

Foreword

THERE—exactly as I had expected—in all its reality, was the book, *The Guideways of Mountains and Seas*; and before my eyes, I could actually see the beasts: the man-faced monster, Snake with Nine Faces. There too was Lord Zhang—One-footed Ox-monster—who looked like a sack. And then I saw Xing Tian—Creature of No Head—who used his nipples as his eyes and his navel as his mouth, and danced with his spear and his shield.¹

Lu Xun (1881–1936)

When Pu Songling died on February 25, 1715, in the seventy-first year of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the collection of tales he called *Strange Tales of the Make-Do Studio* was given over to his sons in a stack of one hundred and ten loose-leaf sheets, hand-written and unpublished.² Now, almost three centuries later, there are hundreds more versions of *Strange Tales* than there were of original pages: from the many editions in the nineteenth century, to the modern printings throughout Asia, and then the favorite tales recreated in varying media: plays and storyteller performance, films and their sequels, television shows and serials: as well as, finally, the approximately forty versions in translation. The one hundred and ten pages have replicated like a magic trick: the ghosts and shape-shifters, lovers and demons emerging confidently from those simple hand-written origins into the modern world. How could Pu Songling's life have prefigured this; constrained by poverty and modest in manner, he was a private, deeply ethical man of conservative accomplishments who was both dedicated to his family and decidedly provincial. But he did call himself "Historian of the Strange;" and perhaps in "the lantern-light that dims and wants to gutter"—as he described the setting of his work—he might have imagined the wild re-duplication of the creatures he concocted.

Certainly, he knew them well. They came from that small terrain that was his home, and Pu Songling was a man deeply tied to home. Indeed, his Pu-family compound in Zichuan, where he had grown up with his brothers and sisters, was painfully dear to him. It was a great grief to him when the three siblings were forced—by family strife—to divide the property and live apart. But "the gossip and blame, chatter and arguments" of the

1 Lu Xun, "Ah Chang yu *Shan hai jing*" (Ah Chang and the *Guideways of Mountains and Seas*), *Lu Xun Sanshinian ji*, Hong Kong: Xinyi chubanshe, 1968. p. 368–370.

2 Allan Barr, "The Textual Transmission of *Liaozhai zhiyi*," *HJAS* vol. 44, No. 2 (Dec., 1984). p. 520

sisters-in law against Pu's wife could not be quieted. His father divided the compound and split up the fields, buildings and furnishings, "setting aside the broken bits" as they argued possession. "My wife stood by in silence," Pu Songling recalled, "disconsolate and resigned, as it was all divided up."³ And his new home, small, broken down, barely adequate for his wife Liu, and his son Pu Ro—and later his three children—remained his home until his death in 1715, over fifty years later.

But the town he barely left, as well as the countryside around, provided a Daoist Gourd of magical encounters. The farm fields and roadways, market towns and villages, all supplied the characters for his miniature dramas.⁴ Wives and mothers, fathers and siblings in scenes of domestic life are the heroes close at hand for many of his stories. His portraits are intimate: "When I was a little boy I went one day to the prefectural city," he recalls. "It was the time of the Spring Festival," and there at the Spring Performance, "I saw a magician traveling with his own small boy."⁵ Pu Songling gathers anecdotes from friends as well: and from friends of friends. Stories are personally relayed to him by word of mouth. "Han Gongfu of Yucheng, told me that he was one day traveling..."⁶ His Strange Tales are local in source, coming to him from a web of voices around him.

Greatest of all the local mysteries were the fox shape-shifters, an extended tribe of mischief-makers, enigmatic neighbors of human kind. They were a known phenomenon of Pu Songling's home province; "Shandong proliferates in foxes," said one intellectual.⁷ They could be persistent and troublesome: alternately human or fox, they borrowed and stole, seduced and confused, and were not always easy to detect within your own compound, although a bushy tail beneath a cloak was a give-away. Householders were often bothered by the fox. "His family was under fox influence," Pu Songling noted blandly, "Many strange things having happened before."⁸ But a fox is a moral shape-shifter as well. Foxes could be helpful; one fox wife of a

3 Pu Songling, "Shu Liu Shi xingshi" (On the Events in the Life of Madame Liu), <http://blog.sina.com.cn/zyc666>

4 For a discussions of the Shandong landscape and historical events of Pu Songling's time, see Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang*, New York: Viking, 1978; and Chang Chun-shu and Chang Hsueh-lun, *Redefining History: Ghosts, Spirits, and Human Society in P'u Sung-ling's World, 1640–1715*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998, pp. 52–62

5 Pu Songling, "Tou tao," *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, pp. 32–34. Also: "Theft of the Peach," in Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, translated by Herbert A. Giles, North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2010, 104.

6 "A Strange Companion," Giles, *Strange Tales*. 87.

7 Victoria Cass, *Dangerous Women, Warriors, Grannies and Geishas of the Ming*, Lanham Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999, p. 93: citing Lang Ying, *Qixiu leigao*, Beijing 1961, p. 705.

8 "A Strange Companion," Giles, *Strange Tales*, 87.

human “knew when harvests would be good or bad.” And one fox tutor was a dedicated teacher, though he went out every night and came back without using the door. Danger is always possible: but so are help and fortune. Too amiably human, the fox evades easy censure.

According to some critics these protean creatures usefully symbolize human ambivalence. They epitomize alien emotions and conflicting values—obsession and compulsion, fear and dread—echoing mythic constructs of the conflicted self.⁹ Pu Songling does make sly references to the ambivalent nature of human response: “We don’t like his kind!” says one father of an impertinent fox who asks to marry his daughter.¹⁰ But exactly what “kind” they were—human or demonic, beneficent or harmful—left room for much ambiguity. Like the foxes themselves, Pu Songling evades easy interpretation. His attitude suggests the witty reply Charles Dickens gave when characterizing his own ghost stories: “My own mind is perfectly unprejudiced and impressible on the subject of ghosts—I do not in the least pretend that such things cannot be.”

Pu Songling, however, was not always the charmed observer. Many of his accounts are informed by a dark imagination and a knowledge that was darker still. A fox-demon was one type of strangeness, but stranger still was the savagery of the powerful. Pu Songling witnessed astonishing cruelties. He was born in 1640, four years before the conquest of China by the Manchu, and lived in the period of Manchu stabilization, a time referred to as “The Troubles,”¹¹ when Shandong was ravaged by battles between the Manchu overlords and local loyalists. Pu Songling wrote boldly of this madness. He named names; and many of these stories were excised from editions. “In 1674, during the time of the Rebellion against the Manchu, the Qing forces were on a punitive expedition to the South when they swept into the town, destroying everything. . . . At that time it was the rainy season and the fields were flooded and had become lakes. The people had no place

9 For multiple and fascinating discussions of fox shape shifters, especially female foxes, see especially: Allan Barr, “Disarming Intruders: Alien Women in *Liaozhai zhiyi*,” *HJAS*, 49.2 (Dec. 1989): 501–517. Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983. Li Wai-ye, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Luo Hui, “The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling’s Ghostlore and its History of Reception,” Ph D thesis, University of Toronto, 2009. (Luo Hui provides a treatment as well of the film versions that are based on the stories). And Rania Hunington *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*, Cambridge, MA the Harvard University Asian Center 2003. For a brief, but pithy overview see John Minford’s introduction to his translation: Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* tr. John Minford. London: Penguin, 2006.

10 “The Fight with the Foxes,” Giles, *Strange Tales*. 35.

11 Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* tr. John Minford. London: Penguin, 2006, p. xvi.

to hide so they made off on rafts into the growths of sorghum. The soldiers realized this and stripped off their clothes and rode out on horseback into the water. They chased the women down and raped them.”

More familiar cruelties appalled him too: corrupt officials revolted him. He called these grandees “wolves” and allowed himself a corrosive disdain. “When I see officials behave thus, my sense of deep disgust seeps like damp into the very marrow of my bones.”¹² His contempt could have as well a personal bite to it. Pu Songling’s own life was scarred by failure. His fourteen attempts—lasting over forty-six years—to pass the second level of the civil service exams was deeply humiliating to him, a humiliation he described as “the seven transformations of a candidate.” “When he first arrives in the examination hall, he drags himself along exhausted under his load of bags; at that stage he is a beggar.” In successive stages he is a “prisoner, an insect larva, a sick bird, or a monkey on a leash.”¹³

This writer, so easily charmed by cleverness, so tolerant and catholic in his views of folk life, finds a voice that is, by contrast, redolent with an intense and inward fury. Nor is this voice a casual experiment; it is his own self-declared *métier*. In his eloquent preface to *Strange Tales* he pretends to an inheritance: the grim perspective of earlier morose solitaries. “Madly I continue my own *Accounts of the Netherworld*,” he professes, claiming the same bleak landscape that they faced: “The wind sighs coldly outside and the chill on the table is like ice.” He summons up the executed minister Han Fei who wrote his own grim assessments in a state of fury: “Drinking my wine and taking up my brush, I push on to complete these writings of ‘Solitary Rage.’”¹⁴ This “solitary rage” is not, for Pu Songling, a writer’s pose; it is, in many of his stories, his vision.

One of the great men of letters Wang Shizhen, (1634–1711), in between his duties as President of the Censorate and Director of the Board of Punishments, read the loose sheets of the manuscript, *Strange Tales of the Make-do Studio*, and was delighted with it. He wrote a poem for Pu Songling, expressing his respect.

12 “Mad Priest,” Giles, *Strange Tales*, CXXXVI, comments by “Historian of the Strange” are in “Dian daoren,” Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, p. 961.

13 Pu Songling, “Author’s Preface,” *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, p. 3.

14 Pu Songling, “Wang Zi’an,” *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, p. 1238–1248.

Bean arbor, gourd trellis, silken rain.
 Idle words, idly spoken, idly heard—
 Like Su the Poet and Teller of Tales,
 Of whom we are both so fond!
 The world's debates disdained;
 We loved to hear the songs of ghosts,
 Issuing from the graves of autumn.¹⁵

Wang Shizhen admires the manuscript for what he knows it is: a masterpiece by a refined classicist. Pu Songling is a worthy descendent, says Wang, of the great essayist, poet and official-scholar, Su Dongpo; Wang is not alone in this assessment. The list of learned readers who championed this work is impressive. From its earliest appearance in manuscript through its publication in the late Qing, the literati praised this book as another fine example of classical tales, finding in it a blending of the two well know genres: tales of the anomalous (*zhiguai*) and accounts of the strange (*chuanqi*). Clearly, their expectations were not to hear the voice of the folk artist, nor the impassioned narrator of the horrific, but were to acquire an additional dose of the unexplained, in the manner of long established genres. Pu Songling was not unclear in this regard; his voice was tuned pitch perfect to the tastes of the literati. Thus he called himself by a sobriquet instantly evocative of classical predecessors. In his comments that follow his stories he calls himself: “Historian of the Strange.”

If his stories reflected the tastes of polite society, this is not surprising. Pu Songling was a literatus steeped in elite traditions. Pu was erudite, educated in the Confucian classics, as were his sons and grandsons. Failing to achieve civil service rank, he became alternately a private secretary and private tutor. These were modest forms of employment, of ambiguous social status; yet his life as minor literatus was rich in intelligent companionship. He worked as tutor for thirty-six years for Bi Jiyou. As patriarch in one of the most important families in Shandong, Bi had a grand estate with a famous library; and both he and his wife were early and loyal enthusiasts of *Strange Tales*. Pu Songling's personal friends were literati; they were writers as well as officials. Gao Heng (1612–1697) served in Beijing in the Imperial Academy and in the Bureau of Punishments and was a companion and enthusiast of *Strange Tales*. Pu Songling, like all literati of standard

15 Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, John Minford trans., London: Penguin, 2006, p. 462.

experience, belonged to a literary society, the Poetry Society of Ancient Chu. Pu Songling was also prolific. He did write about vernacular concerns, but he wrote or compiled extensively on recondite matters in educated language. He wrote six volumes of classical poetry, and tens of volumes on miscellaneous matters for the governing class, such as *The Handbook for Scholars on Essentials of Daily Life and Intellectual Activities*. Finally, as a teacher, he produced texts. The grandsons of Bi Jiyou used his *Essentials of Elementary Learning and Selections from the Zhuang Zi and Lie Zi*, written specifically for them.¹⁶ He was an intellectual.

Not surprisingly, his stories, for all their off hand charm, are exemplars: crisp, elegant, rich in vocabulary, allusive, classical. His style is brilliant. A genius with voice and pace, he draws the reader into a fantasy-construct with the mild, disarming perspective of the innocent provincial, a persona without coyness or ironic distance. Then come the shifts: the small changes in voice—from farmer to fox, back to farmer—creating miniscule, but essential, displacements. These are not so much disorientations, as serial re-orientations, that slip the reader into an exotic world of the other, to see through their eyes. Pace figures in as well. The extreme economy of the narration, reinforced by the classical density, keeps the tale clipped. Sweeping along with rapid shifts in perspective, the tale is finished in one sitting, ending before you can reason your way back to a proper disbelief, leaving you with a kind of useful knowledge, albeit of short duration, that you have been, and can be, taken off guard again. The brilliance of his style was no secret. He was known as the master of the light touch. Feng Zhenluan, writing in 1818, praised his polished subtlety: “the whole story is like that” he said, “fragmentary, inconclusive, loose, delicate, exquisite.”¹⁷

Of course, he is writing in a medium with well-known classical models, yet his tales of the strange are not slavish copies. Indeed, Pu Songling knew the rules and he broke them. He was a fearless writer, manipulating the boundaries of the genre in ways that might be called experimental. He employed highly self-aware techniques of the meta-novel, bending the genre. One scholar notes that in his stories there is a “continual blurring of literal and figurative truth.”¹⁸ His characters step in and out of fictional constructs. The “author,” his friends, his fictional characters, the subjects of paintings, people from dream sequences, and the strange beings of magic,

16 Chang Chun-shu and Chang Hsueh-lun, *Redefining History: Ghosts, Spirits, and Human Society in Pu Sung-ling's World, 1640–1715*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998, pp. 52–62

17 Minford, 542.

18 Zeitlin p. 166.

all exchange positions. In “The Fox Dream” Pu Songling creates a story with Bi Yi’an as protagonist, claiming Bi is a real person, the nephew of his employer. This already ambiguous character in his own strange tale falls in love with one of the fox women of an earlier story in the collection. The tale becomes “a tangle of connections,” with “layers of dream . . . (that) seem to be continually erasing themselves,”¹⁹ all related in elegant, classical rhetoric. This is a writer of immense sophistication.

Literati tastes were highly accommodating to this “tangle of connections.” Reality-shifts, unexpected shocks, ironic knowledge and enlightenment: all these were the common coin of the day. In the Late Ming (1368–1644) and Early Qing educated men and women commonly voiced a revulsion for rational perceptions and praised the eccentric, the wild and the mad; poets and essayists loved the spirit of “Crazy Zen,” as it was termed. The wonder tale was similarly the right medium for this koan perspective; the inverted worlds of magic were the madness cure, the absurdity cure, designed to eliminate bad habits such as thinking. Pu Songling’s tales, with their changing identities and shifting realities, their sudden revelations of worlds within worlds, their dream sequences that reveal higher realities, and the layering of truths within truths, were well attuned to this inside-out logic. They were deemed useful to rout the horror of a life poisoned in small degrees. Pu Songling clearly knew this. Of his own stories, he said, “Foolishness is my core nature,” and, “My madness is solid—impossible to refuse!”²⁰ One of his poems reads like a small manifesto for the strange tale that is laced with Zen. In his “Spring in the Rain Soaked Garden” he says that his “wild talk of ancient ghosts” recreates the Zen enigma.

I study the way of Su Dongpo to stir away melancholy
 With my wild talk of ancient ghosts.
 The Master of Clarity takes his seat,
 Shunning fine phrases he renews the way of Zen.²¹

For all the talk of Zen, however, Pu Songling’s tales are, at heart, ghost stories; but they are ghost stories with a twist. As Henri Maspero pointed out, the word ghost (*gui*) suggests the word return (also *gui*), for the ghost is the creature who, despite the rupture of death, unnaturally returns to

19 Zeitlin p. 176.

20 Pu Songling, “Author’s Preface,” *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, p. 3.

21 Luo Hui, p. 71, but with my own translation.

the living, refusing release from the vestiges of earlier lives. A gui-ghost is literally a “revenant.” Pu Songling’s tales are indeed tales of the malign revenant, not of ghosts, but of deceptive truths and soured mentalities, of shallow visions that seal the self in narrow borders. The tales banish what Pu Songling’s friend Gao Heng referred to as, “men whose eyes are as tiny as peas,” and “who get lost in the forest when they see a single leaf.”²²

Zen tales of shifting visions clearly exercise the lazy self. A Daoist monk provides a hiding place for two lovers. They suddenly shrink and hide up inside his copious sleeve. They, of course, write poems to each other, and when the Daoist examines his robe, he finds their poems written on the silk in “lines of words as tiny as lice.”²³ Inside-out, microcosm macrocosm: his *Strange Tales* press us to change our vision of reality. They also fuse grand spiritual visions with small emotional accommodations, as the intimate seems to matter as much as the philosophical. One man becomes deeply obsessed with a painting, and then becomes the painting: obsessions create deep empathy, a movement of the spirit beyond the self, for as the poet Howard Nemerov noted, “What you look at hard looks back at you.” Even Pu Songling’s state of “solitary rage” is shifted. In “The Three States of Existence”²⁴ the Jade God, Lord of the Underworld, master of all punishments allotted in Hell, is scandalized by the loathing an examination candidate feels for the examiner who failed him. “When will ye have done with your wrongs and animosities?” asks the appalled god. With clearly a nod to his own fury at failing the exams, Pu Songling mocks the rage that survives three cycles of rebirth; and then, as storyteller, he calmly resolves it. Indeed, the small resolutions—among women and men, among siblings, and among generations—are as weighty, and as pleasurable to exorcise, as any Zen leap into another consciousness. Whether human scaled or grandiose, an amplitude of spirit informs the tales. The one punishable offense is rigidity.

Pu Songling began working on the *Strange Tales of the Make-do Studio* in about 1671 shortly after his third failure at stage two of the examination. He then spent the next thirty-five years gathering, writing, editing, polishing, rewriting and re-polishing the remaining tales: five hundred in all.²⁵ Though it was not published in his lifetime, it was a success in 1766

22 Zeitlin, p. 23.

23 Pu Songling, “Gong xian,” *Liaozhai zhiyi*, Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978, p. 895–901. Zeitlin discusses pp 197.

24 “The Three States of Existence,” Giles, *Strange Tales*, 75.

25 The number in the collection is unstable: Chang and Chang state that the most comprehensive

when his grandson—with financial help—had the blocks cut in order to print the sheets that had been preserved for over fifty years.

It seems a harsh existence that Pu Songling led with his fourteen attempts at the Examinations, stopping only after his mother died when, at his wife's urging, he set aside that hard ambition. Yet his decades as schoolmaster cannot have been wasted; and it is impossible not to feel grateful for his forty-six years as classicist and instructor. Perhaps his life in classrooms, though a fall back position for failed candidates, was in his mind when he wrote the tales. Like the textbooks he prepared, the *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is another primer of sorts, one donated to generations unknown to him: a meticulously shaped, classically elegant, exercise book in spiritual agility, composed in the spirit of his earlier primer, *The Essentials of Elementary Learning*, that he had written for the grandsons of Bi Jiyou.

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Excerpt from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*
By Pu Songling
Tuttle Publishing
www.tuttlepublishing.com

version has five hundred, although more commonly used editions have 431. See Chang Chun-shu and Chang Hsueh-lun, *Redefining History: Ghosts, Spirits, and Human Society in P'u Sung-ling's World, 1640–1715*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1998, p 2, p. 44, p. 61. See Chang and Chang as well for an excellent history of his career during this period. For discussion of the history of the publication see also, Allan Barr, "The Textual Transmission of Liaozhai zhiyi," HJAS vol 44, No. 2 (Dec., 1984), p. 530–34.