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## Becoming-Woman in Pu Songling's *Strange Tales*

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### Abstract

This article examines the animal–human erotic encounters in Pu Songling's strange [*zhiguai* 志怪] tales, using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of becoming-woman and affect to think through several intersecting kinds of otherness, including the queer, the woman, the animal, and the strange. *Zhiguai* is a genre of writing that features ghosts, magical animal–human shapeshifting, dreams that intervene in reality, and other supernatural characters and events. The traditional scholarly approach to the *zhiguai* tales has been to understand queerkind in these tales as purely allegorical representations of humans and human society. This article approaches them from the perspective of their distinct supernatural qualities or the importance of hybrid human-animal bodies in the stories, as opposed to an anthropocentric reading of the *zhiguai* tales. It argues that the bodily transformations in the *zhiguai* tales are Deleuzian becoming-woman, which are sexually transgressive when eroticized queerkind bodies and desires queer the Confucian feminine norm of chaste women.

### Keywords

animal–human erotic encounters – becoming-woman – queer – women – *zhiguai* tales

## 1 Introduction

This article examines the animal–human erotic encounters in the strange [*zhiguai* 志怪] tales from Pu Songling's (1640–1715) collection *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* [*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異], using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of becoming-woman to think through several intersecting kinds of otherness, including the queer (i.e., nonnormative), the woman, the animal, and the strange (i.e. supernatural). *Zhiguai* tales are a genre of writing that features ghosts, magical animal–human shapeshifters, dreams that intervene in reality, and other supernatural characters and events. In this article, we use the term “queerkind” to describe and foreground strange figures, which cannot be wholly generalized as animals but are, instead, magical creatures that exist between human and animal. The traditional scholarly approach to the *zhiguai* tales has been to understand the queerkind in these tales as purely allegorical representations of humans and human society. Instead of offering an anthropocentric reading of the *zhiguai* tales, this article approaches queerkind from the perspective of their distinct supernatural qualities or the importance of their bodies in the stories.

Specifically, we examine two tales, “The Lady of Qingcheng [Qingcheng fu 青城婦]” and “Feng the Carpenter [Feng mujiang 馮木匠],” in order to explicate how female sexuality during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) is represented in Pu Songling's tales via erotic encounters and transformations between humans and queerkind animals, arguing that the becoming-woman of these queerkind figures reveals culturally sexual taboos and queer possibilities of the body via sexual transgression. In what follows, we introduce the Deleuzian concept of becoming-woman to construct a framework for analyzing queerkind in the tales in question. After this, we provide a short description of Pu Songling and his *zhiguai* tales and then discuss chastity and becoming-woman within that context. This lays the ground for the further analysis of two animals in Pu's tales: snake and chicken.

## 2 Conceptual Convergence: Becoming-Woman and Queer

Becoming-woman is a Deleuzian concept that is helpful for analyzing queerkind in Pu Songling's *zhiguai* tales. Put simply, becoming-woman emphasizes how women can become other “outside” the male scope. For Deleuze and Guattari, women have the power to become the majority, whereas men become the minority when faced with the woman who has not been subjectified in the male-female dichotomy.

Deleuze and Guattari believe that becoming-woman is the foundation of all becomings.<sup>1</sup> Becoming-woman represents the beginning of human shapeshifting, as man is presumed the origin of human existence.<sup>2</sup> Becoming-woman evades the dualistic economy of gender by disassembling the notion of a separate and distinct structure of existence to men and women. Usually, Deleuzian theorists emphasize the difference between becoming and imitation, arguing that becoming-woman has no relation to the imitation of woman “as demarcated by her form” but, instead, disassembles the conceptual dichotomy of masculine and feminine, which insists on constructing bodies as separate, sexed organisms. There is no becoming-man because the male is the majoritarian norm and becoming is purely minoritarian. This means that only when men are faced with the “minoritarian woman” are they affected, as they find their major identity taken from them.

Becoming-woman is therefore better thought about in terms of epidemic, rather than filiation, in other words as something that is widespread as opposed to a legal relationship between family members. The term “epidemic” redirects the agential authority from the family domain (and the head of the household) to a widespread set of interactions, which are diverse and dispersive in their manner. This pre-empts the patterns of dispersal that characterize the meme, a term first referenced by Susan Blackmore, which suggests that the social practices characteristic of filiation are contagious, rather than natural or legal.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, becoming-woman is better practiced through contagion than heredity or sexual reproduction, as opposed to the marital or familial. A non-human sexuality is also that which has not been “reterritorialized by the Oedipal, conjugal and the anthropomorphic.”<sup>4</sup> The becoming-woman of queer-kind in the *zhiguai* tales, through their contamination of men by promiscuous sexual encounters, often leads to a literal death but also to the empowerment of women through sex that takes place outside the purposes of heteronormative marriage and reproduction.

In this way, we perceive becoming-woman as a queer concept, as queer claims fluidity of meaning (cutting loose being tied solely to sexuality) and similarly has the potential to subvert accepted ways of thinking on many issues. Queer theory aims to expose the ways in which ideas of the normal, particularly as expressed through heteronormativity, constrain or negate lives outside

1 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1987), 277.

2 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 277.

3 Susan Blackmore, *The Meme Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 46–47.

4 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 275.

the norm. “Queer” signifies “a resistance to regimes of the normal.”<sup>5</sup> The queerness of the world is precisely its capacity to shake, disconcert, and perplex us.<sup>6</sup> Queering is the process of disrupting the order of things, a way of looking at the world in a way that explicitly aligns with the strange and uncanny.<sup>7</sup> The queer is something askance to the expected: to embrace the queer is to “have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form *becoming strange*.”<sup>8</sup> Pu’s stories can be read as the queer impulse of the writer to reveal certain potential states for nonnormative sexualities outside the heteronormative expectations placed on gender roles in mainstream Qing dynasty society.

### 3 Context: The *Zhiguai* Tales and Pu Songling

*Zhiguai* is a genre that dates back to the Six Dynasties (222 BCE–589 CE), characterized by narratives of ghosts, magical animal–human shapeshifters, dreams that intervene in reality, and other supernatural events. *Guaiyi* 怪异 [the strange] is about both the transgression and blurring of boundaries. Within the *zhiguai* the boundaries between the living and the dead, the mortal and the immortal, and dream and reality are continually confounded.<sup>9</sup> *Guaiyi* can be understood with the Chinese terms *guai* 怪, *yi* 异, and *qi* 奇, which embody strangeness as fluid categories—the odd, the fantastic, the freakish, and the uncanny.<sup>10</sup> *Guaiyi* thus implies the disruption of the normal or normative; in social life, the “strange” resists the existing system, rule of law, ideology, and conventions. It is within this context that we posit a conceptual overlap between the “strange” and the “queer,” but a further point of connection is the erotic element embedded therein: like “queer,” *guaiyi* opens the realm of the erotic, flouting conventional limitations of sexuality.

As for Pu Songling, he was born in 1640, four years before the collapse of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Despite the disappointments in his professional pursuits, Pu wrote extensively throughout his life. His output includes poems,

5 Michael Warner, “Introduction”, in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvii.

6 Affrica Taylor and Mindy Blaise, “Queer Worlding Childhood,” *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 35, no. 3 (2014), 389.

7 Sara Ahmed, “Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 4 (2006), 565.

8 Ahmed, “Orientations,” emphasis added, 569.

9 Judith Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 5.

10 Idem.

plays, and fiction. Published fifty years after his death, his anomaly tale collection, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, however, delivered Pu the recognition that he had been denied in his lifetime and continues to be read, interpreted, and adapted in different media forms, in both vernacular Chinese and other languages.

Pu Songling's *zhiguai* tales includes those that use an assortment of sources, historical and fictional, and contain myth, folklore, fantasies, earlier tales, and invention.<sup>11</sup> The use of diverse styles or literary traditions of the anomaly tales is the most characteristic aspect of the collection; it combines both brief narratives of strange events in the *zhiguai* reportage style and intricate, prudently plotted stories in the tales of legends style [*chuanqi* 传奇]. The tales describe ghosts, animals, demons, and all other kinds of strange creatures and happenings. The themes also include families, children, and lovers. The ordinary and the extraordinary are juxtaposed, and the familiar is transformed or contrasted with the unknown.<sup>12</sup> In this article, we focus on the queerkind throughout Pu Songling's tales, as a figure that enjoins human and animal as one entwined entity and flagrantly transgress the normative organization of gender and sexuality (on which more later). These erotic tales have a wide range of animal shapeshifters that anticipate transgressive sexual desires, leading their characters into potentially dangerous situations.

### 3.1 *Chastity and Becoming-Woman in Pu Songling's Zhiguai Tales*

We think of the term "morality" in these tales not in the form of pejorative assessment, but figuratively, so as to think particularly about the ways in which the sexual and erotic transgress social codes by crossing over, skirting, or recrossing the boundaries of queerkind relations implied in these texts. This describes the way in which "morality" refers to upholding Confucian principles of human chastity, self-control, and filiality. The Qing dynasty was a rather conservative society that emphasized the appropriate fulfillment of feminine and masculine normative gender roles in line with the Confucian state. The queer and often bold descriptions of sex in the *zhiguai* tales are the queer impulse of writers to reveal certain potential states for nonnormative female and male sexualities, as a response to the repression of sexual practices that could not necessarily flexibly exist in mainstream Qing dynasty society, outside the heteronormative expectations placed on gender roles.

11 Chu-shu Chang and Shelley Hsueh-lun Chang, *Redefining History: Ghosts, Spirits and Human Society in P'u Sung-ling's World, 1640-1715* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 172.

12 Chang and Chang, *Redefining History*, 73.

Pu Songling's stories are full of "strange" women who resourcefully protect and promote their own interests.<sup>13</sup> These women highlight and undermine the female dilemma throughout late imperial Chinese history: women may be decision makers but have no authority to make decisions, and they may have a certain amount of freedom over their physical movements but are socially and economically controlled. One of the crucial features of the Qing period "lies squarely in the gendered terrain of sexuality: women's sexuality, not men's, was thrust into the moral discourse unlike at any other time."<sup>14</sup> The emblematic feature of female sexuality was engraved in two opposite cultural symbols: the chaste and the licentious.

Chinese women were identified primarily as daughters, sisters, and future mothers—categories that imply their gender while emphasizing their obligations within the family-kinship network. Chastity meant that, under patriarchal authority, women who outlived their husbands were expected to be either faithful widows who did not remarry or martyrs who committed suicide.<sup>15</sup> The Qing legal code regarding illicit consensual sex between a woman and a man was a direct result of attempts to maintain family values in the hope of supporting social stability.<sup>16</sup> By emphasizing the "safe" values as filial piety, fraternal affection, female chastity, obedience and respect for elders," the Qing government could use Chinese morality as a form of social control.<sup>17</sup> The regulation of sexual desires and behaviors, especially for women, became an urgent problem for neo-Confucian moralists. It is argued that the chaste woman as role model and licentious woman as cultural rogue demonstrated a response by the elite to bring the male-dominated Confucian social and familial order to the forefront.<sup>18</sup> The shapeshiftings of women in the *zhiguai* tales are thus inherently queer because they are dangerously outside the limits of male authority and control. Sex, as it appears in these tales, is Deleuzian in the sense that it does not always function in procreative form or heterosexual genital copulation in the natural or normative, but in pathological forms of sexuality, and ultimately it is related to the queerkind world.

13 Allan Barr, "Disarming Intruders: Alien Women in *Liaozhai zhiyi*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49 (1989), 517.

14 Weijing Lu, "The Chaste and the Licentious: Female Sexuality and Moral Discourse in Ming and Early Qing China," *Early Modern Women* 5 (2010), 183.

15 Vivien W. Ng, "Ideology and Sexuality: Rape Laws in Qing China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (1987), 60.

16 Matthew H. Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 67–68.

17 Ng, "Ideology and Sexuality," 57.

18 Lu, "The Chaste and the Licentious," 186.

Viewed through the lens of the queerkind in this article, rather than as purely representing the human condition or human nature through analogy,<sup>19</sup> these stories give us space to consider the epistemological paradigms of late imperial Chinese female sexual culture while also demonstrating the ontological uncertainty between the human and animal in *zhiguai* texts. Because Deleuze and Guattari argue against the anthropomorphic division of species or the division of species into forms that resemble the human form, this means that animal and human bodies, or all bodies and all sexualities, are stratified.<sup>20</sup> Sexuality is really a multiplicity of connections that extend across the sexes, species, and genera.

In the *zhiguai* tales, the fox remains the single most important creature throughout the tradition because of its association with the sexual promiscuity of the vixen. Fox tricksters are a feature of *zhiguai*, and as Lewis Hyde argues about tricksters more generally, their legendary sex drive seldom results in any offspring.<sup>21</sup> However, wanton women continued to appear in the guise of other animals, including but not limited to monkeys, tigers, and birds.<sup>22</sup> In this article, we look at the broader variety of shapeshifting queerkind in the *zhiguai* tales, in tales of a snake and a chicken, because in Pu's *zhiguai* collection, these are some of the few queerkind that are not foxes but stand out through their becoming-woman and eroticism in ways that undo the anthropomorphic, familial, and the Oedipal organization of sexuality.

The queerkind's labile sexuality in this article therefore attempts to offer the queer theorist a figure through which to explore the queer textuality of late imperial Chinese storytelling. In the *zhiguai* tales under discussion, queer becoming-woman carry the promise of female empowerment or, more generally, bodily empowerment through physical change. After all, queer is the adoption of the erotically marginal as a "location of ... openness and possibility."<sup>23</sup> A queer approach to queerkind can begin to address supernatural aspects of eroticism in certain *zhiguai* tales, which have hitherto remained concealed in existing critical approaches to the genre. In the tales of transformation that follow, queer desires and becoming-woman appear in the

19 See Chang and Chang. *Redefining History*; Ni Yuanyuan 倪媛媛 and Gai Xiaoming 盖晓明, "Yuewei Caotang Biji zhong de ziran renxing guan 阅微草堂笔记中的自然人性观 [The Natural View of Human Nature in *Tales of the Thatched Cottage*]," *Xiandai yuwen* 3 (2015).

20 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

21 Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), 8.

22 Daniel Hsieh, *Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2008), 130.

23 bell hooks in Alexander Doty, "There's Something Queer Here," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays in Popular Culture*, eds. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 6.

transgressive erotica of the queerkind world. In these tales, as in premodern Chinese art, there is little nudity. Yet, as in Chinese art, the body in *zhiguai* tales is far from invisible.<sup>24</sup> Any transformations of the body incite and suggest anxieties about what count, culturally, as appropriate, natural or normal bodies and desires.

#### 4 Queer Widows and Queer Offspring in “The Lady of Qingcheng”

In “The Lady of Qingcheng,” boundary breaking where the body is dispersed throughout the broader queerkind realm is important, especially in terms of the erotically transgressive force that it incites. This tale tells of a businessman from western Chengdu who married a widow from Qingcheng Mountain. The businessman must return home to deal with some affairs, but before he was to return home to reunite with his wife, he suddenly died. His colleagues believed that there was something strange about his death and told a government prefect of their concerns. The prefect suspected that the widow had committed adultery and plotted to murder her husband and cruelly torture him. The widow did not admit to this and was escorted to the county government. Because of the lack of evidence, the widow could only be locked away in prison, and the case was dragged on for a long time without being solved.

The interesting point about this tale is what ensued after the widow was locked away. This fascinating story of female queerkind bodies constitutes the primary transgression that marks them as sexually aberrant and dangerous, as shown in what the doctor said about the widow to Gaomeng who reported that someone in the official government had fallen ill:

Does the woman have a sharp mouth? ... There are several villages encircling Mt. Qingcheng, and many of their women engage in sex with snakes, so the girls they give birth to have pointed mouths and have snake's tongues in their vaginas. When those women have sex with a man, their snake tongues emerge and enter the man's penis, whereupon he loses his *yang* causing him immediately to die.... There's a witch living not far away who has herbs that can provoke the woman's lust, ... so her snake tongue will emerge, and then we can see for ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

24 John Hay, “The Body Invisible in Chinese Art?” in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, eds. Angela Zito and Tani Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 42.

25 婦尖嘴否? ... 此處繞青城 山有數村落, 其中婦女多為蛇交, 則生女尖喙, 陰中有物類蛇舌。至淫縱時, 則舌發出, 一入陰管, 男子陽脫立死。... 此處有巫媼, 能內藥使婦意盪, 舌自出, 是否可以驗見。Pu Songling 蒲松齡, *Liaozhai zhiyi*



Gao did as the doctor suggested, and the snake tongue emerged and revealed the prefect's suspicion that the woman had intentionally murdered her husband. The image of snake tongues emerging from a vagina and the woman's pointed mouth breaks the boundary dividing the internal from the external. This mimics the boundary-crossing copulation between a male snake and a human female that produced this strange embodiment. This animal-human transgression of corporeal boundaries alludes to the dangers of nonnormative or unnatural reproduction, because the male snake finds a way to propagate its species with random human women. At the same time, the phallic symbolism of the male snake demonstrates that having a male organ and the ability to produce offspring with it were important characteristics of manhood, investing men with the power to reproduce through physical penetration. The penis "represented the patriarchal power handed down the patriline from father to son consistent with the rules of Confucian filial piety."<sup>26</sup>

The grotesque body of the queerkind female's penetrative organ (snake tongue) reflects deep anxiety about women becoming-man, thus subordinating man. The procreation of queerkind women with "grotesque bodies" caught in between fragmented forms demonstrates the disordered female body.<sup>27</sup> Their bodily thresholds are never finished or completed but, rather, built to create a new body that is always "becoming," giving them subversive influence. Sexual deviance of the queerkind woman is thus replicated in her physical deformity, with the penis-like snake tongue perverting the passive principle of female *yin* 陰, the dark negative feminine principle in Chinese dualistic cosmology. In the Confucian belief in *yin-yang* 陰陽, women were *yin*, and men were *yang* 陽, the bright positive masculine principle in Chinese dualistic cosmology. Whereas *yang* looked after matters outside the home, *yin* complemented *yang* in taking care of matters inside the home. The Qing state's "chastity cult" rewarded chaste widows who "refused remarriage or committed suicide upon the deaths of their husbands, and for women who committed suicide to prevent a violation of their chastity."<sup>28</sup> Female virtue became critical in

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聊斋志异 (Zhejiang: Guji chubanshe, 1989), 600; translated in Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from Liao-zhai*, trans. Sidney L. Sonderegard (Fremont, CA: Jain, 2014), 6: 2310–11.

- 26 Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities," in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 27.
- 27 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
- 28 Janet M. Theiss, "Femininity in Flux: Gendered Virtue and Social Conflict in the Mid-Qing Courtroom," in Brownell and Wasserstrom, ed., *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities*, 47.

the promotion of a broader orthodox moral revival.<sup>29</sup> Early Qing erotic fiction was principally misogynist in motivation, commonly depicting female characters as wanton [*shuixing yanghua* 水性楊花].<sup>30</sup> A wanton woman was a threat to stability insofar as “if let out or indulged, she is bound to become dangerous or overwhelming.”<sup>31</sup>

In this tale, the norm of ideal feminine chastity is revealed, threatened, distorted, and subverted by malevolent queerkind. Human-animal interaction is eroticized through sexual temptation and transgression. The queerkind symbolizes unrestrained lust, which is emphasized by the term “lascivious” [*yin* 淫]. To prevent lasciviousness, a moral barrier had to be drawn between men and women in the Qing dynasty. Heterosexual intercourse outside marriage was deemed a sexual offense.<sup>32</sup> The lady of Qingcheng can be read as a deviation from the central Confucian feminine ideal of a chaste woman as a sexually faithful and devoted wife. The Qingcheng widow married a businessman and supposedly killed him because [by doing so] she had committed infidelity. This is confirmed when she is found to be a queerkind, as the witch's herbs force the snake tongue to emerge. The widow's grotesque body is related to a failure of chastity through a lack/loss of control—infidelity and remarriage—but also because her body was part snake, that is, she was forced to reveal herself for what she was.

Other such women who had sex with snakes gave birth to daughters with disordered queerkind bodies, whose mouths were pointed and whose vaginas emitted deadly tongues. This is an outcome of these women's deviations from the ideal of the virtuous female body. It is subversive to male power that passion outside marriage could result in the creation of children. The potential for these women to reproduce physically and culturally outside masculine human influence indicates that they have the power to create children in their own queer subversive image, rather than perpetuating sanctioned social ideals. Therefore, Pu emphasizes the separation between the spheres as dangerous, suggesting that the woman's sphere might be corrupted and full of unchecked queer behavior because it exists outside male control. Perhaps, for queerkind, queer is a space of freedom or a space that “can be inhabitable and even enjoyable.”<sup>33</sup>

29 Theiss, “Femininity in Flux,” 48.

30 Keith McMahon, *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 65.

31 McMahon, *Causality and Containment*, 65.

32 Sommer, *Sex, Law, and Society*, 6.

33 Holly Ferneaux, *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14.

Consequently, queerkind offspring were far from the idealized female Confucian body that was thought to reflect the broader society and the cosmos. The affects of femininity within the queerkind body are perhaps most evident in this tale. Femininity is materialized and, in the process, denatured to the point that it does not adhere to “proper” gender norms. Femininity, in this case, is entangled with an abnormal body, in an instance of gender becoming denatured because the codes of femininity are enacted, to borrow from Judith Butler, in the “wrong” bodies.<sup>34</sup> An ordered society was replicated in a systematic, controlled body and vice versa.<sup>35</sup> In addition, men who had sex with these queerkind lost their *yang* [*yang tuo* 陽脫]. This outcome is related to morality and good health, which is linked closely to the containment of male desire. The traditional conception of good health was that bodily boundaries must be maintained through moral behavior.<sup>36</sup> This meant that *yin-yang* was in balance, enabling the forces to flow unhindered throughout the body. For the men in this tale who fail to regulate their bodily boundaries, the loss of *yang* during sex with queerkind women leads to sudden death. This tale thus demonstrates that sexuality was heavily dependent on virtue for legitimacy. The horrific consequences of a woman with beauty but no virtue, much like the queerkind daughters, would be men bewitched by vicious, self-serving vixens into neglecting their duty for the sake of erotic satisfaction.<sup>37</sup> The men who engaged in sexual intercourse with queerkind women faced the ultimate penalty: certain death upon erotic pleasure.

However, the widow was married to the businessman whom she killed soon after they were wed, which further suggests that theoretically their sexual relationship was licit. This is in significant contrast to many of the other stories, because it demonstrates that although such “queerkind” creatures represent sexual freedom, challenge sexual and gender norms by casting them as dangerous and socially disruptive, and implicitly proscribe such possibilities for mere humans, they also proscribe becoming-other in sexual terms. In her marriage with the businessman and the implied use of sex with such a woman that

34 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

35 Geng Song, *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 96.

36 McMahon, Keith. *Causality and Containment in Seventeenth-Century Chinese Fiction*. (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 3.

37 Robin R. Wang, “Virtue 德 (*de*), Talent 才 (*cai*), and Beauty 色 (*se*): Authoring a Full-fledged Womanhood in *Lienv zhuan* 烈女傳 (Bibliographies of Women),” in *Confucian Cultures of Authority*, eds. Peter D. Hershock and Roger T. Ames (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 109–110.

possesses a snake-tongued vagina, which deprives men of their *yang* essence and kills them, the widow indicates a liberation for women who, though they might not have the capacity to have sex freely, still have the power to choose whether to have sex. This is particularly relevant in a context in which women might not have the possibility of refusal.

The queerkind animal body therefore continues to have an affective capacity in its becoming-woman, as we see in another tale below, but it is so only because of its interaction with other bodies around it. Even forces that seem to be more intimately linked with, or more firmly fixed in, a body are lingering effects, subsequent affective conditions, and perhaps more permanent conditions that remain from the interchange between human and strange animal bodies in motion, of the interchange between a body and the planes between and across which it moves. This story is rather troubling for gender in that it provides a range of hazardous opportunities for Qing dynasty women. These snake-women make the men around them feel anxious because they are unpleasant but also because they make them anxious about the future; there is no explanation as to what happens to the widow later or what happens to the queerkind offspring.

The snake-woman, who exists on the margins of human society in this tale, is therefore constructive and creative. In the Deleuzian sense, anything minor seeks to do away with binary power relations, in this case between men and women, by deterritorializing the codes that regulate their location as minorities. By acting on behalf of women living in a patriarchal Qing society, Pu's queerkind women are part of a larger "becoming-minoritarian," which is "a political affair and necessitates a labor of power."<sup>38</sup> Luo Hui argues that *Liaozhai* is a "minor literature" in the Deleuzian sense that it is not "dominated by the voices of one or two great masters" but instead "allows for the 'collective enunciation' or multiple voices."<sup>39</sup> He goes on to say that, "[O]nce *Liaozhai* was established as the quintessential ghost story collection, other Qing *zhiguai* collections were, perhaps unfairly, treated and marketed as sequels, imitations, but no serious contenders."<sup>40</sup> If *Liaozhai* is, as Luo Hui states, a "minor literature", we would take this further by arguing that as a writer of a "minor literature", Pu Songling finds and expresses politically motivated Deleuzian minoritarian-becomings that pronounce a "people to come."<sup>41</sup> The queerkind figure is the "woman to come," because she illuminates the fabricated nature of

38 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 292.

39 Luo Hui, "The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and its History of Reception", PhD Thesis. (2009), 193.

40 Luo Hui, "The Ghost of Liaozhai: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and its History of Reception", 193.

41 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 345.

the patriarchal grand narratives of the presumably stable masculine-feminine categorization of sexuality and gender identity, thereby demonstrating that such a categorization is an illusion that serves as an ideological apparatus for the sake of preserving the established patriarchal social structure. Pu demonstrates the queer possibilities of the idealized female figure—the rejection of certain aspects of femininity to create new or altered visions of womanhood.

The animal thus opens the human body to a world of forces and agencies that make up the strange. We might think of the mixed body as a central organizing trope in which the erotic and threatening meet between the human and queerkind and in which coded communications—figurative and material—thrive. Nevertheless, human-animal sexuality still has repercussions for decentering or deanthropomorphizing the human. On one level, the tale centers human males by continually situating them in contrast to numerous strange queerkind others. On another level, the tale does not tell what these queerkind others think and feel, what their motivations are, or where they go as they are expelled. We do not know the Qingcheng widow's feelings, and this is significant because it demonstrates that queerkind animality is not the central aspect of such tales, in which other human agents also exist in unity with queerkind agents to decide the outcome of the story.

## 5 Between Home and Wild in “Feng the Carpenter”

In “Feng the Carpenter,” a rather licentious fellow named Feng, who was hired to do some carpentry work by the provincial governor Zhou Youde, became involved with a chicken that had adopted a seductive female persona and began to destroy his health, until Feng hired a sorcerer to help rid him of her. However, the queerkind twisted things around by discarding Feng first. As the story goes, Feng was about to go to sleep one night, when he suddenly noticed by moonlight through a half-open window that a red chicken was standing on a short wall in the distance. As he fixed his eye on it,

The chicken flew down to the ground. Presently, a young woman appeared, and with the shade up, Feng was able to sneak a glance at half of her body. He suspected that she was about to have a secret liaison with someone about her same age; he listened quietly, but everyone else there was already fast asleep. His heart pounding selfishly, he secretly hoped she would mistakenly come to the wrong place. In a little while, the young woman passed by his window and walked straight into his arms. Overjoyed, Feng happily kept quiet and did not utter a sound while they

made love, after which the young woman left. From then on, she came to him there night after night.<sup>42</sup>

After a while, the woman decided to speak openly to him, explaining that she did not come by mistake but, rather, deliberately came to be with him. Then they began to make passionate love every day. Later, after Feng's carpentry job was finished, he once again met the woman in the countryside and took her home with him. However, none of Feng's family members could see her, and he began to realize that she was not human. He continued his relationship with her for a few months, and

as his strength began to dwindle, he started to feel increasingly ... frightened, so he sent a sorcerer to drive her away, but the man's efforts were completely unsuccessful. One night, the young woman came in, her clothing and make-up seductively attractive, and faced Feng as she declared, "Everything that happens in this world is fated; if I'm meant to come, you won't be able to stop me, and if I'm meant to leave, you won't be able to hold onto me. Now I'll do as you wish and leave." Then she disappeared.<sup>43</sup>

In presupposing cross-species affinities, this tale renders transgressive bodily embodiment as a range of possibilities in an unlimited world. The assumption of the female form by the chicken enables a transgressive potential: transgression in this tale works on the premise of disguise, seduction, erotic union, revelation, and departure. First, the young girl debuted as a chicken on the wall staring through the window. She watched the human character Feng as he prepared for bed. The imagery of the wall (more on which later) is important here, as it symbolizes standing on a threshold between two bodily forms as well as between the strange animal wild and familiar human setting. Although the chicken is not like the grotesque human/snake body caught between forms, such as woman-snake, passing through a bodily threshold from strange animal to familiar human allows an incorporation into society with a new female form. Initially, this form is ambiguous: only half the female body can be seen with the window shade up. The elliptical nature of Pu's writing and its rich

42 雞已飛搶至地。俄一少女，露半身來相窺。馮疑為同輩所私；靜聽之，眾已熟眠。私心怔忡，竊望其誤投也。少間，女果越窗過；徑已入懷。馮喜，默不一言。歡畢，女亦遂去。自此夜夜至。Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 458; translated in Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, 2057–58.

43 精神漸減，心益懼，延師鎮驅，卒無少驗。一夜，女豔妝來，向馮曰：“世緣俱有定數：當來推不去，當去亦挽不住。今與子別矣。”遂去。Pu Songling, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, 458; translation in Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from Liaozhai*, 2058.

literary allusion to something more is common in the classical language used in *zhiguai*. Pu's writing contains more than it may first appear, breaching its own boundaries and making it the ideal medium through which to embody the queerkind.

Pu's deliberate refusal to be explicit about the full nature of the female body under the gleaming light of the moon explains how Feng could fail to perceive the animal form. The ambiguity of the body emphasizes the dark outlook toward women in the Qing dynasty, reaffirming that femininity and power were never completely mitigated. The fact that Feng realized the queerkind nature of the young woman only at the end of the tale shows that he is rather egotistic by allowing the woman to walk quite literally "straight into his arms" and believing her when she told him that "I came to be with you." Feng is focusing on material gain, believing that all his wishes should be realized at once. However, Feng was willing to admit the danger only after his health deteriorated or his family could not see the woman. As for the queerkind, the secrecy and revelation of the true body is a crucial narrative mechanism in hiding the shameful desires that lurk in the animal body concealed by a human covering. In this way, the animal form, coupled with human form and intelligence, makes her neither animal nor human but a queerkind—an embodiment enabling her to obtain the capacity for erotic seduction, pleasure, and freedom. After accomplishing this, she left, as Feng's health began to decline.

Here, the seductress refuses the passive sexual role—the *yin* of *yin-yang* thought to define femininity. The queerkind's becomings work through her affects, and as such patriarchal fantasies and fears about the sexual object becoming the subject and thus threatening male control are central to this tale. It is through fears and fantasies that the queerkind can have an affective impact on events and characters. The erotic encounter with the queerkind for characters in the text demonstrates the allusive aspect of eroticism, allure, and danger, which exists in the physical threat to the male character's well-being. This reflects a male exhaustion of *yang*, and Feng's "strength" is seen as slowly deteriorating. Equally, the Chinese connection between sexuality and danger presupposes a loss of bodily control. The classical Chinese ideas about the healthy body emphasized "how best to dispense male ... essence" only for the purpose of conception.<sup>44</sup> A healthy body was controlled, from what entered the body and what came out of it. Excess sexual contact was commonly believed to lead to male infertility.<sup>45</sup> Restraint, as defined by the

44 Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 286.

45 Bray, *Technology and Gender*.

Confucian idealist philosophy of reason [*lixue* 理學], was therefore central in controlling male fertility, consumption, desire, sentimental behavior, and the regularity of sexual contact as a way to maintain a healthy body and thereby support fertility.<sup>46</sup>

Pu Songling contemplates the male search for their own bearing about women and how man is swept up in becoming-woman. The “literary comparison of men against standards for women and feminine example were not unknown in China.”<sup>47</sup> The feminized position of men in political service to the ruler demonstrates the fluidity of gender categories in premodern China. The human protagonists in such tales are all “men,” but only after he enters a becoming-woman with the queerkind and becomes caught up in the physical exhaustion caused by sex with her is he released from his “major identity” by being stripped of his male power. Pu’s tales are “inextricably linked to a conscious ‘negation’ of patriarchy.”<sup>48</sup> The queerkind within is therefore queer, because queer itself cannot “reinforce some positive social value; its value, instead, resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social.”<sup>49</sup> This approach might to some extent relate to this tale—a tale devoted to demonstrating how specific queerkind females seriously threaten male power and destroy the social values they had originally been chosen to foster.

The abject composite chicken-woman body enables the queerkind to infiltrate mainstream society by offering women freedom from the confines of male-dominated culture, not as a molar subject (defining woman by her form, given organs and functions, and deemed a subject) or category of “woman” but as a molecular woman who reenacts her ways of being in her ceaseless self-transformation, prior to being subjected to the dominant notion of femininity. As the queerkind declares in this tale, her comings and goings in the shape of a seductively striking young woman are “predetermined” and will unfold as such. The attempts to control the queerkind’s sexual advances and drive her away are thus totally ineffective. Hence, the becoming-woman in this tale pertains to a queerkind sexuality that is not marital or familial, but, rather, adheres to the sexual act as unconstrained to reproductive function.

46 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 186.

47 Mark Stevenson, “The Male Homoerotic Wanton Woman in Late Ming Fiction,” in *Wanton Women in Late Imperial Chinese Literature: Models, Genres, Subversions and Traditions*, eds. Mark Stevenson and Wu Cuncun (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 54.

48 Sing-Chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 78.

49 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.



The distinct chicken and female bodies converge to become woman by rejecting female restraint and reason, making love with Feng night after night, which leads to an absence of the regulation and containment of female sexuality. This also explains why women were mostly confined “to the inner regions of the house.”<sup>50</sup> When Feng took the woman back to his familial home, none of Feng’s family members could see her. At a literal level, this emphasizes that the queerkind was strange and had only come to seduce Feng and therefore could not be seen by others. At a figurative level, this imagery of invisibility suggests that unchaste women are not associated with the home. The wall analogy appears early in the tale, almost a foretelling that the queerkind will cross the boundary from the wild into the human world—to borrow from the Deleuzian and Guattarian concept of the smooth and striated, in which movement is organized, and free expression is prohibited.<sup>51</sup> Women’s limitation to the home indicated that they were “capable of moral choices and the pursuit of virtue,” and those who stepped outside the home “were innately immoral and lacking in self-control.”<sup>52</sup> Embodying the latter, the queerkind emphasizes this further at the end of the tale, when she appealed to fate and then suddenly disappeared.

Unlike the snake whose strange animal roots were revealed through exorcism, the chicken remains bound to her queerkind embodiment. She was forced to leave only after apparently realizing that Feng was aware of her animality. In such tales, the concealed and revealed is a crucial narrative mechanism, as hidden, shameful desires lurk in the ambiguous animal body concealed by a human covering. Yet the sudden departure of these queerkind perhaps also informs us that, in Qing society, one was always forced out of the social order when one’s true self, or even one’s animality, was discovered.

It is thus evident that both the human male (who became sick) and queerkind female (who was forced to leave) are characters that are incapable of making moral choices and therefore do not pursue virtue through Confucian edicts on restraint. Instead, they chose to make passionate love every day. For that reason, the term for the cult of passion and feelings (i.e., *qing* 情), a transgressive cult that challenged the female chastity cult, is also evoked in this tale. It is argued that *qing* had become a highly celebrated value and central

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50 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 140.

51 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

52 Bray, *Technology and Gender*, 140.

theme in Qing dynasty literature.<sup>53</sup> In late imperial times, there were efforts to minimize and contain the sexual element of *qing* and its subversiveness, distinguishing between sexuality and sentiment.<sup>54</sup> Sexuality was dangerous to the Confucian order because it was an irresponsible and indulgent form of escapism, as is often perceived in the notion of lustful infidelity [*se yin* 色淫], which regards sexuality as “withdrawal from reality.”<sup>55</sup> As a genre, *zhiguai*, in terms of its strange/supernatural and erotic leitmotifs, thus appear as a space of otherness, where the dangerous visions of femininity in the queerkind realm of this tale are in some ways driven by negative *qing*. In the space of otherness, the queerkind can withdraw from reality, emphasizing the dangerous and sexual side of *qing* and its subversive potential, which generates disorder and unpredictability. In reading such tales, we must resist the temptation to reduce our interpretations to a completely human one. Although familiar human characters are central to the narrative unfolding of such tales (Feng the carpenter) as they stand in conflict with a strange animality (the chicken), there is still an important aspect of the narrative agency of a queerkind animal body and its relationship with sexuality. Faced with the human, the strange animal is an ever-unfolding site of creativity in the *zhiguai* tales and can be understood through its power to change bodily form and affect those around it, which from the beginning is the impetus that drives the unfolding transgressive eroticism in the text.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has considered the ways in which queer becoming-woman between man and woman, as well as masculinity and femininity, is implicated in queerkind shapeshifting bodies, through examining how boundary-crossing erotic encounters between human men and queerkind women transgress the strict moral boundaries of the paradigmatic Confucian chaste woman. As moral parables that define the appropriate boundaries of sexual behavior, the tales are emphatic about the costs of crossing them. We have argued that animal–human nymphomaniacs (widowed or otherwise) are erotically transgressive when sexual contact with human males is established through

53 Martin W. Huang, “Sentiments of Desire: Thoughts on the Cult of Qing in Ming-Qing Literature,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 20 (1998), 161.

54 Song, *The Fragile Scholar*, 106.

55 Song, *The Fragile Scholar*, 108.

the prism of threat and danger. Meanwhile, the examples demonstrate that these tales inevitably center on human males by contrasting them with various strange queerkind others and their becomings. As a point of further critical discussion here, we also note that sexually active queerkind vixens challenge the obligation of chastity, yet they also reaffirm the need for it. A loss of control in both men and women that ensues in sex, for instance, could happen if women do not behave. This, moreover, does not create scope for women to be liberated in ways that are *not* based upon sex—in this case, heterosexuality.

These tales deal solely with queerkind that incorporate female erotic desire into their bodies, where sexual communion not only promises untimely death but also threatens the boundaries and subverts the social norms of female sexuality in society at large. As the queerkind body physically crosses species boundaries to entice men, it often implies the failure to control or contain desire, while undermining the model Confucian body and its controlled boundaries for both women and men. Such boundary-crossing privileges patriarchal anxiety over female sexuality in the Qing dynasty. In these tales, sexually agentic queerkind therefore conform to established tropes of excessive female sexuality.

In shaping itself based on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, this article has also argued that in Pu Songling's *zhiguai* collection tales of eroticism, the queerkind provide becoming-woman. This resonates with the overall worldview of the collection—the constant cycle of change, degeneration, and regeneration. Although the queerkind vixen has the freedom to play with appearance and depth in her erotic encounters, she does not imitate women. Becoming-woman (as becoming of any kind) can ensue only through a meeting between bodies, a meeting that affects a conversion of both (or all) bodies from one state to another. For most queerkind, women becoming is the passage, the in between of diverse embodied states—with becoming-woman establishing not just a passage from the human-animal dualism but also the bodily state shaped by dualistic conceptualizations (masculine and feminine) to a bodily state no longer adequately formed in conformity with them. Becoming both queerkind animal and woman is a queerness that brings certain sexual freedoms and produces queer affects by engendering erotic desires in human males while endangering them. Nevertheless, albeit these tales have no true forms or identity cores because of their becomings and changing agencies, revealing the animal beneath still has a potential cost and stigma, seen in the tales of the snake and chicken.

Becoming is not normative. The queerness of becoming lies in the power of the subject to take its becoming upon itself, liberating itself from all the

illusions of a given nature or normality and becoming nothing other than self-becoming.<sup>56</sup> The queerness of becoming-woman for queerkind follows Deleuze's concern with the potentialities of the forms and subjectivities as and through which the body can be lived, offering Qing dynasty women different sexual pathways to create their own destinies. Yet these pathways are depicted as deriving their power from sexuality (sexualizing women) and only here are depicted as applying to queerkind. As an entity that is always partially outside social structures and natural law, the queerkind has the power to speak and act for herself, and she is not positioned as a subject, to expose the inadequacy of a gendered structure that might otherwise have remained unobserved. It is only when becomings are smoother than striated, as is the case for most queerkind, that a body becoming is unformed and unsubjectified. It is here that the task of fashioning new paradigms in which (nondichotomous) queer social subjects may be constituted and formed.

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56 Claire Colebrook, "Queer Aesthetics," in *Queer Times, Queer Becoming*, eds. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

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