INTRODUCTION

It might seem perverse to represent a collection of short sketches that relate to the paranormal as revealing the "real life" of an era, as my title claims. The justification for that will gradually emerge. We need first to explain what kind of material we are dealing with, what kind of age gave rise to it, and what sort of a person the author was.

The Medium and Its Messages

The Chinese title of Ji Xiaolan's collection classes it as *biji*. That does not promise very exciting reading, because *biji* means something like "notes and jottings". In its broadest compass, *biji* literature may indeed be nothing more than that, odds and ends—comments on people and places, reflections on things at hand, animadversions on historical and scholarly matters. But more narrowly the reference is to *biji xiaoshuo*, short narratives or sketches centring on occurrences worthy of note. For such occurrences, isolated or linked together, to be worth recording, they must be unusual; in turn the unusual merges into the abnormal, and the abnormal into the paranormal or supernatural. Historically the genre of *biji xiaoshuo* has leaned in the last direction.

The early extant classics in the *biji* genre, written in the Six Dynasties [AD 420–589], included fable, exemplary tales and jokes, but were mostly about miraculous happenings, magical transformations, journeys down into hell and such like; since that

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was an age of turmoil when Buddhism and Taoism flourished and rationalistic Confucianism waned, nothing very different could be expected. In the succeeding dynasties *biji xiaoshuo* maintained a foothold, but in terms of narrative literature were eclipsed by more sophisticated, appetizing, this-world tales, complete with satisfying plots. Nevertheless *biji xiaoshuo* continued to serve scholarly tastes (they all used the classical language) for matters edifying, quirky, ingenious, erudite or witty.

To drastically curtail its history, *biji* literature saw its last flowering in Ji Xiaolan's lifetime, the eighteenth century. A considerable number of hefty collections by talented writers and eminent scholars were published then. Three authors stand out as having their works still in print, namely Pu Songling, Yuan Mei and Ji Yun, better known as Ji Xiaolan. All three have been translated into European and Asian languages. The first to be translated into English was Pu Songling, whose *Liaozhai zhiyi* was rendered in part by Herbert Giles under the title of *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* and first published in 1880, to a warm and lasting welcome. Less attention has been given to Ji Xiaolan's collection, though in China it has always been accorded comparable esteem, on different if no less worthy grounds. Before attempting to say where the difference lies, for convenience we have to give an English title to Ji Xiaolan's collection. It is made up of five separate volumes composed in his old age, between 1789 and 1798, later combined by his student Sheng Shiyan under the general title of *Yuewei caotang biji*. *Yuewei caotang* is simply the name of Ji's study, and so has no direct bearing on the contents, but as *yuewei* suggests the notion of small inklings or perceptions of great truths, we shall call it *Perceptions*.

Typically Pu Songling's narratives are crafted as fully fledged stories, being variously captivating, imaginative, colourful, graphic and sensual. Some recast and amplify old themes, but many are original creations, arising from the author's experience of life and exemplifying good and bad traits of humanity that he has observed. They impress not by their profundity but by their strength of feeling. The most striking tell of encounters with

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bewitching ghosts or fairy maidens, and given that the recipient of such favours is a poor unsuccessful scholar like the author, it would not be unfair to describe them as wish-fulfilling. Ji Xiaolan classified Pu Songling's style as "literary artistry", in contrast to his own approach which, compliant with the Confucian disdain for fabrication, was that of the scribe or compiler. With that remark we come within sight of his purpose to depict, albeit tangentially, the real life not of himself but of his times. Again by way of contrast, he had no cause to seek wish-fulfilment in his work, because in his case all worldly wishes were fulfilled. His family was wealthy, he rose to the top of the civil service, was laden with honours, enjoyed the emperor's favour, had a long and vigorous sex life (he had six concubines, though not all at the same time), and smoked the biggest pipe in the nation.

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The scribal role limits what is recorded to incidents personally witnessed or read about by the author, or attested to by others, the provenance being noted in every case (which is why so many of the pieces translated here start with "So-and-so contributed this"). The key factor is that the entries are not the product of the compiler's imagination, that is, not pure fiction. Of course the compiler has no way of knowing whether or not his informant has made up the story he tells: his job is done if he faithfully records what he hears. At the same time, by putting the stories down he accords them a certain status, and a degree of credibility. Usually an assessment or comment is added at the end.

In all, *Perceptions* includes around 1,200 entries (compared with the 500 of *Strange Stories*). Some go back to things seen and heard in his childhood, others derive from encounters over his long career, but the bulk are contributed by friends and associates. Ji's own excuse for amassing such a huge collection of what are for the most part seemingly trivial items was that it was his habit to write something of his own every day, and in his declining years it was simply an untaxing amusement to fill in leisure time, at least to begin with. But after the interest shown in the first of his five volumes, people in his circle supplied him with more and more material of a similar kind, so the project prolonged itself.

As we have indicated, the choice of subject matter was by no means eccentric: the retailing of what we can broadly call ghost stories was extremely widespread in his time. The contributors Ji names range from the highest intellectuals and statesmen in the land right down to peasants, servants, soldiers and traders. Domestically his grandfather's generation spun ghost stories to him in his childhood, his student circle swapped and debated them, and in mature life his colleagues amused themselves with them. Needless to say, the viewpoint behind these stories varied greatly, from awe and trembling stemming from belief to deliberate exploitation as parables for comment on society. A fuller discussion of belief in the supernatural will come later; as a preliminary we just remind ourselves that the Chinese people in Ji's time regarded the unseen world as part of, not separate from, the natural world. In that they differed only in degree from people in the western hemisphere before the scientific revolution made itself fully felt. For their part, the Chinese had their native cosmology that generously accommodated an unlimited number of unseen higher beings, which accounted for the plethora of idols, shrines and cults outside the recognized religions of Buddhism and Taoism. In the Christian world such manifold objects of worship had long ago been subsumed under the One God, the Holy Family and the Church's saints; the Chinese had many more diverse powers to revere, propitiate and supplicate: at any moment these powers could intervene in their lives, to punish or relieve. In accounting for the business of the spirit world, manifest in uncanny happenings, the minor literature of *biji* performed the legitimate function of broadening knowledge beyond what high literature dealt with, as well as illustrating in ordinary lives the rewards for good conduct and penalties for bad. Both those purposes Ji Xiaolan emphatically endorsed, in theory and in practice. Hardly any of his items do not contain a moral, either self-evident or expressly drawn, unlike Yuan Mei's nearly contemporary *Zi bu yu* (*What the Sage Did Not Speak of*), which disclaims any didactic purpose. We must suppose that there was something about the social climate that made Ji so single-minded.

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The Times Are out of Joint

Ji Xiaolan lived in the middle of the Qing dynasty [1644–1911], founded by an alliance of Manchu tribes who ousted the ethnically Han Ming dynasty. His adult life spanned the entire reign of the Qianlong emperor [1736–1795], which aspired to be the most splendid in Chinese history and certainly was the most lavish. The economy was prosperous overall, and the empire was strong. Militarily the main preoccupation was with troublesome but containable insurrections on its Inner Asian borders, which it had largely expanded. The European powers with Britain in the lead had not yet impinged upon the Chinese picture of the world. In brief, the Chinese empire thought of itself as self-sufficient. That was indeed the message bluntly given to the British embassy led by Earl Macartney when it came knocking at the door in 1793 to negotiate terms of trade: You have nothing that we need.

Internally the last major rebellions against alien Manchu rule had been put down in the early 1680s. By the turn of the eighteenth century the Han Chinese, high and low, were not only reconciled to Manchu rule, but took pride in the Great Qing Empire. The educated classes had long since returned to the pursuit of an official career via the state examination system, and the domination of Confucianism in life and thought had been reinforced by fiat of the ruling dynasty.

To return to the person of the Qianlong emperor, he was extremely well favoured by endowment and education. His stern father Yongzheng had relentlessly prosecuted corruption, imposed economies and tightened supervision from the centre, which put the son in a position to spend. And spend he did. Much of the architectural splendour which remains to be admired in China is owed to the building carried out in his reign. Grandeur in all aspects was the keynote of Qianlong's philosophy: grandeur in authority, in display, and crucially to our particular concern, grandeur in the arts. He was something of a culture vulture, and in his own estimation a supreme poet to boot: a total of 41,800 verses are attributed to him, a count that rivalled the

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Quan Tang shi (*Complete Tang Poems*) tally of 48,000 (covering 300 years). Perhaps it was the intoxication of power that made his administration in the second half of his sixty-year reign increasingly erratic, swinging from the despotic to the culpably lax. No more certain proof of that was the way an officer in his Manchu guard, Heshen by name, was whisked to prominence at the sole whim of the emperor, bypassing the regular channels. After proving his acumen and efficiency in limited matters, Heshen was promoted in quick succession to control the key instruments of power and decision in the state. His domination lasted from roughly 1775 to 1799, the years when Ji Xiaolan compiled his *Perceptions*.

As the emperor's right-hand man, Heshen's loyalty was to him rather than the state; accordingly he devised irregular means to fill Qianlong's depleted coffers. One of his innovations was to introduce "discretionary fines" as a substitute for demotions or possibly severe punishment for errors and omissions committed by senior bureaucrats, thus effectively undermining the primacy of strict discipline and proper conduct, and monetarizing morality. Some bureaucrats actually pre-empted fines by paying in advance for as yet unknown peccadillos. To placate or buy off Heshen was a protection against incurring the dangerous displeasure of the emperor, hence Heshen's personal wealth came to rival the assets of the central treasury. He was brought down only after Qianlong died, four years into the reign of his successor.

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The emperor himself led the way in the taste for luxury and acquisitiveness. In a manner befitting his ambition to be recognized as the greatest ruler in Chinese history he filled his palaces with jewels, works of art and antiques, either bought or presented to him in fealty. Lower down the scale, dignitaries acquired such rare objects by fair means and foul, with a view to possible presentation. An attendant practical question is where the liquid assets came from to facilitate the rapid and easy transfer of wealth needed to support this trade in luxuries: the simple answer is, in the currency of silver. In the eighteenth century China's export of commodities—chiefly teas, silks and ceramics—dwarfed

its imports: by this gross imbalance of trade China sucked in a very large proportion of the silver mined in Central and South America, doubling the previous internal supply. Officials at all levels connived to share this form of wealth, and naturally the higher up the ladder the bigger the shares. Greater riches meant more nutriment for venality.

Ji Xiaolan was named by a trained observer, a Korean ambassador to the Qing court, as one of a handful of senior officials not in the pocket of Heshen, and no historical account I have read taints him with any double dealing. At the same time, he lived and breathed at the centre of the bureaucratic web, and must have been very aware of the slide into more than usual corruption; in fact he was once openly suspected by Qianlong of encouraging a junior censor to bring down Heshen by indicting his servant for possessing ill-gotten gains. It is surely no accident that a reading of *Perceptions* leaves the impression that his society was peopled by far more sinners than saints. Unable to name and blame, he might have devoted himself the more assiduously to a literature where justice, not to be expected from the civil authorities on earth, is unerringly delivered from the spirit world.

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The Privileges and Perils of Eminence

Let us now look more closely at who our author was and what he did. The Ji clan had emigrated from the Yangtze Valley to Hebei province in the early fifteenth century. They settled in Xian county, Hejian prefecture, which lies to the south of Tianjin. By Ji Xiaolan's grandfather's time they were local magnates, having built up very extensive land holdings. According to county histories they founded and financed charity schools, and opened their granaries to feed the starving when floods occurred. So they enjoyed a good reputation. Several of Ji's ancestors had attempted to climb the examination ladder, but his father Ji Rongshu was the first to get a degree at the provincial level (in 1713), though he failed subsequent attempts at the highest, or metropolitan, level. After a long wait he did get a post in a ministry (1734), and went on from there to serve as a prefect. Considering his own frustration,

it is no wonder that when Ji Rongshu's third wife bore him a son who was precociously bright, quick-witted and blessed with a prodigious memory, he made sure the boy would have the best possible education. The home tutors engaged to teach Xiaolan were learned enough, but after his father bought a residence in the capital when Xiaolan was about ten years old, some of the most distinguished scholars of the age agreed to tutor him. The teenager became talked of among the upper crust for his wit and flair. True to promise, he came top in the first-level prefectural examination at the age of twenty (1744). The state examinations were not, however, a test of genius but rather of ability to work to formulas: it took him two attempts to pass the provincial examination, but when he did in 1747 it was with flying colours. Again he failed the top-level metropolitan examination in the following year; then, delayed by going into mourning for his mother, it was not until 1754 that he cleared that final hurdle, with a good enough pass to be admitted to the prestigious Hanlin Academy, which served among other things as the emperor's personal secretariat. Along this testing way Ji formed lasting bonds with batches of fellow examinees and a succession of examiners (examiners and successful candidates assuming a teacher-student relationship). Those two nexuses merged together as support and friendship groups for a scholar-official's lifetime. A further layer was added when the former student became an examiner, as Ji did. The majority of contributors to *Perceptions* belonged to those circles.

The closest of all relationships were those formed by kinship and marriage. Ji was married at the age of sixteen to a daughter of the Ma clan in the neighbouring county of Dongguang, an alliance which brought together two families of comparable wealth and standing. Their marriage lasted, harmoniously it seems, for fifty-six years (she died in 1795). Members of the Ma family also contributed to *Perceptions*.

So at the age of thirty Ji Xiaolan was at last on the starting grid for a launch into an illustrious career, for those admitted to the Hanlin Academy were judged the best and brightest scholars of the empire. One of the duties of a compiler, which was Ji's

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initial rank, was to record the daily doings of the emperor. On account of his wit Ji soon attracted the personal attention of Qianlong, who as we have noted was addicted to composing verses. As Ji had an extraordinary ability to produce extempore matching verses, he became the emperor's partner in rhyme. A mark of Qianlong's regard was Ji's appointment as chief examiner for the Shanxi provincial examination in 1759, a high honour for one so young. A more substantial posting that followed was to Fujian province in 1762 to act as Director of Education. It was cut short by the death of his father in 1764, when Ji Xiaolan had to follow the rule of suspending his career to observe mourning for three years.

That seemed a temporary intermission in an inexorable rise to eminence. Ji resumed court duties in 1767. The next year he was slated for a post of prefect in Guizhou, but Qianlong ruled that his superior erudition made him better suited to remain at the academy, though with a promotion in rank. Evidently he was still in the emperor's good books. But in the sixth month of 1768 an event occurred that brought his career to a shuddering halt. Without that fall from grace we would probably not have his *Perceptions*, and Ji Xiaolan's name would now be forgotten along with those of his similarly learned contemporaries.

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Much discussion and speculation has been devoted to the detail of the incident, but the bare bones can be simply stated. Lu Jianzeng, grandfather of Ji's son-in-law (married to Ji's eldest daughter), was suspected of receiving benefits from the corrupt sale of permits to transport salt (a government monopoly) while he served as Commissioner for the Huai River Valley. But when a raiding party descended on Lu's mansion to confiscate his valuables, it had already been stripped bare. Therefore he must have got wind of the impending raid, and the warning must have come from someone at court. Ji Xiaolan was found guilty of sending a coded message to his son-in-law in time for the valuables to be removed. He was exiled to serve in the garrison of Urumqi, Chinese Turkestan, the far western reach of the Qing empire, and home of the tribes of the steppes. His journey there under escort

took four months, over mountain ranges and deserts; one stretch had to be made by camel.

Ji expected conditions in Urumqi would be extremely primitive, but it turned out to be a large and thriving settlement, besides which he was cushioned from hardship by his personal fame. He served as something like office manager or chief clerk to the commanding general, the first of whose succession was an old acquaintance. All the same, the demotion from lord of the manor in his home village and palanquin-borne court official in the capital was precipitous. As a criminal in cotton clothes he was owed no respect by the people he rubbed shoulders with, would have been one of the crowd in the street. Inevitably he was made more sensitive to the privations and hazards and cruelties of life for common folk, and on the other hand appreciated at first hand the achievements of farmers, miners and construction workers; so much can be deduced from the 160 poems written in Urumqi, which also express unbounded admiration for the ingenuity of artisans and talents of street players and entertainers. Further clues to his state of mind can be gained from the letters he sent home to his family, which urged attention to famine relief and charitable works, forbad whipping of maids, cautioned against arrogance and extravagance, and warned against contempt for tenants and farm workers. An admonitory tone would have been conventional for a Confucian head of family, but *Perceptions* confirms that those were genuine abiding concerns: when twenty years later he embarked on that work, his underlying theme was precisely the morality of everyday life. And, incidentally, his time in Urumqi gave him a fund of stories that demanded to be told.

The emperor's own great literary enterprise was waiting in the wings when Ji Xiaolan was suddenly recalled from exile in the twelfth month of 1770. He arrived back in the capital in the sixth month of 1771, and was reappointed to the Hanlin Academy, where the work on assembling the biggest ever library of China's written heritage would be initiated. On the recommendation of a very prominent former examiner of his, Ji was appointed in 1773 to be one of the three chief editors of the *Siku quanshu*,

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a title translatable as *Compendium of the Four Sets of Books,* all books traditionally being assigned to one of four classes. For our purposes we shall refer to it as *Compendium*. It was designed to outdo the encyclopaedic collections compiled in the Yongle reign of the Ming dynasty and the Kangxi reign of Qianlong's grandfather. Since Ji Xiaolan stayed the course for the whole nineteen years of the *Compendium's* production, he effectively emerged as *the* chief editor.

To preserve the written heritage through finding and collating various texts to produce the best scholarly editions was of course a laudable aim. Rare books were either solicited or demanded (depending on the owners' willingness to lend) from private collectors to supplement the holdings of imperial libraries, and fair copies made; Ji Xiaolan himself volunteered over a hundred books. Given that China's literary history went back thousands of years, the scale of the project was enormous: once under way, the work of editing and hand copying required a staff of 4,300.

It soon transpired, however, that there was a not so laudable agenda behind this conservation project. Qianlong issued instructions that some books submitted should be destroyed, and offending passages deleted or rewritten, if they were deemed to be heterodox; his next set of instructions were more pointed: editors were to expunge anything defamatory or derogatory of the Manchu people, a ruling later extended to such references to all previous alien dynasties, lest the Manchus be tarred with the same brush. Thus conservation evolved into censorship. The editors had above them a battery of directors of ministerial rank, and Qianlong would also be personally monitoring progress. Understandably the tendency was to err on the side of caution: it is said that more of the acquired books were burned than preserved.

Apart from general duties, Ji Xiaolan was given the special task of editing a general catalogue for the *Compendium,* which took him eight years to complete. It consisted of reviews and synopses of 10,230 works, among which 3,470 were selected for copying, the rest being simply noted. The procedure was for experts in different fields to draft the entries, which were then passed up to

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