

## Erotic Enclaves and Contested Beds: Gardens in Pu Songling's *Chuanqi* Tales

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**Abstract:** This article examines the literary garden depicted by Pu Songling (1640-1715) in his strange stories. The enchanted, deserted, and haunted garden functions as a metaphor for the contested ground on which one of the most important Ming-Qing intellectual issues, *qing*, is debated. The rich associations of the garden in such supernatural stories are traced back to early literary traditions, highlighting Pu's brilliant imagination and the unprecedented sophistication and complexity of *chuanqi* tales. In the process of constructing literary gardens, Pu contests the intellectual issues of his time and dissolves the boundaries between normal and abnormal, real and ideal, death and life, and order and disorder.

**Keywords** Pu Songling; *Liaozhai zhiyi*; *zhiguai*; *chuanqi*; strange stories; literary garden; *qing*; classical Chinese tales.

In the histories of Chinese civilization and literature, both actual and literary gardens have rich cultural connotations. Since the garden retains an intimate contact with nature and physically marks the boundaries of inside and outside, familiar and strange, and private and public, it has been employed by writers, especially those of *zhiguai* 志怪 (*records of the strange*) and *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tales of the marvelous), to explore and contest the cultural assumptions and boundaries of the cultivated and uncivilized, familiar and unfamiliar, restricted and freed, ordered and disordered, and the real and supernatural worlds often marked by the boundary between “normal” and “abnormal.” Needless to say, the garden is closely bonded with aesthetic discourse, and for this reason garden settings greatly enhance images of the supernatural realm depicted in strange stories.

Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) is one of the prominent writers of Chinese strange tales. Focusing on “Xiangyu” 香玉, “Jiaona” 娇娜, “Yingning” 嬰寧, and “Huangying” 黃英, four selected tales from Pu's *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異 (*Liaozhai's Records of the Strange*), a collection of 494 tales, this article examines the significant meanings of the isolated and enchanted gardens he created in his fiction.<sup>1</sup> Pu employed the garden as a site from which to explore the concept of *qing* 情, a Chinese term for emotion, sentiment, sympathy, lust, love, desire, and passion. On the one hand, Pu's usage of the garden is derived and shaped by a long tradition; on the other, it develops this tradition with an unprecedented sophistication and complexity. This study reveals that in the process of constructing literary gardens, Pu contests the intellectual issues of his time, including debates on the dimensions of *qing*, and conflicts between traditional Confucian values and the philosophical ideas advocated by the sixteenth century neo-Confucians.

During the late Ming (1368-1644) and early Qing (1644-1911) periods, China experienced ceaseless power struggles, brutal suppression, dynastic decline, Manchurian invasion, dynastic fall, and the establishment of an “alien” government. These changes had a great impact upon the social, cultural, and intellectual environments of the day. The period was characterized by political terror and coercion, social abuses, brutal suppression, and corrup-

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tion. Nevertheless, this formative and transforming period between the Ming and the Qing dynasties has been described as “one of the most creative and stimulating periods in the history of Chinese thought,” and a time of “lively controversy and intellectual diversity” (De Bary 1970, 3). The period witnessed the expansion of commerce and industry, increasing urbanization, the promotion of the civil examination system, and an increasing awareness of individuality. All these factors play an important role in the revival of the tradition of strange writing during the Qing era.

The period between the two dynasties produced intellectual giants such as Wang Yang-ming 王陽明 (1472-1528) and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), whose philosophical thoughts had a profound influence upon Ming-Qing intellectuals. Wang and his contemporaries debated the nature and role of the individual in relation to essential Confucian values and developed the School of the Mind (*xinxue* 心學). Advocating the notion of “innate knowledge” (*liangzhi* 良知), Wang believed that the way to sagehood is to rid oneself of human desire and preserve the principle of nature. In harmony with Wang, Li Zhi believed that the greatest harm to one’s pure mind was the imposition of moral doctrines and the reading of books. Instead of placing an emphasis on learning, Li elaborated and celebrated the concept of “childlike mind” (*tongxin* 童心). The conflicts between individual and society, ideal and real, “innate knowledge” and Confucian canons, the preservation of “childlike mind” and the engagement with dogmatic learning, which for most students meant the only path to a political career, not only remained unsolved, but intensified as the Ming dynasty was overthrown by the Manchurians from the north.

As a result of dramatic political and social changes and these dynamic intellectual trends, the boundary between “normal” and “abnormal” became problematic and ambiguous and was questioned, challenged, and subverted, as well as simultaneously reinforced and strengthened in Qing strange stories. One of the many key concepts explored by the Qing strange story writers was that of *qing* 情, in which one’s genuine feelings were valued. The strange stories examined in this article show that love, which crosses the boundaries of species, is not only sanctioned, but celebrated, as the quests for humanization of the fox, ghost, and flower spirits are achieved in the desolate yet enchanted garden. Despite the fact that the human hero in these stories is often distracted from family duty and the study of Confucian canons, the power of love turns the garden into a romantic enclave, and the hero’s devoted or single-minded love is depicted as a rare virtue. In such stories, lonely and jobless Confucian scholars and frustrated examination candidates find alternative paths to happiness. By crossing boundaries of species and reality, as well as ethical, social, and cultural limitations, Pu’s strange stories reinforce or subvert traditional Confucian scholars’ values, restoring or redefining their limits.

#### GARDENS, LANDSCAPE GARDENS, LOVE, EROS, AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN EARLY TRADITIONS

The nearly five hundred stories of *Liaozhai* were written in *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*, two subgenres of *xiaoshuo* 小說 (classical narratives, literally meaning “minor talks”) devoted to recording and exploring the *guai* 怪 (anomalous), *qi* 奇 (strange), and *yi* 異 (other). Both traditions have a long history, with *zhiguai* dating back to the Six Dynasties (220-588) and *chuanqi* to the Tang Dynasty (618-906). According to Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 C. E.), the *xiaoshuo* probably originated with “quasi-historians” who collected “street-conversations and alley-stories” for the government. He goes further by quoting Confucius: “Even in inferior studies and employments there is something worth being looked at; but if it be attempted to carry them out to what is remote, there is a danger of their proving inap-

plicable. Therefore, the superior man does not practice them” (Legge 1971, 40).<sup>2</sup> Ban Gu’s statement reveals the origin and social status of *xiaoshuo*, as well as the traditional Confucians’ reserved attitude toward the tradition: it’s not only untrustworthy, but also potentially dangerous, since it distracts men from their proper goals. Here Ban Gu echoes and reinforces a famous statement found in *The Analects of Confucius*: “The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings” (Legge 1971, 201). The origin and the Confucian understanding of *xiaoshuo* shaped the writing and reading of strange stories. Consequently, *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* were considered “inferior” to Confucian orthodoxy, and spending much time on these genres was seen as “improper” for a Confucian scholar. In a literary history dominated by Confucian ideology, the highest forms of literature, such as poetry, concern themselves primarily with *zhi* 志, a concept with meanings ranging from ambition to service, public duty, and social concerns.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the topics of which Confucius never spoke became the main concerns of the *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. It is for these reasons that both Gan Bao 干寶 (fl. 320) and Pu Songling, the two most prominent writers of the *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*, respectively, sought to justify and defend the very act of collecting and writing strange tales.<sup>4</sup> As the tradition continued, *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* became platforms for presenting and exploring “strange” and “unorthodox” ideas, such as erotic desire, sentiment, passion, love, and women. In these two marginal genres, as Daniel Hsieh points out in his study on early Chinese narratives, the transmitters and creators “could think and talk about love and women in ways impossible in other genres. These themes were not ordinarily considered worthy of high literature, just as a proper man should not devote himself to them in life” (2008, 20).

The garden and landscape garden as preferred settings for love and erotic desire, as well as sites of supernatural events, can be traced back to classical poetry and ancient myth. The earliest anthology of Chinese literature, *Shijing* 詩經 (The Book of Songs, 1000-600 B.C.), reveals that there were two types of gardens in early Chinese civilization. The popular song “Qiang Zhongzi” 將仲子 provides an example of the way issues of love and morality are touched upon in a domestic setting such as a simple fruit and vegetable garden.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the songs of nobilities, ritual hymns, and ballads of significant events record another kind of garden—the king’s park, specifically its functions and features. “Ling tai” 靈臺 (Sacred Terrace), for instance, illustrates that the king’s park was a place for worship and entertainment, and a showcase for wealth, prosperity, and power.<sup>6</sup> Modern scholars suggest that in ancient China the king’s park was closely associated with the supernatural, and one of its main functions was to communicate with the ancestors and the Supreme Ruler in heaven.<sup>7</sup> The two garden archetypes observed in *Shijing* can be seen as the origin of Chinese domestic and imperial garden traditions associated with love and Eros and the supernatural, respectively. While the domestic garden did not take a major step in development until the Six Dynasties, the king’s garden has always played an important role in Chinese culture and history.

While *Shijing* provides us a glimpse of the origins of the Chinese domestic and king’s gardens, *Chuci* 楚辭, *Songs of Chu* (composed between the third century B.C. and second century A.D.) presents fantastic pictures of the Chinese garden and reveals an early Chinese attitude toward wild nature. The two shamanistic songs “Zhao hun” 招魂 (“Calling Back the Soul”) and “Da zhao” 大招 (“Great Calling”) record shamans’ religious chants that beckon the soul of a sick or dying king to return to his terrestrial abode.<sup>8</sup> The two poems perceive wild nature to be harmful, dangerous, and evil. “Da zhao” reveals a distaste for and fear of wild nature, derived most likely from a horror of demons and wild animals said to inhabit the mountains. Instead, the song portrays a cultivated garden as the place in which

one could find pleasure, luxury, and comfort. Thus, one hears the shaman persuading the dying soul by promising that it could enjoy great pleasure if only it comes back to its palace garden. In contrast to the images of untamed nature and beasts as threatening and harmful, several songs in *Jiu ge* 九歌 (*The Nine Songs*) provide scenes of beautiful rivers and mountains in which shamans pursue capricious gods and goddesses. “Shan gui” 山鬼 (“The Mountain Goddess”), for example, expresses an erotic longing for the seductive mountain goddesses.<sup>9</sup> Such longing and pursuit, however, often end with frustration: the gods or goddesses always remain elusive and mysterious. Writers of the Six Dynasties found inspiration in *Jiu ge*, and many similarities can be observed between *Jiu ge* and earlier *zhiguai* stories. “Xuan Chao” 旋超 from Gan Bao’s *Sou shen ji* 搜神記, stands as a good example.<sup>10</sup> The motif of a love affair between a young scholar and a beautiful goddess, the departure of the goddess after exposing her identity, the sickness suffered by the protagonist, and the later reunion with the divine are recurrent elements in Tang tales and *Liaozhai*.

The garden and landscape descriptions found in ancient myths before the Qing dynasty are closely associated with the supernatural and fantastic. *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*The Classic of Mountains and Seas*) provides a fantastic geography of ancient China and surrounding lands, including elaborate descriptions of the hanging garden *xuanpu* 懸圃. Situated in the Kunlun Mountains, the hanging garden is a part of the legendary Yellow Emperor’s palace, a fantastic and luxurious place full of exotic plants, animals, food, and clear streams.<sup>11</sup> The impact of *Shanghai jing* upon *zhiguai* works is significant.

The Six Dynasties witnessed a blossoming of *zhiguai*. It was during this period that many important *zhiguai* works were composed, including Gan Bao’s *Sou shen ji* (*In Search of the Supernatural*), the most highly regarded example of *zhiguai*, and Wang Jia’s 王嘉 (d. 324) *Shi yi ji* 拾遺記 (*Gathering Remaining Accounts*). Wang Jia’s *Shi yi ji* is especially pertinent to our study. Its tenth *juan* 卷 (fascicle) is devoted to the fantastic geography of sacred Daoist mountains. The marvelous flora, fauna, and mysterious creatures dwelling in those fantastic landscapes later became hallmarks of Pu’s abode of immortals, fairies, and other strange creatures. The sixth *juan* deals with anecdotes and unofficial biographies of latter Han emperors and provides interesting perspectives on imperial gardens. Filled with exotic and exquisite flowers, the garden in *Shi yi ji* was created for Emperor Ling to indulge his carnal desires.<sup>12</sup> The reader is told that rather than conduct ritual sacrifices on Mount Tai and search for secret drugs in far-off seas, in Emperor Ling’s view the way to achieve immortality, as well as the greatest privilege of being an immortal, is satisfaction of sensual pleasure and erotic desire. Later, by linking the defeat of the capital to the desertion of beautiful palace ladies and the destruction of the palaces, the author criticizes the emperor’s excessive constructions and overindulgence of sensual and material pleasures, satirizing his wish for immortality. It is hard to tell to what degree the anecdote reflects real life in the West Garden, but one observes a close relationship between garden, beauty, erotic longing, and sensual pleasure from Wang Jia’s depictions. At the same time, the message is a warning that sexual indulgence and corruption bring ruin. The two facets of the garden as pleasure and danger displayed in this early *zhiguai* work would be further explored and developed by Tang writers, and eventually brought to full bloom by Ming-Qing writers, in whose works *qing* is raised above carnal desire.<sup>13</sup>

Tang writers’ explorations of women and *qing* are also frequently associated with the garden. The beautiful garden scenes often throw the protagonists’ appearances and characters into a sharp relief. “Cui Xuanwei” 崔玄微 is one of the earliest stories in the long tradition of the flower-spirit tales.<sup>14</sup> Later, our discussion of Pu Songling’s tales shall reveal that it is to this beautiful Tang story that several of Pu’s memorable flower-spirit tales are indebted.

In this classic tale the image of the flower is employed to express women's beauty, delicacy, vulnerability, sensitivity, and affection. It is interesting to see that although the story takes place in a garden on a spring night, a conventional season and setting that give rise to erotic desire in classical literature, the hero here shows no strong emotion toward the beautiful ladies other than admiration and tender affection. This tale illustrates one particular understanding of and male fantasy about *qing*: women are viewed as lovely and vulnerable creatures the male protagonist feels obligated to help and protect. Rather than a sexual relationship, the male and female in this story form an everlasting friendship.

The concepts of love, sensual desire, pain, and joy rising from Cui's garden are the main concerns of Meng Qi's 孟啓 (fl. mid- to late ninth century) "Cui Hu" 崔護. "Cui Hu" is based on an anecdote about the Tang poet Cui Hu (fl. late eighth century).<sup>15</sup> In this tale, the domestic garden is not merely a matter of setting, but associated with several features that later became essential components and recurring metaphors. After failing the metropolitan examination, Cui rambles alone around the suburb in early spring. Walking into an alley, Cui finds a small courtyard surrounded by flowers and trees. He knocks on the door of the courtyard and asks for a drink of water. A beautiful girl answers and offers him a drink and a chair in which to rest. She does not leave to return to her room right away, but instead leans against a peach tree and looks at him quietly. The two gaze at each other with tender feelings without exchanging a word. A year to the day later, Cui goes back to the village but finds no trace of the girl. He writes a poem on the door of the courtyard. A few days later, Cui, returning to the courtyard again, is surprised when told by the girl's father that his daughter fell ill reading Cui's poem and died. Overwhelmed by grief, Cui asks permission to mourn her. He goes into her room, presses his cheek against her cold body, and weeps. Moved by Cui's sincerity, the girl comes back to life.

At the time of the poet's first visit, the peach blossoms suggest the radiant beauty of a young girl and her awareness of a universal desire for love and companionship. At the same time, the blossoms also represent loneliness, confined as they are within the small courtyard. In the second visit, the beautiful peach blossoms offer a sharp contrast to the poet's frustration and disappointment after finding no trace of the girl. When visiting the garden for the third time, they remind the poet of the girl and her unfulfilled love. The lovely garden scene deepens the poet's grief. Sorrow, however, is eventually turned to ecstasy when the poet finds his beloved returning to life. Neatly woven into this short tale are the everlasting themes of time, love, and death. Indeed, the garden depicted in this story perpetuates notions of romantic agony and bittersweet love.

"Cui Hu" had a strong influence upon later drama and *chuanqi* traditions. Tang Xianzu's 湯顯祖 (1550-1616) *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (*Peony Pavilion*) is the best example among many. *Mudan ting* shares the essential motif of "Cui Hu"—women die for and are revived by intense passion. Tang treats the motif with remarkable sophistication and creativity and develops it to a historically unprecedented degree. The heroine Liniang's 麗娘 desire to explore the family garden is essential, since it sets the heroine's emotions into play. Before the garden scene, the author describes a scenario of comic argument to introduce two contradictory views regarding *qing*. An apparently simple question raises a debate as to whether or not Liniang should take a stroll through the garden. Liniang's maid, Chunxiang, tells her mistress's tutor that Liniang's desire for a spring outing in the garden has been initiated by reading the Confucian classic *Shijing*. The tutor, a pedantic Confucian scholar, however, believes that Liniang should not go to the garden because a "spring-stroll" or becoming "spring-struck" violates classical doctrine and only distracts or dazes the mind. Earlier in the same scene the reader is told that Liniang's father, a scholar-official, also forbids his

daughter from going to the garden.<sup>16</sup> Through the figures of Liniang's father and her tutor, who fear the seductive garden, Tang Xianzu satirizes conservative Confucians. The author also reminds us that genuine admiration and longing between young girls and boys is celebrated in the first poem of the Confucian classics. The contradictory attitudes reveal the fundamental question Ming-Qing literati sought to answer: what is the meaning of *qing*? The question would be further explored in Pu Songling's tales.

Through various methods, Liniang is eventually allowed to visit the garden. The scene there is the climax of *Mudan ting*. Liniang's awakening desire is stirred by the beautiful spring scenery; her erotic experience in the garden, as well as the profound sentiment it brings, is the author's first interpretation of *qing*. As she sleeps in the garden, Liniang has a dream (*chunmeng*) in which a young man makes love to her among the peonies. Comparing the play to the Tang tales, we find two fundamental shifts. One is that rather than the male protagonist's perspective, the narrative is told from the female's point of view. Second, the main concern of *Mudan ting* is the heroine's real desire and feelings, not just her sleeping fantasy. As in "Cui Hu," the dimensions of *qing* are enriched by Liniang's discovery of love, death, revival from death, and reunion with her lover and family. However, Tang's celebration of *qing* goes a step further by embracing sexual attraction and physical passion. The complex aspects of *qing*—sentiment, passion, erotic desire, and human devotion—are vividly conveyed, enhanced, and symbolized by the garden and the peony blossoms in *Mudan ting*. It is within this literary and cultural context that Pu Songling's stories of flower spirits and gardens were created and understood.

#### GARDEN AS EROTIC ENCLAVE: "XIANGYU" AND "JIAONA"

"Woman as flower-spirit" is an important motif in Chinese classical literature. In flower-spirit tales, women often possess similar qualities to creatures of nature: they are beautiful, tender, delicate, innocent, passionate, and loving. The flower image is also employed as metaphor for sexual longing and amorous relationships. Pu Songling's "Xiangyu" focuses on a conventional motif—the metamorphosis of flowers into enticing beauties—and explores several different but coexistent aspects of *qing*. In the story, a young scholar named Huang 黃 builds a house in the garden of a Daoist temple for the purposes of study. One day, Huang catches a tantalizing glimpse of two beautiful women, Xiangyu (Fragrant Jade in English) and Jiangxue 絳雪 (Scarlet and Snow). He writes a poem that expresses his longing for the women. While he is absorbed in his thoughts, Xiangyu, the young lady in white, appears in his room and their affair begins. The romantic relationship ends tragically, however, when a visitor to the garden digs up and carries away a white peony that eventually perishes. After the peony is dead, Xiangyu appears no more, and Huang realizes that she was a peony flower-spirit. Sharing their grief over the death of Xiangyu, Huang and Jiangxue, the lady in red and Xiangyu's half-sister, become close friends. Their friendship grows deeper as time passes, and Huang learns that Jiangxue is a camellia flower-spirit. Huang's intense feeling for Xiangyu eventually moves the Flower Goddess to allow Xiangyu to return to life and be reunited with her human lover. Ten years later, Huang dies and is transformed into a plant, growing alongside the peony. The tall and lush plant is cut down, however, because it does not produce flowers. Soon, the white peony also fades and dies, and before long the camellia dies, too.

The story begins with a concise description of the two plants in the garden of a Daoist temple at Mt. Lao:

At the Laoshan's Xiaqing Temple, the evergreen trees are two *zhang* in height, with a diameter of ten *wei*, and even the tree peonies are more than a *zhang* tall, their flowers as brightly colored as brocade fabric. Scholar Huang, from Jiaozhou, came to stay at Xiaqing Temple while studying.<sup>17</sup>

Although brief, the opening description of the camellia tree, peony bush, and the flowers of each draws the reader's attention to the plants. Such a beginning is unusual since *chuanqi* tales generally open with an introduction to the hero. Xiangyu's identity as a peony flower-spirit is a direct allusion to Tang Xianzu's *Mudan ting*, and as such evokes serious concepts associated with gardens and peonies, including sexual desire and passionate love.

Pu Songling's exploration of *qing* is focused on the two contradictory yet complementary aspects of *qing* embodied by the heroines: passion and restrained love. These dual aspects of *qing* are suggested by the heroines' names. As Wai-yee Li points out, Xiangyu and Jiangxue literally mean "fragrant jade" and "scarlet snow," having connotations of "warmth emanating from coldness" and "coldness with a hidden glow," respectively (1983, 124). As evoked by the image of the peony, Xiangyu is closely associated with passion and desire. In contrast, the camellia flower-spirit, Jiangxue, who expresses a more reflective attitude toward *qing*, represents restrained love—a control over and detachment from sensual desire. While passion burns out fast, tender love lasts. After Xiangyu dies and before she returns to life—a period suggesting her intense passion and desire have consumed her life—the hero is comforted and nourished by Jiangxue. In this way, the story puts equal emphasis on these two aspects of *qing*, passion and restraint, attachment and detachment, the fulfillment of sensual desire and the capability for tender, nourishing care.

Through the flower-spirits, "Xiangyu" projects a fantasy of having two women in one's life, representing the romantic as well as the realistic aspects of love. Huang, calling Xiangyu his good wife and Jiangxue his good friend, is intoxicated with happiness as he holds one woman in each arm. Commenting on the often-seen triangle relationship in Qing fictions, Daniel Hsieh points out that rather than a simple expression of male sexual fantasy, "Xiangyu" reveals "the divisions and tensions" found in traditional Chinese perceptions of women (2008, 88). "Xiangyu" is one of a group of stories that expresses an internal desire to balance the splits and tensions of *qing*.

The protagonists' passionate love is symbolized by the flowering and flourishing garden. More than a ground of transformation, the garden is the home, playground, and erotic enclave of the three lovers. Passion and attachment are visualized by the dramatic metamorphosis in the garden, and in a similar way, the tender aspects of love and friendship are also highlighted by the playful scenes in the garden. "Xiangyu" strikes the reader with a surprise before the end of the story and brings one more aspect of *qing* to our consideration. "Xiangyu" begins with an image of a flourishing garden and ends with that of a garden destroyed. The joy of the flowering garden, women, and love is replaced by a lament over withered flowers and dead plants, perished lovers, and the loss of love and friendship. Compared to conventional happy endings in which the protagonists enjoy domestic bliss, the death of Huang and the reunion of the three protagonists in the forms of plants is more moving and leaves a greater space for the reader's imagination. The conclusion reminds the reader of "Gejin" 葛巾, Pu's other flower-spirit story, which also ends with a tragic loss. In that story, the flower-spirit protagonist's passion for a peony transforms her into a human lover, wife, and mother. Yet the hero's insufficient faith eventually results in the loss of this family. The protagonist's son transforms into a peony plant while the protagonist and her sister disappear without a trace. In both stories, the dramatic endings illustrate the illusive

nature of *qing*. Before investigating the paradoxical nature of *qing* in depth, we will look at another story that also involves a triangle relationship and expresses a desire to balance the real with the ideal.

The two gardens in Pu Songling's "Jiaona" 娇娜 are privileged as sites of sensual desire and symbolic of a union between the cultural dichotomies of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The friendship that develops between a scholar, a male fox, and two lady foxes begins with a casual stroll on a snowy day. The young scholar-hero finds himself in a deserted mansion near the temple in which he lives. Here he meets a handsome young male fox, and is later introduced to two beautiful fox ladies. After several twists and turns, the hero, his male fox friend, and their two female fox lovers wind up living happily together.

Our introduction to the protagonist is noteworthy. In the story, the jobless and penniless young scholar Kong Xueli 孔雪笠 is a descendant of the great sage Confucius. The fact that a descendant of Confucius is broke and wandering alone suggests a sense of failure and degeneration. Despite his talent for writing poetry, Kong Xueli has failed the metropolitan examination. Without lodging or the means to travel home, he takes up residence in a Buddhist temple, where the monks give him work as a copyist. In other words, Kong, the talented Confucian descendant, heir of orthodox Chinese culture, and the very embodiment of Confucian lineage, can only make a living by copying Buddhist sutras.

Examination candidates, particularly unsuccessful ones (like Pu himself), occupy a significant place in many Pu tales. Such stories criticize and ridicule the Qing civil examination system and mock corrupt examination officials; they also express sympathy for the ill-fated candidates by exposing their anxiety, frustration, depression, humiliation, and injustice.<sup>18</sup> Sidney Sondergard points out that these stories provided Pu "an instrument for denying the perception that the imperial civil service examination system is the most meaningful way for an individual to demonstrate knowledge of Confucian values, while illustrating Pu's advocacy of those very values" (2010, xiii). In my point of view, these tales also explore alternatives to a system that too often imprisoned minds and deadened souls.

In "Jiaona" the displaced and stranded hero is the embodiment of irony. The portrayal of Kong satirizes the tendency toward ritual formatting in late imperial China, since Kong is not only the embodiment of Confucian lineage, but also Confucian orthodoxy itself. According to Thomas A. Wilson, "Ming regulations prescribe a vast hierarchy of rituals performed at Kong temples at every level of the empire observed by a wide range of degree holders, candidates, and school boys" (1996, 563). The state sought to formulate Confucian orthodoxy by placing a great emphasis on the civil service examination system, body gestures in ritual ceremonies, and the commingling of Confucian doctrinal descendants with Confucian family descendants in temples. In Sing-chen Lydia Chiang's view, the fictive Confucian descendant in "Jiaona" is the embodiment of "the internal contradictions of Confucian ritual and lineage discourse" (2005, 135). It is against such a cultural background that Kong begins his exploration of the margins of society and enters into the realm of the strange, configured as the garden of the deserted mansion, where he encounters creatures of the nonhuman world.

The beautiful garden in a deserted mansion is a realm ruled by emotion and desire, within which Kong is literally and symbolically locked. In the heat of summer, Kong and his new friend, Huangfu 皇甫, the young man he meets in the mansion's garden, decide to hold their lessons in a shady pavilion. It is about this time that Kong begins to develop a strange swelling on his chest. The illness worsens quickly, causing great pain. Jiaona, the sister of Huangfu, a beautiful girl of thirteen or fourteen years, is called upon for help.



... Then she [Jiaona] took a gold bracelet from her arm and calmly placed it over the trouble area, steadily pressing down on it. The swelling puffed up about an inch, poking up through the bracelet, until the base of the swelling was contained entirely inside it, so it was no longer the size of a bowl in diameter.

With one hand she opened the front of her thin gown and unfastened the knife she was wearing that had an edge as thin as paper; then while holding the bracelet in place she took the blade, gently set it at the base of the lump, and began cutting it. A flood of purple blood began to flow, soaking into and staining the bed mat, but Kong was so eager for the beauty to be near him that he not only didn't feel the pains—he was even afraid that she might finish the surgery too quickly, preventing him from being close to her for a longer period of time.<sup>19</sup>

The sexual insinuation of Kong's illness and healing is obvious. Commenting on the healing scene, Chiang points out that "the Confucian descendant, who in late imperial culture personifies the Confucian Dao itself, experiences ecstasy in the cutting away of his skin and flesh. Kong, as the Confucian Body, perishes in a mythic battle against orthodox bigotry and then is resurrected, given new life by the heterodox Other" (2005, 141). When viewed as an embodiment of Confucian orthodoxy, Kong's adventure in the isolated garden becomes an expression of the cultural crisis of losing one's orthodox grounding.

In addition to the fulfillment of desire, Kong's marriage and friendship with fox-spirits symbolizes the consolation of cultural orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Although enamored with Jiaona because of her extremely young age, Kong ends up marrying her older cousin, Songniang 松娘, who is also introduced to him in the garden. After he is married, Kong tries to go back to a normal life. He returns home with his wife, has a child, passes the civil service exam, and takes an official post. Everything seems to be going well, but Kong's officialdom does not last; when he offends a visiting censor, Kong is relieved of his duty, temporarily confined, and not allowed to travel home. One day while hunting, he meets Huangfu again and is told that the Huangfus are foxes who have been disguised as humans, and the entire family is facing great danger. Pu Songling seems interested in reversing roles and plots: Kong risks his life to save Huangfu's family from a disaster. In return, Kong is rescued by Jiaona. Since Jiaona's husband has perished in the disaster, Kong takes Huangfu and Jiaona, together with his wife and son, and returns to his hometown. At the end of many Tang *chuanqi* tales, the hero's life is restored to "normal" by a break with his non-human lover. In *Liaozhai zhiyi*, however, Pu Songling reconciles the conflicts between real and ideal, passion and romance, order and disorder, normal and abnormal, a human world and a strange realm through the reunion of the human and nonhuman lovers.

The enclosed garden found at the end of "Jiaona" symbolizes the reconciliation of these conflicts. Arriving at his hometown, Kong finds an unoccupied garden in which his fox friends settle. The garden is locked from within and only opens when Kong and Songniang come to visit. The ending scene has these two together in the garden, enjoying a game of chess, glasses of wine, and convivial conversation. The mention of Kong's fox-human son, Xiaohuan 小宦, who grows into a good-looking and intelligent young man, reinforces the irony and satire suggested at the beginning of the story. The ending adds a humorous touch and makes one wonder what Confucius might feel knowing that one of his descendants is a fox-human hybrid.

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**THE TWO GARDENS IN “YINGNING”**

“Yingning” 嬰寧 is one of Pu Songling’s finest and most famous stories. The unique hero, Yingning, is a human-fox hybrid who grows up in the wilderness and is raised by a ghost mother and brought into human society by her cousin Wang Zifu 王子服, who she marries. Unlike the heroine in “Xiangyu,” Yingning is innocent, naïve, and unaware of sexuality. Her warm and childlike nature forms a sharp contrast to Jiangxue’s maturity and restrained character. Whereas the heroine Songniang in “Jiaona” happily straddles the human and nonhuman worlds, Yingning’s life and character undergo a dramatic change after entering the human world. Yingning’s personality and her crucial shift toward the human world are best illustrated by her life in the gardens.

Yingning’s home before marriage—an enchanted garden in the deep, green mountains—shapes and reflects the protagonist’s nature. The reader is led to the garden by the hero’s aimless wandering.

Traveling alone, with no one around to give him directions, Wang nevertheless made a beeline for the southern hills. After covering about thirty *li*, he found himself disoriented, with mountains on all sides, but awed and energized by the landscape’s lush greenery, till finally he came across a precipitous path. Looking into the distance, at the bottom of a valley he saw a thicket of flowers and trees, and he could just barely make out a small village nestled there.<sup>20</sup>

This wandering recalls the entrance to Peach Blossom Spring, a utopic archetype in Chinese literature. The impression is confirmed by a close-up view of the garden. Located in a valley, Yingning’s home is hidden within an overgrown tangle of flowers and trees: “One hut faced north, with willow trees in front of its gate, while inside its walls peach and apricot trees were in full blossom, alternating with pruned bamboo...”<sup>21</sup> Cut off from the outside world, the lush garden is the protagonist’s paradise. As a result of growing up in such an idyllic place, Yingning is known for her irrepressible laughter, beaming smile, and fondness for flowers, all of which initiate the hero’s longing for her and drives the plot. Indeed, Yingning is a girl of innocent gaiety; Wai-ye Li observes that throughout the story her laughter is “synonymous with innocence, spontaneity, [and] daring defiance of ritual and authority” (1983, 109). Yingning’s laughter, however, will eventually be suppressed. This dramatic change originates in a scene in the back garden.

After getting married, Yingning develops her backyard into a garden, yet the peace of both the place and its owner are soon threatened by a lascivious neighbor. One day, the neighbor catches a glimpse of Yingning when she climbs a tree to pick blossoms. He stares at her, instantly smitten. With her usual directness, Yingning smiles back, and the neighbor becomes more aroused than ever. She points to the bottom of the wall before climbing back down on her own side. Anticipating a romantic rendezvous, the young man returns to the same spot that very evening, but as he starts to make love to the phantom conjured by Yingning, he is stung by a scorpion (also part of Yingning’s spell) and dies from the wound. This event in the garden is a turning point of the plot, as well as of Yingning’s character. Yingning is admonished by her mother-in-law for bringing trouble to the family. From that time on, Yingning never laughs again, though she is never unpleasantly gloomy.

The fact that Yingning murders her lecherous neighbor causes readers to reconsider her childlike character. Allen Barr believes that Yingning’s apparently “insouciant laughter” is one of her “tactics” to win her husband’s love, enter the human world, and secure her position in the marital home (1989, 504). Barr’s argument is persuasive, but the problem is that in this view Yingning becomes a manipulating woman with a static character. Instead,

I would argue that a change takes place here. Yingning's development through this circumstance displays aspects of growing up. In any culture, the loss of innocence is the price of becoming mature. Moreover, in traditional China the process of transformation from girl to housewife was particularly challenging. It makes sense, then, that Yingning is a character of ambiguity. Like many fox-spirits, Yingning possesses supernatural powers engendered by nature. Rania Huntington observes that both Yingning and Wang are fatherless children still under the protection of maternal figures. She points out that the youth of both is essential to the plot (2003, 251). The complexity of Yingning's character deserves a separate discussion, but the point is that the changes in her disposition and life are crucial. The two sharply contrasted gardens of her enchanted and domestic life symbolize the crucial shift in her understanding and character.

We may further enhance our understanding of the enchanted gardens depicted in "Yingning" and "Jiaona" by analyzing the processes through which the protagonists enter them from within a Qing cultural and philosophical context. Remember that it is at a point of failure, frustration, and helplessness that Kong, the protagonist of "Jiaona," wanders away from the "normal" world and enters an isolated mansion and garden occupied by fox-spirits of the "other" world. However, the reason leading Wang Zifu, the hero in "Yingning," into the "other" world, is quite different. Wang steps into the "other" world and discovers the enchanted garden simply because of his naiveté. Similar to Yingning, Wang is a childlike and naïve boy. Moreover, he is "foolish" and seems completely unaware of the distinction between a lie and the truth. In the early part of the story, Wang falls dangerously ill with longing for a mysterious girl he met briefly on the road. Fearing for his health, another cousin deceives Wang, saying that the girl is their maternal cousin who lives in the mountains, and promises to propose marriage for him. Wang decides to find the girl himself and wanders alone into the mountains. Paradoxically, his blind refusal to distinguish the truth from lies leads to his discovery of the beautiful garden and Yingning.

In general, the apparent aimless wanderings and "accidental" discoveries of the "strange" world in *Liaozhai* repeat motifs often found in other *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* stories. Remembering that the two genres emerged and flowered in periods of social chaos and dynastic decline, respectively, one sees a pattern: intellectuals during both time periods showed a desire to turn away from tradition and locate alternative forms of religion, philosophy, and lifestyle. By associating the frustrated, helpless, and "degenerating" Confucian scholar with Kong, "Jiaona" satirizes social corruption and mocks Confucian tradition. In other words, in a corrupted society and culture that lacks vitality, men get lost. As a result, Pu and other intellectuals sought to reexamine the concept of truth. Frustrated and unsatisfied with culture and society, Pu's heroes set out on quests for what they believe is the truth, though it is often more of an ideal. Like Pu's many other protagonists, Kong is saved by *qing* and finds his happiness in the sensual garden. In contrast, Wang discovers his pure and innocent lover in a garden shielded from desire. Wang and the object of his desire are the very embodiments of the "childlike mind," a concept advocated by the Ming philosopher Li Zhi. The "child-mind" leads the hero away from the world of deceit and lies to the discovery of true love in an enchanted garden.

#### THE CONTESTED GARDEN IN "HUANGYING"

In Pu's literary gardens, flower-spirits not only assume human form and adopt human desires but also question, challenge, violate, and subvert the ethical codes of human society. Ming-Qing literati confronted many philosophical and intellectual problems, such as how best to preserve one's integrity when confronted by dramatic political change and the rapid

growth of commerce, how to understand the newly emerged and rapidly growing social class “*shang*” 商 (merchant), how to redefine the concept of “*shi*” 士 (literati) under new social conditions, and how to balance personal intuition and genuine feelings about truth with fundamental codes of rationality and morality. While “Yingning” advocates “child-mind” as a way to preserve one’s innate nature and integrity, “Huangying” 黃英 provides an alternative solution.

In “Huangying” the debate on contemporary issues is carried out in a blossoming chrysanthemum garden through dialogues between a flower-spirit and her human lover. The chrysanthemum garden is depicted as a ground on which moral and intellectual conviction is contested and the boundary between “*shi*” and “*shang*” blurred. Examining the social and cultural changes of the Ming-Qing period, Yu Yingshi points out that the merchants’ social status rose to considerable heights in the sixteenth century, and many Late-Ming writers praised the merchant class in their writings.<sup>22</sup> Pu Songling’s “Huangying” provides such an example for investigating Qing literati attitudes towards this new social class.

The chrysanthemum flower is a coded emblem closely associated with Tao Yuanming, the famous fifth century poet who is considered the “archetypal recluse” (Tian 205, 12). In the mind of the Chinese reader, the image of the chrysanthemum garden evokes a series of interrelated concepts of rustic, reclusive life, contentment with simplicity, cultivation of a lofty mind, pursuit of spiritual freedom, and the harmony between man and nature. It is from such a cultural background that Pu’s concerns with redefining the identity of *shi* under the impact of *shang*, as well as his thoughts on negotiating traditional values and modern reality, proceeded.

The double irony cast on the garden image in this story is playful and striking—the chrysanthemum garden is turned into a crowded flower market and the “culprits” are the flower-spirits themselves, rather than the human intruder. In “Huangying,” because of his passion for the chrysanthemum flower, the hero Ma Zicai 馬子才 encounters two chrysanthemum spirits—a handsome young man, Tao, and his sister, Huangying. The three become good friends. Living in Ma’s spare house, Tao begins to grow chrysanthemums, and the originally deserted land is soon transformed into a beautiful garden. One morning, Ma is shocked to find out that Tao has started a flower business, and the peaceful garden has become a crowded market. He complains, “I took you for a sophisticated person of high character, someone who could live contentedly in poverty, but now what you’re proposing to do would turn the chrysanthemum garden into a marketplace, a disgrace to the yellow flowers there.”<sup>23</sup> The very gesture of selling chrysanthemums subverts the moral and intellectual convictions we are told Tao cherishes. Yet both men’s beliefs are further challenged, and the irony grows deeper.

Despite his contempt for the flower business, Ma becomes its direct beneficiary. Huangying continues the business during Tao’s long absence on a business trip. As a result of her business acumen and diligence, the garden and the business grow prosperous, new capacious buildings are erected on the grounds, and the garden is extended. Ma marries Huangying after his wife dies, but finds himself in a dilemma. Unwilling to share the wealth Huangying has amassed by selling flowers, Ma tries to separate their compounds, but a new building has been built between them. Surrounded by chrysanthemums, the new structure, in my point of view, symbolizes the unity of the moral and ethical traditions with the new social values.

The new building in the midst of the chrysanthemum garden symbolically projects the mindsets of its two residents, suggesting that the mark between the old and new houses cannot be erased. The old tradition and the new system of values strive to both keep their

original colors and continue to merge. At her husband's urging, Huangying closes her flower market, and thus the peace in the chrysanthemum garden is restored. Nevertheless, she argues:

It is not like I'm insatiably avaricious ... but if we don't do everything we can to make ourselves rich, then people in a thousand years will still be saying that our ancestor, Tao Yuanming, was poor because he didn't have what it took to make money, and hasn't made his mark in the world even after a hundred generations. That's why we do everything we can so they'll stop making fun of our family's Pengze county magistrate.<sup>24</sup>

Persuasive as the argument is, Ma struggles to embrace this "heresy"; he wants to continue to view himself as a poor Confucian. Because of this tension, the scene in which Huangying builds a straw hut for her husband in the middle of the garden and sends a beautiful maiden to serve him is hilarious (despite his protests, Ma clearly enjoys the luxury of having a servant), deepening the mocking tone and playful mood of the story. When Ma reluctantly moves back to the new building with his wife, we learn that while he was away Huangying gave birth to a daughter who married into a *shijia* 世家, a noble family. The fact that the flower-spirit Huangying has had a child and enjoyed a full life confirms her complete assimilation into human society as a "resident alien," to borrow Allan Barr's term (1989, 509). Her daughter marks the final triumph of Huangying's "heresy," since her marriage symbolizes the ultimate unity of the *shi* and *shang* classes, blurring the boundary between them. The chrysanthemum garden gains a new identity of nobility.

#### CONCLUSION

In *Liaozhai*, the garden functions as a metaphor for the contested ground on which Ming-Qing intellectual issues are debated. The strange stories examined show that love, which crosses the boundary of species, gender, and class, is not only sanctioned, but also celebrated; and the quests of the fox, ghost, and flower nymph for humanization are achieved in the isolated and enchanted garden. Despite the fact that the human hero in these stories is often distracted from the study of Confucian canons and family duty, and regardless of whether his lover is a fox, flower-spirit, or ghost, the power of love turns the deserted garden into a romantic enclave, and the hero's singled-minded love is depicted as a rare virtue. Happiness and wealth are gained through alternative paths rather than the traditional route of becoming a successful Confucian scholar-official.

Pu Songling's strange stories reflect the intellectual and philosophical problems confronted by Ming-Qing literati. Intellectual debates about such questions as how to define the essence of Confucian values, preserve one's fidelity to the essential Confucian tradition, protect one's integrity when confronted by dramatic political change and rapid commercial growth, and balance the antithetical emphasis on personal intuition and feelings with established principles of rationality and morality are brilliantly captured in Pu's strange stories, particularly in the beautiful and dark gardens he created.

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## NOTES

1. Among the entire collection of *Liaozhai*, nearly twenty stories involve a garden or landscape garden. "Quguai" 驅怪 (2.760), "Feng Sanniang" 封三娘 (3.920), "Humeng" 狐夢 (4.932), "Jiangfei" 绛妃 (4.1110), "Gongxian" 鞏仙 (5.1334), "Zhang Aduan" 章阿端 (4.945), "Xiaocui" 小翠 (5.1482) and "Gejin" 葛巾 (7.2082) are particularly interesting because a garden is central to the narratives. "Qu guai" ironically tells of exorcizing a monster in a garden. "Feng Sanning" focuses on an intimate friendship between Miss Feng and a vixen. "Humeng" and "Jiangfei" are unique for featuring the author himself as the protagonist. Interweaving Daoist magic with a secret love affair, "Gongxian" tells a story of "a universe in a sleeve." "Xiaocui" highlights the theme of reward. "Gejin" bears many similarities with "Xiangyu." In stories like "Nie Xiaoqian" 聂小倩 (1.238) and "Huanniang" 宦娘 (5.1460), the garden is only briefly mentioned. Other stories, including "Bai Yuyu" 白于玉 (2.589), "Xihu zhu" 西湖主 (2.974), "Pianpian" 翩翩 (3.642), "Lianhua gongzhu" 蓮花公主 (4.1014), and "Fendie" 粉蝶 (8. 2413) feature palace gardens, mysterious mountain landscapes and a fantastic island. These stories contain a Daoist flavor and illustrate the concept of magic, the role of immortals, and the illusionary and transient qualities of human life.
2. The original message reads: 雖小道,必有可觀者焉,致遠唯恐泥,是以君子不為也. Ban Gu 班固 quoted it in *Hanshu* in discussing *xiaoshuo*. See *Hanshu*, vol. 6, 1745. For more discussion on the topic see Campany, *Strange Writing*.
3. The "Great Preface" of the *Book of Songs* (first century A.D.) sets up the tone of poetry: "the Poem articulates what is on the mind intently." For a discussion and translation of the "Great Preface" see Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*, 37-57.

4. For a translation and discussion on Gan Bao's "preface" see DeWoskin and Crump, *In Search of the Supernatural*, xxiv-xxv. For "Liaozhai zizhi" 聊齋自誌 see Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 29-30; for an English translation "Liaozhai's Own Account" see Sondergard, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, 1-4.
5. For an English translation see Waley, *The Book of Songs*, 65.
6. For an English translation see Waley, *The Book of Songs*, 239-40.
7. Wang Yi persuasively suggests that in ancient China the essential function of the sacred terrace and park is for the king to worship the ancestors and Di 帝 (the Lord or Supreme Ruler in heaven). The king's sacred park was a stage for ritual encounters between man, supernatural beings, and the cosmos. See Wang Yi 王毅, *Yuanlin yu zhongguo wenhua* 園林與中國文化, 2-33.
8. For an English translation see Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u*, 101-09 and 109-14.
9. For an English translation of the poems see Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u*, 43.
10. For an English translation of the story see DeWoskin and Crump, *In Search of the Supernatural*, 16-18.
11. For an English translation see Birrell, *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*.
12. For a translation of the story see Foster, "The *Shih-I chi* and its Relationship to the Genre Known as *Chih-kuai Hsiao-shuo*," 227.
13. In *Liaozhai*, as well as other collections of strange stories, such as Ji Yun's 紀昀 *Yuawei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (*Notebook from the Thatched Cottage of Close Scrutiny*), moral discipline and virtue are the two crucial weapons that save the hero from becoming the victim of evil spirits and creatures—the embodiments of lust and greed.
14. Li Fan 李昉, ed., *Tai ping guang ji* 太平廣記, vol. 9, 3392-93. The story takes place in the hermit Cui Xuanwei's overgrown garden. Having returned from a one-year journey to gather herbs and wild mushrooms in the mountains, Cui encounters a young maiden on a moonlit spring night while enjoying a walk in his long deserted garden. The maiden asks to borrow the garden to rest and to host a banquet. Granted permission, more than ten beautiful young ladies appear; each of their names is a pun on a flower or plant such as willow, plum, and peach. Cui is invited to the banquet. During the party, Lady Feng (pun on *feng*, wind) is displeased and leaves abruptly. Encountering the girls again in the garden the following night, Cui is appealed to for protection. One day a huge windstorm blows. Following the girls's instruction, Cui holds a Daoist banner against the wind. Strangely, the blossoms in his garden are left untouched while those outside of the garden are destroyed. Cui realizes that these beautiful ladies are flower-spirits and Lady Feng is the Goddess of Wind.
15. Meng Qi 孟榮, "Ben shi shi" 本事詩.
16. This point is made clear in scene nine, "Sweeping the Garden."
17. *Liaozhai zhiyi* (8.2235-40). The plant in the story, "Naidong" 耐冬, is a regional name for camellia. Rather than being a spirit of an "evergreen tree," as rendered in Sondergard's translation, Jiangxue is a camellia flower-spirit. Translation quoted from Sondergard, *Strange Stories from Liaozhai*, vol. 6, 2218.
18. For examples, see "Yesheng" 葉生 (1.120), "Si wen lang" 司文郎 (6.1619), "Yu Qu'e" 于去惡 (6.1710), "Jia Fengzhi" 賈奉雉 (7.1975), and "Wang Zi'an" 王子安 (6.1811). For discussions of Pu Songling's tales and degree candidates see Chun-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang, *Redefining History*, 125-34; and Sondergard, "The Strange Business of Confucian Ideology and Advancement: Pu's Separation of Values and System," in *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, vol.4, xi-xx. For studies on the civil service examination system, see Ichisada Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*.
19. *Liaozhai zhiyi* (1.85-91). Translation quoted from Sondergard, *Strange Stories from Liaozhai*, vol. 1, 90.
20. *Liaozhai zhiyi* (1.218-28). Translation quoted from Sondergard, *Strange Stories from Liaozhai*, vol.1, 209-12.
21. *Ibid.*, 210.
22. For a more in-depth treatment of the top see Yingshi Yu 余英時, *Rujia lunli yu shangren jingshen* 儒家倫理與商人精神, especially 155-61.
23. *Liaozhai zhiyi* (7.2094-99). Translation quoted from Sondergard, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, vol. 6, 2061.
24. *Ibid.*, 2065.