

## **Mediating Otherness and Place: Literati Discourse of the Strange in Mid-Ming Suzhou**

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Among the genres more or less marginalized by the reigning narrative of classical Chinese literature, the subject of *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of the strange) remains an enigma in proportion to the underlying epistemology the Confucian-educated elite shared.<sup>1</sup> My research aims to mine the unexploited texts of *biji* 筆記 (miscellaneous writings), the form of which facilitates the probe into the narrative modes of the strange. In so doing, I examine the stories from the *biji* written by men of letters in mid-Ming Suzhou around 1500, coinciding with economic boom and cultural revival in the locality. Particularly, this case study pertains to animistic and occult reflections on the contemporary world order elite observers aspired to make sense of. It ponders the historical, cultural and social dimensions of literati sensibility through which the long-established literary tradition of recounting the strange was renovated and the imagined attachment to the locale was constructed within the communal discourses of Suzhou elites and beyond. It is the enthralling force of otherness that redefines the *biji* writers who mediated their self-acknowledged obsession for the strange and place.

In this short article, I illuminate the significance of *zhiguai* against the specific backdrop of how they were composed, circulated and comprehended. The setting of mid-Ming (1450-1550) Suzhou features a cumulative expansion of knowledge and the localist narrative about the evolution of the lower Yangzi Delta into the cultural center empire-wide concomitant with the city's tremendous commercial and social momentum. The city rose not only to be "a dreamland of art and poetry" (Chang 2010, 42), but also the cradle of *zhiguai*. According to my research, at least fourteen *biji* collections that thematize or incorporate *zhiguai* stories were produced in mid-Ming Suzhou. I propose to re-envision the *biji* as a cabinet of anomalies, whereby the literati writers under discussion, as potent "inhabitants of the Song-Yuan-Ming transition" (Smith 2003, 72), crystalized their tastes feelings and learning into the communal discourse that traverses the boundaries of the mundane and the supernatural. The miscellaneous nature of the *biji* needs to be revisited in the new light inasmuch as the acute elite observers' shared interest in telling, retelling, collecting, circulating and editing those far less serious anecdotes points to a heterodox intellectual domain, dictated by a very different regime of knowledge. In response to a rapidly changing social order, in other words, the elite observers in mid-Ming

Suzhou keenly devoted themselves to the discursive practice of recounting anomalies that both originates from and redefines the Confucian-sanctioned taxonomy of knowledge.

The issue of knowledge-legitimizing in the discourse on norms and anomalies raises methodological difficulties. By what standard(s) can one decide what is normal or strange? The literati writers and stories to be scrutinized are highly selective, on the premise that taking up the format of *biji* for an erudite litterateur is to make a statement to claim his own authority. In Peter Bol's reading of Song scholar-official Zhang Lei's *biji*, it is clear that the hybrid nature of miscellaneous writings, or random jottings, alludes to an empirical way of thinking that discredits the universal and the systematic (Bol 1995, 123). In particular, the spatial-temporary construct as is often etched in the preface of a *biji* points to the elite writer's consciousness of recording what has been witnessed in retrospective or told of the moment within the literati circle and beyond, making the narrative to some extent an individual history. Such narrative contextualizes the author's personal experience, and thus legitimizes its format as an alternative to official historiography. In most cases written during literati's stay in the locality, *biji* have been regarded as eyewitness accounts considering their historical richness and literary originality.<sup>2</sup> The various sources the writers counted on provide for us more a collage than a panorama, in which the world of the educated was highly diversified. Central to the heterogeneous issues within a literati writer's concern, however, are the dynamics of elite consciousness from which social elites drew on cultural recourses to contemplate their strategies in the transitional period characterized by drastic dislocation and ensuing restoration. In this regard, such *zhiguai* writers as Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1460-1526) and Du Mu 都穆 (1458-1525), who represented the Suzhou elite circle *par excellence* of the day, witnessed a robust revival in the wake of the "four-century transitional period" at the turn of the sixteenth century locally (Smith 2003, 6). By taking their perspectives as vantage points, I want to bring to the fore the interlocking sets of mediated tensions that underlie narrative: the past/the present, the living/the dead, the mundane/the otherworld, the realistic/the fantastic, the settled/the rootless, the localism-centered/the state-oriented, and the like. The literati collections of anomaly tales present to us an indispensable perspective on its own terms in the sense that the perspective has been carried on among the autonomy of literati life, and echoes the very crisis that hovered over high Confucian culture of the time.

The *biji* is the juncture at which the identity crisis that haunted the cultural elite in confronting moral collapse and political chaos by virtue of waning state power, intersects with the long-lived trope of ghost stories. Here, literary rhetorics negotiated with cosmological and metaphysical thinking. To address the identity crisis through the lens of *biji*, I base my argument on the scholarship of elite activism centering around the interaction between the locality and literati through the middle to late imperial period of China, and thus problematize the text of *biji* as an elite product of involvement with local affairs and imagination of public authority

as well.<sup>3</sup> The mechanism of telling and retelling functions on the narrative level so as to justify the elite participants' construction of their multi-layered identity in the discourse of the strange. The discourse is structured in an innovative cultural sphere in response to rapidly changing circumstances under which local elites tried to redefine themselves in their communities. To tackle the trope of classical Chinese ghost stories, in the second place, this study foregrounds how the narrator deftly crystallizes his voice in between the two realms of the secular and the supernatural, hence problematizing the elite authors' commitment to a cosmological system of correlative thinking that accounts for human encounters with the strange, i.e. what happens in the human realm can be assigned the moral causality to the heavenly and earthy realms.

That perturbed ghosts as the phantoms of the dead urgently return to the human realm in the wake of contemporary violence is a common motif in classical Chinese literature (Yu 1987, 415). There exists an allegorical tradition of anomaly writing, embodying amplified anxieties over the flux of chaotic ages the literati writers incorporated into their narrative that is permeated by dynastic memory, moralistic agendas, individual lament or collective reflections in certain historical contexts. In the same time, the stories of the strange in question stem as much from that tradition as another prototype of ghosts that inhabit the animistic world of nature.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual manifestations of metamorphic beings or inanimate objects provide an unexploited insight into *zhiguai* writers' redirection towards the locality that was conceived of as both the figurative topos and physical home in mid-Ming Jiangnan. In the arena of Suzhou particularly, the local elites brought into play innovative impulse towards strange writing, which arguably paved the way for the flourishing of vernacular fiction during the late Ming by revitalizing of the genre the repressed imagination, fantasy, spontaneity, desire and the like.<sup>5</sup> How did Suzhou elites then conceive the ghosts and spirits that traditionally invite metaphoric interpretations of moral significance? What kind of new meanings were breathed into the genre in terms of the social and intellectual context in which it was revived? How do the literary representations of and reactions to the restored social order in mid-Ming Suzhou justify the discourse of anomalies? The main strategy of my research is to contemplate the ways in which the genre of *zhiguai* can be reinvented with regard to the multifaceted elite sensibility that mediates the place and strangeness. I argue that the *zhiguai* writers negotiated their identity crisis by the agency of literati sensibility that encompasses historical memory, cultural eccentricity and social sympathy in all its complicity, and thus grappled with an epistemological rupture between the literati self and collective identity in elite culture.

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## Notes

- 1 Part of the reason why the *zhiguai* genre retains its “unwieldiness,” as Anthony Yu (1987, 397) puts it, lies in the elusive boundary of the genre itself. Chronologically speaking, the compound word *zhiguai* originated from the locus classicus *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and thrived during the Six Dynasties period as a genre in its “cosmographic” terms (Campany 1996, 21). The label “anomaly accounts” that can’t be categorized in a single genre of writing according to traditional bibliographies has accumulated copious collections and works ever since, complicating the entwined relationship between history and fiction, if one can call the *zhiguai* “the birth of fiction (*xiaoshuo*)” (Dewoskin 1977, 36). Sharing the same narrative tradition epitomized by the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 and *Shiji* 史記, insofar as one can argue, history and *zhiguai* diverged in the wake of the latter’s increasing literary appeal to a well-educated audience whose growing self-consciousness in turn shaped later genres of narrative such as the Tang *chuanqi* 傳奇. Despite its generic ambiguity and bibliographic peripherality, the tradition of *zhiguai* that features a “typology of *guai* phenomena” has been carried on in all its constituent types

from the Six dynasties to the Tang (Kao 1985, 4-48), enriching the structures and techniques of narrative in both the classical and vernacular languages.

- 2 As Wilkinson demonstrates (2015, 650-652), *biji* encompass both fictional and factual elements and such paradoxologies as *zhiguai* can be safely left to students of literature under the rubric of *biji xi-aoshuo* 筆記小說 (note-form fiction). However, since whether the Western category of fiction as opposed to non-fiction applies to *zhiguai* is problematic, I don't think the single category of "note-form fiction" can be used to define the nature of *zhiguai*.
- 3 As far as the English-language scholarship is concerned, a great number of studies have been done regarding the dynamics of Chinese local elites in middle-to-late imperial China with the rise of local history as a field of study in the past four decades. See Esherick and Rankin (1990, 3-9); Bol (2001); Du (2012). One of the focal issues under dispute is how a shared local identity was shaped, maintained and challenged in the discourse of literati culture either from a dynastic or transdynastic perspective (Bol 2003). Particularly, in response to the institutional (the examination system) and economic (burgeoning commercialization and urbanization) changes grounded in the antagonism between the state and society, the cultural elite then deployed the strategies through various genres of literary texts, including prefaces for genealogies, local gazetteers, guidebooks, temple or tomb inscriptions, *biji* and the like. In doing so, the elites negotiated their role and their place in the locality (Fei 2009, 124-238).
- 4 Karl Kao categorizes the type as "animal transformations and transformations of inanimate objects" that are "part of natural reality" (Kao 1985, 8).
- 5 A typical example is Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574-1646), a Suzhou resident who lived through the late Ming and had a strong interest in Suzhou's history, folkways and personalities. He was a productive elite writer who not only edited, adapted and created a large number of vernacular stories, but also explored various genres in both the classical and vernacular languages to figure out a more appropriate way of expressing genuine feeling rather than "cliché-ridden mediocrity" (Hanan 1981, 77).