Pu Songling’s All Too Human Surreal Worlds: A Study of the Narrative Structure of Pu Songling’s Supernatural Stories

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Pu Songling (1640—1715) is one of the most prominent Chinese writers of the supernatural, yet he is neither a representative of the supernatural horror, that dominated the genre in the West in the wake of early 19th century Romanticism, nor a representative of the supernatural love, that dominated in the late 19th century Victorian period. Whereas Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus (1818), which questions Man’s control over nature in an era of rapid revolutionary changes, and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897), which questions the complex nature of human relationships and feelings in times of rigid moral control, Pu Songling’s tales question the notions of authority within the rigid power structures of the Empire. By relying on the analytical tools provided by narratology, this article analyzes the interactions of the main characters of Pu Songling’s stories with the surreal spatial-temporal world they encounter.
Narratology is the study of narrative structures. An analysis of the commonalities and differences in the ways stories are told within a genre, a period or the works of a single author, or, as it naturally follows, between genres, between periods and between authors.\[1\] Tzvetan Todorov in his study of supernatural literature, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*\[2\], clarified the boundaries between the genres of the étrange (strange), the fantastique (fantastical) and the merveilleux (wonderful). According to Todorov, fantastique is the moment of ambiguity when the narrator or the main character is not sure whether the supernatural he encounters is nothing but a dream (étrange) or reality (merveilleux).\[3\] Todorov's discovery is that each genre, regardless of the story itself, exhibits similar narratives. Thus, what defines a genre of literature is a distinct narrative-structure.

Although we can rely upon the tools of narratology as defined by Todorov in his study of supernatural literature, his conclusions on the existence of three different genres of Western supernatural literature cannot be applied to Pu Songling. Even though he is acknowledged as a writer of the supernatural. While in Western supernatural literature the story itself is often the message, Pu Songling's stories are long introductions to sarcastic comments on authority. Historical commentaries explain that Pu Songling’s hostility towards existing structures of the Qing Empire stemmed from his own difficulty to secure employment within the imperial bureaucracy, condemning him to a life of poverty.\[4\] The thesis that will be defended in this analysis is that Pu Songling’s short stories should not be read as supernatural stories, but rather as a social and political critique that relies on supernatural elements to emphasize his attacks on the structures of the Qing Empire. In fact, the surreal worlds he weaves are all too human.

I. Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales from the Make-Do Studio*

In the introduction we introduced two major works of Western supernatural literature, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. The first of these two novels was published at the beginning of English mass literature (1818), and the second when English mass literature had already been well established (1897). Needless to say, mass literature and vernacular literature refer to different categories of literature, even though both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* have now become an integral part of popular culture due to the development of cinematography. The written works themselves are characterized with all the qualities of a literary work, whose educated public has been dramatically enlarged by the socioeconomic changes that led to the rise of a large middle class, and
through the development of mass communication that could now reach its members.

Pu Songling’s bitter experiences with the imperial system lasted for decades, so did his writing career. Yet, his short stories were works of high literary quality, whose complex writing style and structures could only, and probably, were deliberately designed to reach a very small fraction of the educated public. Though his stories now enjoy a wide appeal, they had to be “translated” into vernacular Chinese in order to become accessible to a wider readership and were only first published decades after his death, in 1740. Having written more than a hundred supernatural short stories, the scope of this analysis forces us to limit ourselves to the three short stories compiled by Victor H. Mair in his *Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature*, published in 2000. This analysis will focus on the following short stories: *The Mural*, *The Taoist of Lao Mountain* and *The Cricket*, all of which clearly express his opposition to the existing order.

II. The Supernatural Elements of Pu Songling’s Short Stories

As previously indicated, Tzvetan Todorov’s groundbreaking study of supernatural literature clarified the boundaries between the genres of the étrange (strange), the fantastique (fantastical) and the merveilleux (wonderful). Before attempting to analyze the narrative structures of Pu Songling’s short stories, and their relationship with the many genres of supernatural literature, it is important to determine if they can be categorized within a genre of literature itself. Todorov wrote that only mass literature can be classified within genres, because many variations of a distinct narrative structure inevitably arise, from which a weberian ideal-type narrative structure can be constructed.\[5\]

Considering the fact that Pu Songling’s career took place in the late 17th and early 18th century, before the era of mass literature, and had barely emerged prior to the mid-19th century in the West\[6\], and certainly not before the mid-20th century in China\[7\], it is difficult to insert his stories into any genre. Of course, we may retroactively insert his stories within a genre. Although his short stories incorporate supernatural elements, can they be inscribed as such in a genre of supernatural literature? To talk of a supernatural literature implies the existence of a non-supernatural literature, probably defined as materialist or realist. Thus, to qualify a literature as supernatural implies a world where the dominant paradigm acknowledges the existence of natural laws that are within the reach of human
intellect. Was early Qing dynasty China (1644—1911) such a world?

The aim of the national, nationalist and later communist revolutions of the 20th century was to establish a modern, rational and scientific state. Thus, pre-revolutionary China was a world inhabited by supernatural creatures such as dragons, and supernatural beings such as immortals. Pre-revolutionary China was a world where supernatural forces and spirits could alter the natural world and bewitch humans. Rituals had to be performed at all levels of society at regular intervals to appease spirits and ancestors, to secure good fortune. Divination, astrology, magic rituals dominated every aspect of life. Secrets with supernatural effects could be acquired by learning and practicing the Taoist arts. Illumination could be reached within one’s lifetime because everyone was endowed with Buddha-nature. Even emperors and dynasties could not rule without the mandate of Heaven, a mandate that could be transferred to anyone by the benevolent will of Heaven. Because the supernatural was an inherent fact of life at the time of writing, it is thus anachronistic to qualify Pu Songling’s short stories as supernatural.

Pu Songling mobilizes this lore of beliefs and superstition, which was held by all the classes of the Empire. In the third Story, The Cricket, the reliance on divination is part of everyday life, an event central to planning one’s activity. In The Mural, both worlds are bound by the same physical laws, only the transmigration through the mist from the world of the living to the world of the mural is supernatural.

This theme of the transmigration of the soul, or even of physical transmigration when one goes to the Pure Land of the Amitabha Buddha when one is on the brink of enlightenment, is constitutive of Chinese Buddhism. Similarly, in The Cricket, the fact that the boy became intermittently the a cricket when he was between life and death is consistent with the core belief of rebirth in Buddhism. The Taoist of Lao Mountain focuses on Taoist immortals living in harmony with the Dao on sacred mountains far from the worries of the world, and also focuses on the hidden art of Taoists masters who can effortlessly alter the world because they live in harmony with the Dao. These themes are central to Taoist literature and can be found in Zhuangzi and in Liezi, two classics that no educated man could dispense with, and that also formed the core of popular Daoism. Yet, is it because Pu Songling’s short stories incorporate supernatural elements drawn from his own culture that they are considered supernatural short stories?
III. Pu Songling’s All Too Human Surreal Worlds

As a great Chinese author of supernatural short stories, it is probably more appropriate to compare him to the great Western author of supernatural short stories, Edgar A. Poe (1809—1849). Poe, contrary to Pu Songling, wrote short stories for publication or, more precisely, for sale. This is the main difference between literary works and mass literature; writing as a source of income. In the beginning of mass literature, short stories were the form of literature most readily available for mass diffusion for profit. Short stories were a more secure source of income for the author than any other form of writing. Finally, the vast and expanding readership destined for such literary products was of limited education, with relatively short time to spare for non-productive activities. Thus, not only were the stories to be short, they were also to be easily accessible to a majority of potential readers. In other words, such literature could not aim to be a pure literary work, it had to be vernacular literature. Thus to gain and keep a vast readership, what mattered was not the literary qualities of the text itself or the message it conveys but the strong emotions it stirs within the reader (and the main characters). Successful supernatural short stories frightened the reader[13] and Poe was very skilled at this art, from the immobile Raven which, when asked to leave from the top of the door, “Quoth [...] ‘nevermore’”, to the beating heart of the dismembered corpse hidden beneath the wooden floor, and not forgetting the pendulum that slowly but surely lowers its sharp blade with each movement until it will slowly slice the bounded but conscious unfortunate man.

Without doubt, Pu Songling’s use of supernatural elements is not meant to stir such (strong) emotions within the reader, though the character does experience emotions: incomprehension in The Mural; disappointment in The Taoist of Lao Mountain; fear of legal punishment in The Cricket. Yet, there is undoubtedly a wish to create an identification between the character and the originally intended readership, the literati. First, all three short stories revolve around the character of the young scholar, and probably the poor scholar; second, the complexity of the language restricts the readership; as does, third, the references to Sima Qian’s histories in expressing the sarcastic comments.[14] The superficially supernatural short stories, it must be acknowledged, are closer to Aesop’s (7th—6th B.C.E) and Jean de la Fontaine’s (1621—1695) fables, involving anthropomorphic animals, than to Poe’s supernatural short stories. Although the stories introduce a moral
comment in Aesop and la Fontaine and a sarcastic comment in Pu Songling, the function is the same: to introduce a message, a message that would not carry the same weight as a stand alone. Likewise, the short stories by themselves would probably not have had the same posterity. As in Aesop and la Fontaine, Pu Songling’s stories are nothing but a mirror of his own reality.

IV. The Young Scholar At Odds With the Social Order

All three short stories compiled by Victor H. Mair in his Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature are variations on the same theme: the young and poor scholar’s relationship with the corrupt structures of the Empire. First, we must briefly described Pu Songling’s China. The Chinese Empire rested upon a complex bureaucracy within which admission and promotion were based upon merit. This merit was sanctioned by standardized examinations held at regular intervals all across the Empire. Without the meritocratic scholar-official class, or rather elite, the Empire would have disintegrated, giving rise to strong regionalist and localist tendencies. Furthermore, the civil service was the only avenue for social promotion, while the limited number of offices gave the scholar candidates and scholar officials a strong class consciousness.¹⁵

Pu Songling was born in the year that followed the conquest of Ming China by the Manchus. Late Ming China was already hit hard by corruption¹⁶, and not only The Cricket bore witness to this corruption, which led to the exploitation of children to satisfy the ambition of scholar-officials, but also The Taoist of Lao Mountain, denounced the scholar-officials’ readiness to further their own ambition by unethical ways rather than by their own ability. The conquest of China by feudal people further destabilized the imperial institutions. A racial system was imposed upon China, the Hans were subordinated to the Manchus, while the caste system became more complex, and the meritocratic scholar-official elite was subordinated to the Manchu aristocracy.¹⁷ This is the reality to which The Mural bears witness by denouncing the prohibition of sentimental relationships between castes, and relationships that then one could only be fantasized or kept secret but usually short-lived. Furthermore, Qing dynasty became one of the most conservative dynasties. Under its rule, the Empire enjoyed sustained economic and population growth, yet the dynasty systematically backed away from any reform, which would have eased the rising internal tensions.¹⁸
It did so because any reform would have inevitably weakened the Manchu aristocracy to the benefit of the Han scholar-official elite. While economic and population growth would have called for an extension of the bureaucracy, especially as the pool of scholar-candidates dramatically outgrew the number of government job openings, it did not. Thus, not only the selection and promotion of candidates, but the functioning of the Empire itself, increasingly relied upon nepotism and corruption on a day to day basis. Education, a privilege of the scholar elite, was not a guarantee for employment any more.\[19\] By the mid-19th century, it is out of this growing pool of highly competent but unsuccessful candidates, who were receptive to new ideas, that would emerge the harshest critics of the imperial system and the revolutionary leaders that would challenge it.\[20\] As such, Pu Songling is their forefather.

Notes:

[1] Jan Christoph Meister, “Narratology” in Living Handbook of Narratology, edited by the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology at the University of Hamburg, http://wikis.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Narratology (accessed on 04/01/13).

[2] Tzvetan Todorov, Introduction à la littérature fantastique, Paris: Seuil, 1970.

[3] Ibid., p.29.

[4] Victor H. Mair, The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 485.

[5] Tzvetan Todorov, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

[6] Eric Hobsbawn, The Age of Capital 1848-1875. London: Abacus, [1975] 2003, pp.352-353.

[7] John K. Fairbank, China, A New History. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, pp. 262-263.

[8] Ibid., pp. 250-251.

[9] Pierre Gentelle, et al. eds., Chine, peuples et civilisation. Paris: La découverte, 2004, pp. 145-183.

[10] Ibid., pp. 149-151.

[11] Ibid., p. 189.

[12] Livia, Kohn, Introducing Daoism. London: Routledge, 2009, p.129.

[13] Wilbur S. Scott, “Introduction” in Edgar Allan Poe, Complete Tales and Poems. New York: Castle Books, 2002, p. IX.

[14] Pu Songling, “The Mural”, in Victor H. Mair, The Shorter Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000, p. 485.

[15] Étienne Balazs, Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967] 2012, pp. 16-17.

[16] Fairbank, op. cit., p. 133.

[17] Ibid., p. 148.

[18] Ibid., p. 63.

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