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What Do Jokes Reveal about Trust in Ming Work Relations?

Sarah Schneewind

Abstract This article looks at jokes in a collection dating to about 1610 from the perspective of occupational sociology of the Chicago school. Sociological concepts such as technique, object of technique, and guilty knowledge suggest aspects of the lives of ordinary people who are harder to find in the historical record than the educated elite. The jokes illuminate some of the tensions in the careers of metal-workers, vendors, carpenters, actors, transport workers, barbers, couriers, pawnbrokers, and gatekeepers to suggest further avenues for historical research. Trust emerges as a complex issue. The professional relations suggest a more plebian, but not simple, outlook on the fundamental Confucian value of “trustworthiness.”

Keywords Ming, daily life, work relations, humor, occupational sociology, trust, *xin* (信)

Introduction

A man with a stuffy nose, a blacksmith, a government runner, and a professional scapegoat are all sleeping on board a boat. In the middle of the night the man with the stuffy nose snores with a noise like a bellows fanning the flames. Startled awake, the blacksmith cries “Strike! Strike!” The runner [startled awake] thinks he is beating someone, and shouts, “Count [the strokes]!” The professional scapegoat urges, “If you could let me off even just one stroke, that would be great!”

Feng Menglong, *Treasury of Laughs*

Historians often lament the difficulty of studying ordinary people's daily lives.¹ In Ming times (1368-1644), however, some members of the literate elite recorded aspects of life that included the common people. One such source is Feng Menglong's 馮夢龍 (1574-1646) collection of jokes, *Xiao fu* 笑府 (Treasury of Laughs), published between 1610 and 1616, and translated by Pi-ching Hsu.² The jokes touch on every aspect of Ming life, relying on cultural stereotypes in a way that reveals both the best ideal of each social role and the worst failure to live up to that ideal.³ In addition to officials, military officers, students and scholars, physicians, and servants, the jokes mock “pharmacists, fortune-tellers, Buddhist monks, Taoist priests, merchants, servants, cooks, barbers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, silversmiths, matchmakers, brokers, prostitutes, actors, and functionaries” – and mocks them, Hsu says, “because they could not do what they were supposed to do right.”⁴ Historians Yang Xiaoyue 杨晓越 and Yu Xinzhong 余新忠 focus on quacks in the

¹ I would like to thank Xiaofei Kang for suggestions on first draft of this article, and the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments. Research and writing were supported in part by the Max Planck Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, Berlin.

² Feng Menglong, *Treasury of Laughs*, translated by Hsu Pi-ching as *Feng Menglong's Treasury of Laughs: A Seventeenth-Century Anthology of Traditional Chinese Humor*. Because this translation includes the full original text, I cite it for both the original and Hsu's translation. The jokes are hard to understand, so I am deeply grateful for Hsu's translation, but I sometimes diverge from it and offer my own instead. A wiki of the full text of the *Treasury of Laughs* is available at <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&res=318400&remap=gb>, accessed January 2021.

³ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 15, 26.

⁴ Hsu, “Feng Meng-lung's *Treasury of Laughs*,” 1056. Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 173.

collection.⁵ But beyond incompetence and immorality, as Hsu accurately writes, “The jokes reveal strains in all kinds of human relations.”⁶ A central source of strain is the problem of trust between the practitioner of an occupation and the client. The causes and expressions of the problem of trust in Ming work appear more clearly when we read the jokes within the framework provided by the sociology of occupations.

The sociology of occupations centers on what sociologist Everett C. Hughes dubbed “the social drama of work”: the complex human relations that swirl around the relations among practitioners of every occupation, their clients, their colleagues and co-workers, and their competitors. Occupational sociologists found through observation that one can “learn about doctors by studying plumbers; and about prostitutes by studying psychiatrists....”⁷ In other words, patterns in the social drama of work are shared across different occupations. Although primarily developed with reference to mid-twentieth century North America, the insights and concepts transfer to other place-times as a way of reading to generate hypotheses. The comprehensiveness of *Treasury of Laughs* and the foregrounding of strains in human relations make the jokes suitable for studying the social drama of work. Studying Ming professional tensions with the aid of concepts from the sociology of occupations is a form of the “middle-range level” of history advocated by historian Yang Nianqun 杨念群. Yang promotes aiming for an understanding more general than looking at individuals or particular groups in isolation, but less abstract than discourse about “modernization,” “revolution,” “upper class and lower class,” or “state and society” – abstractions that have erased, sometimes intentionally, how groups of non-elite people managed their lives and

⁵ Yang Xiaoyue and Yu Xinzhong, “Yisheng ye ‘fengkuang,’” 61-7.

⁶ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 24.

⁷ Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 88.

affected national events.⁸ In reading the jokes, I aim below the level of generalization that considers humor as a safety valve that preserves social norms or a subversive force that undermines the rituals that sustain society, yet above the level of considering just one line of work at a time.⁹

Professional tensions – difficult social and emotional relations – appear openly in some jokes, and obliquely in others. We can read the jokes for less-explicit aspects of the social drama of Ming work because, as Hsu points out, Feng Menglong as curator and author of the collection “makes the reader ‘live’ the lives of the fictional characters when s/he is trying to understand their emotions and mentality.”¹⁰ The scenes are so vivid that the historian can play them out, as historian Susan Mann did in *Talented Women of the Zhang Family* and as historian Natalie Zemon Davis did when she created the movie *The Return of Martin Guerre* before the book.¹¹ Take the three occupations in the epigraph (Joke 461). The man with a stuffy nose wakes up the blacksmith, who mistakes his snores for the sound of the bellows. The blacksmith must strike the iron when the fire has been blown up hot, so as not to waste fuel and the labor of the co-worker (probably an apprentice, child, or wife, working the bellows) and the senior blacksmith may call out to synchronize the strokes made by co-workers at the place he points to on the tool or weapon being forged. The government runner hears the blacksmith’s sleepy cry of “strike!” as an order and begins counting the strokes; when he beats someone in court he must count up to the full number of strokes as stipulated in Ming law. Hearing him count, the professional scapegoat, who has contracted to receive the blows for his client, immediately defaults, half-asleep, to pleading with the runner to cheat a bit on the

⁸ Yang Nianqun, “Middle-Range Theory and the Rise of the New Social History,” 124.

⁹ For these views of humor in Bakhtin and Mary Douglas, see Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 17-8.

¹⁰ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 12.

¹¹ Mann, “Scene-Setting,” 631-39. Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre*.

count.¹² Visualizing the work-scene of each character makes the joke clear, and draws attention to a point of professional technique of each occupation.

This article will first provide background on Feng Menglong and his *Treasury of Laughs*, and on trust in Ming thought. The article then springboards from a study in material culture by historian Bruce Rusk to considering the work of the silversmith in the jokes. The fourth and fifth sections address the tensions that arise from the clients' need to trust the expert and from the sociological category "mistakes at work." The last two sections use another such concept, "guilty knowledge," to examine other sources of tension in work and their relation to the issue of trust.

Background

Feng Menglong was a Suzhou gentryman whose works illumine Ming society well beyond the gentry. Feng widely collected, rewrote, and edited stories, plays, poems, jokes, and songs. He failed the civil service examinations repeatedly, entering the National University only at the age of 57.¹³ But that was long after he had published *Treasury of Laughs*. The *Treasury* is more than just another elite cultural product. As Hsu explains, Feng drew jokes from earlier collections and oral sources, bridged high and low culture and social strata, and included old jokes only if they were still funny. The

¹² Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, Joke 461, "Four People on Board a Boat" 四人乘船 (Si ren cheng chuan), 294. Hsu has misinterpreted the blacksmith's utterance as "Beat [back the fire]!" For the role of the yamen runner in beating people and the possibility that he might be open to "using his rod according to the amount of bribery," see Hsu, review of *Shan'ge, the "Mountain Songs": Love Songs in Ming China*, 469-73, 472.

¹³ Li, "Feng Meng-lung," 450-52.

Treasury of Laughs was a best-seller in its day and long after.¹⁴ Furthermore, to be funny, jokes must rely on common understandings.¹⁵ For all these reasons, the *Treasury of Laughs* reflects common modes of thought and feeling based on shared knowledge. That common knowledge may have been shared across China, but certainly by people of different social strata in the commercial heartland of Jiangnan, from lofty gentry to wealthy merchants to petty urbanites.¹⁶ Feng's jokes pillorize greed, lust, and hypocrisy among all levels of society.¹⁷ He categorized the jokes partly by failings like envy; partly by topics like sex; and partly by occupation. This article focuses on less-studied occupations like barbers, blacksmiths, and gatekeepers, whether found across the country or chiefly in wealthy Jiangnan.

In that commercialized milieu, the jokes display a keen awareness that across the whole division of labor, every member of society had to strive or plan make a living (*mou sheng* 謀生). The Chicago-school sociology of occupations defined an “occupation” as activities done regularly to try to make a living, not merely for pleasure. The skills and knowledge of each occupation are called “technique.” Because the sociologists aimed precisely to analyze all occupations on an equal footing, their concepts may help screen out the literati bias of written sources, illuminating dynamics shared by quite disparate lines of work. This article will draw on a few of the sociological concepts to read the jokes as expressions of particular strains and stresses in urbanized late-Ming Jiangnan. Trust

¹⁴ Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 7, 27, 144, 152.

¹⁵ Yang and Yu, “Unqualified Doctors,” 67: a joke that must be explained is no longer funny.

¹⁶ A reader pointed out that, given the amount of Suzhou dialect, the *Treasury* might have been read elsewhere – especially in undercommercialized places – as a portrait of a strange, even exotic, locale.

¹⁷ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 8.

between client and practitioner is a complex issue, and many of the strains in the *Treasury* revolve around trust, credibility, and credulity.

Trustworthiness

The Ming thinker Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602) – whom Hsu thinks the young Feng Menglong admired – in both his writings and his self-presentation highlighted, parodied, and lamented the condition of the time: that things and people were not what they seemed.¹⁸ Joke 252 mocks a rich man for paying a thousand gold pieces each for a lacquer bowl supposedly owned by the sage-king Shun and Confucius’s mat.¹⁹ But Ming also had professional fake people; that is, there were occupations that consisted in pretending to be someone else. The epigraph to this article introduced one such occupation: the professional scapegoat, or substitute sentence-server. Three such men are crammed into Joke 249. One criminal, having already been sentenced, pays a neighbor two-tenths of a tael to take his beating for him; the substitute uses the money to bribe the lictor to lighten the blows and then thanks the criminal for saving him from being beaten to death. Another criminal hires a substitute before the trial; when a death sentence is passed, the substitute comforts his family by saying that he has learned his lesson, and having lost his capital he won’t do it again. The third criminal also hires the substitute before the trial; puzzling over what “strangulation” is, the substitute wishes they’d get on with it so he can get back to transplanting his rice-seedlings.²⁰ The jokes mock

¹⁸ Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age*. Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 50.

¹⁹ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 183-84. When the monk chanting sutras on behalf of a client (thus fooling the universe into improving the client’s karma) in Joke 167 must take another’s beating, the intent may be to refer to these professional scapegoats (*Treasury*, 136-37).

the stupidity of the substitutes and moralize about the wickedness of the criminals, but also raise questions about justice and the perspicacity of judges who are unable to distinguish real from fake.

Another kind of fake person is the professional mourner. Joke 263 speaks of a professional funeral greeter (*peibin* 陪賓) who loses his hemp belt at cards (and wants to borrow his wife's footbindings as a replacement).²¹ Joke 42, about a student who worked as a funeral greeter, takes place in the examination hall. Hearing a clapper that announces another candidate's requesting a bathroom break, the student rushes out to meet the guest being announced by clapper, only to earn a beating for leaving his cell without permission.²² Further, Feng Menglong's note explains that twenty years earlier Suzhou families hired students to pretend to be kinfolk, filling out the numbers at a funeral.²³ As Hsu comments, "This joke reflects discrepancies between reality and name on several levels...."²⁴

Feng underlines the moral hazard of such fakery by ending his collection with a veritable grand finale of professional fakers. A gang of ruffians dresses up a beggar in fancy clothes, and tells him that he can keep the clothes as long as he says nothing to anything that happens but "There isn't much to be said" 卻不道怎的. Pretending to be servants, the ruffians precede the beggar to a silk brocade shop and announce that he, their master, wants to stock up on silks before travelling to

²¹ Ibid., 195.

²² Ibid., 64-5. The joke goes on that after taking his beating, the student/greeter "got up and instructed the flogger: 'Thanks for the hard work. You may go to the office of the funeral director 司喪 to collect your money.'" The funeral director must have been responsible for hiring both the greeter and the extra mourners, and the greeter kept track of the extra mourners at the event itself.

²³ For discussion of this comment see Hsu, "Feng Meng-lung's *Treasury of Laughs*," 1058.

²⁴ Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 189.

the capital. The shop-owner brings out bolt after bolt for the “servants” to display, each time asking hopefully, “Would the master approve of this?” The “master” says nothing but “There isn’t much to be said.” Finally, the “servants” propose taking the bolts to the boat, where the mistress will decide and take the silver out of her safe. The “master” utters his usual sentence, and stays behind. As time passes the shop-owner becomes suspicious, and asks questions to which he gets just the same repeated answer. Finally, the shop staff all shout that the “master” is a swindler. Ripping into his new clothes to reveal the cheap cotton wadding, they curse him as just an old beggar. He replies, “There isn’t much to be said.”²⁵

This joke is rife with people who are not what they seem. Beggars in Ming paintings and fiction are thin from poverty, and importune passersby and connections incessantly. This beggar is fat, and far from begging, he says only exactly what he is told to say, which is “I don’t want to say much.” He does not even beg for mercy when he is being stripped and cursed. The ruffians have even overdressed him for his part as a wealthy man; crowning his padded silk robe and glitzy shoes and stockings is a cloud-cap legally forbidden to commoners, as Hsu points out. For their part, the gang of ruffians are elegant and refined, gracefully displaying one bolt of silk after another as one would expect of shop clerks. But the shop-clerks, for their part, violently tear the beggar’s clothes, as one might expect of ruffians. Moreover, these professional sellers of silk have been unable to perceive that the beggar’s outfit is silk on the outside, but wadded with cheap cotton on the inside. Even if we set aside the entirely imaginary wealthy mistress waiting on the imaginary boat to open her imaginary safe full of imaginary silver to purchase the silkstuffs, this final joke is crammed full of practitioners of one occupation acting like practitioners of another occupation.

²⁵ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 353-54.

The knowledge that people were often not what they seemed raised for Ming people the problem of trust.²⁶ In Confucian philosophical discourse at the time, *xin* 信 often referred to, as historian Bruce Rusk puts it, “an absolute virtue of trustworthiness.”²⁷ Sincerity or trustworthiness (*xin*) that encompasses a person’s whole life appears in the Four Books, fundamental to Ming education. For instance, in *Analects* 1.6, Confucius says that a young man should be filial, respectful, diligent and *trustworthy*.²⁸ (I italicize the words used to translate *xin*.) *Analects* 2.22 speaks of trustworthiness as a quality without which a person cannot move forward at all. *Analects* 7.25 lists *xin* as one of four key things Confucius taught. Trustworthiness is often linked with friendship, as in 5.26 where Confucius lists as one of his three desires to *act in such a way as to earn the trust of*, and perhaps also to *trust*, his friends. Mencius, too, uses *xin* to describe a fundamental virtue. Asked why he called someone “a good man – a *true* man,” Mencius explained, “The desirable is goodness. Those who have it within themselves are called *true*.” This kind of *xin* is a first step in an intensification of goodness that culminates in sagehood.²⁹ He means doing what is right out of honest goodness, not under the pressure of others’ opinions. As Mencius explains, “One invariably *stands by* one’s word, but not just to have others regard one’s actions as ‘upright’.”³⁰ In another

²⁶ Trust and the work dilemmas around it were not unique to late Ming Jiangnan. See Hymes, “Truth, Falsity, and Pretense in Song China,” 1-26; for *xin* in particular, 4-6.

²⁷ Rusk, “Value and Validity: Seeing through Silver in Late Imperial China,” 471-74, 481.

²⁸ The *Analects* text was accessed at ctext.org in January 2021.

²⁹ *Mencius* “Jinxin” VIIIB25. D.C. Lau, transl., *Mencius*, 199. The *Mencius* text was accessed at ctext.org in January, 2021. I refer to Lau’s translation here for convenience, but do not follow his translation in all cases.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, “Jinxin” VIIIB33; Lau, 201.

passage, Mencius explains that good relations with the people, with one's superiors, and with one's parents, and winning *the trust* of one's friends are all part of the same package, and all are founded on sincerity, or as D.C. Lau translates it "being true to oneself."³¹ For Confucians, *xin* was a foundation for building character.

A good government will enable its subjects to cultivate their own *trustworthiness*, alongside other virtues.³² But *xin* in the Four Books also related more directly to state-society interactions. A state that does not *rely on* the benevolent and wise will be hollow (and by implication will fall).³³ As the ruler trusts the wise, so the people must *have confidence in* the ruler, and state institutions as a whole. In *Analects* 12.7 Confucius lists as the most important prop of government – more necessary than grain and weapons – that a state's subjects must *believe in* it. Mencius notes that the whole world *came to have confidence in* the Shang dynastic founder, King Tang.³⁴ A state would be lucky indeed to survive when "courtiers do not *have faith in* the Way and craftsmen do not *have faith in* measures."³⁵ Trust and trustworthiness in a Confucian sense transcends particular interactions and supports individual virtue, solid human relations, and the state.

In contrast to these weighty and political meanings, Bruce Rusk writes that in a Ming collection of anecdotes about conmen, *xin* mainly refers to trusting another person, or accepting a

³¹ Ibid., "Li Lou" IVA12; Lau, 123.

³² Ibid., "King Hui of Liang" IA5; Lau, 53.

³³ Ibid., "Jinxin" VIIB12; Lau, 196.

³⁴ Ibid., "King Hui of Liang" IB11; Lau, 69.

³⁵ Ibid., "Li Lou" IVA1; Lau, 118. 工不信度.

claim, as in Person X did not *xin* Person Y, or Person X did *xin* Person Y's lie.³⁶ Likewise, the verb *xin* appears in about fifteen of the *Treasury* jokes but never refers to Confucian foundational trustworthiness. In two cases, *xin* refers to "believing in" a whole system of thought: in Joke 148 it is geomancy, in Joke 165, Buddhism.³⁷ *Xin* most frequently means "believe a statement (often a lie) to be true," as in Jokes 84, 103, 120, 148, 160, 279, 349, 477, and 559.³⁸ In Jokes 402 and 413, about the characteristics of toes and penises, *xin* means something along the lines of "I have an idea of what this body part should be like, and this example falls short."³⁹ Such meanings align easily with those in *The Book of Swindles*.

In a few jokes, however, *xin* is more complicated. In Joke 68, a pirate has almost captured a student, who has taken shelter in a crevice. The student first claims to be a Neo-Confucian so that the pirate will not kill him, and then, claiming that he is too terrified to emerge while the pirate still holds his knife, asks the pirate to place it in his own mouth, blade inwards. "The pirate is taken in and does accordingly" 倭信為實然. The student emerges, folds his hands politely, and suddenly strikes the knife deep into the pirate's cheeks. Hsu's translation of *xin* captures the sense very well:

³⁶ Rusk, "Value and Validity," 480, speaking of Zhang Yingyu, *The Book of Swindles*. Both *Analects* and *Mencius* also use *xin* to just mean "really" or "accept as a fact."

³⁷ This sense approaches that of *Analects* 7.1, where Confucius describes himself as "believing in and loving the ancients." Likewise *Analects* 19.2: a man may "believe in the Way, but not wholeheartedly." A bit further away: accepting a maxim as providing proper guidance: *Mencius* "Wan Zhang" VA2, Lau, 139 "If one believes this saying, ...".

³⁸ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, 93, 103, 114, 128, 133, 203, 230-31, 302, 353-54.

³⁹ Ibid., "Virgin Concubine" 頭婚妾 (Tou hun qie), 257; "Seducing the Sister-in-Law" 偷阿姨 (Tou Ayi), 261.

the pirate not only believes that the student is terrified, but more broadly trusts him and acts on his request.⁴⁰ Joke 256c, in which a prostitute mistakes a firewood vendor for a lumber dealer, ends with a warning: in Hsu's translation, "So don't *count on* the man who promises to supply the lumber."⁴¹ Finally, Joke 258 riffs on three men in the *Mencius*. One of them refuses to bribe his way out of jail because, in Hsu's apt translation, he is "*confident in his filial piety*." Here *xin* means that he believes himself to be filial, he believes that the prosecutor knows he is filial, and he believes that the prosecutor will release him for that reason. These complicated meanings of *xin*, however, still do not align with Confucian discourse.

Setting aside Confucian trustworthiness, and moving beyond the word *xin*, the *Treasury of Laughs* raises questions of who should trust whom, and what kinds of claims can be believed. The many jokes that revolve around puns – one thing being taken for another – dramatize Ming worries about trust. The theme emerges more explicitly in jokes about tall tales. For instance, in Joke 349, a habitual teller of whoppers reports having seen a snake several hundred meters long. The incredulous audience argues him down step by step, until he is cowed into offering to take the square root of the last figure he mentioned.⁴² Two brothers in Joke 349a agree never to express

⁴⁰ Ibid., "A Pirate Folding His Hands" 倭子作揖 (Wozi zuojuan), 83. This is close to the sense of *Analects* 5.10 where Confucius says, "At first, my approach to others, having heard what they said, was to *take on trust* what they would do. Now, my approach to others is to listen to what they say but [for verification] watch what they do."

⁴¹ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, "Also [Whoring]" 又鬪 (You kan), 191.

⁴² Ibid., "Tall Tales" 說謊 (Shuo huang), 230.

surprise at one another's exaggerations, on pain of a fine of one tael of silver.⁴³ Worries about untrustworthy speech, like fake objects and fake people, were part of the shared world-view of Feng's audience.

Historian Ute Frevert has traced the burgeoning concept of social "trust" – as opposed to unconscious reliance on others and hopeful confidence in God, the weather, and other uncontrollable forces – to the commercialization of early modern Europe, when circumstances made the emotion of distrust much more common.⁴⁴ The same could well apply to early modern China, the commercialized Song and Ming eras. Rivi Handler-Spitz calls the late Ming an "unruly age" of counterfeits and deceptions, in which, as one Ming writer put it, "The people did not know whom to believe."⁴⁵ As Rusk sums up the message of *The Book of Swindles*, in the mobile and

⁴³ Ibid., "Also [Tall Tales]" 又說謊 (You shuo huang), 231.

⁴⁴ Ute Frevert, "Trust as Work," chapter 6 in *Work in a Modern Society*, 100-02. It may be true that "trust is part and parcel of each and every economic transaction and work process," but we must still – especially in an analysis that, like Frevert's, puts emotion front and center – distinguish different sources and kinds of distrust depending on the occupation and specify the institutionalized signs of distinction (the doctor's white coat, the contractor's tool-belt) that mediate between the individual and social levels. Trust between an individual client and a particular practitioner does not have to start from scratch, but builds on the established culture of the occupation, which has created out of the history of individual transactions the "formal and somewhat impersonal" facets of the "role" of the practitioner (Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 57).

⁴⁵ Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age*, 94. I do not argue that trust and the work dilemmas around it were unique to late Ming Jiangnan. See Hymes, "Truth, Falsity, and Pretense in Song China," 1-26; for *xin* in particular, 4-6.

commercialized Ming, where encountering strangers was routine, “Trust in others is, almost by definition, misplaced.”⁴⁶ Jokes from the period confirm Rusk’s and Handler-Spitz’s findings about rampant mistrust

The Silver Tael and the Silversmith

Trust is always a problem in explicitly financial relationships, but the chaotic Ming monetary system sharpened it. Paper money having failed early in Ming, copper was coined, but gold and silver were used as payment by weight.⁴⁷ Bruce Rusk has explicated the issues of trust that swirled around silver in the Ming economy. Voyager Gaspar da Cruz reported that in Canton nearly everyone carried their own scales for buying goods, so as not to be cheated.⁴⁸ Scales were also used to weigh silver. Silver chunks and chips were melted down and cast into ingots called “taels,” which the owner then chipped up again as needed.⁴⁹ One could alloy silver with cheaper metal, or fake it entirely with lead, saltpeter, and copper.⁵⁰ Ming law did not concern itself much with alloys of silver (except for tax

⁴⁶ Rusk, “Value and Validity,” 481.

⁴⁷ Rusk, “Value and Validity,” 480-81. See also Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age*, 91-95.

⁴⁸ Gaspar da Cruz, in C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century*, 129.

⁴⁹ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, Joke 531, “Wife’s Transformation into Silver” 妻化銀 (Qi hua yin), 341: when a woman turns into silver, her father warns her husband to be sure he alone chisels bits off of her.

⁵⁰ Rusk, “Value and Validity,” 472-73, 483-84ff. *Da Ming Lii*, Article 383 (p. 211) outlaws non-government casting of copper cash, “clipping or grinding” of cash to use the copper, and counterfeiting gold and silver. A set of family instructions forbids making a living by “counterfeiting cash and making false silver ingots” (Christine Moll-Murata, “Work Ethics and Work Valuations in a

silver), only with outright fakes.⁵¹ All this meant that physical money, rather than stabilizing work relations, itself contributed to anxiety.

Anxiety about the materiality of money, especially silver, naturally affected social interactions. Alloying silver was normal: Joke 219 portrays one gentryman as a fool for buying things with pure silver, and as a mark, conned by a friend who, having offered to change it to 80% or 90% pure alloy for him, flusters him with complicated fake math.⁵² Rusk says that the norm in the sixteenth century might have been around 50-60%, lower where silver was scarce.⁵³ Since alloys varied, confidence in a payment required figuring out the proffered silver's purity. In large transactions, one could assay a single tael to judge the purity of a whole batch, but that was hit or miss. Moreover, some silver was lost in every meltage; chemical assaying and purification required fuel, equipment, and specialized knowledge; and it was "socially awkward" for a merchant to demand to test a colleague's silver by melting or even by scarring it.⁵⁴ Instead, merchants and customers alike learned to recognize or test purity without chemical assays.⁵⁵ Rusk brilliantly

Period of Commercialization: Ming China, 1500-1644," 178. The source dates to 1721, not 1481 as Moll-Murata says.). Ming instructions on faking gold and identifying fake silver are discussed in Chen Kaijun, "Learning about Precious Goods," 315-18.

⁵¹ Ibid., 491.

⁵² Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, "80% Silver" 八成銀 (Bacheng yin), 166-67.

⁵³ Rusk, "Value and Validity," 473.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 484 for the quotation.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 474-76. For the ways to fake silver and recognize fake silver, 483-85, 492.

hypothesizes that the peculiar shape of the silver tael arose and prevailed precisely because it was visually testable.⁵⁶

By analyzing the shape of the tael, Rusk turned to a real trace of the Ming world, an object we can still see and even hold – to figure out “a nearly unrecoverable sociality,”⁵⁷ a realm of human interactions that occurred centuries ago. The material form of the tael certainly held a place in the Ming imagination. One anecdote personifies silver taels as children who run away to a new family.⁵⁸ But fiction often focusses not on the tael itself, but on the way that the “social awkwardness” between one merchant and another could be circumvented by the professional: the silversmith. As someone who is neither the buyer nor the seller, the professional silversmith could act as the objective, “detached observer” whom Rusk calls “the model for examining goods” and silver.⁵⁹ In one Ming story, a humble vendor is saving up.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 495. Rusk uses the verb “assay” to include visual examination without manipulation or chemistry, and the copy-editor permitted this usage, as does the *American Heritage Dictionary*. It seems to me more useful, however, to reserve “assay” for its more specific meanings of subjecting to chemical analysis or examining by experiment.

⁵⁷ Ibid., “Value and Validity,” 494. Cf. Christian de Pee, introduction, in *The Writing of Weddings in Middle-Period China: Text and Ritual Practice in the Eighth through Fourteenth Centuries* (2007), 1-20.

⁵⁸ The anecdote occurs both in Feng Menglong, “Shi Fu Meets a Friend at Tanque,” Story 18 in *Stories to Awaken the World*, translated by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 389-95; and in Ling Mengchu, *Slapping the Table in Amazement: A Ming Dynasty Story Collection*, translated by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 11-14.

⁵⁹ Rusk, “Value and Validity,” 494. Detachment is precisely a quality of the professional. Everett C. Hughes, “Professions,” 660.

“Every day he put by pieces of the finest silver worth three pennies [in bronze], or two pennies, or at least one penny. After he put by a certain amount, he would have the small pieces melted and made into a larger piece... He had no idea of the exact amount... He went to the silversmith shop across the way to use their scales.”

“Having weighed them, he thought, ‘While I’m in the silversmith’s shop, why don’t I have them made into nicer-looking ingots?’”

He paid the silversmith for this service.⁶⁰ The silversmith himself is a blank – a professional with a properly detached view of his object of technique, the silver. The silversmith – like the shape of the tael – may often have played this role, easing the strain in relations between others caused by the state’s failure to mint silver coins.

In *Treasury of Laughs*, however, the silversmith appears less blank. He speaks. The starting point for understanding an occupation is the scope of its activities: its “technique” (knowledge and skills) and “object of technique” (what those skills are exercised on).⁶¹ The technique and object of technique of the Ming silversmith meant that rather than merely resolving the awkwardness of transactions between merchants, he complicated the problem of trust, and not because he was dishonest. For the Ming silversmith not only handled people’s money (assaying, melting, alloying, and casting taels of silver), but also made jewelry and other items of gold, bronze, and silver. Three jokes show that the silversmith’s dual tasks, making both money and objects, created complex problems of trust.

⁶⁰ Feng Menglong, “The Oil-Peddler Wins the Queen of Flowers,” Story 3 (38-77) in Feng, *Stories to Awaken the World*, 56-7.

⁶¹ On technique and object of technique, see Everett C. Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 35.

In Joke 194, a smith is at work making a silver washbasin. An observer asks in surprise whether copper would not do just as well for such a prosaic purpose. The smith answers that copper has become more valuable than silver, because so many clients have ordered jewelry. Hsu explains that the implication is that the smith has been illicitly mixing copper into the gold that clients entrust to him to make jewelry, presumably pocketing the difference or the extra gold. The law of supply and demand, therefore, means that the silver has become less valuable than copper.⁶² I disagree with Hsu's interpretation here, because the smith explains so openly that copper can be mixed with gold. The reference may be to a different kind of cheating. Women's hair ornaments, earrings, etc., were normatively made of precious metals – gold and silver. But “gold” ornaments could be made of gold alloyed with copper, or even entirely of copper. In the joke, this drives the value of copper up above that of silver. The smith is not the cheater...

... the client is the cheater, as we see in Joke 307. The joke features two female relatives. A favors lavish show and B favors simplicity (or so she says). They are going out to a banquet together, and make a pact to both dress simply. But A shows up with a lot of gold and silver (yellow and white [metal] *huangbai* 黃白) hair ornaments, in violation of the pact. On inspecting them, however, B sees that they are not only borrowed from someone else, but are actually made out of copper rather than precious metal. B furiously rushes into the host's kitchen, emerging with a copper ladle on her head. When everyone asks why, she answers, “It's because the silversmith did not have time [to make the

⁶² Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Silversmith” 銀匠 (Yinjiang), 150-51; and Hsu's comment, 151.

Incidentally, by law all copper objects except legal weapons and musical instruments in religious institutions were supposed to be sold back to the government and were not permitted to be bought, sold, or collected at home (Jiang Yonglin, *The Great Ming Code*, Article 126, p. 91).

copper into jewelry].” This is a beautifully complicated joke that points up the silversmith’s honesty (in Joke 194) in the face of the rampant hypocrisy of his clients.

At the cost of revealing her own hypocrisy, B has brilliantly revealed the social cheating of A. On the one hand, B shows that she cares about people’s judging her by her appearance, whether that be wearing jewelry or ostentatiously not wearing jewelry. Putting a ladle on her head could be just a clownish way to poke fun at A, but the joke describes B as “terribly upset”(yun shen) 愠甚. Her inability to simply laugh it off undermines her own reputation for preferring simplicity. On the other hand, by seizing an item from the host’s kitchen, she points to the fact that A’s ornaments are not her own property, but borrowed. And because the ladle she puts on her head is copper, B further revenges herself by calling attention to the fact that the gold and silver hairpins and earrings that A is wearing on *her* head are fake: just copper. This is a complicated set of cheats. B fakes a fondness of simplicity yet really cares greatly about other people’s perceptions of herself, and expects them to rest on outward ornament. A pretended that she would go along with B, but instead shows off with ornaments. Further, she borrows ornaments yet allows people to think she owns them; and the borrowed ornaments yet further fake being gold and silver when they are actually copper. The joke shows that clients hired silversmiths not only to make or alloy silver, perhaps with the aim of defrauding others financially, as in Joke 219 above and Joke 194a below, but also specifically to make “fake” gold or silver jewelry out of copper, in order to create an illusion of greater wealth (and thus greater personal worth or beauty, greater value in the marriage market, or higher worth in the credit markets) than they possess.⁶³ The silversmith served his clients in good faith when he facilitated their cheating.

⁶³ Ibid., “Competitive Sisters-in-Law” 女眷好勝 (Nüjuan hao sheng), 219. Buying and wearing such fake jewelry might have been illegal; *Da Ming Lü*, Article 383 (p.211) sets the penalty for those who

Jokes 194 and 207 have shown that money, jewelry, and vessels were interchangeable. Perhaps because only copper was coined, and savings often took the form of women's jewelry and hair ornaments, Ming people had a keen awareness of the mutability of fine metal objects back into money metal.⁶⁴ The silversmith – his delicate crafting of beautiful jewelry erased – mediated the transformation. Whether they simply wanted to turn bits of silver into taels for convenience, or wanted to alloy their silver to meet local standards or cheat others, or wanted to cheat others less directly by mispresenting their holdings in jewelry – in all of these cases, clients had to trust the silversmith. Relying on common knowledge, lugging around their own scales, and reading guidebooks about testing could get them only so far. Clients needed the silversmith, and could not be sure that he would not skim off some of the metal they brought him to make their taels, jewelry,

know that gold and silver have been counterfeited but buy and use it anyway at 2.5 years of penal servitude after 90 strokes with the heavy stick, but probably what is meant is the use of fake bullion in business transactions.

⁶⁴ The law made this conversion explicit: goods made of gold or silver taken as a bribe, excess taxation, etc., if they cannot be recovered can be replaced with the metal itself when being returned to the owner; see Jiang Yonglin, trans., *The Great Ming Code: Da Ming Lij*, Article 23.4, 33-4. Ming court vessels of gold often had their weight recorded on them, showing that no matter how exquisite the artistry, the owners did not lose sight of their value as mere metal; see Craig Clunas and Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Ming: 50 Years that Changed China*, 90, 100. Shop-owners were advised to save up money by investing in jewelry and vessels to provide against emergencies; see Liu Chun 劉純, “Ten commandments for the physician, from the Orchid Chamber Collection” 蘭室集醫家十要 (Lanshiji yijia shiyao), in his *Complete Medical Works of Liu Chun* 劉純醫學全書 (Liu Chun yixue quanshu), 468-69. My translation of Liu's commandments is under consideration at another journal.

or vessels. Even as they asked him to help them cheat others, directly or indirectly, they had to – however anxiously – trust the silversmith.

The multi-faceted anxiety around cheating appears in Joke 194a. A client brings silver to a silversmith to adulterate for him for his daily use – in other words, he hires the smith to help him cheat others. But the resulting product feels too light, so he suspects the smith of stealing silver by adulterating the product too far. After a long argument, he demands that the smith reverse the process and give him back his original silver, but the smith laughs at him, saying “Maybe, if there had been even a whiff of real silver in it, I would be able to do that!”⁶⁵ The silver the client brought in, which others had given him as valuable, may already have been very impure or completely fake. Who is cheating whom? The smith knows, but the client cannot know. Not knowing, he must trust.⁶⁶

The Customer is Often Wrong

The reasons why the client cannot know are complex. Rusk notes that silversmiths and other professional assayers kept some of their knowledge hidden.⁶⁷ Nearly all occupations do this, not only

⁶⁵ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Also [Silversmith]” 又銀匠 (You yinjiang), 151.

⁶⁶ As Georg Simmel pointed out in a passage cited in part by Frevert, making a practical decision requires trust when the client knows *something*. The client who knew everything about the practitioner and her trade would not have to trust the practitioner; the client who knew nothing whatsoever about the practitioner or the trade would not even know to turn to the occupation to solve a problem. “What a jumble of knowing and ignorance there must be for the individual to make a practical decision based on trust!” Simmel exclaims (translation by Elizabeth Schneewind). Georg Simmel, *Soziologie*, 346-47.

⁶⁷ Rusk, “Value and Validity,” 487.

purposely to assure a monopoly on the technique that provides their livelihood, but simply because – although laymen may take a crack at the activities of professionals – it often takes a long time to learn how to do things really well. Almost by definition, laypeople misunderstand the expert’s work, knowing only that the expert can solve a particular problem. If, to alleviate their own anxiety, laypeople offer advice, they will probably just offend the practitioner.

Joke 193 illustrates how a specialist in one area is bound to misunderstand another.

A carpenter always hurts his hand whenever he pares boards with his hatchet. To protect his hand, he goes to a blacksmith’s shop and orders an iron hand cover. But the hand-cover makes it hard for him to grasp the wood, so he instructs the blacksmith: “Saw some grooves into the hand cover. After I put it on my hand, chisel it nice and smooth.”⁶⁸

The carpenter tells the blacksmith to apply woodworking techniques and tools, but iron cannot be sawed or chiseled. The reader can well imagine the blacksmith’s response: he will laugh at the client’s ignorance, or deeply resent that the client even thinks that he can make useful suggestions. The violation of the blacksmith’s professional pride is even more egregious given that this carpenter is a klutz even at his own occupation, or he would not have needed the hand-cover in the first place. The fact that laypeople do not understand the practitioner’s work well is both built into the division of labor, and a source of social drama.

In addition to the lay interference of the clumsy carpenter, *Treasury of Laughs* reveals the conflicts around clients interfering with practitioners’ judgement in a set of jokes mocking the folly

⁶⁸ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Carpenter” 木匠 (Mujiang), 150. Hsu comments that the grooves should be cut on the bottom, not the top of the hand-cover, but one cannot cut grooves in iron.

of stinginess. The woman in Joke 295 wants a chamber pot made not of wood but of pewter (tin with lead or other admixtures), so that it will last for generations, but each craftsman she approaches proposes to use what she considers too much tin. From the first proposal of five catties of tin she moves down bit by bit to a workman who says that three ounces will suffice – to make a little scoop for urine.⁶⁹ In the same vein, the tailor finally hired by a stingy customer makes one trouser instead of a pair; the carpenter required by his stingy customer to save wood makes a table with only two legs; and a painter commissioned by a stingy patron to paint him making love portrays, in black ink on cheap paper, the couple’s backsides.⁷⁰ The butts of the jokes are the penny-pinchers: these jokes occur with others about miserly folk, and the artisan gets the punchline (different in each joke). But they also draw attention to a work dilemma of craftsmen working in the free market. For the sake of reputation and pride the practitioner wants to produce the best object, but must also hustle for clients, and make ends meet. Customers who assert control over the material inputs make it difficult for the artisan to create the best object. In the jokes, pushed to absurd limits for the laugh, they make the artisans’ tasks impossible. But the daily struggle is real.

The struggle goes beyond money. The artisan’s technique includes the proper estimate of how much material is required for each task. By intervening in that, the client impinges on expertise and wounds the artisan’s ego. A worker on a fixed salary could simply say, “Fine, if you don’t like it,

⁶⁹ Ibid., “Pewter Chamber Pot” 錫馬桶 (Xi matong), 211.

⁷⁰ Ibid., Joke 288 “Trousers” 褲 (Ku); 289 “Table” 桌 (Zhuo); 290 “Picture of Merry-making” 行樂圖 (Xing le tu), 208-209.

you can lump it. Hire someone else.”⁷¹ Even though the workers in these four jokes are paid by the piece, they still stand up to client demands, whether because they know they cannot make a profit otherwise, out of pride and long-term investment in reputation, or because they have a sufficient number of more reasonable clients. The customer commissioning a pisspot, portrait, or pair of pants may be right in suspecting that the practitioner will overestimate the material needed and pocket the difference. Lacking expert knowledge, the client simply cannot know. For their part, practitioners have their own standards, which involve not just money but pride and pleasure in the work.

Pride and pleasure lead to resentment of any inexperienced advice, but clients’ interference is worse, precisely because resentment must be reined in. Sociologist and pianist Howard S. Becker, in his participant study of dance musicians, recorded their deep resentment of audience interference, such as requesting certain tunes. Bitter about their need to please the audience instead of playing the jazz style they themselves loved and considered their calling, the musicians said explicitly that almost *no* layperson could tell good music from bad, and they separated themselves from audiences – insisting where there was no stage on at least a row of chairs as a barrier, and refusing to make eye contact – lest they invite communication.⁷² In Joke 221b, a country bumpkin demands that the acting troupe his relative has hired add battle scenes to the romantic play “Story of a Lute” 琵琶記 (Pipa ji). When they do so at the behest of the host, the ignoramus triumphantly remarks, “This is more like it! I could have held my tongue, but they would have known then that I was not in the

⁷¹ Sociologist Eliot Freidson suggests four different reasons that a client may accept a professional’s advice, each with its own dynamic. Eliot Freidson, “The Impurity of Professional Authority,” chapter 3 in *Institutions and the Person: Essays Presented to Everett C. Hughes*, 31.

⁷² Becker, “The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience,” 136-44.

business.”⁷³ The butt of the joke is the country bumpkin, and one can imagine the chagrin of his in-law, the host. But with Becker’s work in mind, one can also imagine the hostility of the actors towards the audience member who ruined the artistic integrity of their opera. The bumpkin puts his finger on the crux of the matter: the actors indeed understand his suggestion as an assertion of professional knowledge. Even when they must swallow their pride to earn their pay, practitioners think clients should trust them to do what they have been hired for precisely because of their expertise, and resent interference.⁷⁴

How does the client feel about the knowledge gap? In Joke 467, a man calls in a vendor of sea lion, and asks for the price by weight. The vendor smilingly replies (笑曰 *xiao yue*) that sea lion is sold “by measure,” referring to a scoop called “a measure.” The customer shouts, “Of course I knew that! I was asking how much per foot!”⁷⁵ The customer is the butt of the joke: he has compounded his original error with a second error about the word “measure.” There is no reason the client should have known how the occupation defines amounts – sea lion is not a particularly common seafood – and the matter is completely unimportant, nor is the practitioner trying to make trouble (depending on how one understands his smile). Yet the client still feels embarrassed and

⁷³ *Zhi zhi wo bu zaihang le* 只知我不在行了. Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Also [Watching a Play]” 又看戲 (You kanxi), 170.

⁷⁴ Freidson, “The Impurity of Professional Authority,” 30-1.

⁷⁵ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Sea Lion” 海獅 (Haishi), 297-98, with Hsu’s incomplete clarification that the vendor means by measure rather than by weight. Sea lion is a kind of small conch called *luoshi* 螺獅. The customer’s second utterance may show that he is so flustered that he has lost all common sense, or that he thinks a sea lion is as large as a land lion.

indignant when the practitioner points out his ignorance. And knowing that their ignorance may be revealed, clients may be a bit nervous in any interaction with a practitioner.

Mistakes at Work

Compounding the knowledge gap is a second major source of tension, with worries for both practitioner and client: what sociologist Hughes called “mistakes at work.” Since errors and failures at work are always possible, the physical, financial, social, and psychological risks shape interactions and work culture. Making a mistake does not mean that a practitioner is not an expert, for although people gain expertise by doing things over and over, the more often in one day a practitioner performs a task, the higher the chance that it will go wrong sometimes. When hiring a practitioner, the client is outsourcing the psychological stress arising from the risk of mistakes, as well as the task itself.⁷⁶

The likelihood of errors means that technique includes managing them. In some jokes, the practitioner blames a mistake on the object of technique. In Joke 552, a pots-and-pans salesman is banging on a pot to demonstrate its toughness. He bangs too hard and breaks it, so he tells the customer, “See? This is the kind of pot I would not sell you!”⁷⁷ In Joke 184, a cook blames his lousy soup on the lousy stove of his employer.⁷⁸ This strategy will not work, however, when the client is the object of technique. This dual role is what makes Joke 187a cringingly funny. An incompetent barber, after nicking the client’s scalp several times in just a few minutes, gives up, saying, “Your

⁷⁶ Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 89-91.

⁷⁷ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Selling Pans” 賣鍋 (Mai guo), 350-51.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, “Chef” 廚子 (Chuzi), 145.

scalp is still too tender for shaving. Let's wait for it to toughen up.”⁷⁹ A pot is only a pot, and not yet purchased at that, but when the object of technique is something sacred to the client – such as his or her body – the blame game is lame.⁸⁰

When mistakes offend not merely against something sacred to the client, but against sacred tenets of society generally, the stakes rise again.

A new bride is half-way [to her marital home] when the bottom of the sedan-chair suddenly drops out. The chair-bearers confer with one another, saying that since a new bride may not travel on foot, they want to trade out chairs, but to return and come back [with another chair] would be even further. Hearing this, the bride says, “Well, but I have a plan.” Everyone joyously asks what the plan is. She replies, “You carry [the chair] itself on the outside; I will walk myself on the inside.”⁸¹

In Joke 367, the sedan-chair bearers have committed the mistake of keeping the chair in very poor repair. The distance involved in fetching a second chair would be considerable (and what would they do with her in the meantime?). When the bride says she has a solution, the bearers are relieved to the point of joy 喜, but the reader can imagine their professional humiliation when they hear her proposal: that she walk while they carry the chair surrounding her. The solution points up their failure to have any backup plan (carrying a basic kit of repair tools as bicyclists do nowadays, for instance), but it also reveals that she never really needed them in the first place.

⁷⁹ Ibid., “Also [Barber Shaving Head]” 又待詔剃頭 (You daizhao ti tou), 147.

⁸⁰ Sociology shows that practitioners deal with mistakes at work in at least six other ways. Hughes, “Mistakes at Work,” chapter 7 in *Men and Their Work*.

⁸¹ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Fallen Bottom of the Sedan Chair” 墜轎低 (Sui jiao di), 242.

The bride can walk perfectly well; the sedan-chair carriers are there only for ritual reasons. As the bearers say, in Hsu's translation, "The bride is not supposed to arrive at her new home on her own two feet."⁸² She will do so, presenting the bearers with the truth that they are there only to satisfy, and now must cheat, the client (the groom's family) in a ritual that must be carried out correctly lest society's norms falter. Furthermore, the bride was surely accompanied by someone (the joke refers to "everyone" *zhong* 眾 asking what her solution is) – at least by a bearer with her clothes, even if she brought no dowry.⁸³ At least one other person witnessed the bearers' humiliation, their professional and ritual failure, and the undermining of the social fiction they were tasked with upholding. Mistakes at work entail psychological risks for the practitioner.

Mistakes at work entail psychological risks for the client, too, and not only when something actually goes wrong. Tension ratchets up because the client, lacking specialized knowledge, must select the practitioner who commands that knowledge. It is hard to choose intelligently in a field one does not know well. Joke 193a makes this point explicitly.

A carpenter mistakenly installs a latch on the outside of the door instead of the inside of it. The owner of the property reviles him, calling him "a blind rascal." The

⁸² Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 242. Hsu, *Beyond Eroticism*, 207, explains with reference to this joke that the bride was not supposed to touch Earth or be seen by Heaven on her wedding day. So the bearers' initial proposed solution – that they go back for another chair, was no solution at all – they could hardly leave her by the side of the road without her being seen or touching the ground.

⁸³ Cheng, "Antiquity and Rusticity: Images of the Ordinary in the 'Farmers' Wedding' Painting." Accessed January 4, 2021 at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23496208>, 103. This painting presents a wedding with as few material accoutrements as possible in order to critique expensive weddings of the time, but even so, the bride is accompanied by a villager carrying her personal belongings.

carpenter retorts, “You are the one who is the blind rascal!” The owner says, “How am I blind?” “If you had good eyes,” replies the carpenter, “you wouldn’t have hired a carpenter like me, would you?”

Everyone who must hire an expert practitioner is in this situation to some degree. The house-owner could not have done the task himself, but at least he can see that it is badly done, no permanent damage has occurred, and he may be able to refuse to pay the carpenter right then and there. But in other cases, poor workmanship does permanent damage, or appears only much later. When permanent damage *might* occur, that fact add an emotional charge to the practitioner-client relationship from its very start – the hire – right through until after its end, even if the practitioner in fact does the job well. (When the practitioner succeeds, and avoids damaging the client or his goods, the client’s gratitude and confidence abound, giving him perhaps excessive confidence in that practitioner.)⁸⁴

What is a client to do? In selecting a practitioner, one guideline for the client is the presence of other clients. Too many, and the client will not get the attention he wants; too few, however, is also a bad sign. Joke 196 recounts how pleased a customer is to find a peaceful, quiet wineshop – but the owner ties him up to keep him there while he goes to borrow firewood.⁸⁵ What looked like peace was the doldrums of a failing business. Other such signs can also be misread. In Joke 124, the King of Hell sends his yamen runners up to the world of the living to find a good doctor. He instructs them to look for one whose clinic is not haunted by the ghosts of those who have died early. When they finally find a clinic with just one ghost hanging around, it turns out that the doctor

⁸⁴ Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 91-2.

⁸⁵ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Wine Shop” 酒店 (Jiu dian), 152.

had hung his shingle out just the day before.⁸⁶ To rely on other clients only pushes the problem back a step; they may also not be able to judge well. The knowledge gap, haunted by the risk of mistakes at work, inserts anxiety into the client's search for a practitioner.

Selecting a practitioner is hard, in part, because some are still learning. In Joke 291 we meet a novice pawnbroker (*dianpu* 典舖). Like the stingy clients above, he asks three advisors in turn what it takes to open a shop. The first tells him he will need capital of ten thousand taels of gold to open a large shop, and over a thousand for a smaller shop; the second says he could get by with a hundred taels in gold to offer petty loans. He is not satisfied until the third person tells him all he needs is a shop-counter and some paper tickets. When his first customer hands over an object to pawn, the novice pawnbroker gives him just a blank ticket. The customer demands his silver, but the pawnbroker says, "It is too much trouble weighing silver back and forth. When you come back to redeem your pledge, just pay me the interest then."⁸⁷ He has mistaken the outward trimmings of the business for the substance, or to put it in sociological terms, he has mistaken the "output" of the pawnbroking business, which includes his own profit, for its "purpose:" lending money.⁸⁸ The

⁸⁶ Ibid., "King Yama Searching for an Eminent Doctor" 冥王訪名醫 (Mingwang fang mingyi), 116.

⁸⁷ Ibid., "Opening a Pawnshop" 開典 (Kai dian), 209.

⁸⁸ Kriesberg, "Internal Differentiation and the Establishment of Organizations," chapter 11 in Becker, *Institutions and the Person*, 143. Any enterprise can be analyzed in this way. For instance, the purpose of an acting troupe is to provide entertainment, but its outputs include a livelihood for the actors and/or profit for their owners (Ming actors included slaves), status enhancement for the clients, professional pride, pleasure, and fulfillment for some actors, etc. Pawnshops of course also sold unredeemed pledges. In Joke 392, a henpecked husband pretends to have pawned his penis for one tael of silver. The wife, quickly handing over two taels, tells him to redeem it and if possible

novice has a lot to learn.⁸⁹ The client who mistakenly selected the novice pawnbroker has lost time and effort, but he can just go to another shop.

The novice pawnbroker has done no real harm. The apprentice barber, however, shaves real heads. As Hughes points out, “In occupations in which mistakes are fateful and in which repetition on living or valuable material is necessary to learn skills... there is a special set of problems of apprenticeship.”⁹⁰ Joke 187a tells of a sally (crybaby apprentice): every time his razor slips and nicks the customer’s scalp, he puts a finger over the wound to staunch it. When he runs out of fingers, he laments, “I didn’t know shaving heads was so difficult! It takes the Thousand-Armed Bodhisattva Guanyin to do the job!”⁹¹ The sally’s confession of incompetence shows he is not yet fully imbued with the culture of the occupation any more than he has mastered its technique. A client cannot be sure that a practitioner would admit it if the job were too hard – until it is too late.

Having selected the practitioner, the client must trust him or her to carry out the job correctly. Just one more barber joke will illustrate the general social anxiety around trusting experts.

trade up for a larger one that another customer has failed to redeem. Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Pawning the Penis” 當卵 (Dang luan), 253.

⁸⁹ His advisors omitted the most important part of pawnbrokers’ technique: the broad knowledge to assess the value of all kinds of goods, as shown in Joke 482. Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Poor Judge of Goods” 不識貨 (Bu shi huo), 305.

⁹⁰ Hughes, *Men and Their Work*, 90.

⁹¹ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Also (Barber Shaving Head)” 又待詔剃頭 (You daizhao ti tou), 147. The reference to Guanyin underlines that the hapless clients are monks (unlike in Qing times when all men had to have the front of their heads shaved). Aspects of the occupation apprentices must learn include what to conceal: in Joke 468, a butcher’s son lets slip that the shop sells (inferior) sow meat.

In Joke 187, a barber shaving a monk's head accidentally cuts off his ear with a single misplaced stroke. The monk hollers himself hoarse, while the barber picks up the ear, cradles it respectfully in both hands, and says, "Master, don't panic! Your ear is right here, completely intact!"⁹² Barber jokes, because they evoke a visceral response, well express the social unease of the necessarily ignorant client in selecting and trusting the knowledgeable practitioner even when danger to one's own body is not a risk.

The barber's socially-licensed knowledge of how to carry out such a risky activity as applying a sharp blade to the head and neck is the first, simplest kind of what in sociological terms is known as "guilty knowledge." "Guilty knowledge" as a sociological term does not mean "knowledge of a crime" or other things we use it for in ordinary speech. As a technical term, it covers a number of aspects of technique that society licenses an occupation's practitioners to possess, but that if held by a layperson would be grounds for suspicion – for regarding the knowledgeable layperson as "guilty."⁹³ The barber absolutely must have a sharp razor, and know how to wield it expertly. If someone outside the occupation – say, a pawnbroker – were so skilled with a razor, it would suggest that he was up to no good: people might wonder whose throats he had cut to raise his capital. The following sections introduce other kinds of guilty knowledge illustrated in *Treasury of Laughs*, suggesting that lowly Ming intermediaries of various kinds were prominent holders of guilty knowledge.

⁹² Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, "Barber Shaving Head" 待詔剃頭 (Daizhao ti tou), 146-47. A scene in *The Color Purple* and the plot of *Sweeney Todd* remind us of the anxiety behind the expression "a close shave."

⁹³ Everett C. Hughes, "The Study of Occupations," in *On Work, Race, and the Sociological Imagination*, 26-28.

“Guilty Knowledge” 1: Danger to Individuals and Families

In addition to socially-licensed technique that endangers bodies, guilty knowledge includes professional secrets. The hairdresser must know the true nature of a person’s hair in order to improve its appearance; the client trusts that the hairdresser will not gossip with others about how grey the hair would be in its natural state, for that would endanger his or her image. The lawyer nowadays must know about the murderer’s guilt to defend him, and the client must trust him with that knowledge; misusing it would endanger the client’s life. Intermediaries in Ming times, those who managed communications among others, were permitted by society to possess and use guilty knowledge they needed, in the form of professional secrets. One of the appurtenances of rank is that there are people between you and those who want to reach you, but that necessarily involves trusting those intermediaries and permitting them to hold sensitive knowledge.

Many scholars have discussed how menfolk viewed with suspicion the middle-aged (“old”) women (“three types of granny and six types of crone” *sangu liupo* 三姑六婆) who served as intermediaries between respectable younger women and the outside world.⁹⁴ Male suspicion is reflected in the fictional presentation of matchmakers as not only misleading clients but also undertaking for them the most scurrilous tasks, such as arranging seductions that verge on rape (as in “The Pearl-sewn Shirt”).⁹⁵ The underlying cause of suspicion, however, was not that real female

⁹⁴ Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies and Geishas of the Ming*, chapter 3; Bray, “The Inner Quarters: Oppression or Freedom?”

⁹⁵ Feng Menglong, “Jiang Xingge Reencounters his Pearl Shirt,” in *Stories Old and New*, translated by Shuhui Yang and Yunqin Yang, 28-31.

intermediaries were all villains: as Victoria Cass notes, “The beneficial grannies are lost to history.”⁹⁶ Nor was it merely that grannies were liminal figures, moving across boundaries and themselves (by virtue of their age) no longer quite female. Rather, as grannies moved in and out of households and through public spaces, their technique required that they hold guilty knowledge in the form of professional secrets.

To make marriages, for instance, clients had to trust matchmakers with intimate details about their family finances, the personal appearance, health, education, and talent of sons and daughters, their birth dates and times whether auspicious or not, and so on.⁹⁷ Matchmakers could misuse those secrets. But there was more to the problem of trust than that. In Joke 199a, a man fretting about his poverty (but not seeking a bride) is advised to entrust himself to a matchmaker, for “No matter how poor your family is, through the mouth of a matchmaker you will become rich!”⁹⁸ Clients had to rely on the matchmaker to present them in the very best light, while at the same time – even though this was contradictory – they wanted to trust that the matchmaker would tell them the truth about the *other* family. Sexism and patriarchy surely account for some distrust of matchmakers and other grannies, but clients distrusted male intermediaries, too.

Brokers are one example. In Joke 200, the Jade Emperor (Shangdi, or God-on-High) runs short of cash when remodeling his palace and decides to borrow it from the human emperor, pledging the palace of the Moon Goddess as security. The Jade Emperor sends the Kitchen God to

⁹⁶ Cass, *Dangerous Women*, 54. Likewise, Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, 143: grannies’ services were probably “much less seditious than the men liked to think;” women welcomed even news from outside.

⁹⁷ For the matchmaker’s technique, see Cass, *Dangerous Women*, 51.

⁹⁸ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Matchmaker” 媒人 (Meiren), 153.

the earthly imperial court to broker the transaction. The courtiers all express surprise at his black face, but the Kitchen God smilingly responds, “Where under Heaven could one find a broker who is white (i.e., honest)?”⁹⁹ The broker managing such a transaction must know the real financial standing of both parties, which is sensitive information. Like the matchmaker, he must know also how to assess and manage people, guilty knowledge that potentially endangers clients and others. Those are required skills that clients expect the broker and matchmaker to use on their behalf.

Although Joke 200 is about brokers, Feng Menglong himself extrapolates more broadly. He comments, “This joke may be adjusted to apply to matchmakers, doctors, and their ilk” 媒人醫人之類. What constituted “their ilk”? What was it that brokers, matchmakers, and doctors shared? Precisely that their technique included various sorts of guilty knowledge.

Far lowlier intermediaries also commanded such guilty knowledge. The most obvious management of communication among others appears in Ming China’s enormous transportation industry. Joke 209 mocks cowards afraid of one aspect or another of boat travel.¹⁰⁰ Lowly sedan-chair bearers and rowboat men necessarily saw the distress of travelers, but clients did not like them to notice that. In Joke 366 a wailing bride puts a sympathetic boatman in his place by saying, “Let the weeper weep and the rower row. Mind your own business!”¹⁰¹ Clients expected discretion. Joke 440 suggests that sedan-chair bearers took pride in their role in keeping up clients’ face: when a

⁹⁹ Ibid., “Broker” 中人 (Zhongren), 154. Hsu explains that “white” means “honest,” and that the Kitchen God, who reports on families to the heavenly court, is black with soot and notoriously bribable with sweets.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., “Cowardice” 性畏 (Xing wei), 160-61.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., “Row the Boat” 搖船 (Yao chuan), 241.

woman's big feet protrude from the chair, the bearer "feels ashamed for her and pleads with her to draw her feet in." She snaps, "If I were able to draw them in, would I need *your* advice?"¹⁰² Both the sad client and the big-footed client would prefer that the boatman and sedan-chair bearer not remind them that he is necessarily privy to their secrets. The need for discretion, and not just convenience, may be why some families kept their own sedan-chair bearers, as appears in Joke 365, when the carrying poles are out of sight behind a door in the bride's home (and her readiness to point them out between howls of supposed grief at leaving suggests her true sentiments).¹⁰³ Weaknesses, failings, and other kinds of embarrassing secrets comprised the guilty knowledge of lowly transport workers, which rendered them suspect in the eyes of clients who had no choice but to rely on and trust them. This was as true for male bearers and boatmen as for female matchmakers.

A weakness suffered even by some quite wealthy men in Ming times was illiteracy. It meant reliance on intermediaries, including some who do not appear explicitly in the *Treasury* – scribes, for instance – and others who do. An addendum to Joke 2 includes two stories about a real, and well-to-do, acquaintance of Feng's who could not read. Feng's point is the clever way the rich man covers up his illiteracy, but one of the anecdotes also reveals his reliance on the courier. When the rich man guesses wrong about the contents of the note just handed to him, the courier corrects him, stating the business of the note and enabling the rich man to make a snappy comeback.¹⁰⁴

Literate men also relied on couriers, as Joke 10 portrays. A National University student sees a phrase he does not understand, and misuses it in a letter to someone far away in a way that

¹⁰² Ibid., "Big Feet" 大脚 (Da jiao), 282.

¹⁰³ Ibid., "Finding the Carrying Poles of the Sedan-Chair" 覓轎扛 (Mi jiaokang), 241.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., "Borrowing an Ox" 借牛 (Jie niu), 39-40.

suggests that he is in mourning. He is quite proud of the letter, and when his servant, the courier, returns, he asks,

“What did the recipient say?” The servant reports: “The gentleman opened the letter in front of me and immediately asked if the old master was doing okay. I answered that he was fine. He then asked if the old lady was doing okay. I again said she was fine. He thought it over deeply, then wearing a smile he went inside for a bit to knock out a return letter, and sent me back, and that’s the story.” The student is greatly delighted and says with a sigh, “People can truly benefit from learning. Because I used that one word well, the sight of it profusely added to his good will.”¹⁰⁵

The student has not even read the response. The client (the student) relies on the courier to report the reception of the letter, including a long report of the whole conversation, just as the recipient trusted the courier to know and convey information about the health of the senior members of the family. The courier also observed and noted the demeanor of the recipient. It is that report that the student really wants from the courier, to feed his vanity. One can imagine many social and political cases in which an observant courier’s personal report would be valuable. But at the same time, trusting him with making and reporting such observations gives the courier potentially dangerous leverage over the client.

Guilty knowledge 2: Danger to Society

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., “Senior Affine in Mourning” 眷制生 (Juan zhisheng), 44-5.

By virtue of the tasks set him, the courier holds another kind of guilty knowledge: knowledge that endangers the myths that hold together the social fabric. Ming ideology taught that there were different sorts of people, not just through happenstance, but because of essential differences. The differences between debased people (including bondservants), respectable people, and educated gentry were embedded in legal penalties and privileges as well as in ideology.¹⁰⁶ The educated elite had a conceit that only they could judge character: as *Analects* 4.3 says, “It is only the benevolent man who can [accurately] like or dislike others.” When the student in Joke 10 relies on a debased person – a bondservant courier – to judge a literatus’s mien, that reveals the hollowness of this literati pretension. The hollowness of elite pretension to a monopoly on sound judgement resonates with the student’s ignorance of writing, which leads him to praise learning. In other words, the courier’s tasks dangerously force recognition of lies that undergirded Ming social hierarchy. When socially licensed for an occupation, such a threat to the myths of society – like that revealed by the bride whose sedan-chair broke – is another kind of guilty knowledge.

When the courier arrives at his destination, he faces the doorman: another low-ranking figure who manages communication. In a long addendum to Joke 503a, Feng Menglong tells of a gentry acquaintance who blamed his own private doorman for admitting a notorious gate-crasher. The next day, perhaps figuring that the doorman would be on high alert, the gate-crasher intruded again without giving the doorman a chance to stop or to announce him.¹⁰⁷ The doorman holds the delegated power of deciding whom to admit, whom to turn away, whom to keep waiting.

At one level, doormen, gatekeepers, and door guards had little power. One bitter utterance shows the inequity of their servitude: in Joke 18, an official gets drunk inside a felt tent, warming his

¹⁰⁶ Moll-Murata, “Work Ethics and Work Valuations,” 174-77.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., “Bursting into a Banquet Uninvited” 慣撞席 (Guan zhuang xi), 318-19.

rice wine on a hot stove; he complains about the heat, and the guardsman outside in the snow returns that he finds the weather “quite seasonable.”¹⁰⁸ Hsu’s comment on two jokes emphasizes the “vulnerability of government gatekeepers.”¹⁰⁹ Joke 112a puns on “gatekeeper” (*menzi* 門子) and “mosquito” (*wenzzi* 蚊子): mosquitos bite people, but gatekeepers “are bitten by people,” that is, they are at the mercy of others.¹¹⁰ *Menzi* also refers to an official’s catamite, as appears in Joke 112. An official on an inspection tour feels randy and demands sex from the government gatekeeper. The gatekeeper/catamite kneels before climbing into the bed, then gets out and kneels again to ask about the intended technique of sodomization.¹¹¹ The exploitation of a vulnerable, low-ranking person is indeed illustrated, but there is more to it than that. In response to the second question, the official asks the gatekeeper about local custom, and agrees to follow it.¹¹² As the low-ranking local such a visiting official would most frequently encounter as he went in and out of the yamen every day, the gatekeeper probably did serve as a local informant. The gatekeeper’s physical position and his knowledge conferred a certain amount of informal power, and both he and his superiors knew that they had to rely on his judgement before they could exercise theirs.

As well as outside in the local area, the gatekeeper’s knowledge extends to what happens inside. In Joke 8, a student passing the door of the National University hears that the chancellor is chastising two students who have enraged him. The joke does not specify *how* he “heard” 聞 this,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., “Taking Shelter from the Summer Heat” 避暑 (Bi shu), 49.

¹⁰⁹ Hsu, *Treasury of Laughs*, 109, note 20. Such gatekeepers were often corvée workers.

¹¹⁰ Feng, *Treasury of Laughs*, “Also [Gatekeeper]” 又門子 (You menzi), 109.

¹¹¹ Ibid., “Gatekeeper” 門子 (Menzi), 109.

¹¹² Ibid.

but the form of his first question to the gatekeeper suggests that he was the source: as if continuing a conversation, the inquirer says, “If that’s so then 然則, is it a fine? A beating? Confinement?” The gatekeeper replies that the students have to write an essay exam, arousing the busybody’s sympathy: “Yikes! No crime deserves that!”¹¹³ This gatekeeper knows what humiliating punishments are being meted out, and in this case he indiscreetly shares his knowledge.¹¹⁴ Doormen and gatekeepers had informal power based not only on their physical positioning between inside and outside, but also on the fact that they had to be trusted with the knowledge of who should and should not be admitted. And clients had to trust their discretion. Jokes 44 and 504a, both set in Hell, reminded Ming people of the awkward truth that those guarding their doors were as susceptible as their social betters to bribery and flattery. Selecting and managing one’s relations with so crucial a practitioner was nerve-racking. The client had to trust his own doorman, all the while remembering the doormen he himself had flattered and bribed so he could enter an important man’s home just that day....

Conclusion

Moll-Murata has suggested a number of ways historians can study workers in the long-ago Ming period.¹¹⁵ One elite-produced text that offers insights between the lines is the *Treasury of Laughs*. Its wide-ranging sources, broad popularity, and staying power suggest that its jokes reflect

¹¹³ Ibid., “Exam” 考 (Kao), 43-4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. In Joke 44, “Singing the Praises of a Fart” 頌屁 (Song pi), 66, both the King of Hell and his guard invite a smooth-tongued dead person to drink with them. The gatekeepers at even the lowest level of Hell could be bribed, according to Joke 504a, “Vegetarian Diet” 嚙素 (Chi su), 321.

¹¹⁵ Moll-Murata, “Work Ethics and Work Valuations,” 174-77.

understandings shared by many Ming people, not just the highly-educated social and political elite, and perhaps reaching beyond the highly-commercialized Jiangnan area in which Feng Menglong lived. That shared knowledge includes ideas and feelings about the social drama of work, which appear in the jokes' vividly-set micro-scenes of interactions among practitioners and clients in many walks of life. This article has hypothesized about the work relations of Ming silversmiths, carpenters, blacksmiths, chamber-pot makers, tailors, portrait-painters, actors, sea-lion vendors, vendors of pots and pans, sedan-chair bearers, pawnbrokers, barbers, loan-brokers, boatmen, couriers, and gatekeepers.

The gap between the real and the seeming, and widespread hypocrisy, were weighty matters of the political cosmos for Ming philosophers. Trust and mistrust were also important in the shared understanding of the less exalted. The many meanings of the word *xin* in the *Treasury* hint that even for ordinary folk in the commercial economy trust and mistrust were complex emotions, and were conceived that way. Reading the jokes with a few concepts from the sociology of occupations – technique and object of technique, mistakes at work, guilty knowledge – has illustrated the ramifications of trust and mistrust in work relations.

The knowledge gap that underlies the division of labor leads to a number of different kinds of tension between practitioners and their clients. One can easily see the requirement for trust and the likelihood of distrust around something as valuable as silver. But the problem of the knowledge gap goes beyond financial interactions. It involves the pride of the practitioner, too, who resents lay interference, even or especially from a client; the vanity of the client who wants to be seen as an insider even though, if he were, he would not have to hire the expert in the first place; and the anxiety of the client who must trust, and wishes to trust, the practitioner but also worries about misplacing that trust precisely because of his ignorance.

Historians studying work tend to focus on processes that go right. But everyone knows that things may go wrong, and the social and psychological risks entailed in that awareness add strain to the practitioner-client relationship even when the result of a particular interaction is flawless. Practitioners are socially licensed to hold guilty knowledge when they are trusted to carry out technique that may endanger bodies, when they must be trusted with personal or family secrets, when they must know how to judge and influence their clients and social superiors, and when they are entrusted with upholding the myths that justify social structures. One might expect to find that the occupations with guilty knowledge would be relatively high-ranking, for they hold power over their clients. But Hughes associated guilty knowledge with both the psychiatrist and the prostitute, and the *Treasury* introduces us to socially low-ranking occupations with guilty knowledge. The well-studied mistrust of grannies is only one special case in the social anxiety generated in Ming times by the need of higher-ranking people to rely on professionals to mediate their communication with others. Combining this rich primary source with insights from sociology has raised a number of proposals about Ming occupations that await confirmation or rejection by historical study of other sources.

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