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***Otherworldly Travels:* Zhiguai in the Age of Maritime Discovery and Mechanical Reproduction**

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Abstract

Mediating between the normal and the strange, zhiguai stories are always understood as border crossing, utopian imaginary, and self-expression of the literati. Yet one question is seldom asked: how does the imaginary evolve, particularly when "strange" narratives became conventional and predictable in modern times? Scrutinizing a recurring trope of "otherworldly travels," I argue that late Qing zhiguai situates fantastic journeys in the world, featuring international journeys, realistic concerns, and innovative technologies. Utopian travels are thus infused with realistic concern and actual foreign geographies as the world interfaces with China. In the era of lithography, desire for approachability also emerged as a newfangled visual experience needing to engage and be (dis)enchanted. The plotted fictionality of zhiguai, in this regard, become a writing formula to cope with speeding publication. I treat modern experiences of the ocean liner, chemistry, and photography as "substances" of the fantasy, examining how they inscribe and exceed predecessors in material history. With a focus on fiction by Wang Tao (王韜 1928-1897) and Zou Tao 鄒弢 (鄒弢 1850-1931), this paper aims to explore how late-Qing writing imagines utopia in the face of maritime discovery and mechanical reproduction, instead of what has been represented or done.

Keywords: zhiguai, *utopian imaginary, late Qing, maritime discovery, mechanical reproduction*

The Evolving Utopia/Heterotopia in Late Qing Zhiguai

"Following the style of Liaozhai, the fictions were once widely circulated, but the records of the fox spirits and ghosts were scarce, and stories of courtesans abounded,"[1] writes Lu Xun (魯迅,1881-1936) (141), disparagingly commenting on the late Qing *zhiguai* stories by Wang Tao 王韜 and Xuan Ding (宣鼎, 1832-1880). Indeed, late Qing *zhiguai* is generally considered a stagnant genre compared to its mid-Qing forerunners and modern fiction. However, the genre falls short of being marginalized in the field of literature. From late-Qing to Republican era, roughly 200 collections of zhiguai were published,[2] and serial *wenyan xiaoshuo* (classical

1 一時傳布頗廣遠，然所記載，則已狐鬼漸稀, 而煙花粉黛之事盛矣. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

2 For literary histories of *zhiguai* in late Qing and early Republican times, see Zhuang Yiyun 莊逸雲 *Shouguan: Zhongguo wenyan xiaoshuo de zuihou wushinian* 收官：中國文言小說的最後五十年 (The Last Fifty Years of Tales in Classical Chinese)（Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2019）and Zhang Zhenguo 張振

tales) were a dominant genre in magazines from the 1910s to 1920s. Lu Xun's observations reflect a general advancement of chuanqi (uncommon worldly affairs) and a gradual decline of zhiguai (supernatural encounters).[3] Even in the supernatural zhiguai, utopian narratives flourish with real-life references, real(istic) ruptures, and plotted fictionality, marking a paradigm shift to the secular dimension.

Lu Xun's remark, moreover, insinuates an internal paradox of modern zhiguai. How can zhiguai be possible in modern times? Modern zhiguai are always an oxymoron. Modernity implies a priori rationality, secularism, and disenchantment. If a story revolves around supernatural elements, it shall be fleetingly categorized as premodern fantasy.

Such bordering practices, on the one hand, neglect genealogical innovation of the genre. Beyond the supernatural, secular dimensions of *qi* 奇 prevail in late-Qing. This highlights how a time-worn concept of fantasy gains significance through new mechanisms of everyday life and plotted fictionality. Starting from late-Ming times, a quest for *qi* as a dialectic concept opposite to *chang* 常 ("the common or the ordinary") or zheng 正 ("the normal') — becomes a prominent framework for fiction commentary. However, as Han Bangqing (韓邦慶, 1856-1894) observes, the quest of *qi* was already a cliché for late Qing *zhiguai* writing, and his collection *Taixian mangao* (太仙漫稿 Jottings of Taixian) "even mostly consists of marvelous tales, it seeks to reveal the marvelous and the strange in daily lives, either an alternative meaning, or another theory, disregarding affairs involving gods, immortals, demons, and ghosts. This is how my collection can create an original style" (1).[4] Revealing the exceptional every day without the help of the supernatural, the modern *zhiguai* thus values bizarre plotting and eccentric characters, revolving the plots on straightforward concepts and even ready-made literary formulas.

On the other hand, modern experiences—such as overseas travels, urban

國, *Wan Qing Minguo zhiguai chuanqi xiaoshuoji yanjiu* 晚清民國志怪傳奇小說集研究 [Research on Late Qing and Early Republican Collections of Zhiguai and Chuanqi] (Nanjing: Fenghuang chuban, 2011).

3 I use *zhiguai* in its broad sense of classical tales to include both *chuanqi* (lit. marvelous tales) and *zhiguai* (lit. strange records).

4 玆編雖亦以傳奇爲主，但皆於尋常情理中求其奇異，或另立一意，或別執一理，并無神仙妖鬼之事。此其所以不落前人窠臼也.

experiences, and new technologies—can also be subjects for the writers to enchant. These late-Qing forerunners of "sci-fi" objects are hard to comprehend because what the authors wrote is not a glorification of modernity or newness—as one with progressive literary ideals may presume—rather adapted into discursive narrative or old-fashioned tropes.

To understand its innovation, we may need to delve into the "substance" of late Qing fantasy and read the stories not only as conventional, readerly texts but also as writerly stories to be reinterpreted. Indeed, many of the stories may be fleetingly read as middlebrow productions. These literary objects serve as core allegorical messages, deserving a historically resonating description. Following recent discussion in Elaine Freedgood and Sophie Volpp, I propose to recover "substance" of fantasy by paying attention to literary objects. In the context of Victorian literature, Freedgood treats things as a frame of reference that "goes beyond or lies outside the symbolic structures of the novel—and its meanings are therefore often sought or recuperated in the social structures outside the novel, but inside the social world in which it is read" (Ideas in Things 13). Reading literary objects with material history, Sophie Volpp emphasizes an object's essential literariness, restoring historical resonance. Volpp argues that we may "aspire to the recovery of the repressed illogic" because objects are often portrayed inconsistently across texts, fostering a sense "that there is a world interior to the text that readers cannot fully perceive" (4). To engage the "substance" of the fantasy, one thus needs to read the objects with a readerly experience of misapprehension and imaginative supplementation. Paying attention to the rich material histories of the strange objects —such as chemistry, photography, and ocean liners—I try to illustrate how objects inscribe and exceed historical predecessors because of their literary, fugitive meanings.

Featuring these objects, the otherworldly travels in the late Qing times became increasingly secular, turning supernatural realms into international world-making. I use "otherworldly travel" to denote a recurring trope that revolves around maritime adventures, oneiric journeys, and encounters with fairylands or underworlds. Typically beginning with a shipwreck,

the male intellectual protagonist will be dispatched to a faraway island and encounter a utopia with sages and goddesses; yet the immortal life would end with homesickness and returning to the mainland. The utopian imaginary can be situated in a time-honored trope of "Peach Blossom Spring" (*Taohua yuan* 桃花源) narratives, which, as Zhang Longxi (11-12) delineates, are always a secluded, timeless paradise with noble savages. However, in late-Qing otherworldly travels, such utopias are always already connected to the real globe. To borrow Foucault's terminology, the otherworlds became heterotopias, realized utopias in the societies "that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable" (177). Otherworldly travels can be regarded as "crisis heterotopia," a "privileged or sacred or forbidden places reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis with respect to society and the human milieu in which they live" (Foucault 179) as they consistently maintain an explicit or inverse analogy with genuine issues in China. The stories also inserted a series of metaleptic ruptures of "one ontological or diegetic layer into another" (Freedgood, *Worlds Enough* 102), showcasing real-life concerns in the fantasy such as linguistic barriers or financial anxiety.[5] No matter for the content or the form, otherworldly travels in modern times resonate with the real world.

In the article, I will scrutinize the otherworldly travels written by Wang Tao and Zou Tao 鄒弢. Closely tied to the newspaper Shenbao, they are part of the first generation of professional writers in Shanghai. Serialized in Dianshizhai Pictorial or published by Shenbaoguan, these stories bear witness to the first generation of professional writers and their employment of literary formulae. Delineating substantive concerns of fantastic travels, late-Qing authors convert the otherworld from a reflected reality to a fixed, classified world, enchanted with the all-encompassing power of modern technology, contemplating a dialectic between the *dao* 道 ("way or order") and the *qi* 器 ("technologies or things"). In the era of mass production, strange things looked clearer, protagonists started to get closer to an otherworld, and writers wrote faster to keep up with printing. The distance between normal and strange was was reconfigured.

5 As Gerard Genette defines it, metalepsis is "a shifting and sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells and the world of which one tells." See his *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 1980, 236.

Money, Language, and Map: Allegories of Modernization in the Age of Chinese Maritime Discovery

I will first use Wang Tao's two quintessential fairyland stories, "*Xianren dao*" (仙人島, "Island of the Immortals") and "*Xiaoxia wan*" (消夏灣, "Summer Bay"), to illustrate how the modern gaze works in late-Qing zhiguai writings. In "*Xianren dao*", Cui Mengtu embarks on a steamship journey with a fantasy of exploring the world but is shipwrecked. Accidentally landing on a splendid island the captain fails to locate on any map (*tujing* 圖經), Cui decides to stay but other crewmen disappear the following day due to another rainstorm. Shocked, Cui treks into the mountains and—as is to be expected—encounters the family of an immortal. Cui begins, almost unable to communicate with an immortal who hears Cui's Hokkien accent as a "barbarian birdy voice from the South" [6] (Wang, *Songyin* 13). According to the immortal's daughter, a Daoist apprentice, they came to the fairyland six hundred years ago. Before the immortal couple returns to the human world to visit Buddhist pilgrimage sites, they marry their daughter to Cui. After Cui and his bride enjoy twenty years of blissful life, the couple comes back and urges Cui to go home. Cui's boat soon arrives in Zhapu. While he is worrying about money, he realizes that his fairy wife has placed golden leaves in his clothes. Disillusioned by mundane reality, Cui becomes a Daoist priest and is finally killed by the Taiping army.

What is "modern" in this story? A significant divergence between "Xianren dao" and preceding otherworldly travels is the emphasis on Western maritime topography. When Cui the protagonist wishes to visit the fairyland again, an experienced sailor warns that:

> Nowadays, all steamships are piloted by Westerners, with fixed schedules and regular routes. Every island along the way is inhabited. Vast and boundless as the seas may be, how could there possibly be a deserted island where immortals reside? Give it a break! Such thoughts are pure nonsense, nothing but castles in the air.[7]
>
> 今時海舶，皆用西人駕駛，往還皆有定期，所止海島皆有居人，海外雖汪洋無涯涘，安有一片棄土為仙人所駐足哉？子休矣！忽作是想，徒搆空中樓閣也。 (*Songyin manlu* 16)

6 此真南蠻鴃舌之聲也.

7 Modified from Wang Shengyu's translation in "Chinese Enchantment," 122-123.

Still confident about his destination, Cui carefully plans to visit the West and the South Seas and the Americas, yet the trip is terminated accidentally. In this story, even though the otherworldly travels continue to be present, an epistemology of world order and geographical imagination transfigure from “Mine and True” to “West and True.”[8]

In a similar vein, “*Xiaoxia wan*” also depicts an ambivalent fusion of utopian fantasies and Western topography. An enthusiast of Western maritime technologies, Ji Zhongxian gives up on the imperial examination to do “import-export business” (*maoqian shu* 貿遷術). Like the sailor, he fails to see the fairyland. Arriving in California, Ji quickly boards a larger steamship to London but falls into the sea because of a sudden wind. Desperate, Ji lands on a deserted island, and—once again—is amazed by the immortal realm. He comes across an elderly man but can’t understand his accent; even using “brush talk”, the elder’s words “are as unrecognizable as tadpoles” (*Songyin manlu* 469).[9] Only when the elder invites a recluse, who turns out to be a Song-dynasty loyalist who fled here almost a thousand years ago, does Ji learn that the elder and his neighbors came to the island to take refuge from a flood, probably referring to the Great Flood of Gun-Yu during the reign of Emperor Yao (ca. 2300 BCE). Ji follows the recluse to wait for a ship to return to China. Bothered by the hot summer weather, the recluse takes him to the *Xiaoxia* (“beat-the-heat”) Bay.[10] There is a waterfall cave, traditional-style pavilion, and Xia-Shang-Zhou treasures are exhibited together with a Crystal Palace, waterwheel, and air conditioner. Amazed by a “modernized” hybrid fairyland, Ji chooses to stay behind.

Among the otherworldly travels in Chinese literary history, “*Xiaoxia wan*” is an exceptional case in which the protagonist hasn’t returned to the mainland but stayed on the island. The story elevates manpower and machine-driven technology above natural or divine creation. As the re-

8 For details of late Qing intellectual perceptions and fantasies of the “Age of Discovery”, see Guan Kean-Fung 顏健富, *Cong shenti dao shijie: wanqing xiaoshuo de xingainian ditu* 從「身體」到「世界」：晚清小說的新概念地圖 [From “Body” to “World”: The New Conceptual Map of Late-Qing Fiction] (Taipei: Taiwan University Press, 2015), chapter 5.

9 字皆蝌蚪，瞠目莫辨.

10 “Xiaoxia” 消夏 is also an antonym of “Quyan fushi” (curry favor; lit. pursue the heat and follow the power); it denotes carefree, upright conduct. I will discuss this point later in Zou Tao’s fiction.

cluse claims, "Were the Removing-Heat Terrace and Coolness House recorded in Chinese classics created by Nature? I fear they are all the work of human effort." (*Songyin Manlu* 470).[11] Controlled by a switch, the waterwheel and air-handling cabinet are also manmade and automatic, removing heat with drizzle and wind, "even the Flame Emperor or the Sun would retreat" (*Songyin Manlu* 470).[12] The end of the story is almost like an exposition, introducing modern technologies one after another. On the one hand, one may easily relate the Crystal Palace to the London landmark, which Wang Tao had visited and praised in the travelogue *Manyou suilu* (Wang, *Manyou suilu* 98-100). On the other hand, the technology-fused Chinese utopia can be read as a manifestation of "Chinese origins of Western learning," which regards (Western) technologies as having all originally spread from China.

Wang's otherworldly travels display two distinctly new concerns: language barriers and commerce. Whereas in the earlier fairyland narratives, the time gap between the newcomers and ancient loyalists may be noted, Wang's protagonists clearly distinguish the discrepancies among various pronunciations, dialects, and scripts. For example, the elder in "Xianren dao" even notices the difference between his Southern Song dialect, the hero's Hokkienese, and the maid's Cantonese. Wang's heroes particularly pay attention to having ready money upon arrival in the human world, marking a financial boundary between the worlds. These maritime travels relate to an old understanding that "the Milky Way is connected to the sea" 天河與海通, which suggests that the boundless ocean is always related to the otherworld.[13] Treasures from immortals will always be exchanged to protagonists.

The attention to linguistic and financial issues may be metaphorically attributed to Wang's (inter)national travels,[14] in which an intra-region-

11 中國典籍所稱逭暑之台，招涼之館，有若是之天造地設者乎？恐皆以人力為之者也.

12 雖赤帝炎馭，亦當為之退避三舍.

13 See, for example, Zhang Hua, *Bowu zhi* 博物志 [Records of Diverse Matters] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2012), volume 10, 225. For a discussion on the sphere-crossing journey between humans and immortals, see Liu Chiung-yun's "Negotiating Cultural Boundaries: The Eunuch Sanbao's Voyage to the Western Ocean", *Journal of Chinese Literature and Culture*, 7.1 (2020).

14 Another story I will discuss later, "Haidi qijing", also showcases the importance of communication and money to foreign lands.

al awareness was significantly inaugurated[15] and humorously connotated. Moreover, these realistically fantastic elements encourage a metonymic reading, manifesting relations of contiguity (instead of relations of resemblance). "Modernizing" the underworld, an author opens possibilities of heterogeneous ontology, in which modern beings and mechanisms can mix and mingle with utopian narratives. The seamless fantasy has thus been interrupted by metaleptic ruptures of fictionality into reference, turning belief into disbelief. Introducing price and barrier of magical travels, Wang Tao converts the otherworld from a reflected reality into a fixed, classified world. This echoes the all-encompassing power of modern technologies.

Wang's otherworldly travels might also illuminate ambivalent fusion and internal paradox of *zhiguai* fantasy and technological modernity. Starring maritime enthusiasts—instead of imperial examination candidates—as protagonists, Wang's writing illustrates fantasies of a new generation of Westernized literati. Thanks to the steamship, protagonists travel on a larger scale, heading to Europe and the Americas. Strange encounters with science and the West illustrate a dialectic of *dao* 道 ("way or order") and *qi* 器 ("technologies or things"), of *ti* 體 ("essence") and *yong* 用 ("practical use"), in correspondence with late-Qing reforms. As a representative supporter of the "combination of Dao and Qi" 道器合一 and "Chinese learning as essence and Western learning as application" 中體西用[16], Wang Tao continues the fevered debate in the form of *zhiguai* writing.

In "*Haidi qijing*" (海底奇境, "Wonderland under the Sea"), tensions between Dao and Qi, illusion and reality, as well as practical and fantastic are further exposed and intensified. The protagonist Nie Ruitu is an enthusiast of *jingji* (經濟 or 經世濟民, "practical statecraft"), with a particular aptitude for hydraulic engineering as applied to North China/Yellow River floods. Nie explores the unknown world and embarks on a personal journey to Europe with four interpreters in English, French, Russian, and Japanese. Famous for his generosity—he gives out rare treasures at ev-

15 Apart from the specifics of Wang Tao's experiences, the rise of dialect fiction and urban fiction in the late Qing also shows the emerging awareness of linguistic differences and commercial culture.

16 For a review of Wang Tao's changing views of *Dao* and *Qi* before and after his European travels, see Lam Kai-yin 林啓彥, "*Wang Tao Zhong-Xi wenhua guan de yanbian*" 王韜中西文化觀的演變 (The Transformation of Wang Tao's Views on Chinese and Western Cultures), *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 17.1 (1999), 105-125.

ery party—he makes headlines and receives public attention wherever he goes. In Switzerland, he has a romantic encounter with a Western beauty named Lanna, who gives him as a token of love several Chinese curios previously owned by a deposed French empress.

During the voyage from London to New York, he (once again) falls into the ocean, yet discovers a marvelous realm under the sea where he reunites with Lanna. Lanna asks Nie to teach her Chinese, and she quickly gains a mastery of poetry and music. Later, the marvelous realm is surrounded by surging waves, and Lanna explains that this underworld is soon to be flooded. Lanna composes a Chuci-style verse to say farewell and prepares for Nie two curios to ward off the waves and to break the wind, as well as money, jewelry, and even food (date cake) to take back with him. Nie arrives at the port of Zhapu (near Hangzhou) and then goes to Shanghai. He finally sells one of the diamonds to a Parisian businessman to raise relief funds for the flood in Shandong caused by the Yellow River.

"*Haidi qijing*" also specifies the linguistic and financial barriers between worlds, as shown in the descriptions of translators and transactions. Taking the West as an "otherworld," the story illuminates a complex amalgamation of Chinese learning and Western technologies. Fascinated at first with Western technology, Nie is finally saved by curios originally from China. The traveling curios thus mediate a variety of competing discourses. Originally from China, they are now famous as part of a French royal family's collection. Their timely supernatural power, moreover, could be read literally as the representation of omnipotent Chinese learning and figurately as a metaphor for technologies brought by the West. As Zheng Huili rightly points out, in this story "technological knowledge embodied by the West here is superseded by magic powers represented by the Chinese treasure" (296). On a symbolic level, the story attempts to reassert China's superiority at a turbulent time, conveying a profound sense of irony. In the same issue of Dianshizhai pictorial, a news article entitled "*Shuidi xingche*" (水底行車, "Underwater Train") reported that a British railway built under a river had opened to traffic (Dianshizhai Pictorial 2-3). Expressing amazement at the marvelous spectacle and taxing workload,

the news piece provides a real, technology-based solution to marine perils.

Whereas marine perils occupy a central place in the story, another disaster—that of the Yellow River floods—works as a backdrop generating strong, statecraft-oriented concern. At the beginning of the tale, Jingji enthusiast Nie comments on water conservancy in North China, arguing that instead of constricting flow, low dikes should be constructed to allow the river greater freedom to find its course, so the previously irrigated agriculture on the North China Plain can be restored. He also suggests maritime or even railway transportation should be promoted to replace canals, echoing Wang Tao's proposals (Cohen 190-191). After the 1855 change of the river course, the Yellow River region became a land of trauma and famine, and how to control the river was a pivotal issue for practical statecraft. Wang's modern literatus also participates in the heated debate in a fantastic yet realistic manner.

Wang Tao's otherworldly travels further subvert the conventional parallels between illusion and reality. The otherworldly travels are always read as religious teaching that "life is but a dream" (like "Yellow Millet Dream" [*Huangliang meng* 黃粱夢]) or a utopian vision (like "Peach Blossom Spring"). If the earlier writings preach the Buddhist or Daoist teaching of "life as a dream," Wang's stories build a concrete utopia with real(istic) details. As Li Wai-yee pointed out, even though zhiguai writing like Liaozhai zhiyi has been praised for its social criticism and satire, in the texts "the indignation with injustice stops short of reformist zeal. Structures of order are almost never identified with a coherent vision for a better world based on different principles of social and political organization" (146). However, Wang's protagonists finally contribute to society with the help of a fantastic underworld and/or modern technologies. Against predecessors' disenchantment, Wang Tao proposes new orders of strange things, converting the *zhiguai* genre into a fictional experiment to discuss current affairs. Wang's stories can be read as allegories of modernization, taking fairyland narratives as dreams from which to be awakened.

Clearer, Closer, and Faster: Reorganization of Visual Distance and Formula in the Era of Lithography

"With lithography the technique of production reached an essentially new stage," (219) declares Walter Benjamin. In the boom of Shanghai publishing, lithography indeed "enabled graphic art to illustrate everyday life, and it began to keep pace with printing" (Benjamin 219). With clearer illustrations and faster publishing speed, this medium brings forth an innovative reading experience.

For example, *Dianshizhai Pictorial* could be easily bound into collections, and "the cover with the title and date (...) were to be removed upon binding, and with them the date disappeared, which had tied the illustrations to a particular moment and event. From then on, the illustrations had to live by their timeless interest and attraction" (Wagner 132). After reading the issue, the reader could bind their desired serialized installments into a self-curated collection.[17] An active critic of the late Qing *zhiguai*, Lu Xun was also an avid fan of this practice. Complaining about bad quality of amateur-made *Songyin manlu* collected from the pictorial, he bought two incomplete versions and bound them into one (Lu, *Jiwaiji* 411-413).[18]

Flexible and individualized, the mass-produced pictorial modernized the reading experience. But how did the lithography influence the fictional writing itself—the superstructure, which transforms "far more slowly than that of the substructure" (Benjamin 217-218)? I would like to revisit this technology by looking at two details: the "modern gaze" in the story proper and the themes of social satire. I argue that in the era of mass production, strange things looked clearer, the protagonists started to get closer to the otherworld, and the writers wrote faster to keep up with printing. The distance between the normal and the strange thus was shortened and reconfigured.

"Lifelike" (*bizhen* 逼真; or "approaching reality") is the modifier of Wang Tao's visual experiences, both in everyday life and fiction. He glorifies photography, describing how it "can clearly define eyes and brows, fully revealing the precise details; It can even imitate calligraphy and painting,

17 For details of the pictorial supplement, see Wang Shengyu, "Chinese Enchantment," 95-99.

18 He also purchased the sequel *Songyin xulu* 淞隱續錄 (a.k.a. *Songbin suohua*) as well as Wang's travelogue *Manyou suilu*.

with the characters appearing so lifelike that they seem like a miniature version of the original." (Wang, *Yingruan zazhi* 122).[19] When he praises a friend's painting, he also focuses on how lifelike it is; this has been described as "re-ranking the six criteria of Chinese painting," taking *chuanyi moxie* (傳移模寫, "transmission by copying") as most critical principle (Wu, "Wanqing" 81). The term may be associated with a "realist desire" in late-Qing pictorial culture (Pang 44-48). Clearer details and closer gaze showcase the decay of aura—and a reorganization of distance—in fictional presentations.

Walter Benjamin famously argues that in the era of mechanical reproduction, mass-produced "copies" of artworks lack authentic aura of their originals. Aura, moreover, is related to distance. Benjamin defines aura as a "unique phenomenon of a distance however close it may be," in which "unapproachability" is an essential feature of the cult value of the work of art (243). Authentic, ritualized artworks are always unapproachable, keeping a distance from the viewers no matter how close in space it is. In the modern era, however, the masses have a desire "to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction" (Benjamin 223). How did late Qing zhiguai engage this new desire?

I use Wang's "*Chaiwei shanzhuang*" (茝蔚山莊, Chaiwei Villa) to illustrate how photography's and chemistry's checkered history in China could generate a new literal reading of elusive plots and reduced distance. Interested in Western learning, protagonist Chen Biqiu contends that language is only a trivial matter, whereas "topography, geography, technology and science" are fundamental. He particularly loves *huaxue* (化學, chemistry; or "studies of transformation") because it "traces the original, explores the marvelous, explains the secret and the subtle, and generates profit" (Wang, *Songyin manlu* 279). [20] He also learned photography from his friend.

During the Shangsi Festival, as youngsters gather in the countryside, Chen visits a Manichaean temple. The temple features the Buddhist Maheśvara

19 不獨眉目分晰，即纤悉之處，無不畢現、更能仿照書畫，字跡逼真，宛成缩本.

20 深喜化學，以為窮流源，探奇抉奧，可以致富.

(*Moxishouluo* 摩醯首羅) in the main hall; yet in the prohibited back hall, "the sculpted men and women display their bodies in full, completely unclothed. Some are seated, some standing, some reclining, and others lying down; some are depicted in intertwined poses. Every posture is vividly rendered." (Wang, *Songyin manlu* 279). [21] Using the sunlight, Chen takes a picture of the buddhas. When he checks the photograph at home, he discovers a beauty standing among the statues. Falling in love with the beauty, he even "uses the magnifier to zoom in on the beauty's image. The larger the image is, the prettier she is, with detailed, clear brows and eyes" (Wang, *Songyin manlu*, 280).[22] Lovesick, Chen falls into obsession, what Shang Wei calls "visual absorption" (118), in which the object occupies the viewer's whole vision, showcasing the agency and illusion of visuality. To borrow Shengqing Wu's words on spirit photography, Chen's photograph also "became a novel medium and interface of reenchantment" (212). continuing the dialectic between illusion and reality.

He embarks on a journey to Jiangnan to cure his lovesickness. Invited by a random fisherman, he enters the splendid Chaiwei Villa, and coincidentally reunites with the beauty—the owner of the villa. The beauty explains that she has the power of invisibility and uses it to hide in the Manichaean temple, yet she has been captured by Chen's camera. Chen secretly checks her bookshelves and discovers a lithographic "album of a hundred beauties" (百美圖 baimei tu), listing many famous prostitutes in the Jiangnan area.[23] The beauty later proposes to the scholar and gives him an ink-erasing pearl as a love token, which can help candidates take the imperial examination. Years later, Chen wants to return home, and in a familiar trope, his departure marks the ending of their relationship.

How can we understand the dazzling elements in the story—represented by chemistry, photography, erotic statues, invisibility, and pearls? Chemistry, commonly translated as huaxue, could be read as a meaningful metonymy for this tale. Working closely with Western scientists in the Mohai

21 所塑男女諸像，皓體畢呈，一絲不掛，或坐或立，或起或臥，或作交構狀，諸態悉備.

22 另以大鏡專印女像，放之使巨，眉目明晰，愈增媚.

23 The fiction demonstrates intertextuality and narratological change here. Many of the beauties are the heroines of other stories in *Songyin manlu*, as well as real-life acquaintances of Wang; moreover, the fiction claims that the narrator "can only recognize around ten beauties from Shanghai," demonstrating an intervention of the author's perspective because the protagonist Chen supposedly just arrived Nanjing and has not been to Shanghai.

shuguan 墨海書館 (London Missionary Society Press), Wang Tao played a constructive role in the standardization of the translation of "chemistry", and the use of huaxue first appears in Wang Tao's diary in 1855. By the mid-nineteenth century, chemistry was understood from two perspectives: as a legacy of alchemy, it is a study of exchange or transformation; with the theories of molecules and atoms, it deals with the structures of elements and compounds (Shen, "Huaxue" 64). Whereas the latter definition is fundamental to modern science, the former is how huaxue was created, to denote this learning through magical transformations. Indeed, as illustrated in Wang's stories and diary entries, "chemistry" is always associated with visual changes such as a liquid's discoloration, a photograph's visualization, and amplifying effects. In this light, the beauty's power of invisibility and the ink-erasing pearl are all manifestations of an underlying theme in this tale of transformation.

Moreover, the religious and erotic elements constitute another layer of metonymy, determining how "transformative" one person can be. When the scholar looks at an album of a hundred prostitutes, the beauty quickly snatches the album and explains that "the album includes the secret Buddhist teaching of huanxi yuan (歡喜緣, loosely translated as "tantric sex"). Only those who are part of it can grasp its meaning; it is not meant to be revealed to others." (Wang, *Songyin manlu* 281).[24] The secret teaching also echoes the erotic buddhas (or Yab-Yum) in the Manichaean temple, representing a hybrid of various beliefs (of Manichaeism, and various kinds of Buddhism including Tibetan) that advocate enlightenment through sexual and impure elements. This practice had long been considered licentious in the literary tradition; yet as Shen Weirong (38-39) points out, sexual ritual (*shuangxiu* 雙修) is always a means to transfer desire to the benefit of all sentient beings and to achieve an 'enlightenment-mind' (*bodhicitta*). Whereas ordinary people are simply obsessed with sexual pleasures, enlightened ones will become buddhas. In a similar vein, when scholar Chen blindly enjoys pleasures of illusion (photography), sex, and the literati life (with the fairies/beauties), he loses an opportunity to achieve a meaningful career, which, as he claims in the very beginning of the story, is par-

24 此中有秘密佛授歡喜緣，惟個中人得聆旨趣，不與他人見也.

amount. This opportunity includes fundamentals of Western technology able to modernize the country.

On one hand, to borrow David Wang's words on mimicry in late-Qing novels, mimicry is "over familiarization" instead of "defamiliarization." Mimicry is "a cynical repetition, a menacing maneuver, of a subject, a move so decadent, it's capable of presenting a new thing or concept as if it were a stale replica of something else" (46). On the other hand, from the photos of statues and album of beauties, the story maintains and adjusts distances between representations and their viewers. The story is thus a self-reflexive contemplation of its medium. There is a desire to approach an ever-changing reality promoted in the era of lithography, a new fantasy needing to engage, contain, and disillusion.

Another example is Wang's "Weiyu meng" (煨芋夢 "Potato-Baking Dream"). In a familiar trope of awakening from a dream (such as "Yellow Millet Dream" [*Huangliang meng* 黃梁夢]), the protagonist first visits a fairyland and is disillusioned at the end. Finally, an immortal gives him a mirror, and "with this in hand, one can illuminate the four continents, seeing everything clearly—lands, mountains, and rivers—all transforming in an instant. Even while confined to a single room, one can experience the vastness" (46). [25] Resembling a telescope, the mirror also reorganizes the distance to make the faraway (and the cultic) approachable and perceptible. What follows the bird's-eye perspective in "*Leguo jiyou*" is also worth our attention. The scholar first visits Jiongxiang (窘鄉 "Land of Poverty"), then *Leguo* (樂國 "Country of Happiness"), which has a Garden of Eden. Absorbed in the noble, playful life of Leguo, the scholar doesn't want to return to his homeland. The king exhorts him to do so, saying that "extreme joy would turn to sorrow" (*leji shengbei* 樂極生悲). This story is basically formulated around extreme corresponding antonyms—poverty and wealth, sorrow and joy—conveying a moral satire that was familiar to every late imperial reader. The zhiguai fiction, in this regard, could be mass-produced, too.

In the writings of Zou Tao—who was also affiliated with Shenbaoguan

25 子持此以照四大洲，纖悉畢見,大地山河，頃刻一轉。雖在一室，可作臥游. Modified from Wang Shengyu's translation in "Chinese Enchantment," 126.

like Wang Tao—the figurative expressions have always been literalized, giving rise to literary formulae. Zou's "*Xiang fu chang*" (享富長, "Long-life Prosperity") at first glance is a typical tale of otherworld travel. After a shipwreck, the protagonist-businessman washes up on a faraway *Busi da*o (不死島, "Long-life Island"). On the island, many immortals enter a boiling-hot cave to pick up treasures. Tempted, the businessman also tries to set foot in the cave with wet clothes but is severely hurt by flames. Later, a fairy gives him a "fire-proof pill" (*bihuo dan* 避火丹) to protect him from the heat. He finally enters the cave and later lives a prosperous life. Yet as the commentators rightly point out, a cave with flames is manifestation of quyan (趨炎 or 趨炎附勢, "curry favour"), meaning to pursue the heat and follow the power: "Chasing the flames (indulging in vanity) is unwise, for it may lead to thoughts of self-destruction. How perilous it is! After reading this story, the common people will learn to turn back to the right path" (91).[26] The whole story is thus a literalization of the term quyan, turning the expression into a fully developed allegory.

Zou Tao's "*Buhen tian*" (補恨天, "Remedy-for-Regrets Heaven") and "*Quchou jing*" (驅愁境, "Dispel-Sorrow Land") constitute a pair of his collected stories eliminating all defects in the human world. In "*Buhen tian*," protagonist Yang has an arranged marriage with a girl. Due to his family's impoverishment, the marriage is canceled by the girl's parents, and the girl commits suicide disgraced. Ashamed, Yang leaves his hometown and loses his way in the mountains, but accidentally enters a fairyland named "Remedy-for-Regrets Heaven." He reunites with his fiancé, who in this life is a fairy maiden. She has composed a book of "Remedies for Regrets," in which all the historical tragedies have been twisted to have happy endings in the protagonists' following lives: Liu Bei now unites the country, Wang Zhaojun can return to the central plains, and even Lin Daiyu marries Jia Baoyu.[27] The fiancé is assigned to compose a register for marriage. Yang discovers that in the register there are widows, bachelors, and tortuous relationships. He can't help but modify it: "When the karma is shallow, strengthen it; when the karma is strained, smooth it. For any

26 趨炎不善，便即慮其輕生，險矣哉！世人讀此可以知所返已.
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27 For more "remedies," see Zou Tao, *Jiaochou ji*, 155.

flaws or shortcomings, there is nothing that cannot be mended or filled." (Zou 156).[28] Because of the distortion, which goes against the will of Heaven, Yang is then exiled to the human world to exhort couples to treat each other with respect. He finishes this task perfectly and is respected as a celestial being. In a similar vein, "Quchou jing" also resolves shortcomings seen from historical hindsight. The protagonist is a poor scholar. Despised by his wife, he asks for help at the Temple of Qu Yuan (屈原, c. 340 BCE-278 BCE) and suddenly is transported to the "Dispel-Sorrow Land" where Qu Yuan now is the magistrate. Qu Yuan comforts him, saying that all talented ones will be employed (*youcai biyong* 有才必用), and the current setbacks are only a temporary trial sent by Heaven. Escorting vain, greedy souls to the "City of Sorrow," Qu Yuan shows the scholar a revised heavenly edict, claiming that "since ancient times, principles and truths have been countless. Even sages and philosophers have not been immune to setbacks, while ordinary people have also had their moments of fortune and opportunity. [However,] human determination can triumph over fate, and self-reflection and improvement can serve as a reliable foundation." (Zou 160).[29] In the new edict, the scholar finds out that he can start his career over and receive merit much earlier. After years, his career goes as smoothly as Qu Yuan predicts.

On one hand, these stories gave a very "literal reading" to figurative expressions, generating otherworldly travels based on familiar morals. For the first generation of professional writers, these recurring tropes could be seen as ready-made literary formulae to meet tightened deadlines. On the other hand, fiction is set out from a self-reflexive position, revisiting—and even revising—classical cultural allusions. The title of Zou Tao's work, *Jiaochou ji* (澆愁集, "Collection of 'Pouring Out One's Sorrows'"), directly reveals such a desire to "summarize." Sorrow (*chou* 愁) is a common theme for *zhiguai* authors, and the strange stories of anomaly became an ideal vehicle to vent sorrows felt by literati amidst the human world. As title and literary formulae demonstrate, the collection drowns all sorrows, corrects all defects, and finds a remedy for every regret. Zhiguai stories,

28 緣淺則加之，緣乖則順之，凡有缺陷，無不填補.

29 古來理不勝數，雖聖哲并無淹滯，庸衆亦有遭逢[...]人定勝天，修省亦可滖也.

thus, examined the world through a "modern gaze," revisiting, classifying, and arranging strange things into a new order.

Re-enchanting the Modern World

This paper aims to explore how late-Qing writing deals with a changing world in the face of maritime discovery and mechanical reproduction, instead of what has been represented (international travels) or done (lithographical periodicals). Given its lack of terrifying monsters and a menacing netherworld, otherworldly travels in *zhiguai*, a key subgenre for utopian thinking, evolve from fantastical world to a secular dimension of qi. Utopian travels are infused with realistic concerns, real foreign places, and state affairs. In the era of lithography, a desire for approachability (bizhen) updates visual experience into something to engage or (dis)enchant. Conventionally plotted fictions of *zhiguai*, moreover, suited tight publication cycles. Reading "substance" fantasy as money, language, chemistry, and photography, I aim to illustrate how authors attempted to subsume and enchant innovative technologies and terminologies into Chinese topoi of writing.

As David Wang astutely observes for the late-Qing novels, "[a]t a time when Chinese writers' vision of the real had not been regulated by the 'limits of realism,' when reality suddenly seems arguable and can lend itself to various attempts at representation, Chinese fiction enters a short period of freedom in pursuit of fictive form" (49). Late Qing *zhiguai*, in a similar vein, can be regarded as an attempt to re-enchant the modern world with a time-honored genre. To recognize textual innovations within the genre, one unlearns conventionally defined progressive aesthetic models, proposing a new reading the fantasy in and beyond historical resonance. We thus restore dialectics through which modern minds wrestle with distinctions between strange and normal.

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