns

us that the quintessential intertextual device, quotation, is not humorous per se), it helps us head into the right direction. We have to consider that, on a macroscopic level, Li Kaixian is once again subverting the convention of yuanben as a genre, and the humour, rather than being explicitly textual/physical and utilising something present in the script (as could happen with the extreme physicality and the abundance of slapstick moments that supposedly characterised traditional yuanben plays), is relying on something which is evoked and, strictly speaking, absent from the scene. On the other hand, the characters' outspoken and offensive language is enough to trigger a script opposition in the reader's mind. Genette (1997) traced back the origins of the term *parodia* as meaning "a voice singing beside the main one," which therefore serves to transpose or distort the main melody. Genette notices that parody can take as subtle a form as a change of context (in which the exact same words are spoken by two characters at two different times, with the latter one taking a completely different meaning because of the change of circumstance), and as evident as a completely new work based on an existing one: Yuanlin wumeng is closer to this latter one.

The gentle women of the original stories, although defying the traditional Confucian precepts, at least resorted to proper behaviour in one way or another. Yingying expresses her feelings for Student Zhang by exchanging love poems with him, and she is well aware that "Since I suffer the shame of having offered myself to you, I may no longer serve you openly as a wife", while Li Wa "a woman of low status, from whom no moral expectations are due, rises above her place in the order of things and holds up the standard of morality to those who should be her moral superiors". By contrast, the scene of Yuanlin wumeng presents them yelling at each other such improper (for the readers in XVII-Century China) things as:

*(Oriole speaks:) You purchased good girls and made them base; by precedent you should have been divorced!*

*(Li Wa speaks:) You fucked first and married later; according to what's right, you two should have been whipped apart!*

In this moment the audience/reader has to recognise the violation of the characters in the two original stories, or rather, the parody exposes the ambiguity which is implicitly present in the original stories. The reception of this play was less than flattering, to say the least: as we mentioned before, Shen Defu reprimanded the whole YXS for being too superficial and good only for a laugh; Qi Biaojia 祁彪佳 (1602-1645), the author of Yuanshantang Jupin 遠山堂劇品 (Yuanshantang's Evaluation of Plays), defined this work with these less than flattering words:

崔之長恨傳，曷若李娃？何必嘖嘖！詞甚寂寥，無足取也。

*How to compare Cui's story of everlasting sorrow with The Tale of Li Wa? And why babble so much in the first place? Its wording does not really go anywhere, and it does not have anything worth mentioning.*



In more recent times, influential Japanese sinologist Aoki Masaru 青木正兒 (1887-1964) also spoke in less than flattering terms about this scene, comparing it to a child's play. As it has been discussed elsewhere, the majority of negative comments were attracted by the fact that the commentators expected to read a zaju and found themselves reading a yuanben: Shen Defu uses the name zaju in describing Li Kaixian's two short plays, and groups them together with Feng Weimin's 馮惟敏(1511-1578) four-act zaju *Seng Ni Gong Fan* 僧尼共犯 (A Monk and a Nun commit a Sin together, that he calls *Xiaoni Xiashan* 小尼下山, A young Nun comes out of the mountain); Qi Biaoqia, before lamenting the absence of the grounds for comparison between Yingying and Li Wa, refers to Yuanlin Wumeng as One-act play in the northern style (*Bei yi zhe* 北一折); both Zhou Lianggong 周亮工 (1612-1672) and Shen Fucan 沈復燦 (1779-1850) refer to the plays as zaju, and Yao Xie's 姚燮 (1805-1864) evaluation is nothing more than a rehash of Shen Defu's merciless judgement.<sup>13</sup> The argument that can be made is that the ambiguousness surrounding yuanben and zaju was still persistent, in spite of the various attempts to avoid confusion. As can be seen by the preface of YXS, its author did not manifest great attachment to it as well, although another possibility can be at least entertained: Li Kaixian, in proper Confucian manners, dismissed his own writings out of modesty. Zeng Yongyi 曾永義 affirmed that, although Li Kaixian himself may have disregarded these two scenes, they are important to us as a rare example of surviving yuanben.<sup>14</sup>

Zeng also noticed how the verbal battle which Li Wa and Yingying stage can be identified as a direct descendant of other verbal battles which were seen in traditional literature.<sup>15</sup> Zeng's punctual observation gives us a broader understanding of the two scenes. The absence of slapstick moments, and the subsequent presence of a more sophisticated humour, are key factors which make us speculate about the nature of the text as conceived by its author: it was not meant to be performed in front of a general audience, but its subtlety makes it fitter to be read rather than performed. For this reason, Xia Tingzhi's affirmation that "Yuanben are by and large merely ribald jesting and joking", referring to the traditional texts, does not ring true here.

#### 4. Conclusion

<sup>13</sup> Leggieri, "Meditazione", 18-21.

<sup>14</sup> Zeng Yongyi, *Gudian Xiju*, 331.

<sup>15</sup> Here we can quote the famous *chajiulun* 茶酒論 (Discourse on wine and tea), belonging to the tradition of Transformation texts of Dunhuang (*Dunhuang Bianwen* 敦煌變文), in which the two personified beverages engage in a verbal dispute to show who is better than the other: one of the first examples of Chinese comedy (See Zanini, "Bevanda cinese", 1271).

In his book *Language, Paradox, Poetics* (1988), James J.Y. Liu discusses the main features of Chinese poetics and how what is left unsaid plays a big role in the dynamics of ancient Chinese texts. A story that appears more than once in this book is the legend of the beginning of Chan 禪 Buddhism: Sakyamuni picked a flower and his disciple Kasyapa understood what he meant and smiled at him, none of them needing to say a single word. The importance of meaning lying beyond words is not only a feature of Chan Buddhism, but it also recurs time and again in many ancient texts discussing Chinese poetics. In the first scene of his *yuanben*, Li Kaixian parodies the notion of meaning beyond words, as well as the Chan concept of communication without words that, when done right, nullifies the necessity of any spoken dialogue between a master and his disciple. In the second scene he instead takes the sleeping fisherman's figure to stage the uselessness of human conflicts, but in order to do so he creates a scene full of intertextual characters and references, employing none other than two famous characters coming from the Chinese narrative tradition: is it all an exercise in futility? Or is this futility necessary to show the futility of all human conflicts?

During Li Kaixian's time, drama had already acquired a more mature literary status; plays were now mostly written by the literati and the members of aristocracy, and a number of operas (especially of the *zaju* type) were being written to be read aloud at public readings (or staged in small settings) rather than performed on big stages.<sup>16</sup> In light of this, it is a shame that by that time *yuanben* was already long past its heyday (and that it would virtually disappear soon after), because by analysing Li Kaixian's two scenes, we are only left to imagine the level of sophistication that *yuanben* could have reached if handled by other skilled writers.

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See Idema, "Closet Drama", 191: "Yuan *zaju* changed from an elite genre of commercial theater in the Yuan to court theater of the early centuries of the Ming, and the closet drama of Jiangnan literati".

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## Bionote

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