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Authoring the strange: the evolving notions of authorship in prefaces to classical Chinese supernatural fiction[1]

Frances Weightman

School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, UK

f.weightman@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This article considers the ways in which ideas of authorship have been portrayed in the authorial prefaces (*zixu*) to a selection of classical Chinese tales of the supernatural (*zhiguai*). It posits that the authorial preface is a unique forum for exploring the interplay between the author, reader and text. Within the controversial and contested tradition of writings about strange and otherworldly phenomena, it argues that over time the *zixu* provided a platform for the emergence of an increasingly individualised authorial persona.

Keywords: prefaces, *zhiguai*, authorship

It is remarkable that Seán Burke chooses to begin the introduction to his influential reader on (almost exclusively European) theories of authorship with the famous butterfly dream narrative from the *Zhuangzi*, encapsulating neatly the blurring of distinction between subject and object, fantasy and reality, so common within Chinese

[1] This article is based on a paper prepared for the international workshop on *Paratexts in Late Imperial Book Culture*, held at Heidelberg University in 2010, and benefited greatly from the input of fellow participants, and in particular from the organisers Rui Magone and Joachim Kurtz. The original research stemmed from a project on authorial prefaces funded by the Leverhulme Trust. I am also very grateful for the feedback of anonymous peer reviewers both from the University of Leeds and from JEAPS.

philosophical and literary traditions.[2] If dreaming is in some way akin to the creative process then, as Burke implies by contextualising the anthology in this way, premodern Chinese culture has much to offer the constantly evolving debates on authorship theory.

Concepts of creativity frequently arouse anxiety in Chinese literati discourse. Whether this is, as is sometimes claimed, a response to Confucius' oft-quoted declaration "I transmit but do not innovate" (*shu er bu zuo* 述而不作),[3] or whether it is due to a lack of mainstream theology which could provide an equivalent theory to that of divine inspiration, the issues of why, and how, a particular work comes into being, are questions which have long preoccupied Chinese thinkers. The traditional mistrust of fiction did not help the situation: it has often been pointed out that the closest Chinese term for fiction, *xiaoshuo* 小說, originated in early texts meaning 'small talk' or 'trivial matters'.[4] Perhaps for this reason, some of the earliest writers went to great lengths to demonstrate the historical and factual basis of what they wrote, and, as I will argue below, the paratextual 'packaging' of the texts provided a useful means by which to do this.

Issues of factual legitimacy, and the authorial role as creator or reporter, held particular implications for those who chose to write about otherworldly phenomena,

2 Seán Burke (intro and ed.), *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern: a reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), xv.

3 *The Analects*, 7:1, D.C. Lau (trans) (London: Penguin Classics, 1979), p. 86.

4 Two of the earliest uses of the term in this way occur in the *Zhuangzi,* and in Ban Gu's 班固 (32-92 A.D) *Han Shu* (History of the Former Han).

or the ‘strange’. The category of the strange encompassed a range of topics including animal and plant spirits (most famously fox spirits, but also those of other animals, flowers, trees, and even, occasionally, rocks), ghosts, anomalies of nature, freaks and eccentrics. Boundaries between human and non-human, dreams and reality, animate and inanimate, were frequently blurred or ignored and a ‘supernatural’ world of abnormal events was created. A vibrant tradition of this type of writing, known as *zhiguai* 志怪 or ‘records of the strange’, existed in China from early imperial times, reaching its peak in the seventeenth century with Pu Songling’s 蒲松齡 (1640-1715) celebrated anthology, *Strange Tales of Liaozhai*. In general as the genre developed with time the stories became more complex, and plots could range from apparently two-dimensional portrayals, say of giant cat-killing rats, to detailed depictions of the seduction of naïve scholars by worldly fox spirits, or else to moral, and sometimes satirical, tales of loyalty, justice or sacrifice within the non-human world.

In the Confucian tradition, the subject-matter of the strange was inherently problematic and considered unsuitable for self-respecting scholars to take an interest in, let alone write fiction about.[5] A well-known line from the Confucian classic *The*

[5] There is much debate about the extent to which *zhiguai* writings should be classed as ‘fiction’, particularly given the oft-noted overlap between historical and literary writings, not to mention the etymology of ‘*xiaoshuo*’ itself. Many scholars have discussed this, with some believing these stories to be the initial manifestation of creative fiction and others, notably Campany, who see it more as an extension of cosmography (see Robert Campany, *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China* (New York: SUNY, 1996), pp. 200-201). In his study of the *Liaozhai*, Luo Hui has summed up the debate rather neatly, a divide in his words, “between adherents of the “birth of fiction” theory and those who advocate *zhiguai* as a peripheral form of writing with clear persuasive ends”

Analects was often cited in this regard, namely that "The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods,"[6] and was so pervasive that *zhiguai* writers had to engage with this pronouncement in some way: either by justifying the apparently supernatural elements of their tales by insisting that they actually existed in the real world; emphasising the didactic nature of their work; or else, among the less orthodox authors, ironically subverting it. The ultimate response came in the 18th century when Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798) parodied the dictum directly by boldly entitling his own *zhiguai* collection, *That of which the Master did not speak*.

The controversial nature of this subject matter, which leaves the author vulnerable and potentially open to criticism, seems to underline the particular importance of the paratextual elements of the writing. It is here, in the paraphernalia surrounding and packaging the text, in the liminal channels which connect the work, the author and the reader, where the content can be presented, or defended, or marketed, in a certain way, guiding interpretations or at least protecting the author's image. While Yuan Mei's choice of title is one example of this paratextual function, more often than not, such efforts are most clearly visible in the authorial prefaces to the collections.

As a formal device, the preface has long been privileged in Chinese literary tradition, and has often been used as a vehicle for musings on the nature of literature itself.[7]

("The Ghost of *Liaozhai*: Pu Songling's Ghostlore and its History of Reception", PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, p. 7).

[6] *The Analects*, 7:21, D. C. Lau (trans.), p. 88.

[7] The outstanding example of this is the Great Preface of the *Shijing* (Book of Odes), quoted and referred to in Chinese literary criticism perhaps more than any other single work.

One of the earliest examples of what purports to be an authorial preface in Chinese is the "Appended Commentary" (Xici) to the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), attributed to Confucius. In the words of the Qing scholar, Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731-1815), the function of the preface at this stage was: "To deduce the origins (of the classic) and broaden its significance." [8] However, as time went on the uses of such prefaces became broader and more complex, to include for example the contextualisation of the work within a tradition, the author's declared motivation for writing and sometimes, increasingly so I argue in later works, an attempt at the depiction of an authorial persona.

Scholars have noted that the most common Chinese word for 'preface', *xu* (for which the two characters 序 and 敘 are used interchangeably) suggests the original associations with ordering or sequencing, possibly implying an attempt to organise what comes afterwards.[9] An alternative is *yin* 引 suggesting the function of the preface as being to draw out, or explicate the work. In early works, prefaces tended to be placed after the work itself while in later imperial times, possibly related to the emergence of the *ba* 跋 (postscript) in the Tang/Song period, they normally preceded

[8] Cited in Zhao Jingshen's 趙景深 preface, to Ding Xigen's 丁錫根 *Zhongguo lidai xiaoshuo xuba ji* (An anthology of prefaces and postfaces to Chinese fiction throughout history) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1996) vol. 1, p. 1.

[9] See e.g. Zhou Junqi 周俊旗 and Wang Dan 汪丹 (eds.) 歷代序跋名篇選譯 Lidai xuba mingpian xuanyi [Selected Translations of famous Prefaces and Postfaces] (Beijing: Zhongguo Qingnian cbs, 1998), p. 1.

the main text. The major divisions of *xu* are *taxu* 他序, those written by others, or *zixu* 自序, the authorial preface. The latter is my focus here.[10]

In fiction of any cultural tradition, the authorial preface is perhaps the most direct means of communication between the author and his or her readership. The author is naturally free to use this in very different ways, to adopt a fictional stance, or even a whole new persona, to lie about his or her motivations, defend any imagined criticism or even simply to extend the narrative of the 'main text'. Nevertheless there is an agency at work here which can be identified, even if only as an absence. One of the strongest claims I have come across for an authorial persona being revealed through the preface in Western literature is William Elliot's introduction to his Harvard Classics anthology of *Famous Prefaces*, in which he describes how "a personality which has been veiled by a formal method throughout many chapters, is suddenly seen face to face in the Preface."[11] Elliot's use of the term 'personality' here suggests, to me at least, something more than simply a dim indication of an authorial voice, but rather a glimpse of the writer as an individual, with all that this implies in terms of emotion, motivation, subjectivity and agency.

[10] Further minor categories of *xu* include the *zengxu* 贈序 which refer to pieces written on the occasion of someone's departure, *shixu* which were short pieces 詩序 preceding poems providing contextual explanation, and *shouxu* 壽序 which were popular from the mid-Ming onwards and contained wishes of longevity. These are usually recognised as forming separate genres and are not dealt with in this article.

[11] William Elliot, *Famous Prefaces* (New York: Collier & Son, 1909) 62nd reprint, 1969, p. 4.

Transferring the very term 'individual' into a Chinese context is complex. Lydia Liu, among others, has warned of the dangers of imposing a western idea of the self as an analytical concept onto non-western cultures,[12] and any attempt to impose a definition which relies on such an individualized authorial voice onto a Chinese tradition would of course be immediately problematic. Confucian conceptions of the self were grounded within a network of social relations and roles. Given the numerous instances of well-known texts where the author is unknown, or the attributions highly suspect, along with the prevalence of composite authorship particularly for novels, it may seem even more problematic to speak meaningfully of a Chinese authorial voice.[13]

Traditional shared conceptualisations of the reading process, however, common from a very early period in China, do appear to endorse the idea of the author being knowable and with a specific identity. David Rolston notes that readers from the time of Mencius or earlier had the author very much in mind while reading: "For them, proper understanding entailed putting yourself in the author's shoes or visualising the author as you read."[14] As an example of this, in a footnote, Rolston cites the end of Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (c.145-86 BCE) biography of Confucius in the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*), "When I read the works of Confucius, I try to see the man himself."[15]

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[12] Lydia Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity-China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

[13] See eg. William H. Nienhauser Jr, *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, Vol. 1, (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 43.

[14] David L. Rolston's *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing between the lines* (Stanford, Stanford Uni Press, 1997), p. 7.

[15] Using Gladys Yang and Yang Hsien-yi's translation, *Records of the Historian*, (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1974) p. 27.

While it is arguable that this may be partially due to the nature of the Analects, and the central role of the figure of Confucius as sage within the text, nevertheless it is clear that from a very early period there was an expectation that part of the reading process was an active engagement with the constructed person of the author.

Recently, some scholars have argued that authors within the *zhiguai* tradition are particularly concerned with individual identity. In her study of three late Qing collections of supernatural fiction, Lydia Sing-chen Chiang describes what she sees as "an unprecedented authorial awareness of the problematic of the self."[16] She frames the collections using theories of psychoanalysis and explores the actual process of anthologising or collecting as a way of the author creating an "artifice of the self".[17] "Chinese strange tale collections foreground the issue of *representation* – both of the strange events represented and of the author's unique, individualized identity as a *writer*."[18] A Chinese *zhiguai* collection, she states, is "a textual artifice of the collector's self, whose main concern lies in the centrality and validity of his own subjectivity."[19] Paolo Santangelo, who has perhaps contributed more than any other sinologist to debates on and analysis of the elusive self and personality (particularly in terms of emotions) within premodern Chinese culture, appears to concur, suggesting, with reference to Chiang's work, that the *zhiguai* collections, "are particularly fitting

[16] Sing-chen Lydia Chiang, *Collecting the Self: Body and Identity in Strange Tale Collections of Late Imperial China* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 250.

[17] Ibid., p. 4 ff.

[18] Ibid., p. 2.

[19] Ibid., p. 7.

to construct a literary identity encompassing the multiplicity and contradictions of the elusive self, and to express the self's marginality, multiplicity and mutability."[20]

In what follows, I will consider how Chinese authorial prefaces, within the formal restrictions of the genre, can shed some light on this complex area, by allowing the focus to shift from the impersonal object of the text, towards the person of the writer, thereby providing the most direct means for readers to meet this apparent expectation of envisaging the author. As I will argue below, the formulaic declarations of motivation for writing, which have formed a regular feature of Chinese prefaces throughout history, can provide a space for the revelation of a more distinct and individualized authorial voice. Idema and Haft have described the Chinese authorial preface as the "genre that most closely approaches Western autobiography."[21] As well as providing an elucidation of the main text, the author often chose it to reveal something of his or her own constructed persona.

He Qingshan 何慶善 has described the function of prefatorial texts to classical Chinese works as being peculiarly subjective, although He's perspective is that of the reader: "Prefaces and postfaces are the eyes and windows of a book, they are a bridge to communicate thoughts and emotions between the reader and the author. Through the preface and postface the reader can grasp the author's intention and the writing process, and understand the gist of the book, and once the reader has got a solid

[20] Paolo Santangelo, *Materials for an Anatomy of Personality in Late Imperial China*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 22.

[21] Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft, *A guide to Chinese Literature* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan, 1997), p. 83.

understanding of this, then when they open the book and read, they will feel an extraordinary warmth, and a happy sense of the familiar."[22] It is interesting that in this statement He appears to accept unquestioningly that the preface, in premodern times at least, would be read before the main text was tackled. This is backed up by an episode cited by another contemporary scholar of Chinese prefaces, Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯, which suggests that the paratextual elements of the book were the first stage in the reading process: "Qian Jibo[23] of Wuxi once said that the way to read ancient books was to first read the preface and postface (including the author's own preface and those written by others). By so doing, he said, one can understand fully the book's meaning, the author's purpose, and contemporary and later critiques of the book."[24] The importance of these texts in framing the reader's perceptions and engagement with both the main text and the figure of the author, is clear.

In order to consider an evolutionary shift over time in a genre such as autobiography, we can either link the content to broader historical transformations in society and/or assume a conscious engagement on behalf of the writer with the earlier tradition. Since the works that I am dealing with here are very much part of an established 'canon' of supernatural writing, and since the authors share a common Confucian

[22] From the preface of He Qingshan 何慶善 (ed) *Qiangu xuba* 千古序跋 (Ageless prefaces and postfaces) (Hefei: Anhui wenyi cbs, 2004), p. 1.

[23] Qian Jibo 錢基博 (1887-1957) was a noted literary historian, and father of the renowned author Qian Zhongshu 錢鐘書 (1910-1998).

[24] From the preface to the first volume of Qian Zhonglian 錢仲聯 (ed) *Lidai bieji xuba zonglu* 歷代別集綜錄 (A compilation of prefaces and postfaces to anthologies of individual author's works throughout the ages) (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu cbs, 2005), p. 1.

education, and the subsequent scholar/official aspirations, for this short study, I will take the latter approach and focus mainly on the texts *per se*.

In European literature, Kevin Dunn has noted a chronological shift in the author's self-portrayal in authorial prefaces: "The 'I' that speaks the preface of the early modern book," Dunn states, "is never merely the writerly 'I'; it is first and foremost the essence of the authorial claim."[25] In contrast, he argues, in contemporary Western literature the preface seeks to portray the author as a "representative speaker of public discourse", a figure with something to say to society, independent of the text which follows.[26] Genette further notes that the eighteenth century provides a turning point in terms of the emphasis on originality in the European authorial preface. He cites Rousseau's famous declaration of the novelty and uniqueness of his work: "I am undertaking a work which has no example, and whose execution will have no imitator." This claim to originality is offered in contrast to the classical works, which tended to adopt traditional and time-tested themes, and authors were charged to provide a "new version of a well-tried subject." Genette notes that "In classical prefaces.... this argument from ancientness is handled indirectly, in the form of an indication of sources exhibited as precedents."[27]

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[25] Kevin Dunn, *Pretexts of Authority: The rhetoric of authorship in the renaissance preface* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 11.

26 Dunn, op.cit., p. 153.

[27] Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (1987) translated by Jane E Lewin as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 200.

So to what extent do similar shifts occur within the Chinese context? What are the main features of authorial prefaces to Chinese supernatural fiction, and do these change along with the evolution of the genre, and changing literati culture?

In his survey of the *zhiguai* tradition, Zhao Xiaohuan has identified five stages of development.[28] The first dates from the Eastern Zhou until the fall of the Han, an embryonic stage where the subject material consisted of myths and fables, in works such as the *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi*, *Huainanzi* and the *Shanhaijing*. A more systematic emergence of *zhiguai* as a genre occurred during the Six Dynasties, where Gan Bao's 干寶(d. 336) *Soushenji* (Records of an Inquest into the Spirit Realm) was hugely influential. By the Tang and Five Dynasties period, as more established literati turned their hands to this subject matter, more mature narratives emerged. Thereafter, Zhao notes a decline in the genre, which lasted until the early Ming, and the appearance of Qu You's 瞿佑 (1347-1433) '*jiandeng* 剪燈' series (Anecdotes by the Lamplight). This revival reached a peak in the Qing with Pu Songling's *Liaozhai zhiyi* and later Yuan Mei's *Zi bu yu* and Ji Yun's 紀昀 (1724-1805) *Yuewei Caotang Biji* (Random Jottings from the Cottage of Close Scrutiny). According to Zhao, "the prevailing rational outlook and carefully inculcated philosophical temper" of these last two collections were detrimental to the further development of the genre, and by the late Qing *zhiguai* stories became conventional and stereotyped.[29]

[28] Xiaohuan Zhao, *Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction: A Morphological History* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), pp. 145-147. Below, and in the table in the appendix, I have used some of the English translations of titles from Zhao's work, and others from Robert Campany (1996).

[29] Ibid., p. 147.

The emerging author in *zhiguai* prefaces[30]

In a culture where claiming divine inspiration was not an obvious option for authors, the need to avoid responsibility for creativity often took the form of claims that the material was collected, passed on.[31] The 'author' was not a creator but rather a collator, or reporter. Sometimes quite elaborate stories were concocted about the provenance of these tales, of which the most well-known example is discussed below. A further commonly used justification for the production of a collection of these tales was to cite literary precedents within the *zhiguai* tradition while claiming to be correcting earlier oversimplifications or omissions. By casting himself[32] as more of an editor than a creative writer, responsibility for content was once again avoided, and he could benefit from any reflected legitimacy earlier works had gained. In terms of declared motivations for writing, there were two main traditions[33] open to, and almost inevitably adopted by, these writers: the didactic, which considered literature as the means to convey the *dao* (*wen yi zai dao* 文以載道); or the expressive, literally the tradition of 'venting one's indignation' (*xie fen* 洩憤). Adopting the didactic stance,

[30] The selection of prefaces in this sample have all been taken from Ding Xigen's 丁錫根 exceptionally useful *Zhongguo lidai xiaoshuo xuba ji*.

[31] It is of course perfectly possible that, in many cases, material for these collections was indeed no more than a compilation of anecdotes sourced from others. I am less interested in what 'actually' happened in terms of the production of these anthologies, but rather in how the author presents the authoring/collating practice. The fact that the process needs to be explicitly defined in this way is in itself indicative of the anxiety surrounding the provenance of supernatural fiction.

[32] I have yet to find any instances of female writers of *zhiguai*, prior to the twentieth century.

[33] A third common formulation (sometimes subsumed within the '*xiefen*' tradition), that of 'crying out because of injustice' (*bu ping ze ming* 不平則鳴) is not directly cited within these prefaces.

however contrived it may appear, was one strategy favoured particularly in the early *zhiguai* texts, to deal with the controversial subject matter.

Self-justification in early *zhiguai* writings was a particular challenge for writers anticipating criticism for their heterodox content. In the case of the earliest of the prefaces in this sample, the preface to the *Shizhou ji*, the instigation for writing the work, in this case an account of the lands of the immortals, is stated as being a direct personal request by the Emperor, providing perhaps the ultimate claim for legitimacy. No greater authority could be claimed for a work and the later *Dong ming ji* preface cites this earlier work thereby claiming some reflected legitimacy. In this preface the writer also avoids personal responsibility for the work, and manages to portray himself as a filial son, by stating he is merely continuing a family tradition of collecting such writings.

An alternative approach, which allowed writers even in the earliest period to adopt the didactic stance, was to challenge the notion that the subject matter is not real, thus deliberately constructing themselves as recorders of factual events, rather than as creators of fiction. In what is by far the most sophisticated of these earlier prefaces, Gan Bao 干寶 (?-336) addresses the question of the actuality of the events described:[34] he states clearly his purpose in writing is "to make clear that the way of the spirits is not a fabrication". He also challenges the objectivity of what one sees with one's eyes and ears, citing examples of conflicting versions of eye-witness

[34] According to Campany, it seems likely that this preface may have in fact originated with a Tang edition of the work, although it will have been based on Jin sources (Campany, p. 146). This may also explain the greater complexity of this work.

statements in the past. There are several references to bizarre anecdotes surrounding his family which, at first glance, may seem to be an indication of a strong autobiographical sensibility. However, it soon becomes clear that the purpose of these narratives is rather to emphasise the normality of the tales themselves, by stressing the strangeness of his lived environment. The importance of "events that are seen and heard" can also be addressed, as in Wang Yan's 王琰 (c. 454-?) preface, by contextualizing his whole work in terms of a series of encounters with Buddhist monks. Wang Yan still adheres to the didactic formulation, although his stated purpose in writing is to prove the efficacy of Buddhist, rather than Confucian, teachings.

In sum, the key recurrent features of early *zhiguai* prefaces are: citations of earlier classics or other collections, an insistence on the factual existence of supernatural phenomena, a clear didactic message, and in general a focus on the text or subject matter, with little evidence, in most cases, of autobiographical detail or any attempt to construct an authorial persona as such, although the author's family is sometimes referred to as part of the justification for the work.

In the later imperial period, from the eleventh century onwards, the subject area required somewhat less justification. This is possibly because, beginning in the Song dynasty, Neo-Confucian emphasis on cosmological issues broadened the definition of the *Dao* (namely the 'path' of orthodox doctrine, which writers in the didactic tradition still aimed to convey), to include a wider variety of cosmic and supernatural phenomena. Chinese writers were therefore arguably more justified in populating their tales with supernatural characters, so long as the overall message was in line

with Confucian morality. In this way, there was more space in the later imperial period for writers within this tradition to use their prefaces to develop more of an identity. Following Zhao's analysis above, it is also arguable that by this time the genre itself had gained a degree of maturity such that it may have gained more respectability as a literary form amongst the scholar classes.

Within some of these prefaces, then, and particularly within those which diverge from stating a conventional didactic motivation, an authorial voice is clearly perceptible, although it may still prefer to construct itself as editor rather than creator. The focus of the writing is more on the author himself, rather than on the matter of the text.

To illustrate this, and as what can perhaps be seen as a transitional stage in the development of the *zhiguai zixu*, we can consider the Song historian Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202) and his monumental *Yi Jian Zhi* [Record of the Listener]. According to Zhao's analysis, the tales themselves are disappointing in their lack of original content,[35] but nevertheless Hong Mai was the single most prolific author of *zhiguai*, with around 6,000 separate accounts, in 420 chapters, written over the course of some sixty years, and this persistence in itself suggests at least an unusual level of self-assuredness and lack of anxiety concerning the subject matter. He was equally a prolific preface writer, with 31 authorial prefaces, of which thirteen are extant, written between 1172 and 1199. [36] Reading these chronologically there is a shift of focus. In

[35] Zhao, Xiaohuan, p. 116.

[36] Alister D. Inglis, in his monograph on Hong Mai, provides a full translation of all thirteen extant authorial prefaces. Moreover, he also makes considerable analysis of the remnants and summaries of the other lost prefaces (there were 31 prefaces in total to this work, one for each chapter, except for the

the earliest prefaces, justification of why such a great scholar as he could possibly be interested in this subject matter seems paramount. In many ways this is in direct contrast to Genette's model, cited above, in which the classical writer constructs a lofty subject of which he is unworthy and unable to treat adequately. In the earliest of the extant prefaces (accompanying the second instalment) Hong adopts mostly standard practices and begins very passively stating that people thought of him as a lover of the strange and a worshipper of the exotic, so sent him anecdotes from all over the country. He refers to earlier *zhiguai* works, and says that there must be some moral or allegorical worth within them. He also declares categorically that everything he has written is factually substantiable. However, he also grounds the production process in reality, giving specific locations of publication, and happily boasts of the success of his first instalment, stating that "Every household has a copy." A recurring theme throughout the texts is his pride in the sheer length of the work, and his speed in completing it. Three prefaces later, in a bold use of irony he jokes that he has already written three times as many words in his first four books, as the whole of the Confucian canon. From the fifth instalment he begins to refer to 'real' contemporaries, and starts to build a more personal social identity.

In his later prefaces the focus changes almost entirely from text to author. He talks about how grateful he is that despite his increasing age he is blessed with good hearing so he can still gather material, good mental stamina so that he can still remember what he has heard, and good physical health so that he can still write down the anecdotes. By the tenth instalment (written at the age of 71) he first mentions his

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last one), preserved in a collection of miscellaneous literary pieces entitled *Record after the Guests Retire* (*Bintui lu*), by Zhao Yushi 趙與時, a near-contemporary of Hong Mai.

youngest son as providing him with an incentive to keep writing. This mention of family members is quite different from the early texts discussed above, where family were used to link to tradition, ancestors, and as part of the justification for the subject-matter. Here, by referring to his son by name, the effect is to add to the sense of a more individual authorial persona. As time goes on, as if his confidence in the acceptability of his subject matter grows, his son becomes a fairly regular feature, and he appears to use the texts more as an outlet for autobiographical portrayal, which becomes increasingly personal in the final texts. He mentions that family members are concerned for his health and that he should stop collecting these strange stories at his age (he desists). His self-mocking is gentle and often humorous in tone, in his 24th instalment he again says he felt he should give up, "Yet I cannot release myself from this folly. Regretting it, I once hastily cleared away all my material, not looking at it again. But it was like forbidding a toddler from falling down. Before long, I was once again involved, more so than ever."[37] Inglis notes a change in tone in Hong's final prefaces, which lack what he terms the unusally "brash" style of some of his earlier texts.[38] But it is in this apparent lack of self-assurance, I would argue, that we finally see a glimpse of the personal, subjective, voice, with all its vulnerability. He now states his primary motivation as being that he really enjoys doing it (*shu zi xi ye* 殊自喜也) and finally deliberately questions the necessity of authenticity, pointing out, as had Gan Bao much earlier the relativity of the 'truth'.

According to Zhao's genealogy, the *zhiguai* genre was at its most mature during the mid/late Ming and early Qing. This was also a key period in the evolution of both

[37] Inglis' translation.

[38] Inglis, p. 54.

authorial self-representation, and of paratextual activity. The period between 1566 and 1680 has been described by Wu Pei-yi as "the golden age of Chinese autobiography," with many accounts breaking free of the rather restrictive conventions of historiography and displaying individual eccentricities and distinctive personalities. [39] At the same time, scholars have also noted the increasingly blurred distinction between literati and the merchant classes during this period. Kai-wing Chow notes the general commodification of writing during the Ming and the related sudden proliferation of *taxu* prefaces (along with other paratextual elements) from the late Ming, and the increasing variety of social functions which these now played, as "a source of income, and as a means for social networking, creating publicity for writers and generating patronage."[40] By this period, Chow claims, "Preface writing was an economic, marketing, communal, and professional act." [41] Prefaces were commissioned, and preface writers, along with the financial incentives, also gained social capital and prestige, linked to the reputation both of the author and the work itself. Qian Zhonglian notes specifically that to be invited to write a preface for an anthology of an individual author's works (*bieji*), in particular, was a sure indication of one's scholarly reputation in intellectual circles.[42]

So, according to Zhao's genealogy, the best specimens of the *zhiguai* genre were produced during a period of significant change for literati culture in general: a time

[39] Pei-yi Wu, *The Confucian's Progress: Autobiographical Writings in Traditional China* (Princeton, NY: Princeton UP, 1990), p. 196.

[40] Kai-wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture, and Power in Early Modern China* (California: Stanford UP, 2004), p. 110.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Qian Zhonglian , op. cit., p. 1.

chararacterised by a heightened sense of autobiographical sensibility, a more commercially aware literati, where a single volume could have many different pieces of prefatory writing packaging it, and where many of these paratextual elements were being viewed as commodities. Against this complex backdrop, how did authors of the strange approach the *zixu* to the works? Unlike the practitioners of the *taxu*, there were hardly the same gains to be made by writing a preface to one's own work, either in terms of financial reward or of an enhanced reputation within literary circles. Indeed it is arguable that the significance and impact of a single *zixu* could even be lessened by its inclusion within an ever-expanding paratextual framework to a piece. In what follows I will consider the main features of *zixu* from this period, to explore the traces of the elusive personas revealed by authors of those texts which are generally acknowledged to be the finest of the *zhiguai* tradition.

In prefaces of the late Ming and early Qing, references and allusions still abound. However there seems to be a slight shift whereby general references to early myths and legends set the scene. Where Confucian dictates are mentioned, it tends to be either ironic or, with a direct challenge to their authority, as in the case of Yuan Mei's startling choice of title, or that of He Bang'e 和邦額 (1736?-??), who opens his preface to *Occasional Records of Conversations at Night* with the words, "The Master did not speak of monsters, yet here nothing but monsters are recorded – isn't that heretical!" While in the earlier prefaces justification of subject matter was paramount, here these references usually appear to be chosen deliberately to frame a carefully constructed image of the author, whether as a traditional orthodox scholar, or as a 'romantic' eccentric.

He Bang'e's preface is a good example. He refers in his opening section to various mythological phenomena, but uses them to muse, firmly tongue in cheek, on the heretical nature of monstrosity. He then moves to the main section where he shifts his focus entirely to himself as writing subject: "I am already in my 44th year, but have never yet encountered a monster. Nevertheless I often like to share wine and tea with a few friends, and we turn down the lamps and tell of ghosts, or talk of fox-spirits under the moonlight." [43]

Poets and established literary figures (not necessarily from within the *zhiguai* tradition) now feature strongly as points of reference for the author, rather than simply the subject matter. An interesting recurrent motif for many of these writers is a comparison of themselves, or their temperament, to the colourful Su Dongpo 蘇東坡 (1037-1101) who famously, during a stint as vice militia commander (effectively in exile, for his criticism of Wang Anshi) in Huangzhou from 1080 to 1084, demanded that the local people tell him ghost stories. The shift in contextualisation of the subject matter, to the contextualisation of the author, seems to reflect a growing sense of confidence within the tradition.

While fascinating autobiographical details are provided in some cases, for the most part the authorial persona emerges through the expressed motivations for writing and through reflections on the writing process itself.

In terms of motivation, writers were free to claim both didactic and autobiographical, expressive motivations. Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1461-1527), for example, says of his

[43] Ding Xigen, p. 166.

writing: “I would prefer not to scratch this itch, but I have no choice. I write whenever I have free time, or am inspired, or if anything unusual or exciting happens, I must write it up.” However the same writer in a preface to a later work adopts a didactic stance, saying “although writing about the strange is not as beneficial as writing about normal things…..if I write them down then those who suddenly come across them know what things to avoid and how to admonish them, then this also is not without benefit.” A new championing of the readership and market considerations, and deriving justification from this, is also evident here, when Zhu claims that his stories are things which people like to read and, referring to the tradition, he states that his predecessor Hong Mai, would never have gone on writing for so long if there weren’t people around who really loved these tales. He ends, finally, on a direct and flippant challenge to the Confucian authorities saying that, if ordinary people are so fond of these works, then “If high theoreticians condemn my work as preposterous and discard it …..what do I care?” Zhu’s approach, then, adopts both didactic and expressive motivations while, at least in his later work, distancing himself from the Confucian orthodoxy and constructing himself as an advocate of the common people.

In Pu Songling’s 1679 preface to the *Liaozhai zhiyi*, he appears not at all concerned with justifying the unorthodox content of the work and his focus is far more autobiographical, including a description of a dream his father had at his birth implying that Pu was an incarnation of a Buddhist monk. The preface concentrates on his own loneliness and his writing of these tales as a means of venting his lonely frustration. In this way, using emotional release as his motivation for writing, the literary tradition to which he appeals is that of Qu Yuan, to whom he compares himself directly in the opening lines. However, even in this very self-reflective piece,

he eschews responsibility for creating the tales, and says "What I have heard, I committed to paper" and that like-minded men from all over the country had sent him anecdotes for inclusion. (The unlikeliness of this claim, since Pu was not a well-known writer at this stage, was dealt with by the later emergence of apochryphal anecdotes (popularized only after the author's death) describing how he sat at the road side offering tea to passers-by in exchange for them recounting tales which he assiduously wrote down and compiled.[44]) The relationship between the authorial voice of the paratext and the creative inspiration behind the tales themselves, is clearly an uneasy one. Despite this, as Zeitlin points out, the description of the conscious act of the writer at work in Pu Songling's preface is remarkable. Following Zeitlin's vivid translation: "It's just that here it is the glimmering hour of midnight as I am about to trim my failing lamp. Outside my bleak studio the wind is sighing; inside my desk is cold as ice. Piecing together patches of fox fur to make a robe, I vainly fashion a sequel to *Records of the Underworld.* Draining my winecup and grasping my brush, I complete the book of 'lonely anguish'. How sad it is that I must express myself like this!"[45]

[44] Li Lingnian 李靈年 suggests the most likely source of the proliferation of this legend is the late Qing scholar Zou Tao 鄒弢 (1850-1931) and his account within 三借廬筆談 [*Collection from the Thrice-Loaned Hut*] (see 蒲松齡與聊齋志異 [Pu Songling and *Liaozhai zhiyi*] (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu cbs, 1993) pp. 54-55). For an interesting analysis of how the emergence of this anecdote may be linked to the importance of orality within the tradition, see Rania Huntingdon's *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 20.

[45] Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (California: Stanford UP, 1993) p. 49.

In sharp contrast, Ji Yun despite being one of the latest in our sample, constructs an image of himself as almost entirely disinterested in the content of his work. Not surprisingly, given his very high-profile position at the time as imperially commissioned editor of a huge Qing compilation of texts (comprising over 36,000 volumes), Ji Yun also argues for the didactic function of his supernatural tales, insisting that "the anecdotes and opinions of the alleyways may still be useful in encouraging good and discouraging evil," while noting that they "had no connection with genuine composition." The prefaces are written over a nine-year period, but are fairly similar in content, repeatedly stressing the fact that he wrote them because he had a lot of time on his hands, without much to do, just to pass the time. The rough draft of the first collection, he claims, was published without his consent. The other collections he describes as appearing without any effort on his part, subconsciously. Always published because someone else wanted them to be, he twice states the writing process was "as random as clouds passing before the eyes." A figure of such status as Ji Yun presumably felt less need to construct himself for his readers as consciously engaged with his subject matter and with his writing, and preferred rather to adopt an assumed indifference. Notwithstanding this, even this esteemed member of the orthodoxy in an inscription (although not the preface) to these works, does still compare himself, albeit rather disparagingly, to Su Dongpo.

Ji Yun's 1793 preface adds an interesting dimension to this portrayal as he appears to begin in a far more subjective style, talking about how he had always written, from his earliest years. He does then depict his writing persona, saying that "The volumes strewn about my study resembled an otter's offering of partially eaten fish. After I turned thirty, I hustled to be known as a writer. In search of the perfect antithesis, I sat

up at nights racking my brain." Tellingly, however, we then discover that this writing image refers to his early years (he was seventy at the time of writing this particular preface), and thereafter to his compilation of the imperial collection. In referring to the *zhiguai* work in hand, he changes his tone and returns to his standard detachment and passivity, "Now I am old. I lack the motivation and enthusiasm of those years. Occasionally I set brush to paper and record things I heard long ago just to pass the time."[46]

Other writers lay more stress on the personal and are happy to portray the act of writing as a conscious process, where the selection of subject matter (if not specifically the creative process) is grounded in the self. Ji Yun's contemporary Yuan Mei puts down his own interest in the strange to the fact that he has no great obsessive interest in any one thing, but is open-minded enough to take a note of whatever comes his way. "I'm not like those gourmets who stuff themselves with the eight delicacies, but reveal their limited outlook in the way they won't even try the tiniest piece of ant eggs with minced fish or sunflowers with pickled cabbage." He talks of his wish to "dispel mediocrity with preposterous words and startle the slothful" and he compares the enjoyment he gets from doing this to gambling at a game of *weiqi*. The emphasis on the subjective 'I' of the author here and throughout this preface is remarkable.

In these later prefaces, where there is a discussion of the *zhiguai* subject matter, it generally takes the form not of the existence or otherwise of the supernatural, but

[46] I am using David L. Keenan's translations of Ji Yun's prefaces, which are contained in an Appendix to his *Shadows in a Chinese Landscape: The Notes of a Confucian Scholar, Chi Yün* (New York: M.E.Sharpe, 1999).

rather more introspective musings on the nature of the 'strange' and thus the scope of the genre itself. Xu Qiucha's 許秋垞 (b. 1803?) preface to his *Strange Words Heard and Seen* is a case in point – earlier texts are referred to but by way of justification of the scope of what can be considered strange phenomena, in Xu's case, he is arguing to include the eccentricities and amusements of everyday life. [47] He emphasises the all-inclusive nature of the strange, stating that strange anecdotes can be from the past or present and demonstrates a particular preference for the personal, even at one point possibly hinting by reference to his inkstone that some of the material may have been created by him. "So now what material I obtain, or copy, is of all shades of the Universe, marvels and curiosities, but I pay particular attention to the which comes to me from my friends and family, and even more attention to that which comes out from my brush and inkstone."[48]

Conclusions

The problematic content of *zhiguai* tales means that, even in the late imperial period when there was less of a need to justify the use of such subject matter, in the potentially liberating space of an authorial preface, writers were generally reluctant to accept responsibility for creating the strange. Disclaimers abound and almost all

[47] Yang Yi's 楊儀 (fl. c. 1527) preface to his *Gaopo yizuan* (Compilation of the Strange of Gaopo) provides an interesting exception to some of these principles, as he does appear still to want to link the supernatural to 'real events'. Yang begins by saying that when he was young he hated all stories of the supernatural and the uncanny and couldn't bear to read them. But later, he states, when some bizarre events happened in his prefecture he began to appreciate that not all these ancients recorded was rubbish.

[48] Ding Xigen, p. 188.

references are to collecting, reporting or recording the words of others. Even in the examples in which there is a heightened authorial persona, such as when the physical act of writing derives from the emotions or personal life of the writer, there is no attempt in any of these prefaces to admit to any creativity on the part of the writer. It is of course true that many later *zhiguai* tales were simply reworkings of earlier versions, but the justification for creating something new, strange or supernatural seems beyond even those writers claiming emotional release as their motivation for writing.

Confucian notions of self and identity are generally grounded in social networks and so references to other people are key to any analysis. In the earlier texts in this sample references tended to be made for purposes of justification of the text, so to identify with well-known authors of previous *zhiguai* collections, to prove the continuation of a family tradition, or in the case of Gan Bao to make a claim for the ordinariness of his strange anecdotes by comparison with the unusual behaviour of his immediate family! In the later texts however references to authors (more often than not to Su Dongpo) were less circumscribed and seem to be more about positioning the author as a fellow-literatus, rather than simply wanting to join the established canon of the *zhiguai* tradition. In the creation of a social identity an interesting discrepancy in practice between the *taxu* and the *zixu* is the relative rarity of mention even, within the later authorial prefaces, of contemporaries – friends, fellow-scholars etc. -- despite (or perhaps because of?) the great proliferation of these identified by Chow within the *taxu* of this time.[49] This is also noteworthy as here these differ significantly, for

[49] The only exception I have found, once again, is Yang Yi, in his preface to the *Gaopo yizuan*, who does mention two of his contemporaries by name.

example, from twentieth century authorial prefaces, where social identity and capital was often built up in terms of, 'I just happened to bump into X [a famous literatus] the other day and…'.[50]

However, in attitudes towards the act of writing itself and the declared motivations behind it, authors' statements diverge considerably, and provide more indications of a constructed individual voice. Stated approaches to writing range from the entirely noncommittal, 'I had a lot of time on my hands and not much to do' or the passive 'they just kind of appeared without me knowing it' ("as randomly as clouds passing before my eyes") to those for whom writing is an essential vent for frustrations and indignations (a "scratch that I would prefer not to itch but can't help it").

Chinese cultural and literary traditions are sometimes criticized for a perceived lack of emphasis on originality, individuality or innovation, in preference for conformity, regulation and convention. Authorship appears subject to authority. Such criticisms tend to be grounded in ideas of restrictive education systems stressing, in the imperial period, the need to write formulaic 'eight-legged' essays or an apparently excessive emphasis on rote learning. Confucian orthodoxy is frequently derided (by both western and Chinese critics) as hindering the development of a creative literary scene. Authors as creative agents appear subsumed under issues of form and precedence. With the authorship of many famous works being uncertain, the figure of the author,

[50] For more on these often contrasting features of modern authorial prefaces see Weightman, "Constructing an authorial identity: some features of early twentieth century Chinese authorial prefaces" in *From National Tradition to Globalization, from Realism to Postmodernism: trends in modern Chinese literature*, Oglobin et al (eds.) (St Petersburg, 2004), pp. 266-280.

or even the authorial persona, can appear to be impenetrable. However, while an admission of responsibility for creativity was (as in European cultures, if for different reasons) usually avoided, by the late imperial period authors increasingly could, and often did, reveal something of their constructed personas in their prefaces.

The range of paratextual strategies they could adopt to frame their writings allowed authors, on the one hand, to lay claim to the mouthpiece of didactic orthodoxy, even while writing about the most heterodox topics, or else, on the other hand, to choose to reveal instead something of their own emotions, tribulations and motivations. While there were still limits to what could be expressed in the paratext, within these formulations, I believe, a more individualized authorial voice, even perhaps something approaching Elliot's idea of a personality, can be perceived.

Appendix – list of prefaces analysed

Author, or attributed author	**Title of work**	**English Translation**
Dongfang shuo 東方朔 (154-93 BCE)	*Shi zhou ji* 十洲記	*Records of the Ten Continents*
Guo Xian 郭憲 (Eastern Han)[51]	*Dong ming ji* 洞冥記	*A Record of Penetration into the Mysteries*
Zhang Hua 張華(232-300)	*Bo wu zhi* 博物志	*A Treatise on Curiosities*
Gan Bao 干寶 (?-336)	*Sou shen ji* 搜神記	*Records of an Inquest into the Spirit-Realm*
Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343?)	*Shen xian zhuan* 神仙傳	*Lives of Divine Transcendents*
Wang Yan 王琰 (c. 454 -?)	*Ming xiang ji* 冥祥記	*Signs from the Unseen Realm*
Li Shi 李石 (Southern Song) (dates unknown)	*Xu Bo wu zhi* 續博物志	*Sequel to A Treatise on Curiosities*
Hong Mai 洪邁 (1123-1202)	*Yi jian zhi* 夷堅志 (13 extant prefaces, out of a total of 31)	*Record of the Listener*
Zhu Yunming 祝允明 (1461-1527)	*Yuguai pian* 語怪編	*Tales of Anomalies*
Zhu Yunming 祝允明	*Zhiguai lu* 志怪錄	*Records of Anomalies*

[51] The *Dong ming ji* is attributed to Guo Xian, but this claim is contested.

(1461-1527)		
Yang Yi 楊儀 (fl. c. 1527)	*Gaopo yizuan* 高坡異纂	*Compilation of the Strange of Gaopo*
Pu Songling 蒲松齡 (1640-1715)	*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異	*Strange Tales of Liaozhai*
Niu Xiu 鈕琇 (?-1704)	*Gusheng* 觚剩	*Miscellaneous Jottings*
Niu Xiu 鈕琇(?-1704)	*Gusheng xubian* 觚剩續編	*Sequel to Miscellaneous Jottings*
Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1798)	*Xin Qi Xie (Zi bu yu)* 新齊諧（子不語）	*A New Qi Xie (That of which the Master did not speak)*
Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724-1805)	*Yuewei caotang biji* 閱微草堂筆記 (5 prefaces)	*Random Jottings from the Cottage of Close Scrutiny*
He Bang'e 和邦額 (1736?-??)	*Yetan suilu* 夜談隨錄	*Occasional Records of Conversations at night*
Xu Qiucha 許秋垞 (b. 1803?)	*Wenjian yi ci* 聞見異辭	*Strange Words Heard and Seen*

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