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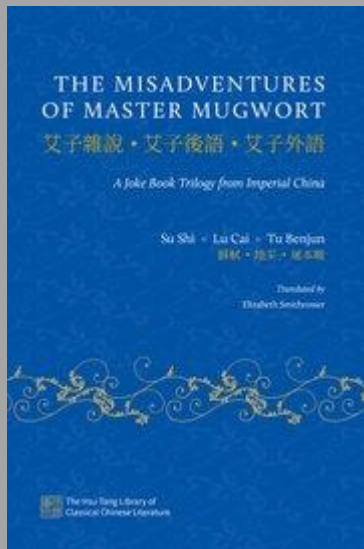
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Review of Su Shi, Lu Cai, Tu Benjun, and translated by Elizabeth Smithrosser (2023) *The Misadventures of Master Mugwort: A Joke Book from Imperial China*. Oxford University Press.



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Joke books have a history of over a thousand years in Chinese literature. This volume contains three collections: Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101), *Aizi zashuo* 艾子雜說 (Miscellaneous Stories of Master Mugwort), Lu Cai 陸采 (1497-1537), *Aizi houyu* 艾子後語 (Further Sayings of Master Mugwort), and Tu Benjun 屠本峻 (1542-1622), *Aizi waiyu* 艾子外語 (Outer Sayings of Master Mugwort). The first certainly dates from 11th century Northern Song Dynasty, although the attribution to Su Shi is debatable (see below), while the other two come from 16th century Ming Dynasty, when printed books became widely available, prompting public demand for entertaining light reading. Elizabeth Smithrosser, a translator and intellectual historian of pre-modern China with research interests in publishing and humour, provides eminently readable translations of the three texts, with footnotes and cross-references, as well as introductory chapters providing the literary and historical background to the works. The original Chinese text is included on alternate pages for easy cross-checking.

The trilogy of joke books illustrates one fundamental characteristic of Chinese humour, that is, its moral and didactic role. This is well understood by the joke compilers, as is evident from Tu Benjun's Preface, dated 1608, to the volume that collected all three fascicles:

“With ‘words of banter that indirectly strike a chord,’ they broaden the narrow mind of rulers, mock the faulty governance of the times, and document the perils and roughness within public sentiment. As they laugh and banter, they caution and admonish.” (p. 138-139)

The anecdotes that form the substance of the jokes are mainly set in the bygone period of the Warring States (471-225BCE), well-known to readers through standard texts such as late 2nd-early 1st century BCE Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Historian) and through historical novels and dramas. The embellishment and the riffs on well-known episodes are not however simple distortion of history. The sharpness of the jokes enlarges their targets to the times of the authors. This is done through the opaqueness of the text that allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about the moral lessons that may be applied to everyday situations. It also deflects censorship of anti-government or anti-establishment sentiments through deniability. While the historical context accords in general with other more official records, deliberate variations are often imposed that are anachronistic, heightening the sarcasm.

Smithrosser draws together the threads of this type of humour by proposing the “Humorists paradigm” (p. xxvi-xxvii). The source of this paradigm is the chapter titled “Biographies of the Humorists” in the *Records of the Historian*, which relates how several wits or court jesters such as Chunyu Kun 春于髡 used humour to reprove or correct rulers. The chapter in effect gave a stamp of approval to this type of humour and to the stories that demonstrated its use. However, occasionally the paradigm could be turned on its head and the ruler or other butt of an intended joke called the bluff.

The Warring States period of history refers to the later years of the Zhou Dynasty when many states vied for supremacy before ultimately succumbing to the State of Qin that unified the country. Seven major states were located along the Yellow River basin in the northern part of China, with some bordering southern states such as Chu and Shu along the Yangzi River in central China. Each state had its own capital and court and was ruled by a king. Their names, titles, habits and follies were common knowledge to the readers of later centuries, particularly as described in the Han Dynasty *Annals of the Warring States Zhanguo ce* (title translated by Smithrosser as “Intrigues of the Warring States”). Statecraft in those fluid years involved diplomacy, warfare, marriage and other alliances and the maintenance of basically rural economies.

Courts employed advisers who offered to advance state interests, using incentives such as official positions and tax benefits. These “scholars” gained the trust of rulers through rhetoric and policy advice and were sometimes sent to other states on diplomatic missions. The more famous of these philosopher advisers were known as “Master”, adding the suffix *zi* 子 to the surname, as in *Kongzi* 孔子 or “Master Kong” (commonly known as Confucius). The character *Ai* 艾 can be a surname or the name of the medicinal herb artemisia, also known as moxa, wormwood or mugwort. Smithrosser chooses to use the latter name for the main character in these stories.

The original collection of stories about Master Mugwort is commonly attributed to the famous Northern Song writer Su Shi, also known as Su Dongpo 東坡. Su was an eminent literary figure and high official who fell from

favour at court largely because of his trenchant criticisms of the ruling monarch. It is said that this joke collection dates from the years when he was exiled to Hainan Island in far south China. The attribution has been widely disputed, as Smithrosser notes (pp. xxviii-xxix), but the work almost certainly dates from the 12th century, and the stories set in the Warring States period were read as attacks on contemporary Northern Song politics.

In that century, the Jurchen people of northeastern Manchuria had grown in strength and aggressively acquired territory that potentially threatened the Song, but for several decades they were bought off with gifts of tea, silver and silk. Then in 1126 the Jurchen commander Aguda took advantage of a dynastic change of ruler to besiege the Song capital and capture the young Emperor Huizong. Remnants of the dynasty escaped and relocated to the south so that China divided into the northern Jurchen Jin and the Southern Song.

The 76 stories of the original collection vary in length and follow no particular historical sequence. Master Mugwort is described as residing or visiting the State of Qi in eastern China as well as other kingdoms. The historic personae and events were familiar to readers but amusing twists and glosses make them fresh for readers. Just to give one example, in story 27, Master Mugwort asks the famous wit Chunyu Kun about how Zou Ji became Prime Minister in the State of Qi. Zou Ji is portrayed as a villain in the *Records of the Historian*, using his position to his personal advantage and to maintain his power. In this version of the story, Chunyu Kun speculates that there is a monster residing in Qi that smacks each new Prime Minister upon appointment, whereupon the Prime Minister instantly forgets his previous moral virtues and loses the power of speech. “Good sir, you are mistaken!” exclaimed Master Mugwort. “Surely those hairy hands of his could only smack a fellow were he made of solid stuff to begin with!” (pp. 36-37)

The Mugwort stories remained popular for many decades, and following the printing and publishing boom of the mid-16th century, two writers seized the opportunity to add new anecdotes. Lu Cai and Tu Benjun built on the existing canon and added new material relevant to contemporary concerns of corruption, cronyism, bureaucratic ineptitude and social folly. Neither Lu nor Tu enjoyed the literary reputation of Su Shi but they shared with him experience of the stresses of careers in the civil service and the uncertainties of promotion and patronage. Lu Cai in fact abandoned attempts to gain a position and devoted himself to writing for the stage and an itinerant life. Tu Benjun came from a distinguished official family in Fujian. His father lost his job after failing to suppress coastal pirates but not before securing a position for his son. After his retirement, Tu engaged in various literary projects including the 1607 compilation of *Shanlin jingji ji* 山林經濟籍 (*The Mountain-Forest Administrator's Companion*) compendium that included the Mugwort stories of Su Shi and Lu Cai and added several of his own.

All these stories are now available in English through Smithrosser's excellent translation and scholarly notes. They significantly expand the growing resources for study of Chinese humour both traditional and modern. The

handy juxtaposition of the Chinese text will appeal to readers and teachers of classical Chinese language. My only quibble with the author is regarding her quirky penchant for using hip English expressions in her translations, such as “codger” for *weng* 翁 (old man) and “Our bad, Our bad” for the expression *guaren zhi zui ye* 寡人之罪也 (it is One’s fault) where One is royal usage referring to oneself. I may be old-fashioned but I found this annoyingly anachronistic.

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Jocelyn Chey is a retired diplomat whose contributions to Australia-China relations spanned several decades. Since retirement she has relished the freedom to speak her mind on various subjects and has renewed connections with her alma mater, the University of Sydney, as well as UTS and Western Sydney University. With Jessica Milner Davis, who not coincidentally is her sister, she has done some pioneering work on Chinese humour.