



## CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PU SONGLING'S WORKS

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**Abstract.** This article provides a comprehensive cultural and historical analysis of Pu Songling's literary works, with particular emphasis on his masterpiece "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" (Liaozhai Zhiyi). The findings reveal that Pu's literary contributions extend beyond mere entertainment, functioning as historical documents that preserve 17th-century Chinese cultural anxieties, gender dynamics, and philosophical tensions between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism.

**Keywords:** Pu Songling, Liaozhai Zhiyi, Qing Dynasty literature, Chinese cultural history, supernatural fiction, social criticism

**Аннотация.** Данная статья представляет собой всесторонний культурно-исторический анализ литературных произведений Пу Сунлина, с особым акцентом на его шедевр «Странные истории из кабинета неучёного» (Ляочжай чжи). Результаты исследования показывают, что литературный вклад Пу выходит за рамки простого развлечения, функционируя как исторические документы, сохраняющие культурные тревоги Китая XVII века, гендерную динамику и философские противоречия между конфуцианством, буддизмом и даосизмом.

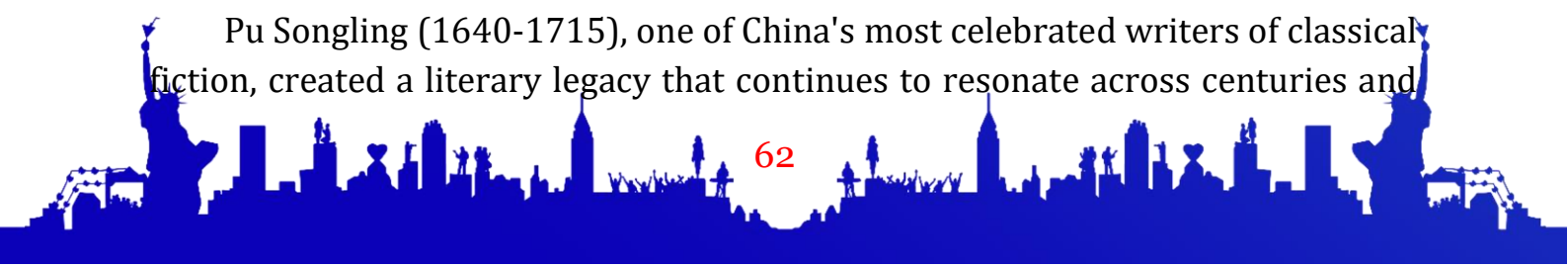
**Ключевые слова:** Пу Сунлин, Ляочжай чжи, литература династии Цин, китайская культурная история, сверхъестественная проза, социальная критика

**Annotatsiya.** Ushbu maqola Pu Sunlinning adabiy asarlarining, ayniqsa uning "Xitoydan g'alati hikoyalar" ("Lyaochjai chjiyi") nomli durdonasining keng qamrovli madaniy va tarixiy tahlilini taqdim etadi. Tadqiqot natijalari shuni ko'rsatadiki, Puning adabiy hissasi oddiy o'yin-kulgudan uzoqroqqa cho'ziladi va XVII asr Xitoyining madaniy tashvishlari, gender dinamikasi hamda konfutsianizm, buddizm va daosizm o'rtasidagi falsafiy ziddiyatlarni saqlovchi tarixiy hujjatlar vazifasini bajaradi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** Pu Sunlin, Lyaochjai chjiyi, Tsin sulolasi adabiyoti, Xitoy madaniy tarixi, g'ayritabiiy fantastika, ijtimoiy tanqid

### Introduction

Pu Songling (1640-1715), one of China's most celebrated writers of classical fiction, created a literary legacy that continues to resonate across centuries and



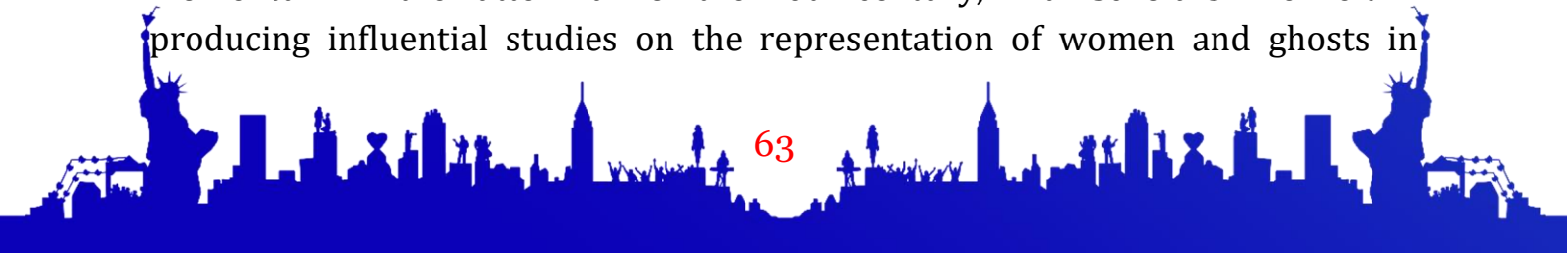


cultural boundaries. His magnum opus, "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio" (Liaozhai Zhiyi), comprises nearly five hundred short stories featuring ghosts, fox spirits, scholars, and ordinary people navigating extraordinary circumstances. Born during the tumultuous transition from Ming to Qing Dynasty, Pu Songling's life was marked by repeated failures in the imperial examination system, an experience that profoundly shaped his literary output and worldview [1]. Despite his scholarly brilliance, Pu never advanced beyond the lowest degree of xiucai (licentiate), spending most of his life as a private tutor in relative obscurity [2]. The cultural and historical significance of Pu Songling's works lies not only in their literary merit but also in their function as social documents that illuminate the complexities of early Qing society, including class tensions, gender relations, religious syncretism, and intellectual life [3].

### **Methodology and literature review**

This study employs a cultural-historical approach to analyze Pu Songling's works, drawing upon both primary textual analysis and secondary scholarly sources from diverse linguistic and academic traditions. Scholarly engagement with Pu Songling's works has evolved considerably over the past century. Early 20th-century Chinese scholars, including Lu Xun, recognized Pu Songling as a master of the classical tale genre and praised his sophisticated narrative techniques and social consciousness [4]. Riffin's comprehensive studies of Chinese narrative traditions position Liaozhai within the broader context of Asian storytelling, emphasizing the universal themes embedded in culturally specific narratives [5].

Serebriyakov's analyses of Chinese classical prose examine how Pu Songling's works function as both literary art and social documentation, revealing the author's sophisticated use of allegory and symbolism to critique contemporary society while ostensibly writing about supernatural phenomena [6]. Soviet and post-Soviet sinologists have particularly emphasized the progressive social elements in Pu's works, viewing his sympathetic portrayal of marginalized figures and critique of feudal institutions as evidence of proto-democratic consciousness. Central Asian scholarship, including Uzbek contributions to the study of Chinese literature, has explored comparative dimensions of Pu Songling's works, examining parallels between Chinese supernatural fiction and similar traditions in Turkic and Persian literatures along the Silk Road cultural sphere [7]. Western scholarship on Pu Songling gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century, with scholars like Zeitlin producing influential studies on the representation of women and ghosts in





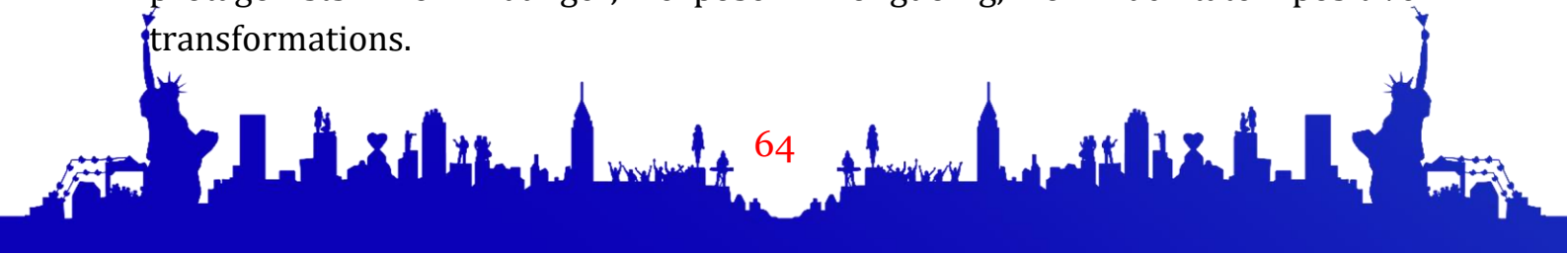
Liaozhai, demonstrating how Pu's female characters often possess greater agency and moral clarity than their male counterparts, thereby subverting conventional gender hierarchies [8].

### **Results and discussion**

The cultural and historical analysis of Pu Songling's works reveals several significant dimensions that illuminate both the texts themselves and the society that produced them. First and foremost, Pu's stories function as a sustained critique of the imperial examination system, which dominated intellectual and social life in imperial China. Having experienced repeated failure in this system despite his obvious talents, Pu developed a keen awareness of its arbitrary nature and corrupting influence. As noted by Russian scholar Alekseev in his studies of Chinese intellectual history, the examination system during the Qing period represented not merely a meritocratic institution but a complex mechanism of social control and cultural reproduction [9]. Numerous stories in Liaozhai feature scholars who achieve success through supernatural intervention rather than merit, or who abandon worldly ambitions for spiritual enlightenment, suggesting Pu's disillusionment with conventional paths to success. The examination system's failures are portrayed as symptomatic of broader social injustices, where genuine virtue and talent are overlooked in favor of mediocrity, connections, and corruption.

Second, Pu Songling's treatment of supernatural beings, particularly fox spirits and ghosts, reveals complex cultural attitudes toward the boundary between human and non-human realms. In traditional Chinese cosmology, these boundaries were porous rather than absolute, and Pu's stories reflect this worldview while simultaneously using supernatural encounters to comment on human society. Fox spirits in Liaozhai are often portrayed more sympathetically than human characters, displaying loyalty, sincerity, and moral integrity that contrast sharply with human duplicity and corruption.

The prevalence of ghost stories in Pu's collection also reflects the cultural importance of ancestor worship and the belief in an afterlife where justice might be achieved even if denied in the mortal realm. Third, gender dynamics in Pu Songling's works reveal both the constraints and contradictions of patriarchal Qing society. While Pu's female characters often inhabit traditional roles as wives, daughters, or courtesans, many display remarkable agency, intelligence, and moral authority. Female ghosts and fox spirits frequently rescue male protagonists from danger, expose wrongdoing, or facilitate positive transformations.





## Conclusion

This cultural and historical analysis demonstrates that Pu Songling's literary works, particularly "Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio," constitute far more than collections of entertaining supernatural fiction. They represent sophisticated engagements with the social, cultural, and political realities of early Qing China, offering both implicit critique and imaginative alternatives to existing social structures. Through his masterful use of the classical tale genre, Pu created a body of work that preserves valuable insights into 17th-century Chinese culture, including attitudes toward education, gender, supernatural beliefs, and social justice. His personal experience of marginalization—as a failed examination candidate and a Han Chinese subject under Manchu rule—informed his literary perspective and enabled him to articulate the frustrations and aspirations of those excluded from official power. The convergence of Chinese, Russian, Central Asian, and Western scholarly perspectives on Pu Songling's works reveals their universal significance while respecting their cultural specificity.

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