

Censored by Confucius

Ghost Stories by Yuan Mei

Edited by

Kam Louie and Louise Edwards



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CONFUCIUS

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NEW STUDIES IN ASIAN CULTURE

CENSORED BY CONFUCIUS

Ghost Stories by Yuan Mei

Edited and Translated with an Introduction by

Kam Louie and
Louise Edwards



An East Gate Book



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For Chris and Alex

隨園先生像



Yuan Mei

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Preface

As one of the most famous Chinese scholars of the eighteenth century, Yuan Mei offered especially valuable insights into life and society in Qing China. The stories in this volume provide a vision of how the trials and tribulations of a wide cross-section of the citizens were understood and resolved. Rituals surrounding the belief in ghosts played an important part in the lives of the Chinese, and yet the manner in which these beliefs were practiced is often not fully appreciated. Confucian-influenced scholarship has tended to avoid matters such as ghosts, sex, and crime, preferring to direct the reader's attention to the weighty matters of self-cultivation and government. But, as the stories in this volume clearly demonstrate, popular culture and popular religion thrive beyond the elite moral strictures found in Confucian texts.

The first table of contents follows the order of the stories as they appeared in Yuan Mei's text. We have also provided a thematic table of contents with the aim of helping readers target tales of more personal interest. We hope this volume will prove useful to a wide range of students of China and its literature, anthropology, and history, as well as to the general reader of ghost stories.

We would like to thank the following people for their help and advice: Bing Leung, George Joshua, Rod Bucknell, Kath Filmer-Davies, Jill Reid, Judy Glasgow, Yew-jin Fang, Malcom Skewis, and Doug Merwin and his production team at M.E. Sharpe.

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Introduction

Yuan Mei's controversial collection of short tales of the strange and supernatural, *Censored by Confucius*, first appeared in 1788,¹ only ten years before Yuan's death. Written in a climate of political and moral conservatism fostered by stifling Confucian orthodoxy, these tales of ghosts, sex, betrayal, revenge, litigation, transvestism, homosexuality, and corruption provide a rich tableau of daily life in China. The popularity of these "exposés" led to their censorship in 1836 as the Qing government (1644–1911) attempted to control the spread of anti-establishment sentiment (Chan 1991, p. 40). Yuan Mei scorned the prudery and moralism propagated by the court and orthodox Confucian scholars of his time, choosing instead to expose hypocrisy and excessive puritanism as the real problems of mid-Qing society.

His direct challenge to court orthodoxy in these tales is reflected in the title he chose for the collection. The phrase "censored by Confucius" (*zi bu yu*) is drawn from the seventh book of the Confucian *Analects*—*Zi bu yu guai, li, luan, shen*. This has been variously translated as "The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings" (Legge 1985, p. 201); "The topics the Master did not speak of were prodigies, force, disorder and gods" (Lau 1982, p. 88); and "The Master never talked of wonders, feats of strength, disorders of nature, or spirits" (Waley 1956, p. 120).

Thus, where the official, Confucian-inspired version of Qing life and culture finds the supernatural and the immoderate anathema, Yuan Mei found them to be a rich and challenging source of inspiration. Moreover, his impolitic citation of "the Master" did not pass unnoticed by his contemporaries. Zhang Xuecheng, a conservative scholar by comparison with Yuan, gained fame for his savage invectives against the "heretical" Yuan's use of classic Confucian texts:

. . . there has never been anyone [except Yuan Mei] who, in broad daylight and beneath the warming sun, has dared to go to this extreme in denying the precedence of the Classics, doing away with sanctity and law, and indulging in such perverse, depraved, obscene, and licentious ideas! (cited in Nivison 1966, p. 264)²

For his part, Yuan justifies his unconventional collection as the whims of an aging man who wishes to spend his remaining days as enjoyably as possible. In his “Seven Poems on Aging” he writes of the many pleasures he finds in his increasing years:

Talk of books—why they please or fail to please—
Or of ghosts and marvels, no matter how far-fetched,
These are excesses in which, should he feel inclined,
A man of seventy-odd may well indulge. (cited in Birch 1972, p. 199)

While Confucius may not have condoned discussion of ghosts and marvels, lust and love, crime and retribution, Yuan and a large section of the reading public most certainly did. Arthur Waley writes of the collection, “The Chinese had an insatiable appetite for wonder-tales, and collections of them had been made since very early times” (Waley 1956, p. 120). Having established himself in the previous half century as one of the greatest poets of his era, a prodigy in scholarship, and a formidable literary critic, Yuan was more than confident enough to indulge his literary whims as a septuagenarian.

His satisfaction with the collection and his enjoyment of the reaction it drew are evident in his continuation of the task. In 1796, a mere two years before his death, he completed a sequel—his increasing age perhaps inspiring his continued interest in the life of the underworld and its interaction with the living.

The Life of Yuan Mei

Yuan Mei’s life was both long and immensely successful. He was born in 1716 in Hangzhou, a city famous for its beautiful scenery and rich literary tradition. His family was genteel but rather poor. His father took up junior secretarial positions around the country as a means of support. Yuan began his formal schooling at six and progressed so rapidly that by the age of eleven he had passed the first-level examinations and become an accredited scholar. For a man, success in Qing society was measured largely in terms of his ability to pass the various

levels of official examinations. The degrees thereby conferred granted the scholar access to the range of positions available in the extensive government bureaucracy. Yuan's early success confirmed his reputation as a prodigy—many men spent their whole lives failing the examinations. In 1736, less than a decade after Yuan's initial success, the emperor announced a set of special examinations for selecting scholars to write the official histories. Yuan was selected to represent Hangzhou and at age twenty was the youngest candidate to attend. He was not, however, one of the fifteen, from a total of two hundred aspirants, to pass. His feelings about this failure and the ghostly encounter that preceded it form part of one of the stories in *Censored by Confucius*. In "Memories of Suiyuan" he narrates how the ghost of an old family retainer told him before the examinations that he would not be successful: The enthusiastic and optimistic young Yuan remained unconvinced of this premonition until the results were published.

Yuan spent the next two years perfecting his examination technique while struggling to make ends meet as a tutor for various families of the gentry. In 1738 he at last succeeded in passing the second-level examinations. Then in the following year his career took several major steps forward. He passed not only the third-level examinations but also the Palace Examinations, which secured his admittance as a fellow to the most prestigious national center of learning, the Hanlin Academy. During the winter of this same year, 1739, he was called home by his parents to marry a certain Miss Wang, to whom he had long been engaged. For the next decade Yuan was employed by the throne first as a scholar and then as a bureaucrat.

His first posting, in 1743, was to Lishui, where at age twenty-seven he was appointed prefect. In 1745 he was transferred to the more senior post of prefect in a suburb of Nanjing. Inspiration for many of the tales in this collection undoubtedly developed during these years as an official. His contact with the social problems experienced by average citizens and his awareness of various miscarriages of justice form the basis of many of the tales. The ghostly revenge on corrupt officials depicted therein perhaps reflects a popular fantasy of "just desserts" generated to assuage the sense of powerlessness among the more vulnerable citizens of Qing China. Arthur Waley's biography of Yuan provides many examples of actual judicial cases over which he presided. All these cases reveal Yuan's concern that the law be enforced humanely and without excessive moralism (Waley 1956, pp. 31–43).