Available Online: 23 November 2026 DOI: 10.54254/2753-7080/2026.39486

The multi-dimensional scholar characters in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*

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Abstract. The Qing dynasty classical Chinese novel *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* breaks the conventional stereotype of the scholar figure in traditional literature, portraying a group of impoverished scholars who embody both real-life hardships and inner spiritual conflicts. This paper categorizes scholars into three types: those who are reckless and fragmented, those obsessed with the imperial examination system, and those devoted to ideal friendships. Against the relevant historical context, it analyzes representative characters such as Geng Sheng, Kuang Sheng, Ye Sheng, and Qiao Sheng against the historical backdrop. It examines the psychological states of low-status scholars under the dual pressures of the imperial examination system and feudal Confucian ethics. The study reveals that these three types represent different spiritual responses among literati: resistance against oppression, alienation by fame and success, and the pursuit of intellectual soulmates. These portrayals not only reflect the actual living conditions of the scholar class during the transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties, but also articulate Pu Songling's own regrets and lifelong aspirations.

Keywords: *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, scholar character, imperial examination culture, scholar spirit, thought history of the Ming and Qing dynasties

1. Introduction

In classical literary studies, the scholar is a central figure running through ancient novels. In traditional narratives, scholars are frequently idealized as gifted, handsome literati who enjoy smooth official careers and fulfilling romantic friendships, often rendered as flat, one-dimensional characters. Existing academic research on scholar figures in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* has produced considerable results: some studies focus on the emotional traits of scholars within love stories, while others analyze individual cases of imperial examination tragedies. However, few have systematically categorized scholars as a complete group from multidimensional perspectives such as personality conflicts, value orientations, and spiritual aspirations. There remains significant room for further exploration into the deeper historical and cultural logic behind these characters, particularly regarding Ming and Qing intellectual history and the culture of the imperial examination system.

Pu Songling endured repeated failures in the imperial examinations and lived for decades in straitened circumstances as an impoverished scholar. As a result, the scholars he portrayed were no longer the one-

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dimensional idealized intellectuals but rather realistic figures filled with inner conflicts. This leads to the research question of this paper: What multidimensional aspects do the scholar images in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* exhibit? How do the behavioral and psychological contradictions among different types of scholars reflect the examination system, Confucian ethics, and the inner struggles of literati during the Qing dynasty? And what personal ideals and reflections on reality does Pu Songling convey through these scholarly characters?

This article focuses on the multi-dimensional scholar figures in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Based on close reading of the text, combined with social and historical criticism, and by introducing theories related to the intellectual history of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the imperial examination culture, the scholars in the book are classified into three types: the unrestrained and fragmented type, the obsessive type of the imperial examination, and the type of deep affection for a confidant. This study will summarize the spiritual traits of the three types of scholar characters in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and generalize the multiple survival patterns of the impoverished scholars in the Qing Dynasty under the oppression of the system. It will also fill the gap in the existing research on the systematic exploration of the multi-dimensional personality of the scholar group by combining character analysis with the intellectual history of the Ming and Qing dynasties and the imperial examination culture and deepening the academic interpretation of the scholar characters in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*.

2. Analysis of the scholar character

The scholar figures in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* depart from conventional formulas found in traditional Chinese literature. In traditional literature, scholars are mostly depicted as having a charming personality or having a smooth career path with a happy life. However, Pu Songling created a group of scholars with three dimensions of ideal character, real experiences, and contradictory personalities, accurately presenting the living conditions and situations of the impoverished scholars in the Qing Dynasty.

2.1. The rebellious and divided scholar

In the scholar character system of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, the rebellious and divided scholar is the type with the most "heretical" characteristics. They are the rebels against feudal ethics and the examination system's teachings. They do not abide by social norms and, through shocking words and deeds, break away from the label of "modest, kind, and courteous" for scholars. This is a phenomenon of "personality division" that emerged in the oppressive environment of the entire society. Here, "division" does not refer to mental illness rather the separation between the scholar's inner self and the external social norms. Scholars were educated by Confucianism from an early age, and they also understood how "morality, righteousness, integrity, and shame" were written. However, due to the long-term suppression in the society, their own consciousness and desires could not be satisfied. Eventually, they used "madness" to disguise themselves and, through unrestrained speech, achieved resistance against social norms.

During the Ming-Qing transition, the "preservation of moral principles and elimination of human desires" advocated by Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism imposed an increasingly strict restraint on human nature, and the spiritual oppression on scholars reached its peak. However, at the same time, due to the fact that the "individuality trend" in the late Ming period had not completely subsided, some scholars, under this ideological oppression, developed a rebellious mentality. They were unable to express their dissatisfaction through the legitimate channels of official career, that is, the imperial examination system. Therefore, they

despised legalism and despised the powerful and used this self-indulgent "madness" to express their dissatisfaction with the social reality.

The "madness" of these scholars is not extreme in character; it merely manifests as a form of rebellion. Their "madness" is manifested in two aspects: Firstly, they openly defy the worldly etiquette and social regulations. These scholars completely disregard the opinions of others and ignore their status as "scholars", acting solely according to their own will and following their primitive desires. This primitive desire is not merely carnal desire, but the self-expression desire suppressed by the system and unable to be released. In "Qingfeng", Geng Sheng is a typical representative of the "madmen". When he first saw Qingfeng, he exclaimed, "There is no such beauty in the world", and then "looked at the girl, stared without moving", not caring about the taboos between men and women. Hiding behind the lotus curtain while drunk, he boldly declares: "To have such a wife, the emperor ruling the south would not change" [1]. In Geng Sheng's eyes, feudal etiquette matters less than the legitimate satisfaction of genuine feeling. The expression of one's own emotions is the primary thing. Secondly, this is actually a form of "spiritual escape", through intoxication or unrestrained words and deeds to escape reality. They can only escape the oppressive reality in the illusory world after getting drunk, not being anxious about fame, fortune, and power, not being bound by feudal etiquette, and fully displaying their nature. In "Madman", the unnamed madman "likes drinking, has no grain at home, but buys wine whenever he gets money". Even if there is no food at home, the money he gets will definitely be spent on drinking. When the magistrate was furious and asked him, "Don't you fear destroying your entire family?" "The man shrugged his shoulders and replied loudly, 'I have no door that can be destroyed!' He walked around without fear of the law. In the madman's eyes, since he has nothing, he is not afraid of losing anything" [2].

However, it is worth noting that the "madness" of these scholars is characterized by a clear "split personality": deep down, they still identify with their status as scholars and retain a spiritual obsession with the pursuit of official positions through the imperial examinations. For instance, the madman went to plead with the prefect, and the prefect merely smiled. The madman then believed that the prefect was insulting him and said, "A gentleman can be killed but not humiliated", and retaliated against the prefect. The madmen also possess the integrity of scholars. Those of this kind rebel against reality as a form of passive resistance. They believe that since they follow social norms and study hard but still cannot gain recognition or enter the official career, they should simply break these rules. They use shocking words and deeds to prove the value of their existence to the world.

A "mad and divided scholar" is a product of the clash between the late Ming Dynasty's trend of individual liberation and the high-pressure dominance of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism in the Qing Dynasty. Outwardly, they resisted ritual propriety and the discipline of the imperial examination system through unrestrained eccentricity; yet inwardly, they could not completely shed their traditional aspirations for official success or their Confucian identity. This split between their inner self and external social norms reflects the ideological dilemma faced by some lower-class scholars in the Qing Dynasty: dissatisfied with systemic oppression yet unable to extricate themselves entirely from feudal literati values, they can only channel anguish through passive eccentricity. They embody the inherent contradictions of the intellectual climate of their era.

2.2. The bookish scholar with obsessive attachment to the imperial examination system

If the "madness" of the rascals represents an active rebellion against the imperial examination system, then the "obsession" of the bookish scholar with an obsessive attachment to the imperial examination system represents a passive lifelong obsession with it. This type of scholar is the most profoundly depicted and tragic character in the book, and it is also an intuitive manifestation of Pu Songling's projection of his own fate through this

type of scholar's image. Their obsession is not mere infatuation with the examinations; it is a psychological distortion forged under systemic coercion. They regard the imperial examination as the highest standard and even the sole criterion for proving their own value. They do not aim to contribute to the country and create a peaceful and prosperous era; instead, they are disciplined by the imperial examination system. In the spiritual world of these scholars, only passing the examinations and obtaining official positions can prove that they are useful people, and this is the entire value of their existence. Once they fail the imperial examination, their beliefs will collapse, they will lose their spiritual support, and even finding meaning in life will become meaningless.

Among these scholars, the one who is most tragic is the protagonist Ye Sheng in "Ye Sheng". He "excelled in literary works and poetry" and "his career did not go smoothly, struggling in the official examinations". He possessed both talent and learning, but his attempts at the imperial examinations repeatedly failed, and he was never able to become an assistant examiner. However, he was appreciated by the then county magistrate Ding Chenghe, who constantly praised his writings and provided him with financial assistance. Even with the help of the "magnificent horse", he still failed in the provincial examinations due to the incompetence of the examiners. This blow completely shattered Ye Sheng's psychological defense, causing him to "lose all his flesh and bones, like a wooden puppet", and he died of depression. However, even death could not stop the end of the tragedy. Ye Sheng's obsession with the imperial examinations was too strong, and his soul remained in the world, transforming into a spirit body and continuing to exist. He became the teacher of Ding Chenghe's son and imparted all his knowledge to him, guiding him to successfully pass the imperial examinations. Later, Ding Chenghe instructed his son to appoint Ye Sheng as a scholar assistant, and finally, Ye Sheng won the first place in the provincial examinations and achieved his long-cherished dream of passing the imperial examinations. When he was filled with joy thinking of returning home in glory, he returned home only to see his coffin. His wife told him that he had been dead for many years and that there was no extra money left to bury him. At this moment, Ye Sheng suddenly realized that he was just a spirit. Trapped in despair, his spirit fades away [3].

Ye Sheng's tragedy was caused by the imperial examination system. The imperial examination was almost the only way for scholars to enter the political arena. A scholar who wanted to change his fate and improve his social status had to achieve this through the imperial examination. Ye Sheng's talent was not in question, but in the examination halls of the time, the examiners were ignorant, and wealthy candidates often engaged in bribery. Truly gifted candidates were overlooked, while unlearned applicants passed. Moreover, the outside world believed that scholars who failed to obtain the imperial examination results were unworthy of being regarded as scholars. This double pressure easily broke through people's psychological barriers, causing mental distortion and even the end of their lives. The second tragedy was the traditional value concept of "a scholar would die for his master". Ding Chenghe appreciated Ye Sheng and continuously supported him. Ye Sheng felt grateful towards Ding Chenghe in his heart. He believed that he failed to obtain the imperial examination result and thus betrayed Ding Chenghe's trust and his own years of efforts. This guilt turned into a spiritual obsession, which made him follow Ding Chenghe after his death and help his son obtain the imperial examination result, which was an act of gratitude towards the "master".

The obsessive scholar type who was obsessed with the imperial examination was a typical portrayal of the alienation of the scholar's spirit under the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty. In a social environment where the imperial examination almost became the only channel for scholars to realize their self-worth, some scholars regarded the imperial examination as the entire meaning of life. Ye Sheng's tragedy is both personal and epochal. It reflects the drawbacks of the imperial examination system in the Qing Dynasty: examiners were ignorant and bribery was prevalent, resulting in the suppression of genuine talents; it also

reflects how the traditional value concept of "a scholar would die for his master" intertwined with the imperial examination obsession, causing the distortion and destruction of the scholar's spirit [4].

2.3. The bookish man with a deep affection for love

This type of scholar in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* is the one with the most idealistic color in the book. The literati are full of emotions. They have been influenced by the beautiful love stories in books for a long time, thus having beautiful imaginations about love. They are passionate but not excessive in their love. When they love someone, they are extremely devoted. These scholars are all such passionate men.

This type of scholar does not regard the official examinations and social status as the highest value goal in life. Instead, they spend their entire lives seeking someone who understands them, that is, pursuing a love that is in harmony with the spirit. Their view of love breaks away from the stereotypical logic of the scholar and the beautiful woman in traditional literature. They do not take family background, property, or power as the basis of marriage but pursue spiritual harmony. First, there is a spiritual resonance, and then it develops into love. Only after mutual understanding can it develop into a couple. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* transforms the friendship-based understanding between friends into love. The most prominent example is "Lian Cheng". The protagonist, Lian Cheng, daughter of the scholar Shi Ju, highly appreciates Qiao Sheng's poetry. However, due to feudal ethics, Lian Cheng could only pretend to obey her father's order to give Qiao Sheng gold. Qiao Sheng then regarded Lian Cheng as his true friend and began to exchange feelings. However, Shi Ju despised Qiao Sheng, believing that he was too poor, and thus married Lian Cheng to Wang Huacheng, the son of a salt merchant. Wang Huacheng was selfish and self-centered, and had no common language with Lian Cheng. When Lian Cheng was seriously ill, she needed a piece of flesh on the chest of a man as a medicine ingredient. Shi Ju went to Wang Huacheng to ask for the medicine, and Wang Huacheng even said, "Crazy old man, do you want me to cut my heart's flesh?" Learning of this, Qiao Sheng unhesitatingly cuts a piece of his own flesh to save her. But Shi Ju was afraid of the power of the Wang family and dared not marry Lian Cheng to Qiao Sheng. He only gave Qiao Sheng some money as a reward. Qiao Sheng was very angry, "I don't love the flesh because I want to repay the appreciation of my true friend. Can it be measured by money?" In his opinion, he cut the flesh to save Lian Cheng only to repay the appreciation of his true friend, and it could not be measured by money. Soon after, Lian Cheng still died in sorrow, and Qiao Sheng went to pay his respects. He "suddenly died and passed away" and followed Lian Cheng there. When he arrived in the underworld, Qiao Sheng also insisted on staying with Lian Cheng. This persistence moved the ghosts and gods, helping the two return to the human world.

Qiao Sheng demonstrated the characteristics of a passionate lover through his series of actions, placing the love for his confidant above everything else in his life. This actually reflects Pu Songling's own emotions. In his era, marriages were arranged by parents, and young people had no right to choose spouses. Under such circumstances, most people could not find a marriage that could be based on a spiritual foundation and generate love. Although Pu Songling and his wife had a harmonious relationship, he had never encountered a confidant who could understand his spiritual world. Therefore, he projected this regret into his literary creation. He made the scholar abandon his family background, property, and rights, and simply fall in love with a confidant who shared the same spiritual connection. In this way, he compensated for the ideal love that he could not have [5].

The "soulmate-obsessed" scholar figure in Pu Songling's works represents the ideal model of a scholar in his conception. In the Qing Dynasty society where arranged marriages were prevalent and the concept of family background was deeply rooted, it was difficult to achieve a spiritual connection in real life. Scholars like Qiao Sheng, who transcended the worldly standards of fame and family background and pursued a

soulmate, were an idealized transcendence of the real marriage system. This image reflects the desire of scholars in the Ming and Qing dynasties for a spiritual soulmate and also conveys the spiritual ideal that Pu Songling himself could not achieve in reality.

3. Conclusion

This paper conducts a detailed textual analysis to explore three types of scholar characters in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*: the unrestrained and fragmented type, the type obsessed with the imperial examinations, and the type infatuated with a close friend. The core issue discussed in this paper is: Under the dual constraints of the imperial examination system and feudal ethics, how did the impoverished scholars in the Qing Dynasty present a state of mental disintegration, value alienation, and ideal pursuit?

By interpreting characters such as Geng Sheng, Kuan Sheng, Ye Sheng, and Qiao Sheng, this study concludes that Pu Songling's scholars depart from the stereotype of the gifted, one-dimensional geniuses in traditional narratives. Instead, they are realistic scholars with multiple contradictions. The unrestrained and fragmented scholar represents the negative resistance of scholars against social discipline; the type obsessed with the imperial examinations demonstrates the spiritual devastation of the scholars by the imperial examination system; the type infatuated with a close friend embodies the author's ideal yearning for a spiritual friend. These three types of characters together form a multi-dimensional group portrait of the impoverished scholars in the Qing Dynasty, reflecting the ideological conflicts during the transition between the Ming and Qing dynasties and also carrying the author's life feelings of being frustrated in the imperial examinations throughout his life.

To sum up, the multifaceted scholar figures in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* are jointly shaped by the social realities of the Qing Dynasty and the author's personal lived experience. The three types of scholars respectively represent three spiritual aspects: resistance, alienation, and ideal pursuit. This reveals the huge gap between the ideal and reality of the scholars under the feudal system. This paper mainly focuses on textual analysis and lacks empirical research. Further research can combine more Qing Dynasty imperial examination materials to further expand the depth of the study of scholar characters [6, 7].

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