

STRANGE STORIES OF LIAOZHAI

聊斋志异选译



Selected Translations from
Pu Songling's
**STRANGE STORIES OF
LIAOZHAI**

by

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聊斋志异选译

莫若强、莫遵中、莫遵均译

外语教学与研究出版社

聊斋志异选译(英文本)
LIAOZHAI, ZHIYI XUANYI

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莫若强等译

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外语教学与研究出版社出版

(北京市西三环北路十九号)

外语教学与研究出版社编辑部电子计算机房排版

中国印刷技术研究所照排中心制版

华利国际合营印刷有限公司印刷

新华书店北京发行所发行

开本 787 × 960 1/32 6.5 印张 90 千字

1988 年 1 月第 1 版 1988 年 1 月第 1 次印刷

印数 1-14,000 册

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ISBN 7-5600-0167-X / I · 3

定价: 2.20 元

Preface

This collection is a new English translation of the twenty best loved stories from Pu Songling's *Liaozhaizhiyi*, a classic of Chinese literature which is as widely read in China as are the tales of *The Arabian Nights* in the English-speaking world.

In the process of our work on the new translation we have referred to the old and the not so old translations by others. We have benefited not a little from their work, and we gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness to them. We have not, however, hesitated to attempt some improvements wherever we noticed inaccuracies or infelicities in the renderings of our predecessors.

Our heartfelt thanks go to Mrs. Jude Carlson, who undertook to read the whole book in manuscript and made numerous valuable suggestions, most of which have been incorporated in the text with gratitude.

We hope that this little volume will be readily intelligible and enjoyable to all readers, Chinese and foreign alike.

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An Introduction to *Liaozhaizhiyi*

Liaozhaizhiyi is the masterpiece of Pu Songling (1640–1715), the famous short-story writer of the Qing Dynasty. Over the past 300 years, it has been circulated so widely and welcomed so affectionately that it has in fact had an influence not inferior to that of Cao Xueqin's *A Dream of Red Mansions*. Several of the stories have been adapted for the cinema, the stage and television.

In its entirety, *Liaozhaizhiyi* consists of 488 short stories, which cost the author three decades of hard work. Begun when he was 20, the first draft was completed when he was 40, the amendments and supplements were not finished until he was 50. 'Liaozhai' is simply the name of Pu's study, and 'zhizhi' means 'strange tales based on fantasy'.

Throughout his life, the author failed to achieve his ambitions. Because of numerous frustrations encountered in his career as an official, he was always dissatisfied with the seamy side of the imperial examination system. Having once been on the staff of a county magistrate, he was also well aware of the dark inner workings of official circles. His work as a teacher at an old-style private school for some thirty years brought him into frequent contact with the lower strata of society. As a result, the author dared to cast suspicion on, and to express his dissatisfaction with, the repulsive and abominable feudal society. All this is

reflected in his writing.

Pu's choice of fox-spirits, flower-spirits, female ghosts, swordsmen and the like to people his stories was intentional. They enabled him to mirror the cruelty of social life under the feudal Manchu rule and yet avoid its censorship and political persecution of scholars. Breaking the restraint of facts in creating these far-fetched fantasies, his brilliant imagination was brought into full play. Not only could he freely criticize the existing state of affairs, he could also foster the ideal of a new, happy life.

One of the distinctive stylistic features of *Liaozhaizhiyi* is the successful use of irony and satire.

Zhiyi is a style of short-story writing with a long history in Chinese literature traceable to the beginning of the 3rd century. Pu, however, carried forward and developed the bitterly ironic, satirical writing technique of *zhiyi*, and ingeniously used this form to criticize the existing state of affairs and nurture hopes for a better life, thus giving the form a far-reaching social significance. This might be one of the main reasons these stories are so joyously welcomed by the reading public and so universally praised by literary critics. It is no wonder that Pu is admired as one of the most excellent short-story writers in China.

Liaozhaizhiyi bears another distinctive characteristic: its terse and lively language. The author deftly refined the material gathered from the world around

him, and made succinct and ingenious use of language.

Liaozhai-zhiyi was written in classical Chinese. Pu, however, wrote in an uninhibited style all his own. He dared to blaze new trails and smash the bonds of tradition by writing classical Chinese in as free a manner as spoken Chinese. This might explain why *Liaozhai-zhiyi* has enjoyed great popularity for several hundred years and has been far more enthusiastically received by readers than the *zhiyi* written during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) when the genre was in immense vogue.

Liaozhai-zhiyi is a truly outstanding collection of short stories. With this 17th-century masterpiece, Pu acquires a high reputation in the literary arena, standing on a completely equal footing with Cao Xueqin and Wu Jingzi.

About the Author

Pu Songling (1640–1715) was one of the greatest Chinese literary figures of the Qing Dynasty. Styled 'Liuxian' and 'Lay Buddhist Liuquan', he was also dubbed 'Mr. Liaozhai', after his masterpiece *Liaozhaizhiyi*.

Pu was a native of Zichuan County, which now belongs to the city of Zibo, in Shandong Province. More precisely, his home was in Pujiashuang, four kilometres to the east of the city.

Pu was born into a landlord–merchant family which was no longer prosperous. From his childhood on he studied very hard, and won literary fame early in his youth. At the age of 19 he was successful in the imperial examinations at the county level, and received the degree of *xiucai*. But time and again he failed the advanced examinations at the provincial level, and never did pass. At the age of 71, however, the degree of *gongsheng* (A *gongsheng* was a student at the Imperial College, the highest educational institution in feudal China.) was conferred upon him because of his long tenure as a *xiucai*. The award was made not on the basis of his examination scores, but in conformity with an old rule of the imperial examination system.

Pu taught at an old–style private school in his native village for 30 successive years, with the exception of a short period on the staff of the magistrate of Baoying County in Jiangsu Province.

Financially, Pu was badly off. The extensive contact he had as a result with ordinary people influenced his writing considerably.

Pu was a master of both poetry and prose, including *liqu*, a popular ballad form. But it was collecting stories about immortals, ghosts and fox-spirits that interested him most deeply, and whenever he heard a story he would record it and try to improve it.

Again and again he rehearsed the stories to his friends, soliciting their opinions, which he heeded in subsequent revisions. After decades of exacting intellectual labour, his renowned masterpieces *Liaozhaizhiyi*, was completed. Begun when he was 20, the first draft was completed when he was 40; polishing and revising continued until he was 50. The work consists of 488 stories in all, written in *zhiyi* style, a literary form in vogue during the Tang Dynasty.

The author was gloomy and melancholy all his life. His career as an official suffered repeated frustrations. Furthermore, in the days of the Qing Dynasty, natural calamities and the heavy oppression of the ruling class reduced the Chinese people to a state of misery. The Pu family did not escape this misery. It was only natural then that he came to acquire a strong resentment, mirrored in his writing, against the evils he both witnessed and experienced.

In his pithy stories Pu criticized the politics and society of the times by spinning tales of ghosts and fox-spirits. With his profound knowledge, extraordi-

nary wisdom and fertile imagination, he produced an outstanding work of literature, remarkable for its subtle, freezing irony and burning satire.

In the literary world Pu, the writer of short stories, is not inferior to the great novelists such as Cao Xueqin and Wu Jingzi.

As well as *Liaozhaizhiyi*, Pu's works include six volumes of poems, four collections of prose and diverse *liqu*.

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A Visit to the Bee Kingdom

Dou Xu, who styled himself Xiaohui, was a native of Jiaozhou in Shandong Province. One day when he was taking a nap at home, he saw a man in brown attire standing by his bedside, obviously anxious to say something to him. "What can I do for you?" Dou asked him. "Our master asks you to come to our house," the caller replied.

"Who is your master, please?"

"He lives not far from here."

So away they went together. After turning a corner they arrived at a place where there were innumerable houses rising one above the other, and thousands upon thousands of interlocking rafters.

They wound their way past countless doors, not at all similar to those usually found in this world. A great many official-looking men and women passed to and fro, each of whom asked the man in brown, "Has Mr. Dou come yet?" The answer was always in the affirmative.

All of a sudden a mandarin appeared, who received the guest very politely and led him into a palace. On being seated, Dou said, "Thank you ever so much for your kind invitation. But as I haven't had the honour of becoming acquainted with you and of meeting you before, I really don't know why you've given me such a cordial reception."

"Our king," answered the mandarin, "has long been aware of your renown as a gentleman of distinction and virtue, and so he is very anxious to make your acquaintance."

"Who is your king, please?" inquired Dou in still greater astonishment.

"You'll see for yourself in no time," answered the mandarin.

Shortly afterwards, two maids of honour, came forward bearing banners and guided the guest through a great number of doors until they reached the throne, upon which His Majesty was seated. Seeing the visitor coming, the king at once descended to meet him, and made him take the seat of honour. Once these preliminaries were over, a splendid banquet was given, with many exquisite viands of various descriptions spread out before them.

Looking up, Dou's eyes lighted upon a plaque on which was inscribed THE CINNAMON PALACE.

He was just beginning to feel perplexed as to what to say next when the king said to him, "The honour of having you for a neighbour is, so to speak a bond of kinship between us. From now on, let's cast away suspicion and fear, and give ourselves over to merriment."

To this proposal, Dou simply murmured his aye aye.

When the wine had gone round several times, the sounds of singing and the playing of flutes were heard

in the distance. Unaccompanied by the drum or gong, the music sounded remarkably elegant and refined.

After a little while, the king looked around and said off hand, "I've got a verse here for any of you gentlemen to cap. Here it is:

"A man of parts calls at the Cinnamon Palace,"

While the courtiers were all engaged in thinking up an antithesis to complete the couplet. Dou continued the poem without pause:

"A gentleman loves the lotus flower."

At this, the king was immensely delighted, exclaiming, "How strange! 'Lotus' happens to be my daughter's name. How nicely capped the antithesis is! Apparently it is fated that there should be bond between the two of you. Tell the princess that she is obliged to come out and receive this gentleman."

In a moment, the tinkling of ornaments and the fragrant aroma of musk announced the arrival of the princess. In came a maiden of about sixteen or seventeen, a matchless beauty. The king introduced her as his daughter Lotus, and bade her curtsy to Dou.

As soon as the formalities were over, she went away. The very sight of her, however, struck Dou with such emotion that he sat there stupefied. When the king raised his cup to propose another drink, Dou gazed at him without seeing anything.

The king, perceiving what had drawn away the guest's attention, said, "You and my daughter seem to be well suited, but I'm ashamed to say that she is not

your peer. What's the best thing to do then?" Dou was too carried away to hear his words.

One of the onlookers sitting next to him discreetly trod on his foot and asked him whether he hadn't seen that the king wished to drink with him, and hadn't heard what the king had just told him. With a start, Dou recovered himself at once. He hastily rose from the table and made an apology to the king for his breach of courtesy, saying, "Thank you for your kind reception, but I have consumed so much wine that I didn't even know what I was doing. Would you please pardon my lack of respect? In any event, as Your Majesty has a lot of business to attend to, I might as well take my leave now."

"I'm so pleased to have met you," replied the king, "and only regret that you're in such a hurry to be gone. However, I won't detain you any longer. Just one more word. If you haven't quite forgotten all about us in a few days time, I shall be delighted to invite you here again." After this, he gave orders that the guest be escorted home.

On the way home, one of the courtiers asked Dou, "Why did you keep mum when the king said that you were a good match for his daughter? His Majesty apparently told you this with an eye to having you as his son-in-law." At this, Dou was overcome with remorse for having missed his chance, and stamped his feet all the way back. Soon they reached his house, and at that moment he awoke from his

dream.

The sun had already set. There he sat in the deepening dusk mulling over the events in his dream, which were still fresh in his memory. That night he put out the candle early, and went to bed hoping to continue his dream. But nothing happened. And for several successive nights, the dream did not return to him. Despondency seized hold of him.

One night, however, when he was sleeping with a friend of his, a courtier from the familiar imperial palace walked in and called him to appear before the king. With great delight, he followed him to the palace, where he threw himself on his knees in front of the king. His Majesty drew him to his feet and asked him to be seated.

"Since we last met," the king said, "I have become aware that you are willing to marry my daughter, and I hope that it doesn't seem improper for me to offer her to you as your wife." At these words, Dou rose and thanked the king. On His Majesty's orders a banquet was prepared which all the great ministers of the state attended. When they had finished drinking, a maid of honour announced "The princess is now fully arrayed."

Soon after that, a bevy of young ladies ushered in the princess, a red, embroidered veil covering her head. She glided on tiny footsteps to the red silk carpet and approached the bridegroom.

The bride and bridegroom bowed to each other,