

WONDER IN THE *SOU SHEN JI*

by

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(Under the Direction of Karin Myhre)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the applicability of theories and notions of the fantastic, the uncanny, the strange, and the uses of wonder in Six Dynasties *zhiguai* texts. By re-examining Freud's notion of the uncanny and Todorov's notion of the fantastic, used by other scholars in their analysis of *zhiguai*, this thesis attempts to achieve a better understanding of the *Sou shen ji* in its own context. This thesis proposes, as an alternative to Freud and Todorov, that Aristotle's notion of wonder plays a significant role in Gan Bao's fourth-century *Sou shen ji*. It concludes that Western theory can be used to discuss Six Dynasties Chinese literature, but only after the assumptions of Western theory are accounted for and compared closely with the assumptions of the historical Chinese context in question.

INDEX WORDS: Wonder, *Sou shen ji*, Gan Bao, *Zhiguai*, Six Dynasties, Todorov, Freud, Aristotle, Uncanny, Fantastic

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DEDICATION

To my family. Thank you for your patience, care, and love.

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Introduction

As Rania Huntington comments in the *Columbia History of Chinese Literature*, there is disagreement among scholars over how *zhiguai* 志怪 (strange accounts) are to be understood in their own context (“The Supernatural” 119). This disagreement might currently be irresolvable. However, this thesis proposes that we should explore the possibility that Six Dynasties *zhiguai*, in particular Gan Bao’s *Sou shen ji* 搜神记 (*Records of the Search for Spirits*), may be read as discourse whose primary focus in its narrative mode is to induce wonder.

Zhiguai, the term used by recent scholars to describe a genre of Chinese discourse, begins with the decline of Han dynasty orthodoxy according to DeWoskin and Crump (*In Search of the Supernatural* xxv). Alternatively, Robert Campany argues that the growth of *zhiguai*, which he re-terms “cosmographic writing,” accelerates in growth after the fall of the Han dynasty. There are also cosmographic texts produced during the Han dynasty and possibly before the Han—depending on how one dates the earliest strata of the *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, *Shan hai jing* 山海经 (Campany 21). Six Dynasties *zhiguai* then, are *zhiguai* written specifically during the Six Dynasties period, also known as the Wei-Jin period—roughly third to sixth century CE. *Zhiguai* are typically considered, since Lu Xun’s *Brief History of Chinese Fiction*, to be the beginning of Chinese fiction—if only in so much that they provide later Chinese fiction with its tropes and motifs, and “in form are generally assemblies of short, simple prose anecdotes” whose combination of “bizarre content with a matter-of-fact presentation provides for the particular pleasure of this genre” (Huntington, “The Supernatural” 119).

Gan Bao's *Sou shen ji*, probably written between 335 and 349 CE, is described by both DeWoskin and Huntington as the most prominent, most highly regarded text in the *zhiguai* genre. The text we have now is a twenty fascicle, 464 item Ming dynasty reconstruction of what the *Jin shu* 晋书 (*History of the Jin Dynasty*) informs us was originally a thirty fascicle text. DeWoskin's doctoral thesis gives a detailed review of the textual history of the *Sou shen ji* which Campany tells us is "among the most complicated of all the anomaly accounts" (55). The earliest extant edition of the twenty-fascicle version of the *Sou shen ji* is found, according to Campany, in the 1603 *Casket of Remitted Secret Volumes*, *Mi ce hui han* 秘册彙函 (55). Unfortunately, the *Mi ce hui han* was burned in a fire before it was published, and only remnants survived to be included later in the *Jin dai mi shu* 津逮秘书 (*Secret Book of the Gateway to Knowledge*), which was itself eventually collected in the 1966 *Hundred-section Grand Compendium of Collectanea*, *Bai bu congshu jicheng* 白部丛书集成 (Ran).

In her essay on "Book Culture and Textual Transmission in Sung China," Cherniack observes that modern Western textual criticism regards transmission "as a wholly degenerative process through which texts become 'corrupted' and 'contaminated'" (6). We can only conclude that the *Sou shen ji* is a textual critic's nightmare. Yet, although we may never know with certainty what was in Gan Bao's original *Sou shen ji*, we do know that "over ninety percent of the 464 items in today's text are attested in extant Six Dynasties commentaries, Tang and early Sung collectanea"—a relatively high degree of correspondence which is all the more remarkable for the text's disappearance in the early Song, and the burning of its earliest known Ming reconstruction.

The first chapter of this thesis begins an attempt at understanding the *Sou shen ji* in its own context by first examining the notion of strangeness or the uncanny adapted from Freud and

Todorov and used by recent scholars interested in *zhiguai* and other genres of Chinese literature involving “the supernatural,” and then comparing these ideas with early Chinese notions of strangeness. While use of both Todorov and Freud may provide valuable insights on how to read *zhiguai* and interpret its themes, there are, however, problems with using terms like uncanny, fantastic, and supernatural in a third-century Chinese context. Karl Kao explained the fallacies inherent in such an approach over twenty years ago in his introductory essay to a collection of translated *zhiguai*, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*.

The second chapter attempts to explain what wonder is and the role it plays in the *Sou shen ji*. It returns to the question Robert Campany asks in his preface to *Strange Writing: Why did such well-educated and important men spend so much effort writing about ghosts and marvels?* The effort and scholarship that Campany employs to answer this question are inspiring, and while I agree that Six Dynasty’s *zhiguai* should be taken seriously “as the vehicles of cosmological reflection and religious persuasion,” I propose that it is wonder that has made *zhiguai* effective as such (Campany *x*). Indeed, the wonder induced by *zhiguai* account for their popularity and hence for the fact that these haphazard collection of tales and omens have survived long enough to be taken seriously is due to the wonder they induce.

The final chapter is a close reading of one of the most popular and well-known tales from Gan Bao’s *Sou shen ji*, “The Tomb of Three Kings,” which will also serve as a space to examine and test some of the ideas discussed in the first two chapters.

Chapter One: The Strange

This chapter's overall purpose is to elucidate some of the problems involved in trying to use Western ideas about what is strange and how the strange affects us in order to theorize the bizarre in *zhiguai* literature. The first goal of this chapter is to understand what assumptions are fundamental to Freud's notion of the uncanny and Todorov's notion of the fantastic. The second goal is to present an idea of what strangeness might have meant in third-century China. The final goal is to assess how compatible Todorov and Freud's ideas are with Six Dynasties *zhiguai*.

The *Unheimlich*

Freud tells us that he was impelled despite his general lack of interest "to engage in aesthetic observations" to theorize a previously overlooked species of literature: the uncanny, literature that primarily induces feelings of "repulsion and distress" (Freud 123). Freud proceeds to isolate the term *unheimlich* (the un-homely/the uncanny) from its general use to describe anything that arouses fear. Instead, according to Freud, the uncanny is a special kind of fear: "a species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well-known and had long been familiar" (124). Freud reasons that while "it is obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar," encountering otherness or strangeness is not always distressing because the novel alone is incapable of producing the feeling of the uncanny (125). A hidden something, i.e. the *heimlich* (the homely/familiar/repressed), must be added to achieve the effect of fear.

Freud deduces from psychoanalytic theory's first principles that if "every affect arising from an emotional impulse—of whatever kind—is converted into fear by being repressed" then

out of all of the things that arouse fear there must be a group among them of fears caused by the return of these repressed emotions (147-8). Thus, instead of using mankind's sense of alienation from the *kosmos* to create fear, imaginative writers like Hoffman are able to reveal the anxieties we have tried to hide in our psychic homes, away from strangers' prying eyes.

According to Freud, the uncanny has two general sources. One type of the uncanny arises from the return of repressed infantile complexes—Freud's reading of Hoffman's "The Sandman" is a relentless yet entertaining unveiling of the protagonist's fear of castration. The second type of uncanny occurs when "primitive beliefs that have been surmounted appear to be once again confirmed" (155). In other words, it is Freud's argument that the unrestrained narcissism of "primitives," psychotics, and children leads them to believe in the omnipotence of their own thoughts—that by thinking something they can make it so. For example, this type of uncanny can be experienced when a person learns that someone he or she had wished were dead has actually died recently.

Not only are writers able to utilize the two types of the uncanny we experience in our everyday lives, but they are also able to multiply and intensify these effects with various artistic techniques and devices which essentially amount to tricks that writers use to manipulate their readers' emotions. However, the ability to induce the uncanny in the reader is limited by the logic of the genre that the writer is employing. Fairy tales, thus, cannot produce uncanny effects because "the uncanny can only arise if there is a conflict of judgement as to whether what has been surmounted and merits no further credence may not, after all, be possible in life" (156). It is understood that the laws of motion or thermodynamics do not necessarily apply in fairy tales, and so no one is bothered by the flying carpets.

It is only the devious creative writer who “has to all appearances taken up his stance on the ground of common reality” who is able to induce the fear of the uncanny in us by seeming to promise to present us with everyday reality and then going beyond it (156-7). *Audition*, Takashi Miike’s infamous 1999 film, which according to folk legend caused several audience members in Ireland to go into shock and hospitalized a man in Switzerland, is a perfect example of a creative director’s ability to frighten people by violating audience expectations. While critics mostly focus on the film’s disturbing grotesque realism, the most distressing aspect of the film results directly from the abruptness of the shift halfway through the film from bland but patently inoffensive romantic comedy about a single, forties-something executive who holds a sham audition in order to meet the woman of his dreams into a surreal torture-horror film.

The Fantastic

Freud’s *unheimlich* seems to haunt Todorov’s *The Fantastic*. Freud anticipates the fantastic when he describes how authors attempt to use any device in their power to deceive us: “For a long time he [the author] may prevent us from guessing the presuppositions that underlie his chosen world, or he may cunningly withhold such crucial enlightenment right to the end” (157). Todorov theorizes this deferment of enlightenment by means of ambiguity when he defines the “fantastic” as a transient genre that occupies the duration of the hesitation a reader experiences while trying to decide whether a particular narrative has a supernatural explanation (the marvelous) or unobvious natural explanation (the uncanny). Todorov describes the fantastic as anxiety caused by uncertainty and hesitation instead of anxiety caused by fear or dread, yet the fantastic depends on a conflict of judgment similar to the conflict that Freud says is necessary for arousing the type of *unheimlich* caused by the seeming confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs in magic, animism, returning dead, etc. Freud explains that this conflict reveals modern

man's need for reality testing, a need to re-confirm our new scientific convictions in which we are not yet secure (154).

Todorov's conflict of judgement seems to be solely about whether a reader can decide if a character is experiencing supernatural or natural events within the logic of a narrative—skirting the question of how any given reader's personal attitudes towards or emotional responses to the supernatural may affect how the individual read. The hesitation which the reader of the fantastic is supposed to experience is over the correct reading of a story, not about the nature of the material world the reader inhabits. Brooke-Rose remarks wryly that the ambiguity of the *Turn of the Screw* is so well sustained that “its very undecidability was for a long time unperceived, or, when perceived seems to have exacerbated critics into taking up positions for or against one of the interpretations; and not unrelated, the text invites the critics unconsciously to ‘act out’ the governess's dilemma” (*A Rhetoric of the Unreal* 128).

This unconscious acting out of the governess's dilemma by critics is funny, but it points out a problem with Todorov's theory of the fantastic: it theorizes a particular kind of reader more than it does any particular genre text, as does Freud's theory of the uncanny. Todorov explains the very heart of the fantastic by dramatizing both the reader's and the protagonist's predicament:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really

exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation that we encounter him infrequently. The Fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (Todorov 25)

Here Todorov conflates the distinction between reader of a text and its protagonist by arguing that an individual who know the laws of nature, when confronted with a possibly supernatural event only has three options: belief, disbelief, or hesitation—suspension of belief. The fantastic implies just such an “integration of the reader into the world of the characters” (31). This scientifically-aware individual’s hesitation over the nature of the material world is the same hesitation a scientifically-aware reader of the fantastic would experience when trying to determine whether a supernatural event is occurring to a character in a book. Todorov has theorized the role of the reader implicit in fantastic texts. Brook-Rose terms the implicit readers of texts “encoded readers” (31). Thus the fantastic is more accurately defined as a text that encodes a reader who should experience hesitation when the protagonist encounters seemingly supernatural phenomenon.

Brooke-Rose notes that if what is central to Todorov’s notion of the fantastic is ambiguity then there are many ambiguous texts we should label fantastic: “if the only feature that distinguishes the pure fantastic from the uncanny and the marvelous is ambiguity, which is shared with some non-fantastic fiction, we must either emphasise [sic] (as Todorov does) that this ambiguity concerns only the supernatural” (Brook-Rose 65).

Freud maintains that there is a difference between “the uncanny one knows from experience and the uncanny one only fancies or reads about” (Freud 154). This allows Freud to

explain why people who read the Bible are not distressed by its uncanny tales of corpses rising from their graves. For hard-boiled atheists, secure in their victory over primitive thought, the Bible is just a book, and for believers there is no return of surmounted beliefs in magic; they believe in magic openly. However, Freud's encoded reader of uncanny texts is the same as the encoded reader of the fantastic. He is the rational man of science who knows that the world's phenomena are bound by natural law. Without this particular reader there can be no fantastic and no uncanny.

Rosemary Jackson revisits Todorov's notion of a genre of the fantastic in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Jackson also argues that the fantastic is not a genre. It is a mode of narration that counters the mode of the marvelous and the mimetic by asserting its reality and then breaking with its own assertions. Moreover, the theme of anxiety in nineteenth-century fantastic texts becomes part of its structure and its purpose: to cause a disturbance in the reader exposing a culture's definition of that which can be and then subverting it (Jackson 23). Jackson concludes that this irruption of the inadmissible in fantastic literature searches, provokes, and tests truth. In its attempt to break the acknowledged order of post-enlightenment thought and literary realism the fantastic becomes the last home of the anti-rational and the un-sayable. All of this seems to echo Freud.

The Alien, the Marvelous, and the Strange

In *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*, Judith Zeitlin unpacks the meanings of the various terms used to describe strange things and events in Chinese Classical tales. The three terms that Zeitlin focuses on are *yi*, *qi*, and *guai* (异, 奇, and 怪).

Yi, which Zeitlin notes is the broadest and most flexibly used of the three terms, is primarily defined as "different, difference, to differentiate." By extension it can also mean

extraordinary, outstanding, foreign, heterodox, and eccentric—whatever differs from the norm. Its opposite is *tong* (the same.) The *Hanyu da cidian* gives us twelve possible meanings for *yi*: 1. to distinguish, differentiate, separate, 2. dissimilar, 3. other [person, thing], 4. rebellious, heterodox, 5. previously, 6. in the future, 7. peculiar, uncommon, 8. surprise, astonish; astonished, 9. monstrous, inauspicious [creatures and things], disasters, 10. something of special value, 11. a loan character for “wing,” 12. a family name.

Qi is often used as an aesthetic term of high praise and means marvelous, rare, odd, fantastic original. Its opposite is *zheng* (canonical.) The *Hanyu da cidian* lists three groups of definitions for *qi*. Group One: 1. rare, 2. particular good [in quality], 3. exceeding all of a person’s expectations, 4. to recognize the worth of [something, someone], 5. very, 6. to make something rare [causative], 7. family name. Group Two: 1. odd numbered, 2. remainder, fractional amount, 3. what one calls bad fate, or unfavorable encounters, 4. abnormal, crooked, devious, 5. special, 6. a loan character for “to send/mail.” Group Three: 1. a loan character for “to lean on.”

Guai, according to Zeitlin, carries the most unpleasant connotations of the three terms and means weird, uncanny, freakish, unfathomable, and anomalous. Its opposite is *chang* (normative). *Guai* has seven meanings listed in the *Hanyu da cidian*: 1. strange, bizarre, rarely seen, 2. bizarre things, 3. surprised, astonished, 4. the Chinese equivalent of something like English’s colloquial “no wonder” or “so that’s why,” 5. to blame, 6. very, 7. a family name.

Zeitlin’s discussion of terms finally notes that the meanings of *yi*, *qi*, and *guai* all overlap and that they are often used to define each other (Zeitlin 5).

Leo Chan also discusses *qi* and *guai* when he argues, in *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth Century Literati Storytelling*, that the term *qi* (marvelous), as part

of the compound word *chuanqi* (marvelous accounts)—a generic category created by Hu Yinglin in the Ming Dynasty to distinguish between early Six Dynasties *zhiguai* and their more elaborate Tang Dynasty descendants—can only appropriately be used to describe stories that emphasize human events: “any event that gives rise to feelings of wonder or marvel can be the stuff of *chuanqi*” (11). Chan goes on to argue that *guai* can only be used to describe stories which involve phenomena inexplicable by natural law. Thus, according to Chan, the compound term *zhiguai* (strange records) denotes records of all of those things and events which are beyond normal human experience. According to the logic of his schema the inexplicable phenomena recorded in *zhiguai* are incapable of arousing wonder, for wonder belongs solely to the realm of *chuanqi*. Chan is ultimately forced to admit that his distinction between *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* is fuzzier than he likes—even Hu Yinglin who first pointed out the distinction between these two genres tells us that they are more like opposite endpoints on the same line.

Huntington’s essay on the supernatural also begins by defining terms: “there is no premodern Chinese term that directly translates as ‘supernatural’ ... content that we would now describe supernatural is labeled with varying words for ‘strange’ or with names of classes of extraordinary beings” (“The Supernatural” 110). In other words, there is no term for the supernatural in pre-modern China because the concept did not exist. No event or creature existed outside, apart from, or beyond nature. Again, *guai* 怪 (strange), according to Chan, only denotes phenomena which are beyond normal human experience.

The Anomalous

Robert Campany, in *Strange Writing: Anomaly Accounts in Early Medieval China*, focuses on the definition of *guai* as “the anomalous.” Using the *OED*, Campany concludes that “the anomalous is that which is taken by some observer or speaker as crossing some boundary”

(3). Campany's definition of the anomalous as the abnormal leads him to a further conclusion that the anomalous is not an ontological category—it is merely a judgment based on a current belief system. As such, to Campany, the *zhiguai* genre is the perfect space, previously absent in the Han dynasty, for a cosmographic literary battleground in which collectors of anomalous accounts dialectically create the boundaries of the world they inhabit. Rania Huntington too, in *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*, argues that *zhiguai* tales, especially those involving foxes, are tales that are primarily concerned with the violation of boundaries that “reveal historical-cultural anxieties” about what is explainable and what remains inscrutable in the world of the narrator (4).

From the beginning of *Historian of the Strange*, Zeitlin considers the possibility that defining the strange might be a futile task if the phenomena we label strange and the reasons we have for labeling them strange are constantly shifting. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari propose that this constant shifting is part of what defines the anomalous:

It has been noted that the origin of the word *anomal* (“anomalous”), an adjective that has fallen into disuse in French, is very different from that of *anormal* (“abnormal”): *a-normal*, a Latin adjective lacking a noun in French, refers to that which is outside of the rules or goes against the rules, whereas *an-omalie*, a Greek noun that has lost its adjective, designates the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization. The abnormal can be defined only in terms of characteristics, specific or generic; but the anomalous is a position or set of positions in relation to a multiplicity. (243-4)

Deleuze and Guattari explain that it is often impossible to tell the if the anomalous is still part of a group, outside the group, or right at the shifting boundary of the group: “sometimes each and every animal reaches this line or occupies this dynamic position, as in a swarm of mosquitoes,

where ‘each individual moves randomly unless it sees the rest of [the swarm] in the same half-space; then it hurries to re-enter the group’” (245).

This presents a useful modification to Campany’s suggestion that the strange is not a category. Perhaps we can say that in a Chinese context the strange does not occur at the perceived crossing of some boundary which denies the strange an ontological status. Instead, the strange is the position an exceptional event can take that marks the boundary between the visible world and the invisible but equally real world. Ghosts, for example, may not be strange in and of themselves, yet they may in any particular story occupy an exceptional borderland position—whenever they interact with the living in unexpected ways. For example, Humu’s deceased father in the *Sou shen ji* tale, “Hu-mu Pan and the Lord of T’ai-shan,” is expected to bless his descendants as a local temple god, but he becomes an anomalous ancestor spirit when he kills his grandchildren because he wants company in the afterlife.

Kao’s Dilemma

Kao, in his introduction to *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*, argues that the fantastic and the extraordinary elements in *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* are not the same as the fantastic and the supernatural in the Western tradition.

Kao claims that supernatural and fantastic genres in Western literature, with their shared notion of otherness, are non-mimetic. They do not claim to be representations of reality, nor are they read as if they were. Instead, they are “conceived mainly from an angle of creative perception (the author’s projection of his vision) rather than from that of the reality represented” (2). He also disagrees with Rosemary Jackson’s claim that they are literary modes when he redefines the fantastic and supernatural as “referring to types of reality represented rather than to the mode of representation employed” (2).

Instead, *zhiguai* are mimetic, by which Kao means, they narrate actual events and observable facts: “Six Dynasties *chih-kuai* particularly are considered to be ‘records’ of facts and observable natural phenomena (or hearsay)” and not fictional creations by various writers (2). Kao then defines the fantastic as the literature of the extraordinary, the anomalous, yet the of-this-worldly, while supernatural literature portrays what is beyond this world. In both cases, the reader considers the account to be mimetic because it portrays events that have their origin in an implicit common understanding of the nature of the world in which the un-seeable and the unobservable do not equal the unreal; instead, the power of perception marks the difference between the initiated and the uninitiated—as in the famous “Monkey Thrice Strikes the White Bone Demon” chapter from *Journey to the West* where only Monkey can see through the three disguises of the White Bone Demon.

Kao’s objections are more problematic than they seem. Kao is partially repeating the argument that Y. W. Ma makes in the *Indiana Companion*: fiction brings about an imaginative reality as the result of a conscious act of an author (Ma 31). Ma declares that “to search for fictional (or for that matter narrative) elements in ancient texts is such a deliberate act” that it misrepresents authorial intention and the function of the work (32). While Ma is willing to permit that fiction in China began with Six Dynasties *zhiguai*, Kao argues that early *zhiguai* writers did not create imaginative stories. They wrote bad history, not great fiction. However, it seems tautological to argue that historians do not use their imagination to write history because they do not see themselves as using their imagination to write history. In fact, Veyne argues that early Greek historians essentially invented parts of Greek history. They summoned the muse and believed in the truth of their creations.

The second part of Kao's objection is that pre-modern Chinese believed in the supernatural aspects of *zhiguai*—a move that effectively eliminates the possibility of hesitation in the reader or of any conflict of judgement making both the uncanny and the fantastic impossible. Chan's work on *Close Scrutiny* supports Kao's objection. Chan explains that even in the Qing highly educated scholars like Ji Yun believed in fox spirits. While scholars may have been critical about the moral nature of ghosts and spirits, they were not actually skeptical about their existence. Thus Kao's second objection is a serious dilemma for anyone who attempts to use Freud or Todorov to read Six Dynasties *zhiguai*.

Huntington notes, in her review of Chan's *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, that Chan goes on to argue that Ji Yun claimed the didactic power of his tales is dependant on the belief that the supernatural is fact, accessible to reason. By this logic one can reason that the most efficacious didactic tale would have to be completely true. This being the case, Ji Yun, in order to affect the greatest moral change in his readership, would only have recounted stories that were true. Moreover, Ji Yun argued that because *xiaoshuo* (small sayings/fiction/literary tales/stories), by definition, were narrative accounts of what was seen or heard, they should not be freely embellished, and he "denied literary invention in the case of the most famous Tang *chuanqi* as well and thought that their elaborate details were based on the authors' personal experience" (Huntington, "Review" 22).

Company and the Fantastic

As mentioned previously, one of the consequences of Kao's argument is that the fantastic and the uncanny are unachievable in Six Dynasties *zhiguai*, not because pre-modern Chinese people were dumb, superstitious, and irrational, and thus incapable of being skeptical of the authenticity of *zhiguai* tales and strange phenomena. What they really lacked was twentieth-

century European insecurity over man's place in the world. Kao argues that without the Enlightenment there was no alienating loss of faith in the unity of man and nature; thus, Chinese tales are not "tormented by any indeterminacy in the character's or the reader's attitude towards the supernatural manifestation in the human world that characterizes the Western fantastic" (Kao 4).

Perhaps it is with Kao's dilemma in mind that Campany attempts to abstract a structure of countered expectation from Todorov's theories. That is, it is the countering of expectations in *zhiguai* that is important, not the natural/supernatural character of its events: "in playing upon the difference between the ordinary and the extraordinary, fantastic writing both presupposes and challenges a prior structure of expectation" (Campany 206). Campany proposes that we start with a less restrictive view of the fantastic in Chinese literature, one in which we can oppose what most people believe with "a partially different but not 'wholly other' view of things" (206). Campany goes on to argue that we can even create a comparative cosmographic poetics of countered expectations.

Conclusion

Interestingly, David Der-wei Wang's *The Monster that is History: History, Violence, and Fictional Writing in Twentieth-Century China* invokes the *unheimlich* when he argues that twentieth-century ghost stories are primarily about the return of trauma silenced by early communism. In theory, the uncanny nature of these stories should evoke indignant memories and a desire for reform in the reader. Zeitlin's *The Phantom Heroine: Ghosts and Gender in Seventeenth Century Chinese Literature* also relies on a modification of the *unheimlich* when she claims that the constant returning of female ghosts in Chinese literature is indicative of repressed

grieving, and presents opportunities for artists to put these ghosts to rest, enabling healthy communal grieving.

Whether or not Wang and Zeitlin can use the *unheimlich* to theorize these texts should be determined in part by the text's encoded reader. While the fantastic and one type of the uncanny may not occur in *zhiguai* (possibly even twentieth-century *zhiguai*), the second type based on the return of infantile complexes can exist in any literary genre according to Freud. Moreover, it seems that any actual reader who has taken a few science classes yet holds secret beliefs in the efficacy of astrology will also be free to experience the jarring uncanny and fantastic effects of *zhiguai* literature despite the intentions of their authors. Ultimately, Western notions of the fantastic, the uncanny, and the supernatural do not match early Chinese notions of the strange at all, yet they illuminate some of what is not happening with Six Dynasties *zhiguai*.

Chapter Two: Wonder

The primary interest of this chapter is an exploration in a medieval Chinese context of J. V. Cunningham's reading of Aristotle and Shakespeare, in which he argues that wonder, because it is pleasurable, is along with pleasure the end of poetry, and as such is therefore a necessary component in all poetic genres. Moreover, poetry, with its accompanying wonder, has always been something that breaks down the clear generic walls that Strabo built between literature, history, and rhetoric when he argued that the aim of history is truth, the aim of rhetorical composition is vividness, and the aim of myth is the excitement of pleasure and amazement (Cunningham 69).

Specifically, the aim of this chapter is to examine wonder in Gan Bao's *Sou shen ji* through a close reading. What is Cunningham's understanding of wonder in Aristotle's *Poetics*? Does wonder in this mediated Aristotelian sense occur in the *Sou shen ji*? If so, what are some potential explanations for what wonder is doing in these stories? Throughout this chapter many sections from the *Sou shen ji* will be referred to as stories or tales. They display aspects of what Campany calls the narrative mode of *zhiguai*. This is not to say, however, that they were considered fiction by third-century readers or by modern scholars like Campany.

What is wonder? For Descartes wonder is one of the six primitive passions, and is defined by him as "a sudden surprise of the soul which makes it tend to consider attentively those objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary" (Descartes 56). These rare and extraordinary things, which seem to be marvels, surprise us because of our previous ignorance of them or their difference from the things that we do know. If this surprise is extreme then we

experience astonishment, which “makes the entire body immobile, like a statue, and renders one incapable of either perceiving anything of the object but the face first presented or, consequently, of acquiring more knowledge about it” (58). Wonder in moderation, however, is useful in that it makes us learn by seizing our attention. It also helps us retain the new knowledge we gain into the nature of this astonishing phenomena. The pleasure that we get from the shock of the new (in this respect) is the other side of Aristotle’s second cause of poetry, the pleasure we gain from identifying mimetic objects, in the fourth chapter of *Poetics*:

...for we take pleasure in contemplating the most precise images of things whose sight in itself causes us pain—such as the appearance of the basest animals, or of corpses. Here too the explanation lies in the fact that great pleasure is derived from exercising the understanding, not just for philosophers but in the same way for all men, though their capacity for it may be limited. (Halliwell 35)

That is, Aristotle explains how we obtain pleasure from examining every detail of a mimetic object and using our understanding to compare it with what we already know, even when the image itself may be extremely disturbing. Descartes explains, by contrast, the pleasure we receive from observing things we have never seen before. Aristotle points to aesthetics to explain the pleasure we gain from things we have seen before: “...if one has no previous familiarity with the sight, then the object will not give pleasure qua mimetic object but because of its craftsmanship, or colour, or for some other such reason” (ibid.)

The marvelous, according to Aristotle, is also a source of pleasure, as Cunningham translates for us from the twenty-fourth chapter of *Poetics*:

The marvellous is certainly required in tragedy. Epic, however, offers more opening for the improbable, the chief factor in the marvellous, because in it the agents are not visibly

before us. The scene of the pursuit of Hector would be ridiculous on the stage—the Greeks halting instead of pursuing him, and Achilles shaking his head to stop them; but in the poem the absurdity is overlooked. The marvellous, however, is a cause of pleasure, as is shown by the fact that we all tell a story with additions, in the belief we are doing our hearers a pleasure. (Cunningham 63)

Here Aristotle explains that the marvelous causes pleasure and is better suited to epic than tragedy because it can be difficult to present certain improbabilities on stage that are easier to talk about or write down. Cunningham then goes on to support what he takes to be evidence for the necessity of wonder in tragedy with a second quote from chapter twenty-five of *Poetics*:

As to the criticisms relating to the poet's art itself, any impossibilities there may be in his descriptions of things are faults. But from another point of view they are justifiable, if they serve the end of poetry itself—if (to assume what we have said of that end) they make the very effect of either that very portion of the work or some other portion more astounding. (63)

Cunningham reads this to mean that the astounding has an absolute value; and therefore, that wonder is an end in itself and possibly the end of poetry. As Cunningham explains, “The relationship of wonder and pleasure is that wonder is pleasurable. It is pleasurable in itself. It is pleasurable also in that it is the occasion and motive for learning” (64). This, too, is why both Aristotle and Plato consider wonder the beginning of all philosophy.¹

Wonder, then, is desirable in literature not only because of the direct pleasure it gives an audience, but also because it heightens astonishment which increases the fear and pity in a tragedy. Cunningham provides an equation to clarify this point: $PF=W$, PF being pity and fear

¹ See Cornelis Verhoeven's *The Philosophy of Wonder* for a comprehensive discussion of wonder as the root of philosophy.

with W being wonder. Thus, according to his equation, there is a direct correspondence between the amount of wonder and the amount of fear and pity in any given tragedy. Here, wonder means specifically surprise. That an increase in surprise in turn increases fear and pity seems reasonable, but plausibility (a consistent situational logic) remains an ever-present necessity in maintaining all of these passions.

Cunningham goes on to argue that while wonder is the effect of marvelous subject matters and unexpected turns of plot, it is also the effect of unusual diction, by which he means poetic language instead of prose. Without arguing about this formalistic understanding of the difference between prose and poetry, it should be noted that poetry as a mode of writing may be very common in one culture and less common in another, or even within different circles and at different times within the same culture. Thus, while use of poetic language might mark an object or event as unusual in one culture, in another it might render that same object or event less unusual. This seems to be the insight Todorov has when he argues that the fantastic requires a very non-poetic sense of language so that the reader does not mistake unusual events as symbolic and non-literal. Six Dynasties *zhiguai* are even more marvelous in prose because prose, at that time, was primarily the mode of writing for history, philosophy and legal documents, and not for self-expression. One is almost forced to accept each story as literal simply because the language is so plain. This is not to say that the marvelous must be true to cause wonder, only that the more true a marvel appears to be the more wonder it will cause. And, in turn, by moving away from poetry and by employing Sima Qian's² historical format, one may optimize conditions for the excitement of wonder.

² Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian* became the standard style and format for historiography from the Han dynasty on.

This discussion of diction brings us to the rhetorical use of wonder. As Cunningham notes, Longinus hopes to exploit the power of wonder in sublime diction, with the aim of overpowering the listener's reason, and thereby bypassing the need for persuasion. This rhetorical use of wonder also has the greatest potential for enticing writers to cross the boundary between historical writing and fiction in order to make their writing more powerful.

Cunningham's analysis of wonder may have been overlooked, but the effects and uses of wonder that Cunningham lists from classical sources seem to be reasonable and generally agreed upon in the West since Aristotle. The problem is one of applicability. Does the wonder that Cunningham discusses really exist in early medieval *zhiguai*?

Almost thirty years ago in CLEAR,³ Victor Mair suggested that the real origin of Chinese fiction is not early medieval *zhiguai*, but instead Buddhist transformation texts, and that they required certain Indian ontological presuppositions that medieval China lacked. Basically, Mair argues that while the early Chinese writers of philosophy and poetry certainly had the imaginative capacity for fiction writing they did not have the interest. They were so focused on the realness of the world and the Confucian imperative to *zheng ming* (rectify names) that an aesthetic of illusionism never occurred to them until Buddhism and its texts became more popular—igniting a narrative revolution that Mair argues culminated in Tang *chuanqi*.

Mair's argument is compelling, but highly speculative. Kenneth DeWoskin, in the very next essay in the same journal,⁴ questions Mair's assumptions about what imaginative literature may be and its purposes. Without rehearsing the details of the argument, we may simply say that despite Dewoskin's protestation Mair might be right. It is interesting to note that David Keightley makes very similar points about the differences in epistemology between the ancient

³ *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews*, Vol. 5, No. 1/2 (Jul., 1983), pp. 1-27.

⁴ "On Narrative Revolutions."

Chinese and the ancient Greeks in his essay “Epistemology in Cultural Context: Deception and Disguise in Early China and Early Greece.” There is no real way to reach absolute certainty in these tentative types of arguments without a time machine and vigorous polling.

This problem, unfortunately, also carries over to the nature of *zhiguai*. How can they be fiction if the anomalous events recorded in them represent real beliefs and a more or less faithful reporting of events considered to have really occurred? On the other hand, how could these stories not be fiction if they record things that are so obviously impossible?

Again, DeWoskin argues that *zhiguai* represent the first prose attempts at literary self-expression (DeWoskin “Six Dynasties Chih-Kuai and the Birth of Fiction” 22.) These writers of *zhiguai* were disinherited Han historians:

Chroniclers of the era were products of Han literatus culture; they were also products of a cataclysmic collapse of the stable society which produced it and pressures from the rise of a new and more diverse political, social and cultural world, the like of which had never been described before. Early Han courtiers collected curiosities and, in the comfort of their own studios, cultivated reputations for “broad learning” through undisclosed methods. Informal histories and brief notes about non-Han people and places issued from the desks of Han scholars before the decline of the empire, but those worthies reveal by their omissions and vague fancies how truly remote from the historian’s gaze were such subjects. (DeWoskin and Crump *In Search of the Supernatural* xxiv)

These new post-Han historians, free from court historical formats and court motivations, began a new kind of historiography:

Those with a flare for narrative created private histories of their own worlds. These resembled in some respects genuine court histories, which their authors knew well from

Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih-chi*, but they were radically different in others. Instead of collecting the acts and lives of eminent courtiers, or being chronographers for each year of an emperor's reign with his *Pen-chi* (Basic Annals), or working out the orthodox technologies of time, ritual, music and law, they collected experiences in and reports of a new world—many were real, many were imagined. (ibid. xxiv)

“Many were real, many were imagined,” is a telling statement. It is so much a common sense statement that we almost forget we are posing the question. How are we to tell which is which? Could they not all be real? Could they not all be imagined?

At first Robert Campany moves beyond this problem by proposing a genre of cosmographic writing that is so all-encompassing that it renders the difference between fiction and non-fiction irrelevant. Both fiction and non-fiction attempt to describe the world around us and thus are cosmographic. However, it is clear that ultimately Campany believes the early participators in the heterodox *zhiguai* genre were all motivated believers who, while intending to promote their competing belief systems, actually trace the boundaries of human experience, mapping the territory of all unorthodox and anomalous interactions between humans and non-humans. As Campany concludes in his postscript to *Strange Writing*:

Works of the anomaly account genre proceeded to characterize the human...by charting the variety of Others against which it was likely to bump...Finding the old center's city walls in ruins, authors participated through this cosmographic genre in the much larger cultural project of locating the newly vast perimeters of a habitable zone outside the walls...they described this habitation by delineating its borders, but those borders had now immeasurably receded, and they had become not walls or outlying wilds but all

those seams running through the midst of everyday life where the human and the non-human unexpectedly collide or dance. (398-9)

Not only were *zhiguai* collectors attempting to flesh out all those everyday-life seams that point to the co-implicated nature of the worlds they inhabited, but their stories were also used by various sects as proof of the validity and efficacy of their religious beliefs—proof for Campany that *zhiguai* stories were to be taken as true.

There are other reasons Campany has to claim that the *zhiguai* are not “made up.” One, *zhiguai* were seen, even by their critics, as unorthodox history instead of fiction: “even critics of anomaly accounts—and there were many—charged their authors with ‘absurdity’ and ‘falsehood,’ with misrepresenting events, but not with simply ‘making up’ their narratives out of whole cloth” (Campany 157). Two, *zhiguai* were not actually written, only collected from older texts and oral or written hearsay reports of true events. Three, anyone who disagrees with him has simply misunderstood how these texts function. Finally, authors’ intentions that we have from their prefaces and “implied in the texts themselves” indicate that authors wanted to persuade others to believe these stories (158).

In response, critics of the time did not have any option but to consider *zhiguai* unorthodox history without inventing a whole new category of writing. Moreover, Campany’s second argument attempts to answer a question by stating itself as a fact. Campany himself admits that no one is citing any sources. Campany’s third point seems to say that if we understand how texts function—in a Bakhtinian-sense, as part of a conversation with the texts around it—then we will know he is right. The fourth argument is also problematic because we can’t be reasonably sure that authors like Gan Bao even wrote their prefaces. The preface of the *Sou shen ji* is only found with Gan Bao’s biography in the *Jinshu* almost two-hundred years after

he died. Finally, the fact that Daoists and Buddhists used *zhiguai* to persuade people to believe in their religions might just indicate they were clever in taking advantage of popular literature and culture, not that they believed the stories to be true. Stories do not have to be true to be persuasive and entertaining. In fact, the opposite seems more accurate.

There may not be a solution to this problem. Paul Veyne's approach in *Did the Greeks Believe Their Myths?* provides a satisfactory interim approach. Veyne's insights into early Greek culture seem to be applicable to early Chinese culture.

One insight is that when we ask if the Greeks believed their myths we first need to keep in mind that there are several modalities of truth: truth based on trust, based on experience, based on scientific verification, etc. Second, we have to recognize that while Greeks are critical of their own myths they are critical in their own way. Veyne labels their critical stance the "doctrine of present things." That is, pre-University historians would evaluate myths and each others' histories according to their own experience. Essentially, this involves sorting the marvelous out of myth and history and declaring what remains history.

The obvious problem, suggests Veyne, is that there is a strong possibility that none of it is historical. Not only was there no Minotaur, there was no Theseus either. Greek historians were not just journalists who faithfully recorded events; they created truth with their imaginations. And because history was born out of inquiry and not controversy, an ancient historian like Hesiod may have had critical moments, but he believed first—especially in himself (Veyne 8).

Moreover, Veyne argues that while the legendary world of myths was accepted as true by the ancient Greeks, it was not true in the same way everyday life was. Marvels belonged to an ageless time, a "space and time [that] were secretly different from our own" (18). Thus, it was easier for them to hold multiple contradictory truths about the world.

Finally, Veyne remarks that of course the Greeks believed in the myths they created with their constitutive imagination, just as we believe the various programs of truth that engage us now. For Veyne, there is no truth; truth is only “the name we give to the choices to which we cling” (127). This is a little melodramatic, but it is a fairly reasonable assessment of the situation.

Stephen Durrant in his essay “Creating Traditions: Sima Qian Agonistes?” contends that Sima Qian, who ironically claims (like Confucius) to be a transmitter and not a creator, was actually an innovator who by projecting his inventions into the past effectively creates tradition (294). Durrant argues that Sima Qian was torn between an older tradition of history as ritual inscription, and a new tradition that expected writers of significance to create something new (ibid). Therefore, when Sima Qian creates a private dialogue between two characters, he begins a trend that favors a good story over good history, or at the very least one that requires good history to read well.

Let us quickly review what has been said so far and bring it back to its application to *zhiguai*. Did people in early China believe in their marvels and legends? Probably. Mozi’s criteria for establishing truth are based on the same modalities and the same doctrine of present things that Veyne discusses:

The way to determine whether something exists or not is to find out whether people actually know from the evidence of their own ears and eyes whether it exists, and use this as a standard. If someone has actually heard it and seen it, then we must assume it exists. But if no one has heard or seen it, then we must assume it does not exist. If this be our method why don’t we try going to some village and asking? If from antiquity to today, from the beginning of mankind to the present, there have been people who have seen

ghostlike and spiritlike beings and heard their voices, then how can we say they don't exist? (Watson 98)

Essentially we must, according to Mozi, trust our own experience, tradition, and the experiences of others. We cannot, however, ignore Mozi's motivation for promoting belief in ghosts. One has the feeling that Mozi is only interested in using ghosts to scare people into line and might not actually believe in them himself.

Zhiguai writers could still have made up many of the stories that seem to have their origin in unknown written and oral sources. As Campany notes, the most prominent early *zhiguai* writers were court historians like Gan Bao. That Sima Qian, like Greek historians, created tradition suggests that it was just as possible if not more likely for Gan Bao and others to do the same. However, making up stories probably involved elaborating on bits and fragments of historical and ethnographic documents in the same way Sima Qian did. It is exactly this process of elaboration in storytelling that Stephen Owen argues for in his comparison of the *Shiji* and *Zuozhuan* in *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*. The only difference is that the fragments Gan Bao elaborated on were already extremely unorthodox.

The question remains, why did they write *zhiguai*? For Campany each writer explored the boundaries of the world through his writing and argued against the boundaries of other writers—Daoists, Buddhists, Ruists, fangshi, etc.⁵ DeWoskin, by contrast, proposes that *zhiguai* writing would have occurred much earlier if there had been more freedom for self-expression in prose writing and that *zhiguai* were a much more personal enterprise.

This explanation hardly seems to exhaust the possibilities, though. For example, it is just as likely that these historians turned *zhiguai* collectors, devastated by the collapse of the empire

⁵ Ruists are scholars, often conflated with Confucianists. The fangshi are “Masters of Recipes,” court magicians and masters of esoteric arts.

and broken-hearted at the chaos surrounding them, simply intended to collect anything that might be a missing piece of an explanation, an unnoticed or unrecognized omen that would reveal a secret cause for so much unwarranted disaster (Myhre). This too could explain several chapters of omens and dreams that Company notices have been lifted from other omen texts and histories.

On the one hand, it might be impossible to know why anyone wrote *zhiguai*; on the other, it seems that, for whatever reason Gan Bao thought he was writing *zhiguai*, wonder must have played a part in the motivation for collecting or writing them, and in their ensuing massive popularity.

Chapter Three: Swords and Tombs

A good place to search for wonder in Gan Bao's *Sou shen ji* is the well-known story of "The Tomb of Three Kings." Wang Shaoying's notes in the variorum text reveal how the story has been read in that these notes focus only on placing the story in real time and space; that is, on making the story historical despite its fantastic elements, in the same way Thucydides rejected what he considered ridiculous in Hesiod. Was it a King of Chu or a King of Jin? Was the tomb in ancient such and such province or some such other place? Wang never raises the question of whether the story was just made up completely. After all, a similar story (one that involves the same protagonists and the same swords) appears in another semi-unorthodox history, the *Wuyue chunqiu*—an Eastern Han collection of folklore from Wu and Yue arranged in chronological order with heavy copying and paraphrasing from the *Shiji*, *Records of the Grand Historian*.

These who and when questions are also significant because they highlight Company's remark in *Strange Writing* that the *Sou shen ji* has one of the most complicated textual histories of all of the *zhiguai* texts (55). Company agrees with many other scholars, including DeWoskin, that the text as it exists now in its twenty fascicle version, is a late Ming reconstruction. As such, there are already many limitations on the access that the text can be assumed to provide to the mind and times of Gan Bao. Moreover, it is impossible to really know how much editing each story went through before arriving in its final form.

Looking again at the story from the *Wuyue chunqiu*, we have another tale involving the eponymous swordsmiths Ganjiang and Moye, his wife, from whom the swords get their names. As it is recorded in the "Helü neizhuan" of the *Wuyue chunqiu*:

The fellow Ganjiang was a man of Wu. Ganjiang and Ouyezi were both students of the same master, and both learned how to make swords. Yue came to make an offering of three swords. Helü accepted and treasured them; consequently, he commissioned swordsmiths to craft two more swords, one called Ganjiang and the other Moye, Moye being [the name of] Ganjiang's wife. (Helü Neizhuan Disi-Helü Yuannian)⁶

The main focus of this story—that happens to be buried in what seems to be serious history—is the marvelous lengths that Ganjiang and his wife had to go to in order to craft these exceptional blades. First, Ganjiang carefully collects, from five different mountains and from all over the world, the best bronze and iron ore. Ganjiang then makes offerings and supplications to Heaven and Earth. The sun and the moon are in the sky at the same time, the gods are all watching his work, and *qi* was falling from the heavens, yet the essence of the ore will not melt and flow. Finally, with three hundred virgin boys and girls pumping the bellows, Moye throws her hair and nail clippings into the furnace as an offering, and the ore melts. Ganjiang decides to hide the male sword and gives the female sword to Helü, who treasures it.

This version of the Ganjiang story from the *Wuyue chunqiu* already contains the seeds of Gan Bao's "The Tomb of Three Kings." For example, in *Wuyue chunqiu* the three months after which Ganjiang's swords are still not complete become the three years Ganjiang requires to complete the swords in Gan Bao's version of the tale. What is fascinating is that "The Tomb of the Three Kings," despite all of its carnage, seems to turn away from the human sacrifice hinted at in the *Wuyue Chunqiu*, wherein Ganjiang and Moye, after realizing that the ore would not melt, collectively remember that in former times a human sacrifice was needed before a supernatural change could be complete: *fushenwuzhijhua, xurencheng*/夫神物之化，须人而成. In ancient

⁶ 吴越春秋-阖闾内传第四-阖闾元年

times swordsmiths in their situation would jump into the furnace with their wives in order to force the ore to melt and become swords, and that even during their lifetime “when people go to the mountains to undertake smelting, they don hemp clothes, and the fragrant rushes of mourning, before venturing to cast metal in the mountains” (Dolby 255). Thus when Moye throws her hair and clippings into the furnace she is offering a token sacrifice that substitutes for her body via synecdoche in the same way that Owen notes failed assassins would be allowed to stab their intended victims’ cloaks to save face before they were executed.⁷ Ganjiang does not have to sacrifice anything. He simply hands over the female sword and holds onto the male sword. Meanwhile, in Gan Bao’s elaboration of the story it is Ganjiang who dies (quietly acting as the necessary sacrifice) while the wife lives on to have a son who can exact revenge on the king who is simply a causal substitute for the chthonic forces that require sacrifice whenever exceptional swords are made. Perhaps, then, we already have a reading of “The Tomb of Three Kings” as a subconscious reaction against this practice of human sacrifice.

But first let us look at the title of the story, “The Tomb of Three Kings.” Story titles, in general, tend to be arbitrary. However, regardless of whether Gan Bao picked the title himself or some later editor chose it, “The Tomb of Three Kings” encapsulates how the story has been read over the centuries. It is a story about a tomb, a real yet unusual tomb with an unusual name that demands explanation. The title is at the core of a reading which, just as Veyne argues the Greeks

⁷ Dolby’s translation reads as follows: “So then Ganjiang’s wife cut her hair off, and clipped her nails, and threw herself into the oven” (255). In the original, *yushiGanjiangqinaiduanfajianzhao, touyuluzhong*/於是干將妻乃斷髮剪爪，投於爐中. The problem is the verb *tou* 投. It can mean to throw something, like throw nail and hair clippings or even hand grenades. It can also mean to commit suicide by throwing oneself into something like a river. There are two good reasons for not reading the line this way, though. First, it seems that the necessity for human sacrifice in making exceptional swords was already a distant memory to the Ganjiang and Moye of the story, one for legendary times which people only partially remember as a matter of ritual and custom, the mourning clothes worn into the mountain forges that marks a certain kind of daring, a willingness to die for one’s craft. Second, it seems counter to Confucian attitudes to cut one’s hair off, except in extreme circumstances. Owen’s comments on human sacrifice and its substitutions in the *Classic of Poetry* are insightful; see Owen’s *An Anthology of Chinese Literature* (26-29).

did, proposes that these stories contain kernels of historical truth from which the supernatural chaff is to be sifted and carried away by the wind of reason.

There are at least two things to be said about this toponymic reading of the story. First, wonder has already made its way into the narrative before the story has even begun. It is wonder that arrests the person who decided it would be important to transcribe the history of this mysterious tomb. It is wonder again that causes the widespread claims for local ownership of the story and its tomb. Some of these legendary claims are just as marvelous as the tale itself. For example, in the *Junguo zhi*⁸ it is recorded that “thirty *li* southwest of [Linfen/临汾] county there is a big pond; another name for it is ‘The Turned-over Cauldron Pond,’ indicating the place where Meijianchi was boiled. [When] the cauldron was turned over, [this] caused a pond to be made; the surface of the water of this pond is still slick with the grease [from Meijianchi’s boiled head].”

Second, not only does the title mark the occasion for a re-telling of the story of Ganjiang, Moye and their marvelous swords, but it also creates a mysterious riddle to be unraveled for a first time reader/listener. And if we assume that the story is an elaboration based on a recombination of various discrete and unrelated parts—a revenge story, a marvelous forging, a story about a strange tomb—there is also mimetic pleasure for someone who has heard any of the pieces of Gan Bao’s story in recognizing what is known, and comparing it with what is new. Maxine Hong Kingston’s fictional autobiography, *Woman Warrior*, works in a similar way for Chinese readers when they re-read the tales and ghost stories she weaves, a bit ironically, from *Stories about Not Being Afraid of Ghosts* into her already fictionalized past.⁹ Furthermore, in

⁸ 郡国志. My translation is from Wang Shaoying’s citation, not from the original text.

⁹ See Wu Qing-yun’s “A Chinese Reader’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*” and Zhang Ya-jie’s “A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.”

that the title suggests a mystery, it also suggests an over-arching logic and an end-place for the tale.

With the title in mind, then, an unraveling of the tale of “The Tomb of Three Kings” begins with noting the size of the tale; in relation to many of the other items found in the *Sou shen ji* it is fairly lengthy. It is about thirty two lines, depending on how it is punctuated, which means it is roughly thirty lines longer than many of the other items in the *Sou shen ji*. Still, thirty-something lines marks a high degree of narrative compression, a common characteristic of Chinese classical prose writings ranging from the brief anecdotal histories of minor persons in Sima Qian’s *Shiji* to the Daoist parables of the *Zhuangzi*. The high degree of compression in Six Dynasties *zhiguai* is especially noticeable when compared with later narratives in the same tradition like the Tang *chuanqi*.

When Barthes dismantles *Sarrasine* according to its five codes—hermeneutic, symbolic, cultural, semiotic, and proairetic—he is also charting the relative speed of the text’s plot. In particular, as he charts the hermeneutic code of the text we can see how compression and excess work together to stupefy a reader. Elaboration halts the proairetic code and creates an overabundance of information, whereas compression focuses on the proairetic code at the exclusion of the other codes. In this sense, there is also a bit of Auerbach’s notion of background and foreground in the terms compression and excess. Finally, it should be reiterated that compression and excess are not in opposition; they work together in the body of a story to create different effects.

Thus, to say that there is a high degree of compression in Six Dynasties narrative means something more than saying that the stories are short. It is more to say that a lot of the story resides in the background, as Auerbach notes of Old Testament narratives. Compression,

however, is necessarily also the dominant mode of shorter narratives. In this way of thinking, a Confucian maxim would mark the greatest possible narrative compression in prose whereas a Ming novel would mark its opposite endpoint.

Despite the compression of “The Tomb of Three Kings,” then, there is enough space to move from what Campany calls the descriptive mode of anomalous discourse to the narrative mode of discourse. That is, “The Tomb of Three Kings” is not merely a detailed description of an odd occurrence; it is a complete story. Because of the story’s compression, though, any narrative excess it might be exhibiting warrants investigation—hints of narrative excess include the occurrence of seemingly unnecessary details, overly complicated turns of plot, repetitions and general oddities.

For instance, a curious example of narrative excess and compression working together in “The Tomb of Three Kings” is an obsession with the number three. As mentioned previously, we know that even in the *Wuyue chunqiu* version of the story it took three months for Ganjiang to forge his swords, but the significance of three is not explained there either. Does this obsession note a relation to the forty-second chapter of the *Laozi* in which we read: “The Dao bore one, one bore two, two bore three, and three bore the ten thousand things,” a theory of the exponentially generative ability of three? Perhaps one purpose of the story is to communicate a Daoist mystical, numerological narrativized sermon on the efficacy of three. Perhaps three’s omnipresence in the story is a calculated effort to evoke a disrupted unity between heaven, man, and earth, localized in this story in the body of the evil king of Chu. The graph for king is often interpreted as three stacked horizontal lines representing heaven, earth, and man with a transverse vertical stroke combining them that suggests the king as axis mundi; 王.

While we may not be able to point to a definitive meaning for the presence of three in the story, it is interesting to note that three is the cause for both compression and excess in the “The Tomb of Three Kings,” compression in the way that symbolic language can compress multiple complex ideas into a single sign or signifier, excess in that three occurs so much and seems to be the cause for the repetition of several lines in the story. For example, the fact that Ganjiang took three years to complete the swords and is to be killed by the king is repeated three times: the first time as background information for the reader; the second time when Ganjiang tells his wife what will happen when he goes to see the king; and the third when Moye explains to her son Chibi why his father is dead. What the recurring number three clearly does accomplish though, is the heightening of the reader’s curiosity. Just as Moye asks her husband Ganjiang in the *Wuyue chunqiu* after commenting on how it has taken him three months—and he is still not finished—to make a pair of swords for the king, “Is there any special meaning in this, *qiyuyihu* (其有意乎)?” Ganjiang’s reply is classic, “I have no idea.” And yet the question lingers.

One suggestion for the reason why this question lingers can be found in Liu Xie’s (ca.465-522) *Wen xin diao long, The Literary Mind Carves Dragons*. In the first chapter Liu Xie clearly delineates how man, by virtue of possessing the attribute of mind, is connected to the patterns of the universe:

In considering the radiance given off above and reflecting on the loveliness that inheres below, the positions of high and low were determined, and the two standards were generated [*Yang* and *Yin*, Heaven and Earth]. Only human beings, who are endowed with the divine spark of consciousness, rank as a third with this pair. Together they are the triad [Heaven, Earth, and human beings]...Human beings are the flower of the elements: in fact, they are the mind of Heaven and Earth. When mind came into being, language

was established; and with the establishment of language, pattern became manifest. This is the natural course of things, the Way. (Owen 344)

This being the case, the mind's linguistic creations are directly connected to the inscrutable Way of the universe. A disordered mind will produce disordered work. Moreover, on a social level a disordered polity is recognizable by an increase in anomalous events. Thus, while the meaning of patterns is especially relevant in a literary context, an attempt to understand the patterns of the universe in general is at the heart of this ancient world of omens and readings.

Going back to the tale of “The Tomb of Three Kings,” we note that the story begins with minimal background information—probably because the background was so well-known: “Ganjiang and Moye¹⁰ of Chu take three years to finish a pair of swords, one male and one female, for the King of Chu.” In the list of the ten famous Chinese swords, Ganjiang and Moye are the only paired swords. That one is male (*xiong*/雄) and the other is female (*ci*/雌) suggests that they are representative of yang and yin forces even though these terms are not used explicitly in this story—they are described as yin and yang in the *Wuyue chunqiu*.¹¹ Again, it is important to remember that yang forces are representative of Heaven and yin forces of Earth.

Apparently, Ganjiang did not make his deadline because the penalty for taking three years to make the swords is death. As is recorded, “...三年乃成。王怒，欲杀之/...three years then complete. The king [is] angry and wants to kill him [Ganjiang]”. Certainly this is an extremely disproportionate response, but Ganjiang is resigned to his fate and explains the situation for his wife: “I made swords for the king; [they] took three years to finish. [When I] go

¹⁰ See Dewoskin and Crump (126), They argue that Ganjiang Moye can be read as one name. While it may be unclear here, we know with certainty that in the *Wuyue chunqiu* Moye is the name of Ganjiang's wife: *Moye*, *Ganjiangzhiqiye*/莫邪，干将之妻也。

¹¹ Popular martial arts films sometimes play on this female-male pairing of the swords to suggest that the male and female protagonists who wield the swords are destined to come together romantically and fight side by side.

to [take the King the swords he will] certainly kill me...” Ganjiang then leaves instructions on how to go about exacting his revenge from beyond the grave with his wife who, in juxtaposition with Ganjiang’s imminent death, happens to be on the verge of childbirth: “...If you bear a son, [when he] is old [enough] tell him: Leaving the house, looking at the south hill there will be a pine tree growing out of a rock. A sword is in its back.”

The setup for a marvelous story of revenge from beyond the grave has now been established. Compression as an effect of simple logic pushes us past asking questions about the justice of the King of Chu’s actions. Revenge is to be had; thus the King must be evil, a violator of the social contract between master and servant. And so it will not be the vassal who will be buried alive with his master, it will be the master who will be laid low and buried together with his vassals.

Ganjiang then hides the male sword and takes the female blade to the King of Chu. Here the story shifts without pause from Ganjiang to the King of Chu. Our storyteller informs us that the King of Chu is not just angry (*nu*) anymore; now he is *danu*, very angry. But why? In one reading we could deduce that the king caused an investigation to be made into the swords because Ganjiang was taking so long: 王大怒，使相之, *Shi* (使) meaning “to cause” and *xiang* (相) meaning “to examine”. DeWoskin and Crump, however, read this as the “the king was wroth for he had made a divination”. Whether the investigation was magical or mundane, it seems the king had some foreknowledge that explains his extreme anger. He knows that there are two swords and that the female sword is coming to him, but the male sword is not. So when Ganjiang arrives, the King of Chu has him executed. This makes sense, but the line seems to translate more naturally as “the King was wroth and caused an investigation [of] it,” “it” or “this” possibly referring to the delay of the swords. It is a small point to make but it seems that

the text is telling us that the King's anger causes an investigation to be made and not the other way around.

The logic of the narrative becomes problematic here. Why does the King kill Ganjiang? Was it because Ganjiang took three years to make those swords? Was it because the king knew he was only going to bring the female sword? This might seem a bit trivial but these kinds of questions are the ones that inspire re-tellings. For example, in Lu Xun's humorous re-casting of the story, the sword-maker fears the king's suspicious and vicious nature: "Ah, you don't understand! The king is suspicious and cruel. Now I've forged two swords the like of which have never been seen, he is bound to kill me to prevent my forging swords for any of his rivals who might oppose or surpass him" (Lu 83).

In short, if the king's anger is really justified because the sword maker took too long to do his job, then we wouldn't need a second and much more elaborate reason. However, we need the first reason to justify an inquiry to get to the second reason for killing Ganjiang. Now, this second reason is much more satisfactory than the first because it indicates that the terms of an important exchange between a ruler and a subject have been violated. Note the epigraph to Mauss's *The Gift*:

"Know—if you have a friend in whom you have sure confidence and wish to make use of him, you ought to exchange ideas and gifts with him and go to see him often. If you have another in whom you have no confidence and yet will make use of him, you ought to address him with fair words but crafty heart and repay treachery with lies. Further, with regard to him whom you have no confidence and of whose motives you are suspicious, you ought to smile upon him and dissemble your feelings. Gifts ought to be repaid in like coin" (xiv).

The decision we have to make as we read, then, is not just about the cause of the king's anger, but about who has violated the terms of their contract. From Ganjiang's perspective, the King of Chu is the violator and Ganjiang is just repaying treachery with lies by withholding the other sword for his eventual vengeance. From the King's perspective, Moye is taking too long and he is withholding a contractual gift and thus must be repaid with death. Both are trapped together in the death-grip of pre-modern economics. Perhaps, if Ganjiang Moye did not know that he was going to be killed then he would not have withheld his sword, and the king would not have been angry and no one would have died. The story would suffer though.

In any case Ganjiang is killed, his wife has a boy named Chibi,¹² and when Chibi is old enough, she gives him instructions for revenge. Lu Xun's story "Forging the Swords" actually starts here. The sixteen-year old boy Mei Jianchi has been playing with a drowning rat with sadistic indecision, foreshadowing his own curious fate. His mother, in frustration at her son's wishy-washy temperament, sighs, "After midnight you'll be sixteen, but you're still the same—so lukewarm. You never change. It looks as if your father will have no one to avenge him." This naturally leads into her narrative unfolding of a tragic family history and the need to avenge his father's death.

What is common between these two stories is the polarizing effect this news has on the son. Chibi, in Gan Bao's tale, immediately follows his mother's instructions and gets the sword. Day and night he thinks about his desire for revenge. Unfortunately, in a prophetic dream the King of Chu sees a boy with a broad forehead, a mark of greatness,¹³ and hears the boy say "I want revenge." The King's solution is an economic one; he tries to purchase his security by putting a price on the boy's head. The irony of this action is delightful. The King of Chu

¹² Also known as Meijianchi due to his broad forehead.

¹³ 眉间广尺, a foot wide between his eyebrows, a sign of a hero. See Cordell D.K. Kee's notes on page 74 of Kao's compilation, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic*.

succeeds in getting exactly what he paid for, Chibi's head, only to realize too late that he has secured his own death instead of his salvation. This echoes Sima Qian's biography of the would-be assassin Jingke, who tries to use General Fan's head to get close enough to kill the King of Qin.

That the King decides to put a price on the boy's head because of the contents of a dream underscores the significance of dreams and omens throughout the *Sou shen ji*. If Campany is right in arguing that Six Dynasties *zhiguai* affected a destabilization of the role of the Kings and adepts as code-masters and gatekeepers to a hidden world of gods, demons, and the dead, then the primary vehicle for this process seems to be the common world of dreams. As Campany notes, dreams were considered not mental states in ancient China, but highly efficacious manifestations of the pattern of the world and real encounters with gods and the dead or real journeys to far away places (354). In their dreams, then, all men could experience marvelous journeys and encounter marvelous beings. Is this not also one of the functions of storytelling which, as Benjamin notes finds, its dominant modes in the far-traveling merchant who exchanges exotic tales with the farmer for local lore?

The contextual logic of the story does not allow the reader to consider the question of the validity of the King of Chu's dream. Not only are dreams generally efficacious, but this particular dream is a king's dream, a dream of someone with unique privilege. And so the King of Chu immediately puts a price on Chibi's head. Chibi discovers there is a reward for his capture and wisely flees to the woods in ignominious defeat. What he does not know is that fleeing to the woods will secure his success. This movement away from the town to the periphery of the wooded mountains is opposed to the movement of his father, who goes directly to the king's palace, the center of civilization and the center of the king's power, to meet his

death. It is only by fleeing to the extreme borders of the King's influence that Chibi can meet death on his own terms and simultaneously stumble upon the path that will result in successfully effecting his revenge on the King of Chu.

Exiled Chibi sings miserably while he walks in the mountains, not knowing that his sad song will be the means to encountering a powerful stranger who will help him exact his revenge. In that his song leads to the next part of the plot, it seems necessary. It's a tender moment in the story where we know the editor/storyteller must be creating this little detail, and despite the excess we do not mind. It is very human and feels real. It heightens our awareness of the asymmetrical relationship of power between the King and Chibi. What is left for the powerless and oppressed to do but sing the blues? Surely, then, part of the pleasure of the story is the fantasy it offers to the disempowered. We root for the underdog and take pleasure in his unexpected success, but first we commiserate with him as we contemplate the hopelessness of his situation. We simply wonder what sad song it is that he is singing.

Meanwhile, a stranger overhears Chibi singing and asks him what the cause of his misery is. After Chibi recounts his tragic tale, the stranger suggests a unique solution: "[I] heard that the King will purchase your head for a thousand gold, bring your head and your sword over here and I will get revenge for you." Without delay, Chibi then cuts off his own head, and offers his head and his sword to the stranger—just like Xiangyu who cuts his head off and hands it to his captors instead of surrendering. However, his body does not fall over until the stranger reassures Chibi that he will keep his promise.

Cordell D.K. Yee, who translates Gan Bao's story in Kao's collection of *zhiguai* translations, remarks that, "The laconic description of the young man's self-beheading is striking and effective, though the action itself is puzzling. The device of conveying a message in a riddle,

while thematically functional, adds a sense of depth to the text as well” (Kao 75). This is a very reasonable assessment of the situation. Gan Bao records, “The boy declaring, ‘How fortunate!’ cut off his head, and holding his head and his sword in both hands, offered them [to the stranger while] standing rigidly.”¹⁴ The action is puzzling. Not only does conveying messages in riddles add depth to a text, it excites curiosity and wonder. That Chibi’s desire for revenge is powerful enough to enable him to remain standing is even more marvelous. That Chibi fears he might be tricked is also reasonable, thus wonder, originating from the unexpected solution to Chibi’s problem, serves to assure the reader that Chibi’s actions are not foolish.

The stranger does exactly as he promises. He takes Chibi’s head to the King of Chu and gives the King instructions to boil it in a cauldron. For three days and nights the head will not boil; again this seems to directly parallel the three months the ore that would not melt in the *Wuyue Chunqiu* account. The stranger then seduces the King of Chu by appealing to the power of his gaze. The only way to get the boy’s head to melt is for the King to come closer to the cauldron and stare Chibi into submission. The stranger then pulls out the male sword and knocks the King’s head into the cauldron. The stranger then cuts off his own head which falls into the water too. All three heads boil and dissolve together until they become indistinguishable, forcing the servants of the King of Chu into burying the remains together in one place known thereafter as the Tomb of Three Kings.

Here, at the end of the story, part of the logic of the narrative reveals itself. It is partially a logic of practical storytelling concerns. How can one explain how three kings were buried together? Well, perhaps there was only one king but there were two other bodies, and no one could tell who was who. How could this happen? They were all boiled together. How do you get

¹⁴ Eryuexingshenjizhiwen.pengtoujijianfengzhi, lijiang/儿曰：幸甚！即自刎，两手捧头及剑奉之，立僵。

three bodies into a cauldron? Maybe you just need to boil the heads. How do we get these three heads into the pot? And suddenly we have a story.

Another one of the hidden threads that keeps the story together has already been mentioned, the logic of exchange. There is an unspoken contract of exchange between the King of Chu and Ganjiang, the terms of which have been broken, which establishes the primary structure of revenge for the whole narrative. There is also the verbal contract between Ganjiang and his wife, Moye, when he asks her to give his son directions for vengeance. Finally, there is the contract between Chibi and the stranger, the most unusual and supernatural of all three contracts, which begins with the wondrous death of one party and ends with the wondrous death of the other. In fact, the wondrous nature of the exchange between Chibi and the stranger seems to emphasize in its difference from the other fairly ordinary exchanges that all human exchanges are a miniature representation of the interplay of grander universal forces, like the yin and yang forces suggested by the presence of the two swords, the swordsmith and his wife, and the *wuxing* forces discussed by Gan Bao in a handful of sections scattered throughout the *Sou shen ji*.

As Datson and Park remind us in the conclusion of their book *Wonder and the Order of Nature*, “Belief is a continuum, and although wonders must be real to evoke horror, they need only be well-imagined to give pleasure” (366). That is, even purely fictional marvels require some degree of plausibility to excite wonder and pleasure. As such, it might be easy to mistake a storyteller’s attempt to bring some measure of verisimilitude into a story in order to evoke more wonder, to mistake what is craft for belief.

We may never know whether Gan Bao was a true believer in Tianrenshuo or how the story of “The Tomb of Three Kings” was actually constructed. As Frank Kermode remarks in the *Genesis of Secrecy*:

If so many causes act in concert to ensure that texts are from the beginning and sometimes indeterminately studded with interpretations; and if these texts in their very nature demand further interpretation and yet resist it, what should we expect when the document in question denies its own opacity by claiming to be a transparent account of the recognizable world? (101)

Texts are tricky, especially when they claim they are not tricky. However, we can clearly see that wonder suffuses Gan Bao's story. Not only does "The Tomb of Three Kings" create wonder as it narrates one marvel after another, but it also creates wonder in the way that it narrates these wonders—in the speeding up and slowing down of its various parts. There is a speeding up that elides the hidden logic behind the marvels it recounts creating mystery, increasing surprise, and in effect maximizes wonder; and then there is a slowing down surrounding the marvels that is focused on the logistics of the story and in one instance is created to heighten pity for Chibi.

While this analysis is obviously not exhaustive, hopefully there is enough here to justify the suspicion that wonder might have motivated Gan Bao and many others to collect these tales and elaborate on them, and that it is wonder that will guarantee that they will be re-told even if only ironically.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This thesis explores the applicability of theories and notions of the fantastic, the uncanny, the strange, and the uses of wonder in Six Dynasties *zhiguai* texts. The first chapter, after examining Freud and Todorov, proposes that the fantastic and the uncanny are both theories about a particular kind of reader. This reader must be scientifically-minded, yet still must harbor un-surmounted “superstitious” beliefs. Without this reader there can be no fantastic. Without this reader only the return of hidden infantile complexes can create uncanny effects in literature. This chapter also concludes that while skepticism did exist in third century China, it is not the anxious, alienated, scientific skepticism required by Todorov’s and Freud’s theories.

The second chapter uses Cunningham’s work to define a general notion of what wonder is, and how it is used in literature from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare. It then proceeds to delineate the unresolved arguments of scholars who have attempted to categorize *zhiguai* as history, fiction, or philosophical-religious discourse. This chapter concludes that wonder is essential to all three categories—rendering all argument on this matter irrelevant to the current study.

The third chapter, through close reading, shows how wonder is pervasive in “The Tomb of Three Kings.” The *Sou shen ji* is full of similarly marvelous stories. They are marvelous by most reader’s standards, because they contradict the doctrine of present things. In other words, the strange, bizarre, marvelous, and wondrous are those phenomena which contradict a person’s everyday experience, not those which contradict his or her ideology. Some people are less

sensitive to the effects of the marvelous, but whether or not a particular reader experiences wonder while reading them depends largely on how well the story is told.

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