

ZHAO, XIAOHUAN. *Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction: A Morphological History*. Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005. xii + 401 pages. tables, appendices, bibliography, index. Hardcover, US\$129.95; ISBN 0-7734-6097-7.

This study is the revised version of its author's PhD thesis that was accepted in 2003 at the University of Edinburgh. It consists of two widely separate halves: Part I, "Zhiguai: Definition and Development" (1–147), provides a literary history of the genre *zhiguai* 志怪 ("accounts of the strange"); Part II, "Classical Chinese Supernatural Fiction from a Proppian Perspective" (149–272), offers an analysis of a sample set of *zhiguai* tales based on the model and method as developed by the great Russian folklorist and formalist Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, originally published in 1928.

The first part starts off from an in-depth discussion of the term *xiaoshuo* 小說, a vague and tricky bibliographical category. If Zhao arrives at the definition of *zhiguai* as a sub-genre of *xiaoshuo*, this does not help much to clarify the nature of *zhiguai*. He even includes the ancient myths as an "embryonic" form among the *zhiguai* tales, and he describes the artful *chuanqi* 傳奇 tales of the Tang as differing from *zhiguai* only by degree, due to their being "more embellished and sophisticated" (85). Zhao, though, is not the first scholar to apply the *zhiguai* category so broadly, for Karl KAO (1985, 1–51) has argued likewise, but Zhao is in danger of extending it to the point of meaninglessness. It would seem a gross overstatement to claim the large majority of Chinese classical tales as "*zhiguai* works," as Zhao does. If the book's first part offers a rather conventional literary-historical account of the classical tale, combining bibliographical information with sketchy summaries of and comments on selected pieces, it also includes some rather daring generalizing statements, such as the claim that in the Tang "*zhiguai* works began to be read more as fiction than as fact" (85). Since this has been disputed by other scholars (cf. HAMMOND 1990; and MA 1980), it calls for further qualification.

In the second part, the author claims to follow a "synchronic" approach. However, the sample set of fifty *zhiguai* tales that serves as the material basis for the morphological analysis includes texts covering an extensive historical timespan, from antiquity to the late imperial period, arranged in four historical groups ("pre-Wei," Six Dynasties, Tang and Five Dynasties, and Song through Qing; see the appended list, 273–75). Therefore the conclusions also offer some general insights about the diachronic development of the *zhiguai* genre. While it does not come as a great surprise that over time the tales gained in complexity, we also learn that, in terms of morphology (i.e., the number of functions and moves),

the *zhiguai* tale had grown to maturity already in the Tang, and from the Song to the Qing it did not undergo any further significant development (241).

The author explains that he selected for his textual corpus fifty items that were “most popular and representative of the time as well as the authors of the work” (4). Some are typical anthology pieces, while others are less known. In order to approximate Propp’s set of “wonder tales,” Zhao selected only “magic tales”—in the book’s main title and various chapter titles somewhat infelicitously dubbed “supernatural fiction”—that included the intervention of a superhuman agency. This thematic criterion allowed to include mythical accounts as well as artful tales composed by literati authors who nevertheless might have derived their basic motifs and narrative patterns from folk tradition. Propp’s corpus of wonder tales, of course, was far more homogeneous.

Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale*, despite its sanctified status as a seminal work and “bible” of posterior structuralists, semioticians, and narratologists, has long been deemed too formalistic, too abstract, and therefore rather impractical to serve as a model for a structural analysis of folk-literary narrative corpuses. Various revisions, simplifications and improvements to Propp’s model have been proposed (e.g., GILET 1998). Propp himself did not raise any claim to universality for his model, but due to its high level of abstraction it has nevertheless been treated as a universal “toolbox” of forms and functions applicable to any narrative corpus. However, Propp’s assumption of fixed, linear sequences of functions actually restricted the applicability of his model to other cultures. Zhao Xiaohuan appears to have been—at least partly—aware of the critical reception of Propp’s model (155–56), but became truly confronted with its limitations only in the course of analytical practice. He realized that those pair functions Propp had considered essential to his sample of Russian fairytales actually hardly occurred in the Chinese *zhiguai* tales. Thus, while basically continuing to subscribe to the original model, Zhao inevitably felt the need to partly modify it by the model as proposed by Alan DUNDES (1964). Closely following Dundes, Zhao identified the four “most recurrent nuclear function pairs” (175), forming four major classes. In terminological usage, Zhao altered the concept of “move” to a structural unit at an intermediate level between function and tale. For the description of the functional schemes of the *zhiguai* tales, Zhao adopted Propp’s somewhat awkward set of symbols for the functional forms which includes superscript and Greek letters. As a comparison of the Appendices III and IV (353–63) reveals, Zhao found in his set of *zhiguai* tales only a rather small fraction of less than one fourth of Propp’s full repertory of roles or functions of *dramatis personae*. The reader might wonder whether the analysis also brought to light any roles or functions that were not sufficiently describable in terms of Propp’s model.

It is certainly laudable that the fifty tales that are analyzed so meticulously in the bulk of Part II have been added in translation, comprising a lengthy appendix (277–351). These translations primarily serve the instrumental purpose of supplying the material basis with “an English version” and therefore were not meant to be appreciated for accuracy or any subtleties of language or style. Nevertheless, I strongly missed any references to the textual sources, the editions used as well as to any extant translations into English. This might also have served to better integrate the texts analyzed in the second part with the extensive historical survey presented in the first part, and thus might have satisfied the expectations of the more philologically minded reader. Moreover, in some places, explanatory notes would also have seemed a requirement to me.

In summary, Xiaohuan Zhao’s analysis of classical Chinese tales on the basis of Propp’s rigid nomenclature of morphological features offers an original and valuable contribution to the study of the folktale in general and of traditional Chinese narrative in particular. As an ambitious, pioneering attempt it has set out to demonstrate that Propp’s

analytical scheme can be quite fruitfully applied to a corpus of classical Chinese tales, and it has indeed arrived at some interesting and relevant results. However, I consider the author's plan of combining a synchronic with a diachronic analysis to be a failure. This is partly due to his subscription to the notion of *zhiguai* as a comprehensive generic category almost equivalent to the classical tale, which however is by no means equivalent to the "magic tale" he seeks to analyze in emulation of Propp. The author might have fared better had he chosen a truly synchronic and more homogeneous corpus of tales.

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