

explanation is the somewhat less satisfying than the other arguments made in the book, as one gets the sense that there were more concrete reasons for the general change of attitude. Again, more use could have been made of the structural limitations of integration imposed by the Qing and later regimes.

Overall, the study is nuanced and well researched. Belsky's topics encompass some highly theoretical issues, such as space, ritual, and architecture, but fortunately, he spares the reader much of the unnecessary jargon that sometimes mars other histories on such topics. His work is theoretically informed and makes valuable contributions to our understanding of the urban environment, centre-region relations, and the formation of broader identities in China; but he prudently avoids becoming a captive of his theoretical influences. Belsky is quite convincing in arguing that overall, huiguan do not deserve the reputation that they developed in the early twentieth century. It does seem clear that scholar-official huiguan in the capital were progressive institutions that mostly facilitated integration and helped foster a wider identification with the imperium, even if the state clearly had an advantage in limiting their ability to challenge imperial authority.

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*Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction: A Morphological History.* By Xiaohuan Zhao. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. Pp. xii + 401. \$129.95/£79.95.

This book, as the subtitle clearly states, takes a morphological approach to examine the history of Chinese *zhiguai* 志怪 (records of the strange or records of the anomalies). It begins with the claim that the genre known in the West as “supernatural fiction” “is closest in theme and content to the Chinese term *zhiguai*” (p. 1). It applies the models and methods established by Vladimir Propp (1895–1970), the famous Russian scholar who developed a structural theory of folk tales, to study Chinese *zhiguai* records. In doing so Zhao aims to reach a “clearer interpretation of the textual patterns of classical Chinese supernatural fiction” (p. 2) and to “find out what distinguishes classical Chinese supernatural fiction in terms of form and structure as a unique genre of ‘strange writing’” (p. 5).

The book is divided into two parts. The first part is a general survey of the history of the *zhiguai* genre from the fifth century B.C. to the eighteenth century. Chapter One places both *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* 傳奇 (stories of the marvelous) as the subcategories of *wenyan xiaoshuo* 文言小說 (classical Chinese fiction). It identifies four stages of *zhiguai*'s development in Chinese literary history: the embryonic, the formative, the mature, and the climatic. Each of these four stages is discussed in subsequent chapters. In Chapter One, the author considers myths, legends, fables and parables preserved in the pre-Han and Han works, such as *Shanhaijing* 山海經, *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義, and *Huainanzi* 淮南子, are “underdeveloped and unsophisticated” and are therefore “supernatural fiction in embryo” (p. 29). Chapter Two treats the *zhiguai* of the Six Dynasties as the formative stage of the development of Chinese supernatural fiction. It traces in great detail the various

editions of major *zhiguai* collections, including Gan Bao's 干寶 most famous *Soushenji* 搜神記. Despite the profusion of *zhiguai* collections, the author believes that individual *zhiguai* stories fell short of sophisticated plots and well-developed characters.

Chapter Three identifies the Tang and the Five Dynasties as a golden age for not only Chinese poetry, but also fiction. A turning point in Chinese fiction writing, Tang *xiaoshuo*, rendered as fictional works, reached their "mature" stage. One of the major markers of such an important turn, according to Zhao, is that fictional writing had evolved from a mere recording of facts, either real or imagined, to intentional efforts to "fabricating stories, vivifying them with skilled use of dialogue, and embellishing them with elegant phrases and poems" (p. 62). The chapter attributes to such a turning point to the revived influence of "three competing religious systems [Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism]," the implementation of the civil service examinations, and the promotion of the *Guwen yundong* 古文運動 (Ancient Style Prose Movement) championed by great literati scholars such as Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824) and Liu Zongyuan 柳宗元 (773–819). Representative works of this period include Niu Sengru's 牛僧孺 (779–847) *zhiguai* collection of *Xuanguailu* 玄怪錄 and Du Guangting's 杜光庭 (850–933) seven collections of lives and miracles of Daoist transcedents.

Chapter Four deals with *zhiguai* writings of the Song, Jin and Yuan dynasties. The Song witnessed both official and private efforts to produce large volumes of *zhiguai* records. The former is represented by the early Song compilation of *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 and the latter by Hong Mai's 洪邁 (1123–1203) *Yijianzhi* 夷堅志 of the Southern Song. Despite these achievements, Zhao concludes that "Song *zhiguai* fiction shows no further development from Tang fiction in content" and "their stories were generally devoid of imagination and creativity when compared with their Tang counterparts" (p. 116). The following Jin and Yuan dynasties are considered as a period of sharp decline in terms of *zhiguai* writing.

The resurgence of literati interest in the *zhiguai* genre during the Ming and Qing is the subject of Chapter Five. Many well-known collections appeared during this time period, being culminated by Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異. A number of *zhiguai* stories in *Liaozhai zhiyi* have become masterpieces in Chinese literary history and thus have won Pu Songling an everlasting fame for having brought the Chinese art of literary narration into an unprecedented level of sophistication and elegance. The author argues that Qing *zhiguai* works of later generations were invariably under the influence of *Liaozhai zhiyi*, including Yuan Mei's 袁枚 (1716–1798) *Zibuyu* 子不語, and Ji Yun's 紀昀 (1724–1805) *Yuwei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記.

The second part of the book focuses on applying the Proppian theories to the *zhiguai* records as "Chinese supernatural fiction" (p. 149). Chapter Six is a general introduction to Propp's morphological study of folklore. Originally a linguistic term to study the structure of words and to explore language as a structured system, morphology was first used by Propp to analyze Russian folk tales. Propp breaks the tales into many different component parts/functions and argues that a universal structure, marked by a total of 31 basic plots and character components, exist in all folk tales. In the next chapter Zhao uses the Proppian model to analyze fifty Chinese *zhiguai* records selected from many collections discussed in Part I, ranging from those from the early Han dynasty to Pu Songling of the seventeenth century. He identifies common components in these records. In Chapter Eight, he points out

that “[a]lthough the variety and number of characters appearing in the *zhiguai* tale texts analysed can be very large, their sphere(s) of action are mostly confined to a very limited area of functions” (p. 237). Not all 31 components appear in all *zhiguai* records, but the actual numbers of key functions in these records increase from Warring States and Han times to the Tang and thereafter. This increase is taken as a sign of the development of *zhiguai* writings from its embryonic stage to its maturity. Furthermore, based on quantitative and comparative analysis on various key aspects of the Proppian model, including the classification of functions, the sequence and forms of functions, courses of action, tale roles, and deviations from regularities in the fifty *zhiguai* samples, Zhao maintains that his morphological study confirms the four stages of *zhiguai* development outlined in Part I. More than that, in distinguishing the *zhiguai* records into four major syntactical types (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex), Zhao concludes that the Chinese supernatural fiction has some distinct features that deviate from the Russian folktale models. Rather than being “fragmentary and trivial street talk or alley conversation [*xiaoshuo*]” (p. 271), it has high levels of both structural sophistication and narrative complexity.

Undoubtedly, Zhao’s book represents a new effort to study the linguistic art and structural development of the Chinese *zhiguai* genre, and his thorough survey of the *zhiguai* through such a long historical span is very informative and helpful. Particularly commendable is the author’s detailed research on the development of *zhiguai* narrative forms over time, on the history of the compilation process and different editions of many *zhiguai* collections.

From the point of view of a historian of Chinese religion, however, I would like to raise some questions on Zhao’s treatment of *zhiguai*. One of the questions concerns the definition. Recent works on *zhiguai* by historians of Chinese religion and literature have recognized *zhiguai* as a special form of historiography. The genre can no longer be taken as mere fiction or folktales. In his groundbreaking book, *Strange Writings: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), Robert Campany takes issue with the very idea that the *zhiguai* collections from the third to the seventh century represent “the birth of fiction.” Rather, he argues convincingly that the *zhiguai* was a type of history writing. Diverse political and religious groups collected and categorized oral and written information about the anomalies as a means to order their own world. In a similar vein, Edward Davis’s book on Song religion (*Society and the Supernatural in Song China* [Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001]) uses Hong Mai’s *Yijianzhi* as a source of social history. Davis shows that treating *Yijianzhi* accounts as folktales because of their simple and repetitive plots is “an utterly fallacious inference” and “may blind us to serious and substantive differences” (p. 17). Such warnings should have an equal effect on scholarly use of *zhiguai* in general, for *zhiguai* writers both before and after Hong Mai took similar approaches to their materials. They may have recorded rumours, gossips, or personal experiences with the divine and the extraordinary, but most of them claimed faithfulness to their informants, and they recorded what they had heard and read in the fashion of a historian. Judith Zeitlin, for example, explains that Pu Songling considered himself a “Historian of the Strange” precisely because he wrote in a tradition of treating *zhiguai* as a “private form of historiography” (*Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993], p. 2). She further contends

that “the concept of the [Chinese] strange differs from our notions of the supernatural, fantastic, or marvelous, all of which are to some extent predicated on the impossibility of a narrated event in the lived world outside of the text” (p. 6). It is therefore very problematic to use a Western structural approach to the Chinese writing of the strange, because “we cannot assume that the same ‘laws’ of commonsense reality are always operant in other cultures or during other historical periods” (p. 7). These scholars’ cautions should give a pause to any author relying on Propp’s morphological model of folktales in the study of Chinese *zhiguai*.

There are other questions. For example, Zhao uses Chinese dynastic changes to divide the different stages of Chinese *zhiguai* history, but one cannot help but wonder whether the rise and decline of dynasties coincide with the development of the *zhiguai* genre. An obvious example is the divide between the Tang and Five Dynasties as one developmental stage (Chapter 3) and Song, Jin, Yuan as another (Chapter 4), even though the long period of Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song witnessed the production of some major *zhiguai* collections in Chinese history and Jin and Yuan is considered a period of genre decline. Such a divide makes it hard to understand the significance of works such as *Taiping guangji*, which was compiled during the early Song but contains mostly Tang and Five Dynasties records. One may also wonder the bases on which the fifty samples are chosen for the author’s morphological analysis, and what make them representative to illustrate the development process of the *zhiguai* genre from “simple” to “elaborate” form. Pu Songling, Yuan Mei and Ji Yun, for instance, are all celebrated *zhiguai* authors, but unlike Zhao, Leo Tak-hung Chan points out that Yuan Mei and Ji Yun were harsh critics of Pu’s writing style of *zhiguai*. In fact Pu and Ji represent two different literary traditions. Ji openly opposed Pu Songling’s elaborate plots and advocated brief anecdotes without much literary embellishment (Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and the Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling* [Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1998], pp. 159–67). The choice of Pu Songling’s stories in the author’s sample analysis in the absence of Ji Yun’s records can therefore only yield to incomplete information and challenge the author’s evolutionary theory of Chinese *zhiguai* from “simple” to “elaborate” forms. Finally, because of its coverage of a long historical span, the book has to give overall summaries of many sample stories at the expense of close reading of the stories’ multiple meanings. The individual agendas of different *zhiguai* authors, and the cultural and literary contexts in which some of them write or rewrite the *zhiguai* accounts are missing from Zhao’s history of *zhiguai* yet they remain indispensable factors in studying the structural change and the linguistic art of this important literary genre.

Overall, Zhao’s book marks an important experiment in applying Western theories to Chinese literary history. Cautious dialogues among literary critics, linguists and historians of religion would certainly force us to reconsider some familiar concepts such as fiction and folktale in the Chinese context and advance us to a better understanding of the Chinese *zhiguai*.

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