Funny Mistakes

墨憨子曰：嘗聞詞隱先生論曲家之謬云：『有名周惟盛者，吳音盛與臘同，因呼為周惟臘，後又誤為周皮匠，未幾逕稱為周師父矣。』又有童子報新聞於主人曰：『頃過學院門，見一黑面秀才，倒步而入，背宗師而跪，宗師命扑其肚皮，是何為也？』主人疑而察之，則一士以反戴儒巾被責耳。事之可笑，多有若此，何必聚三十六州鐵，乃打成一錯乎？集謬誤部。

The Inky Simpleton Master reports that the playwright Shen Jing (1553–1610) once talked of the mistakes careless musicians could make, as follows: “There is a man named Zhou Weisheng who is mistaken to be Zhou Weizang because sheng and zang sound similar in the Suzhou dialect. From there he is further mistaken to be Zhou Pijiang (Tanner Zhou), and finally Zhou Shifu (Master Artisan Zhou).” Along the same lines of error, a page boy reported a news to his master, saying that he had just now passed by an academy and seen a black-faced student walking backward and kneeling down with his back to his teacher, who had him beaten on the stomach. The master became curious and did a little bit of investigation. He found out that it was simply a student receiving a beating on his buttocks for wearing his black Confucian hat backwards. There are so many ludicrous tales like these that we don’t need to melt all the iron of China’s thirty-six iron-producing sub-prefectures to cast one mistake. So I compile the section “Funny Mistakes.”

訟失牛

有訟失牛于官者，官問幾時失的，答以明日，吏不覺失笑。官怒，指吏曰：『是你偷在那裡？』吏乃灑兩袖曰：『憑老爺搜。』

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1 Shen Jing was Feng Menglong’s prosodic teacher and the head of the Wujiang school of Southern Drama, which emphasized metrical perfection, plain diction, and Confucian virtues of loyalty, filial piety, chastity, and righteousness. See Edmond Yee’s intellectual biography of Shen Jing in Nienhauser, ed., Indiana Companion, pp. 675–77.
A man goes to court and complains that his ox was missing. The judge asks him when his ox got lost and he answers, “Tomorrow.” Hearing this, the clerk cannot hold back his laughter, which enrages the judge, who points to him and reviles, “It must be you who stole the ox. Where are you hiding it?” The clerk opens his arms to let his sleeves hang loose, saying, “You are welcome, my lord, to search here to your heart’s content.”

A child is playing shuttlecock. Accidentally he kicks the shuttlecock down a well. Looking down the well, he sees his own reflection and cries, “Return the shuttlecock to me!” His father comes to investigate. The boy complains that the child in the well retains his shuttlecock. The father therefore goes over to the well. Looking down, he also sees his own reflection, and is agitated by that unreasonable father down there. “Your son wants to play the shuttlecock,” he protests, “and my son doesn’t?”

A man conducts a drinking game, where each participant has to come up with a phrase to match the one given by his predecessor. The phrase he gives is “The spring rain is like ointment (timely and fertilizing).” A man, mistaking “ointment (gao)” for “cake (gao)” (and totally ignoring logic), says, “The summer rain is like a steamed bun.” Another man, equally illogical, further mistakes “summer rain (xia yu)” for “King Yu of the Xia Dynasty (Xia Yu),” and says, “King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty is like a pagoda cookie.”