

Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio: How a “Book of Lonely Indignation” Became a Timeless Classic

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Abstract: How did a work propelled by personal frustration traverse three hundred years, rising from the lonely lamp and worn volumes of a rustic private school to become a canonical classic in the pantheon of world literature? This paper seeks to examine the distinctive trajectory by which *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* was transformed from an expression of personal solitary indignation into a literary classic, focusing on three dimensions: the generative mechanism of “Lonely Indignation,” the narrative transformation of the text, and the historical logic of its canonization.

Keywords: Pu Songling; *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*; Popular dissemination; Marvelous-tale narrative

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1. Where does solitary indignation come from?

Pu Songling led a life of considerable legendary character. Viewed from the perspective of his educational formation, his father, compelled by economic necessity to engage in commerce, nevertheless remained steadfastly committed to the Confucian conviction that “study is the foundation upon which one establishes oneself,” and transmitted this conviction to Pu Songling through both precept and example. From an early age, Pu Songling was steeped in Confucian education and developed a deep-seated “imperial examination complex,” regarding the civil service examinations as the most effective path to achieving the Confucian ideal of “regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to all under heaven.”

The fact of Pu Songling’s repeated failures in the imperial examinations during the middle and later periods of his life was recorded by his eldest son Pu Ru in *A Biographical Account of Master Liuquan*, which states that he “struggled painstakingly in the hope of obtaining a degree, yet remained trapped in the examination hall.” Despite repeated setbacks, Pu Songling remained persistently attached to his aspirations for the imperial examinations, yet his path continued to be fraught with hardship. At the age of forty-eight, Pu Songling was disqualified from the examination because he skipped a page in the answer booklet while transcribing his answers; whether owing to a cruel twist of fate or to utter mental exhaustion, he inadvertently

skipped an entire page. At the age of fifty, Pu Songling performed excellently in the first session of the provincial examination; however, an unforeseen misfortune struck: in the second session he collapsed from severe illness, unable even to hold the brush steadily.

“It was not until the age of seventy-one that Pu Songling finally bid farewell to the imperial examinations, having obtained the status of tribute student by seniority”^[1]. This condition of “possessing extraordinary talent in youth yet remaining a mere licentiate in old age” constituted the real-life soil from which his mentality of solitary indignation grew. Writing in a state of solitary indignation, Pu Songling used *Liaozhai Zhiyi* to give expression to the anguish and frustration arising from his unrealized personal worth. In addition, Pu Songling regarded writing as a means of affirming his personal worth and displaying his literary talent. This in turn endowed *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* with such exceptional value that it became the pinnacle of classical Chinese supernatural fiction and has been widely acclaimed.

Although Pu Songling employed *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* as an outlet for his solitary indignation, this solitary indignation should not be simplistically reduced to a one-dimensional emotional release arising solely from his repeated failures in the imperial examinations. Otherwise, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* would not have become the pinnacle of classical Chinese supernatural fiction. Conversely, although Pu Songling used fiction to vent his accumulated frustration, through the genre form of classical Chinese supernatural tales and the narrative strategy of “employing the method of tales of the marvelous to record the strange,” he demonstrated that this emotion of solitary indignation had already been incorporated into a highly self-conscious literary and artistic enterprise.

2. Narrative art in solitary indignation

While solitary indignation may have been the creative impetus behind *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, it was Pu Songling’s distinctive narrative artistry that served as the crucial channel through which the work was transformed from private emotional expression into a literary text. “Although *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, like similar books of its time, consists of little more than accounts of immortals, fox-spirits, ghosts, and other supernatural beings, its descriptions are intricate and its narration orderly; by employing the method of tales of the marvelous to record the strange, it presents transformations so vividly that they seem to appear before one’s eyes”^[2]. The so-called “employing the method of tales of the marvelous to record the strange” refers to the use of the stylistic approach characteristic of Tang tales of the marvelous—marked by “intricate narration and ornate diction”—as the expressive vehicle for the supernatural subject matter that Six Dynasties tales of the strange had merely “sketched in rough outline.” Through his sophisticated literary narration, Pu Songling transformed the earlier simplistic miscellaneous accounts of the supernatural, thereby effecting, to a certain degree, a qualitative leap in literary form.

“In *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu Songling reflected the various social ills of his time, criticized the then “unreasonable” moral concepts, values, and outlook on life, and denounced the feudal imperial examination system and superstitious beliefs in ghosts and spirits. The author combined the feudal dross of reality with the feudal ethics and morality embedded in his own thought, turning it into a powerful weapon against autocratic rule, feudal superstition, and conduct such as pursuing private gain at public expense”^[3]. By borrowing the mouths of ghosts and spirits to say what he himself could not say, and by borrowing their deeds to do what he himself could not do, his “method of marvelous-tale to speak of ghosts and spirits” was in essence a means of expressing his genuine emotions and felt experience.

Furthermore, most worthy of exploration is Pu Songling's stylistic self-consciousness: the self-created commentary formula "Thus Remarks the Historian of the Strange" represents a crucial formal evolution by which Pu Songling shifted from "private writing" to "public history." Because Pu Songling styled himself "Yishi shi" ("Historian of the Strange") and appended critical remarks at the end of his tales, this practice is identical in form to the "Thus Remarks the Grand Historian" in Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, and represents a thoroughgoing inheritance of that model. This phenomenon suggests that Pu Songling may not have been merely recording tales of the strange; rather, he was examining the human affairs and worldly conditions of his own time through a historiographical lens. In other words, in moving from a "book of solitary indignation" to the persona of "Historian of the Strange," Pu Songling found an effective channel through which his private emotions could be transformed into public narrative.

It was precisely through this stylistic self-consciousness that *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* transcended the boundaries of the author's personal "solitary indignation." Although *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* was rooted in the Six Dynasties tales of the strange tradition, Pu Songling transcended the limitations of earlier writers of tales of the strange fiction: rather than taking "delighting the mind and pleasing the eye" as his primary aim, he employed tales of the strange to record the myriad facets of human life, to mirror reality, and to express his innermost thoughts and feelings.

During the early Qing period, when "historical censorship" was severe, Pu Songling, though desiring to satirize the social injustice and darkness of his time, "should have been as cautious as other literati of the period, and therefore deliberately diluted and suspended the historical time of his strange-tale fiction, foregrounding its non-realistic quality so as to dissolve its historicity" ^[4]. Against this backdrop, Pu Songling skillfully blurred narrative boundaries to express his emotions, thereby achieving both genuine emotional resonance and avoidance of the formidable "historical censorship." It is precisely for this reason that *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* became an exceedingly rare literary classic in the history of Chinese literature—one capable of both profoundly resonating with readers and transforming their emotions and temperament—and has been transmitted down to the present day.

3. The journey to becoming a timeless classic

Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio excels in diction ^[5]. Although the literary achievements of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* have been widely acclaimed by later generations, it is lamentable that it was not printed or published during Pu Songling's lifetime. The sole reason was that Pu Songling, being from an impoverished family, was unable to afford the expenses required for printing and publication.

Initially, the readership of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* consisted mostly of Pu Songling's relatives and friends; "in the absence of a printed edition, the manuscript could only circulate in the form of handwritten copies" ^[6]. This mode of dissemination through handwritten copies, though slow, nevertheless constituted an important step in the canonization of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*—namely, the selection of its readership. The readers who continued to transcribe and recommend *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* were almost all devoted readers who had been deeply moved by its literary value.

As Pu Songling himself wrote in "Author's Preface to *Liaozhai*": "Those who understand me—are they perhaps to be found in the green woods and dark mountains?" ^[7]. This indicates that his imagined readership at the time consisted of "friends in the netherworld." Yet the kindred spirits "in the green woods and dark mountains" did not keep him waiting long.

By the early Qianlong period, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* had gradually spread from Pu Songling's hometown (present-day Zichuan District, Zibo City, Shandong Province) throughout Shandong, and had also gained considerable renown. Moreover, owing to its intrinsic literary quality and readability, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* accumulated a strong reputation, which greatly intensified the activity of manuscript copying and circulation, and it began to spread beyond Shandong Province through the gentry and officials assuming new posts.

After the twentieth year of the Qianlong reign (1755), manuscript copies spread to the Jiangnan region. Around the thirtieth year of the Qianlong reign (1765), when Zhao Qigao, a native of Laiyang, Shandong, was serving as prefect of Yanzhou Prefecture in Zhejiang, he—with the generous financial support of the bibliophile Bao Tingbo—printed the Qingke Pavilion edition in Hangzhou. The edition was named after the Qingke Pavilion within the prefectural office. Initially, twelve volumes were completed; later, after Zhao Qigao fell ill and passed away, Bao Tingbo continued and completed the printing of the remaining four volumes. This was the first printed edition of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. After Pu Songling's death, it finally came into being following decades of setbacks and hardships.

The publication of the Qingke Pavilion edition greatly accelerated the dissemination of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and simultaneously improved its existing mode of circulation; “it soon became widely popular and has not declined to this day.” With the appearance of the first printed edition, Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* formally entered the field of public readership from being a personal “book of solitary indignation.”

Moreover, the rise and dissemination of large-scale illustrated albums such as *The Complete Illustrations of Liaozhai* and *Illustrated Narratives of Liaozhai*, together with illustrated editions such as *Illustrated Poems on Liaozhai Zhiyi*, further advanced the popularization of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. The dual dissemination through text and image enabled *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* to move from the literati's desk to a broader general readership in a manner both more worldly and more universal.

In addition, “a large number of traditional Chinese operas adapted from *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* flourished, and most mainstream operas of the time incorporated stories drawn from the collection, such as Peking Opera, Sichuan Opera, Kunqu Opera, Yunnan Opera, Qinqiang Opera, and Shaanxi Bangzi Opera”^[8]. Among these opera genres were both Kunqu Opera, which was appreciated by the upper-class literati, and Peking Opera, which was widely enjoyed by the common people for its popular and accessible nature.

Moreover, “Pu Songling preserved the elegance and philosophical depth of classical literature through literary Chinese, while employing vernacular Chinese to infuse the vitality and warmth of everyday life, thereby achieving an organic unity of ‘refinement’ and ‘popular taste’ within the text”^[9]. Throughout the development of classical Chinese fiction, there has always been a tension between “refined literary language” and “vernacular language.” From the pre-Qin period onward, refined literary language long remained the mainstream, yet this mode of writing dealt mostly with kings, lords, generals, and ministers, rarely touching upon the lives of ordinary people. After the Tang and Song dynasties, vernacular fiction began to flourish. By the Ming and Qing periods, Pu Songling found himself in an era when vernacular fiction was on the rise yet still struggled to gain entry into the realm of high literature. Through his superb literary narrative, he bridged the two modes, resolving the dilemma of the “division between the refined and the popular.”

Therefore, the modes of dissemination of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* became increasingly diversified: while reaching ordinary people, it did not become detached from the traditional literati class. Its

coverage was thus remarkably broad, and such an all-encompassing, multi-level influence was exceedingly rare.

“It was precisely because it appealed to both refined and popular tastes that *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* became a nationwide sensation; its reflections on reality and its exquisitely crafted stories became known to virtually every household”^[10]. Meanwhile, alongside Sino-foreign exchanges, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* gradually spread overseas beginning in the late eighteenth century. To this day, more than thirty translated versions in over twenty languages—including English, French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Vietnamese—continue to circulate around the world.

The intrinsic value and extensive dissemination of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* have secured its enduring position at the summit of Chinese literary history. Beginning the work out of “solitary indignation” and taking “tales of the marvelous” and “tales of the strange” as his wings, Pu Songling realized part of his personal aspirations while renewing and advancing the lineage of literary narrative, ultimately earning acclaim, alongside Maupassant and Chekhov, as one of the “world’s kings of the short story.”

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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