WIT and humour are not usually set down as noticeably Chinese traits and yet the Chinese are very far from devoid of fun-producing words and actions. Much of their fun is of a strained and artificial sort, and often exhibits itself in what may be called horse-play. The rising generation of Chinese, where they have associated much with foreigners, are apt to mimic the jocularity of their alien neighbours, but often ad nauseam in effect rather than ludicrous.

During many years of travel in the interior, among all sorts of people, I have frequently noted instances of spontaneous wit and humour which have seemed peculiarly Chinese.

Like other nations, China has its stock of conundrums that are usually repeated at feasts to give zest to the occasion. It does not follow that any laughter will ensue upon the guessing of a riddle, but none the less it is accepted as funny, and set down in the category of hsiao-hua or “laugh-talk.” I remember one such riddle that is current in Shantung:—

“A bald-headed man fell down a well. There was no rope or ladder at hand. How did they get him out?” Of course they all give it up. (Ans.) “Pulled him out by the queue” (Retort) “But he was bald-headed and had no queue!” Riddle propounder replies, “That is where the joke comes in.” “Ominous silence ensued, when some one ventured to ejaculate “No mistake” (i.e., “True enough!”)

Chinese retorts are often tinged with sarcasm. I was once travelling by wheelbarrow—the double-handled sort with a man at each end—when the two barrowmen got into an argument about the distance to our destination. Wang insisted it was fifty li, but Han claimed it was only forty-five. After a heated debate Han admitted it might be more that forth-five li but certainly was less than fifty. Wang retorted, “All right; let us compromise on something over forty-nine li!”

Exaggeration is a favourite form of witty reply. On another journey the road was very rough and, according to custom, the front barrowman must warn the man in the rear of obstacles. “Stone on the right” was the warning, and was repeated in lieu of response from the rear. In spite of this warning the hinder man stumbled over the stone. “Why don’t you tell a fellow when you come to a stone?” exclaimed the victim in anger. “I did mention it seven-hundred and sixty-eight times. Why did you not listen?”
While on the barrow subject I may as well relate a little incident whose outcome caused my team such laughter that they had to set down their load till the fit was over. We had come to a high bank down which it was necessary to descend rather abruptly. After the usual reciprocal cautioning fore and aft they passed the brink and came down with a rush but without overturning the vehicle. Rear man exclaimed, “Descended first rate that time!” His fellow replied “When did we come down otherwise?” The great hilarity that ensued was doubtless due to the recollection of numerous occasions when the result was not so satisfactory to all concerned.

Perhaps the driest bit of humour was from an old Chinese who was once sitting on the sunny side of the street smoking when my carter stopped to water his mules. I had a Chinese teacher on the cart with me who dismounted to make some enquiry of the old man. “My venerable friend, how old are you?” He removed his pipe and arose, replying, “I am not old; a mere child; only eighty.” As this was said without a smile, my teacher asked, “Do you not consider eighty as an advanced age?” The old fellow responded “Not in these parts. Why there is an old codger in this village who claims to be one hundred and forty.”

This being received by us with some incredulity, the ancient villager went on. “You don’t believe it! Well!” After a few silent puffs at his pipe he resumed, “Did you never hear the advice to young men how to live to be two-hundred years old?”

“No, will the venerable gentleman please advise me?”


This solemn declaration nearly convulsed me, but my teacher never even smiled. He only nodded assent and observed “Not such bad advice after all!”