

Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio



PEOPLE'S CHINA PUBLISHING HOUSE

Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio

III



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Preface

by Wu Xianlin

Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio is a collection of stories involving supernatural spirits. Records of how spirits harmed humans first appeared in China during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 BC). By the Wei and Jin dynasties, from AD 220 to 420, ghost stories had become very popular and tales about the supernatural were common topics of conversation after dinner and in the fields or vegetable gardens. For more than a thousand years ghost stories maintained their popularity despite dynastic changes. Then during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), a scholar named Pu Songling from Zichuan County, Shandong, brought ghost story-telling to its historical peak with his epic collection, *Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio*, which is recognized as a masterpiece of Chinese literature known in every household for more than three hundred years. The three volumes presented here are selections from this work.

Pu Songling was born in 1640. Like many scholars of his era, he studied hard, trying to make a career by first passing the imperial examinations. He studied for ten years but did not emerge as a leading scholar through the exams. His failure compelled him to divert his energies and talents to the creation of *Strange Tales*. Once he began the work, he found great pleasure and motivation in collecting and recording the ancient

folk tales of the Chinese countryside. For forty years he collected tales of the supernatural, creating a work that has been referred to as "unprecedented and unrepeatable" in China's literary history.

Stories in the work cover a wide range of subjects and are full of twists and turns, presenting from different angles the social customs of Chinese society at the time. The book abounds with the mysteries of an ancient culture and offers a window into the psychology of the ancient Chinese people.

Chiefly the stories, through their portrayals of foxes and spirits, express true love between men and women; and through the strange changes in flowers, bamboo plants, stones, birds, insects, fish and animals, convey a longing for a better life. Through illusion and the realm of the supernatural, the author searches for mental peace in the world of humanity. With their strong impact, the stories always strike common accord among readers, arousing their deep longing for what is beautiful, good and truthful and their hatred for what is disgusting.

The achievement of the *Strange Tales* transcends national boundaries and the ages. It was first introduced to Japan in the 17th century, then to Great Britain, Germany and the United States in the 18th century. To date, it has been published in more than 30 editions in 18 languages. The clever structure and unique presentation not only captured the hearts and minds of the elite class in China's past and became a literary model in China, but have also won the admiration of many foreigners. Herbert Allen Giles (1845-1935), a noted British Sinologist, observed that among Western writers perhaps only Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century British commentator and historian

known for his sharp insight into British society, could compare with Pu Songling, who wrote of the worst things so beautifully that he captivated all his readers.

The recent program of reform and opening to the outside world has brought forth an unprecedentedly prosperous period in literary creation in the country. Seminars on Pu Songling and his work have been held; in-depth studies of *Strange Tales* have been conducted by scholars; and new editions of the ancient work have included profound and insightful notations. As part of this work, the People's China Publishing House presents this translation of *Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio*, fulfilling a mission to spread Oriental culture in a new historic era.

The three volumes contain 194 stories, representing the most complete attempt to date to present *Strange Tales* in foreign languages to readers outside of China. Every story stands on its own merits, and each volume serves as a great collection. Volumes four through nine in the series will present strange stories selected from other writers from various dynasties, with more narratives of human characters and fewer tales of the supernatural. In both sub-sets, the stories crystallize several thousand years of culture and offer the readers hours of interesting and rewarding adventures.

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The County Magistrate and an Aggressive Woman

The daughter of Mr. Weng from Linzi County, Shandong, was married to Mr. Li, a teacher at the Imperial College. Before their marriage, a fortune teller predicted that the woman would some day be punished by officials. Mr. Weng was first enraged by this and then could not help laughing out aloud: "It cannot be more absurd. Not only to say a girl from a gentleman's family like ours, who will never commit any offence, will be brought to court, but how can a teacher fail to protect his wife?"

Once Mr. Weng's daughter was married, she acted as a very aggressive woman whose swearing at her husband became a daily routine. Unable to put up with her any more, Mr. Li brought a charge against his wife in the court. The county magistrate, Mr. Shao, sent bailiffs to bring the woman to the court. Her father, Mr. Weng, was scared by the news and hurried to the court along with his sons and nephews, pleading to the county magistrate to drop the case. Mr. Shao refused the plea. Mr. Li, the husband, regretted what he had done and appealed to withdraw his charge. Mr. Shao, the magistrate, flew into a rage: "Who do you think you are, telling the court to try a case and then asking the court to drop it? I'm going to try the case anyway." When the woman was brought to the court, the magistrate asked her one or two questions and came



“She is really a bitch!” Mr. Shao sentences her to thirty beatings.

to the conclusion: "She is really a bitch!" He then sentenced her to thirty beatings. When this was carried out, her back was a bloody mess.

The unofficial historian remarked: The magistrate must have had a strong resentment towards bad behaviors by women, otherwise why should he fly into such a rage. With such a strict official, however, there would not be any unreasonable and aggressive women in the county. So this incident must be recorded to make up the inadequacies of biographies of enlightened officials.

A Test of Loyalty

Scholar Dong from Xuzhou, Jiangsu, loved to play with swords and took pride in being a gallant man. One day he ran into a traveler on the way and they traveled together on donkey backs. Mr. Dong learned that the other traveler was from Liaoyang and his family name was Tong. Tong explained: "I've been away from home for twenty years and have just returned from overseas." Mr. Dong asked: "Since you have traveled so widely and known so many people, have you ever met any people with special skills?" The traveler replied: "What kind of special skills do you mean?" Mr. Dong told the traveler about his special interest in the art of fencing and his regret in having not met any people who really knew the art well enough to teach him. The traveler said: "People with special skills are easy to find, but only those loyal and honest can be taught the real skills." So Mr. Dong talked about how honest he was and pulled out his sword, pointing at it and using it to cut trees along the way, admiring the sharpness of the blade.

Traveler Tong touched his beard, smiled and asked to see the sword. Mr. Dong gave it to him. After examining it for a while, Traveler Tong said: "This sword was made with melted armor and has long been soaked in sweat. It is but the cheapest kind. I don't understand the art of fencing, but I do have a sword, a very good one." He took out his sword, only about a foot long, and began to use it to peel Mr. Dong's sword and cut it into small slivers. Mr. Dong's sword fell off



Mr. Dong take out his sword, only about a foot long.

like a cucumber being cut with a sharp knife. Mr. Dong was greatly surprised. He took his travel companion's short sword, examined it and touched it before he returned it. He invited the traveler to his house and asked the man to stay for two days so that he could learn fencing from him, but the traveler insisted that he knew nothing about the art. Mr. Dong then began to talk in great length about fencing and the traveler simply listened.

It grew late and suddenly noises were heard in the next compound where Dong's father lived. Mr. Dong was both surprised and suspicious of the noises. He leaned over at the wall and heard someone shouting: "Call your son out and let me kill him or I won't let you go!" Soon fighting was heard and someone began moaning. From the voice, he sensed it was his father. Mr. Dong picked up a sword and was ready to jump over, but was stopped by the traveler who said: "The robber asked for you and will try to get you. Since you have no other relatives, you should leave your will with your wife. I'll go and get your servants up." Mr. Dong agreed and went into the house, making his final arrangements with his wife, who cried, pulling at his clothes. Dong's determination disappeared and the couple hid themselves upstairs, where they found arrows to protect themselves in case the robbers came in. Just then, they heard Traveler Tong laugh: "Thank goodness, the robbers are gone." Mr. Dong aimed his light at the traveler, who had totally disappeared. Next he saw his father going out to drink at his neighbor's house and all that was in the courtyard was a heap of ash from grass torches. He realized that the traveler was a person of unusual skills.

The unofficial historian remarked: Filial piety and loyalty