

The Judge Goes to Pieces (審死官):
A Linguistic Study of Humor in a Cantonese Opera

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Shen Si Guan (審死官), translated in this paper as *The Judge Goes to Pieces*, is a Hong Kong Cantonese opera that provides the corpus for a linguistic study into the use of humor. Examined are some linguistic strategies for injecting humor at different levels of linguistic structure, including phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels. The corpus, consisting of an audio-recording and a set of transcriptions, offers a rich source for a preliminary exploration into the linguistic, contextual cues for humor. The intertwining of language and humor in its myriad manifestations is a topic that has hitherto been largely neglected in Chinese linguistics. The present study offers some insights into the topic.

0. Introduction

Humor has, until recently, been generally ignored as a potential subject for serious linguistic research. This situation is rapidly changing, as witness the entire September 2003 issue (Volume 35) of *Journal of Pragmatics* devoted to the pragmatics of humor, and a follow-up January 2006 issue (Volume 38) on humor and gender, along with references cited therein. Chinese linguists have been slower to engage in humor research, even though there is no paucity of linguistic data for analyzing humor in the Chinese socio-cultural context. This paper presents a small corpus-based linguistic study of humor, and strategies used for rendering humor. One source is used, namely, a commercially-available, audio-recording of a Cantonese opera entitled, *Shen Si Guan* (審死官).¹ The English translation of the opera used here is *The Judge Goes to Pieces*, a deliberate

¹ The title of the paper given here is slight modification of the one used for the NACCL-18 conference presentation. The latter, more narrowly construed, was entitled, “*The Judge Goes to Pieces* (審死官): Humor and Utterance Particles in a Cantonese Opera.” This paper expands upon what was presented at the conference, and has, moreover, benefited from feedback from conference participants. My special thanks go to NACCL-18 organizer, Professor Janet Xing, for her hospitality as well as her kindness that extended into the proceedings preparation period. My thanks also go to my research assistant, Jing Yan, as this paper is part of a larger project on written Cantonese that is supported in part by a 2005 Seed Grant in the Arts and Humanities, Office of Research, Ohio State University. An earlier publication under that seed grant concerning Cantonese is the author’s NACCL-17 proceedings paper (Chan 2005).

choice with intention to capture the humor and lighthearted tone of the opera.² This paper aims to analyze language and humor in the opera with respect to the form humor takes at different levels of linguistic structure, and the strategies or linguistic devices used for rendering humor at those levels.

In studying humor, it is necessary to first establish what constitutes humor. This paper takes as the starting point the two basic, non-controversial criteria for humor listed by Schultz (1976, cited in Attardo 2003): “(a) Does the event elicit laughter or smiling? (b) Was it produced with the intention of eliciting laughter or smiling?” Observe that these two criteria would include, under its rubric, verbal humor, such as puns and other demonstration of wit, so beloved by the Chinese, as well as stand-up comedy routines and conversational joking involving spoken discourse or written discourse. The latter potentially involves email, online-chatting, and other computer-mediated communication.

The corpus for the present study, the Cantonese opera, *Shen Si Guan*, is a rich source for conducting a linguistic study of humor. The audio-recording of the performance is intended to be humorous and lighthearted. Two main questions to be addressed in this study are: What linguistic devices are used to convey humor? At what linguistic levels do these devices operate in the language? For future investigation, additional questions to pursue include: What are the functions of humor in a particular context? What are the effects of sociolinguistic factors, such as social distance and gender, on use of humor?

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 provides some background information on the origins of that opera. Section 2 describes the specific audio-recording of the opera that serves as the corpus, together with some background on the personages in the opera. Section 3 focuses on the different linguistic levels at which humor manifests itself in the corpus. The paper concludes in Section 4 with some suggestions for future research.

1. Background on *Shen Si Guan* (審死官)

Shen Si Guan (審死官), translated variously as *The Judge Goes to Pieces* and as *Final Jurisdiction*, is Ma Shizeng’s (馬師曾, 1900-1964) humorous Cantonese opera produced for stage performance (*xiequ wutai Yueju* 諧趣舞台粵劇). A well-known, versatile and influential Cantonese opera performer, Ma Shizeng has played different role types during his lifetime, including the clown role (*choujue* 丑角), as in this opera.³

While Ma Shizeng was living and working in Hong Kong during the 1930s and the 1940s, *Shen Si Guan* (審死官) was probably written in the 1940s (after WWII perhaps?).⁴ The opera should, in any event, have been written before 1948, as that was the

² As will be explained later, the English translation given on the CD set is actually *Final Jurisdiction*. The English title used here is from the 1948 Hong Kong Cantonese film based on that opera.

³ Cantonese opera traditionally does not use the white patch on the nose area to depict that role.

⁴ Information is not (yet) available on the original production and performance of this opera.

year in which a musical comedy⁵—directed by Yang Gongliang (楊工良) and based on that opera but set in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911)⁶—was produced starring Ma Shizeng and his real wife, Hong Xiannü (紅綫女). Ma Shizeng plays the protagonist, Song Shijie (宋世傑), a clown role in that film. A witty, soft-hearted man of the scholar class (a *xiucai* 秀才), he has given up law practice (pettifoggery) to run an inn. Hong Xiannü plays his resourceful wife, *née* Tang (Song Tang Shi 宋唐氏 or simply Tang Shi 唐氏), who wants to aid a woman, Yang Xiuzhen (楊秀珍), who was wrongly accused of having poisoned her husband, Yao Tingmei (姚廷美). Due to his wife's sympathy for the woman (whom his wife brought home, together with the woman's newborn baby), Shijie picks up the pen again and writes the plaint and brings the case before the Yangzhou prefectural judge, Gu Du (顧讀). Shijie ultimately triumphs, but only after some humorous twists and turns.⁷

The Chinese title of both the opera and the musical is *Shen Si Guan* (審死官). The corresponding English title of the film, as recorded in the Hong Kong Film Archive, is *The Judge Goes to Pieces*, a title that serves as the English translation for this study.⁸ The phrase, *shen-si guan* (審死官), consists of three morphemes: *shen* (to try a case) plus *si* (die) plus *guan* (official). The phrase means 'to cause an official to die from trying a case.' The title refers to the effect that Song Shijie and his wit and antics have on judges trying the cases that he brings to court, including this case.

The Cantonese opera is based on the Beijing opera, *Si Jinshi* (四進士 'four presented scholars'), a story set in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). Among these four successful candidates of the highest level of the imperial examination system is the central figure, an eight-prefecture tour-inspection official, Mao Peng (毛朋), who is a bearded, old-man role (*laosheng* 老生). In the Beijing opera, Song Shijie (宋世傑/宋士傑) was originally a minor old-man role, an elderly innkeeper who was formerly a government clerk. As in the Cantonese opera, he gives aid to the wrongfully-accused woman, Yang Suzhen (楊素貞). In the Beijing opera, Song Shijie and his childless wife adopts Suzhen as their daughter. In the Cantonese version, more playful humor develops in the story in

⁵ More precisely, the film is a spoken comedy with some singing in it.

⁶ Chinese operas, including Cantonese operas, are generally set prior to the Qing dynasty, with opera costumes reflecting the clothing of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) regardless of historical time period of the story. However, correct period costumes are used for the Qing dynasty.

⁷ A more recent, 1992 remake of the story that is entirely in spoken language is directed by Du Qifeng (杜琪峰) and stars comedian Stephen Chow (周星馳) in the title role, with Anita Mui (梅艷芳) playing his wife. While the movie bears the same Chinese title as the original opera, the English title is changed to a different humorous title, *Justice, My Foot!*

⁸ The URL of the website for the Hong Kong Film Archive website is <<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/chinese/cindex.html>>

making all three from the same generation. Song Shijie is given a much more active role to play in championing the underdog in the Cantonese opera. Even in the performance of the Beijing opera, the story evolved over time, resulting in a shift from the central role played by the official, Mao Peng (毛朋), to that of the kindly old man, Song Shijie. One consequence of the shift from Mao Peng to Song Shijie is the use of an alternative title, *Song Shijie* (宋士傑), named after the lowly innkeeper. In the twentieth century, both Ma Lianliang (馬連良, 1901-1966) and Zhou Xinfang (周信芳, 1895-1975), for example, have played the role of the kindly Song Shijie. What the Cantonese version did was to have gone a few steps further in the shift of focus to Song Shijie as the protagonist from the scholar class who ultimately wins justice for the wrongly-accused Yang Xiuzhen.

2. The Corpus: An Audio-Recording of *Shen Si Guan* (審死官)

The corpus for the study is an audio-recording on a 2-disc set of DSD CDs that is distributed by Modern Audio Limited. The studio recording of *Shen Si Guan* (審死官) was originally produced in Hong Kong in 1980 (Lee 2004).⁹ The English title that appears on the CD cover is *Final Jurisdiction*. The recording totals 1 hour and 16 minutes, and is divided into five scenes, the first two scenes of which are on the first disc, with the remaining three scenes on the second disc. These scenes, together with a breakdown into duration per scene, are given with English translations in (1).



(1) The Five Scenes in *Shen Si Guan* (審死官)

Scene	Title	Duration
Scene 1	Writing the Complaint (<i>Xie Zhuang</i> 寫狀)	22' 53"
Scene 2	Submitting the Complaint (<i>Gao Zhuang</i> 告狀)	16' 35"
Scene 3	Stealing a Letter (<i>Tou Shu</i> 偷書)	11' 20"
Scene 4	The First Trial (<i>Chu Shen</i> 初審)	5' 46"
Scene 5	The Final Trial (<i>Da Shen</i> 大審)	19' 30"

A printed script in traditional Chinese is included in the CD set, as conventionally done for Cantonese operas and Cantonese operatic songs in older, analogue formats such

⁹ The original 1980 audio-recording was commercially produced and cut on phonograph records, or more precisely, on LP (long-play/33 rpm) black vinyl records. Also see Lee (2004).

as phonograph records and audiocassette tapes. In addition, an online source provided a GB-encoded script in simplified Chinese, thus serving to supplement the printed hardcopy.¹⁰ For the current linguistic research on humor, the digital script was then modified to reflect what was actually spoken (or sung) in the audio-recording. Hence, three versions of the script are used: 1) the hardcopy in traditional Chinese characters that accompanied the commercial CD set; 2) a GB-encoded version in simplified Chinese corresponding to the commercial version; and 3) a GB-encoded transcript in simplified Chinese that reflects the actual spoken and sung lines in the audio-recording (that is, through line-by-line modification of the GB-encoded file).

We turn now to performers and personages in the opera. There are three main Cantonese opera performers recorded in this opera. The first is Liang Xingbo (梁醒波, 1908-1981), a famous, well-loved and versatile comedian of both stage and films (operas and modern drama) whose career spanned well over half a century. In this opera he plays Song Shijie, the main character in the comedic role. The second is Zheng Guobao (鄭帼寶), whose singing career spanned the 1950s through the 1980s and possibly into the 1990s. Specializing in singing comedic roles, she plays Song Tang Shi (宋唐氏, *née* Tang 唐), Shijie's savvy wife who knows how to get on her husband's soft side. The third performer is Guan Haishan (關海山¹¹, 1924-2006), another veteran actor whose career spanned some sixty years and whose screen presence in Cantonese opera and non-operatic films, and then television series, extended through four decades. He plays Gu Du (顧讀), the governor of Yangzhou prefecture. A decent and honest man, his official rank and his roar were no match to Song Shijie's clever and nimble wit.

In addition to the three main roles, other speaking/singing roles in this audio-recording include those of Yang Xiuzhen (楊秀珍)—or Yang Suzhen (楊素貞) in the Beijing opera—the woman wrongfully accused of having poisoned her own husband, Yao Tingmei (姚廷美); her sister-in-law, Yao Tian Shi (姚田氏, *née* Tian 田), who poisoned Xiuzhen's husband for inheritance, accuses Xiuzhen of committing the crime,

¹⁰ The script for two scenes from *Shen Si Guan* is posted at <www.jyec.com>, with interested web surfers invited to obtain the remaining scenes via email request. The URL of the web page containing the two scenes is <http://www.jyec.com/others/ssg.htm>. The website owner, who generously provided this author with the full script of all five scenes in January 2006, simply identified himself/herself as “jyec” in the email address and email communication. Sincere thanks go to “jyec” for the GB-encoded version of the script.

¹¹ Guan Haishan was born in Guangzhou some time during the 1920s; 1924 or 1925 are possible years in which he was born. His death on 11 September 2006 stimulated much online concern about his life and career that spanned over a half a century in Hong Kong. The most popular site (first entry in a Google search) is China's Wikipedia website (維基百科 <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki>), with a long entry that includes an extensive—and perhaps exhaustive—listing of his films and television series. Commercial audio-recordings, however, are not listed. *Shen Si Guan* may very well be one of a small number of commercial audio-recordings with Guan Haishan in it.

and seeks help from her elder brother, Tian Neng (田能), governor of Shanxi province; Tian Neng's messenger, who delivers both money and a letter from the provincial governor, soliciting Gu Du's help and declaring his younger sister's innocence (but not before Song Shijie manages to steal and copy its contents); and Jin Dan (金彈), a dispatcher in Gu Du's court who is taught a lesson or two by Song Shijie before going to Shangcai county to bring back Yao Tian Shi (姚田氏) and her husband (姚廷春) for the big trial that would take place in Gu Du's Yangzhou prefecture court, where justice ultimately prevails.

Besides Gu Du, three government officials who were his former classmates also participate in trying the case in the final scene. The highest in rank among them—and hence the presiding judge in the final trial—is Miao Peng (繆蓬), an eight-prefecture tour-inspection official of the imperial government. Next is Tian Neng (田能), Shanxi provincial governor who solicited Gu Du's help in finding his younger sister innocent. The third official, a very minor role in the opera, is Liu Tie (劉鐵), magistrate of Shangcai county in Henan province where the crime took place.¹²

With this background on the audio-recording and the personages, we proceed to a study of humor and language in the opera.

3. Humor and Its Manifestation at Different Linguistic Levels

The form or medium in which humor is presented has an important bearing on the ways in which it can be enjoyed and appreciated. A humorous story on a printed page, for example, depends heavily on the reader's imagination, be that a case of hearing in his/her mind the punch line, or the voice of the comic character; or be that a case of visualizing a comic scene based on the writer's vivid depiction of it. On the other hand, when a humorous dialogue, sung or spoken, is played back as an audio-recording, the listener can make use of his/her perception of hearing to appreciate the lines as interpreted by the singer/speaker, with full access to acoustic properties, including pronunciation, pitch variations, shifts in speech tempo, modulation in loudness, and so forth. Audio-recordings also provide sound effects and music to accompany singing, or as background for mood creation and atmosphere. In the case of a video-recording, such as a comedy movie, the viewer makes full use of his sight and hearing to appreciate the performance of the

¹² The four corresponding officials in *Si Jinshi* (四進士) are as follows, together with identifying their roles in the Beijing opera: Mao Peng (毛朋), an old-man role (*lao sheng* 老生), Gu Du (顧讀), a painted-face role (*jing* 淨), Tian Lun (田倫), a young-man role (*xiao sheng* 小生), and Liu Ti (劉題), a clown role (*chou* 丑). As one can see, except for Gu Du, the other names differ slightly between those in the Beijing opera and the corresponding names in the Cantonese opera. (Online copies of the *Si Jinshi* script can be obtained at such websites as Zhongguo Jingju Xikao 中国京剧戏考 <<http://www.xikao.com>>, while CCTV (cctv.com), for example, has video-recorded performances of the opera.)

In (2), the high-level tone utterance particle, 嘢 [mɛ⁵⁵], changes the utterance to a rhetorical question. The place is, of course, not a maternity home; it is an inn. Adding to the humor in (2) is the use of anachronism with respect to the institution of maternity homes. Clinics and maternity homes operate in modern Hong Kong; however, the audience can be quite sure that they did not exist in imperial China. Anachronisms, hence, add humor precisely because they are incongruous with the time period in which the dialogue was supposed to have taken place. As one might expect, use of anachronism is not limited to Cantonese opera; in Beijing opera, for example, it is also permissible for the clown role to make similar use of anachronisms. In fact, the clown character may even speak directly to the audience during a performance, thereby further enlivening the scene.

Another strategy often found in comedy is stuttering. Here, this occurs in the speech of only one of the personages in the opera, namely, Jin Dan (金彈), in his conversation with Shijie. The context is as follows: Shijie has submitted his complaint and Gu Du has instructed his dispatcher, Jin Dan, to apprehend Xiuzhen's sister-in-law, Yao Tian Shi (姚田氏), and her brother-in-law, Yao Tingmei (姚廷春). He is to bring them back to stand trial at Gu Du's court in Yangzhou prefecture. Jin Dan thinks that he has outwitted Shijie by pocketing some money that the former had obtained from his boss,¹⁵ only to be outwitted by Shijie in losing more than the original acquired amount.

It should be noted that stuttering is commonly found in the clown role, particularly in portraying a simpleton who has difficulty expressing his thoughts. In humor that relies entirely on audio feedback, stuttering is an especially salient means to cue the listener that the exchange about to take place is a humorous one. This is precisely the case in the exchange between Jin Dan and Shijie in Scene 2, where Jin Dan finds himself not only returning Shijie's money to him, but also has to give him some accumulated "interest" in those few minutes of conversation. On learning from Shijie that Yao Tian Shi's (姚田氏) elder brother is Tian Neng (田能), the governor of Shanxi province—and hence higher in rank and more powerful than his boss, Gu Du (顧讀), whose jurisdiction is merely that of a prefecture—Jin Dan gets super-nervous and gladly hands back the money to Shijie (plus extra) in exchange for tips from the clever Shijie on how to apprehend Yao Tian Shi and her husband in order to bring them back to Yangzhou for the trial.

Example (3) provides an instance of change in tempo combined with repetition that creates a humorous effect. Shijie is not an especially hardworking innkeeper. He prefers to sleep in late. In (3a), he specifies three conditions under which he does not open shop to do business: 1) when it is too early (due to being too lazy to get up early); 2) when it is too late (due to being afraid of thieves); and 3) when it is not-early-not-late (due to not wanting to run into the crane god). Example (3b) is a variant of (3a) in the same scene. These are his responses in Scene 3 on why he is not opening the door when someone knocks, wanting a room for the night. Both utterances in (3) are spoken in

¹⁵ Details on that earlier episode, while humorous, will be skipped here.

quicken speech tempo. In the case of (3a), it also involves the repetition of the negative particle, 唔 [m²¹] ‘not’, a low-toned syllabic bilabial nasal. Its repetition, particularly given the overall quickened tempo of the utterance, contributes to the comic effect. Given the three conditions outlined by Shijie, when *does* he open shop for business?!

- (3) a. 世傑：太早唔做，太夜唔做，唔早唔夜又唔做。 (Scene 3)
 Shijie: “Too early (I) don’t work; too late (I) don’t work; not-early-not-late, (I) also don’t work.”
- b. 世傑：未天光太早，未落更太夜，而家叫做唔早唔夜，唔做。
 Shijie: “Not yet sunrise (is) too early; not yet dawn¹⁶ (is) too late (in the night); right now it’s called not-early-not-late, (I) don’t work.”

A final example under this section pertains to a case of homophony that fortuitously involves a (character-less) taboo word, [lɛn³⁵]. The situation arises in the opera due to the pronunciation of the historical nasal initial *n- as [l] by many Hong Kong speakers, including the protagonist, Song Shijie. The character, *nian* 撚, bearing an *n- initial, is properly (or prescriptively) pronounced [nɛn³⁵] in Cantonese, with the meaning of ‘to tease; to be good at.’ It so happens that there is a syllable that rhymes with it that has an *l- initial belonging to a vulgar word for the male organ. The scene is thus set when one is aware that Hong Kong Cantonese speakers often do not distinguish [n] and [l] in syllable-initial position, in merging [n] with [l]. Hence, even though *nian* 撚 has an *n-onset historically, it is often produced by Hong Kong speakers with an [l] onset. The fact that one of the meanings of 撚 is ‘to tease’ adds yet more mischief in the wordplay here.

The context for the wordplay involving 撚 is as follows. In the midst of writing the plaint for Xiuzhen in Scene 1, Shijie forgets how to write the character, *hen* 恨 [hɛn] ‘hatred’ in the phrase, *shenyuan xuehen* 伸冤雪恨 ‘to seek to redress an injustice and be avenged.’ A few short situational comedy routines then take place involving his wife (Tang Shi 唐氏) giving him the wrong reference source from his bookcase. This is because she is illiterate and cannot read the titles to locate the book he wants. He finally goes to the bookcase to retrieve his rhyme book, where the character *hen* 恨 would be located among other characters belonging to the same rhyme. Flipping through the pages, he finds the rhyme that should contain the character, *hen* 恨, and in (4) he reads aloud the characters in sequence as he searches for the character, *hen* 恨, ending with the character, 撚, which he pronounces extra-emphatically (indicated visually in (4) using a larger bold font). At that, his wife, Tang Shi, sharply interjects. In savoring the example (4), keep in mind that the wife is illiterate.

¹⁶ The phrase in Cantonese refers to night watches (*geng* 更); in traditional China there are five night watches, each two hours in duration, from 7:00 p.m. and to 5:00 a.m.

- (4) 1. 世傑: ... 混、沌、靚、近、搵、疹、**撚** (Scene 1)
 2. 唐氏: =喂, //阿傑, 嘎, 你講乜野**呀**傑¹⁷
 世傑: // x x x
 3. 世傑: **撚呀嗎**
 4. 唐氏: =撞鬼你**咩**, 你亂咁講嘢,
 你講乜嘢, 你頭先?
 5. 世傑: 呢個撚字**囉**.
 6. 唐氏: 重講**添**, 你.
 7. 世傑: **哈**, 乜野**噏**, 係有呢個字**嘅噏**,
噏, 你睇吓**啦**, **噏**, 踢手邊做個然**啊**,
 果然個然**啊**,
 撚手整番幾味家鄉菜就係呢個撚**叻**.
 8. 唐氏: 乜真係有呢個字**呀**,
 就算你**啦**.

1. Shijie: [... wən, tən, jən, kən, wən, ts^hən, **lən**³⁵]
 2. TS: =Hey, //Ah-Git!¹⁸ What?! What are you saying, Git?
 Shijie: // x x x
 3. Shijie: (What I'm saying is) [lən³⁵]
 4. TS: =What the dickens! You don't care what you're saying!
 What were you saying, just a minute ago?
 5. Shijie: This word, [lən³⁵].
 6. TS: *Still* saying it, you are.
 7. Shijie: Hmph, what about it. There *is* such a word.
 There, take a look. There, the character is made up of the hand radical plus
 the character [ji:n];
 [ji:n] as in [kwɔ̃ ji:n] ('really, sure enough').
 [lən³⁵], as in [lən³⁵ səu³⁵] 'to be good at' making a few family dishes.
 8. TS: There really *is* such a character?
 Alright, you're off the hook this time.

First of all, in (4), Shijie pronounces the character, *nian* 撚 [nən³⁵], as [lən³⁵] with a lateral onset in line 1 (and elsewhere in the dialogue). He also does so almost with gusto—certainly with exaggeration, in lengthening the duration and increasing the amplitude on the syllable. For example, compared with the immediately preceding syllable *zhen* 疹

¹⁷ In this paper, latched speech—that is, speech with no discernible pause between speaker turns—is indicated using '=', and overlapped speech is marked with '//'. Unclear speech is marked by x's.

¹⁸ The syllable, *jie* 傑 in Song Shijie's name is pronounced [ki:t] in Cantonese. Shijie's wife calls him Ah-Git (阿傑), where Ah (阿) is a prefix commonly used with monosyllabic given names in Cantonese, as well as in other southern Chinese dialects.

[ts^hɛn]¹⁹ ‘rash’, 撚 is 485 ms in duration and has a mean energy intensity of 75 dB, while 疹 is only 365 ms long and has a mean energy intensity of only 68 dB. The difference is very obvious to the ears. Such exaggerated pronunciation on a syllable homophonous with a taboo word is a very effective means to inject humor in that line. Shijie’s wife reacts instantly, immediately, and sharply, to his loud, emphatic pronunciation of the taboo syllable, and rebukes him for uttering it. Nonplussed, Shijie responds calmly, in contrast to his wife’s agitated state. He even offers an explanation of how that Chinese character is formed—the hand radical 扌 plus the character, *ran* 然 (撚 = 扌 + 然)—together with a sample word that contains *ran* 然, namely, the word, *guoran* 果然 ‘really, sure enough.’ (Here also, note that the selection of *guoran*, meaning ‘really,’ is probably not by chance.) Shijie then switches back to *nian* 撚, and offers a word containing it, namely, 撚手 ‘to be good at.’ If not for the fortuitous homophony resulting from the pronunciation of [n] as [l] for the character 撚, there would have been no Chinese character in Cantonese that is homophonous with the taboo word (due to taboo avoidance). The wife’s illiteracy heightens the humor, rendering the exchange between Shijie and his wife delightfully hilarious for the appreciative listener to the wordplay and exchange.

In closing this subsection, the homophony example illustrates the selection of more delicate topics for humorous effect. Taboos involving the human anatomy and other sexually-nuanced topics, as well as other topics that are not socially-approved for public discourse—such as personal hygiene—may, in the context of humor, be permissible. Outside that context, such topics would typically be disapproved, condemned, or censored as crude or inappropriate for polite society. Humor then gives freer reign with respect to what is permissible, in enabling one to poke fun at socially-accepted mores and behaviors. This is also observable elsewhere in *Shen Si Guan*, as in Scene 5 in the courtroom where the final trial takes place. Tang Shi, Shijie’s wife, suddenly realizes that her baby has wetted her back and has probably defecated on her. Not surprisingly, Gu Du and the other judges are not feeling particularly too accommodating of having the courtroom filled with foul odor. A follow-up reference to pig dung by Shijie adds to the humor in contrasting sharply such references with the on-going proceeding of a serious trial on a homicide case. Note, nonetheless, that the situation involves an infant, thereby making the topic still within more socially acceptable mores.

3.2. Humor at the Lexical Level

Under this section on humor at the lexical level, words as well as phrases will be discussed. In studying humor, it should be noted that very informal, colloquial language serves as a sharp contrast to language that is very standard and formal. If the latter

¹⁹ *Zhen* 疹 ‘rash’ has two readings in Cantonese, [tsɛn] and [ts^hɛn]; the former without aspiration is the formal, literary reading, and the latter with aspiration is the colloquial reading. In this audio-recording, the character is given the colloquial reading and is pronounced with aspiration.

renders an air of respectability, solemnity, and seriousness, the former lacks those very attributes. Hence, vernacular, everyday language can be used to convey a light, non-serious tone. Humor, then, exploits the colloquial language of the masses for playfulness in enlivening the dialogues. In that context, slang vocabulary and expressions, colloquialisms, hyperbole, wordplay, onomatopoeia, and figurative language are important linguistic devices for rendering humor at the lexical level.

In speaking a vernacular language such as Cantonese, which differs significantly from the ‘standard Chinese’ that has Mandarin as its base, there is already a great deal of dialect vocabulary, dialect-specific grammatical markers, as well as colloquial terms and expressions not found in standard Chinese. Further choices of particular words, phrases, and expressions then contribute to heighten the effect of humor. *Shen Si Guan* abounds in slang vocabulary, dialect words and phrases, as well as colloquial expressions to produce humorous dialogues. Only a few examples are shown in (5).

(5) Some examples of humor in vocabulary items, terms, and expressions

1. 肥嘟嘟 [fei²¹ ty:t⁵ ty:t⁵] ‘chubby (of an infant, child)’
2. 宋夫子 ‘Master Song’
3. 你隻衰鬼 ‘you devilish rascal’
4. 牙擦 ‘boastful, smart-alecky’ (lit., tooth + brush)
5. 靚仔 [lɛŋ⁵⁵ tsei³⁵] ‘good-for-nothing young fellow; tough guy’
6. 蚊脾同牛脾 ‘a mosquito thigh to an ox’s thigh’ (i.e., no comparison)
7. 問師姑擺梳 ‘ask a nun for a comb’ (i.e., hopeless)

Example (5.1) is a case of onomatopoeia that is in the Cantonese dialect in affectionately describing a baby or child as chubby. Shijie uses it to describe his infant son in the opening scene. Example (5.2) is a term of address that occurs in three contexts in the opera: 1) Song Shijie uses it for himself, as in his self-introduction in Scene 1; 2) Jin Dan (金彈) uses it to address Shijie when he realizes the latter is far more savvy than himself and may be able to offer him tips on apprehending the Shanxi governor’s younger sister and husband; 3) Gu Du uses it in the final part of Scene 5, when he humbles himself in explaining matters after having mis-applied justice in Xiuzhen’s case in sentencing her in the initial trial (Scene 4). The ordinary polite term of address for Song Shijie is Song Xiansheng (宋先生 ‘Mister Song’). Prior to Gu Du addressing him as Song Fuzi, he simply addresses him by his full name, Song Shijie. Song Fuzi (宋夫子) is rather pompous, given that *fuzi* (夫子) ‘master’ is associated with the most famous philosopher in Chinese culture, namely, Confucius, or Kong Fuzi (孔夫子). The similarity in sound between Kong Fuzi and Song Fuzi would most surely elicit smiles, if not chuckles.

Examples (5.3) and (5.4) are simple cases of colloquial language, the first for scolding someone and the latter for describing someone who is rather smart-alecky. Such colloquial language is, of course, very modern expressions, and hence incongruous with the language of the past. Humor derives in part from imposing modern, colloquial speech onto a historical setting. In example (5.5), under normal circumstances it would be similar to those in the preceding two examples, although more slangy. However, it acquires more comic effect due to the fact that Shijie uses it in referring to Tian Neng (田能), the Shanxi governor in the final scene. Clearly, Tian Neng is no *leŋ*⁵⁵ *tsei*³⁵—but perhaps he is!²⁰

The final two examples in (5)—namely (5.6) and (5.7)—involve figurative language. Example (5.6) is a case of hyperbole, in juxtaposing a mosquito’s thigh against that of an ox’s thigh. Shijie makes this comparison for Jin Dan to emphasize the difference in power and rank between Jin Dan’s boss, Gu Du, being merely by the size of a mosquito’s thigh, and Tian Neng, the size of an ox’s thigh. In other words, there is *no* comparison. Tian Neng’s power and authority dwarf those of Gu Du. Example (5.7) occurs in the dialogue that is part of the episode in (4). The episode involves Shijie and his wife in which he asks her how to write the character, *hen* 恨 [hən] ‘hatred’ in the phrase, *shenyuan xuehen* 伸冤雪恨 ‘to seek to redress an injustice and be avenged.’ Upon her reminding him that she is illiterate, he realizes that he has “asked a nun for a comb”—quite hopeless. Given the vernacular character, 擲 [lɔ³⁵] ‘to get’, the expression is a very colloquial one in Cantonese.²¹ This expression, 問師姑擲梳, is basically a *xiehouyu* (歇後語) ‘an enigmatic folk simile,’ and is more colloquial and dialect-based than the corresponding one that may be the more conventional one in Cantonese that uses all standard Chinese characters, namely, *wen heshang jie shu* 問和尚借梳 ‘to ask a monk for a comb.’ The second, unexpressed, half of the *xiehouyu* is 冇希望 ‘to have no hope.’ Since the episode contains Shijie conversing with his wife, the alteration of the *xiehouyu* to refer to a nun, rather than to a monk, is clever and comical on multiple dimensions.²²

Before turning to the next subsection, a word should also be added concerning lexical items that derive their humor from the writing system. For instance, the character for ‘official,’ *guan* 官 is analyzed by people as being composed of two ‘mouths’; that is, two instances of the character, *kou* 口 ‘mouth.’ While that structure for the character, *guan* 官 ‘official,’ can be taken literally, the more meaningful extension is to view the observation as a critical assessment of officials, namely, a critique by the common people

²⁰ Note that 靚仔 [leŋ⁵⁵ tsei³⁵] is different from 靚仔 [leŋ⁴⁴ tsei³⁵] ‘good-looking boy’; the same vernacular character, 靚, is used in both words, but bears a high level tone, /55/, in one case and a mid-high level tone, /44/, in the other.

²¹ A ‘comb’ in spoken Cantonese is simply the monosyllabic word, *shu* 梳 [sɔ⁵⁵].

²² Note that Example (5.6) also appears to be an enigmatic folk simile, besides being a hyperbole.

that officials (particularly unscrupulous ones) speak from both sides of their mouth. The phrase, *guan zi liang ge kou*, 官字兩個口 (the character ‘official’ has two mouths) is used by Shijie in Scene 2 as a self-directed remark when Gu Du forbids him to laugh after a short series of parries between them. The observation of the structure of the character for *guan* 官, as an indirect indictment against corrupt officials in imperial China, is witty, and is not uniquely found in *Shen Si Guan*. It is, moreover, a well-known phrase that is not limited to operas per se, although today perhaps one might come across it more frequently there.²³ In *Shen Si Guan*, Shijie simply comments using that phrase, rather than use it as a more serious indictment of Gu Du and officialdom in general. Shijie notes that Gu Du is permitted to laugh, whereas he himself is not, when Gu Du orders him not to laugh. Shijie complies but also has a last word on it, saying that he would not even giggle if he is tickled. In any event, humor in general provides a safer, and less threatening, channel to criticize elements in the social system, or in the social and political systems at large; hence, humor can be a powerful tool if used well.

3.3. Humor at the Syntactic Level

In this subsection on humor at the syntactic level, three examples will be used for illustration. The first example was discussed earlier in (3a) with respect to the repetition of the negative particle, 唔 [m²¹] ‘not’. The example is repeated below as (6):

- (6) 世傑：太早唔做，太夜唔做，唔早唔夜又唔做。 (Scene 3)
 Shijie: “Too early (I) don’t work; too late (I) don’t work;
 not-early-not-late, (I) also don’t work.”

The second example was also given earlier. It involves the title of the opera: *shen-si guan* (審死官), where *shen-si* (審死) is a resultative verb compound in which the two components of the compound are in a cause-result relationship. For that reason, *shen-si guan* might be translated as ‘to cause the official to die from trying a case.’ In this opera, it is Shijie, always with a ready answer for Gu Du (Scene 2) and other judges (Scene 5), combined with other tricks up his sleeve, that inspired Ma Zhizeng (馬師曾) to select *Shen Si Guan* as the name for the opera, signalling by means of the title, that this opera is a humorous one. Towards the end of the opera, Gu Du and the other three judges sing, “We also were almost driven insane by you (in trying this case).” (幾乎本官亦被你來審死.) Shijie admits and sings in response, “I, Song Shijie, am famous for getting my way

²³ Another source containing that phrase is the Cantonese opera from PRC, *Wang Hua Mai Fu* 王化買父 ‘Wang Hua Buys a Father’ (on a 3-disc VCD set). From the title, one can readily discern that this is also a comedy. In it, the corrupt official in a clown role prances about and utters the phrase, 官字兩個口, almost proudly, as if giving himself the right to taking bribes and participate in other underhanded dealings in trying his court cases.

and causing judges to go to pieces trying cases (我宋世傑有名扭紋柴, 審死官).²⁴

The third example involves verbal expressions with the idiomatic use of the number ‘one,’ deliberately given a literal interpretation by Shijie in his response to Gu Du in the initial trial in Scene 2. The scene takes place in Gu Du’s court at Yangzhou prefecture, after Shijie has accompanied Xiuzhen there with the plaint to bring before the court. As can be seen in (7), Gu Du opens with stating that he would ask Shijie a question. Shijie takes *yi sheng* 一聲 (‘a/one sound,’ although functioning here as a verbal classifier for ‘to ask,’ as in to ask questions), and treats that phrase literally as ‘one question.’ Its idiomatic usage in the context bleaches the phrase of any numerical value of ‘one.’ Shijie, in giving his response, only too cooperatively invites the judge to ask *several* questions. This is shown in (7) in his immediate, and quick, response to Gu Du.

- (7) 顧讀: 本官黎問你一聲. (Scene 2)
 世傑: =啊, 問多幾聲, 唔該.
 Gu Du: Let me ask you a question.
 Shijie: Uh, do ask *several*, please.

In (7)), observe that Shijie is ever so polite; after all, he includes 唔該 ‘please’ in inviting the judge to ask him more questions. With numerous verbal parries and antics such as this—Shijie seems to have an answer for everything—it is no wonder that he can drive people nuts, and can cause judges to ‘go to pieces’ trying a case!

3.4. Humor at the Discourse Level

There are a number of different approaches to studying humor at the discourse level. One approach can be the study of the rich inventory of utterance particles in this corpus and analyze their contribution to humor in the dialogues. Differences between genders, such as between Shijie and his wife, on how they perform humor would be another potential area for investigation. In this subsection, the topic focuses on conversational joking, utilizing the three types of conversational joking proposed by Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997). These three types are: 1) teasing that is directed at the addressee or hearer, 2) joking about absent others, and 3) self-denigrating humor or self-teasing. Examples of teasing and self-denigrating humor will be illustrated and discussed here.²⁵

Turning first to teasing, the chief personage who engages in teasing is Song Shijie. He teases his wife on several occasions, including teasingly suggesting that he would identify Yang Xiuzhen as his concubine when he goes with her to the Yangzhou prefec-

²⁴ The first quote is a passive sentence involving the *bei* (被) construction, where the patient is *ben guan* (本官), literally ‘this official’ (the use of self-reference rather than the first-person pronoun). The second quote is an active sentence with Song Shijie as the agent.

²⁵ A case of joking about absent others might be Shijie’s reference to Tian Neng as a [leŋ⁵⁵ tsɛi³⁵].

ture court. (Not surprisingly, his wife does not appreciate that in the least bit, even as a joke.) Here, the example shown in (8) involves the occasion in which Shijie's wife tries to convince him to do a good deed, and that is to help Xiuzhen by writing a plaint in order for her to bring the case to court. Whimpering and unwilling, Shijie explains that he has already performed the rites—cut off a chicken's head, burned yellow paper, etc.—and sworn an oath not to take up the pen again. The excerpt in (8) is a portion of a longer exchange between husband and wife. The excerpt is a light-hearted, comic dialogue, with the husband eventually teasing the wife and joking with her about giving birth to a whole brood of some tens to twenty little ones. The wife laughs and takes his teasing good-naturedly. He also chuckles at the thought of likening the scenario of having many babies to a sow having a brood of piglets.

In (8), keep in mind that the couple has only one baby (others having died earlier); consequently, having more children would be a blessing for them, and would be seen as a reward for some good deed. Aside from the bantering that is evident in the excerpt, part of the humor is also conveyed during the dialogue by changes in voice quality, such as when Shijie goes from whimpering to cheering up in a sudden realization that the deed has potentially good consequences. Humor is heightened by the changes in speech tempo, as in several short, rapid-fire responses (marked by '=' to show latching, with no pause between speaker turns). The colloquial flavor of the exchange is clearly evident in the presence of numerous interjections and utterance particles, as well as postposing (e.g., in placing the subject (or vocative, as in Shijie's name, Git (傑)) at absolute utterance-final position. Observe also that throughout the dialogue the wife is very resourceful and encouraging of her husband; and to the very end, she does not lose sight of her objective of convincing him to write the plaint.

- (8) 1. 唐氏：咳呀，亞傑，好心/你咯， (Scene 1)
 2. 世傑：(whimpering) 唔好咧
 3. 唐氏：你講㗎嘛，要做番件好事啊嗎，你都知道嘅啦，開講有話啊嗎
 4. 世傑：(whimpering) 話乜嘢嘍?
 5. 唐氏：救人一命，勝過七級浮屠啊
 6. 世傑：係嚟，[he³⁵]?²⁶ //枉我讀書佬
 7. 唐氏： //人哋指擬你㗎啦，傑。
 8. 世傑：係嚟，救人一命，勝過七級浮屠，
 9. 唐氏：=係啊!
 10. 世傑：做番呢件好事，
 11. 唐氏：=係啊!
 12. 世傑：希望你將來重生番十零廿個都唔定啊 [he³⁵?]
 13. 唐氏：=(laughingly) 唉吔，嚟！乜你咁嘅嘍。

²⁶ No Cantonese vernacular character appears to exist for this utterance particle. In interrogative sentences, it functions similar to a confirmation-seeking tag question such as “Isn't it?”

14. 世傑：當豬嘍 [hɛ hɛ hɛ] (laughter),
 15. 唐氏：=快啲寫啦，傑。
 16. 世傑：係。
1. TS: (Sigh) Ah-Git, have a good // heart, you
 2. Shijie: (whimpering) // Don't
 3. TS: You said it. (We) need to do a good deed. As they say
 4. Shijie: (whimpering) Say what?
 5. TS: Saving someone's life is greater than (building) a seven-story pagoda.
 6. Shijie: Hey, that's right, isn't it? //I'm a scholar in vain.
 7. TS: //Another('s life) will depend on you
 8. Shijie: That's right. Saving someone's life is greater than (building) a seven-story pagoda,
 9. TS: =Right!
 10. Shijie: Do a good deed.
 11. TS: Right!
 12. Shijie: Hope in the future you might even have ten to twenty (little ones), huh?
 13. TS: (laughingly) Aiya! Shoo! Don't be like that.
 14. Shijie: As if like a mother pig. Ha ha ha.
 15. TS: Hurry up and write, Git.
 16. Shijie: Okay.

Self-denigrating humor, or self-teasing, is also found in the opera. A short example is one mentioned earlier in (5.7) involving Shijie asking his wife how to write the character, *hen* 恨 [hɛn] 'hatred,' to put into the phrase, *shenyuan xuehen* 伸冤雪恨 [sɛn jy:n sy:t hɛn] 'to seek to redress an injustice and be avenged.' As given in the excerpt in (9), on being reminded by his wife that she is illiterate, he makes fun of himself and puts himself down in describing his act as a case of asking a nun for a comb. How foolish!

- (9) 1. 世傑：恨.....痕.....邊個恨字啫? (Scene 1)
 痕, 周身... 恨... 伸冤雪恨,
 喂, 老婆啊
2. 唐氏：嘎?
3. 世傑：過嚟, 過嚟
4. 唐氏：乜野//啫,
5. 世傑： //喂,
 個恨字//點寫?
6. 唐氏： //寫完啦?
7. 世傑：唔係, 個恨字點寫啊?
8. 唐氏：嘩, 你真係有解叻, 傑。
 你都明知我唔識黑喇嗎。
9. 世傑：噃, 係, 嘩, 問師姑擺梳。

1. Shijie: [hən] ... [hən] ... Which [hən] character is it?
[hən] (itchy) all over the body ... [hən], [sən jy:n sy:t hən]
Hey, wifey
2. TS: What?
3. Shijie: Come over here, come here
4. TS: What is //it?
5. Shijie: //Hey,
That [hən] character, //how do you write it?
6. TS: //Finished writing?
7. Shijie: No, the [hən] character, how do you write it?
8. TS: Gee, you don't make any sense, Git.
You know darn well I don't know characters.
9. Shijie: Oh, yeah, that's right. Sheesh, asking a nun for a comb.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have offered some glimpses into language and humor. Not yet explored are issues pertaining to sociolinguistic factors, such as gender (e.g., Shijie and his wife) or social class (e.g., Shijie and Gu Du), nor have we analyzed the functions of humor. Shijie's teasing of his wife in this opera, for instance, can shorten social distance and act as a bond of solidarity between them. Use of new theories pertaining to the pragmatics of humor and other exciting research endeavors lie ahead in the linguistic study of both universal and culture-specific aspects of humor in the Chinese language.

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