

## Linking Ancient and Contemporary

Continuities and Discontinuities in Chinese Literature

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# Traditional Chinese Jestbooks and Ming Revival

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**Abstract** The traditional Chinese literary view bestowed value mainly on those texts that pursued a didactic and moral purpose; however, several scholars in Chinese history composed works, recording and gathering anecdotes, to be enjoyed in leisure time. The jestbooks (*Wenyan xiaohua ji*), which had appeared in the literary landscape during the later Han/early Wei period (late 3rd century CE), became extremely popular during the Ming (1368-1644). This article provides a brief presentation of several collections through the ages, and then focuses on how they flourished during the Ming dynasty period.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 A Brief Survey of the Jestbooks Contained in the Bibliographical Chapters of the Official Histories. – 3 Jestbooks in Ming Bibliographical Chapters and Tan Kai's Woodblock Edition of the *Taiping guanji* 太平廣記 (The Extensive Records Assembled in the Taiping Era, 976-984). – 4 Ming Dynasty Jestbooks.

**Keywords** Jestbook. Jest. Humorous anecdotes.

## 1 Introduction

Traditional Chinese jestbooks, in today's histories of Chinese literature, written in Chinese, are normally defined as *Wenyan xiaohua ji* 文言笑話集;<sup>1</sup> this description illustrates a number of features of these texts: that they are collections (*ji* 集), which gather humorous anecdotes, or jests (*xiaohua* 笑話);<sup>2</sup> it also identifies the language in which the anecdotes were written,

1 To identify which texts are now defined as *xiaohua ji*, I used the following works: Hou Zhongyi 1990, Ning Jiayu 1991, Wang Liqi [1956] 1981, Zhu Yixuan 2005, but in particular, and foremost, Ning Jiayu 1996. Here the *xiaoshuo* 小說 with a humorous content (*xiexue lei* 諧謔類) are divided in: *paixie ji* 俳諧集 (collection of comic pieces), *yuyan ji* 寓言集 (collection of fables), and *xiaohua ji*. The first category identifies texts that are similar to parodic biographies, as for example the *Maoying zhuan* 毛穎傳 (Biography of Fur Point) written by Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824); the second category groups those collections of stories which, mostly, have as their protagonists animals, insects, or other creatures.

2 *Xiaohua*, as a term which precisely refers to humorous stories is attested not before the 17th century; before, the expressions *huaji yan* 滑稽言, *huaji yu* 滑稽語, etc. were frequent; cf. Lévy 1971, p. 85, n. 46.

that is literary Chinese (*wen yan* 文言). These works belong to a 'genre' retrospectively defined, and, observing the material collected according to this definition, they are, generally speaking, collections of short anecdotes grouped together for entertainment purposes.<sup>3</sup>

As far as the history of this 'genre' is concerned, the jestbooks appeared in the literary landscape at the end of Han/early Wei Dynasties, and their first specimen can be found in the *Xiaolin* 笑林 (Forest of laughs), ascribed to the late Han dynasty scholar Handan Chun 邯鄲淳 (*fl.* 150-225).<sup>4</sup>

All the works now defined as jestbooks, in the Bibliographical chapters of the dynastic histories, were classified under the «xiaoshuo» 小說 category. This category grouped all the texts which were not easily classifiable: texts in prose, for the most part negatively defined as being as unreliable as street gossip. They were considered a kind of narrative prose which was not fit to be part of the official histories and, as a category, the «xiaoshuo» was placed at the margins of the «Zi» (Masters of Thought) section. The texts contained in this section had a marginal cultural status. However, as far as the collections of jestbooks are concerned, they did enjoy popularity among the literati through the ages.

## 2 A Brief Survey of the Jestbooks Contained in the Bibliographical Chapters of the Official Histories

Works that now are regarded as jestbooks (*xiaohua ji*) appeared for the first time in the Bibliographical chapter of the *Suishu* 隋書 (Book of Sui), under the «xiaoshuo» category (*Suishu* 34.1011). They were: Handan Chun's *Xiaolin*, the *Xiaoyuan* 笑苑 (Garden of Laughs) by Wei Dan 魏澹 (580-645) and the *Jieyi* 解頤 (To Laugh) by Yang Jiesong 陽玠松 (Northern Qi). Among the three, only fragments of the *Xiaolin* remain, scattered throughout several later encyclopedias.

The *Xiaoyuan* and the *Jieyi* were already no longer listed in the bibliographical chapters of both the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 and the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (The Old Book of Tang and the New Book of Tang; *Jiu Tangshu* 47.2036; *Xin Tanshu* 59.1539-1543), in which, however, the presence of possible jestbooks is still attested. The *Qiyán lù* 啓顏錄 (Record of Bright Smiles),

3 The Jestbooks are also defined as *wenyan xiaoshuo xiaohua ji* 文言小說笑話集, in which *wenyan xiaoshuo* 文言小說 (*xiaoshuo* in literary language) is a modern descriptive term in opposition to *baihua xiaoshuo* 白話小說 (vernacular *xiaoshuo*); cf. Hou and Liu 1993, p. 385. The term *xiaoshuo* is difficult to translate, here it is used to refer to texts in literary prose which Glen Dudbridge 2002, p. 16, defines as «literature of record». For a brief overview of the term in the pre-modern era see also Hegel 1998, pp. 12-13.

4 For more information about this text see Baccini 2014.

ascribed to the early Sui official Hou Bai 侯白 (581-618),<sup>5</sup> is listed in both chapters; a manuscript of this text (or part of it) was found in the caves of Dunhuang, and, dated 723, it is an interesting and understudied source with which to examine the literary landscape of the time. The *Xin Tangshu* chapter, in addition, records Liu Nayan's 劉訥言 (fl. 666) *Paixie ji* 俳諧集 (Collection of Humorous Pieces)<sup>6</sup> and He Ziran's 何自然 (?-?, Tang dynasty) *Xiaolin* 笑林.<sup>7</sup> Few texts, then, were ascribed to the Tang period (618-907), and nothing remains of their content. In contrast, during the Song period, the number of collections of humorous anecdotes increased.<sup>8</sup>

The bibliographical chapter of the *Songshi* 宋史 (History of the Song),<sup>9</sup> as far as Song dynasty works are concerned, presents the *Qunju jieyi* 羣居解頤 (Collection of Laughs Placed Together) by Gao Yi 高懌,<sup>10</sup> the *Kaiyan ji* 開顏集 (Collection of Stories to Make You Smile), attributed to Zhou Wenqi 周文玘;<sup>11</sup> the *Xiaolin* 笑林, by an undetermined scholar Lu 路氏; the *Xiyu jishuo* 戲語集說 (Collection of Jokes), by Nanyang Dezhang 南陽德張; the *Huaji ji* 滑稽集 (Collection of Humorous Pieces), by Qian Yi 錢易 and an anonymous *Linxia xiaotan* 林下笑談 (Humorous Conversations Under A Tree).<sup>12</sup> Ning Jiayu (1996, pp. 212-214) is able to identify eight more collections ascribed to this period, which however did not appear in the bibliographical chap-

5 In his biography it is said that he was renowned for his witty nature and for this quality the Emperor Wen of Sui 隋文帝 (581-604) summoned him to court; cf. *Suishu* 58.1421.

6 He was one of the leading scholars in charge of writing commentaries for the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Book of Later Han). He was also the tutor of the prince Li Xian 李賢 (653-684) of the Tang. When the emperor Gaozong 高宗 (649-683) discovered that Liu had written such a humorous text (the *Paixie ji*), and, suspecting that he had used the book to instruct his son, he sent him into exile; cf. *Jiu Tangshu* 189A. 4956.

7 Not to be confused with Handan Chun's *Xiaolin*. Analyzing the titles of the *xiaohua ji* through the ages, it appears that the title *Xiaolin* was frequently used.

8 Ning Jiayu (1996, p. 128), for the Five Dynasties period, identifies two more texts: a book titled *Xiaolin* 笑林 by Yang Minggao 揚名高, and another titled *Qiyuan lu* 啓顏錄, ascribed to Pi Guangye 皮光業 (fl. 900), who was the chancellor of Qian Yuanguan 錢元瓘 (887-941), the second King of Wuyue 吳越.

9 *Songshi* 206.5219-31.

10 Few references about his biography can be found in the «Yinyi zhuan» 隱逸傳 (Biographies of recluses) in the *Songshi* (ch. 457).

11 There is no biographical information about this author; we only know from some bibliographical indexes that he served as *jiaoshu lang* 校書郎 (editor). An old edition of the text, in two *juan*, is preserved in Ding Bing's 丁丙 (Qing) collection of rare editions (*Shanben shushi cangshu* 善本書室藏書). For more information about this text, see Huang Dongyang 黃東陽 2007. «Ci sui qing hui, yi gui yizheng-Songdai xiaoshu *Kaiyan ji* 'ya su zhi bian'shiyi» 辭雖傾回, 意歸義正 - 宋人笑書《開顏集》「雅俗之辨」釋義 (Despite being a series of ludicrous words, the contents are correct and accurate: interpretation of 'Distinguishing Elegance from Vulgarity' in the Song dynasty humorous book *Kaiyan ji*). *Taipei shili jiaoyu daxue xuebao*, 38, pp. 27-44.

12 These last four texts are all lost and no items remain.

ter of the *Songshi*. They are, instead, recorded in the *cunmu* 存目 section (texts only listed but not preserved in the collection) of the «xiaoshuo» category in the Qing dynasty index *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書提要 (Catalogue [with critical abstracts] of the [imperially authorized] Complete library of the four branches), in private catalogues, or in the *Shuofu* 說浮 (Outskirts of texts), a Yuan dynasty (1271-1368) collectanea.<sup>13</sup>

### 3 Jestbooks in Ming Bibliographical Chapters and Tan Kai's Woodblock Edition of the *Taiping guanji* 太平廣記 (The Extensive Records Assembled in the Taiping Era, 976-984)

In Ming times (1368-1644), jestbooks flourished. Despite their being removed from the bibliographical chapter of the *Mingshi* 明史 (History of Ming),<sup>14</sup> fourteen texts are recorded in the «xiaoshuo» category of the private catalogue *Qianqing tang shumu* 千頃堂書目 (Vast Hall Bibliography), written by Huang Yuji 黃虞稷 (1626-1692), on which the *Mingshi*'s catalogue was based. Even though, since the invention of printing during the Song, it was probably possible to produce more books of this kind, the bibliographical chapters of official histories became more selective about the material they presented.<sup>15</sup> The *xiaohua ji* were considered a marginal typology, so it is not surprising that they disappeared from the official catalogue.

For the Ming period, Ning Jiayu (1996, pp. 319-327) lists thirty five *xiaohua ji*,<sup>16</sup> most of which can be dated to a period ranging from the last

13 As is the case for Lü Benzong's 呂本中 (1084-1145) *Xuanqu lu* 軒渠錄 (Records of laughing), Tian Hezi's 天和子 *Shanxue ji* 善謔集 (Collection of good jokes) and Zhu Hui's 朱暉 *Juedao lu* 絕倒錄 (Records to roar with laughter), according to the items left, they were all made of funny anecdotes regarding historical figures, like their contemporaries Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037-1101) and Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086) for the *Xuanqu lu* and *Juedao lu*; or people from the past like Liu Ling 劉伶 (3rd century) for the *Shanxue ji*. For the complete list, cf. Ning 1996, pp. 212-213; for the few texts ascribed to the Yuan period cf. Ning 1996, p. 214.

14 The bibliographical chapter of the *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming) lists only one text regarded as a *xiaohua ji*, the *Zile bian* 自樂編 (A text for self entertainment) by Li Yuheng 李豫亨, now lost; cf. *Mingshi* 98.2434.

15 On the more orthodox approach taken by the *Histories*, especially regarding the *liezhuan* 列傳 (biography), cf. Wilkinson 2013, p. 151.

16 Wang Liqi (1981, pp. 139-432) also records thirty-five texts. However, of the texts listed by Ning Jiayu, twelve have no fragments left, and so are not quoted by Wang Liqi, who, in turn, quotes twelve additional texts which in Ning Jiayu's book have a different classification. For example, Wang Liqi classifies as a *xiaohua ji* the chapter that was made of humorous anecdotes of the *Lushu* 露書 (Book of Dew), its «xie pian» 諧篇, written by Yao Lü 姚旅 (?-1622); a book which Ning (1996, p. 285) actually classifies as a whole in the «miscellaneous category» (*zazu lei* 雜俎類).

part of the mid-Ming to the late-Ming (1436-1644). This was also the period that witnessed the beginning of the dominance of print culture over manuscripts, thanks to the «explosive growth» of the commercial printing industry (Lu 2010, p. 63). The increased number of jestbooks could well be considered an effect of this trend. There must be a connection between events, though, that might have helped this typology to flourish before it came into fashion.

Tan Kai 談愷 (1503-1568) (courtesy name, Shoujiao 守教) was a man from Xishan 錫山 (today Wuxi metropolitan area, near Suzhou). He took the *jinshi* degree in 1526 and,<sup>17</sup> once retired from office, he decided to embark upon a huge cultural project: he edited and then published (1566) the Song encyclopedia *Taiping guangji* (Extensive records from the Taiping era, published in 978), which, as we know, collected stories and anecdotes of previously lost texts, up to Tang times. In Tan Kai's time all circulating editions of the *Taiping guangji* were seriously damaged, so he decided to use his now abundant free time to create a woodblock edition (*ke ben* 刻本) of the *Taiping guangji*.<sup>18</sup> He used a manuscript copy (*chao ben* 抄本), as his base text (*diben* 底本),<sup>19</sup> against which he checked other editions. In the project he was not alone, as he enjoyed the help of three close friends: Qin Cishan 秦次山, Qiang Qicheng 強綺塍 and Tang Shidong 唐石東, who assisted him in compiling the book in its final form.<sup>20</sup>

In the preface to his woodblock edition, Tan Kai wrote a presentation of the text which described its literary nature and the reason he decided to print it. He explained that the *Taiping guangji*: «was compiled by collecting material from unofficial histories (*yeshi* 野史), transmitted records (*zhuanji* 傳記) and lesser sayings (*xiaoshuo* 小說) of all the traditions» (*Taiping guangji* 1961, p. 2) and that the literati did not give much attention to a text of that kind. Differently, he said that the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (Imperial Reading of the Taiping era), the other imperially commissioned Song encyclopaedia compiled in the same period (977-984), was «a collection of passages from officially categorized texts (*jing shi zi ji* 經史子

17 Some information regarding his life can be traced to some passages of the *Mingshi* 明史 (History of the Ming), cf. *Mingshi* 171.4560, and *Mingshi* 210.5554.

18 The edition he created is now the earliest preserved. Tan's edition had several problems: in the manuscript copy transmitted to his time some chapters were missing, so he tried to fill the gap by, for example, splitting a chapter (*juan*) in two (chapter 142 was split in 141 and 142); cf. Pu 2008, p. 222. The original manuscript of the *Taiping guangji* was lost during the Northern Song and up to now it is not possible to know which was the original shape of the text. For more information about the transmission of this text, see the great scholarly accomplishment of Zhang Guofeng 2011.

19 As far as his manuscript is concerned, now we are unable to track down which edition it was; cf. Shen 2010, p. 70, n. 2.

20 *Taiping guangji* 1961, p. 2.

集)», so it was well esteemed by the educated elite of the time.<sup>21</sup> This is the reason the *Taiping yulan* was widely known and the *Taiping guangji* was neglected. Tan Kai also explains that, as he had retired from official appointments and thus had a great amount of spare time, he decided to edit this text (the *guangji*), which assembled «the unofficial stories of the *baiguan*» (*baiguan yeshi* 稗官野史) not only because «it is possible to look at them (*xiaodao keguan* 小道可觀)», but also because «they are as pleasant to read as playing *bo* and *yi* games» (*Taiping guangji* 1961, p. 2). It is evident here that Tan Kai is quoting the *Hanshu* 漢書 (Book of Han) definition of the «*xiaoshuo*» category (i.e. *xiaoshuo* are something that is possible to look at), which from its first appearance onwards, has been used as a definition for all non-official texts. The *Hanshu* states that the *xiaoshuo* were recorded because, even though superficial, they contained some worthwhile knowledge (*Hanshu* 30.1745); but Tan Kai specifies that this is not the only reason he was interested in this category of writings. These texts could also be as entertaining as playing games; this appears to be the main reason he undertook this task.

The *Taiping guangji* collects a large amount of anecdotes and stories, most of them belonging to the *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of the strange) and *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tales of the marvellous) typologies,<sup>22</sup> as well as anecdotes from those *xiaohua ji* previously listed by the official catalogues. But it is not a mere collection; since it was supposed to be an encyclopaedia, it arranges the textual material according to several thematic categories. As the Tan Kai's text was produced and introduced into the market, the *Taiping guangji* quickly gained the interest of the literati, so that during the Wanli period (1573-1619) it was already circulating widely. Its thematic structure had a strong influence on those literati who were already interested in the *xiaoshuo* (Niu 2008, p. 126); Hu Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551-1602), for example, the famous scholar who, devoting his studies to investigating the *xiaoshuo* as a *genre*,<sup>23</sup> became fascinated by it, and he is said to have owned several copies of the text (Niu 2008, p. 111-112).

As far as the categories are concerned, Zhao Jingshen (1980, p. 28) notes that the *Taiping guangji* can be considered, in a way, a collection of *xiaohua*, as it has specific categories related to humor: the «*hui xie*» 談諧 (humorous [anecdotes]) from *juan* 245 to *juan* 252; the «*chao qiao*» 嘲諷 (ridiculing) from *juan* 253 to *juan* 257, and the «*chi bi*» 嗤鄙 (sneering at) from *juan* 258

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21 For more information regarding the compilation of the *Taiping yulan* and the *Taiping guangji*, cf. Kurz 2001.

22 They are two «generic subdivisions» of *wenyan xiaoshuo*; cf. Chiang 2005, pp. 10-27.

23 He divided the *xiaoshuo* into six categories, among which *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* are included. According to Tak-hung Leo Chan (1998, p. 10) with Hu *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* «were introduced in the realm of critical discourse».

to *juan* 262.<sup>24</sup> Ming literati might have paid great attention to the analysis of the encyclopedia's content, and to its thematic subdivision. Hu Yinglin was probably influenced by the *Taiping guangji* in his categorizing of the sub-genres of ancient *xiaoshuo* (Niu 2008, p. 126), and later on, Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), too, devoted great attention to the text, also using it as a repository from which he fished for stories. Additionally, not satisfied with the printed copies he was able to find in the market, he selected passages he liked and made the *Taiping guangji chao* 太平廣記抄 (Selections from the *Taiping guangji*) (1626). Collecting more than two thousand, divided into eight *juan*, Feng Menglong's text helped to disseminate the content of the *Taiping guangji* even more (Niu 2008, p. 75-76).

#### 4 Ming Dynasty Jestbooks

Literary production, however, was not only the private enterprise of an author; after the Jiajing period (1521-1567) it was, more and more, promoted by the pressure of the publishers who needed more products to put on the market.<sup>25</sup> As Tina Lu (2010, p. 69) speculates, also «the reevaluation of earlier canons characteristic of this period must have been partly a response to the pressure to produce new anthologies for the book market»; it helped, in fact, to identify and then reuse traditional literary themes and stories which were then reshaped and rearranged in new collections to meet a broad audience.<sup>26</sup> Tan Kai's woodblock edition, as we already mentioned, also served the cause, providing a book, the *Taiping guangji*, which was a treasure trove of stories about ghosts, the supernatural, love, drama, gossips, and of humorous anecdotes.<sup>27</sup> The appearance of an increasing number of jestbooks can rightly be considered part of the literary trend of this period.

Ming dynasty jestbooks were mostly derivative works, made up of stories collected from other sources. Even if they were written in lit-

<sup>24</sup> Thirteen out of the twenty-nine surviving anecdotes of Handan Chun's *Xiaolin* are contained in the *Taiping guangji*. Nine anecdotes among the thirteen are scattered inside these three categories.

<sup>25</sup> In this period the link between publishers and authors, i.e. literary production and the market, was already very strong. The creation of collections of stories was often instigated by the publishers. Feng Menglong, too, created his *Gu jin xiaoshuo* 古今小說 (Stories old and new) under such a kind of pressure. See Wang 2003, p. 35.

<sup>26</sup> Lu (2010, p. 68) explains that «more was written in these generations [the Wanli period] than in those preceding, but the explosion in publishing and book collection may be attributed more directly to repackaging and reorganization».

<sup>27</sup> Rania Huntington (2003, pp. 8-9), describes how Ming-Qing fox-stories were largely based on the nine chapters about foxes of the *Taiping guangji*.

erary language (*wenyan*), they were not necessarily addressed to a limited audience; in fact, their simple classical Chinese, like that of the *zhiguai*, «with a limited vocabulary and regular sentence structure could, for someone with a rudimentary classical language education, be easier to read than the more verbose vernacular, with its wider range of vocabulary, sentence structure and colloquialisms» (Huntington 2003, p. 21).<sup>28</sup>

Feng Menglong, apart from being one of the most prolific authors at that time, of works in vernacular language, had wide literary interests; he was also an enthusiast compiler of collections of humorous anecdotes in literary language. In this respect, he composed three works: the *Xiaofu* 笑府 (Treasury of Laughs), the *Guang xiaofu* 廣笑府 (Expanded Treasury of Laughs) and the *Gujin tangai* 古今譚概 (Outline of conversations old and new).<sup>29</sup> The *Xiaofu* is perhaps the most famous of the three. It was probably compiled around 1610-1616 and it collected seven hundred anecdotes from previous Ming sources.<sup>30</sup> According to Zhou Zuoren 周作人 (1885-1967), the text «had the insight to restore jokes, long repudiated by Confucian scholarship, to their proper place as a valuable literary genre».<sup>31</sup> Whether or not he was moved also by the desire to make profit from this kind of book is still to be corroborated, to my knowledge, by the sources, but there is no reason to doubt it.

28 Wang Ping (2003, p. 35) lists four characteristics which define the typical reader of *xiaoshuo* during the Ming dynasty: he must be able to read this kind of text, he must afford to buy it, he must be interested in reading books and have the time to do it. According to Wang, the merchants at the time met all these requirements, and they were the leading readers of the *xiaoshuo*. For more insights about merchants and cultural circles see Brook 2002, in particular pp. 124-138. See also Hsu 2012, p. 255.

29 The *Gujin tangai* was later known as *Gujin xiao* 古今笑 (Laughs old and new) or *Gujin xiao shi* 古今笑史 (history of the laughs old and new). According to Li Yu 李漁 (1610-1680) the title was changed in *Gujin xiao*, to attract the attention of readers, i.e. for marketing purposes; cf. Chen 2002, p. 523. For more insights also cf. Zhao 1980, pp. 30-34.

30 The *Xiaofu* has a complicated textual history: lost in China, it was preserved in Japan, where it became very famous. For more information about Feng Menglong and, in particular, about this work, see Hsu 1998.

31 Quoted in Hung 1985, p. 28. Zhou Zuoren perhaps applied to Feng the literary aim which was actually his own. He was in fact one of the founders of the Chinese folk literature movement which tried to reevaluate several neglected literary typologies as folksongs, children's literature, legends, jokes, etc. As far as jokes are concerned, Zhou Zuoren compiled two major works on this topic: the *Kucha an xiaohua xuan* 苦茶庵笑話選 (A selection of jokes from the bitter tea studio) 1933 and the *Ming Qing xiaohua sizhong* 明清笑話四種 (Four types of Ming Qing jokes) 1958; The first collects jokes from Feng Menglong's *Xiaofu*, Chen Gaomo's 陳皋謨 (fl. 1718) *Xiaodao* 笑倒 (Falling over with laughter), Shi Chengjin's 石成金 (b. 1659) *Xiao de hao* 笑得好 (Have a good laugh). The *Ming Qing xiaohua sizhong* adds anecdotes from Zhao Nanxing's 趙南星 (1550-1627) *Xiaozan* 笑贊 (Appraisals of laughter), in addition to several stories from the three collections previously mentioned; for more information, cf. Chen Wenxin 2002, p. 518-519.

Amongst the authors of the numerous collections composed in this period, there were also renowned scholars associated with the Gong'an school, such as Jiang Yingke 江盈科 (1555-1605),<sup>32</sup> who wrote three collections: the *Tanyan* 談言 (Talks and words),<sup>33</sup> the *Xuetao xiaoshuo* 雪濤小說 (Xuetao's stories), and the *Xuetao xieshi* 雪濤諧史 (Humorous history of Xuetao). The first collects stories of the past, in which the protagonists were historical figures (like Northern Song Li Gou 李覲, or Tang dynasty Zhang Hu 張祜); the second reunites anecdotes with unnamed characters that represented a general type (as «a man of Chu», «a doctor», etc.); the last one, his most representative work (Zhu 2005, p. 304), collects stories Jiang saw and heard, and most of which are focused on the imperial examination system. Other collections composed by famous scholars are: Li Zhi's 李贄 (1527-1602) *Kaijuan yixiao* 開卷一笑 (Reading with Laughs);<sup>34</sup> Yu Lüxing's 郁履行 *Xuelang* 謔浪 (Unrestrained jokes); Xu Wei's 徐渭 (1521-1593) *Xieshi* 諧史 (History of Humor); Liu Yuanqing's 劉元卿 (1544-1609) *Yingxie lu* 應諧錄 (Account to attract humor); Zhao Nanxing's 趙南星 (1550-1627) *Xiaozan* 笑贊 (Appraisals of laughs)<sup>35</sup> and Zhong Xing's 鍾惺 (1574-1624) *Xiecong* 諧叢 (Collection of humor).

According to Lydia Chiang (2005, p. 14) a collection «is not an accidental assembly of items. The objects of the collection reflect the taste, values, knowledge, resources, and power of the collector» – and of his own time, I would add. Similar to *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* collections, jestbooks are expressions of the knowledge and taste of a given author in a given time and they deserve their own attention in Chinese Literary history.

32 According to Tina Lu (2010, p. 100) he was drawing his sources also from the *Taiping guangji*.

33 Ning (1996, p. 324) classifies it as a *paixie xiaoshuo* even if after two lines he defines the text as composed of humorous jest and jokes (*xiexue xiaohua* 諧謔笑話); Chen (2002, pp. 517-518) and Wang (1981, pp. 231-237), however, define these works as *xiaohua ji*. Up to now, there is no shared coherence among the literary classifications produced by modern literary historians.

34 Li's work is also known as *Shanzhong yixi hua* 山中一夕話 (One Night's Talk in the Mountain); for more information cf. Lee 2012. Maybe because the attribution to Li Zhi is disputed, Ning Jiayu fails to record this book in his *Zhongguo wenyao xiaoshuo congmu tiyao* 中國文言小說總目提要 (A general index of Chinese *xiaoshuo* written in literary language) 1996. For more information, also regarding another text attributed to Li Zhi, the *Sishu xiao* 四書笑 (Jokes on the four books), see Huang Ching-sheng's unpublished PhD thesis: *Jokes on the Four Books: Cultural Criticism in Early Modern China* 1998, in particular pp. 35-49.

35 Zhao Nanxing's collection is probably one of the most peculiar among Ming dynasty collections. It gathers stories from various sources and oral tradition, as other books do, but at the end of every anecdote a comment is attached, an appraisal (*zan*) in which the voice of Zhao appears to express a judgment, so that the anecdote becomes a tool to express his own opinion about different topics; cf. Chen 2002, pp. 519-521 and Ning 1996, p. 321.

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