

The Mapping of Pu Songling's Southern Journey in the Writing of Predicaments in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the intrinsic connection between Pu Songling's southern journey experience and the writing of predicaments in his work *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai Zhiyi), elucidating how he sublimates his personal real-life difficulties into social critique through literary transformation mechanisms. The research employs a combined methodology of close textual analysis and historical contextual investigation. It focuses primarily on the threefold predicaments Pu Songling encountered during his southern travels: setbacks in the imperial examination, financial hardship, and identity anxiety. The study deeply interprets how these real-life predicaments are transformed into literary expressions concerning the imperial examination system, the survival status of scholar-official aides, and issues of identity recognition in the text. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* constructs a dual artistic expression mechanism through the commentary style of "Yi Shishi says" and the characterization of supernatural figures. This creative mechanism not only realizes the author's personal emotional expression but also endows the supernatural tales with social critique significance, revealing the cultural transformation path of literati predicament writing from individual emotional venting to social metaphor.

Keywords: Pu Songling, Southern journey experience, Writing of predicaments, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Social critique

1. Introduction

In the preface to *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling himself describes the work as a "book of solitary resentment" [1]. However, there remains a lack of systematic scholarly investigation into the intrinsic connection between the motivation behind the work's creation and Pu's experiences traveling in the south. By analyzing the textual mapping mechanism of the predicaments encountered during his southern journey, it becomes possible to reveal how individual life experiences are sublimated into socially significant critique, thus addressing the current insufficiency in interpreting the realism in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and reevaluating its innovative significance in literary history. Existing scholarship has largely focused on the work's aesthetic of the supernatural or on biographical research of Pu Songling, with a notable absence of structured analysis on the literary transformation of his real-life predicaments. This study bridges the interaction between reality and text, unfolding across three dimensions: extraction of real predicaments, literary transformation mechanisms, and critical sublimation. This research not only aids in understanding how traditional

intellectuals engage in dialogue between individual experience and the spirit of their times through literary creation but also offers an instructive analytical model for contemporary literary sociology research.

2. The multiple predicaments of Pu Songling's southern journey

Pu Songling's southern journey marked a pivotal turning point in his life and serves as a key to understanding the core of his creative vision in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. As a frustrated literatus repeatedly thwarted in the imperial examinations, his decision to journey south was both a passive response to the mounting pressures of real life and an active quest for spiritual salvation. However, rather than alleviating his existential predicaments, this journey, in many respects, intensified the tension between his reality and inner world, ultimately becoming a catalyst for his literary creation.

2.1. Frustration in the imperial examinations: the agony of repeated failure

After passing the county-level examination (xiuca) at the age of nineteen, Pu Songling repeatedly took part in the provincial examinations, only to suffer continual failure. In his poem "*Da Jiang Dong Qu: To Wang Rushui*," the line "Heaven's order has aged; it has overturned many a talented man in the world" pointedly criticizes the imperial examination system for crushing the spirit of the literati. In the ninth year of the Kangxi reign (1670), due to "poverty so dire he could not support himself," Pu accepted an invitation from his fellow townsman Sun Hui to travel south to Baoying to serve as a private secretary (mulin). This choice was clearly a passive means of livelihood following his repeated examination failures [2]. Even while serving as a secretary, he did not give up on the pursuit of officialdom. Historical records show that one major reason Pu resigned from his position and hurried back home was to participate in the 1672 Shandong provincial examination during the eleventh year of Kangxi—only to fail once more. These repeated failures not only served as a major impetus for his southern journey but also became the basis for his biting critique of the examination system in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. For example, in the story *Si Wenlang*, a blind monk sarcastically mocks examiners' lack of discernment, while in *Ye Sheng*, the absurd plot of a soul following the protagonist portrays how the examination system distorts a scholar's psyche [1]. Such narratives go beyond merely venting personal frustration; they employ literary forms to deliver a broader critique of institutional oppression.

2.2. Economic hardship: the struggles of a private secretary

Although Pu temporarily left the imperial examination arena during his southern travels, his impoverished living conditions saw little improvement. In the Qing dynasty, private secretaries held a low social status, with annual stipends barely exceeding a hundred taels of silver. In his poem *Gan Fen* (On Resentment), he wrote: "In vain I test my strength amid the dust of the world, a lonely boat adrift to the ends of the earth," directly voicing the suffering of his wandering life. During his service in Baoying, he had to deal with mundane tasks such as handling legal cases and tax affairs, and was often obliged to compose various official and ceremonial writings. This "pen-for-hire" mode of survival stood in stark contrast to his literary passion for collecting supernatural tales. The repressive experience of bureaucratic life was transformed in stories like *Meng Lang* and *Cui Zhi* into allegorical portrayals of "tiger officials and wolfish clerks." By projecting the harsh realities of his life into a supernatural world of foxes and ghosts, Pu constructed a surreal framework through which he allegorically deconstructed the bureaucratic system.

2.3. Shattered ideals: the disillusionment of a reformist spirit and the decision to return north

Pu Songling spent a year in Baoying and Gaoyou, and his personal experiences during this time are deeply embedded in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Before his southern journey, he still harbored an idealistic belief in the possibility of upright governance. But after personally witnessing the inner workings of officialdom, his disillusionment with the entire ruling system grew. In the autumn of the tenth year of Kangxi (1671), he ultimately chose to return north—a decision that marked a phased end to his reformist aspirations. In the story Luosha Haishi (The Kingdom of Women), the grotesque and inverted “Great Luosha Kingdom” serves as an allegorical mirror of the real bureaucratic world, while the protagonist Ma Ji’s shift from a Confucian scholar to a merchant subtly reflects a profound critique of traditional literati values. Pu’s southern experience left an indelible mark on the rest of his life. In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, he innovatively blended historical-biographical traditions with the zhiguai (tales of the strange) form, and through the commentary device of “Yi Shishi says,” he elevated his tales of foxes and ghosts into a penetrating reflection on social reality.

3. The mechanism of mapping the southern journey onto literary dilemmas

Pu Songling’s southern journey was not only a major turning point in his life but also a crucial source of inspiration for his *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai Zhiyi). As an impoverished scholar repeatedly frustrated in the imperial examinations, Pu traveled as a private secretary through the regions of Jianghuai and northern Jiangsu, where he witnessed official corruption, popular suffering, and social unrest. This marginal existence provided him with the experiential basis to construct a literary world where the real and the fantastical intertwine. Through the interactions between ghosts, fox spirits, and eccentric scholars, Pu transformed personal predicaments and broader societal maladies into metaphorical narratives.

3.1. Metaphorical transformation of real-world dilemmas

3.1.1. The tragic projection of examination frustration

Before his southern journey, Pu Songling had three opportunities to participate in the provincial examination—specifically in the second, fifth, and eighth years of the Kangxi reign (1663, 1666, and 1669)—but only sat for the first two, failing both attempts [3]. In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu created numerous figures of Jiangnan scholars, who are vividly depicted and richly varied. These characters not only reflect regional cultural traits but also serve as vehicles for the author’s emotional and intellectual response to his own failures in the examination system.

Stories such as *Three Lives* (Sansheng), *The Examination Officer* (Siwenlang), and *The Judicial Clerk* (Lupan) portray the trials of scholars from Jiangnan and satirize the corruption embedded in the examination bureaucracy [4]. The blind eyes and nose of the examining official in *The Examination Officer* metaphorically expose the darkness within the examination arena. In *Three Lives*, the irresponsible behavior of the reviewing and chief examiners, coupled with their mutual buck-passing, is powerfully satirized. The protagonist Xing Yutang, along with other Jiangnan scholars, dares to challenge them even in the underworld, engaging in a struggle that spans three lifetimes. These portrayals become artistic conduits for Pu’s disappointment with the examination system and his critique of the sociopolitical mechanisms behind it.

3.1.2. The alienated writing of the secretariat experience

Many stories in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* employ metaphor and symbolism to reflect Pu Songling's observations of the dark bureaucracy and the hardships of ordinary people during his service as a private secretary in Jianghuai. His exposure to factional struggles and legal disputes while working under Sun Hui provided source material for stories such as *Xifangping*, a ghost story centered around legal justice [5]. These grim realities pierced Pu's heart like daggers, intensifying his indignation toward Qing rule and deepening his sympathy for the suffering masses. It was such experiences that led him to conceive of his collection as "a presumptuous continuation of the Records of the Netherworld" and "a book of solitary indignation," as described in his self-preface [6].

The portrayal of corrupt underworld officials in *Xifangping* serves as a literary projection of the widespread corruption Pu witnessed in Qing legal institutions. The protagonist Xilian, having offended a wealthy magnate, sees his son Xifangping undergo a series of appeals through city gods, regional officials, and the Yama court, exposing the layered injustices of both the living and the dead. This depiction is not merely fantastical; it mirrors the collapse of public justice and the pervasive rule of wealth and power in the real world. Through "using ghosts to mock the living," Pu crafts a profound critique of the bureaucratic system. Other stories that reflect the evils of feudal bureaucracy—such as *A Sequel to Huangliang*, *Hongyu*, *Zhang Hongjian*, *The King*, *The Treasury Clerk*, and *The Cricket*—as well as those portraying the oppression and rebellion of the people—such as *Tian Qilang*, *The Dream Wolf*, *Wang Da*, *Wild Dog*, *Ghost Cry*, and *The White Lotus Sect*—are all deeply rooted in Pu's southern journey experiences [7].

These secretariat-themed tales transcend simple supernatural storytelling by constructing an artistic world that is simultaneously absurd and realistic. Pu Songling projected the distortions of power in the real world onto the netherworld, demystifying and deconstructing the Qing bureaucratic system through literary metaphor. In doing so, he offered a sharp reflection on the alienation of human nature. His portrayal of underworld officials, exaggerated and distorted versions of real-world bureaucrats, symbolically reveals the essential nature of unchecked power: whether in earthly courts or the netherworld, both are capable of becoming terrifying machines that devour human dignity.

3.1.3. Symbolic expressions of alien spaces

A significant number of stories in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* are set in Jiangnan. Preliminary statistics indicate that out of the 491 tales (including six from the appendix), at least 54 are related to the Jiangnan region, accounting for approximately one-tenth of the total [6]. During his travels through Jianghuai, Pu Songling passed through many peripheral spaces—wildernesses, ancient temples, abandoned houses—as well as southern scenes vastly different from his native Shandong. These spaces function not only as stages for the activities of ghosts, foxes, and spirits, but also as metaphorical containers for real-life predicaments.

The wildlands and ruined temples depicted by Pu often exhibit utopian tendencies. These secluded settings serve both as idyllic retreats for romantic liaisons and as artistic mediums through which Pu transposes real-world contradictions—such as frustration with the imperial examination system, bureaucratic struggles, and ethical dilemmas—into symbolic representations. The setting of Lanruo Temple in *Nie Xiaoqian* is particularly emblematic. The temple, described as "its grand halls and towers overgrown with weeds," [1] is not only the site of human-ghost romance but also symbolizes the spiritual sanctuary of the intellectual. The juxtaposition of images such as the "white poplars in the moonlight" and the "demonic weeping at night" metaphorically conveys the dual predicament of the scholar: the longing to preserve personal integrity in seclusion (as exemplified by Ning Caichen's refusal of riches), and the necessity of confronting external pressures and threats (as symbolized by the yaksha's pursuit of souls).

Pu Songling's journey through Jiangnan not only broadened his geographical awareness but also profoundly shaped his literary imagination. In *Strange Tales*, Jiangnan is more than just a geographical backdrop—it becomes a cultural symbol representing a spiritual temperament starkly different from that of his native Qilu. These Jiangnan narrative spaces often bear a dual nature: they are both real geographic locations and surreal imaginative realms. Moreover, the graceful demeanor of southern beauties inspired the creation of many of the female characters in the collection, adding further depth and sensuality to his tales.

3.2. Textual representation of identity predicaments

Pu Songling's southern journey removed him from the relatively stable identity of a local gentry figure in Shandong and plunged him into the marginalized existence of a wandering retainer in unfamiliar territories. The sense of identity displacement caused by this spatial relocation is sublimated in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* into a universal literary motif. Through the narrative portrayal of two intersecting dimensions of contradiction, Pu constructs a spiritual map of the intellectual's plight in the waning years of feudal society.

3.2.1. The conflict between the scholar's ideal and the retainer's identity

Throughout his life, Pu Songling repeatedly failed the imperial civil examinations, becoming a defeated candidate of the “ten years in vain, unfulfilled ambition” type. Nevertheless, he never relinquished his ideals. His role as a retainer was a reluctant means of survival, as well as an indirect expression of his political aspirations. Pu attempted to achieve his Confucian ideal of “cultivating oneself to serve the world” through the profession of a private secretary. However, this dependent mode of existence was inherently fragile. Retainers were perpetually excluded from the formal bureaucratic system, and their talents were often reduced to tools at the disposal of the powerful elite. This systemic suffocation reaches its peak in *The Raksha Kingdom*, where the protagonist Ma Ji is forced to engage in grotesque flattery and “painted-face ingratiating” merely to survive [1]. The absurdity serves as Pu Songling's sharp indictment of the imperial examination-retainer system and the resulting spiritual alienation of the intellectual—when the channel of “becoming an official through scholarly excellence” is obstructed, the scholar's subjectivity is ultimately dissolved by the power structure. In *Ye Sheng*, Pu declares: “If a scholar gains one confidant, he may live without regret—why would he pursue profit like a peddler of white cloth?” Pu initially believed that becoming a retainer in the South might gain him such a confidant and compensate for his failures. However, his eventual estrangement from Sun Hui revealed the futility of that hope and shattered his dream of achieving merit through the retainer role.

During his tenure as a private secretary, Pu did strive to fulfill his ideal of serving the people and relieving their suffering. His essays and poems, such as *Inscription for the Life-Release Pond*, *Persuasion to Donate*, *Ode to the Great Man*, and *Song of the Boat-Towers*, all reflect his earnest efforts to realize his political and humanitarian ideals. Yet reality proved harsh: he witnessed local magistrates abusing power, and even his own superior, Sun Hui, indulging in sensual pleasures while ignoring the floods that had long plagued the common people. Sun showed no intention of “suffering with the people,” instead continuing his revelry, while Pu could only offer admonitions in vain. As a powerless dependent, he held no real authority. Ultimately, Pu projected his inner contradictions and frustrations into tales such as *The Cricket*, *Dreaming of Wolves*, *The Raksha Kingdom*, and *Xi Fangping*. While Sun Hui caroused to music and song in his Bao Ying residence, Pu wielded his pen like a blade, constructing in the ghost-fox realm a moral tribunal more truthful than reality—one devoid of blind and deaf examiners, but filled with characters like *Xi Fangping*, who, even when branded with hot irons and maimed with axes, stubbornly pursued justice. These spectral courts

enacted a symbolic judgment on behalf of the countless starving peasants kneeling before the county yamen.

3.2.2. Reflections of the cross-boundary identity dilemma

Pu Songling's southern travels marked not only the beginning of his retainer career but also opened a window for him to engage with all strata of society. He witnessed the rise and fall of merchants along the Grand Canal, the displacement of disaster victims, and the wandering lives of performers. These multifaceted experiences were sublimated in *Strange Tales* into a profound observation of the identity crises across all four social classes—scholar, peasant, artisan, and merchant. Through the surreal narratives of “human–ghost” and “human–fox” interactions, Pu exposed the universal oppression of individual identity under the power structure of a decaying feudal society.

The underworld portrayed in *Strange Tales* is, in essence, a distorted reflection of the real world. In *Lady Dou*, a peasant woman is deceived and killed by a local gentry member, only to return as a ghost to seek revenge [1], exposing the desperate plight of lower-class women under class oppression. Her posthumous vengeance targets not only her betrayer but also acts as a powerful denunciation of the patriarchal norms inherent in feudal ritual codes. In *Plum Girl*, a wronged woman commits suicide and later returns to life by inhabiting another's body [1], hinting that even after death, women must still depend on male agency to reclaim a social identity. These narratives break free from the scholar's perspective, presenting a broader anxiety about social identity.

The “human–fox” narrative, meanwhile, constitutes a multidimensional critique of gender, capital, and power in *Strange Tales*. In *Mistress Yan*, a talented woman disguises herself as a man and passes the imperial exam, while her husband repeatedly fails—this seemingly absurd role reversal satirizes the civil service examination's failure to recognize genuine talent and alludes to the misalignment of gender and ability within the power structure. In *Scholar Wu*, a fox spirit saves a man's life with a magical elixir, only to be murdered by him after he gains wealth and status [1]. This plot extends Pu's critique to the moral perversion under capitalist corruption—when the imperial examination and commercial success join forces, the traditional moral order degenerates into a naked pursuit of self-interest.

3.3. Subtle catharsis of emotional predicaments

During his southern journey, Pu Songling found himself ensnared in multiple emotional predicaments: as a failed candidate in the imperial examination system, he bore the frustration of repeated failure; as a wandering literatus, he endured the confusion of a traveler far from home; and as a grassroots observer, he was plagued by existential anxiety in the face of rampant bureaucratic corruption. These emotional tensions found cathartic expression in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (Liaozhai zhiyi) through distinctive artistic techniques.

3.3.1. The conflict between emotion and reason, and the use of dream narratives

Pu Songling was not only adept at writing tales of the supernatural, but also excelled at recording dreams. Among the nearly 490 stories in *Liaozhai*, over 70 are dream-related. Many celebrated pieces—such as “Judge Lu,” “The Daughter of Lord Lu,” “The Scholar of Fengyang,” “Sequel to ‘Yellow Millet,’” “Princess Crimson,” “Tian Qilang,” “Fragrant Jade,” “Green Plum,” “Lian Suo,” “Fox Dream,” “Dream Wolf,” “Princess Lotus,” and “Scribe Siwen”—feature remarkable dreamscapes.[8] Constrained by the literary inquisitions of the Qing dynasty and other social realities, Pu chose the dream realm as a vehicle to reflect a distorted yet revealing mirror of the real world. Many elements and scenes depicted in these dreams were inspired by his firsthand experiences during his southern travels.[9]

The psychological trauma wrought by the examination system is vividly embodied in *Wang Zian*, where the protagonist's drunken dream of excelling in the palace examination stands in sharp, ironic contrast to the bleak reality of begging for food upon waking. This grotesque disparity lays bare the dismemberment of the scholar's integrity by an obsessive pursuit of fame and fortune, echoing the bitter satire found in *The Scholars*. The political immersion Pu experienced in Jianghuai during his southern journey gave him profound insight into the rot at the core of the bureaucracy. In *Dream Wolf*, a father dreams of his son surrounded by wolves in an official yamen, where the predatory clerks devour the people—a chilling allegory for bureaucratic exploitation. Pu transformed his southern observations into surreal aesthetic devices through dream narratives, resisting and transcending the constraints of reality via a shifting interplay of the real and the unreal.

3.3.2. The sting of reality and the allure of ideals

In *Liaozhai*, Pu Songling constructed a unique system for emotional catharsis: on the one hand, he employs the rational critique of “The Historian of the Strange Says” (Yishi shi yue) to tear away the mask of societal hypocrisy; on the other hand, he builds spiritual sanctuaries through supernatural figures. This dialectical interplay of reality and fantasy turns the text into an alchemical furnace for the soul, transmuting real-world suffering into universal literary insight.

Adopting the form of Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, Pu appends moral commentary—“The Historian of the Strange Says”—to approximately 195 tales in *Liaozhai*, not as didactic moralizing, but as a mechanism of “traumatic writing.”[10] At the end of *The Cricket*, he incisively deconstructs the myth of imperial omnipotence with the line “The emperor occasionally uses a trivial object,”[1] elevating personal tragedy into a critique of institutional violence. In *Xi Fangping*, the comment “A golden light covers the ground, yet Yama's court remains shrouded in gloom” indicts not only the injustices of the netherworld but also those of the earthly bureaucracy. These sharp commentaries are Pu's “spiritual scalpel,” dissecting the social maladies that had accumulated over two decades of academic failure.

At the same time, Pu endows figures of folkloric superstition—the so-called “demonic”—with idealized moral character. Qingfeng, beneath her gentle and obedient exterior, reveals a courageous decisiveness; Hongyu's chivalric deeds shine as a beacon of human dignity; and Yingning's laughter becomes a life-affirming cry that pierces the gloom of patriarchal orthodoxy. These fox-spirits and ghosts, rendered with supernatural purity, stand in stark contrast to the moral degeneration of the real world. Beneath their monstrous exteriors pulses a brilliance more radiant than anything found in the human realm.

4. The cultural connotations of Pu Songling's dilemma during his journey to the south

Prior to his southern journey, Pu Songling had endured the harsh realities of life at the lower rungs of society; during the journey, he finally came face to face with the entrenched, corrupt, and even “cannibalistic” bureaucracy of the feudal system. Caught between the disappointment of repeated examination failures and the disillusionment of a secretary's life, he transcended the narrow perspective of the traditional Confucian literati and instead, through the keen sensitivity of a grassroots scholar, fused personal experience with the ailments of the times in the ghost-fox narratives of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*), reaching a level of satirical critique that was both incisive and profound.

4.1. A mirrored critique of the bureaucratic ecology in the Qing Dynasty

During his year in Baoying and Gaoyou with Sun Hui, Pu Songling experienced three rounds of turbulent political power struggles, granting him firsthand exposure to the scheming and treachery of

officialdom.[2] In such a suffocating environment, Pu felt deep anguish and frustration at the darkness of the human world, yet was powerless to change it. He poured his myriad emotions into *Strange Tales*, transforming the structural decay of Qing officialdom into sharp literary criticism.

In the work, Pu uses grotesque portrayals of officials in the netherworld as allegories for systemic corruption in the Qing legal system. In *The Bureau of Examination Irregularities* (Kaobi Si), the underworld examiner “Ghost King with a Hollow Belly” demands flesh from the examinees’ legs—a grotesque metaphor for the rampant bribery in the imperial examination system.[1] According to *The Veritable Records of the Qing* (Qing Shilu), Censor Guo Xiu impeached officials for accepting bribes and showing favoritism, corroborating the institutional scandals depicted by Pu. In *Wu Qiu-yue*, the scene where underworld messengers openly solicit bribes and disregard human life mirrors historical accounts in *Draft History of Qing* (Qingshigao) that detail county magistrates’ corruption and abuse of power—together revealing the fundamental reality of a judicial system where “money is worshipped, and justice is dead.”

Pu also effectively uses bestial imagery to expose the violent essence of the bureaucratic apparatus. In *Dream of the Wolves* (Menglang), the magistrate’s office transforms into a den of wolves, and the officials into man-eating tigers—vivid symbols of the bureaucracy’s predation on the common people. The tragedy of *Mei Nü* (The Plum Blossom Girl), in which an innocent woman is driven to suicide by the false accusations of corrupt officials, is a tearful denunciation of official depravity. Pu’s personal encounter with the “Zhenjiang Incident” exposed him to the treacherous nature of political machinations: fabrication of charges, preemptive accusations by wrongdoers, and stirring up confusion for personal gain.[2] Such malicious conduct blurs the line between officials and wild beasts—how are the bureaucrats any different from wolves and tigers?

4.2. The collapse and reconstruction of the scholar’s ideal of social salvation

During the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals faced a severe crisis of values. Pu Songling’s travels in the Jiang-Huai region serve as an individual reflection of this collective predicament. His spiritual disillusionment occurred on three levels: the erosion of his political ideals by the examination system, the damage to his scholarly dignity by the lowly secretary post, and the collapse of moral conviction in the face of realpolitik.

Pu’s southern journey was, in essence, a forced escape. His repeated examination failures not only blocked his official career path but also shook the foundational Confucian belief in “studying as a pathway to office.” As a secretary, he witnessed firsthand the social reality of “sumptuous feasts behind vermilion gates while the poor freeze to death on the roadside.” This put him in a moral quandary: his secretarial status prevented him from consistently practicing the Confucian ideal of serving the people, while his job duties required him to draft tax-collection documents against his conscience. His eventual decision to return north symbolized the complete disillusionment with the traditional Confucian dream of saving the world through governance.

Through the medium of zhiguai (tales of the strange), Pu created many scholar-figures trapped in existential dilemmas. *Scribe Si Wenlang* (Si Wenlang) exposes the darkness of the examination system through absurd narratives; in *The Bookworm* (Shuchi), the ghost Yan Ruyu rebukes the pedantic and out-of-touch scholarly ethos of the time. While portraying the hardships of grassroots scholars, Pu simultaneously tried to help them transcend their predicaments, thereby soothing his own feelings of grief and indignation. Although many scholars in *Strange Tales* fall into the trap of examination woes, not all end in failure. Characters such as Kong Xueli in *Jiaona* and Ning Caichen in *Nie Xiaoqian*, with their refined character and moral integrity, eventually achieve success. Furthermore, the poor scholars in his tales often encounter beautiful women, whose affection compensates for their frustrations in the examination system—an artistic expression of Pu’s yearning for dignity and affirmation of self-worth.[11]

Since he could not realize his ideal of saving the people in reality, he turned to literature as a substitute. In *Strange Tales*, Pu Songling achieved a degree of transcendence from both worldly and spiritual predicaments. The work became an emotional and ideological refuge, allowing him to restructure his shattered ideals through the alchemy of storytelling.

4.3. The fusion of the zhiguai tradition and social critique

In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling adopts the zhiguai (records of the strange) narrative mode to embed the social contradictions of the Qing dynasty and the dilemmas of the literati in a text that blends fantasy and reality—creating a literary paradigm that uses the strange to reflect the real.

The “strangeness” in *Strange Tales* can be broadly categorized into three types, each serving distinct critical purposes:

1. Human-like monsters: In *Painted Skin* (Huapi), a malevolent ghost disguises itself with a beautiful woman’s skin, using the inversion of appearance and reality to expose human greed and hypocrisy. In *Lady Gongsun* (Gongsun Jiuniang), a wrongful death leads to a spectral lament against the Qing massacre during the *Yu Qi Rebellion*, turning personal tragedy into a powerful condemnation of historical violence. 2. Spirit creatures: In *Little Cuilan* (Xiao Cui), a fox spirit uses wit and humor to resolve a family crisis, satirizing the rigidity of Confucian ritual codes. In *Huang Ying*, a chrysanthemum spirit becomes wealthy by selling flowers, challenging the Confucian taboo against profit and subtly hinting at the impact of market economy on traditional values. 3. Underworld powers: In *The Office of Examination Irregularities*, an underworld examiner demands “thigh meat” as a bribe, an allegory for the endemic corruption of the examination system. In *Wu Qiu-yue*, ghost officials roam the mortal world and kill innocents at will, directly pointing to the judicial rot of the Qing dynasty.[1]

Pu’s fascination with the supernatural is closely linked to both his personal experiences and the historical-literary context of his time. During his journey through Jianghuai, he collected numerous strange tales and encountered various regional customs and urban cultures, which enriched the zhiguai content of his stories. The harsh literary climate of early Qing China also forced him to adopt the zhiguai form. Under the frequent threat of literary inquisition, any work of social critique ran the risk of bringing disaster. *Strange Tales* circumvented censorship through its ghostly narrative mode—e.g., “Wild Dog” (Ye Gou) uses zombie-like transformations and cannibalism to allegorize the atrocities following the Manchu conquest. Moreover, the rise of a commercial middle class in the Ming-Qing period stimulated demand for popular literature. *Strange Tales* packages social critique within a zhiguai shell, satisfying the reader’s curiosity while conveying profound critiques. The zhiguai thus becomes a “microscope of social pathology,” expressing emotion through distorted reality and deconstructing reason through absurdity, forming what Lao She once described as “ghosts and foxes with personality, satire that becomes literature.”

Pu’s frequent use of the phrase “The Historian of the Strange says” (Yishi shi yue) embeds commentary into the narrative itself. This combination of narration and critique injects the spirit of historiography into classical Chinese fiction. The impact of *Strange Tales* on later writers is profound. Ji Yun’s *Notes from the Thatched Abode of Close Observations* (Yuewei caotang biji) carries on the tradition of “using ghosts to satirize the world”; in late Qing fiction, Liu E’s *The Travels of Lao Can* echoes Pu’s exposure of official hypocrisy. In the modern period, Lu Xun’s “Diary of a Madman” continues the “cannibalism” metaphor found in Pu’s depictions of “tiger officials and wolfish clerks,” while Mo Yan’s *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* uses a reincarnation narrative to critique historical violence—offering a contemporary echo of Pu Songling’s zhiguai aesthetic.

5. Conclusion

Pu Songling's journey to the south was not only a turning point in his personal fate but also a vital source of creative inspiration for *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Through the medium of ghost and fox narratives, Pu transformed personal hardship into a profound critique of Qing official corruption, the deep-rooted flaws of the imperial examination system, and broader social injustices. In doing so, he achieved a shift from a "book of solitary indignation" to a "fable of the times." As Lu Xun observed, *Strange Tales* "uses the form of the chuanqi tale, but with the spirit of zhiguai"—its value lies not only in its rich imagination but also in its ability to expose the maladies of the age through the brush of the supernatural. Pu's depiction of personal adversity encapsulates the spiritual condition of late imperial literati, while simultaneously setting a precedent for later writers: using individual experience to reflect the ills of society. This creative approach continues to offer critical insight into the enduring relationship between literature and the social realities it seeks to portray.

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