

# *The Horror Writing of Strange Tales from Liaozhai*

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**Abstract:** *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* is a representative work of the Zhiguai Chuanqi of Chinese classical literature, and the writing of horror stories is one of its most essential parts, which contains adequate meaning, showing its rich details and vivid writing characteristics, which also reflects a certain extent of the author, Pu Songling's unique aesthetic and value orientation. This paper analyzes the setting of the time and space environment of the original text, the use of the third-person limited angle of view in the narrative, and the selection of horror images, respectively, from the scene of the incident, the subject of experience and the object of experience in the horror story. This paper analyzes the original texts of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* by summarizing writing techniques of horror stories in work to explore the process of creating the sense of horror in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* and how the author uses the original source of human fear to create a horror story. It reveals the alienation and abnormality of time and space, the immersive sense of subjective, limited perspective, and the deadly threat behind horrific imagery. While appreciating the artistic beauty and realizing the diversity of stories types of this work, its implicit humanistic concern is not ignored.

**Keywords:** *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, narrative, horror

## 1. Introduction

Affected by Lu Xun, one of the greatest writers and critics in China, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* is considered as a work filled with ghost images like "more human, amiable, and making people forget to be an alien" and ghost stories that are not scary. However, this conclusion does not apply to all the strange stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*. The chapters in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* are rich in content and diverse in themes. Ghost stories full of human warmth are not all of their contents, and the creepy horror chapters cannot be ignored. In Yu Tianchi's *Chinese Horror Novels and the Horror Aesthetic Appeal of Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, he advocates that the ghost stories of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* can be divided into five categories: war trauma, ghosts and strange things, love between humans and ghosts, religious exhortation, and natural disasters, to draw attention to the fact that the chapters in the book that show the horror and weirdness are actually more than people think [1]. In addition to the horror clips inserted in heterodox marriage and love stories, religious punishment stories or social criticism stories, there are also many stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* that express horror as the main content throughout the beginning and end, most of which tell the story of a certain human being encountering something scary in a specific time and space. There are many excellent works with superb brushwork and profound connotations that have been admired for a long

time. The horror stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* contain the author Pu Songling's ingenious conception and superb description and narrative skills. To a certain extent, it also reflects the real fear in the life of the Chinese people in history. The above three not only show the characteristics of the horror writing of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* but also provide a source of horror for its horror stories. Therefore, this paper focuses on the horror narrative in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* to discuss its artistic characteristics as a representative work of Chinese classical Zhiguai novels and explore its mapping to real history.

## 2. The Setting of the Time and Space Environment of the Horror Stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*

### 2.1. Time Environment Settings

The storytime of the horror chapters in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* is mainly set at night, which is also the consistent choice for most of the Ming and Qing classical horror novels. In the traditional Chinese concept, there is no sunlight at night, so the yin, a kind of negative power in Chinese culture, is strong. It is the time for monsters and ghosts to appear, and the visibility at night is reduced. After a day's activities, people's energy also declines; at that time, people tend to be afraid of unknown things in the dark, and things that seem ordinary during the day will become hazy and blurred under the rendering of night, triggering human horror associations. At the same time, nighttime is also a high-incidence period for crime, which further weakens people's sense of security at night [2]. In *Sorcery*, the fortune-teller uses magic to harm Master Yu, and the sorcery works in the middle of the night when Master Yu's spirit is relaxed and intends to go to bed. The sense of thrill and suspense surged when Master Yu fought with paper figurines, earthen dolls, and puppets driven by magic arts in the dim candlelight and moonlight of the night. When he defeated the monsters, the dawn gradually approached [3]. It meant the crisis was lifted. In addition, the silence of the night without anyone also highlights the horror of the sound. In *The Mountain Spirit*, Sun Taibai's great-grandfather, as the moon rose and the light filled his window. All sounds were silent, "suddenly he heard the rumbling of the wind and the creaking of one of the Buddhist monastery's doors", and there was "also a sound like that of boots tromping, gradually drawing near his doorstep" [4], it was in the silence, the approaching wind and footsteps became clearer and eerier. It is conceivable that if the monsters in *Sorcery* and *The Mountain Spirit* appear in broad daylight and during a period of noisy human voices, the sense of terror will be greatly reduced.

Some horror stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* also take place during the daytime, or more precisely, during the "day sleep". Blurred consciousness during sleep can reduce the sense of security brought by daytime and is also conducive to the laying of hallucinatory scenes. At the same time, when there is sufficient light during the day, ghosts appear in a clear field of vision, and the visual impact will be strengthened. Fear is also aroused. For example, in *The Ghost's Saliva*, during his daytime nap, Li witnessed a female ghost with messy hair and a covered face walking out of the wall, walking to his bed, and then brushing back the messy hair, suddenly revealing a terrifying face. An intuitive and straightforward impact in an instant makes Li so scared that he wants to run away. If the horror stories that take place at night use "invisibility" to create a sense of horror, then the horror stories that take place during the day use "visibility".

### 2.2. Space environment Settings

The space settings of horror stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* can be divided into two categories: one is the house, which is a space where people can be familiar with the basic situation, and the other is the hotel, temple, forest, cave, and more which are located outside, unfamiliar space [5]. Pu

Songling skillfully creates a terrifying atmosphere in these two space settings by enabling readers and characters to confront various psychological and cognitive states in different settings.

The most used place for horror stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* is the home. Unlike the common haunted house stories today, most of the haunted houses in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* do not use the background to explain the terrifying history of the house. The house in the story is just an ordinary residence, making people maintain the psychological presupposition that "home is the safest", and readers have no psychological expectation that supernatural events will happen. Therefore, in such an environment, a sense of terror is created. The key is to "make the normal appear abnormal". *Biting the Ghost* tells the story of a ghost at home. A certain older man in the story did not notice anything strange when the female ghost entered the room. Why do women come into the house wearing mourning clothes? When he realized that the strange situation had appeared, the peaceful atmosphere of the daily space was instantly broken, and the contrast between the dangerous situation and the safe environment played a role, turning into a sense of horror.

In an unfamiliar space, unfamiliarity and the unknown are sharp tools to create a sense of terror. When people are in an unfamiliar space, they often feel uneasy because of unpredictable situations, constantly worrying about the occurrence of dangerous situations, and even to the point of being apprehensive and suspicious. The *Zhaya Mountain Cave* makes good use of the anxiety in this unfamiliar space, starting from the characters' subjective feelings of fear of unknown situations, to depict horror. The protagonist of the story drilled into a dark cave to explore alone. At first, he was very confident. He saw the strange rocks in the cave but unconsciously thought of them as spooky statues. Later, he found an unidentified corpse and used torches to look at the corpse to find valuables. He felt that breath was coming out of the corpse's mouth and wanted to blow out his torch. He was so frightened that he ran all the way to the entrance of the cave, and felt a strange force grab his hair, so he fainted on the spot. However, an unfamiliar space sometimes does not mean completely unknown. The familiar conditions provided by some special unfamiliar spaces can prepare readers for horrors, such as the hotel room where the corpse is parked in *The Restless Corpse*, and the desolate and uninhabited rural monastery in *The Dead Monk*. Those factors easily remind readers of the supernatural power that may work in the story. Will the corpse in the same room as the guests suddenly wake up? Will there be ghosts in the temple? Being in an unfamiliar environment where abnormal conditions have been discovered is already terrifying.

### 3. Limited Angle of View

Most chapters in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* are written in the third person. At the same time, it is a limited angle of view from the third person. The characters in the story are the narrators, and the author will not add anything that the characters do not know. To explain and describe, but to observe and feel the situation in the story only from the subjective perspective of the characters, makes the author inevitably introduce a variety of sensory narratives [6]. Thanks to this narrative perspective, when readers read the horror stories in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, they can substitute the characters in the text through various vivid sensory descriptions to obtain an immersive horror experience. The charm of the limited angle of view in horror stories is also to maintain suspense to the greatest extent so that horror things can show their existence through the characters' hearing, vision or touch with the perception of the central perspective of the characters while not revealing their true qualities. Moreover, when the true quality is revealed, and the suspense is released, the limited angle of view will bring an immersive and terrifying impact.

In the horror story of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, the auditory narrative from the view of a limited angle is often the first to cut in. The ghosts are initially discovered by the characters in the form of strange voices rather than being directly presented from the omniscient perspective. In *In the River*, on a night when the moonlight is bright and makes people sleepless, Wang Shengyu was sitting in a

boat, moored in the middle of the river, when suddenly, he heard a strange sound from the top of the boat, this strange sound at first sounded from the stern of the boat, and gradually approached the cabin where he was. In *Driving Out a Monster*, Xu Yuangong kept awake in the middle of the night. After a while, a strange footstep sounded on the ceiling, so heavy, so loud; the footsteps came down the stairs and came to the door of the room where he slept. As shown above, the main body of the narrative is people. Everything in the story comes from the limited observation and feeling of this human subject; rather than being directly explained by the author to break that limit like, there was a ghost in an ambush on the boat, it made a deliberate noise and was heard by Wang Shengyu, or there was a monster hiding in the garden. It was active in the house where Xu Yuangong lived.

Following the auditory narrative, it frequently switches to the visual narrative so that the reader can experience the cause of the odd voice's dread through the characters' eyes, heightening the sense of horror [7]. Still taking *In the River* and *Driving out a Monster* as examples, in *In the River*, the source of the strange sound soon appeared in the visual image as a mysterious man peeping at the cabin; in *Driving Out a Monster*, Xu Yuangong checked the source of the strange noise and saw a monster and its threatening appearance and behaviour.

As shown in the examples in the two stories above, the horror stories of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* usually frame the narrative within the limited angle of view of the characters, first using the auditory narrative to lay suspense and then adding the visual narrative to release the suspense and create a shocking effect. In addition to the above-mentioned *In the River* and *Driving Out a Monster*, chapters such as *Squirting*, *The Restless Corpse*, and *The Mountain Spirit* also use this model. In addition, the tactile narrative has also been used in the writing of the horror story in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*. The protagonists in *The Ghost's Saliva* and *Drawing Out the Intestines* each felt the coldness of the ghost's saliva and the heat of the internal organs physically; the subjectivity of the limited angle of view makes these two disgusting touches very real and perceptible.

#### 4. The Image of Terror

Most of the horror images in the horror stories of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* are more traditional and are also common in other classical Chinese Zhiguai novels, such as ghosts, monsters, and corpses [8], but there are also some special images which can be summarized as a kind of death-related gloom and melancholy atmosphere that is inextricably linked to the actual historical context in which the author Pu Songling grew up [9].

There is a chapter name *Zhang A-Duan* in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, in which it is mentioned that ghosts can also die. After death, ghosts turn into something called *Jian*. Ghosts are afraid of *Jian*, just like people are afraid of ghosts. The term "ghost" describes the human soul that separates from the body once a person dies. It is often considered to have extraordinary magic power, and it is easy to become evil and endanger human beings. Humans have an almost innate fear of ghosts, which may stem from the fear of death, and is embodied in the fear of ghosts' evil and potentially aggressive behaviour. The actions of the ghosts in the horror stories of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* can be divided into two types: haunting and frightening. The former attacks humans, making them feel the fear of being threatened, while the latter does their own things, and humans feel afraid just because they are witnesses. Examples of the former category include *Biting the Ghost* and *The Ghost's Saliva*. The female ghost in the story launched a less violent but very oppressive attack on the human protagonist, which made them feel nervous and fearful in the process of struggling to resist. Examples of the latter category are *The Dead Monk* and *The Hanging Ghost*, in which the ghosts remained in the places where they passed away and refused to leave, acting out their last moments or displaying their obsessions, but they did not interact with the human protagonists who saw them. As Freud said in *The Uncanny*, conditions for a sense of horror are created when it is intellectually uncertain whether an object is alive or not or when an inanimate object becomes very much like an animate one [10]. It

can precisely interpret why the frightening ghost image in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* is terrifying, such as the older woman in *Squirting*, whose appearance is undoubtedly a human form, but not a healthy human form, and she behaves weirdly, walking around the courtyard in a circle, taking long, quick steps like a crane, spouting water endlessly as she walked. It constitutes a horror image of looking like a person but not really being one.

The chapters with monsters as the main horror images include *Sorcery*, *The Feral Dog*, *The Giant*, and more. The beast-shaped or human-shaped monster is a relatively aggressive image. In the horror stories mentioned above, monsters have attacked humans or attempted to do so. For example, the giants in *The Giant* feed on creatures, including humans, humans in the story are completely controlled by the giant, which is violent, irresistible and terrifying. However, the insidious, cunning and good at disguising monsters in *Painted Skin* seem more frightening than these violent but unintelligent monsters. It carries out deadly attacks on Wang, but some of its attacks are inconspicuous and carried out under cover of a conspiracy, so Wang was in a hazardous situation when he even did not realize it. When Wang knew the truth and recalled what the monster in human form had done before, a tremendous sense of fear hit him.

The horror of corpse images is associated with ghosts or death. At the same time, the corpse will be corrupted and deformed. What is more, there are some corpses that are dead in a miserable state, and their appearances also terrify people. The corpse images in the horror story of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* can be divided into two types: static and active. The static type, such as the nameless female corpse in *The Zhaya Mountain Cave*, is mainly terrifying in appearance. It has messy hair sticking to the skeleton, empty eye sockets and nostrils, as well as two rows of white teeth. The active type is like the female corpse that gets up from the table in *The Restless Corpse*. In addition to the horror caused by the strange phenomenon of a corpse getting up, its attacks and harms against human beings are also terrifying.

In addition, some horror stories of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* have an implicit description object, that is, the gloomy emotions caused by death. When this emotion is depicted, readers may experience a mixture of dread, sadness, pity, and worry. Pu Songling, the author of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, lived during a difficult period in Chinese history—the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties. The change of regime and ethnic conflicts have led to many wars and killings, and Zichuan County, where Pu Songling lived, is one of the places shrouded in the shadow of death [11]. Chapters such as *The Feral Dog* and *The Weeping Ghosts* reflect the massacres of the Qing Dynasty regime. Although those chapters depict the resurrection of corpses, monsters sucking human brains, ghosts turning into flames and other terrifying spectacles, what arouses the reader's empathy and fear is the powerlessness and vulnerability of the deceased whose lives were brought by wars or bloody conflicts.

## 5. Conclusion

This article sorts out the chapters that have horror as their primary theme in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* and summarizes their distinctive features in setting and narrative. The horror story of *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* has special ingenuity in the environment setting, narrative perspective and image description. First, the author creates an unfamiliar, unknown or abnormal space-time environment as a backdrop for horror stories to take place. Second, he confines the narrative to the protagonist's subjective feelings, telling the story through a third-person limited angle of view supplemented by various sensory narratives. Finally, he selects the horror image that looks terrifying and is threatening to human life. The fantastic horror tales in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* are created by fusing these three aspects, leaving readers feeling in the frightful suspense and atmosphere, experiencing the terror stimulation of numerous senses with a strong sensation of substitution. Analyzing the superb writing skills contained in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*'s horror stories can make readers concentrate on *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*'s unique artistic value as the pinnacle of



classical Zhiguai novels in China and understand an essential part of Pu Songling's literary aesthetics, which are bizarre, curious and thrilling. At the same time, it also pays attention to the narration of the real historical pain behind horror stories. It realizes that *Strange Tales from Liaozhai* pays great attention to the material world and society and always cares about the fate of the people.

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