Humor in the Zhouyi
Contributed by Bradford Hatcher

It was the 1969-1970 school year at Cal Poly, Pomona, when I signed up to study some philosophy under Dick Richards, on the advice of my brother Byron. I was in the middle of a radical renovation of my worldview at the time, having dropped out of college. The rocket science major didn't work out, once I realized that all the jobs were military, and the math major had suffered from an epiphany while trying to differentiate inverse hyperbolic trig functions on two hits of acid. I needed to switch to some more primitive human endeavors, where it wasn't so very far to the creative frontier. Both philosophy and psychology fit that bill: those guys didn't have a clue, except maybe Nietzsche and Maslow. I wouldn't find out about the Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics until later. Neuroscience wasn't really invented yet.

Byron and I had lucked out big time in public high school with a world-class teacher (literally), who understood that education required little more than lighting a fire and keeping it stoked. Hunger to learn would never be a problem for either of us. And I knew that Byron wouldn't point me to a lesser teacher. I would be serious about my new studies, but that problem was getting chipped away slowly by Alan Watts and Asian studies. That's where Dick came in, a funny guy in a serious business. I took logic and semantics the first semester, and ethics the next. There was something about humor, and the way Dick demonstrated it. I wish I'd kept copies of his zany-ass quizzes. Anyway, that approach of his gave me a huge missing piece to my puzzle. I had always had a fondness for pranks, and always enjoyed comedy, but this went a lot deeper than that. For me it was the license to unbind ourselves from any one perspective or frame of reference, to go exploring outside the box, to put unfamiliar things together, and to nest analogies. To poke the world, to sound out the idols for that hollow ring. It was the key I needed to cognitive nimbleness, and was almost the same thing as play. It was permission to be a polymath, an eclectic, and an interdisciplinarian. It was permission to question everything, and especially my own seriousness. I didn't have that overview before, and I remain immensely grateful to Dick Richards for that gift. A 2015 cartoon by Hilary B. Price pictures a happy rat walking atop the walls of a maze and wondering "Why didn't I think of this earlier?"

I picked the following essay because it illustrates what can happen when we approach a thing that's always taken seriously with the suspicion that it might have something to entertain a sense of humor. The commentary is on the *Zhouyi*, or Changes of Zhou, the original part of the Book of Changes, superficially a book of divination written 28-30 centuries ago, but which appears to also contain a situational ethic or moral instruction for the young of the nobel class (Junzi, a word that changed meaning with Confucius). The book was used officially by the king and the nobles. Of the tens of thousands of studies done on this book, from hundreds of different points of view, I have never encountered a one that acknowledged a layer of humor in the subtext. But I saw stuff that I thought was peeking through, even though humor had to have plausible deniability at the royal court, since it was primarily used to affirm important decisions in affairs of state. I saw what I thought were hints and puns, and plenty of irony and caricature, but I wasn't certain until I had taken a few years to learn ancient Chinese and translate the book myself.

Appendix 2: Humor in the *Zhouyi*

In 1997, when I first proposed writing an article with this title, I wondered what ideas others had already happened upon and so I posted an inquiry on several newsgroups in search of some favorite examples. I was a little shocked to learn that, while many long-time readers had had several humorous coincidences and encounters with the *Yijing*, very few saw any intentional humor buried in the text itself. A few, particularly those belonging to religiously Daoist, academic Modernist, and the Twitching Captives schools, were quite openly hostile to the idea.

Indeed, few systems of thought or belief have acknowledged humor as a special state of mind and made an honored place for it in their doctrines. Only three of the world's 'religions' come to mind: Daoism, Zen and Sufism. All three of these seem to be deeply concerned with the resolution of paradox, of which spontaneous laughter, grinning, or weeping in good ways, is often the consequence. Elsewhere, humor seems to be more of a threat than a promise. When Abraham was called to test his faith in YHVH, he was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac as proof. Care to guess what the name Isaac meant when the story was written? Laughter. The coexistence of belief or conviction and humor is frequently the most difficult

paradox of all to resolve. Just ask anyone who has followed their love of the lighthearted lore of Zen into a Zen monastery: this can be a bitter, cold shock, at least until you can get the Roshi alone.

Humor was making its way into Greek art and literature by the 5th century BCE, and it was fully at home there by the time of Aristophanes. But humor had appeared long before this, on cave walls and in Egyptian hieroglyphics. It cannot be that people did no chuckling yet. As to the China of the Early Zhou, it may be argued that the serious matters faced by the royal court could not permit such foolishness, especially where there were questions of war and such. But doesn't this call to mind the royal courts of old Europe, where the court jester or fool had the ability to make the king laugh at just the right moment? And how many lives might this have saved? There would of course have been serious constraints on the *Zhouyi* authors - it would not be at all wise to offend or insult the king or his court. The authors, even in jest, were not pure fools - wherever such seeds were to be planted, there would need to be a little ambiguity, a lot of subtlety, some back doors to escape through, and plenty of plausible deniability. Otherwise the work would face censorship whenever a king took offense. As such, it's always very easy to see the serious side of even the funniest *Zhouyi* line.

I need to call upon my personal experience with the humor of shamans in their more 'primitive' versions of the societal role of counselor or mental health worker. These people have cracked me up too often to ignore this. This proves nothing, but it prepares me to accept humor as a deliberately applied treatment, or a therapy. The Sufis have mastered this as well, and use it with a kind of surgical precision to treat human ignorance (of the divine) as a disease. The understanding of humor as medicine has even gained wide acceptance in professional circles, and claims of its effectiveness is backed up by a statistically significant number of statistical studies. Humor will usually involve being jerked suddenly out of a prior state of mind. In anxiety or neurosis, it is the 'thing which we do not understand' which is obscured by our life within these mindsets, expectations or frames of reference as mental confines. In subjects for divination, the 'thing that I am just not seeing' will often demand nothing more
than a new mindset, expectation, or frame of reference. This is humor's home turf. 'Before you say something that might offend another person, it is always a good idea to first walk a mile in their shoes. That way, if they take offense to what you say, you are already a mile away. Plus you have their shoes.' Much of humor, whether rude and crude, or refined and witty, seems to have two key ingredients: 1)

a buildup of something that might be called an emotional charge, which is released suddenly into nowhere; and 2) the juxtaposition of two frames of reference which are worlds apart, with the humoree's attention being jerked suddenly from one to the other. Sometimes, however, it may simply be the enjoyment of cognitive dissonance.

The source of the emotional charge that humor makes use of is often something much less than noble: aggression, apprehension, fear, xenophobia, racism, sexism, revulsion at deformity, negative or anti-sympathy, or other emotional discomfort. The use of laughter, of course, goes way back in primitive society in its use as a corrective social force, as a precursor to shame. You don't see much of this malice in the *Yijing*, but it may be that the frequency of malice in humor in general is the source of so much reluctance to perceive humor as a device used by the *Zhouyi* authors. In contrast, the emotional charge here, as it is in the teaching stories of Daoism, Zen and Sufism, seems to use more of the reader's hope, expectation and anticipation, and to rely heavily on the respect and reverence that the tradition is accorded. The current theories of humor, of which Arthur Koestler is the best known author, suggest that the process of humor involves emotion and intellect traveling a while down the same track or line of reasoning. The intellect is then made to jump suddenly and unexpectedly onto a different track, leaving emotion, with its greater inertia or slower response to change, derailed with nowhere to go and nothing to do but go Blooey.

The frames of reference, lines of reasoning, or tracks to jump, can come from any two worlds which are unrelated and have their own sets of internal logic, assumptions, and rules. The two can be literary vs literal (walk a mile in their shoes), one meaning vs another meaning (take my wife, please), general vs specific (that was no lady, that was my wife), mental vs physical, specialized vs common, sacred vs secular, trivial vs exalted, conscious vs automatic, part vs whole, mental vs material, and so on. The simplest form, the pun, plays on the homonym or polysemy, the assignment of two different meanings to the same word or sound. The Yi seems to have much of this - the limited number of syllables and polysemous nature of the Ancient Chinese language would, I suspect, make this play irresistible. Much of this, of course, would be lost to us, lost on us, and even lost on the later Chinese scholars. Some we can infer, like plays on *Yi* as Change, Easy and an ancient place name. And some seem to carry well between Chinese and English because they are the same puns in both languages and both cultures.

The notion of cultural differences brings up a much bigger problem. As

Koestler says, "Humor thrives only in its native climate, embedded in its native logic; when one does not know what to expect, one cannot be cheated of one's expectations." In other words, if one of the two juxtaposed frames of reference is missing (or hard to reach, or poorly understood) in the cultural repertoire of the hearer, both sides of the joke are lost. You could see how the mere existence of cultural differences could be used to avoid looking for humor altogether. Even the Chinese people do not exactly live in the *Zhouyi*'s native climate. But look at this statement closer: only in its native climate. This is oversimplified and there is a much broader spectrum here. In its narrowest sense this points to the difficulty of a native of rural Minnesota in "getting" a New Yorker's urban humor. A little broader might be the difficulty that an American television viewer has in laughing at a BBC comedy special. Then there is my own most embarrassing difficulty with understanding sophisticated puns in Swahili. But there is also a sense in which 'native climate' can refer to the broader realms of human experience, and I have already made my prejudices known regarding this issue - that technology and complex cultural advances aside, we still have a great deal in common with the Early Zhou Chinese as humming beings living in humming societies with more than a hundred millennia as a single species in common. And in conjunction with this, an argument can be made that the *Zhouyi* authors were keeping their famously keen cognitive abilities alert to the existence of human universals. Assuming that they were looking for common problems, this is what they wanted to write about. With this possibility, we should not be too quick to assume that any or all *Zhouyi* humor would necessarily be lost to our cultural differences.

It has been my admittedly unreachable objective to discover the intended meanings of the *Zhouyi* authors. I have made no apologies or excuses for this, and I will openly disagree with anyone who claims that this should not even be attempted simply because it is doomed to failure. As a working hypothesis, and not a theory in need of a proof, the value of the idea can be judged by its conclusions as well as by its premises. And one of these conclusions is that the hypothesis might be able to solve several long-standing and otherwise intractable problems of interpretation. An inability to even look for humor may have left a number of lines completely misunderstood and thus badly translated for all these many centuries. I am, of course, too close to the task to be the judge of this, and so I submit the following for your edification and amusement.

Below are several examples of what I consider to be intended humor, but somewhat buried by the *Zhouyi* authors in what I've termed 'layers of vertical

ambiguity.' It has gradually become my opinion that humorous devices such as these, particularly irony, used to illustrate a situational ethics, and caricature or parody, using images depicting people 'unclear on the concept,' may be characteristic of as much as a tenth of the *Zhouyi* text. Irony and parody are the two most common forms, but there are others, some specific to the nature of the *Zhouyi* itself, which will be discussed as they come up. All this is in addition to the use of a still more frequent 'simple light-heartedness.' Even if some of these nominations fall to more serious scrutiny, I hope that enough survive to at least open a discussion on the topic, to which there seems to be a lot of resistance from both believer and scholarly types. Two translations are given for each line, one of the popular versions and my own. Admittedly mine seems to put a little spin on the line translation to help to bring out the subtle ideas, but a look at the Matrix translation and the Glossary will show that I have still not ventured very far at all from a strictly literal translation. In fact, I have tended to be more verbatim than the often stuffier translations.

01.4 - 或躍在淵，无咎。

* Leaping about on the brink of a chasm. He is not at fault. (tr. Blofeld)
* Somehow to dance across the deep. With no mistakes.

This one is more of an example of simple lightheartedness than humor, and it has a good reason for being so. It is generally assumed that the subject is still the young dragon, finally ready to make that all-important rite of passage, the big transition from aerodynamic theory to true flight, wherein the insubstantial wind must be grabbed, used for support, and climbed upon. (Wind is from the *hui gua* or upper Trigram in the *zhi gua* or resultant hexagram). Well, you may be a young dragon, but standing there on the edge of that cliff for the first time, your mighty knuckles are still really white. Just take hold of the wind - yeah, right. While the very Gravity of the situation must be fully appreciated, it is also the thing that will kill you. And so it is important to learn to 'lighten up,' giving up all but the most necessary baggage. Lightening up could be just the key, just the thing to do against gravity. I think the line is similar in implication to this quote from David Lloyd George: "Don't be afraid to take a big step if one is indicated. One cannot cross a chasm in two small jumps." Btw, this is translating *Yue*4, with its feather radical, as a shamanic feather dance, a rite of passage from one world to another. But here is an example where vertical ambiguity is necessary. At the same time, another querent might be ready to hear exactly the opposite: "Look down. This is a serious

jump. Rethink this whole thing. Life or death. Nothing funny here." The authors, at least from my perspective, appear light-hearted and playful much of the time. They loved to look at things and problems in novel ways, and they loved to have fun with words and expressions. But I want to concentrate here on lines which bear more of the structural properties of humor.

05.6 - 入于穴，有不速之客三人來，敬之終吉。
* The topmost line, divided, shows its subject entered into the cavern. But there are three guests coming, without being urged, to his help. If he receive them respectfully, there will be good fortune in the end. (tr. Legge)
* Entering into a pit. With no invitations extended to visitors, three people arrive. To attend to them will end in good fortune.
The authors use the term *Xue*2 (pit, hole, cave) in several places the same way we do, as (also) a predicament, or an emotional state, or the dumps of despair, and as a pun. The general idea of the *Gua* is to maximize the meantime, to get ready for less humdrum experience to arrive, and to get worthy of its arrival. The opportunity to have cleaned up one's pit, one's dump, has now passed and now here come the guests. One can still salvage some dignity here by showing respect.

10.6 - 視履考祥，其旋元吉。
* The sixth line, undivided, tells us to look at the whole course that is trodden, and examine the presage which that gives. If it be complete and without failure, there will be great good fortune. (tr. Legge)
* Studying the footsteps, examining the omens. (If) these come full circle, supreme good fortune.
You have just finished treading on the tiger's tail. If you are still alive, this can be taken as the primary measure of success. Ghosts do not leave footprints. If your footprints do not lead all the way back to where you now stand, you must have had bad luck somewhere. The omen is that you have already succeeded. The natives of Fiji have a tongue-in-cheek peasant omen parallel: if you are walking through a coconut grove and a coconut lands on your head, this is an omen that you had very bad luck.

13.5 - 同人，先號咷而後笑。大師克相遇。
* Men bound in fellowship first weep and lament, but afterwards they laugh. After great struggles they succeed in meeting. b) That is, they are victorious. (tr. Wilhelm)
* Fellowship with others begins with wailing (and) weeping. But then follows with laughter. Mighty armies can entertain each other. 13.5x Praising each others abilities.
I hope the translation explained this one. There are other levels to meet on, and the battlefields have better uses. The wordplay relies on the broad range of meanings for *Yu*4 (7625), meet with, encounter, receive, entertain, engage, etc. to show that there are other options in real life as well. Here is a fairly rare instance where the *Wing* authors of the *Xiao Xiang* 'got it' as well.

15.1 - 謙謙君子，用涉大川，吉。
* The first line, divided, shows us the superior man who adds humility to humility. Even the great stream may be crossed with this, and there will be good fortune. (tr. Legge)
* Authentic modesty in the noble young one (is) useful (in) crossing great streams. Promising.
This line illustrates the simple, straightforward application of incongruity, a device used many times in the *Zhouyi*. The *Gua Ming* of *Qian*1, at least when it is glossed as Modesty, is fraught with a number of connotations which are inconsistent with the ideas being set forth here. Modesty can carry implications of false humility and self-effacement, or connote a toady or a sycophant. The *Zhouyi* uses this device to dismantle these illusions. The very idea that modesty can be applied to the achievement of great and ambitious ends (and later, that modesty can even be used to set an army in motion) sets up a kind of tension which is broken only with the understanding that something closer to Honesty, Authenticity, or Maturity is being portrayed here.

27.6 - 由頤，厲吉，利涉大川。
* The source of nourishment. Awareness of danger brings good fortune. It furthers one to cross the great water. (tr. Wilhelm)
* (At) the source of the appetites. Brutal (but) promising. Worthwhile to cross the great stream.
For me this one calls up the image of two missionaries sitting in a big old cannibal

cook pot. But in any event, this far across the great water, the tables can turn and predator can quickly become prey. The food chain is actually a nutrient cycle. The corresponding line in the *zhi gua* is the one beyond hope of returning, which was repeated in the West as Napoleon's winter march on Moscow.

28.1 - 藉用白茅，无咎。
* The first line, divided, shows one placing mats of the white mao grass under things set on the ground. There will be no error. (tr. Legge)
* (For) cushions, using white thatch grass. Make no mistakes.
This is an example of irony. While precaution is called for here, and this behavior shows what is ordinarily admired as a civilized, aesthetic sense, what is needed here and now is a heads-up brand of caution. Elsewhere throughout the *Gua* texts, the roof is about to come down. These little woven white place mats are seriously misplaced. The *Zhouyi* will frequently trap someone who has moved on to the *Yao Ci* texts but has already lost sight of the theme of the *Gua* as a whole.

43.5 - 莧陸夬夬，中行无咎。[中未光也]
* In dealing with weeds, firm resolution is necessary. Walking in the middle remains free of blame. b) The middle is not yet in the light. (tr. Wilhelm)
* Wild greens (on) dry land. Determined to uproot. To balance the behavior is not a mistake. 43.5x The center has not yet been honored.
This is irony again. Our dedicated gardener has too much force and not enough sense. Not only is he destroying salad greens as weeds, they are growing voluntarily on a hill, where no plowing or irrigation is necessary. Presumably he will then replace them with something more delicate, which needs more weeding, and will require that water be run uphill to meet its needs. This is not the world's first permaculturist here, and not the path of least resistance. The character is demonstrating the normally praiseworthy virtue of persistence, but without this being in balance (*Zhong*1), it is not a virtue yet.

44.3 - 臀无膚，其行次且，厲，无大咎。[行未牽也]
* His haunches have been flayed and he walks totteringly – trouble, but no great error! 44.3x His walking totteringly implies being able to walk without being dragged. (tr. Blofeld)
* A rump with no skin. His progress (is) second-rate now. Brutal. (But) not a complete mistake. 44.3x Advancing (but) now not being dragged.

The *Gua* text was right: the woman was powerful. It was not at all useful to court that woman. Apparently, little helmet-head has been demonstrating poor leadership skills for some time now. This represents one of the forms of humor specific to the Yi, preying upon the reader who has lost sight of the theme of the Hexagram as a whole, in this case Restraint. However, ropes, chains and other kinds of restraints may indeed have been involved. But he has learned his lesson, and now he is no longer bound, leashed, or tethered. Maybe some sweet nurse ... .

47.5 - 劓刖，困于赤紱，乃徐有說，利用祭祀。[受福也]
* His nose and feet are cut off. Oppression at the hands of the man with the purple knee bands. Joy comes softly. It furthers one to make offerings and libations. b) Thus one attains good fortune. (tr. Wilhelm)
* Nose cut off, feet cut off. Oppressed by rouge-sashed (ministers). And then gradually finding relief. Worthwhile (and) productive to sacrifice (this) sacrifice. 47.5x To suffer happiness.
Our subject here is a noble or a sovereign (line 5) with the ability to make command decisions. But his life is being moved by forces outside his control because he is being so purely passive in all things. He has adopted the victim mentality. Maybe next time they bathe him they could use ice water. This is an example of parody, satire or caricature, and this device may be found in every line of this particular Hexagram. The Hexagram itself has being stuck in rut, a mindset, an expectation, or a frame of reference, as a good portion of its central theme. Given this, it is not surprising that the text attempts to get the reader outside looking in, and poking some fun at the victim's approach to life.

50.3 - 鼎耳革，其行塞，雉膏不食，方雨虧悔，終吉。
* The third line, undivided, shows the caldron with the places of its ears changed. The progress of its subject is thus stopped. The fat flesh of the pheasant which is in the caldron will not be eaten. But the (genial) rain will come, and the grounds for repentance will disappear. There will be good fortune in the end. (tr. Legge)
* The cauldron's ears [handles] (have been) altered, its function (is) impaired. The pheasant's rich meat is not eaten. A sudden rain (would) diminish regrets. In the end, an opportunity.
This is parody, satire or caricature again. This situation has been grossly mishandled, and you can't get a grip. Here too is an example of common ideas crossing cultural boundaries and used as images, metaphors, and finally puns, in

both cultures. If the cauldron represents, let us say, your philosophy of life, it lacks practical application. The cauldron appears to have been redesigned either by artists or by art critics. The most you can do now is pray for rain to put out the fire, to salvage what's left of the fat, juicy pheasant. And rethink the relationship between form and function. The *Gua* theme concerns pragmatism, the application of reliable methods in the cultivation of merit and a superior culture. Empty ritual and show do violence to this objective.

53.4 - 鴻漸于木，或得其桷，无咎。
* The wild goose gradually draws near the tree. Perhaps it will find a flat branch. No blame. Wilhelm says: "A tree is not a suitable place for a wild goose. But if it is clever, it will find a flat branch on which it can get a footing." p. 207. (tr. Wilhelm)
* The wild goose advances by degrees to the trees. Perchance to find that flat branch. No harm done.
A similar image appears in the *Shijing* at 1.10.8, with geese fighting for balance in a Jujube tree, so this image was apparently known to the culture as a whole and may have been proverbial. Geese, of course, have floppy webbed feet, not mighty talons able grab hold of anything but mud and water. The call here is for acceptance, patience, and adaptability, but the image is a caricature, or a Gary Larson cartoon. The goose, if he fails, can always waddle around on the hill, with a view almost as good as an eagle's.

57.6 - 巽在床下，喪其資斧，貞凶。
* Crawling below the bed. He loses what is required for his traveling expenses. Persistence brings misfortune. (Blofeld) [In line two, a rabble of diviners and wizards are used]
* Subtleties happening under the bed. Losing some valuables (and) an axe. Constancy has (its) pitfalls.
This happened only recently, down in Line 2. Our subject has now been comforted, and laid all doubts to rest. His *Wushi* have assured him that this was only a couple of spooks trying to wear him down. But this time the 'spooks' are really there, and run off with his money and his axe. The symptoms are the same, but the disorder is entirely different: different kind of spirits this time, spiriting his stuff away. As *Xun*4 doubled, this is the 'thinking twice' Hexagram. Here of all places it is not wise to generalize from single instances and go back to sleep on your bed of complacency. Quick generalizations are most ill-suited to the shapeshifting world

of the *Gua Xun*. Here again is a line of the type which plays with the tendency to lose sight of the subject matter of the *Gua* as a whole, or to not relate one line to what is happening in the others.

Excerpted from *The Book of Changes: Word by Word*, 2006, published free online at www.hermetica.info