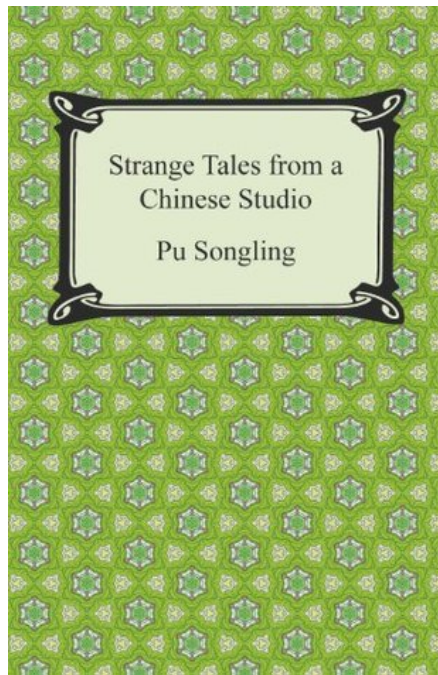




Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio

Pu Songling , Herbert Allen Giles (Translator)

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Written during the early Qing Dynasty, "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" is a collection of nearly 500 mostly supernatural tales by Chinese author Pu Songling. The work, which was published posthumously sometime between 1740 and 1766, is comprised of stories varying in length. While the main characters of this book apparently are ghosts, foxes, immortals and demons, Pu Songling is more focused on the real life of commoners. Four main themes run throughout the book. The first is the author's complaint with the existing feudal system, which he finds to be unjust and skewed towards the elite. Secondly the author is concerned with the corruption that exists in the Imperial examination system. Thirdly the author shows his admiration of pure, faithful love between poor scholars and powerless women. And lastly is the overarching theme of morality for which Pu Songling intended "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" to be instructive towards bettering. This work of classical Chinese literature is translated here by Herbert A. Giles.

Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio Details

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From Reader Review Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio for online ebook

tom bomb says

Lots of fun stories. The most notable theme is sex with fox spirits although there's a good variety of stuff too, with varying morals and conclusions even when the set-up is pretty similar. There's nothing here that made me think "woah that's amazing" hence the 4 star but I enjoyed reading every single story here - there's a lot of cool ideas and overall there's an amazing and absorbing atmosphere that really takes you into the world of the Chinese studio.

The Penguin edition I was using has very helpful notes and a good glossary that help you understand the setting for each story as well as pointing out allusions to classic Chinese literature - although I'd note it relies notably on 19th century sources and stuff quite a bit, dunno how some of the explanations of concepts stand up to modern scholarship. 1 story adds the commentary which is apparently standard in the full original Chinese editions.

Rowena says

The title, and the fact that this is a Penguin classic, attracted me. I really, really enjoyed this read. The stories were quite short, some only a paragraph in length, and the longest ones being perhaps 4-5 pages. And they were strange indeed, strange is definitely an understatement. They were very candid tales, especially considering they were written almost 400 years ago. Many stories were of a sexual nature which also surprised me because of when the stories were written. A couple of stories were distressing, I must admit. I'm fascinated by the idea of Chinese ghosts; they actually bleed if injured. And the idea of fox spirits that take on human form and act like succubi.

Vu K says

Không bi?t là l?n ??c này là l?n th? m?y. Ch? nh? nh?ng l?n tr??c thì ??c ch?ng hay ch?, lúc ??c truy?n này lúc l?i ??c truy?n khác trong t?p. Mà là quy?n khác, th?ng th?y Chu V?n gi?i thi?u, nh?ng nay ??c b?n này - do ?ào Trình Nh?t d?ch, thì ?oán b?n tr??c kia v?n ??c là do T?n ?à Nguy?n Kh?c Hi?u d?ch. Không nh? là ?ã ??c t? ?âu chí cu?i t?p do T?n ?à d?ch hay ch?a. Nh?ng trong trí nh? thì là ?ó là t?p truy?n v? ma quái, h? (t?c là ch?n) và th?n tiên, th?y c?ng thú v?. Nay l?n ??u ??c toàn t?p do ?ào Trình Nh?t d?ch, nh?ng nh? gi?i thi?u ?ào Trình Nh?t m?i ch?n d?ch 50 truy?n làm m?t quy?n và d? ??nh s? làm ti?p 3 quy?n n?a thì hoàn t?t, nh?ng công vi?c m?i ??n ?ây thì ?ào Trình Nh?t ?ã m?t. M?i ?ây Cao T? Thanh có d?ch l?i toàn b?, có l? ??c xong t?p này l?i tìm ??c b? do Cao T? Thanh d?ch v?y, cho ??y ???. B?i ??c b?n d?ch này c?a ?ào Trình Nh?t m?i rõ thêm v? tác gi? B? Tùng Linh, t?c là thu?c ki?u g?n nh? b?t ??c chí ? ??i, nên không ch?n cách h?c khoa c?, mà thiên v? nh? trong sách nói là c? v?n. Nên nh?ng truy?n ma qu?, ch?n, th?n tiên là g?i g?m nh?ng suy ngh? v? tác gi? v? cu?c s?ng, ch? không ??n thu?n là chuy?n hoang ???ng, th?y th?m thía ???c nhi?u ?i?u. Nh? khi l?n tu?i m?i b?t ??u ??c l?i m?t cách nghiêm túc, c?n th?n Ki?u c?a thi hào Nguy?n Du v?y. Minh s? so quy?n này v?i Ki?u, hay Dante, Faust tuy th? lo?i và cách th? hi?n, câu chuy?n v? c?n b?n là khác nhau.

Và hy v?ng quy?n ?ang b?t ??u - M??i ngày (Decameron) c?a Boccaccio c?ng thu?c lo?i t??ng t?.

Nancy Oakes says

According to John Minford (whose translation in the Penguin edition of some of these strange tales is my preferred translation of this book: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*), what readers are about to experience here are

"longer stories with complex plots, often involving relationships between men, fox-spirits and ghosts, sometimes interweaving the events of several incarnations. Then there are a large number of medium-length tales dealing with a variety of themes: the foibles of spiritual or alchemical pretension, both Buddhist and Taoist; the workings of illusion and enlightenment; and the ways of human vanity and corruption in general. These are interspersed with brief accounts of strange phenomena (earthquakes, hail-storms, mirages), of unusual skills (rare sorts of kungfu, mediumistic skills -- genuine or otherwise) -- strange performances with animals, obsessions with snakes; descriptions of unusual varieties of bird, fish, turtle and alligator, of magical stones, bags and swords; and tantalizing evocations of the transience of life, of strange tenants and abandoned halls." (xiii-xiv),

a perfect description of what's between the two covers.

I did sort of flit between the Penguin and the Tuttle editions while reading this book -- as grateful as I am to Herbert A. Giles for his outstanding scholarship (and for also giving me a great start in trying to understand classical Chinese well over a decade ago), his version of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* has much less to offer than Minford's. Minford breathes life into the stories he's translated while Giles' version ends to be a bit on the dry side; there are also some big differences in the translations themselves. I found myself going back to the original Chinese more than once to try to sort things between the two English versions and decided I preferred Minford when all is said and done.

I love Chinese classical works and this one with its focus on the strange made me a seriously happy person while reading. It's not a book you can read in one sitting, and it's certainly not one to speed read because there is so much at work here within each story that needs time and thought to try to suss out what's really happening.

I leave you with some excellent advice from nineteenth-century commentator Feng Zhenluan who says the following (as quoted in Minford) about reading *Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio* which I found helpful:

"Read these tales properly, and they will make you strong and brave; read them in the wrong way and they will possess you. Cling to the details, and they will possess you; grasp the spirit, and you will be strong."

<http://www.oddlyweirdfiction.com/2017...>

Jesse Field says

This is the kind of book that, when read carefully, can transform the English reader from perfect ignorance of Chinese culture to nerd-like engagement with aesthetics, society, history, mythology, folklore, science, medicine, technology, and the list goes on and on. It's really worth remembering how powerful a single book can be, and if you think about the variety and range of this book, you begin to understand why Chinese

writing so often comes in anthologies and collections.

I'll likely return to this book again and again, both for personal benefit and to assign to my students. Just today I re-read the story "Twenty Years a Dream" (Pu Songling's original title was "Locket" ??, which is the name of the ghost girl).

the gift says

fascinating short short tales from the late 17th-early 18th century China. possibly more interesting as anthropology/sociology than purely literary. as folk tales resemble 'fairy tales' of western history. cultural differences: living and dead worlds resemble eg. bureaucracy, magistrates, judges, merchants, scholars, doctors, Taoist priests; family very important: filial/nonfilial responsibilities and effects, husbands, wives, rich rewards, poor punishment, 'fairies' role taken by amoral, friendly, tricky, foxes. 164 short stories. older translation (tr died 1935), cultural notes, appendices... perhaps best not read all at once as plots may blur. popular fiction, fantastic interventions, realist focus on human foibles, human generosity to spirits, foxes, ghosts, previous lives, all rewarded...

Justin Evans says

I've been reading a lot of "difficult" books recently, and a few short books that just weren't very good. Amid that pile, Pu's tales were a glorious reminder of why people enjoy telling stories, why people enjoy reading them, and how many different ways something can be interesting.

Short of listing the best stories here, there's not much to review. There are supernatural tales (ghosts and 'foxes'); there are little anecdotes; there are morality tales; there are anti-morality tales; and most of all there's a kind of joy I just don't get from a lot of contemporary books. I've been recommending this to all of my meat-space friends since I finished reading it. Now I recommend it to my interwebby friends on goodreads: anyone who likes to read will love this book.*

As a special bonus, you'll learn a bit about Imperial era China. As a super-extra-special bonus, the editor/translator includes illustrations from a nineteenth century Chinese edition of the text. They are fabulous.

* caveat: this is a book written by a lonely scholar for other lonely scholars, all of whom are men. There's a lot of lady-love wish-fulfillment. It's unfortunate.

Grady McCallie says

Pu Songling (1640 - 1715) collected these tales of the supernatural and uncanny and left them to his sons in the form of 110 handwritten, loose-leaf sheets. They have since been published many times, with additions and deletions, and been drawn upon by other authors (and playwrights, and television script-writers) for plots and plot elements. This edition uses Herbert Giles' translation of the late 1800s, complete with his extensive footnotes offering commentary, but updates spellings to reflect the currently-favored Pinyin system. Giles' notes are themselves an artifact now, half illuminating, half hopelessly chauvinist.

The tales are wonderful, involving fox people, dreams, trips back and forth to the afterlife/underworld, just deserts, rewards for long-suffering love or virtue, and inexplicable tragedies. These are not ghost stories in a western, gothic sense; just tales of the fantastic, with the implicit promise that, for better or worse, bizarre events may unfold anywhere, at any time. Most of the stories are not long, but altogether, the collection is dense, and reading a few at a time, it took me over a year to work my way through.

Larou says

Classical Chinese literature obviously does not consist solely of the Six Great Novels, and I wanted my reading project to also include some shorter (but not necessarily minor) books. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* was my first attempt at a canonized work which is not a several thousand pages long, and overall I enjoyed it, if not quite as much as the novels, which I strongly suspect is due to more getting lost in translation.

Pu Songling's work is written in "classical" Chinese as opposed to the "vernacular" of the novels. Not knowing any Chinese at all, I have not the faintest clue what the implies, but according to the translator of the edition I have read, John Minford, the former is highly elliptical and allusive, while the latter is much more straightforward. The tales in this volume often rely heavily on references to other works, and are often oblique in their allusions – a Chinese gentleman reader of the 17th century would probably have caught them easily, but a modern day Western reader is quite lost and has to rely on annotations. John Minford thankfully supplies a generous amount of those (as well as a highly informative introduction), but it still is not quite the same – the whole situation is rather reminiscent of Plum in a Golden Vase – and in fact, *Strange Tales* shares another trait with that novel, namely that it is very frank about sexuality; the sex is not as explicit, but it occurs rather more often.

When I was starting with this, I was expecting a Chinese version of Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, but what I got instead was a Chinese version of Hebel's *Kalendergeschichten* with added supernatural elements (and more sex). Which, as I hasten to add, is not a bad thing at all. The stories in this volume (104 in all, a selection from the original) are all short to very short (I don't think there is a single one above twenty pages) and vary in nature, from didactic morality tales over ghost stories to reports of strange occurrences like you'd find them in the Miscellaneous section of your newspaper (if it was published in 17th century China, that is). And there is, of course, cannibalism – I guess no piece of Classical Chinese literature would be complete without it. Some tales I found delightful, some left me scratching my head, some were amazing, some plain bizarre, some I got, some left me baffled – in short, this collection is very much like the notorious box of chocolates, you never know what you will get.

Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio is best read one or two tales at a time, so that each piece has space and time to unfold its own peculiar charm. Another trait this collection shares with chocolates is that too many ingested at once will spoil your stomach, and that while they are delicious, they are not particularly nourishing. Only maybe half a dozen stories felt like they'd make any lasting impact, the rest, while a pleasant diversion, also seemed somewhat shallow. Which may be because of the shortness of the tales, but I'm more inclined to blame it on them being translations. John Minford's translation does appear to be a good one (as far as i can tell not knowing the original), but translations can only do so much; and if a work which depends as much on nuances and wordplay (not to mention the occasional double entendre) as *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* appears to do, then it will unfailingly be bound in its original language and any translation, no matter how good, will only give a blurry, washed-out reproduction of the original's splendour. Even so, just for the glimpse it grants us, it is well worth reading translations. And who knows, readers might find themselves motivated to actually learn the language of the original...

Laurie says

Sublime. With every story I read I found myself immersed in the rich life and thought of Ming dynasty China. Here we meet fox spirits, Taoist monks versed in the art of alchemy, magic implements, beautiful women possessed by the ghosts of the recently departed and vexed lovers. Unlike ghost stories in the western tradition, these tales are designed to engage, entertain and enlighten the reader; not scare us. Short tales contain get depth of insight into the human condition and psychology. Minford's deft translation of the 104 (of an original 500) tales reads with a clarity and cadence that must surely reflect the beauty of classical Chinese. Illustrations, an outstanding introduction by the translator, glossary, bibliography and extensive background notes on most tales add to fullness of the reading experience.

Horace Derwent says

????????????????

nicely terped

although the selected stories are not in the round(you know, at that time, the terp translated this directly from classical chinese, it was so hard, absolutely much more harder than reading old english, such as BEOWULF, for me), but it still gave me a fresh experience, and it looks like an omnibus of kwaidans with the illustrations inside

Edward says

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Note on the Text, Translation and Illustrations

Note on Names and Pronunciation

- Homunculus
- An Otherworldly Examination
- Living Dead
- Spitting Water
- Talking Pupils
- The Painted Wall
- The Troll
- Biting a Ghost
- Catching a Fox
- The Monster in the Buckwheat
- The Haunted House
- Stealing a Peach
- Growing Pears
- The Taoist Priest of Mount Lao
- The Monk of Changqing

--The Snake-Charmer
--The Wounded Python
--The Fornicating Dog
--The God of Hail
--The Golden Goblet
--Grace and Pine
--A Most Exemplary Monk
--Magical Arts
--Wild Dog
--Past Lives
--Fox in the Bottle
--Wailing Ghosts
--Thumb and Thimble
--Scorched Moth the Taoist
--Friendship Beyond the Grave
--Karmic Debts
--Ritual Cleansing
--The Door God and the Thief
--The Painted Skin
--The Merchant's Son
--A Passion for Snakes
--A Latter-Day Buddha
--Fox Enchantment
--Eating Stones
--The Laughing Girl
--The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag
--The Devoted Mouse
--An Earthquake
--Snake Island
--Generosity
--The Giant Fish
--The Giant Turtle
--Making Animals
--The Little Mandarin
--Dying Together
--The Alligator's Revenge
--Sheep Skin
--Sharp Sword
--Lotus Fragrance
--King of the Nine Mountains
--The Fox of Fenzhou
--Silkworm
--Vocal Virtuosity
--Fox as Prophet
--This Transformation
--Fox Control
--Dragon Dormant
--Cut Sleeve
--The Girl from Nanking
--Twenty Years a Dream
--Mynah Bird
--Lamp Dog

--Doctor Five Hides
--Butterfly
--The Black Beast
--The Stone Bowl
--A Fatal Joke
--Raining Money
--Twin Lanterns
--Ghost Foiled, Fox Put to Rout
--Frog Chorus
--Performing Mice
--The Clay Scholar
--Flowers of Illusion
--Dwarf
--Bird
--Princess Lotus
--The Girl in Green
--Duck Justice
--Big Sneeze
--Steel Shirt
--Fox Trouble
--Lust Punished by Foxes
--Mountain City
--A Cure for Marital Strife
--A Prank
--Adultery and Enlightenment
--Up His Sleeve
--Silver Above Beauty
--The Antique Lute
--Waiting Room for Death
--Rouge
--The Southern Wutong-Spirit
--Sunset
--The Male Concubine
--Coral
--Mutton Fat and Pig Blood
--Dung-Beetle Dumplings
--Stir-Fry

Author's Preface

Glossary

Maps

Finding List

Further Reading

Notes

Anh says

th?t v?ng bàng hoàng ??n câ nín luôn :|
review mai bình t?nh l?i s? vi?t v?y :(

Nh? l?i cách ?ây h?n 7 n?m, tui t?ng mê m?n v?i lo?t phim Liêu trai chí d? chí?u trên tivi lúc 12h tr?a, tui dán m?t vô tv mòn m?i ngày ngày qua ngày khác, coi ?i coi l?i, coi mê m?n m?t ph?n vì dàn di?n viên ??p l?ng l?y t? chính t?i ph?, t? nam t?i n?...Tui ?âm nh?p tâm m?y câu chuy?n v? h? li, tình yêu gi?a ng??i và tiên, h? li, ma...V?i tui lúc ?ó các t?p phim không ch? thu hút nh? c?t truy?n li kì lôi cu?n mà còn nh? vào tính nhân v?n sâu s?c v? cách ??i nhân x? th?, tình yêu th?ng và các th? lo?i phép thu?t, qu? báo... -> tui nói dài dòng v?y ?? bi?t là ??i v?i tui, b?n ?i?n ?nh c?a Liêu trai chí d? r?t r?t tuy?t v?i :)

Xong h?i ?ó tui bi?t phim ???c d?ng l?i t? b? truy?n Liêu trai chí d? c?a B? Tùng Linh, mà h?i ?ó làm gì có nhi?u ti?n nên tui nh? lòng sau này nh?t ??nh mua v? ??c. R?i Nh? Nam xu?t b?n cu?n Liêu Trai chí d? này, kh? l?n, dày c?m, bìa r?i c?m siu ?ã tay, tui ?âu có ngu mà ko t?u li?n v? ?? ??c, nh? là phim ?ã hay v?y truy?n chak c?ng ko v?a. Tui là ng??i th?c t? nha, bi?t phim làm d?a theo c?t truy?n c?a nguyên tác thôi nên phim s? ???c thêm th?t này n?, thêm m?m d?m mu?i các tình ti?t ?? gây h?p d?n và kéo dài m?ch phim. Nh?ng tui ngh? c?t truy?n thì v?n ???c gi?, linh h?n c?a phim là ???c xây d?ng nên t? linh h?n c?a truy?n, phim 10 thì truy?n t? l?m c?ng ?c 7...bla...bla...tâm tr?ng tui khi chu?n b? ??c cu?n này háo h?c vô cùng luôn...

?y v?y mà tui bé cái l?m, tui th?t là ngây th? mà...

M? ôi, ??c xong ch?ng 3, 4 truy?n ??u (c?ng có truy?n ?ã ???c d?ng thành phim ?ó ch?). Tâm tr?ng tui x?p nh? cái bong bóng xì luôn :(Tui không bi?t do cách d?ch c?a ?ào Trinh Nh?t hay b?i lí do nào khác, mà tui th?y ba?n di?ch không ???c trau chuôt, có nhi?u ch? c? g?ng g?o và "tr?n tr?i" sao sao á :| Nh?ng b?n d?ch là v?n ?? con ki?n thôi, n?i dung m?i là con voi >.<

Xong tui ráng, tui ngh? m?i m?y truy?n ??u thôi, ch?c tui ch?a th?m nhu?n ???c h?t ý ngh?a khéo léo ?n gi?u sau t?ng câu truy?n, ch?a quen v?i b?n d?ch này. Tui ráng t?i câu chuy?n th? 15 b?t ??u tui ?u?i ?u?i. Bây gi? nói t?i c?t truy?n. Thi tho?ng l?m m?i có m?t câu chuy?n có ý ngh?a nhân v?n th?t s?. Còn l?i 95% là các tình ti?t ki?u nh? ch? m?i g?p nhau có m?y phút ?ã lôi nhau lên gi??ng giao hoan các ki?u (m?c k? nó là h? li, là ma, là h? hàng hang h?c xa xôi các ki?u, mi?n nó ??p và d? dãi là anh qu?t t?t >"<) làm tui t? h?i hong l? ??n ông h?i x?a ?y g?p con gái nhà ng??i ta là trong ??u ch? xu?t hi?n m?i m?c ?ích là th?t ng??i ta! M?t s? chuy?n tui th?y tình ti?t r?t kiên c??ng, ??n gi?n ??n d? dãi trong c?t truy?n.

C?ng may có m?t vài câu chuy?n có n?ng l?c c?u v?t toàn b? tác ph?m. Nh? "M?i dao Kinh Kha", "Thanh Mai", "Th?c Phán", "V? d? h?n c?p", "Báo ?ng tr??c m?t", "Phiên ch? gi?a bi?n". Các câu chuy?n này mang m?t vài ý ngh?a nhân v?n nh?t ??nh v? cách ??i nhân x? th? gi?a ng??i v?i ng??i, tình ngh?a v? ch?ng con cái son s?t g?n bó, s? hi sinh vì ng??i khác và l?i r?n ?e con ng??i v? các qu? báo nh?n ti?n. "Ác gi? ác báo". Còn l?i các câu chuy?n khác làm tui th?t v?ng toàn t?p và khó mà nu?t n?i vì n?i dung nh?t nh?o, g?ng ép, sáo r?ng nh? "Liên H?ng", "B?ch Thu Luy?n", "C?i tru?ng r?t ma", "M?t nhà ?? ch?n", "Cô Tân th? m?i b?n", "Hoa Cô T?", "Liên T?a"...ôi thôi k? quài ko h?t.

Nói chung là có th? Liêu trai chí d? ko có t? nh? tui nói n?y gi?, vì dù sao ?i n?a nó v?n là m?t ki?t tác c?a Trung Hoa nh? ph?n gi?i thi?u sau bìa sách: *Nhi?u ng??i b?o là Liêu Trai là truy?n th?n quá d? ?oan, có l? ch? nghe nói mà ch?a ??c qua bao gi?. Hay là có ??c nh?ng không ng?m ngh? nh?n xét...Liêu trai hay c? truy?n l?n v?n, không l? gì nó ???c truy?n t?ng x?a nay, coi nh? m?t b? ?o?n thiên ti?u thuy?t ??c s?c nh?t c?a Trung Qu?c.*

Ch?ng riêng ? Á ?ông, nhi?u n??c Âu M? ?ã có b?n d?ch t? lâu. M?t nhà phê bình không ng?n ng?i vì t? r?ng:"nhi?u chuy?n trong Liêu trai có giá tr? làm bài h?c tu thân x? th?, há ph?i là lo?i ??c tiêu khi?n cho ng??i hi?u k? mà thôi.

Nh?ng mà v?i tui, có l? s? v? m?ng ?ã phóng ??i n?i th?t v?ng c?a tui lên t?i c?c ??i luôn. Tui ráng h?t 9.5 ph?n công l?c m?i ??c h?t ???c cu?n này. ??c xong th?y h?i ti?c vì ?ã mua và tui bik tui s? ko ??c l?i cu?n này l?n th? 2 :(((ch?c luôn!

Tim says

"Read these tales properly, and they will make you strong and brave; read them in the wrong way, and they will possess you."

- Feng Zhenluan

Early nineteenth century commentator on the Strange Tales

I honestly don't know how to begin with reviewing a book like this. Normally with short story collections, I try to do a short review for each tale, but with 104 stories, I'm not going that route this time. Perhaps we'll go with a little historic background?

These tales were written by Pu Songling sometime in the Qing dynasty (from what I can gather, he probably completed the tales by 1679, but could have been adding extra stories up until the early 1700s) and published by his grandson in 1740. The stories range from silly real life problems from the upper classes, to stories dealing with monsters, ghosts and fox spirits. Throughout this collection there is obvious social criticisms; sometimes these are outright preached as a moral at the end, more often they are more subtle or presented as a joke (Ha! Those silly merchants and their greed, that priest sure showed them, eh?). The only major theme tying all the stories together is that they are indeed strange. Sometimes the strangeness comes from the supernatural side, or it can just be the peculiar habits people pick up, but every single tale serves as an oddity that shows human nature in often surprisingly witty fashions.

If I was to do a one word review, the closest word to capturing the feeling of these tales would be sublime. In this collection you will find stories about fox spirits, ghosts, demons and priests. You will find longer tales of the supernatural and short almost slice of life moments of comedy. There is horror, humor and wonder all in about equal measure and it is stunning.

While I do not know if it is the translation or the style it was written in, but the book is very readable. The stories flow well, and never feel their age other than in some of the opinions he expresses which are very much a part of his time. Some American and European readers may be shocked by the amount of sexuality in this book considering its age, but remember, this is 1600/1700 China, with stories often taking place much earlier, not your usual proper English subject matter of the time. Though as a fun historic note, in the introduction to the Penguin edition I read, the translator discusses earlier translations where they tried to hide the more erotic content, with some examples being a fox spirits coming into bed chambers at night and "drinking tea" or "playing Go" instead.

I can't say that every story in the collection is perfect. Some are duds, but the good far outweighs the bad, and as a look at history its rather fascinating on that ground alone. Well deserving of a full 5 stars and my highest praise.

Hadrian says

*Each played his
Pipes of Heaven,
Seeking not beauty of sound,
But music that is what it is
For reasons of its own.*

-The Author's Preface, Lines 11-13

The 104 stories in this collection (out of some 450+ in the original work) are clearly tales, and they are clearly Chinese. Yet what is in them to make them so strange?

The easy answer would be the presence of the supernatural. There are many stories with goblins and dragons and paintings that come alive, mountains where immortals live and mystical dreams. A recurring element in these stories is the trickster fox-spirit, or huli jing (狐妖), which take on human form to seduce or bamboozle hapless humans. To use an archaic and gendered word, they are vixens in every way.

But this is only part of what is strange. There are stories here which are plausible despite their label of strangeness. These include little anecdotes about panicked crowds running around naked during an earthquake, or merchants with trained animals, but also romantic set pieces true love outside of the social order, or fearsome women who reverse traditional gender norms. (but to be honest, many people today find that last one strange and frightening). These might appear to be romantic canards to us in the 21st century, but back then they were so rare to be an object of curiosity.

Now granted these are placed along sides of fox spirits and lovers come back from the dead, but even within these supernatural images, the humans who act in them are still 'real', in the sense that their behavior is familiar. Just because they are fictional, doesn't mean they aren't real. There are convincing stories of obsession, lust, greed, and other very real follies. It is these human emotions which ground these fables from the past in something distinctly recognizable.

There's also an audacious criticism of the government and the inefficiencies of the educational system. Many officials are either out-of-touch, powerless, or complete dupes. This portrayal might be motivated by resentment at the author's own failure to navigate the degree system, but it could be another factor entirely - this was written the Qing dynasty, who are cast as Manchurian invaders who overthrew the Ming in 1644, when Pu Songling was a young child.

Speaking of history, this book does not exist in a vacuum. The stories are collections of local folklore, but the author also cannot help but add references to past poets and contemporary beliefs. Because we are not 17th century Chinese scholars, many of the poetic references will inevitably be beyond our grasp, but the translator has included some extremely helpful endnotes.

These stories blur the boundaries between what is real and what is unreal, or what is natural and supernatural. I enjoyed them, but I wish the rest were there too.
