

The Sound of a Beautiful Woman:
A Study of Sensory Imagery in
Pu Songling's Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (*Liaozhai zhiyi*)

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Dedication

To my high school Chinese teacher Chou Laoshi,

Thank you for sparking my interest in Chinese.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents and roommates for their endless support and encouragement. I would also like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Lai, for motivating me throughout this thesis journey.

Abstract

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**The Sound of a Beautiful Woman: A Study of Sensory Imagery in
Pu Songling's Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio (*Liaozhai zhiyi*)**

The sense of sound is one of the most prioritized senses in Chinese culture. This can be seen from a linguistic angle with Chinese being a tonal language, and in historical importance where music is integrated with ritual. Philosophically and cosmologically, “hearing the Dao” (*wendao* 闻道) is synonymous with “understanding the Dao.” An innovative treatment in the prioritization of sound is especially prominent in Pu Songling’s (1640-1715) Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio. In this well-known collection from the genre of “strange fiction” (e.g. the supernatural), Pu Songling enriches the prioritization of sound in his literary descriptions of beauty and love through sensory imagery. Furthermore, these descriptions are also aligned with that of the zither, a stringed musical instrument that has been a literary vehicle for understanding the Dao, especially through the companion muse-like figure of a “*zhiyin*” 知音, or “one who knows the tone.” In this context of a kinship of true minds, the listener “appreciates” the zither music that is played because of “understanding” the music. In Chinese cultural memory, the zither is typically a man’s instrument, and the origin parable of the *zhiyin* refers to the inseparable cosmic connection solely between two men.

This thesis argues that through the use of auditory sensory imagery, Pu Songling effectively communicates the notions of beauty and love, and especially creates a more complex and nuanced characterization of a beautiful woman. More significantly, Pu Songling breaks from the traditional gender roles and innovates the *zhiyin* as both a woman and lover. This concept not only bypasses the conventional Chinese formula but the female archetype is empowered beyond literary type. Perhaps of significance is that innovative representation of women and ideas such as love and beauty are framed only in the late imperial fictional arena of the “strange” and deviate from the normal.

In contrast to Pu Songling’s use of auditory cues, this thesis also includes a literary sampling of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), an author who wrote similar tales but through the Western lens. A comparison of Poe’s ideas of “horror” and projection of beauty delineates an emphasis on the visual sense. Contrasting Edgar Allen Poe’s use of visual imagery targeting a human’s sense of sight helps provide a contrastive context for appreciating the uniqueness of Pu Songling’s use of auditory sensory imagery and the prioritization of sound in the Chinese culture.

Pu Songling was one of the Qing writers who introduced audiences to the world of the “strange.” He spent much of his early life studying for exams in order to become successful and hopefully enter into career as a distinguished official. However, Pu Songling found much failure in what was known as “examination hell” and chose instead to spend his time reading and writing fiction. The inspiration for his stories was drawn from his own experiences from the rebellions and uprisings during his early life, to the arduous examinations in his middle life, and his later life spent in the mountainous north-eastern province (Minford xii). He died in 1715, but his collection of stories, known in English as Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, carry on his literary legacy.

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Preface

Sitting in Dr. Lai's class as a sophomore, I remembered her introductory remarks, "Well, we all have something in common, we all are anime fans." As an underclassman still grappling with how the UT class system works, I had no idea that Dr. Lai's class I signed up for was 1) a senior year capstone course and 2) a class studying the "genre of the strange" or ghost stories. I knew nothing about "the strange," and was very startled to hear that Dr. Lai would be lecturing about Chinese supernatural fiction for three hours every Monday evening. Yet, there I was, a Caucasian sorority girl in a Chinese "genre of the strange" class. As I gazed around the classroom, the students seemed friendly enough, plus, Dr. Lai brought snacks. After briefly contemplating a quick exit, I instead chose to remain in the class, and I stepped out of my comfort zone to learn something new. Little did I know that this class planted the seed for my senior year thesis. In Dr. Lai's class, I was introduced to Pu Songling and his work, and thus launched my interest of sound in the Chinese culture. In fact, my capstone presentation was titled "Perception through Sound." Since that initial class, I have spent dozens of hours researching the human senses, and particularly the sense of sound in the Chinese culture. I hope to continue such research in the future, but for now, I am excited to narrow my focus to studying "The Sound of a Beautiful Woman."

Section I

Overview of “Sound” and the “Strange”

*Empty mountain, after new rain,
 The air of nightfall, autumn.
 A bright moon glows among the pines.
 The clear stream flows, upon the rocks.
 Bamboo rustles, washing maids come home.
 Lotus stirs, as fishing boats return.
 Fragrance of spring rests here and there.
 You too, my gentle friend, may stay*

Wang Wei, “Autumn Mountain Evening” (Translated by Jerome P. Seaton)

Introduction

The sense of sound is one of the most prioritized sense in Chinese culture. The importance of sound is evident from a linguistic angle with Chinese being a tonal language, and in historical significance where music is integrated with ritual. Philosophically and cosmologically, “hearing the Dao” (*wen dao* 聞道) is synonymous with “understanding the Dao.” An innovative treatment in the prioritization of sound is especially prominent in Pu Songling’s (1640-1715) Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, translated by John Minford (from here on will be referred to as Strange Tales). In this well-known collection from the genre of “strange fiction” (e.g. the supernatural), Pu Songling enriches the prioritization of sound in his literary descriptions of beauty and love through sensory imagery. Furthermore, these descriptions are also aligned with that of the zither, a stringed musical instrument that has been a literary vehicle for understanding the Dao, especially through the companion muse-like figure of a “*zhiyin*” 知音, or “one who knows the tone.” In this context of a kinship of true minds, the listener “appreciates” the zither music that is played because of “understanding” the music. In Chinese cultural

memory, the zither is typically a man's instrument, and the origin story of the *zhiyin* refers to the inseparable cosmic connection solely between two men as "soul-brothers."

This thesis argues that through the use of auditory sensory imagery, Pu Songling effectively communicates the notions of beauty and love, and especially creates a more complex and nuanced characterization of a beautiful woman. More significantly, Pu Songling breaks from the traditional gender roles and innovates the *zhiyin* as both a woman and lover. This concept not only bypasses the conventional Chinese formula, but also the female archetype is empowered beyond literary type. Perhaps of more significance is that innovative representation of women and ideas such as love and beauty are framed only in the late imperial fictional arena of the "strange" and deviate from the normal.

In contrast to Pu Songling's use of auditory cues, this thesis also includes a literary sampling of Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849), an author who wrote similar tales of "the strange," but through the Western lens. A comparison of Poe's ideas of "horror" and projection of beauty delineates an emphasis on the visual sense. Edgar Allen Poe's use of visual imagery targeting the human sense of sight provides a contrasting context for appreciating the uniqueness of Pu Songling's use of auditory sensory imagery and the prioritization of sound in the Chinese culture.

A conventional image or phrase for the sound of a beautiful woman can be understood in the famous poem, "The Jewel Stairs' Grievance" by Li Bai (701-761) (Minford and Lau 744). Li Bai describes sound of jade pennants through the "tinkling of jade" or "*ling long*" as imagery for the sound of a beautiful woman. However, Pu Songling does not solely rely on onomatopoeia to convey his idea of the sound of a beautiful woman, but instead he uses innovative language with regards to auditory imagery.

The concept of deductive reasoning, although a Western idea, is evident in late imperial Chinese fiction, in particular, the “genre of the strange.” This is seen in the late 18th century Strange Tales by Pu Songling. Chinese audiences had to conclude that a character was “beautiful” through auditory cues and without Pu Songling specifically stating “she is beautiful.” For example, if Pu Songling described the quiet steps of a woman’s feet or the sound of her clothes in the wind, the audience would conclude that the woman was beautiful. Thus, when Pu Songling used auditory imagery to describe beauty, it was expected that the audience understood the auditory cues.

Pu Songling was born during the Ming Dynasty to a well-to-do family in a small town of Zichuan (Minford xi). Pu Songling lived during a period known as “the troubles” during which he experienced the transition between the fall of the old order of leaders and the rise of conquerors taking over vast lands in China. However, In Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction, Daniel Hsieh states how the idea of romance and love took a very different turn during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) before Pu Songling’s birth. The tendency was to suppress any notion of romance primarily due to the social practice of arranged marriages and marrying for status or wealth, rather than for love. Furthermore, erotic emotions and passions were contrary to Confucian teachings. This was when the Chinese shifted “away from the strict Confucian gaze, amongst tales of the strange and bizarre, love and women found a home” (239).

Pu Songling was one of the most influential Chinese writers to introduce audiences to the world of the “strange” and his collection of popular fiction remains the most important source of the “strange fiction” from late imperial China. He spent much of his early life studying for civil service exams in order to become successful in a career as a distinguished official. However, Pu Songling found much failure in what was known as “examination hell” and chose instead to

spend his time reading and writing fiction. While some of his stories were derived from the oral tradition, the inspiration for the majority of his stories was drawn from personal experiences during the rebellions and uprisings of his early life in Ming and Qing China, from the arduous examinations in his middle life, and time spent in the mountainous north-eastern province in his later life (Minford xii). Pu Songling died in February of 1715, but his collection of stories, known in English as Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, carry on his literary legacy.

Methodology and Sources

The main source of this thesis is Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, John Minford's authoritative English translation of Pu Songling's collection, *Liaozhai zhiyi*, originally written in vernacular classical Chinese. Minford, a British sinologist and translator, is best known for his translation of the popular Chinese work, The Story of the Stone. Furthermore, I relied upon a wide variety of sources such as scholarly books and articles, and lectures. Moreover, Edgar Allan Poe's literary works were also an important primary source for this thesis. Major secondary sources that contributed greatly to the study of this thesis were Daniel Hsieh's Love and Women in Early Chinese Fiction, Sabina Knight's Chinese Literature: A Very Short Introduction, and Stephen Owen's scholarship on Chinese literature.

The Genre of the Strange

Minford describes Strange Tales as ‘Tales of Foxes and Ghosts’ or ‘Tales of the Supernatural’ (xxiv-xxv). This collection of works by Pu Songling is filled with ghosts, fox-spirits, death, and scenarios that bind real world to the afterlife. Pu Songling began his work on Strange Tales with writing two distinct genres called *zhiguai* and *chuanqi*. Minford translates as *A Weird Account* and *The Strange Stories*, respectively (xii). Minford explains *zhiguai* means a strange account or an unusual phenomenon. This strange or bizarre experience was the foundation for Strange Tales. *Chuanqi* is a more polished account of the fictional, supernatural storylines. These narratives were more refined in plot and character development, with the common theme of romantic encounters within unusual storylines. Strange Tales was derived from both *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* traditions that included themes such as the supernatural, haunting, and romantic tales. However, this collection of tales began to involve both fictional and semi-historical characters (Minford xii).¹ The collection of stories in Strange Tales fits into an overall genre coined by Dr. Chiu-Mi Lai (February 6, 2017 “What Makes Chinese Culture Chinese”) as “the genre of the strange.”

The genre of the strange compiles a collection of stories regarding interactions between the natural and the supernatural. Pu Songling is the one of the most well-known writers in this genre. Even though stories about the supernatural have been popular since the Han Dynasty, Stephen Owen argues that Pu Songling’s collection of Strange Tales is one of the most beloved. Pu Songling lived during a period when a man’s time could be consumed by examinations, and the life for the exam candidate was fairly normal and boring. Strange Tales added a new element of life and entertainment for the Chinese, especially the male audience. Owen writes how the

¹ For more discussion on the genre of early medieval *zhiguai*, reference Kenneth J. Dewoskin, “The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction” in Andrew H. Plaks, ed. Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays (21-52).

strange tales about unusual sexual encounters with supernatural characters became the most popular. He writes how the “strange,” meaning the fictional and supernatural characters, and “normal,” meaning human men, were almost always in competition, “this constant play on appearance and a truth that lies behind appearance is worked out through the social roles and obligations that shape human relationships, especially between men and women” (1103).

The genre of the strange was unique to Chinese literature. However, many Western writers also produced literature that was comparable on themes such as horror and the occult. Such themes are exemplified in Edgar Allan Poe’s works. Because of the tradition of the genre of the strange, the Chinese were obsessed with Western horror stories. In “Edgar Allan Poe in Contemporary China,” Ruijuan Hao discusses how many Chinese men and women “struggle for survival” and found Poe’s works relatable. In the 19th century, Poe traveled to mainland China and introduced some of his most famous works of literature. As Poe wrote mostly on horror, it is not surprising that Chinese translations of Poe’s fictional works, “The Black Cat” and “Tell-Tale Heart,” rose in popularity. When the Chinese first started reading and translating Poe’s works, they found his pieces terrifying, but were captivated by the supernatural and gothic themes (117).

Many 19th century Chinese works included themes and ideas from Poe’s writings. The ten most popular Chinese writers of horror stories claimed they have read Poe’s works and “put Poe’s composing philosophy into practice” (Hao 118). While Poe’s works were censored for 30 years (1940s-1970s) during the People’s Republic of China, in the 1990s, “contemporary Chinese critics were eager to find lyrical connections between Poe and Chinese works” (Hao 118).

Poe’s themes of the unending search for beauty paired with a melancholy ambiance is what both attracted and inspired contemporary Chinese horror fiction writers to do the same. The

supernatural theme is common in the works of both Pu Songling and Poe. Hao explains that one of the most cited similarities between the two writers is the "horror effect" that is conjured at the outset to set the mood for the audience (Hao 121).

Not only did the works of Pu Songling and Poe have common themes on horror and the strange, but in both, beauty and sexual attraction to women are treated with supernatural elements. However, Poe had a unique inspiration and experience that lead him to combine beauty and the strange in his works. Poe's writings reflect beauty, and the root of his inspiration derived from mourning his wife, Virginia Eliza Clemm. Poe and Clemm married young, and when Clemm passed away at age sixteen, Poe was heartbroken. This tragedy drove Poe to write about "the inseparable divine love between these lovers is mostly beautifully eulogized in both poems, blurring the boundary between this world and the other world" (Hao 121). Thus, one of Poe's literary trademarks was born: the death of a beautiful woman.

Compared with Pu Songling, Poe uses different characteristics in his idea of beauty and his "aesthetic doctrine." Poe explains his ideal beauty through visuals and aesthetics. Poe believed "beautiful objects seen in nature" are what stimulate the human mind, and these objects must be described, because a simple statement of the objects alone cannot produce the same stimulation (73). Focusing on visual images, Poe believed "the moral sentiments of grace, of color, of motion" were what enabled Poe to illustrate beauty. Poe furthers his definition of beauty saying, "the mystical and the august- or the ideal" can also aid in the true creation of beauty (Laser 74). An example of such visual beauty is evident with Poe's depiction of the scenery in the "Red Death:"

These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened... and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple. The third was green throughout, and so were the casements. The fourth was furnished and lighted with orange (2).

As Marvin Laser states in “The Growth and Structure of Poe’s Concept of Beauty,” “Poe finds [a close association] between beauty and melancholy,” and Poe defines beauty as the “ideal” (73). In Poe’s famous work, “The Raven,” this specific combination of beauty and melancholy can be seen:

Ah, distinctly I remember, it was in the bleak December,
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor. Eagerly I wished the
morrow; - vainly I had sought to borrow
From my books surcease of sorrow-sorrow for the lost Lenore-
For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore-
Nameless here for evermore (143).

Poe sets up the scene of a “bleak December” including details of “ghosts” and “sorrow.” These melancholy descriptions add to the common theme of “the strange.” Poe describes the mourning of a beautiful woman who died, in the lines “the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.” The pairing of beauty and death was disquieting, but due to Poe’s personal mourning of his young wife, it is also understandable. Poe’s audience can understand the beauty from the woman’s visual “radiance” and the horror through the visual “dying ember wrought.” Poe’s works do provide a glimpse into 19th century examples of visual descriptions of beauty and the strange.

In addition to personal reasons, was Poe’s trademark “death of a beautiful woman” influenced by his visit to China and interaction with Chinese stories of the strange? This particular theme is seen in many Chinese works that fall into the category of genre of the strange, especially in the ghost spirit and fox fairy spirit characters in Strange Tales. Many of Pu Songling’s beautiful female characters are “ghosts” or other forms of the undead in human form. For different reasons than Poe, Pu Songling uses his own version of “death of a beautiful woman” to tie together romantic, supernatural, and horrific tales.

The idea for long-lost lovers is another theme that can be seen in many Chinese ghost tales. Pu Songling portrayed a similar idea of love between other worlds when describing love among humans, ghosts, and fox fairy spirits. In the lines “the longing for reunion is so strong that it could go beyond the seemingly incommunicable line of the living and the dead,” (Hao 121) specifically “longing for reunion” being stronger than the living and dead, was also an inspiration for Poe and a theme that appears in both Poe and Pu Songling’s works.

The purpose for these Strange Tales was to entertain the scholarly men of China, thus many of the tales include erotic love scenes. It is unusual for love and beauty to be found in ghost stories because they seemed to be incompatible ideas. Love and beauty coincided with truth and good, whereas ghost stories traditionally were neither true nor about anything good. The innovative idea to combine these two opposites appeared that much more interesting to both Pu Songling and his audience. Knowing his audience, Pu Songling executed this idea of combining beauty, love, and the supernatural. He understood the need for entertainment but the restraint of time because his audience, the scholarly men, had only little time for anything besides studies. Thus, only writing short tales, Pu Songling utilized the sense of sound in an effective and efficient way in order to best describe the complexity of beauty and relationships through the *zhiyin*.

In Strange Tales, beauty is described and communicated to his Chinese audience through sounds. As for Edgar Allan Poe, sight is the prized sense as seen in Poe’s visual descriptions in “Red Death.” Poe paints a picture for his audience using visuals to communicate and trigger certain memories within his audience’s mind. Works by both Pu Songling and Edgar Allen Poe are similar in their common themes of genre of the strange and “the death of a beautiful woman.”

However, in order to best communicate to a Chinese audience, Pu Songling prioritizes auditory sensory imagery, and for a Western audience, Poe prioritizes visual imagery.

This thesis explores how Pu Songling prioritizes certain senses specifically when describing beauty, and how he strengthens his description of both sound and beauty through understanding the *zhiyin* between a man and a woman. Within the Chinese sensory world, the human sense of sound is reflected in the historical Chinese emphasis on hearing as a means of wisdom and understanding. Sensory imagery in literature is important because literature is a reflection of a society's values and beliefs during certain time periods. When writers describe beauty in different ways, this reflects both the difference in beauty standards but also the difference in communication across cultures.

Studies on Human Sight and Sound

Human beings are born with five unique and different senses in order to perceive and understand the world. These senses, sight, smell, touch, taste, and sound, allow for a human to learn, communicate, and remember experiences during his or her lifetime. In a classic study by Grant Allen, "Sight and Smell in Vertebrates," sight and smell are compared and contrasted throughout history within vertebrates. Allen, a western scientist, begins by first stating "the highest intellectual development is necessarily based upon sight" (31). He explains that in modern day, sight has survived as the main function of the human body, and that sight is the prized sense in a human's life (Allen 31).

However, Allen describes that this is unique to the human being due to our body structure. He first compares humans to fish, a creature that he argues is the lowest level of the food chain. After studying fish anatomy, it was discovered that their eyesight is very weak and that they rely on smell to navigate the deep blue (Allen 31). He then compared fish to dogs, and the fact that they both prioritize the sense of smell. However, dogs do not have the same structure as fish, and have stronger eyesight than fish. The question is then raised, why do dogs prioritize smell? Allen contributes this to a dog's lack of arms, hands and fingers. "Touch" Allen explains, highly relies on one's ability to see. Because fish and dogs do not have hands to touch, they did not need to rely on their eyes as much to see (Allen 464).

Allen believes this is why "sight survives as the main function, the demanding sense for the developing intellectual and smell only barely survives as a relic" (Allen 31). Human beings need to be able to see what they are touching for survival. Smell does not nearly accomplish the ability to identify what an object is, the location, and the surface area of an object like sight does.

Allen cites Professor Croom Robertson in *Nature*, Feb. 27, 1873 stating:

Our external world (whether as actually perceived or imaginatively represented) may be called a world of sights and touches, blended with and modifying each other in the most intimate way. . . All other sensations, as of hearing, smell, and taste, come before us only discontinuously and intermittently, not being had from all things nor always from the same things. But, in a dog's experience, touch cannot possibly co-operate with sight, as it regularly does in ours. The organ of effective touch in man- touch that gets associated with vision-is, in the last resort, the hand, combining mobility and sensitiveness in the highest degree; and the dog has no hand (464).

For humans, sight is already thought to be the most important means for survival. From here one can begin to understand why human beings would prioritize sight also within their cultural values.

Joachim Braun states in his article “All Ears: ICOHTEC, Sound and Music Hans,” “Until the late 1960s, the visual element in scholarly studies relating to the senses was clearly dominant” (42). Braun believed that sound was the prized sense until literature became more popular. He argues that the Gutenberg Press was a main reason the Western culture began to prioritize sight over sound because literary works increased (Braun 42). Technological advancements also further the need for sight. Discoveries in science and medicine, such as with the invention of the microscope, telescope, telegraph, gramophone, etc., increased visual habits (Braun 42).

On the contrary, there were also many advancements in medicine and technology that targeted sound in the world. When radios, telephones, and other sound amplifiers were created, engineers and scientists had to understand its characteristics which meant understanding how to quantify and measure sound’s physical qualities (Braun 49). This begged the question, “what does sound look like?” Braun explains how doctors found the answer while performing heart surgery (Braun 48). Doctors needed to calculate the cardiac rhythms, and suggested charting their notes as done with writing sheet music or with graphemes modelled after poetry. However, this some feared, would be too subjective and not accurate enough to gain the correct results (Braun 48).

The doctors did not give up, and with the help of physiologists and clinicians, a graphical recording system was developed to mechanically register heart sounds, and this method is still used, today. Braun argued that subjective hearing was necessary to make a diagnosis (48). Thus, one can understand that although sight does take priority in the West, it is not an all or nothing equation. Braun states, “historians and sociologists of science, medicine and technology have recently stressed that scientific work involves more than visual observation alone (51).” A human best reacts, learns, and grows using more than just one human sense.

From the basic understanding of the importance of sight, one can comprehend why sight remains the dominant human sense for survival. However, once one is at a point in his life when survival is possible, that person’s desires and needs become more complex. This thesis is not arguing that the sense of hearing is more important and necessary for survival than the sense of sight, but that once one reaches the point in one’s life where the focus is on building relationships and reaching self-actualization, that is the time when hearing takes the forefront. As Braun stated above, prioritizing senses does not mean an “all or nothing” equation, but that there are times when a specific sense takes precedent over the others (58). When life becomes more complex, and the foundation of survival has been laid by one’s ability to see, other senses play a larger role in developing memory and in emotional responses to situations.

Communication is necessary for survival for human beings. Having the ability to talk and listen is what grows people both intellectually and emotionally. In the case of communication in Chinese, hearing is an especially important skill as the Chinese language is a spoken tonal language that prioritizes the sense of sound.

In the comprehensive reference on Chinese language, Chinese, Jerry Norman writes that unlike Latin, Italian, French or other Western languages, the Chinese language is a “family of

languages” that have been unbroken since the third millennium BC. Norman argues that the Chinese language is one of the strongest symbols of Chinese culture because it represents the unity of the Chinese empire due to its uniform and unchanging nature (1). Chinese phonological history can be broken into three distinct time periods: Old, Middle Chinese, and Old Mandarin. Norman states how the main medium for the Chinese language is the *Qieyun* dictionary which was compiled in AD 601 by Lu Fayan, and this dictionary arranges Chinese in order of tone and rhyme (24).

Chinese, unlike Western languages, is a tonal based language. However, Norman argues this was not always true. The *Qieyun* produced Middle Chinese with four tonal categories, but modern linguists have examined these tones and are unable to pronounce the words based off of present Chinese pronunciation techniques. Thus, Norman points out that if tones were around in AD 601, they have greatly changed (53). For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to understand that modern day Chinese is comprised of four contrasting tones to indicate the meaning. Norman states, “at some point in the history of Chinese, the primary four-way tonal contrast of Middle Chinese was affected by initial consonants in this way: syllables with voiced initial began to be pronounced at a lower pitch than those which had voiceless initials” (53).

The tones can be seen as a high versus low phonological comparison. This phonological comparison is when measuring one syllable words with rhyme based sounds (Hsieh and Kens 280). When monosyllables are compared, the underlying tones are used to measure the differences as well as the location of the underlying root rhyme (Hsieh and Kens 281). Thus, in order to understand a word, one must be both very clear and precise with speaking, but also the listener needs to be paying attention. For example, the Chinese word “*ma*” has four different tones or pitches used to indicate four different meanings (Hsieh and Kens 280). One could be

trying to say “mother” but say “horse” by mistake if the tone emphasized is pronounced incorrectly.

The tonal nature of Chinese differs from the English language of “pitch and accent” where there are no stressed syllables that greatly or directly indicate meaning or change the meaning of a word (Hsieh and Kens 290). This is because the English language is based on the consonant’s position and the syllable’s tone, and that structure is incompatible with the stressed tone difference (Hsieh and Kens 292). Thus, it is hard to see any adaptation of the tonal language into English. However, Chinese has incorporated the Romanization system, Hanyu Pinyin. Many reasons played into the development of Pinyin, but one main reason is due to the globalization of the Chinese language.

Sound as a Vehicle for Understanding the Dao

“Hearing the Dao” in Chinese tradition, is synonymous with understanding and knowing the Dao. In “Benti, Practice and State: On the Doctrine of Mind in the Four Chapters of Guanzi” by Peng Peng and Huawei Liu explain, “Dao is the origin of the universe and myriad things” and everything is born from the Dao (550). The relationship between man and the Dao is very complicated because man must “empty his mind” in order to accept the Dao. Although the Dao is what fills the world, it is the human mind that acts on the Dao, meaning man has to react and respond to the world around him (Peng and Liu 550).

One must control one’s mind in order to respond to the Dao and create order and prosperity in the land. This can be done by preparing the “*jing*” or “essence of spirit,” and nurturing the “*qi*” or “life force.” However, many challenges present themselves because in order to have emptiness of mind through “*jingqi*” there must be quietness (Peng and Liu 553). The Dao can then be found in peace and harmony through such silence. Emotions, though, cause movement and sound within the mind, so one must remain still, emotionless, and “empty in mind,” in order to use “*jingqi*” and hear the Dao in the stillness of the world (Peng and Liu 554).

The Dao, or “the Way,” is the “holistic path of the eternal generation and decay” (Knight 18). Moreover, the Dao is the foundation for philosophical and religious education and in order to be one with the Dao, one needs to “yield to the flow of what is” (Knight 18-19). What this means, is by being free to spontaneous movements, one can enter the Dao and then in this state of mind, one can be aware of the sensitivity of natural tendencies. One can also find balance and flow between “*yin* and *yang*,” and be free from operating any emotions. Through all of this, a person would not have deliberate control of the flow, but would “ride the chariot of the six energies” (Knight 20).

Contemplating nature and being in nature is one way scholars sought to be in union with the Dao (Knight 22). During political and military chaos, being alone in nature and away from all the frustrations of the real world provided men with peace. Through contemplation of the simple aspects of nature, such as streams, rocks, rivers, and mountains, and by being in solitude and in the quiet of nature, one has the best ability to let go any busy or distracting thoughts. Through this serenity, one can find a balance of the natural order and the order of one's own virtue, and ultimately find union with the Dao (Knight 22).

In traditional Chinese cultural understanding, hearing music is also a way to be in communion with the Dao (Lai February 27, 2017 "The Senses in the Genre of the Strange"). To hear the Dao is emphatically to know the Dao, and knowing the Dao was the primary objective for the moral gentleman. Moreover, "unlike in the West, where vision is upheld as a virtue for wisdom, it is being able to *hear* that is the standard for a model sovereign [in China]" (Lai February 27, 2017). The virtue of understanding is associated with sound, or one who has the ability to truly hear. If one hears the Dao then one knows the Dao, and knowing the Dao is associated with ultimate understanding of the inner workings of the cosmos. Also, the Classical Chinese word for "hear" is "*wen*," and is incorporated in the phrase "*wen Dao*" which means "to hear, to know the Dao," a common concept in the Confucian Analects (Lai February 27, 2017). "Hearing the Dao" thus embeds sound with true understanding.

Sound in Chinese cultural tradition is best understood through music. In I-Hsien Wu's "Enlightenment through Feelings: Poetry, Music, and Drama in The Story of the Stone," music is claimed to be a very important aspect of pre-modern Chinese culture (304). The 18th c. work, The Story of the Stone, written by Cao Xueqin, is regarded as one of the masterpiece novels in Chinese tradition. The main character, Jia Bao-yu, learns a difficult lesson of "awakening

through love,” by immersing himself in emotions and love in order to “recognize the truth” (Wu 296). It is Bao-yu’s use of poetry, music, and drama that helps him enter this state of being, of recognizing the truth that, “the music he listens to communicates beyond spoken words and written texts. The aural and visual immediacy of drama shakes and transforms his belief system” (Wu 296). The music, the sounds Bao-yu hears, when presented by itself or paired with visuals, is a primary tool for learning to be awakened through love.

Musical activities were very popular in the aristocratic life, as seen by musical performances during Chinese rituals, funerals, homecomings, and holiday celebrations (Wu 304). Music can allow certain emotions to stir inside a person, as seen in The Story of the Stone when cheerful music is played:

In the cold, clear air of autumn, the undulation of flutes rising above a drone of pipes and organs came stealing through the trees and across the water, ravishing the hearts and minds of those who heard it (Wu 304).

Cao Xueqin’s descriptions of the audience’s reaction to the music as being “so delighted that she moves her hands and feet vigorously.” Furthermore, when one of the characters requests a solo flute player to perform, the atmosphere changes to one of deep melancholy and “nocturnal stillness and ghostly moonlight... such overpowering sadness in the listeners” (Wu 305). These deep, serious emotions did not derive from any immediate event, but by an immediate memory of an event invoked by music. Here, “music strikes to the very core” and the power of the music changed the mood and emotions of the listener (Wu 308). This type of music can be so overpowering that other senses are blinded. For example, one character “opened her eyes” to see that the festival she was attending was over, but she did not realize this was due to being completely hypnotized by the musical performance (Wu 305).

In The Moon and the Zither: The Story of the Western Wing, the zither is characterized as an instrument of love and seduction (West and Idema 147). The zither is normally meant to be

“played solo- in private or shared with one or two close friends who are true music lovers” (Wu 306). However, in a context with sexual connotations, playing the zither for someone is known to be used as a method of arousal and can be understood as foreplay. With the zither becoming a “token of sexual love” (West and Idema 147), the music made by the zither becomes even more powerful in awakening love and emotions within a person. This relates to the intimate setting required for a zither to be played, just as sexual arousal is not a public experience, but a private encounter between two lovers.

Hearing music specifically is a vehicle through which to become “in communion with the Dao.” Music, and particularly playing the zither, has been characterized as: “Your Soul may now commune with the Divine and enter into that mysterious Union with the Way” (Wu 306). Furthermore, hearing the sound of a person and truly knowing a person are also the same. The *zhiyin* is one who hears the music, one who listens to another and knows the other’s “tone” (Lai February 27, 2017). To be someone’s *zhiyin* is to “know” someone’s sound. Given the importance of sound in understanding Chinese culture, due to its connection with the Dao and knowing someone’s sound, to be their *zhiyin* is the most powerful connection one could have with another.

Stephen Owen in “Poetry in the Chinese Tradition” calls “the one who knows the tone,” a person who is able to “see through the music,” meaning one who can hear the music and understand that the lyrics are actually being spoken to a specific person (296). This person does not necessarily have to be alive during the same period. In fact, the work is kept alive if the person who “hears” the lyrics is the writer’s *zhiyin*. An author or musician who writes for their future listener “goes beyond to make friends” (Owen 296).

The emphasis on sound as a pivotal part of Chinese culture and intimate relationships can be traced to the parable, “A Good Listener” by the early Chinese thinker, Liezi. In this parable, two men are seen to have an unusually deep connection due to their understanding of each other’s sound or *zhiyin*:

Bo Ya was a good lute-player [zither-player], and Zhong Ziqi was a good listener. Bo Ya strummed his lute [zither], with his mind on climbing high mountains; and Zhong Ziqi said: “Good! Loft, like Mount Tai!”
When his mind was on flowing waters, Zhong Ziqi said:
“Good! Boundless, like the Yellow River and the Yangtze!”

Whatever came into Bo Ya’s thoughts, Zhong Ziqi always grasped it. Bo Ya was roaming on the North side of Mount Tai; he was caught in a sudden storm of rain, and took shelter under a cliff. Feeling sad, he took up his lute [zither] and strummed it; first he composed an air about the persistent rain, then he improvised the sound of crashing mountains.

Whatever melody he played, Zhong Ziqi never missed the direction of his thought. Then Bo Ya put away his lute [zither] and sighed:
“Good! Good! How well you listen! What you imagine is just what is in my mind. Is there nowhere for my notes to flee to?” (Minford and Lau 231)

In the first line, “Bo Ya was a good [zither-player], and Zhong Ziqi was a good listener,” it is emphasized that there is a very important connection between music and the listener of music. Such a connection is seen when it is written “Bo Ya strummed his [zither], with his mind on climbing high mountains; and Zhong Ziqi said: ‘Good! Loft, like Mount Tai!’” Bo Ya did not tell Zhong Ziqi that his mind was on climbing high mountains. Furthermore, Zhong Ziqi could not see that Bo Ya was envisioning climbing high mountains. The only understanding Zhong Ziqi had was that he heard and deeply appreciated the music Bo Ya was playing. Zhong Ziqi understood it so perfectly, and heard the sound so clearly that the “hearing” became the vehicle for Zhong Ziqi to better understand and hear Bo Ya himself. This complete understanding of Bo Ya allowed Zhong Ziqi to hear Bo Ya’s thoughts, and thus became Bo Ya’s *zhiyin*.

The strength of this connection is seen in the lines “Bo Ya was roaming on the North side of Mount Tai; he was caught in a sudden storm of rain, and took shelter under a cliff. Feeling sad,

he took up his lute [zither] and strummed it... Whatever melody he played, Zhong Ziqi never missed the direction of his thought.” Even on a mountain, Zhong Ziqi heard Bo Ya’s music and understood the thoughts of his friend. This parable is not only the origin of the *zhiyin*, but establishes the “cosmic” connection as between two like-minded men.

To be someone’s *zhiyin* is understood and communicated mainly between two men. Furthermore, if one of those men were to die, then it would be unusually tragic because the other man would lose his “listener.” In Chinese tradition, while a lover can be a *zhiyin*, a husband and wife could not be each other’s *zhiyin*, and this “listener” is believed to understand someone better than a wife would understand her husband. Being someone’s *zhiyin* was more intimate than a marital relationship, furthering the point that the *zhiyin* is the ultimate form of connection and not conventionally assigned to a female. Therefore, Pu Songling’s innovation of the *zhiyin* in a husband-wife pairing is significant and empowers the female archetype.

Love and Marriage Within Chinese Social Norms

Daniel Hsieh explains the role of women from the Tang through the Qing Dynasties. As mentioned earlier, after the Tang Dynasty, a strong attraction to “bizarre love and beauty” came about in contrast to traditional Confucian teachings. Throughout the confusion of whether to suppress or engage in the romantic passions one felt, there was also a debate of the place, nature and purpose of women. During a time when one did not marry for romantic love but for duty, women were divided between those that one married and those who provided only love or sexual needs (Hsieh 239-249). To find true romantic love in an arranged marriage was rare. As time went by, these traditional, orthodox views on love and marriage began to be questioned.

The eminent scholar, Richard J. Smith, explains traditional marriage unions in Qing China for, “the purpose of marriage was explicitly to continue the male line of descent” (697). This illustrates the importance of uniting two families with different surnames. It was the parents or the elders in the family of the bride and groom who decided whether or not to marry the couple, and there was no room for individual affection or choice between the two (697-698). Furthermore, there were several different forms of marriage, such as circumstances when the wife would be transferred to her husband’s home, when a woman would live in her future husband’s home for 10-15 years as a “daughter-in-law reared from childhood” until the marriage date, or even rare occasions when the husband was transferred to the female’s home (698). All of these were outcomes based upon a family’s status, wealth, and social class. A man would marry for virtue, class, or status, and a virtuous woman was not considered a sexually desirable woman.

From these traditional and strict marriage structures grew the institution of the “concubine” (Smith 698). Concubines were generally purchased from poorer families, and they were considered lower status than the primary wife. Occasionally, the concubine had to perform

different rituals as a testimony to her inferiority. Concubines were purchased in an effort to produce more sons to the family line. Unlike the concubine, the sons of the concubine were considered equal to the sons of the primary wife (Smith 698). The institution of marriage perfectly illustrates the inequality between men and women. Because men carried the family name, they were prioritized and valued higher than women. Women were sold and purchased like slaves, and they were used only used for pleasure and to produce more males in order to continue the family line.

Marrying for love deviated from social norms, which is why it falls into the genre of the strange. Robert Ford Campany in Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China writes how “the anomaly” or “the strange,” as understood in China, was not common and was unnatural (3). The strange is equated with the “other,” and the supernatural “should be understood strictly as a cultural and not as a natural phenomenon” (Campany 3). Similarly, as strange and bizarre occurrences do not simply happen, love did not simply happen. Consequently, true love was considered of “the other” and depicted as a supernatural phenomenon. In other words, finding true love in Chinese society was portrayed as a cultural phenomenon that was of “the strange.”

Chuanqi tales embody these love stories. These love stories were actually the most realistic of the tales in *chuanqi* and the strange. The love affairs, “depend less on supernatural agencies for the working out of their plots” (Hightower 78). The connection between men and women did appear in Chinese tradition, but *chuanqi* took this connection and applied it to the love between a married couple. Love was more often seen for a girl as a courtesan or as a fox-fairy (Hightower 78-79). As this view of love began to evolve from traditional Chinese culture, so did the attitudes toward women. These changing attitudes can be correlated to the rise and fall

of dynasties throughout Chinese history. During the reign of the Tang Empress Wu, and when brothels flourished allowing men to meet educated and attractive women, romantic tales grew in popularity (Hightower 79).

Hsieh describes that in two Tang *chuanqi* stories, “Li hun ji” (The Departed Spirit) and “Li Wa zhuan” (The Story of Miss Li), finding a wife candidate who was both virtuous and sexually attractive was possible (240). These tales offered new hope and wonder for the male audience. However, Hsieh argues that as the Tang dynasty declined, the hope to find an ideal wife did not materialize. When the Tang dynasty continued to decline and the empire entered into deeper chaos, women were blamed. The female protagonists in “Li hun ji” and “Li Wa zhuan” stood in stark contrast with later images of women. This fictional female archetype was constructed as both a demon and as a cannibal (Hsieh 240). Such depictions were greatly disturbing, especially after women had been earlier portrayed in a more idealized light.

Men in the Tang Dynasty recognized that the ideal woman was extreme, and there was a critical development and maturity in how they viewed women. Instead of thinking of women as threats and as “men versus women,” the Chinese men began to experience “*qing*” or “emotions and love.” The men came to the realization that the realities of life, flawed love, and the strange and irrational world were the issue, not the women. Men turned away from love, feeling hopeless, and that was when popular literature began to portray love “sympathetically.” This then turned into illusions of men falling in love with beautiful women who ended up being ghosts, because a virtuous and sexually appealing human woman was too perfect in the flawed world (Hsieh 241).

Towards the end of the Ming Dynasty, many of the previous patterns and cycles portraying women are seen again, yet on a much grander scale. Chinese civilization needed answers on the position of love and women in society, and, thus, the previous culture that had

suppressed romantic emotions now became obsessed with them (Hsieh 242). Works of literature emerged containing very unvirtuous women who were still loved and married. In fact, writers found it popular to produce certain literary formulas, such as the now sought-after dramas of men finding desirable women, and then having to enter into a supernatural realm in order to remain in love.

These formulas projected the hope to marry a desirable woman out of love, but the Chinese world was not ready for marriages based on love rather than arranged by family. Hsieh argues that the end of the Ming Dynasty was when romance was as alive as ever in China, “this was a period that saw the valorization of courtesans and the romance between scholar and courtesan as a kind of romantic ideals. It was even thought that love and heroism, passion and patriotism were possible” (243). The Ming intellectual, Tu Long (1543-1605), encouraged people to seek as much pleasure as possible, yet he also warned of the dangers of desire. Tu is yet another example of a man torn between remaining true to traditional teachings of marriage and allowing oneself to long for a beautiful virtuous woman (243). It seemed impossible in Chinese society to for a woman to be both virtuous and beautiful.

Pu Songling experienced the transition between the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Therefore, his fiction can be interpreted as a reflection of the idealization of marriage. Seen through reoccurring themes of love and marriage within Chinese social norms, Pu Songling enhances Tu Long’s philosophy that pleasure is possible yet dangerous (Hsieh 243). The various tales of men falling ill or victim to beautiful fox-spirits and ghosts were a form of escapism for the male audience. Significantly, Pu Songling projects the hope to find a woman who is beautiful *and* marriageable.

Section II

Sensory Imagery in Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio

*Under the leaves and cool flowers
The wind brought to me the sound of a flute
From far away*

*I cut a branch of willow
And answered with a lazy song.*

*Even at night, when all slept,
The birds were listening to a conversation
In their own language*

Li Bai, "A Flute of Marvel" (Translated from the French of Judith Gautier by E. Powys Mathers)

Beauty is a very highly valued human characteristic in Chinese society, and the significance of this cultural value can be seen through its manifestation in literature. As discussed in Section I, Western and Chinese writers use different literary techniques, they target two different senses in explaining the concept of beauty. In Pu Songling's Strange Tales the sense of sound is prioritized in explaining beauty and love. Through various auditory cues, the Chinese audience is able to comprehend whether or not a woman is beautiful. In this section, I will discuss some of Pu Songling's works that demonstrate the prioritization of sound for beauty, love and the *zhiyin*. Exemplary cases of this idea are drawn from Pu Songling's works, "Lotus Fragrance," "Twenty Years a Dream," "Silver Above Beauty," and "The Antique Zither."

The Confucian cultural argument for a core meaning of beauty correlates beauty with goodness. To be in complete harmony with the world, one must be in unity with both beauty and goodness (Fu and Wang 68). The most beautiful was also considered the "most good," and this was reflected in the Chinese characters for beauty and good. "*Mei*" 美, the Chinese character for "beauty," is interpreted in modern Chinese as a much narrower scope of beauty, meaning beauty

that is “pleasing” and satisfies the eye. *Mei* can be used to mean “hao” 好 which is the Chinese character for “good.” “Se” 色, is the Chinese character for appearance, and in this context one should include *se* in addition to *mei* because *se* carries a sexual and sensual component, adding another dimension to beauty. The classical meaning of *se* means face or countenance, and this is how the meaning “appearance” was derived (Fu and Wang 69).

However, the character *mei* does not strike at the heart of beauty, but only acts as the link between beauty and goodness. The link is stressed in the Confucian view as both concepts are needed to be in harmony with the world. For the purpose of understanding beauty, a deeper and more complex understanding of beauty is needed. This deeper meaning digs into the crux of beauty (Fu and Wang 69).

In “The Formation and Function of Aesthetic Cognitive Modules,” scientific research and evidence explains why beauty is important to understand. To understand the origin behind human pleasures, human senses were targeted and tested for emotional responses (Li, Wang and Meng 75). It was found that when a human being perceives a beautiful appearance and when a human being accomplishes a task that is needed for survival, both actions can produce the same “pleasurable or good feeling” (Li, Wang and Meng 78). Pleasure is triggered by both survival needs and what humans find aesthetically pleasing. The difference between the two depends upon the origin of the pleasure. One type of pleasure derives from internal favorable value, or what helps a human live and survive, while another type of pleasure derives from something or someone’s appearance (Li, Wang and Meng 78).

If something is pleasurable, aesthetically pleasing, and brings joy, then one would determine that this “thing” is beautiful. However, all of these characteristics are very subjective and do not lay a firm metric for a constant measurement of “beauty.” One person may claim that

a painting is beautiful, whereas another person, from a different background, may disagree. Still, it is not simply through “sight” or “visuals” that elicit pleasure, but it is possible to find pleasure through all of the senses of scent, sound, touch, and sight (Li, Wang and Meng 79). In order to understand the root of beauty, one needs to understand that all five senses can communicate pleasure to a human.

In David Hume’s definitive discourse on beauty in A Treatise of Human Nature, beauty is described as a trigger for experiencing pleasure (2.1.8.2). Beauty is a measurement of “the quality, which operates upon the passion, and the subject, in which the quality inheres.” Hume established that beauty is subjective in his idea, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” and “the quality is the beauty” (2.1.2.6). Hume believed this beauty can be found in both a human and an object. However, beauty can be found in higher degrees with living beings than with inanimate objects. Hume argues a “beautiful” object can only bring about a calm response that is hard to distinguish from pure perception (2.1.1.1).

Yet, because a beautiful object alone does not stir as strong a reaction as a beautiful person, a living being holds the standard for beauty. Therefore, when a beautiful woman is associated with a sound, this sound thereupon becomes synonymous with “a beautiful woman” and is significant in enhancing the seduction of the audience.

The Idealized Woman in “Lotus Fragrance”

In Strange Tales, many men fall victim to beautiful women, foxes, or ghosts, simply because these women are “beautiful.” In one of the tales “Lotus Fragrance,” the main character Sang Xiao falls in love with both a ghost and a fox-spirit. Sang is unaware that these women are of the supernatural, but is captivated by their beauty. Sang first falls in love with a fox-spirit.

Her name was Lotus Fragrance, and that she was a sing-song girl from the Western District (212).

In this description, Pu Songling uses both her name and her title to illustrate her beauty. A sing-song girl means she has a beautiful voice, and her name “Lotus Fragrance” symbolizes not only that she is physically beautiful like a water lily or lotus, but her scent, or fragrance, is also enticing.

The tale continues with Sang falling in love with another character Li, who is a ghost. Before Sang knew this woman was a ghost, he had admired how “she seemed to drift through the air rather than walk... but before going gave him a tiny embroidered slipper” (213). Pu Songling uses the image of a small shoe to reference the idea of quiet footsteps. Beautiful women, desirable women, had bound feet, thus had very delicate, or soft, footsteps. “Drift through the air” and having a “tiny” slipper painted the picture for quiet footsteps, and from these descriptions Sang and Pu Songling’s audience again understood the ghost as beautiful.

Men desired beautiful women, and men could even become victims to beautiful women. Women could use their beauty and ability to seduce men in order to get what these women wanted. Women used their beauty as a weapon to take advantage of men. In “Lotus Fragrance,” when the ghost is found to be using her beauty to take advantage of Sang, it is exclaimed, “How could a beautiful girl like you use love as a weapon of hatred?” (218). Sang thought the ghost, Li, was a beautiful woman, and he called this sexual attraction “love.” Li knew Sang would want to

sleep with her because of her beauty, and encouraged this in order for her to get something in return.

Hsieh depicts this concept of beauty as, “the awareness that it was beauty and desire aroused by beauty that were the root of the problem” (34). Beautiful women were desirable for sex since they were more arousing than athletic, smart, or kind women. Since sex is pleasurable and extremely desirable, attractive women were even more sought after by the men. Because they are wanted, the attractive women have the ability to make a decision, making them powerful. This power, when used to manipulate others, can be very dangerous. Many ancient stories and poems explain how great rulers lose their kingdoms because they were distracted by beautiful women (Hsieh 34).

A proper woman, who was gentle and faithful to her husband, was not the type described in Pu Songling’s Strange Tales. While these traits were praised, they were not as highly valued as was beauty. These views are again on display in “Lotus Fragrance” where the female characters, Li and Lotus Fragrance, are only included because Sang desired to sleep with them. Even when Li and Lotus Fragrance accuse each other for not being human, one is a ghost and the other is a fox-fairy spirit, Sang dismisses this concern because it does not affect his intentions of using them for pleasure.

Lotus Fragrance took her leave, earnestly beseech him once more to break off relations with Li. He assured her- with apparent sincerity- that he would do so. But the moment she was gone and the door was closed, he dimmed his lamp, took the little slipper in his hand and thought of Li. The very next instant, there she was (216).

Despite having been sick and Lotus Fragrance diagnosing Li, the ghost, as the cause for his sickness, Sang still desires to have sex with Li. He calls on Li after Lotus Fragrance leaves. If Li were ugly, Sang would not desire her. It was not simply the fact that Sang was using these women for his own pleasure, but he was free to do so and would not be accountable or bound by

societal dictates on love and marriage. He did not have to give up one of the women, and Sang was liberated from other conventional moral rules due to the female characters not being human. Also, because of Pu Songling's portraying the situation in a supernatural context, other men reading this tale could fantasize about such an idea. Women were considered threatening creatures, especially when described as foxes and ghosts. Hsieh argues, "desire is bestial: a woman's beauty leads a man away from the upper, civilized world to a ghostly, underground world where he can be transformed from man into animal" (36).

Furthermore, this formula of one man and two women as seen in "Lotus Fragrance" was common for such erotic tales (Hsieh 87). Many exam candidates fantasized of such a threesome. The roots of this formula, one man and two women, can be traced to ancient tradition. Even though, legally speaking, a man could only take one wife, "de facto polygamy" was alive and well in Chinese tradition where a man could take secondary wives or concubines for their own personal pleasure. Given the "basic male longing" and the ability for men to actually have more than one woman, this motif was very realistic and understandable (Hsieh 87-88).

Because this practice of "multiple women at a time" became popular, and men were not only subject to have sexual relations with the woman they married, categories of women were created. There were, "women you marry and women you romanced" (Hsieh 88). In theory, these two women complemented each other and together created the perfect woman. The perfect woman, one you married and romanced, was seen as impossible. Pu Songling develops this motif and the storyline of two women in a unique way (Hsieh 89). Thus, his innovative works were beloved, because of the richness and complexity of these scenarios. More significantly, Pu Songling enhanced the fantasy and dramatized the idealization of women who were both virtuous and desirable.

Sound in “Twenty Years a Dream” and “Silver Above Beauty”

The Chinese believed beautiful women were considered the most lethal weapons in the world (Hsieh 30). This idea can be seen by exploring the gender roles and social classes in Chinese culture. A traditional, upper class, educated Chinese man was seen as someone who would reign in his desires. A proper man was seen as someone who could control his emotions. Beautiful women had the ability to distract these men and let powerful men forget their responsibilities (Hsieh 34).

Pu Songling also associates beautiful women as “the other” and how they are in the “out-group” and distant from civilization because they are desired and sexual. The reason for such a characterization exists due to Pu Songling’s descriptions of women being unlike the normal, proper women of the time. It was a fantasy to provide entertainment and a diversion from tedious days filled with studying. Thus, in order to comprehend Strange Tales, one must thoroughly understand that beautiful women were not only significant but also very powerful in Chinese cultural memory.

Historically, rulers from competitive empires would send beautiful women known as “sing-song” girls to other rulers in order to do just that. The translation of “sing-song” girls again emphasizes that these beautiful women were not simply *mei*, or visually beautiful, but that they were talented in the arts and were *yue* beautiful. Some Chinese men even concluded that beautiful women must be demons. The problem for beautiful women was not the simple fact that they were beautiful, but that men were aroused by this beauty. These made them “strange” yet appealing to the audience (Hsieh 34).

The idea of the “sing-song girl” is present in Pu Songling’s “Twenty Years a Dream.” In this tale, a forlorn and lonely man, named Yang, hears the winds howling while trying to fall

asleep on a cold and dark night. Suddenly, Yang hears a female voice singing, and immediately his mood changes:

Over and over again he heard the same plaintive, melancholy lines chanted by a delicate woman's voice. The sound intrigued him greatly (280).

The sound of the woman's voice invoked emotions within the man, and the voice was "melancholy," yet he was "intrigued" and stimulated, so Yang searches for the voice. Yang had yet to set eyes on the woman, but her delicate voice was enough to entice him to leave the comfort of his own bed and head outside into the cold, dark night. Here is a very clear example of feminine beauty displayed through the voice of a sing-song girl, where the voice is the lure.

Sabina Knight defines feminine beauty as both internal and external, "despite exemplary devotion and other virtues, such women characters almost always meet with sad ends, as if undeserving of human concern because of their supernatural powers" (68). Because men were unable to see into the depths of the emotional state of a beautiful woman, women were misunderstood and disregarded as just "beautiful" and nothing more. Chinese women must have been negatively impacted by these stories as well as cultural norms (Knight 68).

Pu Songling illustrates many examples of men encountering a beautiful woman, and immediately wanting to have sexual relations with them. In a few cases, the woman refuses. Similar to "Lotus Fragrance" where the female character uses her sexual appeal to use Sang, Pu Songling described most female characters in his tales to be willing to have sex, and were happy to be sought after in a sexual way. In reality, this was not the normally the case, and women were upset that they were only desired for their outward appearance (Knight 68).

However, in "Twenty Years a Dream," the female character does reject Yang's pursuit, which is an exception to the convention. Yang only refrains from pursuing her because it would be harmful for him to sleep with her due to her supernatural, or ghost, state.

Yang wished to make love to her without further ado, but she would not. “I am a creature of the night,” she said, a slight frown crossing her brow. “My dead bones are not like those of a living body. If we were to make love it would be an inauspicious union. It would only bring you an early death, and I could not bear to cause you harm.” So, Yang held back, merely toying with her breasts (281).

Yang agrees to not have sexual relations with her, but still attempts to find some sexual pleasure with the “creature of the night.” Here, women are again portrayed as sexual pursuit. Pu Songling portrays another unconventional relationship in the lines, “they never made love, but were happier and more intimate than many a married couple” (282). At first, their relationship appears to be more than a superficial sexual encounter, but something more “intimate.” Nevertheless, Pu Songling ends the piece that “they made love” (288), thus holding the point true that there had to be some type of sexual intimacy. This further emphasizes that women were disregarded as just a “beauty” rather than a person who deserved to be loved and known. This prioritization of erotic love greatly objectifies women. Although these stories served as entertainment for a male audience, they paid a great disservice to women by setting unfair and impossible standards and degrading their worth. Most significantly, the relationship began with the sound of the female character’s voice. It was her voice that lured Yang, and emphasizes the importance of sound in seduction.

In “Twenty Years a Dream,” Pu Songling emphasizes the prioritization of sound when it comes to recognizing beauty and love. Not only in the first scene, but when the female character appears to him in his room, she announces her presence “with a little shake of her sleeves” (281). In cultural memory, the sound of a woman’s clothing signals beauty to the audience. In a second meeting between Yang and the mysterious woman, “towards the end of the first watch, he saw a young woman come walking, almost gliding, out of the tall grass” (280). Yang then “asked to see her little bound feet” (281). From cultural memory, this “hidden signal” of small feet meant quiet footsteps, and this characteristic was again unique to women and was considered

beautifully seductive. Yang wants to confirm that the woman he saw “gliding” through the grass, a sign of small, quiet, bound feet, was indeed the same woman in his bedroom. Inspecting her feet, he found that it was her. Small, bound feet were considered very attractive and beautiful by men and women, due to the quiet, feminine steps. Thus, the woman’s voice, the sound of her clothes, and her quiet footsteps all signaled to the audience that the woman described in “Twenty Years a Dream” was quite beautiful.

This idea of “hidden signals” to the audience to indicate something is beautiful is also present in Pu Songling’s “Silver Above Beauty.”

One night two beautiful women came into his room and sat down side by side on his bed, smiling quietly, their light silken sleeves brushing silently against the bedstead (397).

If Pu Songling had not included the word “beautiful” his audience still would have been able to understand that the women were attractive. Silk is a very delicate, soft and luxurious fabric. Only the wealthy were able to afford fine silk. Silk is also very thin and can cling to one’s body, thus silk emphasizes the body’s shape, curves, and beauty. In regard to clothing, silk is also a material normally used for underwear or for bed garments. Thus, when two women enter into a man’s bedroom wearing silk, the scene is highly suggestive that sexual relations are bound to occur. Instead of detailing how the silk clothing looked, Pu Songling only details the sound the clothing makes. “Their light silken sleeves brushing silently against the bedstead” means that in this instance, their clothes are so light and thin they barely make a sound.

The actual sound of the silk is very challenging to describe, so Pu Songling taps into the cultural memory and describes sensual experiences associated with silk, in order to describe the sound. Through this “sound,” one can not only picture what silk looks like, but one also hears the sensual movement of silk and the memories that come with silk against naked skin. In fiction or reality, the male scholarly audience have memories of movement with silk in sexual relations

with beautiful women. Thus, when describing the sensual sounds made in the bedroom in “Silver Above Beauty,” Pu Songling understood how one’s mind would respond to the auditory description of silk. Combining descriptions of beautiful women wearing silk with the sound of silk would stir strong and pleasurable reactions.

Pu Songling uses this powerful story as a warning to be cautious of beautiful women who will rob you of your fortune.

The scholar felt for his silver, and it was gone. Two beautiful women had sat beside him and offered him a thing of beauty, and he had paid it no heed but instead had pocketed the silver (397).

Pu Songling is relating this story to his primary audience of scholarly men and how many of these men work hard in order to become wealthy. With wealth and success, one attracts many beautiful women. However, while advocating the allure of beauty, Pu Songling is also warning against the danger of beauty. He dismisses the idea of virtuous women being also beautiful because a virtuous woman would not trick a man out of silver. However, in criticizing the victimized man as an “unbearable beggar,” Pu Songling points out that a beautiful woman who enters your bedroom, although dangerous, is more valuable, and more pleasurable than money. Pu Songling uses this story to pose the question – what is more pleasurable, money or sexual intimacy?

The Zhiyin and “The Antique Zither”

Pu Songling describes sounds that are pleasurable, aesthetically pleasing and connect people in the most intimate ways. He mostly does this to explain beauty, capturing the full essence of beauty by targeting not only sight, but primarily the sense of sound. In Pu Songling’s “The Antique Zither,” the power of sound is further emphasized, yet in a new way.² The zither is an instrument similar to a harp and is played by plucking 30-40 strings across a flat, shallow, horizontal box. Known in Chinese as the “*qin*,” a zither is associated with aesthetics, virtue and morality (Wu 306). This instrument was known to help a man purify himself, and was always played solo due to how private the music and instrument was. Occasionally, the music of the instrument was shared between one or two close friends, but because it was intended for spiritual and intellectual cultivation, the environment for playing the zither was normally in a quiet chamber, in nature, or in a studio with a view (Wu 306).

The origin parable of two male friends in “A Good Listener,” is a common formula that is used by others to explain a deep connection by means of playing and listening to the zither. Pu Songling applies this formula of the *zhiyin* with two men in “The Antique Zither.” However, the outcome of the story has a gender difference from “A Good Listener” in which a beautiful woman is the zither player.

In “The Antique Zither,” a gentleman named Li, an accomplished zither player, was invited to the home of the Deputy Magistrate of Jiaxiang, Cheng. As time went on, they found much enjoyment in each other’s company, and grew to become great friends. One day, when Li sees a zither in Cheng’s home, he questions Cheng about it and discovers that they both play the instrument. Thus, Li and Cheng decide to perform for each other.

² It is important to note that the musical instrument translated as “lute” is an incorrect translation by Minford. “Zither” is the correct translation which is why I modified the title “The Antique Lute” to “The Antique Zither.”

[Cheng] played the piece known as “Riding the Wind.” His performance had a crystalline quality about it, and conveyed to perfection a transcendental sense of leaving the world and dust behind. Li was overwhelmed and begged Cheng to accept him as a pupil (400).

This strong connection through music brought the men together into a much more intimate relationship than before. This relationship became worthy of the zither associated “soul-brothers,” where they “know each other’s sound” (Minford 400). As mentioned earlier, in Chinese cultural understanding, to “be a *zhiyin*” is the ultimate understanding of another person and is one of the strongest bonds of friendship. When Cheng left unexpectedly, Li felt great distress because he lost his “soul brother.” A similar distress could be felt when a man loses his lover. Also, the zither was a very private instrument and was only to be shared between close friends who are “true music lovers” (Wu 306). This does not mean that the music can be shared with any one to two different people every time one plays, but forever by only one to two of the same select company. This is due to how special the *zhiyin* is that only one other person will know one’s sound for entirety of one’s life. Such a connection is so enduring that it will only be shared between oneself and “one’s listener.”

The loss of the lute [zither] utterly devastated Li, so much so that he could neither eat nor sleep. He travelled hundreds of miles seeking information about Cheng, but succeeded only in ascertaining that his home was in the southern region of Chu (403).

In this passage, if the word “zither” was replaced with “lover” or “beautiful woman,” the sentiment of loss would remain the same. This is because when a woman leaves a man unexpectedly, and the man loves her very much, the intensity of his heartache would be that he could neither eat nor sleep. The man did not just lose the zither, but he lost his listener, his *zhiyin*. Pu Songling argues that *zhiyin* is much stronger than one’s relationship to a lover. Beautiful women have a dangerous amount of power derived from the fact men find them desirable. If that power increased due to a woman’s ability to seduce men not only their beautiful appearance but

also by their beautiful music played from the zither, men would be subjected to the will of women.

Pu Songling writes not only about men playing the zither and hearing each other's sound, but, significantly, he innovates with a beautiful woman playing the zither.

Presently through the blind they distinguished the outline of a beautiful form, and then a subtle fragrance emanated from behind the blind, followed by the sound of the zither. Li listened, and although he did not recognize the melody, he felt his senses ravished and his soul transported to another realm. When the music ceased, he peeped through the blind and saw a young woman, some twenty years old, of a striking beauty. Cheng now poured him a large goblet of wine, and from behind the blind the lady struck up another melody, this time the piece known as 'All My Heart's Care.' Once again Li was ravished by the sheer beauty of the sound (401).

While describing the sound of the zither, Pu Songling states Li's senses were "ravished." When the "beautiful form" of the woman is described, Li notices she is of "striking beauty." However, Li's focus returns almost immediately to the beauty of the music where his senses are again "ravished" by the "sheer beauty of the sound." The sound of the zither stirs a stronger reaction from Li when paired with the sight of the beautiful woman. Not only did the first song played on the zither leave him Li feeling "ravished," but he exclaims "his soul transported to another realm." The music was beautiful, but Li felt the ultimate satisfaction and pleasure when Li experienced the beautiful woman playing the beautiful music. The seduction and temptation is amplified by the auditory hallucination that Li experiences.

In this scene Pu Songling created another dimension of beauty by depicting a beautiful woman playing exquisite music on the zither. Such a scenario was unconventional and ran counter to the traditional formula of a man playing the zither for his male *zhiyin*, Pu Songling empowered the female archetype by creating a "beautiful woman" zither player for a male listener. Significantly, Pu Songling posits the idea that a man could be a woman's *zhiyin*, a concept completely foreign to the traditional male-to-male formula. Pu Songling creates another nuance to amplify the love, seduction and intimacy between a man and woman. Of note is the

innovation of this *zhiyin* pairing in a marital relationship between *husband and wife*. During a time when one did not marry for romantic love but for duty, women were divided between those that one married and those who provided only love or sexual needs. To find true romantic love in an arranged marriage was rare. Traditional Confucian-based views on marriage were questioned in Strange Tales, and Pu Songling challenged these conventions with proposing a yet to be achieved reality in Chinese society – the ideal that marriage is a pairing of *zhiyin*.

One might ask, why would a gendered shift in the *zhiyin* pairing be significant? Because of the power beautiful women hold in seduction, if a woman could be the object of the *zhiyin*, and able to understand a man on the most intimate level, then women would become even more powerful and irresistible. Men would be greatly intimidated, and they feared that they could become enslaved to the power of beautiful women.

Pu Songling does not explicitly state that Cheng is his wife's *zhiyin*. However, from context, it is apparent that this is in fact the point. In "The Antique Zither," when Cheng stole the zither, Li lost his *zhiyin* but Cheng did not feel Li was his *zhiyin*. Similar to two lovers, it is both heartbreaking and difficult to leave the one you love. Cheng not only left willingly, he also stole the zither demonstrating his lack of respect for Li. But, what is the sound of a zither without a listener? Li was not Cheng's true listener. If one goes back to the moment when Li first heard Cheng play, Li begged to be Cheng's pupil, in other words, his listener. However, Cheng did not desire another listener for he already had one-- his wife. Cheng's wife was the one who played the zither so beguilingly, and she is the only other character who is a zither player. Thus, Cheng's wife was Cheng's *zhiyin*, and Cheng was, in turn, his wife's true listener.

As discussed in Section I, the zither is an instrument for sexual arousal (West and Idema 147). Although the zither was historically considered a masculine instrument, in later years when

it became a “token of sexual love,” this scenario where the zither was played between a man and woman was to indicate foreplay. Combining the sexual arousal aspect that comes from playing the zither and the link that Cheng and his wife are *zhiyin*, the emotions and connections felt between these two is profound. In the Qing, it was unprecedented that a man could be married to such a woman who was educated and talented in zither playing, and who was also both sexually appealing and virtuous. This was the ultimate desire of the men among Pu Songling’s audience.

There are also cases of a man playing the zither to win the heart of a woman. By using “stringed seduction,” the man plays the zither for a woman to communicate his desire for the woman. This communication allows woman a choice to either choose or reject him (West and Idema 105). When the woman does choose him, the connection and love experienced between the two is even more profound. Choosing to love instead of forcing one to love is the ultimate form of love. This truth is portrayed when the man allows himself to be vulnerable to being chosen or rejected. If the man had forced the woman into this relationship, then the intimacy would be lost. Freedom to love was unheard of in Chinese tradition due to arranged marriages. Thus, having the freedom to love accompanied with finding true love with a beautiful and virtuous woman was the ultimate “strange tale.”

The woman is portrayed to have a choice in the matter, but does the man have a choice? In “The Antique Zither,” the man as being “entrapped” or even “helpless” to the beautiful woman and the beautiful sound he is hearing. His emotions overwhelm him, and he is possessed by the beauty. This adds to the “manipulation” that women can cause. This beautiful woman was also feared due to her potential power over men. Losing control in any situation is intimidating, and beautiful women had the power to take control of men. Li lost control when he hears a beautiful woman playing entrancing music. Fear of losing control due to beautiful women

playing music was enough to restrict women from not only playing the zither, but also from the idea that they could be the object of the *zhiyin*. However, Li was invited to hear Cheng's talented wife play, thus he was given the option to refuse and therefore not put himself in that situation. Li knew the power of a beautiful woman, yet he still put himself in a vulnerable position that created an opportunity for his zither to be stolen.

[Li] was quite carried away by the experience and began drinking recklessly (401). Pu Songling does not describe men as passive victims of beauty, but that men are dynamic and actively choose to subject themselves to pleasure. Thus, Li did have a choice before the encounter, but once he was consumed by the pleasure of the beautiful sound, and that pleasure entrapped him.

“The Antique Zither” is not the only work in which a man becomes a woman's *zhiyin* and where men could be entrapped by the pleasure of “stringed seduction.” In “Twenty Years a Dream” Pu Songling describes a woman who connects with a man on a more intimate level than just a sexual one. Yang first “hears” the woman before he sees her, and even during times when she is not around, he can still hear her the sounds of her footsteps. Furthermore, the female character plays music for Yang which triggers an emotional response, suggesting that there is more of a connection than just a sexual one (Minford 283).

However, because the female character is a ghost, the audience is allowed to fantasize about the idea of a woman being so desirable. The woman is not real, and thus does not pose a realistic threat. Pu Songling uses this new male-to-female formula, and entertains the idea of a beautiful, virtuous woman for whom one can also be a *zhiyin*. Combining virtue, beauty, and the *zhiyin* is simply too good to be true for any living woman, thus Pu Songling casts the female character as “not human.”

In “The Antique Zither” the female archetype is empowered. More significantly, Cheng’s wife is human. When one understands that she is also Cheng’s *zhiyin*, and in fact his superior as a zither player, the fact that she is described as a living human woman and not a ghost, or fox fairy spirit, Cheng’s wife becomes the most powerful character in the story. This combination of beauty and sound makes such a powerful impact on the connections between people that it is not discussed at all. Pu Songling allows for Cheng to desire his wife on a physical, sexual level due to her physical beauty, but also on a spiritual level due to their *zhiyin* connection.

Comprehending such a point helps one understand how beauty through sensory imagery of sound contributes greatly to the appeal of the genre of the strange, and signifies how “strange fiction” can be socially empowering. When beauty and sound are intertwined, this powerful combination propels the reader into the story and, more significantly, to be more receptive to challenges to conventional ideas about women, love and marriage.

The emerging field of “sound studies” demonstrates that the sense of sound can signal messages to the brain to incite a myriad of emotions that circulate throughout the body. In other words, beauty can greatly arouse people, thus the response of the body and brain is only intensified by sound imagery associated with beauty. When a woman’s beauty is sensualized through sound imagery, this description stirs an intense response from the beholder. Without auditory descriptors, the pleasurable response to beauty greatly decreases. In “The Antique Zither,” Pu Songling accomplishes this in complementing the beauty of a woman with the quintessential *zhiyin* zither performance.

Beautiful women are powerful, and beautiful woman can manipulate men due to her appearance. Furthermore, when a woman’s beauty is illustrated with sounds, this description stirs an intense response from the beholder. Beauty is better experienced and better understood

through both visual and sound sensors. However, without auditory descriptors, the pleasurable response to beauty greatly decreases. Thus, sound is essential to completely capture sensory imagery of beauty, and in Strange Tales, Pu Songling expertly narrates this through innovative descriptions of the sound of a beautiful woman.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that the sense of sound is a prized sense in Chinese culture, and a clear example of the importance of sound can be understood through literature, specifically when describing beautiful women in Pu Songling's Strange Tales. This thesis also serves to help one understand the uniqueness of the Chinese prioritization of sound and the role of women. It is seen through Pu Songling's work, as well as the work of other philosophers on beauty and sound, that the Chinese understanding of beauty is unique to its culture. Through the prioritization of sound, and combination of sound with visuals, the beauty is further and more deeply understood. This combination allows Pu Songling to best communicate an understanding of beauty in relationships to his audience. Such a unique perspective of beauty draws the audience to clearly reflect and experience beauty written in literature. Thus, beauty described with the combination of sounds and visuals allows for greater and fuller responses than visuals alone.

Popular literature such as the genre of the strange is a prism through which cultural and social values can be viewed with refracted distortion. Pu Songling depicted the world of Strange Tales through diverse sensory filters, specifically auditory sensory imagery, allowing his audience to experience and respond to beauty. This auditory filter was influenced and fostered by Chinese culture as seen through other ways Chinese society prioritizes sound. In exploring the different sensory filters, one can appreciate cultural diversity to contribute towards a better understanding and communication amongst societies.

Gender roles are a topic of debate in the modern world, and China remains a top offender of holding prejudice against women. Throughout history, women in China were treated as objects and pawns. Pu Songling understood this desire for a beautiful woman, and he amplified this beauty through auditory sensory imagery. Furthermore, the power and potential of beautiful

women is seen in the dynamic female characters. Yet, the Chinese audience was not ready for such empowered women, so Pu Songling veiled the empowerment in supernatural women.

Pu Songling also portrays men as victims of their sexual desires. The average Chinese man does not fall in love with a ghost or fox-fairy. This overdramatized seduction scenario portrays a man as helpless and vulnerable to any beautiful woman. Pu Songling uses this formula to emphasize the power of the sound of a beautiful woman. Pu Songling also allows male characters to reflect the extremes of societal expectations, and demonstrate the danger of not being in control of one's emotions.

If the thesis project were to continue, a variety of different directions could be taken. One angle would be to study Chinese and Western poetry as a medium to further the discussion of beauty communicated through sensory imagery. Another angle would be to expand on literature capturing other human senses such as the sense of smell. An additional angle could be studying marriage dynamics through Chinese history. I also plan to explore Edgar Allen Poe's experience in China, and how his literature inspired Chinese writers and vice versa. I hope to continue research on deductive reasoning methods on both Chinese and Western audiences. Finally, studying the sense of sound is a fairly new topic, and I would like to explore modern studies on sound and beauty. For instance, preliminary studies are exploring podcast hosts, radio broadcasters, Apple's "Siri," and other voice devices in order to determine if one finds someone "beautiful" by simply hearing a voice.

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Biography

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