

Liaozhai zhiyi and *Shiji*

It is often said that Sima Qian 司馬遷 created in *Shiji* 史記 a model that did much to shape the subsequent development of the narrative tradition in China. It would therefore not be too surprising to discover links between Sima Qian's great history and another classic of Chinese story-telling, the collection of literary tales by Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640–1715), *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異. By the early-nineteenth century, indeed, Chinese scholars were already identifying *Shiji* as an inspiration,¹ and recent studies have offered more systematic comparisons, paying particular attention to Sima Qian's influence on Pu's narrative rhetoric.² These contributions notwithstanding, there is still room for a more detailed picture of the relationship between the two works.

The impact of *Shiji* on Pu Songling is best understood against the background of widespread admiration for Sima Qian's work during the late-Ming and early-Qing periods. Early in the sixteenth century, *Shiji* was still a neglected and under-valued text: scholars complained about the scarcity of copies and lack of a reliable edition.³ The energetic promotion of Qin and Han prose by such men as Li Panlong 李攀龍

¹ See Feng Zhenluan's 馮鎮巒 "Du *Liaozhai zashuo*" 讀聊齋雜說 (1818), reprinted in Zhang Youhe 張友鶴, ed., *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben* 聊齋志異會校會注會評本 (rpt.; Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978; hereafter, *LZ*); He Tongwen's 何彤文 1837 preface to He Yin's 何垠 annotated edition of *Liaozhai*, reprinted in Huang Lin 黃霖 and Han Tongwen 韓同文, eds., *Zhongguo lidai xiaoshuo lunzhu xuan* 中國歷代小說論著選 (Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin chubanshe, 1982), p. 565.

² See Wai-ye Li, "Rhetoric of Fantasy and Rhetoric of Irony: Studies in *Liao-chai chih-i* and *Hong-lou Meng*," Ph.D. diss. (Princeton U., 1988), pp. 18–80; Judith Zeitlin, "Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi* and the Chinese Discourse on the Strange," Ph.D. diss. (Harvard U., 1988), pp. 43 ff. For a useful overview of *Shiji*'s influence on Chinese storytelling more broadly, see Li Shaoyong 李少雍, "*Shiji* jizhuanti dui woguo xiaoshuo fazhan de yingxiang" 史記紀傳體對我國小說發展的影響, in Zhongguo shehui kexue yuan wenxue yanjiusuo gudai wenxue yanjiushi 中國社會科學院文學研究所古代文學研究室, ed., *Zhongguo wenxueshi yanjiu ji* 中國文學史研究集 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1985), pp. 188–219.

³ See, for example, Yang Shen 楊慎 (1488–1559), *Sheng'an xiansheng wenji* 升庵先生文集 microfilm of Ming edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 47, p. 1a; Liao Kai 廖鑑, "*Shiji xu*" 史記序 in *Shiji* (microfilm of 1517 edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan); Li Jian 李堅, "Chongjiao *Shiji* yin" 重校史記引, in *Shiji* (microfilm of 1518 edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan); Fei Maozhong 費懋中, "Ti xinke *Shiji*" 題新刻史記 in *Shiji* (microfilm of Wang Liang's 汪諒 1525 edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan). According to Liao Kai's account, his 1517 edition was the culmination of a ten-year search for a satisfactory text of *Shiji*.

(1514-1570) and Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (1526-1590) led to a dramatic reappraisal of *Shiji*, however, and elevated Sima Qian to the most exalted position in the literary firmament. Zong Chen 宗臣 (1525-1560) articulated the mood of the age when he wrote: “When I explore the forest of letters and select from all the ages, Sima Qian is preeminent. In poetry it is Du Fu. Fifteen years have passed since I first read their two books in my youth. During that time I have been able to manage without clothes in cold weather, without food when I’m hungry, without a carriage on land, and without oars on water, but I have not for a moment been able to do without these two books.”⁴ Dozens of new editions of *Shiji* were published in the last hundred years of Ming rule,⁵ and by the end of the sixteenth century *Shiji* had become the most widely read prose text outside the basic Confucian canon. Taking stock of the prevailing trend in 1596, Feng Mengzhen 馮夢禎 (1546-1605) wrote: “[Sima] Qian’s book and Du [Fu’s] poetry circulate everywhere and are recited in every home.”⁶

Ming readers saw *Shiji* primarily as a literary tour-de-force, and gave short shrift to critics who insisted on treating it on other terms. A representative seventeenth-century view comes from Chen Jiru 陳繼儒 (1558-1639): “The Grand Historian is peerless throughout time, without match in the world in his boldness, vigor, and vitality. When Neo-Confucians and historians nitpick and criticize him unmercifully, the Grand Historian must be clapping his hands and laughing in his grave, disdaining to employ his rhetorical talents to refute their spurious charges!”⁷ Ming intellectuals were impressed by many aspects of *Shiji*, by its originality and imagination, by its narrative subtlety and verbal agility, but above all by the evocative powers of Sima Qian’s prose. As Mao Kun 茅坤 (1512-1601) put it: “When people read ‘Biographies of Wandering Knights’ they immediately feel ready to risk their own lives, and when they read the biographies of Qu Yuan and Jia Yi they immediately want to burst out crying. ... To read the biog-

⁴ “Du Taishi gong Du Gongbu Li Kongtong san shu xu” 讀太史公杜工部李空同三書序 in *Xinqie Zong xiansheng Zixiang wenji* 新鐫宗先生子相文集 (microfilm of Wanli edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 2, p. 31a.

⁵ These editions are listed in Yang Yanqi 楊燕起 and Yu Zhonghua 俞樟華, eds., *Shiji yanjiu ziliao suoyin he lunwen zhuanzhu tiyao* 史記研究資料索引和論文專著提要 (Lanzhou: Lanzhou daxue chubanshe, 1989), pp. 6-12, 15-16.

⁶ “Xinjuan *Shiji* xu” 新鐫史記序, in Feng’s *Kuaxuetang ji* 快雪堂集 (microfilm of Ming edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 1, p. 5a. Cf. Hu Yinglin (1551-1602), “Du Changli Mao-ying zhuan” 讀昌黎毛穎傳, in *Shaoshi shanfang ji* 少室山房集 (*SKQS* rpt.) 105, p. 4b.

⁷ “Xinke *Shiji* xu” 新刻史記序, *Meigong quanji* 陳眉公全集 (microfilm of late-Ming edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 1, p. 36a.

raphies of the Grand Historian is like witnessing the subjects' lives at first hand and forging a lasting relationship with them."⁸

Many scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries consciously modeled their prose style on that of Sima Qian, aided by new editions that offered extensive commentary on the literary qualities of *Shiji*. Tang Shunzhi's 唐順之 edited selections from *Shiji* initiated the trend, followed by Mao Kun's influential abridgement *Shiji chao* 史記鈔 (1575) and Ling Zhilong's comprehensive *Shiji pinglin* 史記評林 (1576), which reprinted over a dozen commentaries by sixteenth-century scholars.⁹ The flow of commentary editions continued unabated over the next hundred years, culminating in the appearance of Wu Jiansi's 吳見思 *Shiji lunwen* 史記論文 in 1687. Imitations of Sima Qian's style were, however, widely felt to be unsuccessful, for reasons explained by Mao Kun:

From an early age I loved to read *Shiji*. I have often noticed that scholars take its prose as their model, but they invariably seek to emulate it in terms of syntax, vocabulary and assonance, and fail to understand its true properties. They are like a portrait artist who devotes all his attention simply to the beard, eyebrows, cheeks, ears, eyes, mouth and nose – the outwardly visible aspects of appearance, never conveying the emotions that stir the soul to fierce indignation or joyful laughter, to inconsolable grief or brooding meditation, that make filial sons weep in mourning and men of letters compose sorrowful lines of tribute.¹⁰

The remedy for this common failing, argued Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583), was to “be guided by the author's intention, not by his words.”¹¹ As we see in what follows, Pu Songling arguably came closer than most to achieving this objective. Although his rhetoric and language bear the recognizable imprint of Sima Qian's influence, it is the emotive power of his stories that most powerfully recalls the Han historian at his best.

⁸ See the prefatory digest of comments, “Du shi zongping” 讀史總評, pp. 16a–17b, in Ling Zhilong 凌稚隆, comp., *Shiji pinglin* 史記評林 (Ming edn., Bodleian Library, Oxford). Cf. Cheng Zhengkui's 程正揆 preface to *Shiji pinglin* (1628 edn., Bodleian Library), p. 5a.

⁹ For the impact of these editions on contemporary readers, see Chen Jiru, *Chen Meigong quanji* 1, p. 42a; Wang Shizhen, “*Shiji zuan xu*” 史記纂序 (1579), in *Shiji zuan* (Ming edn., East Asian Library, Princeton), rpt. *Yanzhou shanren xugao xuan* 兪州山人續稿選 (microfilm of Ming edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 9, p. 11a.

¹⁰ Mao Kun, “*Ke Shiji chao yin*” 刻史記鈔引, *Mao Lumen xiansheng wenji* 茅鹿門先生文集 (microfilm of Ming ed. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 31, p. 6b.

¹¹ Wang Ji, “*Jingchuan pidian jingxuan Shiji Hanshu xu*” 荆川批點精選史記漢書序, in *Tang Jingchuan xiansheng pidian jingxuan Shiji* 唐荆川先生批點精選史記, rpt. in *Longxi Wang xiansheng quanji* 龍溪王先生全集 (microfilm of Ming edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 13, p. 10b.

RHETORIC

As Judith Zeitlin has pointed out, *Liaozhai* shares with *Shiji* a narrative rhetoric that combines three elements: autobiography (in the form of their respective preface and postface), narrative, and commentary.¹² In *Liaozhai*, as in *Shiji*, preface and commentary together constitute a frame that encloses the narrative core.

For traditional readers of *Shiji*, Sima Qian's postface supplied an autobiographical perspective from which to regard the narrative that preceded it. In a key passage, Sima Qian explained his work as springing from circumstances similar to those that led others to compose great works of literature: "Qu Yuan 屈原 in banishment wrote *Li sao*; Han Fei 韓非, imprisoned in Qin, [composed] 'Discussion of Difficulties' and 'Solitary Indignation.' . . . These men had all found their ambitions frustrated and were unable to proceed with their plans, and thus invested their hopes for the future in their accounts of past events."¹³ Pu Songling, a perennially disappointed examination candidate, clearly felt a close affinity to the Han historian, for in a short prose work he identifies closely with Sima Qian's predicament, compelled by adverse circumstances to channel all his energies and passions into his writing:

When I was young, my favorite reading was "Biographies of Wandering Knights." Late at night I would trim the wick and set a good gallon of wine by my side to accompany my reading. When I reached "Biographies of Money-Makers" I would always skip past that chapter after giving it nothing more than a cursory glance. This habit has not changed at all even in my advanced years.

When a man fails to achieve his ambitions, it is in literature alone that his song finds expression. "To seek advancement through expediency" or "to prefer a life of degrading comfort to an honorable career" are choices that I do not value. An author's indignation springs from his own circumstances. Had Ban Gu changed places with Sima Qian he would not have done differently. When one cannot fulfill one's aspirations in life one spurns the path of the money-maker. Even if one does not become a wandering knight, one will still be inclined to say: "Swords of Tai'e and Dragon Spring, do you appreciate me?"¹⁴

¹² Zeitlin, "Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi*," p. 41.

¹³ *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959; hereafter *Sj*) 130, p. 3300.

¹⁴ "Inscription for Wu Muxin's 'Discussion of Ban and Ma'" 題吳木欣班馬論, in Lu Dahuang 路大荒, ed., *Pu Songling ji* 蒲松齡集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962) 4, p. 116.

By implication, Pu subscribed to the historian's view of literary composition as an outlet for one's thwarted ambitions, and in writing his preface to *Liaozhai* took a leaf out of Sima Qian's book, introducing his own plight against a background of familiar historical precedents: "The Sanlü minister composed the *Sao* while in distress. . . With wine cup in one hand and writing brush in the other, I complete only a book of 'Solitary Indignation.'"¹⁵ The preface to *Liaozhai* thus places the author in the same tradition of Qu Yuan and Han Fei to which Sima Qian felt that he belonged, and his introduction plays a comparable function to the *Shiji* postface in emphasizing the personal dimension of the narrative to come.

In terms of the second rhetorical mode, the narrative itself, Pu Songling often draws upon the biographical form pioneered by Sima Qian. As the Qing commentator Feng Zhenluan put it:

This book takes the form of a historian's biographies, the author wielding a brush as mighty as that of Ban Gu or Sima Qian, but applying the model, on a less exalted level, to fiction. What a shame that Pu Songling did not assume the role of historian of the age, for with his talent, if he had compiled a contemporary history as did the various masters of the Liao, Jin, Yuan and Ming periods, he would have been sure to surpass them in his achievements of composition and arrangement.¹⁶

The affinity between the two authors' methods is evident particularly in their narrative openings, which introduce the main character by name and place of origin, and supply details on his social and economic position. Below, the first extract is from *Shiji* and the second from *Liaozhai*:

Han Xin 韓信, Marquis of Huaiyin 淮陰, was a native of Huaiyin. Originally, when he was a commoner, he was poor and unprincipled. He did not succeed in securing recommendations to be an official, nor was he capable of running a business and engaging in trade, and so he often depended on others for his meals. He was despised by many.¹⁷

Ma Yong 馬永 was a native of Qi, greedy and unscrupulous by nature. As he was often completely penniless, local people mockingly gave him the nickname "Hungry Ghost." In his thirties, he found it all the harder to make ends meet, and with his

¹⁵ See "Liaozhai zizhi," p. 3, in LZ.

¹⁶ LZ prefatory material, p. 14.

¹⁷ SZ92, p. 2609.

clothes patched in a hundred places, clutching his shoulders with his hands, he would pinch things to eat in the market. Everybody despised him and refused to associate with him.¹⁸

To open a narrative with the main character's name, place of origin, and social position was, of course, a convention shared by a wide variety of biographies and tales during the entire imperial era, and to find Pu Songling following this formula is not at all surprising. Less obviously, Pu also found in *Shiji* inspiration for his own brand of narrative, which while firmly rooted in a realistic setting veers off at various junctures into fantasy and the supernatural. In this regard, a reading of Pu's essay "A Discussion of Guan Zhongru" 灌仲孺論 is highly instructive. An assertive, headstrong individual, Guan Zhongru plays a pivotal role in Sima Qian's "Biographies of the Marquises of Weiqi 魏其 and Wu'an 武安," in which he exacerbates the tensions between Tian Fen 田蚡 and Guan's friend Dou Ying 竇嬰. According to the *Shiji* account, Tian Fen fell ill soon after destroying Dou and Guan, and was assailed on his sickbed by the vengeful apparitions of his former adversaries.¹⁹ Pu Songling took a special interest in this intervention by the spirit world, suggesting two ways of interpreting it. The first entails a prosaic, literal reading and assumes that Sima Qian was merely recording an oral tradition circulating at the time: "Can it really be that the heroic spirits became specters capable of returning from the Nine Springs to demand Tian's life?" A second interpretation, which Pu appears to favor over the first, ascribes to the historian a creative impulse that sought to restore the moral balance: "Was it that since Tian had slipped through the wide mesh of Heaven's net Sima Qian therefore fell back on this episode as a way of lodging his own protest?"²⁰ In *Liaozhai*, Pu Songling chose to pursue the possibilities suggested by this second alternative, shaping his materials to apportion rewards and punishments through supernatural means.

The third rhetorical level in *Shiji* and *Liaozhai* emerges through postscript commentaries, ascribed respectively to the Grand Historian (*taishi gong* 太史公) and the Historian of the Strange (*yishi shi* 異史氏). Commentaries of this kind enjoyed a particular vogue in the wake of the *Shiji* revival, and early-Qing tales frequently culminate with several lines of reflection, attributed in some cases to such commentators as the Historian of the Irregular (*jishi shi* 畸史氏) or the Historian of the Unreal (*huanshi shi* 幻史氏), monikers which, like Pu's Historian of

¹⁸ LZ6, p. 819.

¹⁹ SF107, p. 2854.

²⁰ *Pu Songling ji* 4, pp. 115-16.

the Strange, are clearly reminiscent of the formula used in *Shiji*.²¹ The varied and complex rhetorical effects of the *Liaozhai* commentary derive from a sophisticated manipulation of the formal properties of historical commentary.²² Just as the *Shiji* commentary tends to oscillate between objective detachment and subjective involvement, so too Pu Songling moves readily between these contrasting positions. At times, Pu plays the role of the conscientious historian, offering informed judgments and balanced appraisals, as at the conclusion of “A Court-Case in Xinzheng”:

When Mr. Shi was a licentiate he was unassuming and restrained, and I thought he would make an excellent academician but a poor administrator. But once he was assigned to a magistrate’s post, his reputation for wisdom and justice spread all across north China.²³

The practice here of reserving personal observations for the commentary, thus bolstering the narrative’s claims to veracity, derives from the *Shiji* model of postscripts such as this:

I have seen General Li, a man so unassuming that you would take him for a farmer and almost incapable of speaking a word. But when he died all the people in the empire were moved to profound grief whether they knew him or not.²⁴

Much of Pu’s commentary adopts an individual response to the events recorded that is reminiscent of the personal perspective of *Shiji* commentaries. Just as Sima Qian declares his admiration for the daring honesty of Yan Ying 晏嬰: “Were Master Yan still to be alive today I would happily serve him as his chariot driver, out of respect for him,”²⁵ so too Pu Songling extols his fictional character Judge Lu, who performs surgical transplants that enable unsuccessful students to pass the provincial examination: “Is Mr. Lu of Lingyang still around? Is he still in possession of his powers? I would serve him as his chariot driver, out of respect for him.”²⁶ Like the Grand Historian too, the Historian of the Strange is an emotional observer, much given to the expostu-

²¹ See, e.g., tales by Huang Zhouxing 黃周星 and Xu Yao 徐瑤 in Zhang Chao 張潮, ed., *Yu Chu xinzhì* 虞初新志 (rpt. Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 1985) 13, p. 243; 14, p. 264.

²² For further discussion, see Fujita Yūken 藤田佑賢, “Ronsan to zuisō no nagare, ishishi etsu kō” 論贊と隨想の流れ異史氏曰考, *Geibun kenkyū* 藝文研究 14-15 (1963), pp. 78-88; Ma Zhenfang 馬振方, “‘Yishi shi yue’ suoyi” “異史氏曰” 瑣議, *Wenxian* 文獻 1980.2, pp. 125-35; Zhao Fu 趙馥, “‘Yishi shi yue’ zai *Liaozhai zhiyi* zhong de zuoyong” 異史氏曰在聊齋志異中的作用, *Pu Songling yanjiu jikan* 蒲松齡研究集刊 4 (1984), pp. 175-86; Li, “Rhetoric of Fantasy,” pp. 43-56.

²³ LZ 12, p. 1693. ²⁴ SJ 109, p. 2878. ²⁵ SJ 62, p. 2137. ²⁶ LZ 2, p. 146.

lations of sorrow and dismay that appear so regularly in Sima Qian's commentary. Sima Qian's confidences at the end of his biography of Qu Yuan ("When I visited Changsha and viewed the deep waters where he drowned himself I could not help but shed tears, wishing I could have seen him in the flesh")²⁷ are echoed in Pu Songling's commentary to "Zhang Cheng": "As I listened to this story I shed tears at several points between beginning and end."²⁸

Pu's commentary often addresses an issue of central importance to Sima Qian, the role of divine fate in shaping events. This theme emerges in a number of *Shiji* commentaries: a series of military victories by Fu Kuan 傅寬 and Jin She 靳歙, for example, are said to be "awarded by Heaven";²⁹ the extinction of the Lü 呂 lineage and Liu Bang's 劉邦 rescue by Zhang Liang 張良 are both attributed to Heaven's mandate;³⁰ and Heaven's purpose in presiding over the deaths of Bo Yi 伯夷 and Shu Qi 叔齊 is intensely debated.³¹ One effect of such comments is to enhance the authority of the narrative, revealing the historian's efforts to make sense of the historical record.³² Pu Songling often employs commentary to the same effect: the sudden death of a magistrate, for example, prompts the comment, "I have heard that thunderbolts are bound to take wicked men as their target. Why then did an official of such probity suffer this cruel disaster? How muddle-headed is the Lord of Heaven!"³³ In another tale, the Historian of the Strange responds to the story of a talented scholar's examination failures by remarking: "Living in this world, all one can do is close one's eyes and walk ahead, accepting whatever position, high or low, that one is assigned by the Creator."³⁴ In such cases, the commentator gives the impression of sharing Sima Qian's perception of "an incomprehensible or irrational heaven."³⁵

²⁷ *SZ* 84, p. 2503.

²⁸ *LZ* 2, p. 253. *Liaozhai* commentaries, of course, go much further than the *Shiji* prototype in the presentation of a personal view, offering scathing remarks on a whole range of subjects, viz.: "To have a yaksha as a wife is certainly a rare occurrence. But if you think about it carefully, it is not so rare after all: there's a yaksha in every man's bed" (*LZ* 3, p. 353); "I would like to propose the introduction of the following law: the penalty for murdering yamen clerks should be three degrees less severe than for homicides where ordinary people are victims. Among such men there are none whose murder is unwarranted" (*LZ* 5, p. 672); "There are many such men employed as secretarial staff – no wonder that when night falls in the prostitute quarter of Peking there's not a single idle bed" (*LZ* 10, p. 1310).

²⁹ *SJ* 98, p. 2713.

³⁰ *SJ* 49, p. 1970; 54, p. 2049.

³¹ *SJ* 61, pp. 2124–25.

³² See the discussion in Wai-ye Li, "The Idea of Authority in the *Shih chi* (Records of the Historian)," *HJAS* 54.2 (1994), pp. 404–5.

³³ *LZ* 7, p. 1015.

³⁴ *LZ* 1, p. 84.

³⁵ The expression is that of Li, in "Idea of Authority," p. 405.

LANGUAGE

In keeping with the fashion of his day, Pu Songling largely eschewed the studied artifice that had once been favored in Ming times, preferring instead a supple and robust narrative style reminiscent of *Shiji*. Like the Han historian, Pu Songling embellishes his narrative with a combination of literary allusions and popular proverbs. Sima Qian, for example, closes his biography of Zhang Shizhi 張釋之 and Feng Tang 馮唐 by quoting the *Shujing*: “The *Documents* say: ‘Neither partial nor partisan, but broad and fair is the way of the king; neither partisan nor partial, but level and fair is his way.’ Zhang Shizhi and Feng Tang come close to this ideal.”³⁶ We find Pu engaging in a similar practice, as when he cites the *Yijing* in summing up the achievements of Zhou Lianggong: “The *Changes* say: ‘What extraordinary insight it requires to discern the subtle signs.’ Mr. Zhou possesses just such an ability.”³⁷

Pu Songling likewise adopts Sima Qian’s custom of incorporating into his conclusions a contemporary adage that somehow encapsulates the central truth emerging from his narrative. Sima Qian’s descriptions of mercantile life close with the remark, “A young man with a thousand pieces of gold does not meet death in the marketplace.’ This is no idle saying.”³⁸ Pu’s ironic account of a successful but undignified exorcism ends with a similar formula: “Yellow cat or black cat, it is the one which catches the mouse that wins acclaim.’ This is no idle saying.”³⁹

Also inspired by Sima Qian is Pu’s technique of bringing characters to life through the selective use of colloquial language in moments of high drama or psychological strain. In this connection, it is perhaps significant that in his discussion of “Biographies of the Marquises of Weiqi and Wu’an” Pu paid particular attention to the scene where an exasperated Guan Fu vents his indignation at the shabby behavior of Tian Fen, turning on another guest and saying to him: “All your life you have heaped abuse on Cheng Bushi 程不識 and told people he’s not worth a cent, but now when one of your elders toasts your health you start prattling in Cheng’s ear like a girl.”⁴⁰ Pu Songling was plainly conscious that vivid effects could be achieved by the use of dialogue, and in his own tales he frequently relied on colloquial speech to lend immediacy to a scene. One example, among many one could cite, comes from the story “Student Miao.” Exasperated by his fellow candidates’ insistence on reciting their examination essays during a picnic, Miao tells them: “I have heard quite enough already. This kind of composi-

³⁶ *SJ* 102, p. 2761.³⁷ *LZ* 8, p. 1137.³⁸ *SJ* 129, p. 3256.³⁹ *LZ* 4, p. 511.⁴⁰ *SJ* 107, p. 2849.

tion is only fit for reading in bed to your old woman. It is outrageous to blabber on like this in company.”⁴¹

ALLUSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

One needs do little more than glance through the variorum edition of *Liaozhai* to be struck by the regularity with which citations from *Shiji* appear among the copious annotations provided by the Qing scholar Lü Zhan'en 吕湛恩. By this standard, Sima Qian's work would appear to be the most fondly cherished volume in Pu's library, for allusions to it far exceed in frequency references to any other book, even two other favorite sources, *Zuo zhuan* and *Han shu*. Although allusions to *Shiji* are sometimes simply decorative,⁴² they more often serve to generate ironic resonances between the original context and the new setting in *Liaozhai*. Terms of reference associated with heroic exploits in *Shiji* are now applied ironically to domestic dramas and marital disputes. A seduction that involves the surreptitious swapping of beds by a woman and her husband is described as a strategy of “uprooting the flags of Zhao and installing the flags of Han,”⁴³ a reference to a legendary feat of prowess by the Marquis of Huaiyin. In another tale a peony spirit echoes the words of Han Xin's outsmarted adversary when she challenges her opponent in Go to a re-match: “Is it acceptable for the general of a defeated army to talk of battle?”⁴⁴ When a fox spirit instructs a companion in the art of dominating one's husband, she punctuates her seminar with such comments as “Come again, a month from now” and “You are really fit to be taught, child,”⁴⁵ phrases that recall the memorable scene in *Shiji* where Zhang Liang wins the approval of his mysterious mentor and receives training in the arts of war.

In such cases, reference to *Shiji* takes the form of a fleeting allusion to an episode in Sima Qian's history. But there is at least one instance where a *Liaozhai* tale appears to be conceived in its entirety as an adaptation of a *Shiji* biography. Pu's tale “Tian Qilang” draws much of its essential material from Sima Qian's account of the life of Nie Zheng 聶政, the fourth of the five assassins whose activities are recorded in *Shiji*.⁴⁶ But Pu Songling also updates and re-shapes the story in such a way as radically to alter its character.

⁴¹ LZ 12, p. 1600.

⁴² Pu Songling's use in “Nianyang” (LZ 4, p. 564) of the bridging device characteristic of *Shiji* is an example.

⁴³ LZ 12, p. 1711.

⁴⁴ LZ 10, p. 1438.

⁴⁵ LZ 10, p. 1432.

⁴⁶ The connection between the two works was noted by two Qing commentators, Feng Zhenluan and He Shouqi 何守奇. See their interlinear comments, LZ 4, p. 466, p. 473. Cf. Li, “Rhetoric of Fantasy,” pp. 30–31.

A brief summary of the Nie Zheng story will be helpful. The narrative falls into three distinct stages. In the first, a butcher named Nie Zheng is sought out by Yan Zhongzi 嚴仲子, who aspires to avenge himself on Xia Lei 俠累, a minister in the state of Han. In an effort to recruit Nie, Yan offers a large sum of money, but Nie declines on the grounds that as long as his mother is alive he cannot endanger her by forming hazardous relationships. The second segment opens with the death of Nie's mother, whereupon Nie dedicates himself to Yan's cause and boldly carries out the assassination of Xia Lei, then commits suicide. In the final section, Nie's sister fearlessly claims Nie's body and dies by his side.

Traditionally, Nie Zheng had tended to be somewhat overshadowed by the two most celebrated assassins, Yu Rang 豫讓 and Jing Ke 荊軻, but he was never short of admirers, and evaluations grew ever more positive in Ming and Qing times. Although Yu Rang had been singled out for praise by Song scholars such as Su Che 蘇轍 and Huang Zhen 黃震, the correctness of his actions was seriously questioned by another current of opinion, particularly prevalent in the Ming.⁴⁷ By the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, we thus find Nie Zheng and Jing Ke often paired together as models of the heroic character.⁴⁸ Nie's virtues would later be characterized as follows by the Qing commentator Liang Yusheng 梁玉繩 (1745–1819): "He was filial in refusing to promise his life to anyone while his mother was alive. He was courageous in marching straight in, going up the steps and stabbing Xia Lei. He was humane in his reluctance to implicate his sister, and he was righteous in being willing to die for one who appreciated him."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ For cogent presentations of this more critical view, see Wang Anshi (1021–86), "Shu Cike zhuan hou" 書刺客傳後, *Linchuan xiansheng wenji* 臨川先生文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 71, p. 758; Fang Xiaoru 方孝孺 (1355–1402), "Yu Rang," in *Xunzhizhai ji* 遜志齋集 (microfilm of 1612 edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 5, pp. 9a–10b; He Mengchun 何孟春 (1474–1536), cited in *Shiji pinglin*, comp. Ling Zhilong (Ming Wanli edn., Bodleian Library, Oxford) 86, p. 6b; Hu Yinglin, "Yu Rang," in *Shaoshi shanfang ji* (SKQS rpt.) 96, pp. 2a–4a; Zhang Fengyi 張鳳翼 "Yu Rang lun," *Chushitang ji* 處事堂集 (microfilm of Ming Wanli edn. in National Central Library, Taiwan) 6, pp. 21b–22b.

⁴⁸ In the extracts from *Shiji* selected by Yang Shen, Tang Shunzhi, and Mu Wenxi 穆文熙, Nie Zheng and Jing Ke are the only two assassins included: see *Yang Sheng'an xiansheng pixuan Shiji shiyuan* 楊升庵先生批選史記市言 (Ming edn., East Asian Library, Princeton) 5, p. 8a; *Jingchuan xiansheng jingxuan pidian Shiji* 荊川先生精選批點史記 (Ming edn., Library of Congress) 11, p. 25a; *Shiji jielue* 史記節略 (Ming edn., East Asian Library, Princeton) 10, p. 290a. Cf. Qian Bochong 錢伯城, ed., *Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 袁宏道集箋校 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1981) 42, p. 1240; Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), comp., *Xingshi hengyan* 醒世恒言 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1957) 30, p. 649.

⁴⁹ See Wang Shumin 王叔岷, *Shiji jiaozheng* 史記斟證 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo, 1982), p. 2597. Hu Yinglin ranks Nie Zheng second only to Jing Ke in his appraisal of the *Shiji* assassins, in *Shaoshi shanfang bicon* 少室山房筆叢 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958) 13, p. 186. High praise for Nie Zheng is also offered by Dong Fen 董份 (1510–95)

Pu Songling, for his part, was fascinated by the heroic ethos embodied by the *Shiji* assassins, and repeatedly embellished his tales with references to them. The assassins' credo, "A knight dies for the one who appreciates him," is cited as the guiding philosophy both of "Liancheng,"⁵⁰ a romance of young love, and "Shi Qingxu," the story of a remarkable friendship between a man and a stone.⁵¹ The intrepid heroine Shang Sanguan is described as "a female Yu Rang,"⁵² and General She's gruesome fate is presented as a warning to the very men that Yu Rang despised, "those in the world who would maintain divided loyalties while serving their lord."⁵³ By his own admission, Pu held Nie Zheng in particularly high esteem. In his comments on the *Liaozhai* tale entitled "Nie Zheng," which relates a contemporary incident involving Nie's ghost, Pu argues that Nie combined the positive traits of three other *Shiji* assassins:

When reading the "Biographies of Assassins," the one I respect most deeply is the man from Deep Well township in Zhi. In his determination to avenge his patron he displayed the righteousness of Yu [Rang]. In his slaughter of a minister in broad daylight he exhibited the courage of Zhuan 專 [Zhu 諸]. In his self-disfigurement and suicide and in his resolve not to implicate his family he demonstrated the cleverness of Cao 曹 [Mo 沫].⁵⁴

Pu Songling's interest seems also to have been piqued by the two themes central to the Nie Zheng biography: the compelling nature of reciprocal obligations and the competing claims of family ties and friendship bonds. For Sima Qian, whilst the second of these themes was problematic, the first was not. Although the reciprocity in the Nie Zheng story takes the form of an unequal exchange between a rich man whose gifts are strictly monetary and a commoner who offers up his life, the hierarchical nature of the two men's relationship is never questioned by Sima Qian. The bond that ties Nie Zheng to his patron is articulated by Nie in the same plain and unqualified terms used elsewhere by Yu Rang: "A man dies for one who recognizes him." While Nie's sister appears to voice regret at the sacrifice Nie was required by this bond to make,⁵⁵ her ambivalence represents only a minor under-

in *Shiji pinglin* 86, pp. 4a-6b, and Li Zhi 李贄 (1527-1602), in *Cang shu* 藏書 (rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959) 27, pp. 439-40.

⁵⁰ LZ 3, p. 364. ⁵¹ LZ 11, p. 1578. ⁵² LZ 3, p. 375. ⁵³ LZ 6, p. 738.

⁵⁴ LZ 6, pp. 844-45.

⁵⁵ This point was particularly emphasized by Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574-1624) in his 1625 commentary: see *Zhong Bojing pingben Shiji* 鍾伯敬評本史記 (Bodleian Library, Oxford) 86, pp. 8a-b.

current in the biography as a whole, and Sima Qian brings the account to a close by extolling Yan Zhongzi's resourcefulness in winning Nie Zheng to his service.

The ties that bind Nie Zheng to his patron, as Mark Edward Lewis has shown,⁵⁶ are a reflection of the social and historical climate of the Warring States period, and the sort of relationship celebrated in this story was not always viewed in later times with the same unalloyed satisfaction that we see in Sima Qian's response. For readers more remote from the events related, the Nie Zheng episode presented certain difficulties. The Song commentator Bao Biao 鮑彪, for example, expressed the following objection:

In society one must not fail to appreciate the talents of others, but by the same token one must beware of being accorded recognition by those unqualified to give it. Yan Zhongzi alone appreciated Nie Zheng and thus succeeded in carrying out his objective. But alas! Yan was nothing more than a small-minded vindictive man, and it was Nie's misfortune to receive recognition from this quarter and to die as a consequence. Had he been appreciated by an enlightened ruler or able minister, would not his achievement have been a thousand times greater?⁵⁷

An uncritical acceptance of the ethic prevailing in the story of Nie Zheng was not then sustained indefinitely. Although tales of extraordinary swordsmen retained their popularity in later periods, such figures tend more often to be presented as free-wheeling individuals, contracting or transferring allegiance as they see fit and spontaneously leaping to the defense of complete strangers. In the Ming anthology of swordsman stories *Jianxia zhuan*, compiled by Wang Shizhen in the mid-sixteenth century, we find a much more egalitarian relationship existing between swordsman and patron than is evident in the bond between Nie Zheng and Yan Zhongzi.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); further discussion in Eric Henry, "The Motif of Recognition in Early China," *HJAS* 47.1 (1987), pp. 5-30.

⁵⁷ See *Shiji pinglin* 86, pp. 6a-b. The Ming scholar-official Feng Shike 馮時可 faults Nie Zheng for devoting his life to his personal benefactor rather than being motivated by a larger commitment to social justice. See "Cike shuo" 刺客說, *Feng Yuancheng xuanji* 馮元成選集 (Ming edn. in a microfilm ser. collectively titled "Rare Books of the National Library of Peiping") 27, pp. 68a.

⁵⁸ A Ming edn. whose postface is dated 1569 is preserved in the Beijing Library. Its contents are described in Liu Yinbai 劉蔭柏 "Longqing keben *Jianxia zhuan* xulu" 隆慶刻本劍俠傳叙錄, *Wenxue yichan* 文學遺產 1985.2, pp. 112-14.

By the seventeenth century, the hierarchical model of reciprocity was thus found to be less appealing than another form of service to others, one that we see presented elsewhere in *Shiji* in the biographies of “wandering knights” such as Zhu Jia 朱家 and Guo Xie 郭解. Of the former it is said: “All his life he never boasted of his abilities nor bragged of the favors he had done others. On the contrary, his only fear was that the people he had once aided might come to see him and try to repay him.”⁵⁹ Whereas the aid rendered to Nie Zheng is offered on the expectation of due recompense, Zhu Jia’s services are rendered in a spirit of disinterested generosity. By Pu Songling’s time, it was the Zhu Jia pattern of service which tended to be accorded unqualified praise. This is obvious when one looks at contemporary accounts of friendship. One celebrated relationship, recorded by various authors of the early Qing, involved the Ming loyalist historian Zha Jizuo 查繼佐 and a military officer by the name of Wu Liuqi 吳六奇. According to the story, Zha rescued Wu from poverty and distress, giving him food, clothes, and money. Although recognizing Wu’s outstanding qualities, Zha made no effort to find out Wu’s identity and sedulously shunned any implication that Wu was now in his debt. Many years later, reciprocity came into play when Wu lavished gifts on Zha and saved him from a literary inquisition. But the overwhelming impression is of Zha offering his patronage to a worthy recipient with absolutely no strings attached.⁶⁰

Guo Xie, who “gave generously and expected little in return,”⁶¹ similarly presented a model with enduring appeal. Of Ding Qianxi, the protagonist in an early story by Pu Songling, we are told, “He admired the conduct of Guo Xie.”⁶² The story celebrates reciprocal acts of kindness that are performed several years apart. In the first episode Ding receives generous hospitality from the Yang family, who, despite their poverty, refuse his offer of monetary compensation. Only under a threat of imminent starvation do the Yangs seek a second encounter with Ding, who immediately lavishes gifts upon them, guaranteeing their future security.

⁵⁹ *SJ* 124, p. 3184.

⁶⁰ For a translation of the story and further discussion, see Allan H. Barr, “Novelty, Character, and Community in Zhang Chao’s *Tu Chu xinzhì*,” in Wilt L. Idema, Wai-ye Li, and Ellen Widmer, eds., *Trauma and Transcendence in Early Qing Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), pp. 303–9. This episode was also commemorated in the 18th c. by the dramatist Jiang Shiquan’s 蔣士銓 (1725–85) *Xuezhong ren* 雪中人.

⁶¹ *SJ* 124, p. 3185.

⁶² *LZ* 1, p. 174. This line itself echoes a passage from Sima Qian’s biog. of Ji An 汲黯: “He often admired the conduct of Fu Bo 傅柏 and Yuan Ang 袁盎” (*SJ* 120, p. 3106).

In Pu Songling's "Tian Qilang" 田七郎, it is the wealthy patron Wu Chengxiu who plays a role comparable to that of Yan Zhongzi, unstinting in his efforts to win over a formidable man of action, here embodied by Tian Qilang. Key events in Pu's tale closely parallel the action in the *Shiji* biography, sometimes displaying an almost exact verbal correspondence: overtures are made, and are rejected; the hero explains his misgivings; vengeance is taken; and the hero commits suicide. Despite these similarities, "Tian Qilang" presents a very different picture from the Nie Zheng story, owing to Pu Songling's extensive modifications to the original narrative design.

For a start, the social and institutional setting is dramatically altered. The rivalry at the highest levels of state administration that generated the drama in *Shiji* has been transferred by Pu to the mundane, provincial milieu with which he was intimately familiar, the world of corrupt magistrates, overbearing gentry, and domestic scandal.⁶³ Nie Zheng's long discredited vocation of butcher has been converted to a more attractive alternative in the case of his *Liaozhai* counterpart, who is a hunter,⁶⁴ and the cast of characters has been expanded. Tian is confronted with multiple adversaries: first, Wu Chengxiu's disloyal servant Lin'er, who has attempted to rape Wu's daughter-in-law; second, the brother of a powerful Beijing official, who has given shelter to the perpetrator of this outrage; and, third, the district magistrate, who, as so often in Pu's work, is interested solely in maintaining good relations with the local elite and is indifferent to the claims of justice. Given the importance of the legal institution in Qing China, the story's negative presentation of the local judicial process is critical to the story's internal logic, conferring legitimacy on private acts of vengeance that recall the rough justice of the Warring States period. Pu's detailed account of the humiliations suffered by Wu Chengxiu at the hands of his enemies also provides a clear rationale for vengeance which is lacking from the

⁶³ A number of Pu Songling's prose works make reference to miscarriages of justice at the local level, to outrages perpetrated by members of gentry households, and to the misbehavior of servants, all elements which feature in "Tian Qilang." In his celebrated letter to Sun Hui 孫蕙 (1632-86), a Zichuan scholar-official who for many years held the position of supervising censor, Pu dwelled at length on the misdeeds of Sun's relatives, associates, and domestic staff during his absence in the capital. Lin'er's conduct in "Tian Qilang" recalls Pu's comment: "People who violate imperial laws hope that, if they find refuge with you, officials will dare not press for their arrest, and servants who flee from other households after a scandal use your protection to resist their masters." For this and similar remarks, see *Pu Songling ji* 5, pp. 124-26, 146-48; 10, pp. 286-87.

⁶⁴ This may have been suggested to the author by the portrayal of the hunter Liu An 劉安 in *Sanguo yanyi*, whose devotion to his mother outweighed his desire to serve Liu Bei 劉備. See Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (rpt. Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1953) 19, pp. 159-60.

Nie Zheng story, where the cause of Yan Zhongzi's hatred for Xia Lei is never fully documented.

Although "Tian Qilang" includes an expanded cast of characters, one major figure in the Nie Zheng tale is omitted: there is no counterpart in Pu's tale to the assassin's sister Nie Rong. It is not hard to detect the reasons for her absence. As Stephen W. Durrant has noted, Nie Rong comes close to upstaging her brother in Sima Qian's account.⁶⁵ Her exploits occupy about a third of the *Shiji* narrative, and because her death follows that of her brother, it tends to overshadow his own act of heroism. For the very reason that Nie Rong's story can be read as a drama in its own right, the Ming scholar Wu Zhenyuan 吳震元 (d. 1642) incorporated it into his anthology *Qi nüzi zhuan* 奇女子傳, adding the comment: "By her death she made her brother famous, and she made herself famous too. If he had not had such a sister, who would ever have known just who it was who killed the minister of Han?"⁶⁶ The elimination of the Nie Rong character not only serves to give more prominence to the hero's actions, it also reshapes the internal balance of the story. In *Shiji*, both Nie Zheng and his sister die in the wake of Xia Lei's assassination, whereas in "Tian Qilang" the hero's death costs the lives of three evildoers, and justice is seen to be done in a more conspicuously satisfying way. Only in the closing lines is there a faint echo of the *Shiji* narrative: Tian's son takes refuge in Dengzhou, on the Shandong side of the Gulf of Bohai, changes his name, and pursues a successful career in the army. When he returns to Liaoning many years later, he is guided to his father's grave by a now elderly Wu Chengxiu. Thus, again, respects are paid to the hero by his closest surviving relative, but the scene serves a different purpose from the Nie Rong episode, being designed primarily to draw attention to the continuity of Tian's family line.

Pu Songling has also abandoned the simple tripartite structure of the *Shiji* biography, arranging his intricate plot in eight distinct stages:

1. Wu Chengxiu seeks in vain to establish a bond with Tian.
2. Tian is jailed for manslaughter; by bribing the magistrate and the victim's family, Wu secures his release, thereby winning Tian's loyalty.
3. Danger is portended, to Tian's dismay, but is seemingly averted.

⁶⁵ See Durrant's *The Cloudy Mirror: Tension and Conflict in the Writings of Sima Qian* (Albany: State U. New York P., 1995), pp. 105–10. Cf. the comment, "Zheng was certainly remarkable, but his sister was more remarkable still," in Mu Wenxi, ed., *Shiji jielue* 10, p. 292b.

⁶⁶ Wu Zhenyuan, ed., *Qi nüzi zhuan* (microfilm of Ming edn. in the Naikaku Bunko, Tokyo) 1, p. 11a.

4. Wu's daughter-in-law is assaulted by Lin'er, who then finds shelter at the home of the censor's brother; the magistrate takes no action.
5. Lin'er is found murdered; Wu's uncle is blamed by the magistrate and dies from his beating.
6. Tian kills the censor's brother, then commits suicide.
7. Tian's reanimated corpse kills the magistrate.
8. Wu Chengxiu bribes his way out of conspiracy charges and arranges Tian's burial; years later, Tian's son returns from hiding.

This plot, characteristically for Pu Songling, consists of a series of dramatic fluctuations: scenes 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6 all end in apparent impasse or delicate balance, while parts 2, 4, 5, 6, and 7 open with startling jolts that break the deadlock and destabilize the situation. The element of surprise, largely lacking from the biography of Nie Zheng, is also accentuated by Pu Songling's narrative point of view, which is much more restricted than the omniscient viewpoint of *Shiji*.⁶⁷ Almost without exception, events are seen from the perspective of Wu Chengxiu, and the reader's knowledge of Tian's intentions is strictly limited. This permits a substantial degree of suspense and surprise in the climactic scenes 5-7.

A particularly significant change that Pu has wrought lies in his revisionist presentation of the moral ethic that animates the narrative. Wu Chengxiu's patronage of Tian Qilang is cast in a very different light from Yan Zhongzi's cultivation of Nie Zheng. In *Liaozhai*, the rich man's assiduous efforts to establish a bond of reciprocity with a man of lower station in life take on a sinister, almost predatory quality, and in the first half of the story the hunter Tian Qilang finds himself Wu's quarry, harassed and harried until circumstances finally conspire to put him irrevocably in Wu's debt.

Pu Songling's characterization of Tian's mother has an important bearing on the men's relationship. In the *Shiji* biography, Nie Zheng's mother, although the reason for his initial reluctance to accept Yan Zhongzi's friendship, does not otherwise take an active role in the story.⁶⁸ Pu, on the other hand, gives the hero's mother a distinct identity of her own, thus intensifying the latent tension between the duties

⁶⁷ Only towards the end of the *Shiji* biography is an aspect of Nie Zheng's thinking briefly concealed: the reason for his self-mutilation does not become entirely clear until his sister explains that he was trying to eliminate any possibility of her being incriminated. This feature was first noted in the commentary edn. by Tang Shunzhi; Tang's comment was reprinted in later editions of *Shiji* such as Zheng Weiyue 鄭惟岳, ed., *Zheng Hairu xiansheng jingxuan Shiji* 鄭孩如先生精選史記 (Ming edn., East Asian Library, Princeton) 5, p. 37a.

⁶⁸ In both stories the hero's father has already died before the action begins, a circumstance that serves to highlight the mother-son relationship. Fathers generally play a marginal role in *Liaozhai* tales – mothers are much more prominent.

accruing to mother-son kinship ties and those of the patron-client relationship.⁶⁹ It is Tian's mother who articulates the profound inequality which exists between her son and Wu Chengxiu: "I have heard it said: 'He who wins someone's recognition will share his woes, and he who receives someone's favors will rescue him from difficulties. The rich reward others with wealth, the poor with righteousness.'"⁷⁰ Although the first part of her declaration mirrors the heroic ethic embodied in *Shiji*,⁷¹ her second observation significantly redefines the relationship, starkly juxtaposing the unequal contributions made by rich man and poor man to their pact of solidarity. In another scene she goes so far as to accuse Wu Chengxiu of attempted entrapment: "Never again try to induce my son to spend time with you. You do not have good intentions at all." Through the negative commentary given them, Wu's initial efforts to draw Tian into a net of reciprocal obligations are thus denied the positive value that is attached to the conduct of his counterpart in *Shiji*.

In the final analysis, however, Pu Songling seems to have intended the tale to celebrate the righteousness and heroism that typified the *Shiji* assassins, and thus cannot afford to discredit entirely the ideal of reciprocity between men of different classes and thereby diminish the value of Tian's fearless sacrifice in the culminating scenes. About a third of the way through the story, therefore, Pu inserts a crucial scene which substantially mitigates the tensions and inequalities that have hitherto governed the relationship between Wu Chengxiu and Tian Qilang. By securing Tian's release from prison and a certain death sentence, Wu Chengxiu in effect saves the hunter's life, forging a bond between the two men which Wu's earlier monetary gifts to Tian had conspicuously failed to establish. Tian's mother, ever the shrewd observer, is the first to point out the significance of this development. "You owe your life to Mr. Wu,"⁷² she tells her son, signaling the formation of a new and compelling bond.

⁶⁹ This fuller portrayal of the hero's mother has a precedent in chapter 50 of *Shuihu zhuan*, where Lei Heng 雷橫 initially refuses to join Song Jiang's band of outlaws on account of his responsibilities to his elderly mother. The old lady then plays an active role in the series of events that lead up to Lei's flight to Liangshanbo. Jin Shengtan's commentary on this episode echoes the language of the *Shiji* biography of Nie Zheng. See *Diwu caizi shu Shi Nai'an Shuihu zhuan* 第五才子書施耐庵水滸傳 (rpt. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou guji chubanshe, 1985) 50, pp. 820-829.

⁷⁰ LZ 4, p. 467.

⁷¹ Cf. Han Xin's comment, "I have heard it said: 'He who rides in someone's carriage bears his troubles, he who wears someone's clothes shares his woes, he who eats someone's food dies for his cause'" (SJ 92, p. 2624).

⁷² LZ 4, p. 469.

The climax to Pu's story introduces elements redolent of the other *Shiji* biographies of assassins. Tian Qilang infiltrates the magistrate's compound disguised as a woodcutter in much the same way as Yu Rang attempted to insinuate himself into his enemy's apartments, and Tian slays the censor's brother after a desperate tussle reminiscent of Jing Ke's confrontation with the king of Qin.⁷³ There follows an extraordinary scene in which Tian's prostrate corpse suddenly leaps to its feet and decapitates the magistrate. This incident clearly bears Pu Songling's signature (it borrows the motif of the revitalized corpse which is common in the Chinese anecdotal tradition), but it also reflects the same interest in the supernatural as an agent of justice that Pu himself detected in "The Biographies of the Marquises of Weiqi and Wu'an." Additionally, it represents a pointed revision of the Jing Ke story. Like other men of his time, Pu Songling seems to have held Jing Ke in low regard, as he demonstrates in his postscripts to "Shang Sanguan" and "Nie Zheng." Partly for this reason, perhaps, he allows Tian Qilang to triumphantly complete his mission, thereby painting a stark contrast to the irrevocable failure of Jing Ke's efforts. The execution of the magistrate also marks the culmination of a crescendo of violence that begins with the slaughter of the disloyal servant and escalates as Tian Qilang punishes Wu's enemies in ascending order of importance.

In the aftermath of the blood bath, birds and dogs gather around Qilang's corpse, guarding it from harm until Wu Chengxiu is in a position to take charge of the burial. The suggestion here of a symbiosis between nature and the righteous knight also harks back to the Warring States tradition, and, in particular, to a memorable passage in *Zhanguo ce* where the king of Qin is told, "When Zhuan Zhu assassinated king Liao, a comet collided with the moon; when Nie Zheng assassinated Han Gui, a white halo touched the sun; when Yaoli assassinated Qing Ji, a black hawk struck the palace roof."⁷⁴

Pu's commentary at the end of the story is worth translating in full:

Unwillingness to accept lightly a single coin is characteristic of someone who would not forget the gift of a single meal. What a fine mother! Qilang's wrath had not been fully discharged, so even in death he could vent it further – how awesome was his spirit! If Jing Ke had been capable of this feat, he would have left no regret to linger on for a thousand years. Were there such men as this,

⁷³ Tian's sword, one might add, has miraculous powers that recall Jing Ke's weapon, acquired by the Prince of Yan after an extensive search and capable of killing a man immediately with the finest of cuts: see S786, p. 2533.

⁷⁴ *Zhanguo ce* (rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1978) 25, p. 922.

they could patch the holes in Heaven's net. So clouded is the way of the world, I lament the scarcity of Qilangs. Sad indeed!⁷⁵

Almost every line contains some echo of the *Shiji*: the opening analogy credits Tian's mother with the heroic values of Han Xin, who never forgot the debt he owed to his benefactor and later repaid her a thousand fold. The comparison of Tian to Jing Ke underscores the obvious affinity between the two men's careers, at the same time reflecting on the implications of a different outcome to the Jing Ke episode. This type of "what if . . ." speculation itself is a feature of the *Shiji* commentary.⁷⁶ Finally, the mournful lament that concludes the postscript is quintessential Sima Qian.

Even after the completion of "Tian Qilang," the drama of Nie Zheng's divided loyalties continued to haunt Pu Songling, and we find it re-enacted yet again in "Qiao's Daughter" 喬女, albeit in a very different context. In this tale the heroine is courted by a scholar named Meng, but declines his suit so as not to compromise her chastity as a widow. Meng's death is the critical turning-point, allowing her to act as his champion without jeopardizing her reputation. As she puts it: "Licentiate Meng alone could recognize my worth. Although I refused him earlier, in my heart I had already promised myself to him. Now that he is dead and his son is but an infant, I should naturally make efforts to repay the one who appreciated me."⁷⁷ As subsequent events unfold, her fearless campaign to protect the interests of Meng's son is presented as the counterpart, in the female sphere, of Nie Zheng's exploits.

"Cui Meng" 崔孟 is another story that dramatizes the code of chivalry, highlighting the voluntary and egalitarian mode of reciprocity which was most valued in Pu's day. In the manner of many paired biographies in *Shiji*, this tale is conceived as a story of two heroes, Cui Meng and his friend Li Shen. Cui's finest moment comes when he boldly admits responsibility for the murder of Li's tormentor, a powerful member of the gentry who had laid claim to Li's wife. His declaration is couched in terms that recall Nie Zheng's resolution to take action on behalf of Yan Zhongzi:

About this time Cui's mother died. After her funeral, he said to his wife: "It was I who actually killed that man. It was solely because my aged mother was still living that I dared not reveal the truth. Now that her affairs have all been settled, how can I possibly inflict on someone else the penalty that is due to me? I am going to turn myself in to the authorities and meet my death." His wife

⁷⁵ LZ 4, p. 473. ⁷⁶ E.g., SJ 66, p. 2183; 92, p. 2630. ⁷⁷ LZ 9, p. 1284.

was filled with alarm and tried to hold him back, but he pushed her aside and left.⁷⁸

The rest of the tale is largely concerned with reciprocal acts of gallantry on the part of Li Shen, the condemned man, who insists on taking the blame for the first murder, avenges another injustice, taking care not to implicate Cui Meng, and finally rescues Cui's wife from her abductors. Like "Tian Qilang" and "Qiao's Daughter," it is a story that reflects Pu Songling's enduring fascination with the heroic ethic that so appealed to Sima Qian.

While a line of descent can be traced from the notions of heroism and justice promoted by the Han historian to those found in *Liaozhai zhiyi*, it is clear from these examples that the more immediate cultural context also played a crucial role in shaping Pu's ideas of what constituted a satisfying story. As others have noted, the tale of Cui Meng and Li Shen "has many echoes from heroic tales and episodes of the *Shui-hu-chuan* (*Water Margin*) type,"⁷⁹ and popular traditions and aesthetic norms embodied in the classic vernacular novels and short story collections of the Ming era find frequent expression in *Liaozhai*.⁸⁰ For all its affinities to *Shiji*, a story like "Tian Qilang," with its intricately constructed plot and the careful balance of its narrative elements, is unmistakably a work of Qing fiction. The untidiness of history, reflected in the competing agendas of the Nie Zheng biography, has given way, in Pu Songling's hands, to the well-crafted order of creative storytelling.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- LZ *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben* 聊齋志異會校會注會評本
 SJ *Shiji* 史記

⁷⁸ LZ 8, p. 1129.

⁷⁹ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Death of Woman Wang* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1978), p. 154.

⁸⁰ See my chapter "Liaozhai zhiyi and Chinese Vernacular Fiction," in Daria Berg, ed., *Reading China: Fiction, History and the Dynamics of Discourse, Essays in Honour of Professor Glen Dudbridge* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 3-36.