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PU SONGLING AND THE QING EXAMINATION SYSTEM

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Admirers of *Liaozhai zhiyi*, the collection of strange tales by Pu Songling (1640-1715), have long considered the author's failure to fulfill his career aspirations as a critical factor inspiring the composition of the work and influencing the form which it took. As early as 1723, the painter and poet Gao Genghan (1683-1751) commented in a postface to the anthology, "At an early age Liaozhai displayed brilliant talent but, unfavored in the examinations, he received no recognition, and to express the stifled feelings that filled his heart, he had no other recourse but to write this book."¹ These remarks have often been echoed by later critics as they relate Pu's experiences in the examination hall to his preoccupations in *Liaozhai*.

The present study attempts to provide an answer to a question that is central to our understanding of Pu Songling's examination life: why did he fail? It is a question on which scholarly opinion is divided: the Japanese historian Miyazaki Ichisada has concluded that, given the institutional factors governing the examinations results, it was hardly surprising that Pu never passed,² whereas two recent biographical studies by Maeno Naoaki and Gao Mingge suggest that choices or blunders made by Pu Songling himself largely shaped the course of his career.³ Of these two

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¹ "Geben xu ba tici" (Collected prefaces, colophons, and dedications), p. 31, in *Liaozhai zhiyi huijiao huizhu huiping ben* (Strange Tales from Liao Studio, variorum edition), ed. Zhang Youhe (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1978, repr.; hereafter abbreviated to *Liaozhai*). For the circumstances under which this postface came to be written, see Yuan Shishuo, "Zhuxuezhai he Zhuxuezhai chaoben Liaozhai zhiyi" (The Molded Snow Studio and the Molded Snow Studio Manuscript of *Liaozhai zhiyi*), *Pu Songling yanjiu jikan* 1 (1980):155-156.

² Miyazaki Ichisada, *China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China*, tr. Conrad Schirokauer (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 59.

³ Maeno Naoaki, *Ho Shōrei den* (Biography of Pu Songling) (Tokyo: Akiyama shoten, 1976), pp. 67-77; Gao Mingge, "Pu Songling de yisheng" (The Life of Pu Songling), *Pu Songling yanjiu jikan* 2 (1981):234-237.

conflicting views, Miyazaki's is much the more persuasive, but his case can be documented in greater detail if we focus our attention on the conditions prevailing in Pu Songling's own time. The first half of this article thus sets out to identify the chief external factors that affected Pu Songling's candidacy in the late seventeenth-century provincial examination.

The second concern of this study is to reassess Pu's response to the examination system, as reflected in *Liaozhai*. Ever since Yang Liu classified "satire and attack on the examination system" as one of the four major elements in the "ideological content" of *Liaozhai*,⁴ the characterization of Pu Songling as a fierce critic of the examination system has become a commonplace of academic discourse both in China and in the West.⁵ As later discussion will show, a careful reading of *Liaozhai* leads one to conclude that Pu's dissatisfaction with the system was accompanied, or even overshadowed, by a deep sense of the omnipotence of fate, and that any evaluation of Pu as a commentator on the examinations must be modified accordingly.

Pu Songling as Examination Candidate

An outline of Pu Songling's examination record will be a valuable preliminary to further consideration of these issues. As a boy, Songling was gifted with a retentive memory and a lively intelligence, and was regarded by his father, a man of scholarly leanings but modest social and economic status, as the most promising of his four sons.⁶ This judgement was vindicated when in 1658 the eighteen year old student passed top of the list in the district examination. Pu went on to collect the highest position in the prefectural examination and repeated the feat in the qualifying examination (*yuan shi*). His essays were singled out for praise by the education intendant,⁷ the prominent poet Shi Runzhang (1619-1683). This warm

⁴ Yang Liu, *Liaozhai zhiyi yanjiu* (A Study of *Liaozhai zhiyi*) (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi chubanshe, 1958), pp. 53-61.

⁵ See, for example, Zhongguo Kexueyuan Wensue Yanjiusuo *Zhongguo wenxue shi bianxie zu*, ed., *Zhongguo wenxue shi* (History of Chinese Literature) (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1962), 3:1041-3; Chang Chun-shu and Chang Hsüeh-lun, "The World of P'u Sungling's *Liao-chai chih-i*: Literature and the Intelligentsia During the Ming-Ch'ing Dynastic Transition," *The Journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies of the Chinese University of Hong Kong* 6.2 (1973):407, 412-414.

⁶ Pu Ruo, "Liuquan gong xingshu" (Biographical sketch of Master Liuquan), *Pu Songling ji* (Collected Works of Pu Songling), ed. by Lu Dahuang. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 2:1807.

⁷ In translating Chinese official titles, I follow the renderings suggested by Charles O. Hucker in *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* (Stanford, 1985).

endorsement by a famous man of letters established for the young scholar an enviable reputation among his fellow government students in Jinan prefecture.⁸ At this point in his life, all the signs seemed to indicate that he might well become one of the most outstanding Shandong scholars of his generation.

Of his ensuing attempts to pass the provincial examination we have only an incomplete record. After such a brilliant start to his career, Pu would no doubt have been keen to extend his run of success in the first provincial examination for which he was qualified, that of 1660. But when the list of graduates was issued, Pu's name was conspicuously absent, an omission soon to become recurrent. Although we cannot be sure how regularly Pu entered for subsequent examinations, given his relative youth in the 1660s and 1670s it is unlikely he would have willingly dropped out of competition.

A poem dated 1678 reveals that Pu, then thirty-eight, had made another abortive attempt to pass in that year.⁹ The demoralization that followed in its wake no doubt contributed to the unrelieved gloom to which he gave expression in the preface to his stories composed in the following spring. His fortieth birthday, as several of his poems show,¹⁰ was a painful reminder of how little he had achieved in the first half of his life.

We know that Pu Songling competed in the provincial examination of 1687, but here he made the unfortunate mistake of skipping a page in his answer book when writing out one of his essays and was automatically failed for breach of regulations.¹¹ Pu's next attempt in 1690 was also unsuccessful,¹² and Lu Dahuang and others have inferred that it was his last.¹³ Their conclusion is based on a passage in the biographical sketch of his wife which Pu wrote soon after her death in 1713. In it he says:

In my fifties I had still not abandoned hope of advancement. She urged

⁸ *Pu Songling ji* 2:1807; Zhang Yuan, "Liuquan Pu xiansheng mubiao" (Epitaph for Mr. Pu Liuquan), *Pu Songling ji* 2:1804.

⁹ See "Sailing on Kaming Lake with Li Wenyi of Anqiu," *Pu Songling ji* 1:513-514. In this poem Pu tells how he and his friend sat together and shed "Lingyang's tears." The allusion to Bian He, Marquis of Lingyang, who suffered cruelly when his precious jade was not appreciated, was a favorite of Pu's, and he used it to denote the rejection of true talent in the examinations. See *Liaozhai* 1:84; and the lyric "To Wang Rushui," *Pu Songling ji* 1:702.

¹⁰ See the poems "Ailing," "Forty," and "During Illness," *Pu Songling ji* 1:516.

¹¹ Lu Dahuang, *Pu Liuquan xiansheng nianpu* (Chronological biography of Mr. Pu Liuquan), *Pu Songling ji* 2:1774.

¹² *Pu Songling ji* 2:1778-79.

¹³ *Pu Songling ji* 2:1778-79; Liu Jieping, *Pu Liuxian zhuan* (Biography of Pu Liuxian) (Taipei: Xuesheng shuji, 1970), p. 54.

me to desist, saying, "You're going to have to give this up! If you had been destined to be eminent, you would be a government minister by now. One can find happiness here among the hills and woods—why need you look for entertainment in the music of bamboo striking flesh!" I thought this good advice. But when my sons and grandson went to take the provincial examination, absorbed by my narrow ambition I could not help but feel a certain hope, and words often betrayed my feelings, but she ignored them completely. Sometimes I would try to win her over by observing portents of success, but these too she disregarded. I laughed and said, "My dear, do you want to be a lady?" Her answer was: "I have no other virtues, but I do know where to stop."¹⁴

Lu Dahuang takes this to mean that Pu did not enter himself as a candidate after 1690, an interpretation that finds some support in the comment by Pu Ruo that his father "lost heart for the examinations" in his fifties.¹⁵ Both statements, however, fall short of outright declarations that Pu completely withdrew from competition, and their reliability is open to question.¹⁶

Some of Pu Songling's surviving examination answers do in fact furnish evidence of continued participation after 1690. The latest of Pu's memorials, compositions required of all candidates in the provincial examination, dates from 1705, while others were written in every examination year from 1693 to 1702.¹⁷ The regular production of such pieces suggests that Pu was still actively engaged in examination preparation during these years.

To sum up, then, Pu Songling's trials in the provincial examination hall appear to have spanned almost fifty years. Although he may have missed the occasional session due to illness or poor results in the preliminary test (*ke shi*), until 1705 graduation at the provincial level remained a prime objective in life. Pu thereafter seems to have abandoned his efforts as futile.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Pu Songling ji* 1:253.

¹⁵ *Pu Songling ji* 2:1808.

¹⁶ See Maeno, pp. 145-146; Gao, p. 232.

¹⁷ See Gao, pp. 232-234. Other evidence that suggests continued examination participation after 1690 is presented by Maeno, pp. 145-149; Gao, p. 231.

¹⁸ Although Pu visited Jinan again in 1708, he seems to have been a spectator rather than a participant in the examinations of the year. See his "Song of Lixia," *Pu Songling ji* 1:618-19. It should be noted that as a government student Pu was still required to attend the triennial *sui* examination which determined the promotion and demotion of students. In 1682 he had been awarded the rank of stipend student on the basis of high marks in this examination (*Pu Songling ji* 2:1770). It was not until 1711 that he was promoted to tribute student (see Ma Zhenfang, "Pu Songling xinmao suigong kao" (Verification of Pu Songling's 1711 tribute studentship), *Wen shi* 15 (Sept. 1982):291-93).

Given Pu Songling's extraordinary abilities, recognized by his examiner in 1658 as well as by many contemporary scholars and later readers, his failure to pass at the second level has aroused much speculation, and a number of explanations for it have been offered. Recent studies in both China and Japan have tended to place particular emphasis on factors relating directly to Pu Songling the individual which may have put him at a disadvantage in competition with other candidates. Maeno Naoaki and Gao Mingge suggest that Pu was reluctant to apply himself single-mindedly to study, and they identify a poetry club which Pu and his friends founded in 1659 as an early instance of his susceptibility to distraction from a competitive career.¹⁹ Maeno notes that in the 1660s Pu amused himself by composing lyrics for popular Shandong folk tunes, and points out that Pu's short stories, which he may have begun writing as early as the 1660s, constituted another conflicting investment of time and effort.²⁰ Both Maeno and Gao therefore draw a parallel between Pu Songling and Wei Haogu, the young poetry enthusiast reprimanded so sternly for his unorthodox interests by his examiner Zhou Jin in a famous scene from the eighteenth-century novel *Rulin waishi*.²¹ Like Wei, they argue, Pu damaged his prospects by indulging in extra-curricular pastimes. Pu Songling, as Gao Mingge puts it, "took the wrong road right from the start": his individualistic inclinations made his failure almost a foregone conclusion.²²

In my view, however, we will reach a truer understanding of why Pu never passed if we divert attention away from him and consider instead the institutional features which determined the selection of provincial graduates in the early Qing period. Overwhelming evidence indicates that it was these objective conditions rather than subjective factors relating solely to Pu Songling which really moulded the pattern of his undistinguished career.

¹⁹ Maeno, pp. 67-69; Gao, pp. 235-36.

²⁰ Maeno, pp. 69-74.

²¹ Maeno, pp. 76-77; Gao, p. 236.

²² Gao, p. 235.

The Examination Institution in Seventeenth-Century Shandong

It is common knowledge that the examination system was extremely competitive. It is important to note, however, that during the years when Pu Songling participated competition was particularly intense. This becomes clear if we examine the academic record, not of Pu Songling, but of the district in which he resided, Zichuan. Seventeenth-century Zichuan was a county proud of its scholarly traditions. Though by no means a rich area, Zichuan could boast a record of scholastic achievement that compared favorably with other districts in Jinan prefecture. In the late Ming period (1573-1643) twenty-two local scholars achieved the distinction of becoming metropolitan graduates,²³ including several men who went on to become high officials.²⁴ Pu Songling's own lineage also prospered during this time, producing two district magistrates and one provincial graduate.²⁵

In the opening years of the Qing dynasty, Zichuan maintained its excellent record in the examinations. During the Shunzhi period (1644-1661), seven provincial examinations were held in which no less than thirty-nine local scholars were awarded the provincial degree, an average of about six per examination. These included two relatives of Pu Songling, Pu Rui and Pu Zhenying, who passed in 1651 and 1657 respectively.²⁶

Subsequently, the success rate plummeted. During the sixty-year reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662-1772), twenty-one provincial examinations were held, in which only twenty-seven Zichuan scholars passed, an average of little more than one graduate per examination.²⁷ Why this dramatic drop in the pass rate? The explanation is not hard to find. In the years immediately following the subjugation of China, the Qing administration, anxious not to antagonize the key intellectual class whose support it sought, offered aspiring scholars opportunities for upward mobility which equalled or bettered those existing in the late Ming period. Thus the quota for provincial graduates in the first Shandong examination in 1645 was fixed at ninety, a figure slightly in excess of that which prevailed in the early seventeenth century. When Pu Songling's cousin received his

²³ *Zichuan xianzhi* (Zichuan county gazetteer) (1776) 5.4a-7a.

²⁴ Notably Bi Ziyan (*jinshi* 1592), who served as minister of revenue, and Zhang Zhifa (*jinshi* 1601), who held the post of minister of rites. See *Zichuan xianzhi* 6.26b-30b.

²⁵ Pu's great-uncle Shengwen (*jinshi* 1592) served as magistrate of Yutian (*Zichuan xianzhi* 5.5a). Shengwen's cousin Shengchi, a tribute student, took office in Wuji in 1584 (*Zichuan xianzhi* 5.23b; *Chongxiu Wuji xianzhi* [1936] 6.14b). Shengchi's grandson Zhaochang passed the provincial examination of 1621 (*Zichuan xianzhi* 5.15a).

²⁶ *Zichuan xianzhi* 5.16b-17a.

²⁷ *Zichuan xianzhi* 5.17a-19b.

degree in 1651 the quota had been enlarged even further: he and his ninety-seven fellow graduates formed the largest class ever in Shandong's history.²⁸

Inflated admissions quotas, which were in effect at each of the three stages of the examinations during this period, imposed heavy strains on the institutional structure, however, and by the final years of the Shunzhi period the authorities felt confident enough to slash the entrance quotas at all levels. In 1660, by coincidence the very same year that Pu Songling launched his campaign to secure a provincial degree, the quota for Shandong was halved, to forty-six.²⁹ Although later in the Kangxi reign the quota was raised somewhat, throughout the bulk of Pu's career the graduating class in each triennial session was smaller than it had been for over a century.

During the Kangxi era, the provincial examination was intensely competitive not only in terms of the constricted graduation quota but also in terms of the volume of candidates competing for those limited places. Though in 1645 it had been decreed that only thirty candidates could enter for every one place in the quota,³⁰ this edict was generally not enforced, partly because officials found that an indulgent policy in admitting candidates to the examination hall was a good way of courting popularity with provincial scholars.³¹ The ratio of candidates to places commonly ranged from about 80:1 to 100:1. In a typical example, the Henan examination of 1681, for the forty-seven places in the pass quota, more than 4,500 candidates competed.³² It was not until the 1740s that efforts

²⁸ *Shandong tongzhi* (Shandong province gazetteer) (1736) 15 (sec. 2).lab. For a general description of changes in examination quotas in the early Qing period, see Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (rev. edn., New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 176-86. For the size of graduating classes in the last three Ming reign periods, see *Shandong tongzhi* 15 (sec. 1).114b-141a; for Pu Rui's class, see *Shandong tongzhi* 15 (sec. 2).37-40a.

²⁹ *Shandong tongzhi* 15 (sec. 2).1b-2b. Cf. Wang Dezhao, *Qingdai keju zhidu yanjiu* (Studies in the Qing Examination System). (Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1982), p. 63.

³⁰ *Qinding Da Qing huidian shili* (Imperially Sanctioned Collected Statutes and Precedents of the Great Qing) (repr. of 1899 edn., Taipei: Taiwan Zhongwen shuju, 1963; hereafter abbreviated to *Shili*), 337.1a.

³¹ See the 1742 edict of the Qianlong emperor in *Shili*, 337.8a.

³² See Shi Runzhang, *Xueyutang waiji* (Supplement to the Collected Works of Shi Runzhang) (*Siku quanshu zhenben*, 3rd series) 2.10a. Over 3,800 candidates participated in the Shanxi examination of 1684 (Zhao Zhixin, *Yishan wenji* (Collected Prose of Zhao Zhixin) (*Sibu congkan* edn.) 2.1a). The quota at the time was 47 (*Shili*, 348.5a-6a). In the Shaanxi examination of the same year, over 4,000 candidates competed for 47 places (Li Zhenyu, *Baishi shanshang ji* (Collected Works of Li Zhenyu) (Kangxi. edn.) 14.1b-2a). Prior to the reduction of the quota, a more favorable ratio had existed. In the Henan examination of 1654, for example, over 4,000 candidates competed for 99 places (Sun Zhongyi, *Airitang wenji* (Collected Prose of Sun Zongyi) (late-Qing edn.) 5.4b).

were made by the Qianlong emperor to regulate strictly the admission of candidates to the examination.³³ In Pu Songling's time, a liberal policy produced extreme congestion at the provincial level.

A number of other defects in the administration of the provincial examinations existed in the early Qing and often operated to the disadvantage of the most gifted candidates. The first two Qing emperors paid relatively little attention to the administrative details of the examinations, and it was not until the Yongzheng emperor came to power in 1723 that a flurry of edicts were issued, designed to correct some of the more glaring anomalies.³⁴

The first problem concerned the competence of the examiners. The team responsible for reading and grading the papers was led by a provincial examiner and an assistant provincial examiner appointed by the central government. These two men read only a small proportion of the papers, usually just those recommended to them by their subordinates.³⁵ In practice, therefore, their power to control the selection process was circumscribed. The main responsibility for distinguishing the good papers from the bad was delegated to a dozen or so examination aides selected by the provincial administration in Shandong, consisting of department and district magistrates temporarily transferred from their normal duties. Although these men had entered official life on the basis of their success in the examination hall, many people doubted whether they were the most appropriate judges of scholarship. As the Yongzheng emperor observed in an edict of 1727, "After a magistrate takes up office, he is daily embroiled in official documents and matters pertaining to tax collection, and his knowledge of the principles of literary composition will inevitably become rusty."³⁶ Provincial governors were reluctant to lose the services of their

³³ *Shili*, 337.8ab.

³⁴ Edicts relating to examination matters occupy only pages 1a-3b of *juan* 5 of *Shizhu shengxun* (Sacred Edicts of the Shunzhi Emperor) (in *Shi chao shengxun* (Sacred Edicts of Ten Emperors), late-Qing edn.), and only pages 1a-11a of *juan* 12 of *Shengzu shengxun* (Kangxi). In contrast, edicts on the same subject in *Shizong shengxun* (Yongzheng) occupy pages 1a-16a of *juan* 10, and in *Gaozong shengxun* (Qianlong) they extend from *juan* 33 to *juan* 40.

³⁵ For a summary of the examining process, see Miyazaki, p. 52. Shi Runzhang indicates that the provincial examiner would read just a tiny percent of papers, a number perhaps half as large again as the quota for the province (*Xueyutanq wanji* 2.11a).

³⁶ *Shili*, 334.4b. A century earlier, Ai Nanying (1583-1646) had complained, "The examination aides are all just temporarily seconded from their handling of official documents and legal cases, and cannot be compared to the education intendant, who devotes his concentration and energy to the reading of papers and whose mission is to evaluate literary merit." See Ai Nanying, *Tian yongzi ji* (Collected Works of Ai Nanying) (1879 repr.) 2.6b. In a seldom noticed passage in *Rulin waishi*, Wu Jingzi also contrasts the accurate evaluations at the first level with the inept selections at the second. In chapter 49, the vain and mediocre Hanlin Academician Gao remarks that although he had often been given low grades by the education intendant, he succeeded in passing the provincial examination. See *Rulin waishi* (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1955), pp. 480-81.

most able and conscientious administrators for the 4-6 week period necessary to fulfill the duties of an examiner. They therefore tended not to select those magistrates who would make the most effective examiners, but simply those whose absence from office would be of least consequence. As the Qianlong emperor noted in 1756, "Governors-general and governors . . . usually choose those whose area of jurisdiction is not very important and whose performance in office is average. In some cases they even appoint men whose powers are already near decline and whose energies are limited."³⁷

Both of the Kangxi emperor's immediate successors devised various means to improve and regulate the quality of examiners, either giving prospective aides a written test to check their competence or employing instead scholars who were not burdened with administrative commitments.³⁸ But during the period when Pu Songling was a candidate, the system whereby government bureaucrats were indiscriminately assigned to examination duty was still in force. As preliminary decisions to pass or fail were made by the examination aides, this constituted a serious flaw in the selection process.

The sheer volume of examination papers to read and evaluate presented these often rather second-rate examiners with almost insurmountable difficulties. They received scripts submitted in the first session on the eleventh day of the eighth month, and were required to announce the list of successful candidates by the first of the ninth month at the very latest.³⁹ It was only after Pu Songling's retirement from competition that the deadline was extended to allow examiners more time for the thorough inspection of papers.⁴⁰ In Pu's day, then, examiners were expected within the space of about a fortnight to plough through the mountains of scripts presented in all three sessions of the examination by several thousand candidates.

³⁷ *Shili*, 334.11a.

³⁸ See the Yongzheng emperor's edicts in *Shili*, 334.4b-7b, and those of the Qianlong emperor in *Shili*, 334.9a-11b.

³⁹ *Shili*, 352.1a; Ye Mengzhu, *Yue shi bian* (Collected Observations of the World) (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981) 2.42.

⁴⁰ In 1711 an imperial edict extended the deadline for medium-sized provinces like Shandong to the tenth day of the ninth month (*Shili*, 352.3b-4a).

The problems confronting the graders are well summarized by an eighteenth-century provincial examiner:

To evaluate people on the basis of their words has since ancient times been considered difficult. To try and assess a man's learning accumulated through a lifetime by the essays of a day is all the more forbidding a task. Over 4,000 scholars take part in the Hunan examination, generating over 12,000 sets of scripts for the three sessions. If you count the aggregate of essays, discussions, dissertations and poems, this amounts to nothing less than 56,000 compositions. My colleagues and I have spent eighteen days and nights since we started reading papers until the final selection. The volume of scripts was enormous and time was limited. If one were to assert that our decisions were in all cases appropriate and that not one talented scholar was overlooked, I could not honestly place too much faith in this claim.⁴¹

It was humanly impossible to give adequate attention to all the papers in the time allowed. The combination of pressure of time and volume of work had two effects on the selection process. The first was that disproportionate emphasis was given to the first session of the examination, which consisted exclusively of the so-called "eight-leg" essays.⁴² Form dominated content in these essays, and candidates were required to conform to rigidly conceived principles of composition. The result was, as one official put it, "the accomplished essay does not differ to any great degree from the inferior work, and selection and rejection lack any dependable basis for judgment."⁴³ The second and third sessions, which set questions of greater substance, including discussions of historical or political topics and issues in contemporary affairs, played only a minor role in determining the final results. If a candidate's essays in the first session failed to impress the examiner, it was unlikely that outstanding papers in the subsequent sessions would alter the examiner's negative

⁴¹ Qian Daxin, *Qianyantang wenji* (Collected prose of Qian Daxin) (*Sibu congkan* edn.) 23.5a.

⁴² Imperial edicts designed to counteract this tendency were issued in 1728 and 1744 (*Shili*, 347.4b-5a, 8a-9b). Huang Zongxi noted that examiners had time to grade carefully only the papers from the first session in his essay "Keju" (Examinations). See He Changling, comp., *Huangchao jingshi wen bian* (Collected Qing Writings on Statecraft) (repr. of 1886 edn., Taipei: Guofeng chubanshe, 1963) 57.25b.

⁴³ Xue Fucheng, "Zhiping liu ce" (Six plans for peaceful governance), in Ge Shijun, comp., *Huangchao jingshi wen xubian* (Supplementary Anthology of Qing Writings on Statecraft) (repr. of 1901 edn., Taipei: Wenhui chubanshe, 1972) 12.6a.

opinion. Although the examination was designed to be quite comprehensive and potentially could test quite a wide range of intellectual and literary aptitudes, in practice decisions hinged on the examiner's subjective appraisal of the "eight-leg" essays alone.

The second consequence was that hasty and sloppy grading was inevitable. Essays were unpunctuated, and in their hurry or in a lapse of concentration, examiners might mispunctuate a difficult passage and lose the sense, or skim through papers carelessly without pausing to consider the quality of the work.⁴⁴

Another factor tended to inhibit the selection of outstanding scholars. After each examination, the papers of successful candidates were dispatched to the Ministry of Rites in Beijing for a further round of checking for errors, violations of prescribed form, or infractions of convention. Examiners faced disciplinary action if the papers they passed were regarded as defective by the central authorities. This led them to adopt a safety-first policy in grading, opting for predictable and stereotyped essays which they were confident would not provoke criticism. Essays which posed certain difficulties in comprehension or interpretation would be passed over in favor of pieces which, though ordinary, were formally unobjectionable. A number of observers blamed this tendency for the phenomenon of second-rate scholars being selected instead of truly talented men.⁴⁵

In this connection it is interesting to note that the qualifying examination at which Pu Songling was awarded his first degree had been administered by an official particularly sensitive to this kind of problem. Shi Runzhang was critical of colleagues who showed an undue preference for shallow compositions and was well-known for his adventurous examining policy. He quoted a Ming writer to the effect that "words must flow from the heart," and added, "Meaningless essays which have borrowed their ideas right and left do not deserve to be selected," summing up his guiding principle in the declaration, "It would be better to pick a blemished jade than a flawless pebble."⁴⁶ It may have been no coincidence that Pu Songling passed with distinction when this enterprising selection policy was

⁴⁴ See *Xueyutang waiji* 2.9b-10a, *Yue shi bian* 2.46; also Lin Zexu, "Qing ding xiangshi kao-guan jiaoyue zhangcheng bing fang shizi chaoxi zhu bi shu" (Memorial Requesting the Establishment of Regulations Governing the Reading of Scripts by Examination Aides and the Prevention of Plagiarism and Other Abuses by Scholars), in *Huangchao jingshi wen xubian* 53.5b-6a.

⁴⁵ See *Xueyutang waiji* 2.9ab and the Qianlong emperor's edict of 1760 in *Shili*, 347.9b-11a.

⁴⁶ *Xueyutang waiji* 2.9a-10a.

enforced.

Two other anomalies further impeded the rational selection of the best candidates. The number of papers assigned to each reader for grading often differed substantially. Individual examination aides were made responsible for marking the scripts of candidates specializing in particular titles of the five classics, and as some of the classics attracted more candidates than others, some graders might have to read as many as a thousand papers, while others were let off lightly, with just a couple of hundred. It was not until 1777 that a more equitable distribution of the work-load was approved.⁴⁷ Until that time, these discrepancies placed excessive burdens on some examiners and adversely affected the quality of their grading.

Secondly, in determining the final selection the provincial examiner was required to observe set quotas for the papers graded by each examination aide. If one reader had recommended many excellent papers and another had recommended a less distinguished group of scripts, the provincial examiner would be compelled ruthlessly to prune the first total and possibly pass papers of lesser merit from the second, in order to satisfy these rigid quotas. Again, it was not until the 1720s that a more flexible policy was adopted which allowed the provincial examiner to disregard such considerations and use quality as the sole criterion for selection.⁴⁸

Finally, we should note that there existed a real danger that some papers would not even be read, let alone marked. Once an examiner had filled his slim quota of selected papers, he had no great incentive except the stirrings of his own conscience to plough on through the remainder of his pile.⁴⁹ In an attempt to prevent negligence, an edict of 1679 required that failed papers be returned to candidates with some indication of why they were considered unsatisfactory.⁵⁰ It is doubtful whether this eliminated the problem, for examiners could simply justify the rejection of a paper with a vague criticism like "lacking in distinction" or "not exceptional," which could apply to almost any piece of work, and which could quickly be scrawled at the top of any paper.⁵¹

Corruption was another factor affecting Pu Songling's prospects. Collusion between candidates and examiners in the early Qing seriously undermined the ideal of a selection process based on the impartial evaluation of academic achievement. Given the high attrition rate in the provincial

⁴⁷ *Shili*, 347.13b-14b.

⁴⁸ *Shili*, 347.4b-5a.

⁴⁹ *Xueyutang waiji* 2.10a; *Yue shi bian* 2.46.

⁵⁰ *Shili*, 352.14b-15a; cf. *Yue shi bian* 2.46, which dates this edict to 1681.

⁵¹ *Huangchao jingshi wen xubian* 53.5b-6a.

examinations, it was particularly tempting to resort to corrupt practices to assure success at this level. The examinations held in Zhili and Jiangnan gained especial notoriety during this period, as a series of scandals made it clear that some examiners were accepting bribes and awarding degrees to the sons of high officials. In Zhili in 1657, for example, one examination aide promised to pull strings for as many as twenty-five candidates, and several of his colleagues made similar arrangements. The scandal broke after the results were published, and five aides were executed.⁵² After the discovery of similar violations in the Jiangnan examination of the same year, fourteen graduates were disqualified and all the examiners were put to death.⁵³ Despite these stern punishments, irregularities continued to be uncovered at intervals throughout the Kangxi reign. Frustrated candidates, outraged by the blatant favoritism sometimes shown, staged protest demonstrations on a number of occasions and invented jingles which ridiculed the shameless behavior of their judges.⁵⁴

Unscrupulous acts of collusion between examiners and the minority of candidates who possessed ample funds or influential connections naturally worked to the disadvantage of scholars like Pu Songling who could not compete on these terms with the rich and privileged. The disproportionate examination success of the sons of well-placed families in the late seventeenth century finally forced the government to adopt measures to appease hostile public opinion. So-called "official quotas" were established in 1700 which set a strict limit on the proportion of graduates who could come from a high official background. Thereafter, in the Shandong examination only one place in ten was reserved for scholars related to high office-holders, and the other places were awarded to men of lower family status.⁵⁵ One may safely assume that prior to 1700 the proportion of sons of officials in each graduating class was much higher.

In conclusion, it seems both misguided and unnecessary to seek the reasons for Pu Songling's examination failures in the writer's personal idiosyncrasies. What really impeded his progress were the constricted graduation quotas during his lifetime and the vagaries of the selection process. Pu Songling's case is therefore far from unique: among his generation of Shandong intellectuals we find many other gifted men who suffered similar frustrations. Pu's friend Zhang Duqing (1642-1711+) was

⁵² Meng Sen, *Xin shi congkan*, 1st series (Shanghai: Dadong shuju, 1936) 25a-41b.

⁵³ Meng Sen, 41b-52b.

⁵⁴ *Yue shi bian* 2.48-51; Shang Yanliu, *Qingdai keju kaoshi shulu* (Description of the Qing Examination System) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 1958), p. 309.

⁵⁵ *Shandong tongzhi* 15 (sec. 2).2a; Ho Ping-ti, pp. 185-86.

an unsuccessful candidate in eleven provincial examinations between 1663 and 1705.⁵⁶ Pu's relative by marriage Yuan Ruyu (1643-1726), who had become a government student when just thirteen, failed in the provincial examination on seven occasions.⁵⁷ Li Yochen (1643-1722+), another friend, was only fifteen when he was awarded the first degree, but a lifetime of competition at the higher level achieved nothing.⁵⁸ The Zichuan scholar Zhang Yongji (1652-1735) was recognized at an early age as a man of outstanding abilities, but did not receive the provincial degree until he was fifty-nine.⁵⁹ Pu's friend Bi Shengyu (1651-1723+) won top place in the district, prefectural and qualifying examinations but participated unsuccessfully at the provincial level on no less than sixteen occasions.⁶⁰

The extremely low pass rate and the irrational features of the selection process aroused the participants the sense that the whole system was one gigantic lottery in which they themselves could do little to improve their chances, and where they were totally at the mercy of a higher force whose operations appeared random and unpredictable. This sense of helplessness was not peculiar to early Qing candidates, though it seems to have been particularly common among them. As early as 1043, the Song official Fan Zhongyan (989-1052) had noted, "Selection or rejection of a candidate is often attributed to fate and not to achievement,"⁶¹ and a number of Ming writers had expressed a similar skepticism, including Gui Youguang (1506-1571), who remarked: "In the examination hall it is just a matter of luck--there is no other special technique you can learn to assure success."⁶² A popular saying circulated in Pu Songling's day: "In the examinations one cannot discuss literary merit,"⁶³ reflecting this same

⁵⁶ See the entries for the Kangxi period in Zhang Duqing, *Houzhai zizhu nianpu* (Chronological Autobiography of Zhang Duqing), attached to *Kunlun shanshang ji* (Collected Poetry of Zhang Duqing) (microfilm of unpaginated Qing MS. preserved in the National Central Library, Taipei).

⁵⁷ *Zichuan xianzhi* (1920) 9.86a.

⁵⁸ *Zichuan xianzhi* (1776) 6.98a; Lu Jianzeng, ed., *Guochao Shanzuo shichao* (Anthology of Shandong Poets of the Qing) (1758 edn.) 33.19b.

⁵⁹ *Guochao Shanzuo shichao* 49.11a.

⁶⁰ *Zichuan Bi shi shipu* (Genealogy of the Bi Lineage of Zichuan) (Jiaqing edn.) 34b.

⁶¹ *Fan Wenzheng gong zhengfu zouyi* (Government Memorials of Fan Zhongyan) A.7a, in *Fan Wenzheng gong ji* (Collected Works of Fan Zhongyan) (*Sibu congkan* edn.), cited in Wolfgang Franke, *The Reform and Abolition of the Traditional Chinese Examination System* (Cambridge, Mass: East Asia Research Center of Harvard University, 1972), p. 17.

⁶² Cited in Wang Dezhao, p. 156. A rationalization by Gui of his examination failures in terms of fate can be found in his collected works, *Zhenchuan xiansheng ji* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981 repr. of Kangxi edn.) 4.97-98.

⁶³ *Liaozhai* 4.541; cf. Pu's poem, "Practice essays," *Pu Songling ji* 1:593-94. Zhang Duqing attributed several of his failures to fate: see the entries in *Houzhai zizhu nianpu* for 1678, 1681, and 1702. Other examples of such views are noted by Wang Dezhao, pp. 145-48.

belief that success and failure were a matter of accident or fate.

This denial of any clear connection between the examination results and the intellectual caliber of the candidates was further elaborated in the belief that the examination system essentially functioned as an instrument of divine retribution. A rich anecdotal literature developed over the centuries which related success and failure to one's own moral behavior, in this life or a previous one, or to the conduct of one's ancestors. Again, this strain of thought can be traced back at least to the Song period. A twelfth-century anecdote concerns a candidate who seduces a young woman immediately after the second session of the examinations. That night his parents have an identical dream in which a messenger from heaven announces that their son has passed at the top of the list. No sooner does he say this than another officer corrects him: "That is not right. He has committed an improper act, and Heaven has suspended him for one examination." Sure enough, a few days later the young man is duly failed for a breach of regulations.⁶⁴ Stories of this type were collected assiduously by Qing writers, and whole anthologies were devoted to them.⁶⁵

The belief that suprahuman forces determine examination selection was not confined to frustrated students attempting to rationalize their failures. One of the most forceful assertions that fate governs the outcome was made by the scholar Xu Fang (1619-1665+), who passed the Jiangxi provincial examination in 1639. He learned subsequently that his papers originally had been set aside unmarked, as the examination aide had already selected a sufficient number to recommend to the provincial examiner. Miraculously, his untouched scripts found their way into the pile of recommended papers and caught the examiner's eye, thereby enabling Xu Fang to graduate near the top of the list. Reflecting upon this episode years later, he attributed his good fortune entirely to the support of

⁶⁴ See the story "Liu Yaoju" in Hong Mai, *Yijian dingzhi* 17.683, in *Yijian zhi* (Southern Song; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981 edn.). John W. Chaffee discusses this and other Song anecdotes in *The Thorny Gates of Learning in Sung China: A Social History of the Examinations* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169-81. Episodes analogous to Hong Mai's tale are found in *Liaozhai* 3.424 and 4.514-15. C. K. Yang discusses the appeal to candidates of such lore in his *Religion in Chinese Society* (University of California Press, 1967), pp. 265-68.

⁶⁵ See Qian Yong, *Lü yuan chonghua* (Collected Notes of Lü Garden) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979) 13.335-40; Zhao Songyi, ed., *Dan gui ji* (Records of Orange Osmanthus) (Kangxi edn.); Lü Xiangxie, comp., *Kechang yiwen lu* (Record of Strange Tales from the Examination Hall) (1879 repr.).

heavenly powers, rewarding him for the merits accumulated by his family. In Xu's view, the gaping disparity between the pass quota and the immense pool of excellent candidates rendered the selection process virtually meaningless. He added:

A candidate on a particular day may do better or worse than at other times, while the examiner is even more prone to some sudden predilection or aversion to his work. There is thus no guarantee that the most gifted will be selected, nor that those selected will be the most gifted. In short, if luck comes your way, then you will succeed; if luck is against you, you will not. To pass is fortuitous, to fail is commonplace.⁶⁶

Other explanations for examination success he firmly repudiated. The ultimate vanity, he argued, was for graduates to claim that it was their talent which earned them their degrees.

Typically, frustrated candidates moved to a more resigned stance over time, as youthful confidence in their ability to shape their own future was gradually eroded by bitter experience, and in later life they were overwhelmed by a sense of utter waste. This process of disillusionment is clearly charted in the autobiography of An Zhiyuan (1628-1701), a Shandong writer who sat the provincial examination for fifteen consecutive occasions between 1645 and 1684, failing every time. At his seventieth birthday, looking back on his futile career, he described two of his three greatest regrets as follows:

Promptly at the age of seventeen I went off to take part in the "battle of letters," but was retired fifteen times. I travelled north to Yantai (Beijing) and journeyed west to Lixia (Jinan), shivering in my student's gown and swaying on my weary donkey. In my worst moments I was pelted simultaneously by sand and hail in the hinterland of Ying and Mo (in 1660 I had gone as far as the outlying areas of Mo when I met with hailstones as big as hens' eggs--a dangerous situation); I was confronted jointly by arrows and knives in the outskirts of Yuling (in 1654 I had reached Yuling when I was robbed by mounted bandits and lost my travelling expenses). In my envy of some paltry glory I never turned back in the face of such perils. When I recalled the ancient saying, "Failure and success are governed by fate," I felt as though I had awokened from a dream or recovered from a drunken stupor, but (by

⁶⁶ Xu Fang, *Xuan ta bian* (Prose works of Xu Fang) (Kangxi edn.) 5.64a-65a.

this time) my creative energies had been squandered on examination essays for over forty years. I can only grieve that in the twilight of my life I cannot halt the passage of time. This is a second regret.

I remember that in the spring of 1666 the provincial graduate Gao Genzhong and I were ascending Taishan, and when we reached Yellow Scarp Ridge, we met a white-haired Taoist skilled in physiognomy. He scrutinized my face and said, "You are not destined to be eminent in the realm of dust. Come and meet me here beneath the tall pine tree in ten years' time, and I will speak with you of things outside this world." At the time I was brimming over with self-confidence and believed that wealth and status would surely be mine. Inwardly resenting his remarks, I made no response to his offer. It is now over twenty years since that day, and I am feeble and fatigued, content to be an outdated relic. I sigh that "rock marrow" is hard to find; I lament that the Taoist immortal has gone I know not where. This is the third thing I regret.⁶⁷

Examination Candidates in Liaozihai

It is against this background that we should consider the response to the examinations which is reflected in Pu Songling's work. The central male characters in almost all of his short stories are like himself scholars of relatively low status: either government students or Confucian apprentices. It is the preoccupation with this social group which gives the sprawling collection a unity it might otherwise lack. The tales focus on diverse aspects of the scholars' lives: some describe their romantic entanglements or marital difficulties, some their humiliations at the hands of gentry or officialdom, others their encounters with ghosts, demons and immortals. But throughout the book, the examination treadmill looms ominously in the background, casting its shadows on the scholars' lives as failure constantly gnaws away at their self-respect and generates tensions in their personal relationships.

The selection process generally is presented in Pu's fiction as irrational and totally unpredictable. Time and again, the essays of a talented scholar are recognized by everyone as work of the highest quality, but he does not receive the deserved honours in the examination hall.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ An Zhiyuan, *Yuwei ji* 1.22ab, in *An Jingzi ji* (Collected Works of An Zhiyuan) (1863 edn.). Ying and Mo are the districts of Hejian and Renqiu in Hebei; Yuling is the Changshan district in Shandong. Dramatic rejuvenating properties were ascribed to "rock marrow" (Su Shi, *Dongpo zhilin* (Dongpo's Forest of Notes) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981) 2.42).

⁶⁸ See, for example, *Liaozihai* 1.81, 7.964, 10.1351, 11.1453.

In a number of tales Pu Songling exposes the institutional flaws in the examination system. At times success is attributed to influential contracts or simple bribery.⁶⁹ More often, however, the irresponsibility and incompetence of the examiners are identified as the most serious defects in the system. Examiners are implicitly criticized for entrusting the grading of papers to subordinates unsuited to the task, or for not maintaining adequate surveillance of the selection process.⁷⁰

Like other critics, Pu seems to have felt that examiners at the provincial level were generally less discriminating than those who awarded the first degree. In one tale, a brilliant scholar who repeatedly fails the provincial examination is told by a friend, "Your essays are more than good enough to secure you top place in the lower examination, but they will not win you a place even at the bottom of the graduation list in the provincial examination."⁷¹ It is only when the scholar abandons his high standards and models his style on the most stereotyped kind of essay that he impresses his examiners and passes.

In "Yu Qu'e," Pu Songling raises the issue which was later to concern the Yongzheng emperor: whether ordinary magistrates are really qualified to act as readers in the provincial examination. In this, his most elaborate satire of the examination system, Pu invents an underworld system of examinations whose operations furnish an enlightening contrast, or sometimes a mocking parallel, to the conventional human administration. In the underworld, so as to maintain high standards of accuracy in grading, prospective examiners must themselves undergo a rigorous screening process. Only those officials who have demonstrated their proficiency in a written test are permitted to become examiners, and all others are disqualified. A character in the story notes pointedly that in the human world, on the other hand, the magistrates who are commonly appointed as readers are not subjected to scrutiny, and the principle of selection on merit is consequently jeopardized.

Although in normal circumstances Pu Songling's imaginary underworld examination would far surpass its earthly counterpart as a reliable testing system, in this particular year the preliminary selection of examiners is cancelled, and examiners are appointed instead in the same haphazard manner which prevails among the living. The chosen list of readers, which includes a blind ghost and the spirit of an avaricious money-grabber, is

⁶⁹ See, for example, *Liaozhai* 1.81, 6.820, 7.963.

⁷⁰ See *Liaozhai* 10.1309, 10.1330.

⁷¹ *Liaozhai* 10.1359.

therefore an effective commentary on corresponding human mismanagement. As one might expect, the results of an examination entrusted to such a motley crew are a complete travesty, and a superbly qualified ghost is failed. Later the examiners' decisions are scrutinized and two-thirds of the graduates are deemed unsatisfactory and stripped of their degrees.⁷² Once again the implications for the earthly examinations are clear: there is little chance that the strongest candidates will be selected unless the most able examiners are recruited.

Were Pu Songling to maintain consistently that the anomalies in the selection process derived primarily from the ineptitude of the examiners, this would constitute a damaging indictment of the examination system, and *Liaozhai* scholars, by stressing the critical tone of Pu's comments, have often claimed that such an expose indeed composes one of the three or four main themes of Pu's work.⁷³ This conclusion, however, is based on a highly selective reading of *Liaozhai* which ignores another crucial element in Pu's presentation of the selection process, an element that balances or even outweighs the human factor: fate. This is seen as an irresistible force which no amount of literary talent can counteract, and a resigned acceptance of its influence on the results is urged upon frustrated candidates. Pu's criticisms of the administration of the examinations therefore tend to lose their potency, as human selection procedures fade into insignificance in face of Heaven, the supreme examiner.

In a typical case, Student Ye's failures in the provincial examination are attributed to a divine agency that governs his career: "Unknown to him, destiny confines men, 'art loathes fate', and when the results were announced, he suffered rejection once again." After literally dying of heart-break, Ye, now a ghost, comes to terms with his setbacks. When his patron tests his reaction to repeated failure, he responds, "It was probably destined to be so." The author's postscript adopts the same tone of philosophical resignation: "Living in this world, all a man can do is close his eyes and march forward, submitting to whatever destiny, lofty or low, Heaven may allocate. There is no shortage of men like Ye in the world, who possess remarkable abilities yet drown in disappointment."⁷⁴

⁷² *Liaozhai* 9.1167-70.

⁷³ See footnotes 4 and 5. For a recent restatement of this view, see Li Houji and Han Haiming, *Ren gui hu yao de yishu shijie: 'Liaozhai zhiyi' sanlun* (The Artistic World of Men, Ghosts, Foxes, and Demons: Random Discussions of *Liaozhai zhiyi*) (Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1982), pp. 163-68.

⁷⁴ *Liaozhai* 1.81, 82, 85. "Art loathes fate" is a phrase borrowed from Du Fu's poem "Thoughts of Li Bai from the world's end" (*Qian zhu Du shi* (Du Fu's Poems Annotated by Qian Qianyi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958) 10.354).

A story entitled "The Commissioner of Literary Affairs" provides the most extensive exegesis of the relationship between fate and examination results. The tale introduces four characters: an able scholar named Wang; his friend, a ghost named Song; a third-rate scholar; and a blind monk. The monk predicts that the good scholar will pass and the third-rate scholar fail, but in fact the reverse happens: Wang fails and the mediocrity graduates. Challenged by the gleeful graduate to account for the inaccuracy of his forecast, the monk declares that his projections were based on academic criteria alone, and points to a second frame of reference, one which is to dominate the story: "What I discussed was simply literary merit. I have no intention of discussing fate with you."⁷⁵ When Wang fails yet again, Song explains to him the principles by which fate operates: in determining the careers of men the divine administration lays more stress on morality than on literary achievement. Wang's failures so far derive from neglect of moral cultivation, and his luck will turn if he adheres to the way of virtue. Wang later receives further clarification: he had been crossed off the register of officials-to-be because he bore responsibility for the death of a concubine.

Here, and elsewhere in his tales,⁷⁶ Pu Songling expresses the widespread view that one's examination experiences are predetermined by non-academic factors, the moral credits or debits accumulated by oneself or one's ancestors. And so, though we may explain Pu's failures in terms of statistical probability and a defective selection process, it is clear that Pu himself would have offered a different answer, that which he supplies in a passage from the preface to *Liaozhai*:

When the bow was hung at my father's door, he dreamed that a sickly-looking Buddhist priest, but half-covered by his stole, entered the chamber. On one of his breasts was a round piece of plaster like a cash; and my father, waking from sleep, found that I, just born, had a similar black patch on my body. As a child, I was thin and constantly ailing, and unable to hold my own in the battle of life. Our own home was chill and desolate as a monastery; and working there for my livelihood with my pen, I was as poor as a priest with his almsbowl. Often and often I put my hand to my head and exclaimed, "Surely he who sat with his face to the wall was myself in a previous existence"; and thus I referred my non-success in this life to the influence of a destiny surviving from the last.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ *Liaozhai* 8.1101-2.

⁷⁶ *Liaozhai* 2.141, 7.968-69, 10.1308, 9.1170.

⁷⁷ "Liaozhai zi zhi" (*Liaozhai's Own Record*), pp. 2-3, in *Liaozhai*; the translation is that of Herbert A. Giles, *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, rev. edn. (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd., 1916), pp. xiv-xv.

Efforts have been made, most recently by Paul S. Ropp, to link Pu's reactions to the examinations with the critiques presented by seventeenth-century thinkers like Huang Zongxi (1610-1695) and Gu Yanwu (1613-1682), or the novelist Wu Jingzi (1701-1755).⁷⁸ As the foregoing discussion has indicated, such comparisons must be hedged with qualifications. Pu Songling's orientation clearly differs enormously from that of intellectual innovators such as Huang and Gu. Emerging from prosperous official families, they do not appear to have felt a pressing need to prove themselves in the examination hall and establish their place in society on that basis. Ming loyalists personally opposed to examination participation after 1644, they did not hesitate to question basic assumptions and advocate the reform of a system which they believed had contributed to the decline of their dynasty.⁷⁹

By contrast, Pu Songling's social position could be improved only with a higher degree, something he often reminded his sons as they in turn toiled in the examination hall.⁸⁰ As a member of a generation that reached adulthood in the early Qing, he accepted the ground-rules by which the existing system operated, and objected only to their violation or neglect. His indignation over various abuses did not inspire any radical rethinking, and this scattered protests against the irrational features of the selection process do not amount to any fundamental expose. The gap that divides Pu from a scholar such as Gu Yanwu is perhaps best illustrated by the following extract from Pu's story "Yu Qu'e":

Those officials who have attained their career ambitions do not cast so

⁷⁸ Points of contact between Pu Songling's ideas and those of early Qing thinkers have been seen by such writers as Yang Liu, p. 66; and the Chinese Department of Beijing University, in its "Pu Songling he tade *Liaozhai zhiyi*" (Pu Songling and his *Liaozhai zhiyi*), in *Liaozhai zhiyi xuan* (Selection from *Liaozhai zhiyi*), ed. Zhang Youhe (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1978), pp. 377-78. Paul S. Ropp includes Pu Songling in his survey of intellectual critics of the examinations, *Dissent in Early Modern China: 'Ju-lin wai-shih' and Ch'ing Social Criticism* (Ann Arbor, 1981), pp. 91-119.

⁷⁹ For a summary of the far-reaching reforms which Huang and Gu advocated, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Chinese Despotism and the Confucian Ideal: A Seventeenth-Century View," in *Chinese Thought and Institutions*, ed. John K. Fairbank (University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 180-84; David S. Nivison, "Protests Against Conventions and Conventions of Protest," in *The Confucian Persuasion*, ed. Arthur F. Wright (Stanford, 1960), pp. 195-98.

⁸⁰ See Pu's poems, "After the examination, to be shown Chi, Hu and Yun," in *Pu Songling ji* 1:575-76; "After the examination, in exhortation to my son Chi and grandson Lide," in *Pu Songling ji* 1:608-9; "To be shown my son Chi and grandson Lide," in *Pu Songling ji* 1:630; and "In celebration of Lide winning the first degree," in *Pu Songling ji* 1:637.

much as a glance at the ancient classics, which were simply picked up in their youth as a brick to knock upon the door and gain access to fame and fortune, a brick to be cast aside as soon as the door has opened; then, after ten or more years of handling official documents, even an accomplished scholar will hardly have one literary phrase left in his head. The reason why the shallow and inferior unexpectedly gain advancement in the human world, whilst the heroic talents are thwarted, is simply that this one examination (to weed out those unfit to be examiners) is lacking.⁸¹

Omitting the last sentence, Ropp has cited this passage as an instance of a striking correspondence of views between the two men.⁸² It is true that Pu, like Gu, condemns the careerism which accompanies the examinations, but the final lines make it clear that this is not his primary concern: it is a problem only insofar as it has a bearing on the immediate preoccupation of an examination candidate, the competence of his examiner. Whereas Gu's point of departure was the deterioration of intellectual standards and moral values, Pu's protest was directed much more narrowly at administrative weaknesses in the system.

In the limited scope of his criticisms, Pu Songling also contrasts with Wu Jingzi. The latter was an altogether more unconventional and bohemian individual who lost interest in examination participation in his mid-thirties. His novel, written from a detached perspective, dwells at length on the adverse impact of the examination system on the scholarly world.⁸³ Pu, as an examination candidate for most of his life, objected to those features which presented obstacles to success on his own personal level, and seldom explored the broader implications of the system's influence on society. It was no doubt difficult for him to distance himself sufficiently from his own disappointments to adopt the analytical view that Wu was able to take. Instead he endeavored in his tales to provide answers to the immediate questions: why does a candidate fail, and how can he pass? Only rarely could he stand apart from his own predicament as he does in the story "Wang Zi'an," where after reviewing the sufferings of an unsuccessful candidate in the provincial examination, he concludes, "In such circumstances the competitors cry in torment, wishing they were dead, but in the eyes of a spectator there is no sight more ludicrous."⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Liaozhai* 9.1167.

⁸² Ropp, p. 99.

⁸³ Wu's criticisms of the examination system are discussed by Ropp, pp. 100-13.

⁸⁴ *Liaozhai* 9.1240.

The difference between Pu Songling and Wu Jingzi was precisely that Pu remained a "competitor" almost to the end of his days, whilst Wu soon became simply a "spectator."

If Pu Songling can be distinguished from critics such as Gu Yanwu and Wu Jingzi, then so too can the bulk of traditional intellectuals, and indeed we can see Pu's response to the examinations as more representative of mainstream reaction than either Gu's or Wu's. In his exposure of various abuses, he voices the dissatisfaction common among examination candidates of his period. At the same time, in his emphasis on fate's role in determining the results, he articulates a widespread rationalization. His stories are written from the point of view of an insider who, like many men in the same position, responded to failure in a number of ways: now cursing the examiners for their stupidity, now incensed by corruption and other irregularities, now comforting himself by laying his humiliations at the door of heavenly fate. It is as a creative literary expression of this social undercurrent of deep-seated and ubiquitous frustration, rather than as a critique of the examination system, that Pu Songlong's tales are of exception interest.