

## Literature and its Characters – Strange Tales of Liao Zhai

Strange Tales of Liao Zhai, referred to as Liao Zhai, is also known as “The Biography of Ghost Fox”. The author is Pu Songling (1640-1715), whose style name is Liuxian as well as Jianchen, alias Liuquan Jushi. He was born in Zichuan in Shandong (Zibo City nowadays), a famous writer in Qing Dynasty.

Strange Tales of Liao Zhai is a collection of Classical Chinese short stories written by Pu Songling, a famous novelist in Qing Dynasty of China, comprising more than 490 short stories in total; the stories cover a wide range of subject areas with rich content. It is filled with Pu Songling’s lifetime effort, although the stories are mainly about the sceneries of nether world and land of fantasy, as well as matters related to ghost foxes and flower monsters, it circuitously reflects the broad social phenomena and people’s daily life during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty. The work had successfully created numerous artistic models, with vivid and lively characters, as well as twisty and intriguing story plots, which can be deemed as the pinnacle of the Classical Chinese short stories. The stamp issue “Strange Tales of Liao Zhai” is designed by Chen Quanshen, who is a famous painter in China. The relevant brief stories on the eight stamps and souvenir sheet are as follows:

**“Mural”** – A Jiangxi student Meng Longtan, and a provincial graduate surnamed Zhu are both staying in the capital as visitors. By chance, both of them go into a temple. As Zhu is deeply attracted by a fairy in the mural, he unwittingly enters into the mural, and falls in love with the fairy. However, it is not allowed in the fairyland, therefore he is arrested and evicted by the god in golden armor. As he comes out from the mural in panic, he is terrified by what he has encountered. Afterwards, he visits an old monk and inquiries about it; the monk cheerfully says, “All imagination comes from human’s heart.” It suddenly dawns on both of them and then they leave.

**“Qing Feng”** – The mansion of the Geng family is always haunted by ghosts; as they are very scared, the whole family moves out of the property. Geng Qubing, the nephew of the Geng family, is fearless by nature, so he breaks into the empty house during the night, and happened to meet a family of fox demons. He falls in love with the fox daughter Qing Feng, but her uncle disapproves it, so he moves out with the whole family. Afterwards, Geng Qubing saves a little fox on a road, who is actually Qing Feng he has been missing day and night, the two then live together. Two years later, he also rescues Qing Feng’s uncle. Since then, Geng Qubing has been spending his life together with the foxes.

**“Judge Lu”** – It mainly depicts a story about the main character Zhu Erdan who fortuitously meets Judge Lu, and then they become best friends. In which, the plots about Judge Lu replacing the heart for Zhu Erdan and replacing the head for Zhu’s wife are extremely bizarre and weird, they are thrilling. After Zhu died, he becomes an officer in Hades. He always go home to educate his son, later he gives his son a sword as a gift, and urges him to be a good officer and pass on the sword from generation to generation.

**“Nie Xiaoqian”** – Ning Caicheng is generous, forthright and well behaved. He once goes pass Jinhua and stays in a temple. A demon of Jinhua enslave a female ghost Nie Xiaoqian seduces Ning Caicheng for few times, yet he always refuses her. Nie Xiaoqian respects his integrity, so she tells him about her encounters and asks Ning Caicheng to exhume her skeleton and take it with him. Afterwards, they become husband and wife. They use the leather bag given by the swordsman, Yan Chixia, to exterminate the demon. After getting married, they live happily and give birth to a child.

**“The Magnanimous Girl”** – Gu is a Certified Student, although his mother is poor, she is full of compassion and allows her son to help out the widow and orphaned girl who live opposite to them regularly. Gu intends to marry the girl, but he is refused. In order to pay the debt of gratitude, the girl gives birth to a child for him. One day, the girl comes to say goodbye, he then realizes that she has been concealing her identity in order to take revenge for her father. As she has already taken the revenge, she bids farewell to him and disappears in an instant. Later, Gu’s son passes the exam and becomes Imperial Scholar, and has been looking after his grandmother until old age.

**“Lian Xiang”** – There is a scholar Sang Xiao in Yizhou who lives alone in Honghuabu. After being teased by a scholar in east neighborhood, he invites the female fox demon Lian Xiang to be with him and secretly meets her. Afterwards, a romantic and beautiful lady ghost Li also accompanies Sang Xiao during the spare time. From being suspicious and jealous of each other, Lian Xiang and Li gradually become good sisters. The spirit of Li attaches onto the body of a rich man Zhang’s daughter who has just passed away, she is then called Yan’er; Sang takes Yan’er as his wife. Lian Xiang also reincarnates to the Wei family, and eventually reunites with Sang and Yan’er.

**“Zhang Cheng”** – There is Zhang in Henan province, whose original domicile is Shandong. During the chaos of war in late Ming Dynasty, his wife was taken away by the Qing Dynasty military. After staying in Henan as visitor, Zhang gets married and has a son named Zhang Na. After his wife died, he married another wife Niu and has a son called Zhang Cheng. Niu hates Zhang Na out of jealous, and shouts at him as if he is an ox or horse, she also commands him to chop down one picul of firewood before going back home every day. Zhang Cheng has an honest and considerate nature, so he secretly chops the firewood for his brother. One day, Zhang Cheng was taken away by a fierce tiger with its mouth. With deep sorrow, Zhang Na injures himself with an axe, and he dies few days later. Soon after the spirit of Zhang Na leaves home, he visits everywhere to look for Zhang Cheng. He then happened to meet Zhang Cheng in Jinling, who has already become the godson of Zhang Biejia, the son of Zhang’s ex-wife who was taken away by the Qing Dynasty military. Meanwhile, Niu has already passed away. As a result, Zhang’s ex-wife reunites with Zhang along with her three sons.

**“Exchange of Brides”** – Zhang, who is in an aristocratic family in Ye county, has been dreaming about Mao, the son of a cattle herder, being wealthy in future, therefore he takes him home and educates him; he also marries off his elder daughter to him. Yet, the elder daughter despises Mao for being poor, so her feelings of being grumble and ashamed are visible on her face. On the wedding day, the bridegroom attends the feast banquet and the bridal sedan chair is by the door. However, the elder daughter refuses to dress up, and she cries with disappointment and distress. Because of the urgent situation, the Zhang couple is in a dilemma. Understanding that the parents are disconcerted, the younger daughter voluntarily takes her sister’s place to marry Mao, and she leaves with the bridal chair. Afterwards, Mao becomes a First-degree Scholar, then, he was promoted as Imperial Scholar, and finally becomes a Prime Minister. The elder sister gets married with a man from a wealthy family; whereas, the family gradually declines, so she becomes a nun in the end.

**Souvenir Sheet “Painted Skin”** – A scholar Wang encounters a woman during an early morning. As he finds the woman beautiful, he takes her to his study room and lives with her together. Afterwards, he meets a Daoist priest by accident, who tells Wang that there is evil influence on his body, but Wang does not believe him. As he gets back home, he discovers that the woman is indeed a ghost, he then asks the priest for help. The priest gives him a horsetail whisk and says that it can protect him. Although the ghost is scared of the horsetail whisk, she still takes away the scholar’s heart. After realizing Wang’s death, the priest kills the ghost, and instructs Wang’s wife to seek for a beggar to save his life.

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