JOURNAL OF CHINESE HUMANITIES 11 (2025) 249–263

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Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio: the Western Reception and Cross-Cultural Transformations of "*yi*"

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Received 3 May 2025 | Accepted 21 May 2025 |
Published online 10 December 2025

Abstract

The classical Chinese work of supernatural fiction *Liaozhai zhiyi* is the ancient Chinese novel that has been translated into the most foreign languages. During nearly two centuries of transmission to the West, "strange" (*yi* 異) has become the focal point for sinologists' translation and study of *Liaozhai zhiyi*. Shaped by different historical contexts and scholarly concerns, the interpretations of *yi* by sinologists have evolved alongside broader developments in Western sinology, creating multiple levels of discourse. From the misinterpretations of the early Sino-Western contact period, to using *Liaozhai zhiyi* to observe the "strangeness" of customs out of a desire to understand Chinese social life, and finally to the deep exploration of fundamental characteristics of Chinese culture, European and American sinology has regarded this idea of "strangeness" as a bidirectional link for understanding the other and examining the self. Ultimately, sinologists elevated the *yi* of *Liaozhai zhiyi* from a culturally specific literary experience to a universal discourse resource, while enriching the understanding of *Liaozhai zhiyi* in cross-cultural contexts.

Keywords

overseas sinology – *Liaozhai zhiyi* – European and American transmission – cultural representation

The Qing dynasty (1616–1911) classical Chinese fiction *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 employs a refined yet archaic language that posed reading challenges even for Qing readers. The Qing scholar Sun Xigu 孫錫嘏 (fl. 1895) noted in his postscript "Du *Liaozhai zhiyi* hou ba" 讀聊齋志異後跋: "I still cannot fully recognize all the classical allusions and literary techniques used in the book."[1] Contemporary *Liaozhai* studies expert Yuan Shishuo 袁世碩 has similarly observed that research on *Liaozhai zhiyi* lacks the scale and depth of the study of *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢, recognizing that the classical Chinese language employed limits *Liaozhai zhiyi*'s influence compared to ancient vernacular novels like *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 and *Hongloumeng*.[2]

If we turn our attention overseas, we discover another intriguing literary phenomenon: "Among Chinese classical novels, *Liaozhai zhiyi* has been translated into the most foreign languages."[3] In the English-speaking world, since London's *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* introduced the story "Bai Yuyu" 白于玉 from *Liaozhai zhiyi* in 1835, the work has undergone translations by sinologists Charles Gutzlaff (1803–1851), Herbert A. Giles (1845–1935), George Soulié de Morant (1878–1955), Martin Buber (1878–1965), Rose Maud Quong (1879–1972), H. C. Chang (1923–2004), and John Minford. In the 2020s, American sinologist Judith Zeitlin collaborated with Oxford University Press's "Hsu-Tang Library of Chinese Literature Fund" project to plan a four-volume bilingual *Liaozhai's Strange Tales: A New, Complete, Annotated Translation*. For nearly two centuries, *Liaozhai zhiyi* has been translated and transmitted almost continuously in Europe and America, gathering sustained attention from sinologists and general readers in the English-speaking world.

This demonstrates that classical Chinese as the novel's linguistic form has not hindered the widespread transmission of *Liaozhai zhiyi* in the English-speaking world. This naturally raises a question worth considering: what has driven overseas sinologists to maintain their scholarly enthusiasm for *Liaozhai zhiyi*? This article argues that one important reason lies in the *yi* of *Liaozhai zhiyi* – "strange" has long constituted "a strong fascination" for readers.[4] As a concept rich in meaning, *yi* has engendered different cultural

1 Zhu Yixuan 朱一玄, Liaozhai zhiyi *ziliao huibian* 聊齋志異資料匯編 (Nanjing: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2002), 495.

2 Yuan Shishuo 袁世碩, "*Liaozhai zhiyi* yanjiu jingyan tan"《聊齋志異》研究經驗談, *Pu Songling yanjiu* 蒲松齡研究, no. 3 (2022): 129–42.

3 Wang Lina 王麗娜, *Zhongguo gudian xiaoshuo xiqu mingzhu zai guowai* 中國古典小說戲曲名著在國外 (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1988), 214.

4 Cai jiudi 蔡九迪 [Judith T. Zeitlin], *Yishishi: Pu Songling yu Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo* 異史氏：蒲松齡與中國文言小說, trans. Ren Zengqiang 任增強 (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2023), 4.

representations under varying scholarly approaches in overseas sinology, thus becoming a unique literary experience through which European and American scholars understand Chinese culture.

1 Understanding the Dimensions of *yi* in *Liaozhai Zhiyi* and Its Sinological Focus

What does *yi* 異 mean? According to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, "*yi* means to distinguish. The character is composed of 廾 and 畀."[5] This definition already indicates that *yi* carries the meaning of distinction and difference. In the Qing dynasty *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典, which synthesizes earlier lexicographical work, *yi* appears with additional meanings: "different," "strange," "odd," and "contrary."[6]

These definitions reveal an intriguing phenomenon. First, the *Kangxi zidian* offers a much richer understanding of *yi* than the *Shuowen*, presenting multiple interpretations. However, this approach also creates a circular problem of definition, since "strange," "weird," and "odd" are synonyms that essentially define each other. American sinologist Judith Zeitlin, who specializes in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, observes this difficulty: "it is hard to give a precise, clear, and adequate definition of *yi*, which raises the question: can *yi* be defined at all?"[7]

Rather than directly pursuing the essence of *yi*, it is more productive to explore how *yi* emerges through the relationship between observer and observed. As Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324) noted in his "*Shanhaijing* xulu" 山海經敘錄: "When people call something strange (*yi*), they do not understand what makes it strange; when they call something ordinary, they do not understand what makes it ordinary. Why is this? Objects possess no inherent strangeness – strangeness emerges only through our encounter with them. Strangeness resides in the observer, not in the observed."[8] From the perspective of self and other relationships, Guo Pu argues that *yi* is not an inherent property of objects but emerges from the subjective understanding of the observer.

Following this logic, we can understand how *Liaozhai zhiyi* gained popularity during its cross-cultural transmission. Overseas sinologists from different

5 Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, annot. Cai Menglin 蔡夢麟 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 2021), 100.

6 Zhang Yushu 張玉書 and Chen Tingjing 陳廷敬, *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 1995), 242.

7 Judith T. Zeitlin, *Yishishi*, 7.

8 Yuan Ke 袁珂, Shanhaijing *jiaozhu* 山海經校注 (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 1992), 542.

cultural backgrounds, historical periods, and scholarly positions have interpreted *yi* differently, sustaining nearly two centuries of overseas interest in this classical Chinese fiction collection.

A careful examination of the English translation history of *Liaozhai zhiyi* confirms that *yi* serves as the primary scholarly focus for most overseas sinologists studying this work. Although the title *Liaozhai zhiyi* contains the character *yi*, not all sinologists have expressed it in their translations of the title. For instance, American sinologist Samuel Wells Williams (1812–1884) translated *Liaozhai zhiyi* as "Stories from the Pastime of the Study" in his 1842 textbook *Easy Lessons in Chinese* and his 1871 work *The Middle Kingdom*. This translation deliberately omits the word "*yi*" and instead emphasizes *Liaozhai*'s "beautiful literary style and pure Chinese language."[9] Similarly, British sinologist Walter Hillier (1849–1927) simply rendered *Liaozhai zhiyi* as "Liao Chai" in his textbook *The Chinese Language and How to Learn It* (first published in 1907), focusing on its "content and literary style" rather than its strangeness.[10] These scholars emphasized the artistic qualities of *Liaozhai zhiyi*, while its "strangeness" was reserved for discussions on social meaning and cultural representation.

However, most early English-language treatments did focus on the supernatural elements. *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, which introduced *Liaozhai zhiyi* to English readers relatively early, did not provide a direct translation of the title. Yet in reviewing "Bai Yuyu," the magazine used terms like "the marvellous" and "genii" (a plural form of "genie").[11] German sinologist Charles Gutzlaff subsequently wrote about the work in *Chinese Repository* in 1842, calling it "Extraordinary Legends."[12] About twenty years later, British sinologist William Frederick Mayers (1831–1878) published "The Record of Marvels; or Tales of the Genii" in *Notes and Queries: On China and Japan*, again focusing on its strange elements.[13]

The scholarly emphasis on "strange" became established through British sinologist Herbert Giles's late 19th-century translation "Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio." Giles used the English word "strange" to translate 異, a

9 Samuel Wells Williams, *Easy Lessons in Chinese* (Macao: Printed at the office of the Chinese Repository, 1842), 157.

10 Walter Hillier, *The Chinese Language and How to Learn It* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Limited, 1919), III.

11 Δ, "Horæ Sinicæ," *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 11, no. 65 (1835): 549.

12 Charles Gutzlaff, "Liáu Chái I Chi, or Extraordinary Legends from Liáu Chái, Reviewed by a Correspondent," *Chinese Repository* 11, no. 4 (1842): 204.

13 William Frederick Mayers, "The Record of Marvels; or Tales of the Genii," *Notes and Queries: on China and Japan* 1, no. 3 (1867): 24.

choice that influenced subsequent Western sinologists. This pattern continued with French sinologist George Soulié de Morant's 1913 selected translation *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisure*, Denis C. Mair and Victor H. Mair's 1989 selected translation *Strange Tales from Make-do Studio*, John Minford's 2006 selected translation *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, and Sidney Sondergard's 2008 complete translation *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*. The culmination of this scholarly trend appears in Judith Zeitlin's *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*, published in 1993, the first English-language monograph on *Liaozhai zhiyi*, which not only mentions but provides extensive analysis centered on the concept of "strange."

Even translations that did not use the word "strange" emphasized similar themes. Martin Buber's 1911 German selected translation and Rose Maud Quong's 1946 English selected translation both shared the same title *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, while H. C. Chang's 1983 work on Chinese literature including *Liaozhai zhiyi* was titled *Tales of the Supernatural*. Although these translators avoided "strange," their use of "ghost" and "supernatural" demonstrates the continued scholarly attention to the concept of strangeness.

2 Observing the "Strange" of Customs through *Liaozhai Zhiyi*

Western interest in foreign customs arose from an expanding global awareness facilitated by capitalism and a fascination with the unknown. French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) pioneered the European study of world cultures and customs. His 1756 Geneva publication, *An Essay on Universal History, and the Manners, and Spirit of Nations, from the Reign of Charlemagne to the Age of Louis XIV*, sought to understand "the spirit, manners, and customs of the principal nations, and some of the facts necessary to illustrate all this."[14]

This scholarly interest gradually formed a discipline around "customs" in Europe. In 1846, British scholar W. J. Thomas (1803–1885) coined the term "folk-lore" to designate this emerging field, which aimed to study the beliefs and customs of ordinary people.[15] As capitalism expanded and early globalization took shape, European folklore studies inevitably influenced how Westerners in China produced knowledge about Chinese society. This influence was

14 Fuertai 伏爾泰 [Voltaire], *Fengsu lun: lun ge minzu de jingshen yu fengsu yiji zi Chaliman zhi Luyi shisan de lishi* 風俗論：論各民族的精神與風俗以及自查理曼至路易十三的歷史, trans. Liang Shouqiang 梁守鏘 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2009), 229.

15 Marian Roalfe Cox, *An Introduction to Folk-lore* (London: David Nutt, 1895), 3.

manifested in two ways: Westerners began conducting ethnographic fieldwork in China's interior, producing extensive literature on Chinese folklore and national character, and they increasingly turned to translating popular literature – novels and dramas – to understand authentic Chinese social life.

Regarding *Liaozhai zhiyi* specifically, early Western attention remained largely superficial, involving selection, rephrasing, and often misinterpretation of source material. Herbert Giles observed that "many Chinese customs are ridiculed and condemned" because "although a great number of books have been published about China and the Chinese, there are extremely few in which the information is conveyed at first hand; in other words, in which the Chinese are allowed to speak for themselves."[16]

Recognizing this limitation, Giles fundamentally reoriented the goals and methods of translating Chinese knowledge. Through *Liaozhai zhiyi*, he sought to let "the Chinese speak for themselves," introducing Western readers to Chinese social customs and human relations in a comprehensive and objective manner. Together with sinologists like George Soulié de Morant, Giles established a new approach to examining the "strange" elements of *Liaozhai zhiyi*.

Liaozhai zhiyi, as a classical Chinese fiction collection containing nearly five hundred stories, "records numerous customs and cultural phenomena from the Ming-Qing transition period, depicting a 'Qing dynasty customs painting.'"[17] British sinologist John Francis Davis reinforced this perspective, noting that "novels and legendary stories are full of the most subtle details of customs and life scenes." He concluded that "one of the most effectual means of gaining an intimate knowledge of China, is by translations of its popular literature, consisting principally of drama and novels."[18]

Under the influence of this philosophy, Giles undertook a comprehensive English translation project of *Liaozhai zhiyi*. Having lived in China for twenty-five years, he possessed intimate knowledge of Chinese language and culture, demonstrating "an accurate knowledge of the grammatical structure of the language, and an extensive insight into the manners, customs, superstitions, and general social life of the Chinese."[19] Giles selected 164 high-quality and distinctive stories and presented a comprehensive view of this foreign society to Western readers.[20]

16 Herbert A. Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (London: Thos. De la Rue & Co., 1880), xv.

17 Xu Wenjun 徐文軍, *Liaozhai fengsu wenhua lun* 聊齋風俗文化論 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2008), 8.

18 John Francis Davis, *Chinese Novels* (London: John Murray, 1843), 9–10.

19 Herbert A. Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, xiv.

20 Ibid., xxix.

Most notably, Giles made full use of annotations as a medium. Beyond translator prefaces, he provided detailed item-by-item notes explaining folk beliefs, seasonal festivals, and living customs that would challenge Western readers' understanding. This helped Western readers gain close knowledge and understanding of ancient China. As Giles noted in his reprint preface, "As a supplement to knowledge of Chinese folklore, as a guide to understanding the customs, habits, and social life of this vast empire, my English translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* may not be entirely without interest."[21]

Following Giles's path of observing the "strange" of customs through translation, French sinologist George Soulié de Morant published an English selection from *Liaozhai zhiyi* in 1913. His twenty-five selected stories included longer *chuanqi* 傳奇 tales such as "Huabi" 畫壁 and "Hai gongzi" 海公子, alongside shorter *zhiguai* 志怪 stories like "Shanxiao" 山魈 and "Qiao zhong guai" 蕉中怪. De Morant's translations were not entirely faithful to the original text but were rather adaptations.

For example, in "The Fresco" (his translation of "Huabi" 畫壁, The Painted Wall), de Morant added courteous expressions such as "Your arrival lightens my humble dwelling" and "I do not dare! I do not dare!" – typical host-guest pleasantries not found in the original.[22] Similarly, "The Dwarf Hunters" (his version of "Xiao liequan" 小獵犬) opens with detailed descriptions of southern China's humid climate and mosquito-related discomfort.[23]

De Morant's additions of various descriptions of local customs and practices served a specific purpose: to present Chinese social life to Western readers as comprehensively and from as many angles as possible. His preface articulates this clearly: "Outside of school, the Chinese pay no more attention to Confucian classics than we do to Western classics: if you see the books they hold in their hands, they are definitely not the *Great Learning* or the *Analects*, but more likely novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* or collections of ghost stories … Their influence on Chinese thought is much greater than all the Confucian classics combined." He emphasized that "the novels and stories throw an extraordinary light on Chinese everyday life that foreigners have been very seldom, and now will never be, able to witness. …"[24]

21 Ibid., xxiii.

22 George Soulié, *Strange Stories from the Lodge of Leisure* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 11.

23 Ibid., 18.

24 Ibid., v–vi.

Here, de Morant pushed back against traditional sinological approaches that focused exclusively on Confucian classics, emphasizing instead fiction's crucial importance for understanding Chinese society and daily life.

3 Cultural Codes behind Ghost-Love Narratives and the "Strange" of *Liaozhai Zhiyi*

Based on continuous exploration of Chinese national character and modes of thinking, Western sinological study of *Liaozhai zhiyi* has evolved toward greater analytical depth. This development has generated new approaches to understanding "strange" – specifically, examining the national character, psychological dispositions, and worldviews embedded in *Liaozhai zhiyi* stories from an anti-rationalist perspective.

Since the Enlightenment, Western civilization has championed reason while exploring nature and transforming the world. However, this emphasis has created binary oppositions between humanity and nature, humanity and society, and among human beings themselves, resulting in spiritual crisis and self-alienation. The two world wars prompted a questioning of the rationalist foundations of Western society. Consequently, the people turned to Eastern culture for theoretical resources to reconsider relationships between people and between humanity and the world. *Liaozhai zhiyi*, which manifests different value orientations, thus re-entered Western sinologists' scholarly vision.

3.1 Liaozhai Zhiyi *and Buber's Philosophical Inquiry*

Austrian philosopher Martin Buber was the first to explore the relationship between self and other through translating *Liaozhai zhiyi*. In 1911, Buber published a German selection translating sixteen *Liaozhai* stories under the title *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*. Ten stories were adapted from Herbert Giles's translation, while Buber completed six additional stories with assistance from his collaborator Wang Jingtao 王警濤. These sixteen stories were subsequently translated into English by Alex Page in 1991, with an introduction by Israeli sinologist Irene Eber.[25]

Buber's translation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* aimed to seek intellectual resources from Chinese traditional culture to validate his philosophical positions. In *I and Thou*, Buber argued that the fundamental nature of the world is relational, rooted in the "I-Thou" dynamic. He explored two relational categories – "I-Thou"

25 Martin Buber, *Chinese Tales*, trans. Alex Page (New York: Humanity Books, 1991), 113.

and "I-It" – and distinguished between the world of experience and the world of relation. Through this framework, he profoundly critiqued Western philosophy's subject-object binary opposition since the modern period, proposing his theory of "between-ness." The "I-Thou" relationship exists between two active subjects. It represents not a subject's recognition of an object, but encounter and dialogue between two active subjects. In contrast, the "I-It" relationship in the experiential world is one-sided. The "I-Thou" relationship better achieves completeness and purity, existing not only between human beings but between humans and all things as comprehensive and loving connections.[26]

Buber's selected translations of "the most beautiful and most curious tales concerning love between human beings and demons"[27] demonstrate what similar stories from other cultures lack: "an air of intimacy and harmony." In these tales, "demons are loved and possessed by humans, humans by demons," with no "mystifying, shattering horror" and where "the order of nature is not ruptured but extended; nothing interferes with the plenitude of life, and everything living carries the seed of the ghostly."[28]

Buber used *Liaozhai zhiyi* to demonstrate his philosophical insights while simultaneously illuminating the unique modes of thinking and worldview that the collection contains. As Irene Eber notes in her introduction to the translation: "The holistic concept in Chinese thought concerns an all-encompassing order that includes both this world and the other world. These two worlds – the socio-political order and the order of spirits and deities – are not completely separated from each other. They interact in a peculiar, unexpected yet by no means chaotic manner."[29]

3.2 *Male-Female Relationships in* Liaozhai Zhiyi *through the "I-Thou" Framework*

Chinese Ghost and Love Stories was also the title of Australian-Chinese sinologist Rose Quong's English selection from *Liaozhai zhiyi*. Her translation selected forty stories and shared the same title as Buber's German translation. With Buber's permission, Quong included and translated the preface from his German edition.[30]

26 Mading Bubo 馬丁・布伯 [Martin Buber], *Wo he ni* 我和你, trans. Yang Junjie 楊俊傑 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 2017), 13.

27 Martin Buber, *Chinese Tales*, 113.

28 Ibid., 111.

29 Irene Eber, Introduction to *Chinese Tales*, xiii.

30 Rose Quong, *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1946), 2.

Quong's translation fully explored the non-Western approach to male-female relationships within the "I-Thou" framework found in *Liaozhai zhiyi*. "Huabi", one of the collection's most famous stories, has consistently attracted English translators. Giles, Quong, and British sinologist John Minford, all included it in their respective translations, but their treatment of the romantic relationship differs dramatically.

The original text describes the meeting between the fictional scholar Zhu Xiaolian 朱孝廉 and the flower-picking fairy: "He immediately embraced her, and she did not strongly resist, so they became intimate."[31]

Quong's translation approach differs significantly from her predecessors and successors. She neither follows Giles's categorical removal of all sensual experience from the original text, nor adopts Minford's male-centered emphasis on masculine perspective and possessiveness. Instead, she translates the passage as "their hearts were suddenly filled with ecstatic joy."[32]

Here, Quong demonstrates the mutual affection between Zhu Xiaolian and the fairy – their physical and spiritual union in an encounter characterized by love and respect. This represents equal participation and experience between male and female. Her approach contrasts with Giles's adaptation for "observing customs," which reads "[T]hen they fell on their knees and worshipped heaven and earth together, and rose up as man and wife. ..."[33] It also differs from Minford's translation that treats the female as an object to be possessed: "he embraced and, finding her to be far from unreceptive, proceeded to make love to her."[34]

Through Buber's "I-Thou" framework, Quong's exploration of male-female relationships in *Liaozhai zhiyi* revealed to Western readers of the first half of the twentieth century an Eastern approach to gender relations that differed fundamentally from Western binary opposition.

3.3 *Minford's Translation and Analysis of Strange Narratives*

While Quong's translation focused on male-female romantic relationships, using the "I-Thou" framework to examine gender perspectives and value orientations in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, John Minford devoted considerable attention to the worldview behind the collection's strange narratives.

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31 Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Quanjiao huizhu ji ping* Liaozhai zhiyi 全校會注集評聊齋志異, comp. Ren Duxing 任篤行 (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 2000), 1: 21.

32 Rose Quong, *Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, 306.

33 Herbert A. Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, 10.

34 John Minford, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2006), 23–24.

Through his translation work, Minford discovered that *Liaozhai zhiyi* is commonly called "ghost and fox spirits stories" in Chinese contexts. However, only a few stories such as "Shibian" 屍變, "Penshui" 噴水, "Shanxiao" 山魈, and "Yaogui" 咬鬼 belong to the category of hair-raising "ghost and supernatural stories."[35]

More commonly, ghosts appear as female revenants who use the seductive arts to ensnare humans and demonstrate expertise in the Daoist sexual cultivation practices ("the art of the bedchamber"). Minford cites the chapter "Lianxiang" 蓮香 to exemplify this phenomenon: the story depicts a triangular romance between a scholar, a fox spirit, and a female ghost. Even when the story includes metaphysical dialogue, it merely explores how humans and supernatural beings can love each other.

The story's development proves particularly revealing. After initial jealousy and rivalry, the fox spirit Lianxiang and the female ghost Lady Li become as close as sisters. This transformation inevitably calls to mind the harmony between wives and concubines in polygamous households.

After citing "Lianxiang" as evidence, Minford returns to Buber's philosophical insights. He points out that although many stories in *Liaozhai zhiyi* involve ghosts and other supernatural forces, these narratives operate on two levels. First, the images of ghosts and foxes are symbolic of human men and women and the eternal struggle between the sexes. The origins of foot-binding and Daoist sexual cultivation practices can be traced to such gender conflicts. Second, these strange events transcend the boundary between natural and supernatural realms. In traditional Chinese modes of thinking, the relationship between "this" world and the world "beyond" remains more elastic rather than clearly demarcated as in the Western tradition.[36]

Here, Minford carried on Buber's position while explaining the Eastern worldview manifested behind *Liaozhai* stories from a philosophical perspective. Unlike Western supernatural tales, the holistic thinking mode that transcends binary opposition constitutes a fundamental cultural code for generating the "strange" in *Liaozhai zhiyi*.[37]

35 Ibid., xxiv.

36 Ibid., xxv.

37 Beyond direct citations, Martin Buber's German translation and its English version, along with Rose Quong's English translation, are prominently listed in Minford's preface and the "Further Reading" bibliography, clearly indicating Buber's influence on Minford. See *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, xxxi, 492–493.

4 Structural Approaches to the "Strange" of *Liaozhai*

Examining the cultural codes underlying *Liaozhai zhiyi* narratives has become a crucial method for sinologists studying the collection's "strange" elements and exploring different cultural psychology and thinking patterns. This analytical approach, initiated by Martin Buber's investigations, reached systematic development in the scholarly works of H. C. Chang and Judith Zeitlin.

4.1 *Value Systems and the Utilitarian Dimension of "Strange"*

H. C. Chang, a prominent British-Chinese sinologist originally from Shanghai, made significant contributions to *Liaozhai zhiyi* scholarship through his work *Chinese Literature: Tales of the Supernatural*. Chang applied structuralist methodology to identify four underlying value orientations in *Liaozhai zhiyi*: "examination success, beautiful wives and concubines, worthy descendants, and material prosperity."[38]

These aspirations reflect Pu Songling's psychological desires within Qing dynasty social and cultural contexts and reveal the fundamental logic governing his story construction. As a lower-class intellectual who repeatedly failed the imperial examinations, Pu Songling never abandoned his dreams of official success and material wealth. This utilitarian mindset inevitably focused his attention on practical concerns and worldly desires, which he channeled into *Liaozhai zhiyi* through a "daydreaming" form of literary creation that became a pervasive narrative logic.

Philosopher Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) delineated four realms of human existence: natural, utilitarian, moral, and cosmic, based on varying levels of awareness.[39] The four aspirations Chang identified clearly belong to the worldly "utilitarian realm," representing relatively modest spiritual aims.

However, *Liaozhai zhiyi* extends beyond this utilitarian level. Stories like "Kao Chenghuang" 考城隍 and "Tongren yu" 瞳人語 prompted Qing commentator He Shouqi 何守奇 to observe that "the principle of rewarding virtue and punishing vice is manifest,"[40] placing these stories within the "moral realm." Others, including "Yingning" 嬰寧, "Gu Sheng" 顧生, and "Hanyue fuqu" 寒月芙蕖, touch the "cosmic realm." Chang's structural analysis thus has certain limitations. But from a cross-cultural perspective, the Chinese emphasis on

38 H. C. Chang, *Chinese Literature*, vol. 3, *Tales of the Supernatural* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1983), 119.

39 Liu Mengxi 劉夢溪, ed., *Zhongguo xiandai xueshu jingdian: Feng Youlan juan* 中國現代學術經典・馮友蘭卷 (Shijiazhuang: Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 2: 528.

40 Zhu Yixuan, Liaozhai zhiyi *ziliao huibian*, 380.

"examination success, beautiful wives and concubines, and worthy descendants" represents a distinct form of cultural "strangeness" for Western readers.

4.2 *Three-Layered Structural Relations and Reconceptualizing "Strange"*

As discussed earlier, "strange" has consistently attracted European and American sinologists to *Liaozhai zhiyi*. Although generations of scholars have explored the cross-cultural implications of "strange" through translation, their discussions remained fragmented until American sinologist Judith Zeitlin published *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. This monograph provided the first systematic theoretical analysis of "strange" in European and American sinology.

Driven by strong scholarly concerns, Zeitlin's study addresses a fundamental question: what constitutes the "strange" in *Liaozhai zhiyi*? Rather than focusing on supernatural elements like ghosts and fox spirits or emphasizing class-based sociological analysis, Zeitlin conducted comprehensive close readings of the entire collection. She identified three boundary-crossing relationships: "obsession (subject-object)," "gender transgression (male-female)," and "dream states (illusion-reality)."

According to Zeitlin, *Liaozhai zhiyi* creates its "strange" narrative effects by transcending these boundaries – through what she terms "traditional boundaries and categories being distorted or altered in some way."[41] This new understanding of how "strange" emerges and what it means was also influenced by Buber's philosophy of "between-ness." As Zeitlin notes, "overly rigid classifications create various false binary oppositions." The "strange" of *Liaozhai* "must be recognized in the shifting zone between history and fiction, reality and illusion."[42]

By combining Ming-Qing (1368–1911) cultural contexts with twentieth-century Western sociological and literary theories, Zeitlin offers fresh insights into "strange." In "Shi Qingxu" 石清虛, she observes that stone-lover Xing Yunfei 邢雲飛 and his beloved stone share a "mutual pursuit" rather than a simple subject-object relationship. Xing sacrifices property and lifespan for the stone, while the stone converses with him in dreams and shatters itself after his death to join its devoted friend. This completely dissolves the subject-object boundary.

The transcendence between worldly and otherworldly realms appears most clearly in "Huabi". Scholar Zhu Xiaolian enters a temple wall painting and becomes intimate with a young flower-picking fairy. Upon returning to reality,

41 Judith T. Zeitlin, *Yishishi: Pu Songling yu Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo*, 227.
42 Ibid., 12.

he discovers the fairy's hairstyle in the painting has changed from a maiden's style to a married woman's coiffure, suggesting the permeability of boundaries between realms.

As mentioned above, while subject-object unity and cross-realm accessibility represent distinctly Eastern cultural "strangeness," gender fluidity emerges as a phenomenon attracting both Eastern and Western attention. Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘 (1856–1928) argued in *The Spirit of the Chinese People* that "the value of a civilization ultimately depends on what kind of people – what kind of men and women – it produces. Only the men and women shaped by a civilization truly reveal that civilization's essence and character, its very soul."[43]

Zeitlin seized upon this fundamental issue of a "civilization's soul" through analyzing stories like "Yan shi" 顏氏, "Shang Sanguan" 商三官, and "Qiao nü" 喬女. She discovered that "in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, heroic masculine spirit is redefined as genuine moral character that both women and men can achieve through self-cultivation and righteous action."[44]

Lady Yan disguises herself as a man to succeed in imperial examinations; Lady Shang becomes a male performer to avenge his father's murder; Miss Qiao appears in court to repay a benefactor. These actions violate traditional moral constraints on female behavior. Yet Pu Songling transcends conventional gender boundaries precisely to demonstrate the female consciousness of ancient Chinese women. As Simone de Beauvoir observed, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman. One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman through the circumstances that surround them, through the culture in which they live, and through their personal experiences and self-determined activities."[45] Pu Songling's portrayal of women in *Liaozhai zhiyi* and his subversion of patriarchal authority resonated with the 1970s and 1980s American radical feminist movement, attracting academic attention.[46]

When Western scholars like Zeitlin focused on gender-transgressive stories in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, their interest in "strange" moved beyond "observing customs" or discovering Eastern cultural differences. Instead, they sought Eastern resources to understand their own cultural phenomena based on shared scholarly concerns. This approach transcended East-West binary opposition,

43 Gu Hongming 辜鴻銘, *Zhongguoren de jingshen* 中國人的精神, trans. Sun Yong 孫永 (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 2022), preface, 3.

44 Judith T. Zeitlin, *Yishishi: Pu Songling yu Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo*, 149.

45 Boruwa 波伏瓦 [Simone de Beauvoir], *Di er xing* 第二性, trans. Zheng Kelu 鄭克魯 (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2011), 348.

46 The influence of 1970s–80s American radical feminist thought on sinological interpretation of *Liaozhai zhiyi* exemplifies how contemporary theoretical frameworks shape cross-cultural literary analysis.

endowing *Liaozhai zhiyi*'s "strange" with universal value and global significance as an effective discourse resource for addressing common cross-cultural topics.

5 Conclusion

Liaozhai zhiyi began its Western transmission no later than 1835 and has sustained nearly two centuries of continuous translation and scholarship. Throughout this process, "strange" has remained the central theme and underlying thread of European and American sinological engagement. From early misinterpretations through customs observation to deep exploration of national character, thinking patterns, and worldviews, the "strange" of *Liaozhai zhiyi* has continuously acquired new meanings and values in cross-cultural contexts.

The various cross-cultural representations surrounding "strange" reflect European and American sinologists' investigations of *Liaozhai zhiyi* based on their own scholarly concerns. But these cultural representations have also revealed the collection's rich literary and cultural implications, promoting its overseas transmission and securing *Liaozhai zhiyi*'s place among the classics of world literature.

Acknowledgements

This article presents partial findings from the research project, "Cataloging, Reproduction, and Research of Chinese Ancient Books in the National Library of France" (Grant No. 17ZDA167), funded by the General Program of the National Social Science Fund of China (NSSFC).

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