

# Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio



PEOPLE'S CHINA PUBLISHING HOUSE

# Strange Tales from the Liaozhai Studio

II

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People's China Publishing House  
1997, Beijing

(京)新登字 133 号

翻 译	郝光锋 孔 伟
	郭 林 江志平
	鲁启文 陆 江
英文编辑	理查德·皮尔斯
主 编	吴显林
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封面设计	李士伋
文内插图	肖书印

聊斋志异(2)

蒲松龄著

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人民中国出版社出版  
(北京车公庄大街 3 号)

邮政编码 100044

外文印刷厂印刷

中国国际图书贸易总公司发行  
(北京邮政信箱第 399 号 北京车公庄西路 35 号)

邮政编码 100044

1997 年第 1 版(英文版) 1997 年第一次印刷

ISBN 7-80065-599-7/G·201(外)

10-E-3131

First Edition 1997  
ISBN 7-80065-599-7

Chief Editor: Wu Xianlin  
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Published by People's China Publishing House  
3 Chegongzhuang Street, Beijing 100044, China

Distributed by China International Book Trading Corporation  
35 Chegongzhuang Xilu, Beijing 100044, China

Printed in the People's Republic of China



**Author Pu Songling**

# 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 Repentant Tiger

Once upon a time there was an old lady in her seventies who had only one son. One day, her son went into the mountains and was eaten by a tiger. The old lady was so grieved that she nearly committed suicide. When she went to see the county magistrate and wept in front of him, the official laughed, "It was a tiger that killed your son. How do you expect me to use my power to punish a wild beast?" The old lady howled when she heard these words. The county magistrate criticized her, but she was not afraid. Taking her age into consideration, the county magistrate could not bring himself to be unsympathetic, so he promised her that he would try to have the tiger caught and take revenge for her loss. She knelt on the ground and would not get up until the document was issued ordering the capture of the tiger. So the county magistrate asked of his staff who would volunteer to catch the tiger. One man, by the name of Li Neng, who happened to be drunk at the moment, walked up to the official and took the job. Only then did the old lady get up and leave the county government office.

As soon as he awoke from the stupor, Li Neng regretted his foolishness. Still he believed that the order issued by the county magistrate to catch the tiger was only a show and a method to free the magistrate from the nagging of the old lady. As a result, Li did not really carry out the order, but took the document back with him to the government office. The county magistrate was enraged, saying: "Since you've



An old lady opens her gate in the morning and finds a deer, which has already been killed.

promised to do it, there is no way for you to be allowed to take back your word!" Embarrassed, Li Neng finally asked to have all the hunters in the county gathered. Then he took them to the mountain valley in the hope of catching a tiger and reporting that the job was done.

Over a month passed and Li Neng was punished with several hundred lashings for failing the job. Having no other place to pour out his grievances, Li went to pray at the Mountain God Temple in the eastern suburbs. Soon, a tiger came in, catching Li off guard. The tiger, however, pruned itself in the center of the room. Li prayed: "If you are the one who ate the old lady's son, please lower your head and let me tie you up." So saying, he tied a rope around the tiger's head without meeting with any resistance from the beast.

Li took the tiger to the county government office where the county magistrate questioned the tiger: "Were you the one who ate the old lady's son?" The tiger nodded its head. The magistrate went on: "Paying for a life you've taken with your own life has been a rule since antiquity, besides the man was the old lady's only son. How can she live in such an advance age without the care of her son? If you can serve as her son, I'll let you free." The tiger nodded its head again. The magistrate had it unbound so that the tiger could leave.

Although she complained that the county magistrate had let the tiger go instead of avenging her son, the lady opened her gate in the morning and found a deer, which had already been killed. She sold the deer meat and skin and used that money to support the family. Such things happened pretty often. Some times, you could see the tiger bringing in money and silk in its mouth. In a way the tiger was more filial than

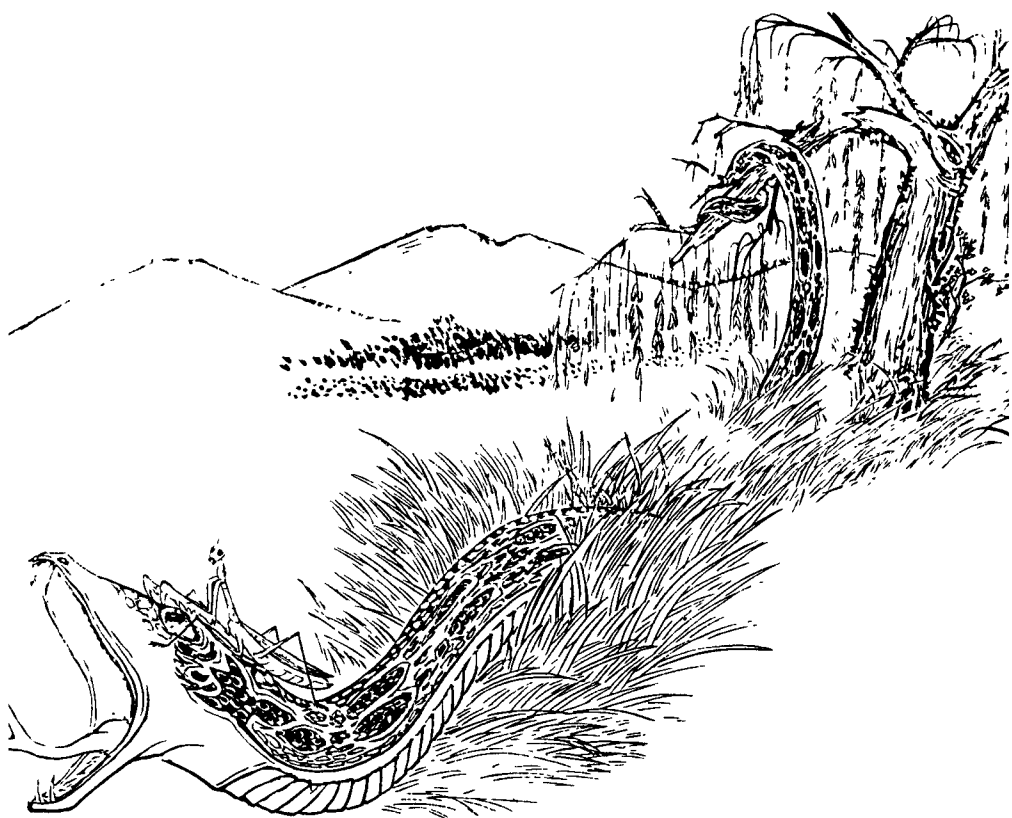
her son and quietly she felt grateful to the tiger. When the tiger came, it would lie under the eaves all day long. She and the tiger lived in harmony.

Several years later, the old lady died and the tiger roared in the living room. The savings of the old lady were more than enough to cover her funeral. As soon as the tomb was built, the tiger rushed to the sight, frightening away the guests. The tiger went straight to the tomb, roaring even more loudly. It did not leave until it had vented its grief. The locals built the Virtuous Tiger Temple, which still stands today.

## **The Fight Between a Mantis and a Snake**

A certain Mr. Zhang was walking in a mountain valley and heard a loud noise from the cliffs. He climbed up the cliffs and saw a huge snake tossing in the trees, its tail beating the willows and breaking willow branches. Its desperate tossing and turning suggested that it was being gripped by something. Mr. Zhang looked closely but found nothing. He became more curious and walked nearer to the snake. This time he saw a mantis clinging to the snake's head, cutting the snake head with its forearms as sharp as swords. Despite whatever the snake did, it could not throw off the mantis. Eventually, the snake died. Skin and flesh had been peeled off from its forehead.





**A mantis cuts the snake's head with forearms  
as sharp as a sword.**