Liaozhai Zhiyi
Liáozhāi Zhìyì 聊斋志异

Liaozhai Zhiyi 聊斋志異 (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio) is a Chinese collection of short stories famous for its many fables describing the interaction between humans and supernatural beings such as ghosts, fox-spirits, and a host of immortal creatures and spectres.

The short stories comprising the collection Liaozhai Zhiyi (Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio) were compiled and written by Pu Songling (1640–1715). Pu was born into a merchant family of modest means in Zichuan, 100 kilometers east of Ji‘nan in modern Shandong Province. Having passed the county civil service examination with distinctions, he repeatedly failed at the provincial level until, at the age of fifty, he stopped trying. Pu made a living working as a secretary and tutor and spent most of his life collecting stories and writing them down. In his preface of 1679 Pu acknowledged his indebtedness to traditional “recordings of the weird” (zhi guai) and “transmissions of the odd” (chuan qi) in works such as Gan Bao’s (early fourth century) Soushen ji (Records of Investigations of Spirits). Liaozhai Zhiyi is based on a variety of traditional and contemporary sources, and Pu embellished and expanded many of the stories.

Various handwritten copies were in circulation after 1679, and for the next thirty years Pu added stories to the manuscript. In spite of his financial struggles, Pu turned down a substantial offer for the manuscript made by a Shandong official around 1693, and his last manuscript copy was kept in the family after his death. From a postface written by Pu’s grandson Pu Lide (1683–1739) in 1739 it appears that handwritten copies were in great demand, and in 1766 the first printed edition of 431 stories appeared in Hangzhou. Since then handwritten manuscript copies containing some sixty stories not included in the printed edition have surfaced.

The stories are written in the literary language and characterized by a tight composition, numerous classical allusions, and Pu’s masterly sense of economy with words. He copies and develops different genres such as journal notes or historical biographies. Examples of the former include observations on strange events that have no story line, whereas the latter, based on real-life events, have plots progressing in chronological order. Liaozhai Zhiyi is primarily celebrated for the many stories depicting the interaction between humans and supernatural beings such as ghosts, fox-spirits, and a host of immortal creatures and spectres.

Although Pu freely mixes reality with fantasy and dreams, his description of Chinese society in the early years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) seems true to life. Most of the stories fall into two categories: romantic love stories, which praise purity and fidelity, or scathing pieces of social criticism, which target corrupt bureaucrats and landowners. A common theme is the confrontation between the passive frustrated scholar and the assertive woman who may be a benign spirit or an evil demon or even human. Several scholars have noted Pu’s interest in and favorable treatment of women, who are
A common theme of the short stories found in the Liaozhai Zhiyi involve interaction between humans and super-natural beings such as fox-spirits as seen in this excerpt from Pu Sonling’s “Seizing A Fox.”

A certain Mr. Sun, an uncle of one of my distant relatives by marriage, had always been a gutsy man. Once, while taking a day-time nap, he felt a vague sensation of a creature mounting his bed and then his own body rocking and swinging upwards, as if floating on a puff of clouds and fog. He thought to himself, “Could this be an succubi (ya hu, literally, “oppressing fox”)? He took a peek at the creature, which was the size of a cat, with yellow fur and green snout, stealthily crawling toward him alongside his feet, as if trying to avoid waking him up. The creature slowly crept against his body; first his feet then his thighs fell numb as it touched them. As soon as it reached his abdomen, however, Sun abruptly sat up, hunched down, and grabbed its neck. The creature cried in distress but was unable to break loose. Sun urgently summoned his wife, who then tied up the creature with a sash around its waist. Clasping both ends of the sash, Sun laughed at the creature, “I have heard that you are skilled at transformation, now I am going to see with my own eyes how you are able to do it.” Before he was done speaking, however, the creature suddenly sucked in its abdomen to the size of a straw, almost slipping away. Greatly taken aback, Sun firmly clutched it with renewed force, but this time it swelled its abdomen until it was thicker than a rice bowl and so hard that it did not give in to Sun’s tight grip. As Sun instinctively loosened his hands, the creature again shrank. Fearing that it might break free, Sun urged his wife to kill it. She frantically looked around, unable to find a knife. Sun momentarily looked to his left to indicate to her where one was. When he turned back, he found in his hands only a sash tied in the shape of a noose, the creature having already disappeared.


often positively contrasted with their feeble spouses. Pu’s satirical criticism of society, which not surprisingly took aim at the official civil service examination system, has earned him labels such as “proto-Marxist” and “anti-Manchu.” Liaozhai Zhiyi has inspired scores of plays and films and has been translated into English several times.

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Further Reading

