




De-Heroized Scholars and Empowered Fox Spirits: Gender Reversal and Mutual Salvation in *Liaozhai Zhiyi*

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Abstract. This paper examines the conspicuous yet critically overlooked scholar-fox spirit pairings in Pu Songling’s *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*), focusing specifically on the crisis of masculinity embedded in these cross-species romances. While existing scholarship has predominantly centered on the subversive potential of fox women, this study shifts analytical attention to the scholar protagonists, revealing how their physical fragility, examination failures, and emotional dependence reverse hegemonic gender configurations. Through close textual analysis of tales including “Xiaocui”, “Yingning”, and “Nie Xiaoqian”, the paper demonstrates that the fox spirit’s supernatural competence functions not merely as narrative device but as structural compensation for masculine deficiency under the late imperial examination regime. The analysis further identifies a dialectical model of “mutual salvation” wherein both marginalized figures, namely the alienated literatus and the ostracized non-human, achieve identity reconstruction through affective interdependence, transcending the binary logic of rescuer and rescued. By foregrounding male vulnerability and female agency in tandem, this research contributes to masculinity studies in premodern Chinese literature and offers a non-Western framework for understanding gender relations beyond dominance-submission hierarchies, underscoring literature’s capacity to imagine ethical co-existence across species and social boundaries.

Keywords: Masculinity, *Liaozhai*, Fox Spirits, Mutual Salvation, Identity Reconstruction.

1 Introduction

The romantic encounters between scholars (“Caizi”) and fox spirits in Pu Songling’s (1640–1715 AD) *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhiyi*) constitute one of the most enduring narrative paradigms in East Asian literary history [1]. In previous studies, the image of the fox spirit has often been the center of attention, with scholars interpreting these supernatural characters from the perspectives of female transgression, sexual liberation, or resistance from the lower classes, examining how they challenge feudal ethics and subvert gender norms [2]. However, in this research perspective, the scholar figure, as the narrative counterpart, is often taken for granted as the possessor of power and agency. They are presupposed as the rescuing subjects in the

traditional hero-saves-the-damsel narrative, while the construction process and inherent crises of their masculinity have not been adequately examined. This critical blind spot obscures the complex restructuring of gender power hidden within the textual discourse: a close reading of stories such as “Xiaocui”, “Yingning”, and “Nie Xiaoqian” reveals that the scholars in Pu’s works are not dominant figures of authority, but rather exhibit “de-heroized” characteristics of physical weakness, social marginalization, and emotional dependence. They are not only unable to fulfill the traditional male protector’s family and social responsibilities, but are deeply dependent on the fox spirits, who possess supernatural abilities and practical competence, for material survival, emotional solace, and even moral redemption. This dramatic inversion of gender roles invites systematic theoretical consideration from the academic community.

This study, through the dual perspectives of textual analysis and gender criticism, re-examines the image of the scholar and the mechanism of salvation in the human-fox love narratives of *Liaozhai*, aiming to reveal how the power relationship restructuring between weak men and powerful fox spirits breaks the traditional “man saves woman” narrative convention, forming a “bidirectional salvation” model based on emotional interdependence. On a thematic level, this paper introduces masculinity studies into the discussion of human-fox/human-ghost love in *Liaozhai*, pointing out that the pairing of weak scholars and active fox spirits is not only a superficial reversal of gender roles, but also a profound metaphor for the survival crisis and identity alienation of literati under the imperial examination system, reflecting the collective anxiety and imaginative compensation of the literati class facing a sense of powerlessness during the transition between the Ming (1368–1644 AD) and Qing (1616–1912 AD) dynasties. At the conclusion level, this paper transcends the binary opposition of “savior-saved” and proposes a symbiotic relationship between humans and foxes, achieved through acknowledging vulnerability and embracing heterogeneity. This identity reconstruction, based on emotional interdependence, provides a non-hierarchical emotional community framework for understanding gender relations in traditional society. The study not only offers a new interpretive paradigm for gender narratives in Ming-Qing literature but also provides important intellectual resources from a non-Western tradition for contemporary discussions on the reconstruction of masculinity, emotional ethics, and interspecies subjectivity, highlighting the enduring value of Chinese literature in reflecting on human limitations and interdependence.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Masculinity in Crisis: Hegemonic Ideals vs. Textual Subversions

As a core concept, masculinity is not an inherent biological attribute but rather a product of socio-cultural construction. Connell (2020) proposed that masculinity was “a set of practices constructed within specific historical and cultural contexts, defined through its difference from femininity” [3]. Under the dominance of traditional Chinese Confucian culture, masculinity centers on the aspiration to loyal ambition, noble character and advancement in officialdom. However, in the human–monster romance narratives of *Liaozhai*, the scholar figures often deviate from these traditional norms: most are

marginalized in the civil service examination system, repeatedly failing or living in poverty, lacking the power and capital demanded by conventional masculinity, and even displaying vulnerability. Ning Caichen in “Nie Xiaoqian” is upright yet powerless to protect himself; Wang Zifu in “Yingning” nearly descends into madness from obsessive love; Wang Yuanfeng in “Xiaocui” appears as a foolish child. These textual representations deconstruct traditional masculinity; scholars are no longer subjects of power but emotional objects in need of salvation, offering a unique perspective for understanding the multiplicity of masculinity.

Masculinity in *Liaozhai* also exhibits duality. On the one hand, scholars adhere to Confucian moral principles; on the other hand, their interactions with fox spirits reveal the limitations of traditional masculinity since they cannot resolve real world predicaments by themselves. This duality renders masculinity a dynamic and contradictory existence. Dai (2006) noted in *Gender China*, “Traditional literary male images serve as vehicles of patriarchal discourse, but the intervention of anomalous women in supernatural tales breaks this monopoly and reveals the process of masculine construction” [4]. The scholars in *Liaozhai* are both inheritors and deconstructors of tradition; through emotional bonds with fox spirits, they redefine men’s position in relationships of emotion and power.

2.2 Emotional Dependence: Emotional Bonds Within Power Relations

Emotional dependence is not merely the satisfaction of psychological needs but a dynamic linkage embedded in power relations. Foucault (1978) argued that power was a network of mobile relations in which every subject is both an agent and a target [5]. In the human-monster romances of *Liaozhai*, fox spirits proactively intervene in scholars’ lives with supernatural abilities, like Xiaocui in “Xiaocui” helps the Wang family out of trouble; Yingning in “Yingning” cures Wang Zifu of his obsessive love. Scholars depend on fox spirits’ supernatural powers to escape difficulties, while fox spirits depend on scholars’ identity to obtain legitimacy, and power is reconfigured through dependence. This dynamic disrupts the traditional model of “male dominance and female subordination”. Whyke & Brown (2023) argued that the romance between humans and demons in *Liaozhai* was not simply a matter of rescue or being rescued, but an entanglement of emotion and power, in which each subject gains strength yet loses freedom through dependence [6]. Such complex emotional dependence reconstructs traditional gender power relations and provides a classic case for understanding the interplay between emotion and power.

3 Deconstruction of Masculinity in the Scholar Image

3.1 Paradigms of Masculinity in Traditional Literati Narratives

The Confucian ideal of the “Junzi” constitutes the core of traditional literati masculinity, whose essence lies in taking moral perfection and social responsibility as the ultimate criterion for evaluating male worth. In *Liaozhai*, scholars such as Ning initially conform to this paradigm, he is upright, adheres to the Confucian moral baseline, yet

suppresses personal emotional needs [7]. In fact, the construction of masculinity among Ming-Qing literati is persistently accompanied by moral anxiety; they are compelled to enact the Confucian ideal and struggle to repress innate emotional desires, which prefigures the subsequent deconstruction of masculinity [8].

Another core of the Confucian ideal is the value orientation of “supremacy of scholarly achievement,” with the civil service examination system serving as its institutional pathway. Elman (2000) stressed that the examination was not merely a mechanism for selecting officials but a form of “cultural discipline” shaping male identity [9]. Men had to prove their competence through examination success or be deemed “failures” by society. This value orientation rendered the lives of traditional scholars dominated by arduous study, relegating emotional needs to a secondary position. The patriarchal order of “male superiority and female inferiority” in the traditional gender power structure also constitutes an important backdrop for the construction of masculinity.

3.2 “De-heroization” Characteristics of the Scholar Image in *Liaozhai*

3.2.1 Embodiment and Competence as Fragility: The “Weak Physique” Trope.

The physical fragility of scholar figures in *Liaozhai* constitutes a central manifestation of their de-heroization. Under Pu’s pen, many scholars exhibit a clear tendency toward weakness, they are physically frail, susceptible to illness, or lack the capacity to cope with real-world difficulties. Lu noted in *A Brief History of Chinese Fiction* that *Liaozhai* narrated extensively on foxes, ghosts, and spirits, yet rendered human affairs with equal subtlety, and this “subtlety” is precisely reflected in the depiction of scholars’ weak physiques, providing the logical starting point for fox spirits’ acts of salvation [10].

Scholar’s fragility extends beyond the corporeal to deficiencies in practical competence, scholars in *Liaozhai* often appear helpless in mundane affairs. For example, Ning in “Nie Xiaoqian” is righteous but powerless against a monster; without Nie’s aid, he would have perished. This deficiency metaphorizes the alienation wrought by the examination system, prolonged book learning estranges them from reality and erodes their ability to navigate a complex world. Scholars in *Liaozhai* are mostly victims of the examinations, their abilities alienated, capable only of rote learning and lacking practical skill, and that such alienation directly causes their real-world fragility [7]. Depictions of scholarly weakness essentially deconstruct traditional masculinity. Such portrayals break traditional male hegemony and highlight female agency. Pu thereby reveals male helplessness before emotion and reality, reflecting a late Ming-Qing shift in masculinity (from external vigor to inner affective needs) and legitimizing narrative space for proactive female salvation.

3.2.2 Marginalization of Social Role: Examination Failure and Real-World Predicament.

During the Ming-Qing period, the civil service examination became the primary channel for upward mobility of the literati class, yet intensifying competition plunged most scholars into persistent loss and confusion [11]. Traditional literati ideals are

closely tied to *examination* success and smooth bureaucratic careers; superior learning leads to office defined life purpose. Yet in *Liaozhai*, scholars characteristically occupy marginalized social roles and examination failure is a common fate. This failure allegorizes that institutional injustice and corruption impede the realization of scholarly worth.

Examination *failure* leads to declining social status and material hardship. More importantly, marginalization disables scholars from fulfilling traditional masculine responsibilities, driving them to seek solace in human-demon romances. As supernatural beings, fox spirits are not only emotional anchors for scholars but also bearers of hope for transcending worldly constraints. Such depictions of social marginalization reflect Pu's critique of literati ideals, scholars function as projections of his discontent, while fox spirits emerge as idealized saviors. The examination regime dismantles scholarly aspirations, compelling recourse to illusory worlds for existential affirmation; the fox spirits' intervention thus represents a literary response to this impasse.

Moreover, the turmoil of late Ming-Qing social transformation (early Qing's rule by non-Han peoples) and the rise of a commodity economy thoroughly disrupt the traditional "scholar-peasant-artisan-merchant" hierarchy, eroding the literati's sense of identity-based superiority. Frequent appearances of impoverished scholars in *Liaozhai* attest to this, in "Nie Xiaoqian", Ning is described as self-restrained and principled, yet remains a poor scholar unable to ensure even basic lodging safety during his journey to Jinhua for the examinations, forcing him to take shelter in the desolate Temple. Such depictions of destitute scholar reflect the decline in the economic status of scholars; they are no longer a core social stratum and face marginalization if they fail to gain office promptly. The female saves male narrative thus projects the literati's identity crisis, having lost the identity conferred by traditional values, they could only rebuild self-worth in fantasy through fox spirits.

4 The Bidirectionality of Salvation Relationships — The Debate of "Who Saves Whom" under Emotional Dependency

4.1 Explicit Salvation: Direct Assistance from Fox Spirits to Scholar-Bachelors

In the human-demon romance narratives of *Liaozhai*, the explicit salvation rendered by fox spirits to scholars constitutes the most immediate narrative dimension. It is manifested in the fox spirits' direct intervention in the lives of scholars through material aid, life rescue, and deliverance from predicaments, making them the decisive force in helping scholars escape crises. For example, in "Xiaocui", the fox spirit Xiaocui imitates the emperor's voice to help the Wang family avoid annihilation [7]. Behind this explicit salvation lies Pu's reflection on men's lack of independent living and social adaptability, when the scholar proves incapable of shouldering familial responsibilities, the fox spirit assumes the posture of a stronger party and fills the vacancy left by the male role.

Beyond material and life-saving assistance, explicit salvation also appears in the alleviation of scholars' spiritual distress. In "Xiaocui", the fox spirit Xiaocui marries the

intellectually impaired scholar Wang. Aside from repaying a debt of gratitude, she seeks to restore his cognition and to devise opportunities for him to display his talents before the emperor, thereby earning honors and altering his fate of being mocked. Xiaocui's spiritual salvation transforms an individual labeled as intellectually disabled into a socially *recognized* normal person, allowing him to regain dignity and value. The narrative significance of such explicit salvation resides in its subversion of the entrenched hero rescues beauty pattern in traditional gender narratives; it positions women as saviors and men as objects in need of protection.

Qingfeng in "Qingfeng" is originally the adopted daughter of her uncle, she lives under strict control *within* the fox clan's domain, lacking independent personality and status. Scholar Geng falls in love with Qingfeng at first sight and through emotional persuasion and courageous action (breaking into the fox residence to rescue Qing Feng from punishment), liberates her from her uncle's constraints and marries her. Geng's salvation is not material or physical; rather, it grants Qingfeng the social identity of wife of Geng, transforming her from fox spirit to human wife, incorporating her into the order of a human family and endowing her with socially recognized existential meaning. It means, the identity anxiety of fox spirits can only be resolved through union with scholar-bachelors; the emotional acceptance of the latter essentially empowers the former's existential legitimacy". Although Qingfeng initially appears as a fox spirit, after marrying Geng, her identity gradually becomes subsumed by the role of family member. This implicit identity empowerment frees her from the label of other and accomplishes a spiritual metamorphosis from fox to human.

Scholar-bachelors' implicit salvation also extends to emotional affirmation and spiritual comfort. As beings deemed inauspicious and thus consigned to prolonged loneliness and marginality, fox spirits find in the scholars' love an emotional home. Moreover, the emotional dependency and identity empowerment between scholar and fox spirit are bidirectional: scholars require the abilities of fox spirits, while fox spirits require scholars' social identities. They fulfill each other within their affective bond.

4.2 Dialectics of Mutual Salvation: Beyond the Binary

Salvation relationships in the human-demon romances of *Liaozhai* are not unidirectional contests of "who saves whom", but a dialectical unity of the explicit and the implicit. Fox spirits and scholar-bachelors serve reciprocally as subjects and objects of salvation, forming an emotionally interdependent community. Under the premise of emotional dependency, the values of both sexes are realized; there are no absolute strong or weak parties". Such bidirectional salvation dismantles the binary opposition of savior-saved, rendering both parties simultaneously saviors and saved, thereby highlighting the intersubjective nature of salvation.

Behind this dialectical unity lies deep emotional dependency between fox spirits and scholar-bachelors. Scholars rely on the abilities and assistance of fox spirits, while fox spirits rely on scholars' identities and acceptance; neither can be dispensed with. This emotional dependency elevates the salvation relationship beyond utilitarian concerns, turning it into a bond of shared destiny. Through narratives of bidirectional salvation, Pu deconstructs the heroism inherent in traditional masculinity, men are no longer

omnipotent saviors but individuals in need of emotional support and practical aid; female characters are no longer passive victims awaiting rescue, but autonomous agents with independent capabilities [7]. Furthermore, this dialectical unity reflects *Liaozhai*'s positive valuation of heterogeneous love, love between humans and demons not only transcends species boundaries but also achieves mutually empowering salvation, fox spirits gain identity through scholars, scholars gain rebirth through fox spirits, and both accomplish mutual redemption within emotional dependency.

From a broader cultural perspective, the narrative of bidirectional salvation also implies Pu's critique of male predicaments under feudal rites and his reappraisal of female value. Traditional patriarchal society demands that men bear social responsibilities, yet many scholar-bachelors in *Liaozhai* fall into hardship due to failures in the imperial examinations and social oppression. The explicit salvation of fox spirits compensates for deficiencies in masculine competence, while the implicit salvation of scholars satisfies fox spirits' yearning for identity. This bidirectional relationship essentially reconstructs traditional gender roles: men are no longer the sole saviors; women are no longer passive recipients of salvation; both achieve gender-role equality through emotional interdependence. This narrative mode not only enriches the human-demon romance theme of Chinese supernatural fiction, but also offers a new lens for understanding gender relations in traditional society, under the tie of emotion, salvation is never one-way, but always mutual fulfillment.

4.3 Narrative Significance of Bidirectional Salvation: Gender Equality and the Imagination of an Emotional Community

One of the core significances of bidirectional salvation in the human-demon romances of *Liaozhai* is its capacity to transcend traditional gender opposition and construct a community based on emotional resonance. For instance, in "Nie Xiaoqian", Nie repeatedly warns and protects Ning in times of danger, and later devotes herself to caring for his family [7]. This mutual salvation and dependency break the singular male saves female pattern of traditional gender narratives, presenting instead a relationship of mutual support. Gender interaction in these stories is no longer confined to differences in physiology or social roles, but forms an organic community bound by emotion, thereby transcending gender opposition and establishing a community grounded in emotional empathy. Taking Nie as an example, Ning's integrity and kindness not only rescue Nie from demonic control, restoring her humanity, but Nie's wisdom and warmth also protect and sustain Ning in return, so that the value of both parties is recognized. Here, the fox spirit's otherness is softened, the scholar's masculinity is no longer the sole dominant force; instead, equal emotional exchange and mutual redemption prevail.

Within such relationships, gender roles are fluid, with no fixed categories of savior and saved; both are builders and beneficiaries of the emotional community. This narrative that transcends gender opposition presents readers with a mutual reliance founded on emotional equality. Additionally, the narrative of bidirectional salvation poses a gentle but powerful challenge to traditional patriarchal culture. In traditional patriarchy, men are cast in the role of the strong, obliged to save women, while women are defined as passive weaklings or those to be saved [12]. Yet in "Xiaocui", the fox spirit Xiaocui

emerges as the key agent in saving the male protagonist, she not only cures Wang's mental affliction, but even sacrifices her own cultivation at a critical juncture to save the Wang family. Such scenes of women actively saving men directly challenge *the* omnipotent image of traditional masculinity, allowing men to exhibit vulnerability and dependency. Rather than adopting a radical oppositional stance, such narratives gently deconstruct rigid gender role perceptions in patriarchal culture through portrayals of emotional dependency. Although Xiaocui's actions occur within a domestic framework, her independent personality and formidable abilities undoubtedly shake the traditional notion of male superiority and female inferiority. This narrative of women actively participating in the salvation of male destinies breaks through the male-centered storytelling convention, permits men to reveal fragility and helplessness, and endows women with greater subjectivity, thereby offering readers a new imaginative possibility that women also can be saviors and men can also depend on women.

5 Discussion & Conclusion

Tracing the developmental trajectory of Chinese literature from the poetic traditions of the pre-Qin era, through Han fu and the poetry of the Tang and Song dynasties, to the novels of the Ming and Qing periods, one observes a gradual shift in narrative focus which moves from the ethical frameworks of patriarchal kinship and state order toward an increasing emphasis on individual emotion and the representation of socially marginalized subjects. Within this long-term literary evolution, *Liaozhai* stands out for its distinctive vision of the supernatural and tales of romance between humans and spirits. It constructs a narrative paradigm that transcends the traditional binary opposition between male and female, offering a site for cross species and cross identity gender experimentation within pre modern Chinese literature.

The profound significance of reciprocal redemption in *Liaozhai* lies in the way such narratives reflect and respond to the ontological solitude inherent in human existence under established social structures. Whether scholars or fox spirits, characters in these stories encounter destinies marked by definition, exclusion, and even the denial of existential legitimacy within their respective conditions of survival. Their encounters and mutual salvation represent moments when two entities marginalized by dominant orders come into visibility, recognition, and mutual completion, thereby suspending externally imposed labels and perceived deficiencies. In doing so, they enter an authentic mode of shared presence in the world. Such redemption thus surpasses utilitarian exchange or moral commendation. It touches upon the deep-seated human yearning, in a world often experienced as isolating, to be seen, understood and valued by another. In this light, the reciprocal redemption depicted in *Liaozhai* can be regarded as an alternative conception of integral humanity. Wholeness need not derive from self-sufficiency or dominion but may instead emerge through the acknowledgment of vulnerability, the acceptance of difference, and the co creation born of emotional resonance. It suggests that true redemption is not the imposition of order by the strong upon the weak, but rather the construction of a dwelling place for existence by two finite beings within each other's imperfections. In a cultural context historically dominated by

anthropocentric and patriarchal narratives, this vision holds value. It transforms boundaries of gender, species, and identity from barriers into opportunities for mutual fulfillment, and it positions literature as a space for rehearsing coexistence with alterity. Illuminated by such insights, *Liaozhai* is more than a record of fantastical love. It constitutes a profound inquiry into the traversal of loneliness and social discipline. By inviting readers to sense the warmth of reality within imagined tales, it prompts reflection on the nature of human existence.

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