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«ЛЯО ЧЖАЙДЫН УКМУШТУУ ОКУЯЛАРЫНДАГЫ» ТҮЛКҮ ОБРАЗЫНЫН МАДАНИЯТТЫК  
МААНИСИ ЖӨНҮНДӨ

КУЛЬТУРНОЕ ЗНАЧЕНИЕ ОБРАЗА ЛИСЫ В “ЛЯО ЧЖАЙ ЧЖИ И”

ON THE CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FOX IMAGES IN THE STRANGE STORIES  
FROM A CHINESE STUDIO

**Кыскача мүнөздөмө:** Түлкү кыздын бул классикалык адабий образы, байыркы түлкүнүн маанисинин өнүгүшүнөн келип чыккан. Анын мазмуну бай жана өзгөчө адабий кооздукка ээ. «Ляо Чжайдын кызыктуу окуялары» адабий фантазиянын ыкмаларын колдонуп, мифтик жана адамдык сапаттарды бириктирген идеалдуу түлкү кыздардын образдарын түзгөн. Бул өзгөрүү адабият тарыхында түлкү кыздарга болгон терс баалоону түбөлүктүү өзгөртүп, аларды адабияттын сыйкырдуу кооздукка толгон системасына айланткан. Түлкү кыздар сырткы көрүнүшү боюнча гана эмес, өздөрүнүн зээндүүлүгү менен да көзгө түшүп, Пу Сунлиндин ички тилектери менен адабий кыялдарын чагылдырган. Бул Кытайдын байыркы адабиятына өзгөчө түс кошту.

**Аннотация:** Образ лисы-девушки, этот классический литературный персонаж, возник в результате эволюции древнего образа лисы. Его содержание богато и обладает уникальной литературной красотой. «Ляо Чжай Чжи И» с помощью литературной фантазии создал серию идеальных образов лис-девушек, сочетающих в себе божественность и человечность. Это преобразование полностью изменило негативную оценку лис-девушек в истории литературы, превратив их в систему, полную эстетической красоты. Лисы-девушки не только красивы внешне, но и обладают выдающимися талантами, отражая глубокие желания и литературные мечты Пу Сунлина, что добавило уникальный оттенок в историю древней китайской литературы.

**Abstract:** The fox lady, a classic literary figure derived from ancient fox imagery, is rich in symbolic meaning and possesses a unique literary charm. The Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio employs techniques of literary fantasy to portray idealized fox ladies who embody both divinity and humanity. This representation not only diverges from traditionally negative portrayals of fox ladies in literary history but also establishes an aesthetically refined and cohesive image of the fox lady within literature. Beautiful and talented, the fox ladies embody Pu Songling's aspirations and literary dreams, adding a distinctive hue to the history of ancient Chinese literature.

**Негизги сөздөр:** Ляо Чжайдын кызыктуу окуялары; түлкү кыз; искусство куруу; жазуучунун кыялы

**Ключевые слова:** Интересные истории Ляо Чжай Чжи; лиса-девушка; художественное построение; мечта писателя

**Keywords:** Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio; fox lady; artistic construction; writer's dream

The *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, hailed as the pinnacle of ancient classical Chinese short stories and likened to a brilliant pearl in the treasure house of Chinese literature<sup>[1]</sup>, is a masterpiece of fox imagery. It features foxes of various types and characteristics in the Chinese literary tradition, be they witty or cunning, gentle or kind. Among the 491 classical Chinese short stories in the book, 82 feature foxes as main characters or key figures. Notably, about 20 such short novels revolve around male foxes such as “scholar foxes” and “friend foxes,” including the famous *Hu Shi* and *Huai Shui Fox*. In contrast, over 40 center on female foxes, making up more than half of the fox-themed stories. That is why the book is also referred to among the common people as “The Stories of Ghosts and the Foxes.” These tales not only enrich the connotative depth of Chinese literature but also reflect the author Pu Songling’s consummate literary artistry and profound insights into human nature.

#### 1. The Connotation and Evolution of Fox Imagery

Pu, a brilliant literary figure, masterfully employed romantic artistic techniques to craft a series of fox ladies imbued with human charm and warmth. The fox ladies, noble in character, have presented a highly aesthetically pleasing system of imagery in Chinese literature. In his masterpiece, two distinct bloodlines of fox ladies are portrayed. One is the pure fox bloodline, including figures like Feng Sanniang, Hong Yu, Shi Shunhua, Lian Xiang, Xin Shisiniang, and Yun Cuixian, all representatives of pure fox breeds. The other is the products of human-fox hybridization, like Ying Ning. Regardless of their bloodlines, the short story collection endows all the fox ladies with a unique dual identity — they are foxes with human qualities, humans with fox-like traits, a seamless blend of both fox and human. They radiate the beauty of human feelings and compassion while exuding the enchanting charm and attractiveness of the fox race. Here “enchanting” carries none of the traditional connotations of evil or temptation. Instead of portraying them as the symbols of negativity, the author imbues them with both humanity and divinity, thus transforming them into elves in the human world<sup>[2]</sup>. They represent Pu’s ideal female imagery, reflecting his aspirations for beautiful

human nature and ideal personality.

Fox imagery in Chinese folklore is deeply rooted in cultural contexts, with its origins tracing back to a divine beast of ancient times. The image gradually evolved from a divine fox into a demonic beast fox before culminating in a fox of human nature. The fox imagery originated from the nature worship practiced by early people. As a product of nature worship, the fox retained a sense of divinity and, regarded as an auspicious symbol, became a significant totem among clans and tribes. According to myth, Yu the Great met a fox and married a girl from Mount Tu, further establishing the fox as a highly revered totem. In ancient times, foxes were revered as divine creatures embodying noble virtue and spirituality, symbolizing dignity and good marriage. The nine-tailed fox is referenced in both ancient history and mythology. The “Nanshan Jing” section of *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* states, “On the mountain of Qingqiu, there is a beast. It resembles a fox but has nine tails and makes sounds like a baby. It eats humans, yet consuming its meat can prevent man from being bewitched by demons<sup>[3]</sup>.” According to *Analytical Dictionary of Characters* by Xu Shen of the Eastern Han Dynasty, foxes possess three virtues: the soft color of their fur; being smaller at the front and broader at the back; and the tendency to face the direction of their birthplace when they die<sup>[4]</sup>. These features, in line with the moral principles of Confucianism, were appreciated and highly regarded by mainstream culture. As social productivity advanced and human self-awareness deepened, fox imagery transitioned from gods to demons, evolving from auspicious symbols in primordial times to demonic beasts as depicted in the literature of the Wei and Jin dynasties. *In Search of the Supernatural* by Gan Bao of the Eastern Jin Dynasty records that, “The fox was once a lewd woman named Ah Zi in ancient times. She later transformed into a fox, which is why many fox monsters called themselves Ah Zi”<sup>[5]</sup> (from *Record of Famous Mountains*). Similarly, *Extensive Records compiled in the Taiping Years*, a Song Dynasty book, recounts that a promiscuous woman called Ah Zi turned into a fox, portraying foxes, particularly female foxes, as lewd creatures. Gradually, fox ladies and fox spirits

became symbols of indulgence and wildness. As the female fox was increasingly depicted as a lewd and evil creature in literature, another fox imagery emerged in the history of literature, namely Ren Shi, a fox spirit embodying goodness and emotions. The *Story of Ren Shi*, a Tang Dynasty book, recounts how Ren Shi, the fox spirit, significantly contrasts with Ah Zi, highlighting the opposing themes of good versus evil and love versus lust. Ren Shi, the most beloved fox of all time, reflected the aesthetic sensibilities of the secular world as well as its psychological identification with fox spirits. In the Qing Dynasty, Pu Songling abandoned the Ah Zi type of fox spirits. Drawing inspiration from the Ren Shi fox spirit prototype, he created numerous vivid fox ladies with diverse affections. Of course, these characters are the highly aestheticized and idealized creations of the author.

## 2. The Artistic Construction of Fox Lady Images

### 2.1 The Outer Beauty of Fox Ladies

Pu, with a particular focus on female beauty, endowed the fox ladies in his works with breathtaking beauty, graceful and charming demeanor, as well as an alluring style. In “Qing Feng,” the fox lady Qing Feng is so delicate and charming that Geng Qubing falls in love with her at first sight. In “Xiao Qi,” the fox lady Xiao Qi mesmerizes Xu Jichang with her extraordinary beauty. “Chang’e” tells the story of a fox lady named Dian Dang, whose intelligence and charm fascinate both Zong Zi and the Moon Goddess. “Jiao Na” tells the story of a slender and beautiful fox lady, Jiao Na, who enchants Kong Sheng. In short, all the fox ladies created by Pu are stunningly beautiful and charming.

Moreover, nearly all the fox ladies in the book are girls or young women. For example, Jiao Na is thirteen or fourteen years old, Qing Feng and Dian Dang are both fifteen, Ying Ning is sixteen, and Ah Song is eighteen, each blossoming in youth. This approach not only drew on earlier portrayals of fox ladies but also reflected the author’s unique aesthetics. Young girls and young women, youthful, energetic, simple and kind, were less influenced by social pressures, which made it easier for the author to construct and develop his narrative, giving the wording rationality and flexibility.

### 2.2 The Inner Beauty of Fox Ladies

In Pu’s writing, the pretty fox ladies also embody truth, goodness, and inner beauty. 1. They are true in love. They dare to love and express their feelings directly, often more unwavering, passionate and steadfast than humans. For example, Lian Xiang, a pure and selfless fox lady deeply in love with Sang Sheng, embraces Sang Sheng’s passions and is willing to risk her life to pursue their love, making her a true embodiment of love and loyalty. Similarly, Hong Yu’s deep affection and persistence outshine those of many ordinary people. Ying Ning, a charming fox lady with unmatched beauty, is fond of flowers and smiling, impressing readers with her naive and pure personality. 2. They are gifted. Pu spared no efforts portraying his characters as gifted, some passionate about poetry, some skilled in medicine, some witty and intelligent, and some observant. For example, “Hu Xie” portrays a fox lady who, articulate and witty, shows superb insight and composure in the face of a group of scholars’ frivolous words. Qing Mei, a fox lady with discerning eyes, quickly recognizes the diligence and filial piety of the poor scholar Zhang Sheng. Xiao Cui not only cures her husband’s idiocy but also repeatedly saves the whole family from danger with her wit and supernatural powers. Nearly omnipotent, these fox ladies either punish the powerful to aid the weak or help those in need, establishing themselves as “Heroines” in the book<sup>[6]</sup>. 3. They support justice. The fox ladies, sentimental, tender and considerate, are chivalrous and loyal, valuing love and righteousness. For example, Jiao Na’s actions place her among the most sincere and passionate, reflecting her noble emotions and embrace of righteousness. Ah Xiu, a creator and guardian of happiness, impresses us with her self-sacrifice and her willpower in pursuing the good and beautiful. All these fox ladies embody righteousness through their actions, serving as living representations of benevolence and faithfulness.

In conclusion, the fox ladies, as the embodiment of truth, goodness and beauty, perfectly blend their sentiments, morality and emotions. Beautiful and intelligent, they distinguish right from wrong; helpful and grateful, they punish evil and promote good, radiating the

brilliance of humanity and ethics. They are not humans, but they are humane, lovely and respectable. Most of these fox ladies are the author's ideal characters, reflecting his passionate love for beautiful things. By praising their virtue and magical power, the author gave artistic form to his vision of ideal beauty.

### 3. The Idealization of Fox Ladies and the Deconstruction of the Writer's Dream

Many fox ghosts and flower demons in the book possess both outer and inner beauty. These perfect women represent the author's social ideal — an ideal that was unattainable in the society at that time. Thus, they are creations of the author's idealization. The author also infused them with his life experiences and emotional fantasies. Through these idealized and unrealistic illusions, Pu expressed his unique fantasy of love.

#### 3.1 Perfect Women in Non-realistic Creations

In the era when women were considered inferior to men, Pu demonstrated that women could outshine men by creating fox ladies who were intelligent and calm in the face of danger. They either mock the feudal bureaucracy, like Xiao Cui, or toy with unfaithful men, like Heng Niang. Some offer timely help to the disadvantaged, like Jiao Na; others skillfully navigate official ranks and imperial examinations with their wit, like Hong Yu. Alert and intelligent, they help people in trouble, thereby expressing the author's frustration and helplessness regarding social issues. Pu, whose unique social insight broke the age-old idea that a woman's virtue lay in her lack of talent, bestowed supernatural and extraordinary abilities upon many of the fox ladies who, as beautiful as flowers, easily tackle many practical problems faced by men. The fox ladies in the book carried the fantasy of poor students, reflecting their aspirations for life<sup>[7]</sup>. As a literary creator, Pu needed a platform to vent his pent-up pain and frustration over being denied the opportunity to fulfill his ambitions. In this sense, literary creation became the best tool for writers like him to console themselves.

Freud stated in his *Creative Writers and Daydream*, "A happy person never daydreams, but only someone with unfulfilled wishes does. The motivation behind daydreaming is the unfulfilled wish. Each daydream represents the

fulfillment of a wish and is related to the dreamer's unmet reality<sup>[8]</sup>." Pu, isolated and helpless in his struggle against social reality and lacking support in his endeavor to speak out for the masses, had to resort to literary creation, an avenue of the least resistance but capable of self-expression. The stories of fox ghosts and flower demons provided an appropriate outlet for his emotions. Pu, having failed the imperial examinations, was often in mental distress. Poor and helpless, he was forced to leave his hometown to earn a living, leaving his family behind and trapped in endless loneliness. One of his poems titled "Home Living" goes, "For long I have treated the crane and plum as my family, visiting frequently the post as if it were my home<sup>[9]</sup>." It showed how lonely and helpless he was when living far away from his hometown. The characters he created in the *Strange Stories* embodied his unfulfilled desires. The fox ladies, meticulously crafted by the author, possess near-perfect images that express the author's strong realistic aspirations and profound social insights.

#### 3.2 The Love Dream of Fox Ladies

The fox ladies often come to console the frustrated scholars, appearing as their desirable mates, chivalrous women who lift them out of trouble, or as creators and guardians of a happy family. Thus, the fox ladies carry the love dream of the struggling scholars, keeping them in good company during their studies. The author wrote the love stories with passion and boldness, weaving "sex" as a central theme throughout. Unlike traditional literature, where love develops from "emotion" to "desire," *Strange Stories* features a shift from desire to emotion. That is, a hero is first captivated by the heroine's beauty, then they have sex, and finally, they live together, a stage where "desire" transforms into "emotion." Pu advocated for the freedom of love. Therefore, in his writing, the fox ghosts and flower demons defy the feudal rituals, ignore worldly constraints like family status, and boldly pursue their true love and happiness.

This was undoubtedly a wonderful love dream of Pu, the story's protagonist, for whom all the fox ladies developed a deep love. The poor scholars who failed to achieve their dreams but won the love of the fox ladies all point to the

author himself. However, the unexpected romantic encounters experienced by the poor scholars could hardly be viewed as true; rather, they reflect the idealism of the author, who is male. That is why the fox ladies, divine and humane, beautiful and gifted, embody the romantic dreams of the struggling scholars, as well as the desires and hopes of the author himself. Additionally, the strange stories also reveal the author's awareness of breaking free from the constraints of feudal morality and his resistance to social restrictions. In other words, he sought to liberate love and marriage from restrictions, advocating for individual freedom as a natural human right, thereby challenging the feudal ethics proposed by feudal moralists that "preserved the principles of heaven and suppressed human desires."

### 3.3 Yearning for an Ideal World

The hardships of life and spiritual confusion compelled Pu to find a way to make his voice heard by the world. It was very difficult for a poor scholar to succeed in the imperial examinations. In this context, love allowed the struggling scholar to temporarily forget his failures and social injustices, balancing his desire and ideal, emotion and soul. Through this, he embraced values beyond fame and fortune. The author created many fox ladies who are so beautiful, charming, emotionally steadfast, intelligent, witty and grateful, offering readers an endless aesthetic experience that lingers long after. The author, immersed in the realm of the fox ladies, sought to make up for the imperfect real world through the imaginary world he created. He used the fox ladies as a medium to express both his own and social aesthetic experiences, to restore the suppressed ego and distorted freedom, and to escape the filthy reality in pursuit of life's true meaning within an illusionary world. In short, the fox ladies in the book embody a fairy tale world where the struggling scholars in the feudal era could temporarily escape their frustrated lives.

### 4. Conclusions

The *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* is a pinnacle of classical Chinese short stories. Pu Songling, employing romanticism, built a fantastical and beautiful world of fox spirits inspired by his unique life experiences and dreams

as a writer. The fox ladies he created represent the great achievement in the depiction of fox spirits in the history of Chinese supernatural novels. His book, a complete departure from the traditional negative portrayals of foxes, endows them with the beauty of ordinary women from a new aesthetic perspective, standing out in the history of ancient Chinese literature. The master built on the brilliant legendary novels of the Tang Dynasty, drew on the creative essence of Song story-telling scripts and Yuan poetic dramas, and developed a unique artistic style that vividly reflected his distinct personality. These typical images of fox ladies give the work a more profound artistic appeal, embodying the unique characteristics of the times and artistic charm in ideological connotation and cultural significance.

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