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Text and Talk

Classical Literary Tales in Traditional China and the Context of Casual Oral Storytelling

Abstract

This article represents an attempt to re-examine the tradition of classical literary tales in China, understanding them not as “literature” but as products of amateur oral storytelling that took place in elite circles. Evidence abounds of such stories being initially circulated among the literati of traditional times; examples from the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) are especially plentiful. This article aims 1) to challenge the current “literary-critical” reading of the tales by introducing the perspective of folklore and discourse analysis; and 2) to venture a new conceptual model for delineating the relationship among the various categories of traditional Chinese short narratives that have been grouped together rather indiscriminately.

Key words: orality—storytelling—the elite—discourse—conversation

THE ORAL FICTION narrated by professional storytellers in traditional China has recently won a well-deserved recognition in literary and folklore scholarship. Often called *shuoshu* 說書 (“telling books”), such narration has formed a continuous tradition lasting until the present day. Its beginnings can be traced to times as old as the Zhou dynasty, although clear written references to the activities of the professional artists are found only from Tang times. In the opinion of an overwhelming number of literary scholars, such storytelling activity strongly influenced the vernacular short stories that flourished in the late Ming (seventeenth century), since writers borrowed freely from both the form and content of the oral tales. However, it has also been recognized that an alternative tradition of casual storytelling exists, a tradition to which classical literary tales (*wenyan* 文言 tales: tales written in the classical language) were indebted. Thus Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123–1202), one of the masters of the *wenyan* tale, mentions in his *Yijian zhi* 夷堅志 [Records of Yijian] that his stories originated in a variety of contexts, including occasions of amateur (as opposed to professional) storytelling.

Patrick HANAN, author of a distinguished study of the vernacular short story from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, remains one of the few critics to stress the importance of this “casual fiction” and note its impact on the development of Chinese narrative (1965, 186–87). Jaroslav PRUSEK, another acknowledged authority on the vernacular short story in China, makes brief reference to the two kinds of oral storytelling in traditional China; in his opinion the “professional” tales gave rise to an “epic folk literature,” while the casual tales contributed to an “upper class folklore” recorded in miscellaneous writings and anecdotal literature (1967, 9–10). His bias, however, is reflected in his decision to regard only the former as “true” folklore, and to devote the main portion of his scholarly work to elaborating on the contributions of professional storytellers to the narrative tradition (PRUSEK 1970, 228–302). Such privileging of professional storytelling helps explain why certain literary historians have paid little attention to classical literary

tales, which are regarded, at best, as sources for the vernacular story. Some scholars even argue that the storytellers' tales exerted a pervasive influence on every variety of Chinese fiction in traditional times, including the full-length novel of the late imperial era. Andrew H. PLAKS has taken such scholars to task, critiquing the simplistic view that Ming novels are nothing more than accretions of popular lore (1987). It is high time that we reconsider the intricate relationship between *wenyan* (literary language) narratives and *bai-hua* 白話 (vernacular language) narratives, as well as the link of both forms to oral storytelling traditions, casual and professional.¹ Obviously a simplistic model like the following, while useful, needs to be re-examined:

Oral Tales	Folklore	Literature
Professional	Lore of the lower classes	Short stories and novels in the vernacular
Casual/ amateur	Upper class folklore	Tales in the classical literary language

The present paper makes use of the body of material associated with casual storytelling available in collections of classical literary tales. It can well be argued that casual tales undergo great changes when written down, making it difficult to detect their forms and styles (like those of professionally narrated tales when transformed into vernacular stories), and that any attempt to trace their influence on the written stories is sketchy at best. It can also be argued that the contexts of amateur storytelling were created by the authors concerned in order to provide the occasion for literary production, just as in the case of vernacular fiction, so that references to an oral background must not be taken literally. Furthermore, one can even argue that the original oral elements were superseded by "literary" elements as the tales assumed lives of their own on the written page. The point to be stressed, however, is not that every classical literary tale must be studied from this "oral" perspective, but that an important aspect of these tales is missed if one dismisses all contextual references as irrelevant constructions.

In fact, taking the oral element into account when studying the classical literary tale has the special virtue of opening the way to a consideration of narrative as more than just a pure literary or aesthetic form. A renewed understanding of Chinese narratives is made possible by the close relationship that amateur stories bear to historical reality, whether that reality be the

rivalry of political factions in the mid-Tang (ninth century) or the literary inquisitions of the Manchu government in the Qing period (1644–1911). Our understanding of Chinese narratives has suffered under the rather limiting view of generic categorization, and this is seen nowhere more clearly than in the strict separation of historical from “fictional” narratives. Recent historiographers in the West have noted the overlapping between the two forms, and have suggested that what is “fictional” could be historical as well. Focusing on the oral elements in classical literary tales forces critics to pay attention to extraliterary references, rendering the need to contextualize as important as the need to textualize.

As Hanan has remarked, more often than not the casual narrative (or conversational narrative, when it is embedded in conversation) is represented as the “actual experience” of the narrator, of an acquaintance, or of an acquaintance of an acquaintance. The presentation of experience in narratives is of course a much-debated issue. The classical literary tales we will consider below make one thing clear: the fact-or-fiction issue cannot be resolved by collapsing distinctions and asserting the primacy of fictiveness, which Wallace MARTIN has cited as a trend in twentieth-century narrative theory (1986, 31–56).² An awareness of the oral background of classical literary tales alerts us against taking all “narrative fact” as “fiction.” Most such tales, originally orally transmitted, are prefaced by some statement vouching for the verifiability of the accounts. It is precisely to circumvent possible incredulity that the narrators insist so strongly on the reliability or authenticity of their stories. It does not seem feasible that such statements are no more than excuses for fictionalizing, or that everybody is simply “playing along.”

Evidence of the oral origin of a sizable proportion of classical literary tales is provided by the titles of the collections themselves. What was uppermost in the minds of the compilers/writers was not fiction but the element of “talk,” of conversational exchange. *Xiaoshuo* 小說, the Chinese term for narrative, literally means “small talk”; it originated, according to LU Xun (1959, 1) and Kenneth DEWOSKIN (1977, 21–52), in the “street talk and alley gossip” gathered by minor officials during the early dynasties as intelligence about the ordinary people in the officials’ locales. “Fiction” is a misleading term when used as a translation for *xiaoshuo*, lacking the necessary inclusiveness. The oral element is clearly suggested by the following list of *xiaoshuo* titles:

Ermu ji 耳目記 [Record of the eyes and ears], by Zhang Zhuo 張鷟 (ca. 657–730);

Jutan lu 劇談錄 [Record of conversations], by Kang Pian 康駢 (fl. 875–886);

- Shangshu tanlu* 尚書談錄 [Conversations of the Minister of State Affairs], by Li Chuo 李綽 (late ninth century);
- Maoting kehua* 茅亭客話 [Guest talk at the thatched pavilion], by Huang Xiufu 黃休復 (fl. 1006);
- Dongnan jiwén* 東南紀聞 [Records of events heard in the southeast], by a Yuan author;
- Jianwen jixun* 見聞紀訓 [Admonitory records of what was heard and seen], by Chen Liangmo 陳良謨 (1482–1572);
- Shuoling* 說鈴 [Talk from the bell], edited by Wu Zhenfang 吳震芳 (seventeenth century);
- Qiudeng conghua* 秋燈叢話 [Collected discourses under the autumn lamp], by Wang Xian 王械 (*juren* 1736);
- Ershi lu* 耳食錄 [Hearsay accounts], by Yue Jun 樂鈞 (1766–1814);
- Zhiwen lu* 咫聞錄 [Record of events heard in the vicinity], by Yongna jushi 慵納居士 (fl. 1843).

What is told (and heard) is, in effect, the stuff of which the stories are made. Thus a clear understanding of the narrative tradition in China entails as much a study of the context of events and occurrences transmitted by word of mouth as it does an investigation of the gradual mastering of narrative material, as Victor MAIR has said (1983).

Bearing in mind the impossibility of tracking down the actual spoken discourse of the past—no transcribing or recording facilities were then available—we can do no more than comb literary and historical documents for vestiges of casual storytelling. Classical literary tales are traditionally classified as *chuanqi* 傳奇 (stories transmitting marvels) and *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of anomalies), categories that include most of the casual fiction needed for our analysis (although one must be wary of classifying as conversational narratives all stories for which the author indicates a source—Hong Mai, for example, heard for himself some of the tales he eventually included in his collection, but others were sent to him by friends, and still others he copied from published works). The tales as discussed here are defined by their referential (pointing-beyond-the-text) character as well as their conversational (speech-related) nature. Casual stories, embedded in conversations where both the tellers and the listeners participate, are in distinct contrast to professional stories told in a situation that involves an active performer and his receptive audience. Even considering the fact that professional storytellers take account of the reaction of the audience and shape their tale accordingly, the degree of audience participation is significantly less than in conversational storytelling, where listeners can turn into storytellers right on the spot. In general it can be said that casual storytelling has yet to be closely studied,

either in China or the West. Gary BUTLER has recently pointed out how much the conversational story has been neglected in comparison to the *märchen* of professional artists, commonly viewed as the folk narrative genre par excellence (1990, 32).

At the same time, we should note that there are two major categories of casual narratives, and that for many of the stories culled from our sources (classical literary tales, notebook literature, and belletristic writings) it may be impossible to tell which they belong to. One category comprises the casual or conversational stories that formed part of elite life; the other consists of stories solicited from the lower classes by literati interested in folk material. One such literatus was Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), who, according to ZOU Tao, set up a stall at the side of a thoroughfare and offered tea in exchange for stories told by anyone who passed by (1912, 6:12b); indeed, the degree to which Pu Songling's tales, often regarded as of the deliberately crafted kind, are indebted to amateur storytelling from the lower levels of society is a question well worth studying in its own right. Another example is Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716–1797), who in searching far and wide for tales among the common folk can be likened to a modern folklorist tracking down rumor and gossip in out-of-the-way places. Yuan recorded the lore he gathered in his *Zi bu yu* 子不語 [What the master would not discuss], ostensibly for the purpose of understanding “folklife.”

The likelihood is that the propensity to tell tales is equally strong among the literate/elite as among the illiterate/commoners.³ While the former seek out tales from the latter, they also engage in a great deal of storytelling themselves. It is with precisely this—the tradition of oral storytelling among the elite—that we will be primarily concerned here. The narration of strange-event tales in a conversational context has for centuries been a pastime of the literati, as can be easily documented by referring to the *zhiguai*. That being the case, we shall first turn to the more problematic case of the *chuanqi*, where traces of such oral storytelling have been largely eliminated.

ORAL ORIGINS OF TANG *CHUANQI* STORIES

Much recent criticism, in the form of thematic, structural, and archetypal analysis, has focused on the Tang *chuanqi*'s literary merit (that is, on its supposedly timeless significance) as opposed to its topicality and relevance to the political and social life of the era.⁴ The popularity of this approach can be traced to the widely held view, promoted by critics like Lu Xun, that the *chuanqi* was the first “consciously artistic” form of Chinese narrative and must be clearly distinguished from its antecedent, the Six Dynasties *zhiguai*. For Sarah YIM, it is the “expressive” quality of the *chuanqi* that differentiates it from the *zhiguai* (1986, 358). Yet, as noted by the sixteenth-century biblio-

phile HU Yinglin 胡應麟 (1551–1602), the *chuanqi* and *zhiguai* are in fact linked, existing, as it were, at two ends of a scale on which one form or the other “weighs heavier” (1985, 27). Traditionally the *zhiguai* and the *chuanqi* have been differentiated in line with the notion that the former concerns the *guai* 怪 (strange) and the latter the *qi* 奇 (marvelous). But it should be noted that the “strange” plays a more significant part in the *chuanqi* than is commonly assumed, so the distinction between the two types can be quite blurry. The present essay will show that both also share similar oral roots.

The fact that many *chuanqi* tales are in fact later renditions of stories narrated in elite gatherings gives support to an interpretive approach that sees them less as aesthetic discourse than as social discourse. The claim for authenticity implied by the specification of time/place at the beginning or the end of the tales—a feature common to many *chuanqi* narratives—is more than just a convention borrowed from official historiography; it is also an indication of oral provenance. Instead of considering these tales solely as literary creations, we can do well by examining why they were told in the first place and what contexts originally informed the storytelling.

The need to view the Tang *chuanqi* as conversational discourse is further underscored by the fact that “literature” as an independent aesthetic undertaking is by and large a modern, post-Romantic notion, and was totally foreign to the world of the ninth century. Moderns assume “artistic value” as the primary reason for writing something down, but in the past other motives were often cited for literary composition: self-vindication in the *Shiji* 史記 [Record of the historian], revenge in the *Jin ping mei* 金瓶梅 [Plum in the golden vase], and so on. Historically and ideologically conditioned as it is, *chuanqi* discourse incorporates elements from a vast cultural system. What occurred, in the examples to be considered below, was an interpenetration of disparate realms in this system, realms like social conversation, literature, and politics (understood as the relations of power among men as social beings). By taking this perspective we can even see the *chuanqi* tales as written records of special discursive practices like rumor and gossip, which are connected in many ways with relationships of power.⁵

In this connection the traditional Chinese view of narrative, both oral and written, is instructive. *Xiaoshuo* can be no more than gossip, rumor, and hearsay. In one of the very few studies of the literature of gossip, Patricia SPACKS notes how the apparent inconsequentiality displayed by this genre is in fact a device for masking the intended target; the story or anecdote could cause harm to the party by making him either the butt of satire or the object of laughter (1985, 4–7). This is even more true, of course, of real-life rumor than it is of the literature of gossip, and there is ample evidence that Chinese

readers of the past were more sensitive to this dimension of the *chuanqi* than we are at present. To cite one of the best-known examples: the “Baiyuan zhuan” 白猿傳 [Chronicle of the white gibbon], an early *chuanqi* tale about the abduction of Ouyang He’s 歐陽紇 wife by a white gibbon, was read at the time as a veiled attack on Ouyang He’s son, Ouyang Xun 詢 (557–641), possibly by an ally of the political clique of Zhangsun Wuji 長孫無忌 (ca. 600–659). The wife was said to have slept with the gibbon and later given birth to a son—Ouyang Xun, that is, who reportedly had a gibbon-like face. It is suggestive that the author chose to remain anonymous in order to protect himself, much as a scandalmonger would. Yet the fact that readers at the time could perceive the point of the narrative as clearly as they could appreciate its literary merits seems to have been lost on the majority of modern critics. The undeniable link between text and talk has been severed in the intervening centuries.

A rather similar case of a *chuanqi* being used as an elaborate libel against a political adversary is that of the “Li Wa zhuan” 李娃傳 [Chronicle of Li Wa] by Bai Xingjian 白行簡 (775–826), a tale datable to the closing years of the eighth century. This story, about a Chang’an courtesan living with a young scholar from a reputable family who had come to the capital to take the examinations, is the subject of considerable critical controversy, much of it revolving around the question of whether the tale originated with a famed professional storyteller who performed it before Bai Xingjian, his brother the famed poet Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), and another *chuanqi* writer named Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779–831), or whether these three friends simply told the tale among themselves one night in the year 795.⁶ The debate, in other words, is whether the storytelling context that informed the written tale was professional or amateur. The latter position, whilst giving rise to certain dating problems, is nevertheless based very clearly on evidence in the text itself: the last paragraph of the story.

Once during the Zhenyuan years (785–805) I was talking with Li Gongzuo 李公佐 (ca. 778–ca. 848) of the Longxi clan about the firm and unbending character of women, and in that context told him the affairs related to the “Duchy of Qian” [i.e., Li Wa]. Clapping his hands as he respectfully listened, Gongzuo persuaded me to chronicle the story. Accordingly I took up my brush, dipped it in ink, and recorded the story in its broad outline.⁷

This account becomes even more persuasive when viewed against the prevalence of informal storytelling among literati friends in their gatherings at home, on trips, or when off duty. In such activity one finds reflected not only

the leisure life of the elite class, but also both the unity and inner divisive-ness among its members.

In addition to the author's remarks, there is evidence from the listeners' end proving that the "Li Wa zhuan" was rumor, circulated as political satire by people with an axe to grind. Two views of the origin of the "Li Wa zhuan" that must have been current following its publication are mentioned by the Song poet LIU Kezhuang 劉克莊 (1187–1269) in his collected writings (1926, 173:18a–b; translated by DUDBRIDGE [1983, 187]). One view saw the tale as an attempt to vilify Zheng Ya 鄭亞 (?–ca. 848) and his son, the renowned minister Zheng Tian 鄭畋 (825–883), by insinuating parallels between the story's male protagonist and Zheng Ya; Song readers could not have been unaware of the story's hidden suggestion that Zheng Tian was the son of a prostitute (Li Wa). The other view held that since Bai Minzhong 白閔中, an elder member of the Bai clan, was engaged in a factional feud with Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–849) and the two Zhengs, Bai Xingjian's "Li Wa zhuan" served as a means of launching a scurrilous attack on the three.

Although Dudbridge has largely discredited these "political interpretations" of the tale, the fact remains that such views are in perfect keeping with what we know of the likely background of the story's transmission. On the whole, Dudbridge's well-researched study underplays the importance of the topical references in the tale, highlighting instead intertextual relationships (to the "Changheng zhuan" and the "Renshi zhuan," among others) as well as the generic properties of the *chuanqi*. My argument here is aimed at counterbalancing the factor of intertextuality with that of social and historical context in an interpretation of the "Li Wa zhuan." In the study of oral narratives in everyday life, the need to approach them within a human context cannot be overemphasized. Two components are essential to the structure and meaning of such narratives: what happened, and why it is worth talking about. The latter, the element of "tellability," ties a tale to its immediate context, for it simply would not be recounted unless it was "story-worthy" (a term coined by Polanyi), that is, unless it made a point relevant to the speaker, the audience, and the world in which they find themselves. This is what POLANYI means by saying that "people do not talk to each other at length about matters which are not of some interest to them" (1985, 1). A reading of the "Li Wa zhuan" as a defamatory story thus works as a powerful corrective against the modern predilection to dissociate the narrative from its historical context, to discount, in other words, the fact that the scandal surrounding the Zhengs must have been of fresh and immediate interest for Bai Xingjian's circle of friends. The contemporary Tang and the later Song readers are, to say the least, more reliable guides.

Such a conversational-discursive perspective, in which situational con-

tingencies come to be highlighted, can of course be applied quite legitimately to a number of other Tang *chuanqi* works that obviously derived from similar oral contexts. Not all of these stories were meant to serve political ends; how they function depends on the individual story. Interestingly enough, two more such tales originated in conversations within the Bai-Yuan literary circle. One is the “Changheng zhuàn” 長恨歌傳 [Song of everlasting sorrow], concerning the love affair between Yang Guifei 楊貴妃 (719–756) and Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (685–762). The author, Chen Hong 陳鴻 (fl. 805), a close friend of Bai Juyi, recalls at the end of the tale how it was narrated during a trip he took with Bai Juyi and Wang Zhifu 王質夫 to the Temple of the Traveling Immortal in the winter of 806. The written account most closely resembles Wang Zhifu’s rendition (WANG 1984, 117), a fact that the Japanese scholar YANASE Kiyoshi emphasizes as a key element to understanding the composition of the entire story (1987). The other is the “Yingying zhuàn” 鶯鶯傳 [The story of Yingying], in which a youthful, passionate maiden falls in love with a young scholar but is subsequently deserted; the author, Yuan Zhen, concludes the *chuanqi* with a note that the oral narration of the story took place one night during the Zhenyuan era when Li Shen 李紳 (780–846) visited him at his residence (WANG 1984, 138).

The “Lujiang Feng’ao zhuàn” 廬江馮媪傳 [Chronicle of Old Woman Feng of Lujiang], which concerns a chance meeting between an old woman and a certain Dong Jiang’s 董江 dead wife and parents the night before Dong remarries, contains the following colophon:

On the fifth month of the sixth year of the Yuanhe reign [i.e., 811], in the summer, Li Gongzuo, the Retainer of the Jianghuai region, went to the capital Chang’an on official business. On his return trip he put up at Hannan, and at the inn happened to meet Gao Yue 高鉞 of Bohai, Zhao Zan 趙贊 of Tianshui, and Yuwen Ding 宇文鼎 of Henan. Through the night they conversed on strange events, exhausting all that they had heard and seen. This [tale] was narrated by Gao Yue, and Li Gongzuo has duly written it down (WANG 1984, 97).

This same story is found in the *Youyang zazhu* 酉陽雜俎 by Duan Chengshi 段成式 (ca. 800–863), showing how widely circulated the oral story must have been.

Similarly, Shen Jiji 沈既濟 (ca. 740–ca. 800) gave details concerning the oral origins of the “Renshi zhuàn” 任氏傳 [Chronicle of Ms. Ren], a tale of a virtuous female fox-spirit. In 781 he was traveling on a boat with his friends and colleagues to the coastal regions of the southeast, there to assume

his new post as Left Reminder, when he had the opportunity to hear the entire story. In his words, “All who heard the affairs relating to Ms. Ren were astounded. Sighing, they entreated Shen to record them, to bear witness to the marvels that transpired” (WANG 1984, 47).

One can go on listing *chuanqi* inspired by conversational narratives. The processes of oral transmission are expressly cited in, for example, the “Dinghun dian” 定婚店 [House for matchmaking], by Li Fuyan 李復言;⁸ the “Feng Yan zhuan” 馮燕傳 [The Chronicle of Feng Yan], by Shen Yazhi 沈亞之 (ca. 770–ca. 830); the “Dongyang yeguai lu” 東陽夜怪錄 [The night monster of Dongyang], by Wang Zhu 王洙 (*jinsi*, 818); and the “Liehu ji” 獵狐記 [Records of capturing foxes], by Sun Xun 孫恂. Even these alone allow us to define the parameters of our alternative, more oral, approach to the *chuanqi*. Obviously the possibility of serious literary intent behind the *chuanqi* tales cannot be denied in all cases, but neither can the signs of oral transmission be regarded as mere conventions. As noted above, a crucial concern in our present approach is *why* a story is told, so that a consideration of the story’s “point” seems more pertinent than an investigation of its theme. Another concern is with the narrative’s possible communicative functions, which more likely involve practical or pragmatic matters like persuasion, indictment, justification, rebuttal, and exemplification than the presentation of abstract truths or ethical values. A third concern is with topical relevance; critical energies can be directed to explicating the “rhetoric of reference”—the foregrounding of the historically specific elements in a tale.

This “communicative” perspective on classical literary tales clarifies certain interpretive dilemmas, such as that involving the “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” 霍小玉傳 [Chronicle of Huo Xiaoyu]. Especially puzzling in this story, which is ostensibly about the tragic love affair of Li Yi 李益 (748–824) and the famous courtesan Huo Xiaoyu, is the mild humor that lurks just beneath the surface. If one remembers that this story was circulated against the general knowledge in contemporary elite society of Li’s excessive jealousy, an idiosyncrasy referred to in his own time as “Li’s weakness,” then the *chuanqi* can be said to have served as an illustration. The inclusion of the apparently redundant last section also becomes meaningful, for after the conclusion of the story proper with the death of Huo, the narrator goes on to describe Li’s sadistic treatment of his wife Madame Lu and his killing of concubines and maidservants. Li is described as being “unable to look at a woman without suspecting her [of being unfaithful]” (WANG 1984, 80). At the time readers of the “Huo Xiaoyu zhuan” must have been as amused by the end of the tale as modern readers are confused. Still, there is no knowing whether the tale was told good-naturedly to poke fun at Li Yi, or narrated with malicious intent to cast an adverse light on the Vice Director of the

Palace Library and one of the leading poets of the time. In any event, it can be said of the interactional dynamics between the oral and the written tales that the written version made this characterization of Li Yi known to a much wider audience, and either enhanced his popularity or harmed his reputation.

With regard to the search for the “point” of a classical literary tale, one can go one step further and view with suspicion those raconteurs who go out of their way to disclaim any intention behind their narrations. Especially in the case of *zhiguai* tales, many storytellers point out that their stories were worth recording for their wayward and unusual character—their extraordinariness—and nothing more. Despite this it needs to be stressed that all oral stories have an indissoluble link with an external context (manifested in the metadiscourse of their time), one that justifies the telling. With this in mind, we shall proceed to discuss the oral storytelling that informs a much larger group of classical literary tales—the *zhiguai*.

TALKING OF FOX-SPIRITS AND GHOSTS

The oral storytelling that gave rise to the Tang *chuanqi* actually belonged to a continuous tradition of casual narrating of strange events, in which ghosts, demons, deities, and fox-spirits figured prominently. This tradition of discourse is designated in Chinese by the words *tanhu shuogui* 談狐說鬼, literally, “talking of fox-spirits and ghosts.” The *zhiguai* genre includes such tales as are recorded in collections for consumption by what was basically an elite readership.

Several points should be highlighted with regard to the orality of *zhiguai* tales. First, any *zhiguai* narrative presented as hearsay or personal testimony combines both fact and possible narratorial manipulation, even if the storytellers themselves adamantly and repeatedly insisted that the narrated events did indeed occur. This is understandable in view of the fact that these events, being of an unusual or bizarre nature, were far more likely to be disbelieved than believed. As noted above, this issue is not to be settled by collapsing all distinctions between narrative fiction and narrative truth. Second, the links of the *zhiguai* to oral discourse are often more clearly documented than in the case of the *chuanqi*. As noted by LIU Yeqiu, the practice of indicating the source of the stories has been standard in *zhiguai* collections since the time of the Tang collection *Duyang zhibian* 杜陽雜編 [Collection of miscellanea at Duyang], in which the compiler, Su E 蘇鶚 (*jinshi*, 886), took care to name the informants (1980, 37). This, again, was no doubt an effort to counter possible disbelief and lend greater credibility to the transmitted tales. Third, the forms of the oral *zhiguai* have been duplicated more strikingly in their written counterpart. Unlike the *chuanqi*, most *zhiguai* entries can be easily

analyzed into two constituent portions: the story proper and the dialogic frame.⁹

Surveying *zhiguai* literature from the Six Dynasties until the end of the Qing, one discovers that, while the content of the ghost and fox-spirit stories remains generally unchanged through the centuries, the tales of the respective historical periods speak to their own time. The same chains of motifs, in other words, serve different functions that evolve through the passage of time. Chinese *zhiguai* criticism has often confined itself to the classification of story-groups according to the species of spirit that dominates the action. It remains to be seen how such an approach can be improved upon with the folkloristic methods of Vladimir Propp, where the focus is on the identification of functions and the discovery of relations among elements in a large corpus of texts. For example, the Qing *zhiguai* raconteurs' use of their stories to express views on such things as prostitution, homosexuality, and master-servant relationships would have been unthinkable to the Six Dynasties storyteller, for whom the greater concern appears to have been the reporting of the multitudinous responses to a new epistemological category called the "strange." Specifically, the oral narrations of wayward events and bizarre phenomena revealed the differing responses of the proponents of various religions (Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism) to the local reports of anomalies. The desire to offer schemes of interpretation that supposedly would continue to buttress the old order is especially notable among Six Dynasties *zhiguai*.

The proliferation of *zhiguai* narrations in the Tang has not received due attention. As Charles HAMMOND has pointed out, many more *zhiguai* were written during Tang times (1987, 16)—though it must be remembered that there was no clear distinction at the time between the two genres we recognize today, the term *chuanqi* first being used during the eleventh century by Yin Zhu 尹洙 (1001–1046). Tang tales of the strange are abundantly present not only in *zhiguai* collections but also in the miscellaneous histories of the time, in addition to their being reworked as *chuanqi*. The oral background to these tales is often noted by their authors: the *Shangshu tanlu*, a record of trivial events including much that is magical and supernatural in import, derived from conversations that its author had with a minister while a guest at the latter's house. Strange occurrences also abound in the *Kaiyuan Tianbao yishi* 開元天寶遺事 [Reminiscences of events in the Kaiyuan and Tianbao reigns], a collection by Wang Ren'yu 王仁裕 (b. 880) of what could have been orally circulated stories related to Emperor Xuanzong. The fad of collecting oral tales at the time is perhaps best exemplified by Wei Xuan 韋絢 (mid-ninth century), who in his *Liugong jiahua lu* 劉公嘉話錄 [Enchanting tales told by Duke Liu] jotted down stories told by Liu Yuxi 劉禹錫

(772–842), a poet related to the Bai Juyi circle discussed above. Wei also compiled the *Rongmu xiantan* 戎幕閒談 [Casual conversations in the military quarters], a record of conversations with Li Deyu.

As time passed the attitude towards the strange gradually changed. At the risk of slight oversimplification, we may say that the strong reaction towards the supernatural of the Six Dynasties gradually gave way to a more relaxed and dispassionate approach. A representative example is Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), whose habit of soliciting bizarre stories from his guests typified the interest among the Song literati in using tales of the strange to enliven social conversations. Ye Mengde 葉夢得 (1077–1148), a contemporary of Su Shi, gives an account of the amateur storytelling activities associated with Su's circle. In his *Bishu luhua* 避暑錄話 [Record of talk while taking a summer retreat] he records that every day during his Huangzhou exile Su Shi either invited people to his home or visited them in order to indulge in conversations on practically any topic. Those hard-put for something to say would be encouraged to talk of ghosts, with Su suggesting that one could “listen in a casual way” and not take the stories seriously. Many of these stories were included by Su in Books 2 and 3 of his collection of random notes, the *Dongpo zhilin* 東坡志林 [Records on the eastern slope]. Entitled “Anomalous Affairs,” these contain a total of thirty-two anecdotes of strange events (SU 1983, 72–99). In noting that Su's friends “laughed to their hearts' content on hearing the ghost stories,” Ye Mengde underscores the jovial mood in which the stories were told and taken—a mood describable as “fine events, fine talk,” to borrow an expression from the standard preface to the *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 [A new account of tales of the world], by Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 (403–444). Hardly surprising, then, that Su Shi, popularly known for his convivial character and his fondness for socializing, should become associated with this light-hearted mode of *zhiguai* narrating.

This seemingly inconsequential kind of oral storytelling that focused on the strange remained an important facet of literati life in the Ming dynasty, as documented in many anecdotal collections of the period. There is evidence for such activities among literati groups in the Jiangnan region, centering around the famed poet-painters Tang Yin 唐寅 (1470–1524) and Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1461–1527). One of the results of such discourse was Zhu Yunming's *zhiguai* collection, the *Zhiguai lu* 志怪錄 [Record of strange events]. The *Zhicheng kelun* 治城客論 [Discourses by guests on governing the city], by Lu Cai 陸采 (ca. 1495–1540), also contains anecdotes that circulated among such literary and artistic luminaries of the mid-Ming as Shen Zhou 沈周 (1427–1509) and Zhu Yunming.

In contrast to those who narrated *zhiguai* stories out of an intrinsic interest in the strange, there were those for whom the *zhiguai* served ulterior

purposes. In times of political and social turmoil, stories of untoward events were used to reflect the disintegration of the old order. Yuan Haowen 元好問 (1190–1257), a renowned poet and literary critic, is thought to have written his *Xu Yijian zhi* 續夷堅志 [A sequel to the Records of Yijian] as a means of recording the wayward events that accompanied the overrunning of the Jin empire by the Mongols.

Similar motives informed the narration of ghost and fox-spirit stories in the final years of the Ming. As Wu Weiye 吳偉業 (1609–1672) said in his poem “Zixin” 自信 [I believe]: “Seeing ruins, I am worried about battles, / Yet I hear the wind and waves speaking of ghosts and spirits.” The presence of ghosts must have seemed quite real in an age when hundreds and thousands of people were dying amidst the perpetual warfare (WU 1965, 12:9b). Most likely, too, Wu was reiterating the well-known theme of prodigies and anomalies appearing during a period of dynastic decline.

At the same time, however, the indulgence in *zhiguai* storytelling provided a way of escaping the harsh realities of life during the years of strife and political instability. Thus the loyalist Wan Tai 萬泰 (1598–1657), who withdrew from public service and led a reclusive life following the collapse of the Ming, was said to have often stopped at a tea shop near his cottage to engage in enthusiastic conversations on supernatural events and phenomena.¹⁰

There is yet another reason for the popularity of *zhiguai* stories in social talk during the first century or so of Manchu rule: it formed a response to the repressive political measures adopted by the government. The early years of the dynasty saw not only the legal prohibition of meetings of more than ten members of the elite, but also the famous Jiangnan Tax Arrears Case and the censorship of the writings of Zhuang Tinglong 莊廷鑑 (ca. 1600). In the mid-eighteenth century there was a whole series of literary inquisitions; the compilation of the *Siku quanshu* 四庫全書 [Complete library of four treasures], conceived in part as an effort to weed out offensive remarks in every publication then in existence, served to further intimidate the scholar class. Since seditious statements are just as possible in speech as in writing, it seems likely that fear of punishment caused the literati to turn to ghosts and fox-spirits as safe, apolitical topics of conversation. The penchant for telling stories of the strange must be seen, then, to reflect the political atmosphere.

Be that as it may, stories of supernatural occurrences could still be manipulated as vehicles for expressing anti-Manchu sentiments. The fact that the character for fox, 狐 (*hu*), is homophonous with that for foreign tribes, 胡 (*hu*), made it possible to use fox-spirit tales as vehicles for concealed attacks on the Manchus. This is revealed in the famous tale of “Lu Shuibu” 陸水部 [Lu of the water conservation department], in the *Yetan*

suilu 夜譚隨錄 [Occasional accounts of conversations at night] by He Bang'e 和邦額 (b. 1748) (HE 1988, 199–203). The homophonous parallel was obviously well known at the time—indeed, it came as a surprise to Zhao Lian 趙樾 (1780–1833), a distant descendant of the Qing founder Nurhaci 努爾哈赤 (1559–1626), that He's collection was not proscribed by the Qianlong Emperor. One would not be too far wrong in supposing that many fox-spirit stories concealed hidden diatribes against Qing practices, rebuttals of its legitimacy, and expressions of pent-up hatred of the Manchu ruling class. In this way power relations between the Han people and the Manchus became inscribed in the texts as a kind of sociopolitical discourse.

Hence once again we have the link, observed earlier in regard to certain *chuanqi* tales, between conversational/casual narratives and allegory. The Qing storytellers were in fact quite aware of the way in which tales of all types could serve as vehicles not only for political satire but also for commentary on socioeconomic issues and discourses on the relationship between the sexes. Thus the belief in a female fox-demon's ability to nurture herself spiritually through the absorption of male sexual energy was easily turned to good use by those who wished to condemn prostitution. Again, such things as dishonesty, hypocrisy, and double-dealing among the general public—things often linked to the corruptive influence of the money and wealth that arose as an embryonic capitalism developed in the late imperial era—were criticized in stories where such vices were conveniently attributed to ghosts.

QING *ZHIGUAI* DISCOURSE AND ITS CONTEXTS

Against this backdrop I shall attempt a reconstruction of the world of casual *zhiguai* storytelling in the Qing dynasty, focusing on the contexts of its occurrence as well as on the conscious and unconscious uses to which it was put. The available sources being what they are, the focus is primarily on the world of conversational give-and-take among the mid-Qing elite in the lower Yangtze region and in the capital, Beijing. These two areas played an important role as nuclei of elite activity; in the cities and commercial towns of the Jiangnan region, literati members frequently gathered to eat, drink, and compose and exchange poetry, while in Beijing (and in provincial capitals as well) the periodic examinations provided opportunities for candidates from different parts of the country to meet each other and socialize with government officials. One aspect of the gilded elite life of the mid-Qing was depicted as follows by He Bang'e:

I often like to get together with a couple of friends. As we get ourselves drunk on wine or drink tea at a low table, we extinguish candles and

talk of ghosts, or converse on fox-spirits under the moonlight. The wild and bizarre often enter into our conversations (HE 1988, 6).

In the 1824 preface to another *zhiguai* compilation, Yue Jun made the observation that learned scholars, travelers, eminent statesmen and ministers, poets, and men of letters at the time were all enthusiastically engaged in narrations of strange events (YUE 1987, 1–2).

These two remarks describe very well the general background of casual storytelling in mid-Qing times. For specific references to conversational occasions in which known historical personages participated, as well as concrete instances of the stories they narrated and of the discourse in which these were embedded, I will turn in particular to the *Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 [Random jottings from the cottage of close scrutiny], a compilation of *zhiguai* undertaken by Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) in the years 1789–98. This will be supplemented by other accounts found in the *Xu Zuozhi yaoyan* 續佐治藥言 [A sequel to *Medicinal Words to Aid Good Governance*] (a book on local administrative affairs by Wang Huizu 汪輝祖 [1731–1807]), as well as nineteenth-century anecdotal collections by writers like Liang Gongchen 梁恭辰 (b. 1814) and Xue Fucheng 薛福成 (1838–1894). Broadly speaking, the casual storytelling activities occurred in connection with three kinds of elite network associated with government service, with the examination system, and with local administration.

Among Colleagues in Government Service

Throughout traditional times bureaucratic links naturally served to draw literati members together socially, but in the Qianlong era (1736–1795) a particularly strong network of elite relationships was created by the system of government patronage that supported large-scale compilation projects. Beginning with the *Ming shi* 明史 [History of the Ming dynasty] project of the Kangxi era (1662–1722), scholars from all over the nation had repeatedly been brought together to collaborate in an officially approved institutional framework. This deployment of large groups of scholars on imperial projects increased during the mid-Qing, reaching its culmination with the *Siku quanshu* project of 1772–82. In the *Siku* bureau a total of 360 Hanlin scholars were employed full time. The core of the editorial staff consisted of eminent scholars like Dai Zhen 戴震 (1722–1777), Hong Liangji 洪亮吉 (1746–1809), Zhang Xuecheng 章學誠 (1738–1801), Shao Jinhan 邵晉涵 (1743–1796), and Ji Yun, the chief editor. Relations among them were, as KAWATA Teichi has shown, very close (1979, 84–105). Many of the conversational narratives documented by mid-Qing classical literary tales originated from this group.

Dai Zhen, the leading philosopher of the eighteenth century, recounted four *zhiguai* stories in the *Yuewei caotang biji*. One concerns a ghost-hermit; the second, a fox-spirit who solicited the help of a Daoist priest and with an amulet exorcised a ghost who had haunted his house for years; the third, a spirit who cut short a debate by two licentiates concerning the classical Chinese text *Chun qiu* 春秋 [Spring and autumn annals]; and the fourth, a man living in a deserted house who stubbornly refused to be cajoled by a ghost into leaving the premises (Ji 1987, 92, 107–108, 443–44, 534). While the second and the fourth stories are simple, straightforward narratives, the other two conceal concerns that were topical as well as “political.” In the account of the ghost-hermit, for example, Dai Zhen the conversationalist displays ingenuity in the manipulation of analogues. The ghost in its former life had been a Ming-dynasty official who during the Wanli reign (1573–1619) had resigned from his post of district magistrate to lead an eremitic existence. He found to his dismay that corruption and pettiness were just as common in the netherworld as in the realm of the living, so he avoided other ghosts by retiring to a remote mountain in Anhui. At the end of the tale he attempts to discourage intruders by having the characters for “recluse” inscribed at the entrance to his cave. As an allegorical statement of the difficulty of extricating oneself from politics once one gets involved, Dai Zhen’s tale must have amused its listeners by its display of wry and sardonic humor.

That stories of this kind gave rise to discussion is evidenced by the response of one listener to a fox-spirit tale told by Cheng Jinfang 程晉芳 (1718–1784), a *Siku* compiler from a prestigious patron family in eighteenth-century Yangzhou. Cheng’s account, recorded in the *Yuewei caotang biji*, concerns a certain traveler who took a concubine. One day the concubine suddenly departed, saying that she was actually a fox-spirit who had come to repay a debt she owed him from a previous life. Later, however, it was found that she was actually human and had made use of a “supernatural” excuse to elope with a new lover. In response to Cheng’s narrative we find the following comment by another *Siku* compiler, Zhou Yongnian 周永年 (1731–1791):

She *was* a fox; how could there be talk of her being disguised as one? Among stories in *zhiguai* collections many tell of human encounters with female fairies and immortals who eventually take their leave. I suspect that some of these might belong to the same category as this incident. (Ji 1987, 310)

This constitutes what can be called a “dialogic frame,” since it originally belonged to a conversation in which, presumably, several people participated. Zhou’s remarks bring to light the story’s moral point, in contrast to Dai

Zhen's political point: the concubine is, because of her treacherous nature, indeed nothing less than a fox-spirit. The idea of a "frame" for interpretation originates with Erving GOFFMAN, who has examined from a theoretical standpoint the impact of frames on our perception of reality and action (1974), but the concept's application to conversational stories is most notably seen in Katherine YOUNG's work (1987). Through Zhou's comment, the "spiritual" is replaced by the ethical, and doubts are raised concerning the credibility of many similar orally circulated stories of the strange.

The stories by Dai Zhen and Cheng Jinfang reveal to a certain degree two features of conversational narratives that cannot be neglected: first, that of deliberate fabrication; and second, that of a strong proclivity to allegorize. These observations may provide us with a key for distinguishing between two kinds of oral storytelling—that of the elite as opposed to that of the lower social groups. Research remains to be done on the different kinds of fabrication/ manipulation found in the oral tales of the former, using classical literary tales as evidence.

Between Examiners and Examinees

The traditional examination system as it functioned in Qing times fostered special, lifelong relationships between the examiners and candidates who participated in the same examination. Bonds also developed among candidates attending the provincial, metropolitan, or palace examinations in the same year. These, together, made up the second kind of elite social circle in which *zhiguai* stories were transmitted. Scholars coming to an examination would address their examiners as "teachers," humbling themselves as "disciples"; degree-holders of the same year called each other *tongnian* 同年 (literally, "same year"). The scope of such networks is exemplified by Zhu Yun 朱筠 (1729–1781), the mid-Qing scholar-official who, according to one biographer, had close to one thousand "disciples." These relationships have been described by R. Kent GUY as "congenial" (1987, 57), although that may have been more apparent than real, as shown by some of the stories about to be analyzed. Many classical literary tales document how, at the parties and feasts where these candidates and bureaucrats socialized, the topic of conversation turned to anomalies, and stories of the strange were narrated.

Ji Yun recorded a sequence of thematically related stories narrated in response to the following statement denying the efficacy of geomancy, made by Qian Weicheng 錢維城 (1720–1772), a poet-painter who was Ji Yun's "teacher":

Suppose the following letter [was written] to commend an official: "His behavior has fallen short of perfection; he has achieved nothing during

his tenure. But since the door of his house was built on an auspicious day and faces a beneficent direction, he ought to be promoted to a higher position.” Would the supervisor grant the request or deny it? He would definitely deny it. [In that case] can we say that the ghosts and deities were powerful? Hence I continue to find it impossible to agree with the theory of auspicious yang abodes. (Ji 1987, 18)

To counter this, Ji narrated three events concerning disasters that befell people staying in inauspicious abodes. According to him, diagonally across from the Temple of Giving-to-the-Fatherless in Beijing was a house where five people died. At another house, in the area of the famed Colored-Glaze Street, he personally mourned seven deaths. He also related strange things that happened to Cao Xuemin 曹學閔 (1719–1787), who once lived in the house by the temple;¹¹ shortly after moving in, it was said, two servants died on the same night, and Cao, becoming apprehensive, moved out. Ji concluded by asking, “How can these be explained?” This exemplifies the exercise of narrative power (displayed by Ji) against the power of logical reasoning (displayed by Qian) on the question of the supernatural.

Dong Yuandu 董元度 (*jinshi*, 1752), who took (as Ji Yun did) the 1747 provincial examination, was another narrator of tales of the strange, but by contrast his were mostly firsthand encounters with the supernatural. This provides us with some interesting instances of the first-person conversational narrative.¹² Dong recounted how in 1747, at a Buddhist temple in Jinan, a female ghost, formerly the concubine of a local official, appeared to him and begged that she be reburied since her coffin had rotted away (Ji 1987, 237). He also described how he received from a spirit-writing deity (*jixian* 乩仙) a poem, which surprised everyone by containing accurate characterizations of their personalities (Ji 1987, 95).

Other stories reveal aspects of the real-life relationships among those who came for the same examination. One tale, by an unidentified narrator, was used to vilify a fellow scholar of Dong Yuandu. It involves a fox-spirit who preferred Dong, characterized as an upright and cultivated person, to his more conceited and vulgar friend. The fox-spirit’s description of Dong might have accurately reflected the prevailing perception of Dong’s character among those in his circle, but the story soon engendered much bitterness on the part of the “vulgar friend” against the original storyteller (Ji 1987, 73). This tale suggests the possibility that certain stories were employed as disguised expressions of personal rancor, perhaps even as “weapons” in the intrigues amongst elite members in competition with one another. This casts doubt on the notion of “friendliness” or “congeniality” among a supposedly cohesive group. Indeed, the impact of this tale is reminiscent of that of the

“Huo Xiaoyu zhuan,” with its apparently negative presentation of Li Yi’s character.

Of all the stories considered in this section, Qian Weicheng’s is a special case that merits consideration in its own right. For it is an instance of a *zhiguai* that simply cannot be adequately understood without the contextual frame, in this case provided by Ji Yun, who opposed Qian’s views. In fact, the full discussion that accompanies the story reveals how intimately it was related to the social context, where all sorts of issues, including that of the existence of the supernatural, were debated and became “talk.”

In Local Administrative Circles

A third arena in which the vogue for “ghost and fox-spirit talk” figured prominently needs to be understood within the framework of certain unique developments in late imperial Chinese society. The mid- to late-Qing dynasty saw the emergence of a new group of administrative experts, known as *muyou* 幕友, who were employed by local officials. These low-level functionaries, responsible for some of the most fascinating conversational narratives, were generally scholars who had failed in the higher examinations and were thus barred from upper-level bureaucratic positions in the government. With special practical knowledge and skills, they performed secretarial functions, kept accounts, acted as advisors in legal matters, and enforced tax collection in the area under the jurisdiction of the magistrate they served. The spectacular expansion of this stratum in the Qing period was partly due to the great increase in the number of successful examination candidates since the beginning of the dynasty; the significance of the *muyou* as a group was enhanced by the essential part they played in the smooth operation of the government machinery.

The best-known of them all was Wang Huizu, who for thirty-four years worked under sixteen different officials in Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Writings (in the form of epistolary collections and casual jottings) by Wang and others, like Gong Weizhai 龔未齋 and Xu Jiacun 許葭村, afford us a glimpse of the lifestyle of this group, which on the whole resembled that of the elite. Besides attending theatricals, collecting rubbings, seals, and other rarities, writing literary miscellanies, and taking part in various artistic pursuits, they also indulged in religious practices, especially divination by spirit-writing. Above all, however, we know that they spent much of their leisure time in the quarters of their patrons telling tales of the strange.

Whether reported by an intermediary or narrated first-hand by the storytellers themselves, tales concerning encounters of the *muyou* with ghosts, in this world as well as in the realm of the dead, abound in Qing-period collections of classical literary tales. Liang Gongchen’s *Beidongyuan bilu*

北東園筆錄 [Written records at the garden of the northeast] is a collection of short conversational narratives, most of them heard in the summers of 1843–44 when LIANG was recuperating from an illness in Nanpu, Jiangxi (1960, preface). It is worth noting how Liang named his informants in a considerable number of cases. Quite a few of the stories coming from the mouths of local administrators who reported on strange happenings they had heard or experienced involve the private secretaries. The story of Shen Qu Yuan 沈曲園, a *muyou* of late Qianlong times, can be cited as typical of one type of *zhiguai* (LIANG 1960, fourth series, 3:2a–b). Shen said he was continually hounded by ghosts since passing a wrong sentence that led to the deaths of a virtuous woman, her son, and her father-in-law. Of an opposing type is another story, narrated to LIANG by a private secretary under him, in which ghosts helped a district magistrate solve a case of a wife murdering her husband (1960, third series, 4:2a–b). The popularity of stories of these two types is seen in the fact that similar tales found their way into the collections of Yuan Mei and Zhao Yi 趙翼 (1696–1771), to name only two.

The *muyou* of the time seemed to believe firmly in the existence of spirits, especially ghosts. An example is the nineteenth-century private secretary Xue Fucheng, who for some twenty years served under Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872) and Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 (1823–1901). In his random jottings collection, the *Yongan biji* 庸齋筆記 [Miscellaneous notes by Xue Fucheng], he narrated both historical anecdotes and *zhiguai* narratives. A characteristic feature of Xue Fucheng's approach is that he chose to conclude many of his tales by blithely asserting the inexorability of supernatural law, the omniscience of deities and ghosts, and so on (see XUE 1935, 96, 116, 154, 170). Time and again he attributed disasters to predestined causes and discusses the operations of a retributive logic.

Although this interest in *zhiguai* tales may be taken as indicative of nothing more than the general superstitiousness of the *muyou* as a class, an in-depth look reveals more intricate dynamics at work. A story narrated by Ji Lianfu 季廉夫 (late eighteenth century) rises above of a mere tale of vengeful ghosts to offer judgment on the carelessness of private secretaries involved in legal work. Two private secretaries, one in charge of statistical records and the other of signing and dispatching documents, were aroused one night by a ghost. However, only one was killed in the ensuing fight. Ji Yun's comments on the story show how it is to be read:

There may be instances of ghosts coming to disturb men for no reason at all, but for a ghost to appear in its real form and seek human lives there must be an underlying reason. Private secretaries and assistant

functionaries are not officially appointed but they have the authority of officials. They decide on matters of life and death with a flourish of their brushes. Easy indeed it is for them to do good as well as do harm. Obviously it was a wronged soul seeking vengeance [in the story], and hence the disaster. (Ji 1987, 308)

Since the *muyou* often played a crucial role in deciding the outcome of a trial, Ji felt that some grave wrong must have been committed by the one on whom the ghost sought revenge. It was for his failure to carry out his responsibilities that he was punished.

Once this perspective is taken into consideration, the stories of the strange that circulated among the mid-Qing *muyou* can be seen to reflect the psychological fears of a group who shouldered heavy legal responsibilities. Residing in the households of the patrons from whom they earned a living, they justified their existence primarily through their exercise of judicial skills. Such skills, however, were acquired through trial and error rather than formal training; precisely for that reason, the private secretaries were prone to mistakes and misjudgments. Quite naturally, then, many of the conversational narratives they told were tales of crime and punishment, in which the supernatural realm intervened either to help them carry out justice or punish them for wronging the innocent.

For further support we need only to look at several other *zhiguai* narratives penned by WANG Huizu in his *Xu Zuozhi yaoyan*, now included as part of his *Wang Longzhuang yishu* 汪龍莊遺書 [The posthumous writings of Wang Huizu] (1970). These tales are telling examples of how the otherworldly upholders of justice can affect human affairs. All are purportedly actual occurrences, some recorded with the greatest precision, including details about the time and location of the spectral events. In the tale "When Passing Sentences, One Relies on Ghosts," a Zhejiang magistrate gives a personal-witness account of an event that took place in the autumn of 1755, in which he saw two ghosts appear to an official and demand that a just verdict be conferred on the perpetrators of a crime (WANG 1970, 9a–10a). In "Retribution for Tampering with a Confessional," a private secretary acting as judge, possessed by the ghost of a woman he had wrongly sentenced to death, is made to stab himself to death (WANG 1970, 10a–11b). Both tales, in which the supernatural intervenes to promote justice, are interesting foils for the prototypical hell-tale, where it is only after death that injustices are redressed in Yama's court. In this way the *muyou*'s stories give a new twist to the *zhiguai*; they reflect the overriding concern of legal personnel with justice being carried out in the here and now.¹³

Cumulatively, conversational narratives concerning the supernatural by

this marginal group of mid-Qing functionaries embody a belief in a morally active universe, one that punishes them for their errors yet assists them in making the right legal decisions. The intervention of supernatural forces assures the private secretaries of the interrelatedness between human and supernatural laws, and provides no little psychological comfort as they venture their legal judgments. At the same time, however, the narratives reveal their fear: they need to take their vocation seriously, since they will always be held responsible for their mistakes. Oral storytelling in this context is, therefore, less a diversionary activity than a response to the exigencies of daily life. In these apparently inconsequential classical literary tales the most subtle processes of folk psychology are revealed. In using their tales to represent and constitute reality, the casual storytellers are in effect engaged in what Jerome BRUNER has called the “narrative construction of reality” (1991,5); the tales allow the tellers to make sense of their world, to organize experience in comprehensible ways.

CONCLUSION: THE OUTLINES OF AN APPROACH

The above description of the various amateur storytelling activities among the Qing elite and semi-elite is of necessity incomplete, not the least significant reason being the dearth of dependable records; the available evidence is written (the classical literary tales), not oral. In addition, no effort has been made to give an exhaustive account, which would have required us to examine oral storytelling phenomena in other social circles. Neither have we scrutinized all the possible uses to which oral tales could be put—thus C. K. YANG’s thesis that stories of liaisons between aspiring scholars and fox-spirit seductresses were told to release sexual desires in repressive traditional Chinese society remains outside the purview of the present essay (1961, 56–7). Nor have we analyzed all the subcategories of conversational storytelling—subcategories like the serial tales and “stories within stories” (where events by more than one informant are pieced together). What we have done, simply, is interpret Qing-period casual narratives of the strange with reference to three different sorts of social contact.

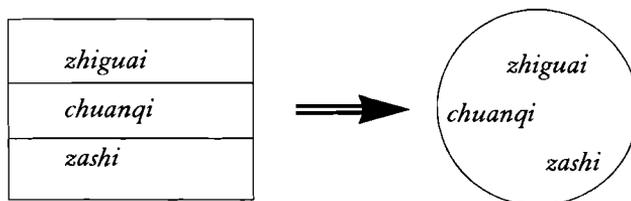
My main aim throughout this article has been to offer a sampling of casual narratives, identify the social circles in which they were told, and relate them through their residual conversational frames to the cultural and ideological formations of the amateur storytellers and their audiences. General contours are delineated for earlier periods, while a slightly more extended analysis is possible for the Qing collections of *zhiguai* tales. Specifically, each Qing tale or group of tales can be said to serve a special purpose related to the particular circumstances of its telling. While Dai Zhen wished to make a political point, Ji Yun used his stories to argue

against distrust in geomancy. The narrative circulated by Dong Yuandu's friend might have functioned as a veiled attack on a personal foe, while Cheng Jinfang's tale could have been told out of a simple fascination with the events themselves. Although the narratives of the *muyou* can be broadly understood in terms of the lifestyle of this class, individual stories merit close study and analysis since there are many possible motives in addition to those mentioned above that can inform a particular storytelling activity.

The Qing tales also reveal how complicated this kind of discourse can become when the role of the listeners, as receptors of the narratives, is given due consideration. The case of Zhou Yongnian's moralistic interpretation of Cheng Jinfang's concubine-turned-fox-spirit story is an apt illustration of the way in which a tale can be interpreted by a particular listener. Given the vast number of hearsay accounts narrated by intermediaries, the casual narratives can be adequately approached only if room is made for "distortion" or "interpretation" at not just one, but multiple, levels. Furthermore, since the author of a classical literary tale, as a recorder of events, becomes roughly analogous to a listener, the text as it comes down to us should be seen as colored by one further set of preferences and presuppositions, if not prejudices.

Often discussions of *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* tales have been limited to the level of text, and this has created obstacles to the formulation of a critical theory of Chinese narrative. On the textual level what is conspicuous are the differences between the two subgenres of classical narrative, differences created when two groups of authors reworked their material in contrasting ways. For long the two have been assigned to different realms of analysis. The study of historical anecdotes (*zashi* 雜史) has been similarly handicapped, the main difficulty (again) being where to draw the lines of demarcation from the *zhiguai*. Interestingly enough, these two subgenres are often found together, with the mixing of modes occurring not just in the same collection but often in the same account. One need only think, for instance, of the infiltration of the "strange" into entries in miscellaneous histories like the *Sui Tang jiahua* 隋唐嘉話 [Illustrious tales of the Sui and Tang], or the incorporation of sections dealing with i) rulers and ministers and ii) marvels and supernatural phenomena in the *Zhongchao gushi* 中朝故事 [Stories of the current dynastic reign]. Both types of narrative embody "historiographic facts" (FINEMAN 1989), and the presence of oral elements in both makes the two genres hardly distinguishable. The hybrid forms in which these tales have been preserved—collectanea, miscellanies—add further to the critical confusion, as do the classificatory systems of traditional bibliographies. Rather than compartmentalizing the classical literary tales, one should note the many common features the different subgenres share. For one thing, the common oral roots of these three categories permit us to place them on a

continuum of short narratives. A recategorization of classical literary tales may be graphically represented in this manner:



A further question is: Can we also place other short story genres—jokes, fables, proverbial stories, legends, and stories of historical personages (e.g., the *Shishuo xin'yu*)—into the new conceptual model?

In contrast to prevailing approaches, we have focused on elements of orality in the classical literary tales and tried to see the tales as speech acts that derive meaning from the specific contexts of their occurrence. The storytelling impulse is of course as old as language itself, as shown by the use of stories to prove a point, to solicit sympathy or approval, to illustrate points or serve as typifying cases, or simply to generate laughter and provide amusement. When inscribed within conversations, the story becomes essentially a communicative act, participating in the wider discursive realm of which it is a part.

This is not to say, of course, that there were no “imitations” of oral stories in the classical literary tales, or that the storytelling context could not have been fabricated to justify the composition of a tale. But, at least in cases where direct topical references to living people (raconteurs, participants, and witnesses) are made, forthright “imitation” seems to be difficult. In fact, the existing evidence points in the opposite direction: there are cases where the originators of the stories have pointed out discrepancies between the tale they told and the tale as it was written down, the most prominent example being the charges brought by the Qing dramatist Yang Chaoguan 楊潮觀 against Yuan Mei's inaccurate recording of his story. On the other hand, I am not suggesting here that the stories must necessarily be straightforward transcriptions of oral tales. Not only would faithful or word-for-word recording have been totally out of the question, but it might have been the farthest thing from the compilers' minds. The position of the present article is to be fixed somewhere between the two extremes of either treating the tales as full-fledged literary inventions or viewing them as authentic folkloristic accounts.

To sum up, just as the analysis of Chinese vernacular narratives has profited much by viewing them against the tradition of professional story-

telling, tales in the literary language will be fully appreciated only when the potentials and constraints of amateur oral storytelling are taken into consideration. Although much excellent literary analysis of classical literary tales has been carried out, the real challenge is to revamp the entire Chinese “small talk” tradition with the help of methodological tools developed in folklore studies and communication theory. By relating classical literary tales to their own historical periods, we have, in our brief survey, identified a *mélange* of functions served by these narratives—including the political, moral-didactic, and psychological. In the cases considered, the local and historically contingent nature of the narrations were seen to be just as important as their literary qualities. Our approach to assessing the classical literary tales focuses not on the reception of the modern-day reader, but on the the reception of the tales’ intended audience—or at least on the reception of the immediate readers, as far as existing documentary evidence allows us to do so. Instead of interpreting a classical literary tale solely in terms of its intertextual links to other stories, we also take into account the life of the tale prior to its literary existence. New insights may be gained this way, insights that will help counter the imbalance perpetuated by the predominantly literary approach that, for some time, has reigned in the study of the classical literary tale.

NOTES

1. HANAN presents a theoretical discussion of the use of classical literary language and the vernacular by fiction writers (1981, 1–16). PRUSEK illustrates the recasting of a *wenyan* story in the colloquial in his article “The creative methods of Chinese medieval storytellers” (1970, 366–84).

2. According to Wallace MARTIN, this situation can be largely attributed to the ascendancy of the novel—fiction created essentially for its own sake—since the eighteenth century in Europe, and the consequent impact on criticism. But he believes that the narrative (as opposed to the novel) has regained center stage through the work of theorists in the past few decades (1986, 15–30).

3. For succinct discussions of the relationship between written/oral expression and literate/illiterate cultures, see the work of Walter ONG (1982) and Jack GOODY (1987).

4. In the category of archetypal analysis is ADKINS 1980; an example of a thematic-structural study is YIM 1979.

5. The term “discourse” brings to mind the theories of Foucault, but it should be noted that the term as used here serves to highlight the conversational context. Foucault’s discourse does not refer specifically to speech or conversation; it is more comprehensive, including all that is “spoken” and “written.” Nevertheless, the connection between articulated discourse and social relationships of power, as can be observed in some of the Tang and Qing stories analyzed here, bears some resemblance to Foucault’s theory of the power-knowledge relation in discursive practices.

6. Both Glen DUDBRIDGE (1983, 18–37) and SEO Tatsuhiko (1987) have explored the

issue at length—Seo, in particular, is convinced that the story was part of the Chang'an professional storytellers' repertoire.

7. All translations of texts from Chinese sources in this article are mine. In many cases, however, previous translations have been consulted.

8. With regard to the "Dinghun dian," Karl S. Y. KAO noted that the story is "surely constructed for the purpose of illustrating the notion of predestination" (1985, 274). One can surmise that the story was constructed by more than one man, and circulated orally before it was put down in writing.

9. The *chuanqi* has also been said to be more "literary." KAO's discussion of the literariness of the Tang *chuanqi* remains the most incisive treatment of the issue to date, but his analysis is largely author-centered (1985, 1–53). Literariness also consists in the application by the reader of a special regime of reading to a certain text.

10. According to HUANG Zongxi (1610–1695), in his "Epitaph for Wan Huian" (1922, 6:1a–3a).

11. Cao Xuemin was a close friend of Ji Yun while both served in the Hanlin academy. Evidence of the factional feud within the academy, a point to be brought up below, is furnished by an incident in 1761 when Cao supported Ji against rumors spread by rival members in the academy. The incident is described by LU Jintang (1974, 40a).

12. The classic formulation of narrational strategies in fictional texts is, of course, provided by Wayne C. Booth; for a study of orally recounted first-person stories, see ANDERSON 1988.

13. One can argue, however, that at least one story in this collection shows how ghosts could obstruct, rather than assist in, the carrying out of justice. In this story the dead father of a convicted criminal pleads for leniency for his son, the only male member left in the family line (WANG 1970, 9a–9b). Note also that a description of Wang's handbooks on local administration, the *Zuozhi yaoyan* 佐治彙言 and the *Xuezhizhi yishuo* 學治臆說, is given in Étienne BALAZS (1965, 50–75).

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