

Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio

Pu Songling



FOREIGN LANGUAGES PRESS

PU SONGLING

STRANGE TALES
FROM MAKE-DO

STUDIO

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藏书章

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Preface

Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio is an outstanding collection of classical Chinese short stories, but its author Pu Songling was a little-known figure during his lifetime.

Pu Songling (1640-1715), styled Liuxian (Earthbound Spirit) and sometimes called the Recluse of Willow Spring, was born in what is now Zibo City, Shandong, to a declining landlord-merchant family. His father Pu Pan was a man of broad learning who had a disappointing official career. Pu Songling was a bright, studious child, and his father took pains to foster his talents. At nineteen he placed first in three consecutive regional examinations. No one could have expected that he would repeatedly be rejected in subsequent provincial examinations. At the age of seventy he still wore the dark gown of a poor bachelor of letters. Except for a few months clerking for a magistrate south of the Yangtze when he was thirty-one, Pu Songling lived his whole life out of favor, teaching in a country school-room.

Out of the poverty and austerity of his unfulfilled life, Pu Songling learned to identify with the common people in their sufferings. Unlike most feudalistic literati, who looked down sympathetically on the people from positions of privilege, he stood among the people and pondered their fate. For the ill-treated he argued cases in court, and for the indignant he raised his voice. Seeing peasants lie ill for

want of medical care, he compiled a book of prescriptions to help them help themselves. Seeing them ignorant and without access to schools, he compiled *Common Characters for Everyday Use* to help them study on their own. To enhance the practice of agriculture, he gathered the fruits of past farming experience to write the *Book of Husbandry and Sericulture*. Among the literati of China's feudal past, men as concerned for the lot of poor peasants as Pu Songling were few and far between. Of course his thinking could not help but reflect the feudalistic education he received from an early age. But this was secondary to the progressive, democratic nature of his thinking.

From his approach to the writing of *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* we can see how close were Pu Songling's ties to the people. Diarists of the time tell how Pu Songling collected folk tales by setting out tea for passers-by in a pavilion next to Willow Spring in Pu Village, imploring them to tell their new and strange stories. The country people called him a "story maniac." His fondness for stories about werewolves, immortals, ghosts, and goblins prompted the country people to warn him playfully: "Be careful the werewolves don't get you with their spells." Obviously many stories in his book were collected from popular sources. Friends and relatives who knew of his hobby were glad to send unusual folk tales to him. Eventually he amassed nearly five hundred of them. From Pu Songling's manners of collecting some stories and writing others himself, we can say that *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* is a crystallization of shared wisdom.¹

Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio is closely tied to folk

¹See the materials collected in *Pu Songling yu Minjian Wenxue* (*Pu Songling and Folk Literature*) pp. 24-32, Shanghai Wenxue Chubanshe, Shanghai. 1985.

literature, but ultimately it is not a book of folk tales, because it is imbued with Pu Songling's particular passions and ideals. This is why Pu Songling called it his "book of isolated indignation."

In reading *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* the first question that strikes us is: "Why did Pu Songling make up all those ghost stories? Some people say his enthusiasm for ghost stories stemmed from belief in outdated superstitions. This view is untenable. True, certain elements of fatalism and feudal superstition are treated with approval in the stories, but Pu Songling had more socially compelling reasons to write about ghosts. The late Ming and early Qing was a time of great upheaval for China's feudal society. In 1644 the corrupt Ming court was overthrown by Li Zicheng's army of peasant rebels.¹ Aristocratic leaders of the Manchu nationality, in collusion with Wu Sangui, the Ming general garrisoning Shanhai Pass, robbed the peasant army of its victory and established China's last feudal dynasty—the Qing. The Qing rulers overcame the various nationalities of China with the help of widespread slaughter and pillage, thus stirring up fierce flames of resistance. In order that the ruling elite of a small minority people could rule a huge nation, suppression and obliteration of resistance became a key means of protecting its government rule. This was the background for an unprecedentedly ruthless system of suppression—the "literary inquisition." In the circumstances Pu Songling faced, he and his whole family might well have been executed if he had spoken out, but the outrage that swelled within him could not be pent up forever. Thus his thoughts could not help but turn to

¹Li Zicheng (1606-1645), leader of a late-Ming peasant rebellion. In 1644 his army of peasant rebels took Beijing and toppled the Ming dynasty.

toward the realm of the mysterious and fantastic, to kindred spirits that waited in shaded groves and dark valleys, to stories of werefoxes and ghosts that could vent his secret indignation. Nothing could have followed more naturally. What was more, numerous stories of werefoxes and ghosts had been handed down since ancient times in China. Song dynasty scholars had put together the 500-fascicle collection *Far-Ranging Records of the Taiping Reign*, which contained many stories of werefoxes, ghosts and spirits. This collection laid the groundwork for the writing of *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*.

But whether Pu Songling wrote of werefoxes, ghosts, spirits or demons, the true subject of his writing was people. The stories of *Make-Do Studio* appear in the guise of the supernatural, colored with an uncanny strangeness. But this strangeness is not the freakishness of the old marvel fiction. These stories are strange without being freakish, marvelous yet in tune with human feelings. Their unpredictable events are tied to the personalities of ordinary people. The marvelous depictions of young women, in particular, have a lively brilliance, with characters that stand out in clear relief and bold coloring. The genuineness of their feelings wins our esteem and touches on our true concerns.

Of course many of these young women are figures with a positive place in the feudal order, such as Feng-xian and Hu Fourth-maiden, who encourage their husbands to seek fame and riches. But the ones that especially draw our attention are the rebellious women who dare to transgress the code of feudal propriety and fight to throw off their feudal chains. The writer did not create these unusual female figures just for novelty's sake. Through them he could express his outrage at the ways of the world, and his

unique perspective on society's problems; he could explore paths that might lead to a better society. Thus most of Pu Songling's female figures tend to pose challenges to accepted practices of feudal society.

Women were the most deeply oppressed segment of feudal society. The fourfold authority of government, clan, religion, and husband pressed down on them like a great mountain, keeping them submissive and hardly able to draw a breath. Even the freedom of women to talk and laugh was constrained by the rule: "Women are not to speak in raised tones, or to expose their teeth in laughter." In direct opposition to this, Pu Songling created the character Yingning, a vivacious girl who is not afraid to speak out and laugh. Wherever Yingning goes, one hears the sound of laughter. The author captures images of her look and mood as she reacts with laughter to differing circumstances. The unfading mountain flower in the story is an unmistakable emblem of her beauty of character. In an authoritarian setting that suppresses laughter, Yingning throws back her head and laughs with an unabashed frivolity that plainly clashes head-on with feudal propriety. Later, Yingning leaves her remote, flower-bedecked valley and comes to the unclean realm of ordinary mortals, where such laughter becomes impossible. "She would not laugh, even when teased." This contrast makes the challenge posed by Yingning's laugh even more obvious.

The feudal landholding classes put a high value on dominant men and submissive women. "In women lack of talent is a virtue." Pu Songling reversed this by writing of many young women whose intelligence and judgement far surpass their men. The incompetence of the girl-scholar's husband in "Miss Yan" prompts her to dress in male clothing, win top honors in an examination, and become

an outstanding official, outdoing her husband in everything she sets her hand to. The author plainly created this story to criticize the mistaken notions of male superiority prevalent at the time and demonstrate that female intelligence was capable of great things, if only given the right opportunity, in spite of the long-standing effects of a repressive system. What was more, the talents of many women would put scholarly males to shame.

Feudal propriety ruled that "men and women are forbidden to pass objects from hand to hand." But Pu Songling went against the current to write of close friendships between men and women. In "Ghost Girl Xiaoxie" the girls Qiurong and Xiaoxie show up in young Scholar Tao's study and play whimsical pranks on him: they tug his whiskers, pat his cheeks, or tickle his nose with a feather to make him sneeze. Sometimes they sneak up behind him and cover his eyes with their hands, then hide in a corner trying to stifle their laughter. The reader chuckling over their antics is liable to forget that they are ghosts. The theme of "Fox-Fairy Jiaonuo" is also an affirmation of undying friendship between a man and a woman. Such sincere, pure relationships between the sexes were impossible given the unclean realities of the time, yet people longed for them. Besides relationships of husband and wife, or between lovers, this story demonstrates a wish for simple, open-hearted friendship between the sexes, which can sometimes be more precious than an ordinary love affair.

The feudal classes vociferously proclaimed marriage to be a weighty event that required obedience to "the bidding of one's parents and the words of a go-between." Pu Songling followed the opposite course and wrote many stories of free love between young men and women,

surpassing earlier romantic fiction in the boldness and strength of desire they express. For the sake of love Sun Zichu ignores the ridicule and abuse of others ("Precious"); Nie Xiaoqian is unable to find love while alive, but she continues her indomitable search for happiness in ghostly form ("Nie Xiaoqian"); Liancheng gives her life to gain the love of one who understands her, and through the strength of love comes back to life again ("Liancheng"). What eventually brings these young people together is as much an ideal arrangement of the author as it is their own victory through struggle.

Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio brings to life a large number of remarkable female characters, brilliantly prefiguring the gallery of young women who frequent Grand-view Garden in *A Dream of Red Mansions*.¹ The emergence of these independent-minded young women in fiction indicates that China's feudal society was in its decline. the moribund condition of the feudal system was exposed for what it was: life was becoming impossible, not just for the oppressed classes, but also for the young men and women of the ruling classes. Thus each of the characters in the stories breaks away from feudal restrictions in their own way, foretelling the breakdown of the feudal structure. This is our understanding of the book's significance in social terms.

Pu Songling was not only an incisive critic of society as it actually was: he wrote of his highest ideals as well. What others dared not conceive of, he conceived of. The wings of his imagination took him to places no one else could go.

His imaginary flights differ from the absurd concoctions

¹ *A Dream of Red Mansions* is a classical novel by Cao Xueqin. "Grand-view Garden" is the large pleasure garden in the novel, where the young members of the aristocratic Jia family live.

of the old marvel fiction in the following ways:

1) His imaginary flights have a sharp critical edge:

The forward-thinking fiction of the past includes many pieces which expose the workings of feudal officialdom. But the stories in *Make-Do Studio* have an approach all their own. They do not simply give a straightforward account of crimes committed by feudal officials. Instead, they create illusory settings in which the nature of feudal officialdom is more profoundly exposed. "The Cricket" exposes the endless hardship which the tribute system brought upon the people. But Pu Songling does not waste many words describing the desperation of people who could not hand over the required tribute. He describes a child who is in such desperation that his spirit leaves his body and transforms itself into an item of tribute—a fighting cricket. This cricket is finally presented to the imperial palace, where it overcomes the "famous generals" presented from all the other parts of the empire. It even overcomes an intimidatingly large rooster, much to the glee of the nabobs at court. But underneath this glee are the blood and sweat and resentment of the people. Such an exposé is more touching than a straightforward treatment of a family destroyed for failure to pay tribute. "Dream of Wolves" uses imaginary means to show the cannibalistic nature of feudal officialdom, in all its bloody savagery, and concludes: "I am forced to admit that beasts in official robes are everywhere in the empire." Few works of fiction in past times spoke out so forcefully against feudal officials.

2) His imaginary flights convey heartfelt praise:

Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio uses the techniques of fantasy to portray idealized characters. Pu Songling's werefoxes, immortals and flower spirits are approachable and warmly human, yet noble and high-minded. In "Huan-

niang" for instance, the girl Huanniang was devoted to the lute from an early age. One hundred years after her death, she still regrets not having learned lute-playing in direct succession from a famous teacher. On hearing Wen Ruchun's beautiful playing, she imitates it in secret until she completely masters his skills. In the course of learning the lute, both she and Lianggong fall in love with Wen. This could naturally have fostered the mutual jealousy of a love triangle, but Huanniang does not know what jealousy is. Instead, she exerts her wit and talents to win happiness for the man she loves, bringing Scholar Wen and Lianggong together in a blissful marriage. This done, she smiles and steals away. This contrasts markedly with the war of wits and trickery that really went on among people then, and the suspicion, jealousy, hypocrisy, and indifference among families. The moving thing about these love stories is how the author's imagination opens a window to the inner beauty of his characters.

3) The author's imagination evinces a powerful quest:

The real and the ideal are a unity of opposites. Pu Songling hated the dark reality of his times and harbored ideals of a better life. But he did not rely on utopian visions to embody his ideals: instead, he attacked the benightedness of the monarchy, and at the same time made his stories an outlet for his hopes of easing society's ills. The book's imaginary flights are a quest for understanding. Consider the questions some of the stories in the book raise:

Why is it the rule in society to invert beauty and ugliness? Might there perhaps be a "city in the sea" where men of talent win an honored place, and each can make use of his ability? ("City of the Rākṣasas")

Why, in so many seats of government, do beasts in robes

and scholars' caps hold sway? Can there ever be a magically powerful ruler who cares enough to free his people from harm? ("The Ruler")

Why is the world of men, as well as the palace of dragons, under dominion of evil demons? Is it possible that somewhere between heaven and earth a paradise might exist? ("Wanxia")

Why do civil examinations hold back brilliant scholars and favor mediocrities? When will the results be audited by Zhang Yuanhou, who would make sure that men of genius assume their rightful place? ("Yu Que")

In other stories we find one woman made anew by the exchanges of her heart for another's ("Judge Lu"), and another disfigured so her innocence may be protected ("Courtesan Ruiyun"). Many of the stories tell of young men and women who break the stifling bonds of feudal propriety. All demonstrate that Pu Songling, though he lived under a corrupt monarchy, never gave up his bold quest for another world. Although the goal of his quest was somewhat obscure, it was admirable in spirit.

4) The author's imagination gives form to thought-provoking messages:

Pu Songling's stories use language sparingly, but yield a great deal of meaning on careful reading. Though other writers wrote of ghosts just as he did, he manages to convey more of a message. His stories are efforts to encapsulate certain lessons of experience or reflections on life. "Painted Skin" is one of the most famous of his stories, and the words "painted skin" have become a synonym for duplicity that wears an outwardly human face but is inwardly demonic. "Witchcraft" and "Nie Xiaoqian" are a thought-provoking study on how fixity of human purpose can overcome demons. "The Taoist of Lao Mountain" is rich

with messages that cannot be summarized by the simple moral—"easy paths lead straight into brick walls."

Pu Songling's flights of imagination give his stories a fascination all their own, and they produce artistic effects that other works do not have. To accommodate their unusual characters and ideas, the stories have to be built along unique creative lines. They carry on the technique and form of ancient marvel fiction and wonder tales, but they are developed much beyond this. Their fantasies do not depart from truthfulness, and their marvels are woven cleverly together with normality. Lu Xun, in his *History of Chinese Fiction*, writes:

Though the *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*, like other collections of the period, are merely stories of the supernatural—of fairies, foxes, ghosts and goblins—the narratives are concise and meticulous in the tradition of Tang Dynasty stories, so that all these strange events appear very vivid. Sometimes the author describes oddities belonging not to the world of fantasy but to the world of men, and minor incidents are so well-recorded that readers find them fresh and interesting.

This is an overall view of the stories, but each of them has its own particular coloring. Some of them construct fantastic realms, and some strike out into the unknown. Some use tiny incidents as windows on larger things, and some seek reality in figments of imagination. There are uncanny coincidences, interplays of forces and transcendence of time and space. A nimble play of fancy and an unbounded field of imagination combine to build the scintillating world of these stories.

Pu Songling's treatment of the age-old subject of love,

for instance, sparkles with originality. Writing four or five different love stories might not cost an author much effort, but to write over a hundred love stories, as Pu Songling did without covering the same ground, is certainly no easy matter. Though we must admit that "Liancheng" bears some similarity in plot to the play *Peony Pavilion*,¹ such stories as "Yingning," "Precious," "Ghost-Girl Xiaoxie," "Ghost-Maiden Huanniang," "Ghost-Girl Wanxia," "Bird Nymph Zhuqing," "Linen Scarf" and "Fish Demon Bai Qiulian" are radical departures from previous models of romantic fiction. "Fairy Qing-E" in particular seems to have grown magically from a plot of ground that only the author could tend. The feudal code of propriety deprived young men and women of any chance to meet with each other. If they "tunneled through walls" to be with one another, they were "despised by parents and townsmen." In a setting like this, Huo Yuan feels regard for Qing-e but has no way to see her. Then Pu Songling lets him meet a priest of great magical powers who gives him a little spade. With this spade he digs straight through one wall after another, straight to Qing-e's secluded room, where he spends the night beside her. With the same spade Huo Yuan also drills into the rock face where Qing-e is kept captive, rescuing her from the tyranny of her father. The magic spade is the key element in the story. As a symbol of power it expresses the ardent wish of young men and women to penetrate the walls erected against their love. It expresses their long-felt demand to break through the barriers of rigid decorum. Pu Songling's remarkable plots evince his individual creativity and his progressively dem-

¹ *Peony Pavilion* is a romantic play written by the noted Ming playwright Tang Xianzu.

ocratic thinking. This is what gives his stories enduring life.

Chinese and Western scholars through the years have found much to praise in the streamlined, evocative style of *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*. This is one of the remarkable things about the book. The stories are short—in general little over a thousand characters and at most a few thousand. Yet they are surprising for their abundant content, their intricate reversals of plot, and their depth of thought. These stories are reminiscent of Chinese miniature landscapes, in which fist-sized mountains and ponds the size of a cupped hand impress as with scenic grandeur. What is more, each story has its own realm of thought, unlike all the rest. These stories stand rightly at the peak of China's classical short fiction.

In short, *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* is a book remarkable in many respects—for its characters, its ideas, its artistic conceptions, and its power to fascinate. Since its appearance, it has been a popular favorite, and its success as a work of the imagination has attracted the notice of scholars overseas. Over the years its stories have been translated and retranslated into many foreign languages. From this we can see that *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio* has become a shared treasure, not just of the Chinese people, but of all the world's people.

Wang Jisi and Liu Liemao

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