

I. Introduction

Between 1789 and 1798, the high official Ji Yun (1724–1805) compiled five collections of notes (*biji*)¹ on natural and supernatural themes. Immediately each of the books became very popular.² Shortly thereafter, in 1800, Ji Yun's protégé, Sheng Shiyan, published all of the approximately 1200 stories under the title *Yuewei caotang biji*.³ At the time of the work's compilation, China had a period of political and social stability. The consequences of the dramatic population growth could still be controlled by means of territorial and economic expansion.⁴ The court allowed wealthy merchants and their guilds to amass great fortunes, which strengthened a trend in political power defined by wealth. The growing commercialization later created a crisis in traditional institutions. Thus, Ji Yun lived in an era of steadily growing plutocracy.⁵

Emperor Hongli (1711-1799), better known under his reign title, Qianlong (1735-1796), was a strong ruler. An enthusiastic writer and artist, he claimed to have composed more than 42,000 poems and was a great

¹ Next to "random notes", due to the flexibility of this literary genre, the *biji* of the YWCT can also be rendered as "stories, anecdotes, accounts, records, and narratives". See also chapter I. B 1.

² Leo Chan, "To admonish and exhort": The didactics of the *zhiguai* tale in Ji Yun's *Yuewei caotang biji*" (diss., Indiana University, 1991), p. 34, and his "Narrative as Argument: The *Yuewei caotang biji* and the Late Eighteenth-Century Elite Discourse on the Supernatural", *HJAS*, 53 (1993), pp. 25–62.

³ The title *Yuewei caotang biji* (阅微草堂笔记) can be translated as "random notes from the cottage of subtle perception".

⁴ The population had probably doubled from 150 million in the early 17th century to 300 million in 1800. See William T. Rowe, "Social Stability and Social Change", in *The Ch'ing Dynasty to 1800*, Vol. 9, No. 1 of *The Cambridge History of China*, Willard J. Peterson, ed. (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 473–562. Through the addition of (what is now known as) Manchuria, Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and finally Taiwan, the territory of China had more than doubled by 1760. See Willard J. Peterson, "Introduction: New Order for the Old Order", in *Cambridge History of China*, pp. 7–8.

⁵ Alexander Woodside, "The Ch'ien-lung Reign", in *Cambridge History of China*, pp. 231, 286; Benjamin Elman, "The Social Roles of Literati in Early to Mid-Ch'ing", *ibid.*, p. 426. In the case of the salt merchants of Yangzhou, Ping-Ti Ho even speaks of "China's capitalists *par excellence*", see his "The Salt Merchants of Yang-chou: A Study of Commercial Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century China", *HJAS*, 17 (1954), p. 130.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

collector and patron of the arts.⁶ The biggest cultural undertaking during his time was the literature encyclopaedia *Siku quanshu* (四库全书 *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries*). More than 10,500 texts were inspected for this library, of which over 3,400 whole works were eventually included.⁷

The Qing dynasty continued to officially support the Confucian ideology of Zhu Xi (1130–1200); nevertheless, in academic circles there was an increasing trend towards more scientific methods:

[...] a shift from Sung-Ming rationalism (*li-hsüeh*), typified by the moral philosophy of Chu Hsi, to a more skeptical and secular classical empiricism. By making precise scholarship, rather than reason, the source of acceptable knowledge, Ch'ing classicists contended that the legitimate reach of ancient ideals should be reevaluated through comparative delineation of the textual sources from which all such knowledge derived.⁸

Evidence and verification, the “search for truth from facts” by means of philological science and empirical research, spread successfully.⁹ Since the majority of relevant scholars working on the *Siku quanshu* belonged to this branch of learning, the encyclopaedia is seen as an achievement of 18th century evidential scholarship (*kaozhengxue* 考证学).¹⁰ Ji Yun is best known as one of the three editors-in-chief of the library and as responsible for its annotated catalogue, the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao*.¹¹ Upon reaching the pinnacle of his official career and completing the *Siku quanshu*, Ji Yun began to collect stories for the YWCT. He made notes of narratives exchanged during social gatherings with friends and colleagues: He wrote

⁶ Alexander Woodside, “The Ch'ien-lung Reign”, p. 232.

⁷ Robert Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries: Scholars and the State in the Late Ch'ien-lung Era* (Harvard, 1987), p. 107. See also chapter I. A 5.

⁸ Benjamin Elman, “The Social Roles of Literati in Early to Mid-Ch'ing”, pp. 393–394.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Robert Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries*, pp. 155–156; Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (rep., Cambridge, 1990), pp. 65–66.

¹¹ Robert Kent Guy, *The Emperor's Four Treasuries*, a.a.O., pp. 87, 123; *The Indiana Companion to Traditional Chinese Literature*, ed. by William H. Nienhauser Jr. (rpt., Taipei, 1989), S. 248; Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling* (Hong Kong, 1998), pp. 167–169. Leo Chan writes, that “[...] it is a moot point whether Ji Yun was the sole compiler or the ultimate editor” of the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao*. *Ibid.*, p. 168.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

anecdotes from and about his relatives, autobiographical accounts, and his thoughts on almost every subject. As Ji Yun himself explains in the different prefaces, his main motive was not only to while away time, but also to edify and to have a moral influence.

The stories of the YWCT belong to the genre of the *biji* (笔记 random notes) and the *zhiguai* (志怪 describing anomalies). The latter are “naturally occurring, unaestheticized narrative”¹² and belong to the didactic literature, through which the reader or listener should receive moral instructions and be persuaded.¹³ During the Six Dynasties (222–589), the *zhiguai* were collected and published systematically on a large-scale for the first time.¹⁴ Through their origin and claim of authentication the *zhiguai* are close to the historical writings, whereas their content reflects popular beliefs.¹⁵ Many collections were compiled in the 18th century; starting with Yuan Mei’s (1716–1798) *Zi bu yu* in 1788, and until the publication of Ji Yun’s fifth book in 1798, this was an era in which more *zhiguai* were published than ever before.¹⁶ Today’s best-known collection is the *Liaozhai zhiyi* by Pu Songling (1640–1715), which was printed in 1766.¹⁷ Pu Songling used an unconventional literary style, in which his narratives and characters became livelier than the custom. Therefore, the collection marks a turning point in classical oral storytelling.¹⁸ Ji Yun criticized the *Liaozhai zhiyi* for this novelty in style and stayed in accordance with literary conventions. His narratives are written in a traditional, plain and straightforward style. Accordingly, the authenticity of the orally transmitted stories is retained and

¹² Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, p. 247.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁴ Kenneth DeWoskin, “The Six Dynasties *Chih-kuai* and the Birth of Fiction”, in *Chinese Narrative: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, Andrew H. Plaks, ed. (Princeton, 1977) pp. 21–52; *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural and the Fantastic: Selections from the Third to the Tenth Century*, ed. by Karl S. Y. Kao (Bloomington, 1985), p. 16.

¹⁵ Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15. For a complete list of all the *zhiguai* collections of this time, see Maeno Naoaki, *Chūgoku shōsetsushi kō* (Tokyo, 1975), p. 347.

¹⁷ Pu Songling wrote the *Liaozhai zhiyi* between 1675 and 1705, but it had been available in manuscript for some time before its publication.

¹⁸ Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, pp. 3–4.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

the contents more directly communicated.¹⁹ The stories of the YWCT have a wide range of topics. They include everyday observations and characterizations of humans, as well as the influence of heaven, and descriptions of gods, ghosts, the underworld, foxes and demons.²⁰ Typical for this genre, the names of persons, places, and dates are often given, so that many narrators, protagonists, and commentators can be identified to this day. Next to prominent contemporaries, there are numerous servants, farmers, merchants, monks and nuns featured in the collection. Most of the narratives are set during Ji Yun's lifetime and in his native region of northeast China.

As an adherent of the *kaozheng*-scholarship, Ji Yun often demonstrates his textual criticism and has a tendency to expose neo-Confucian scholars as captious and small-minded pedants.²¹ Both traits will be considered, but for the scope of this study will not be examined further.

While the YWCT is very popular in China, the collection as a whole has hardly been noticed in the West. The first exception is the Russian sinologist Olga Lazarevna Fisman.²² In 1974, she analyzed all stories of the collection and concluded that Ji Yun tried to morally improve society by means of educating the individual. His morality is built more upon reason and "universal benefit", and less upon religious beliefs and traditions. Following Olga Fisman, David Laurence Keenan and Leo Tak-Hung Chan examined the collection.²³ David Keenan analyzed the ghost stories of the

¹⁹ *Yuewei caotang biji xuanyi*, Huang Guosheng, ed. and annot. (Chengdu, 1990), p.11; see also chapter I. B 1.

²⁰ All these terms will be defined in the relevant chapters.

²¹ In the YWCT, neo-Confucian scholars are mainly called *daoxuejia* (道学家) or *songru* (宋儒), and neo-Confucianism *lixue* (理学) or *daoxue* (道学). These terms refer to the Confucian philosophy, that stands in the tradition of Cheng Yi (1033–1107) and Zhu Xi (1130–1200).

²² See *Czi Jun': Zametki iz chiziny "Velikoe v Malom" (Juevei Caotan Biczi)*. Pervod s kitaiskogo, predislovie, komentarii i prilozhenija Olga Lazarevna Fisman (Moscow, 1974).

²³ Leo Chan, "To admonish and exhort", and, next to articles in journals, his book *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*; David Keenan, "The Forms and Uses of the Ghost Story in Late Eighteenth Century China as Recorded in the *Yüeh Wei Ts'ao T'ang Pi-chi* of Chi Yün" (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1987), and his book *Shadows in a Chinese Landscape: The Notes of a Confucian Scholar; Chi Yün* (New York, 1999).

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

YWCT and found three distinct plots where humans and ghosts meet. David Keenan is of the opinion that even though Ji Yun lived in a dangerous and oppressive time, a strong political criticism is present in his narratives. Leo Chan, on the other hand, thinks that on the whole, Ji Yun upholds a conservative standpoint and adheres to orthodox Confucian core values. In Leo Chan's view, the only way to correctly interpret the YWCT lies in the understanding of the *zhiguai* as a literary genre.

The general argument developed in the present study is that Ji Yun and the other elite narrators used irony as a technique to criticize some aspects of the 18th century society. Referring to the interpretations of the YWCT by Olga Fisman, David Keenan, and Leo Chan, the portrayal of the individual as a hierarchical social being is examined in the present work. Accordingly, the treatise is more sociological and historical, than literary. It is based on Wolfram Eberhard's analysis of the Chinese novella, and deepens the approach of my M.A.²⁴ All narratives of the YWCT are considered, analyzed, and arranged according to topic. Of further interest are the fascinating definitions of the divergent supernatural beings and their relation to humans. Here, Ji Yun's explanations are employed as the standard order for grouping the different beings. As clear concepts in sinology are often not easy to find,²⁵ the definitions given in the stories and the frequently appended comments are used. This leads towards a slightly different and sometimes unusual categorization of supernatural beings and phenomena in this study; for example, gods, ghosts, and demons are considered as very different classes.²⁶

Strictly speaking, there is no such terminology as “the evil”, which Olga Fisman uses to describe many of the supernatural beings.²⁷ Further on, “the supernatural” also does not exist, since everything, no matter how

²⁴ “Ji Yun (1724–1805) und seine Gelehrtenkritik – dargestellt in ausgewählten Geschichten aus dem *Yuewei caotang biji*, fünftes Buch” (M.A., Universität Hamburg, 1999).

²⁵ See Stephan Peter Bumbacher, “Zum Problem nichtreflektierter Begrifflichkeit in der Sinologie”, in *Asiatische Studien*, LVI, No. 1 (2002), pp. 15–41.

²⁶ See also chapter III. C 1 – 3.

²⁷ Olga Fisman, *Czi Jun'* (Plot-index of the YWCT), pp. 551–553.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

strange, is said to be natural and have a cause. Ji Yun often tries to explain and interpret these in a scientific, moral, or philosophical way. In some cases he admits to not having an explanation because, as he put it, human understanding is limited. Nevertheless, to make things easier, the Western term of “supernatural” is used for all humans, animals, plants, beings, things, phenomena and occurrences that display or have abnormal abilities.

For a quantitative analysis of the YWCT, the 1,196 narratives are divided into 1,259 different stories. In addition to Wolfram Eberhard’s sociological method,²⁸ Olga Fisman’s way to thematically categorizing the contents is used.²⁹ The definitions, enumeration and evaluation of the given data in this study differs from those of the aforementioned sinologists.

This work consists of five main parts. In part one, Ji Yun’s biography is portrayed and his connection with historical persons in the YWCT is highlighted. This biographical and historical background information is in harmony with the aim of authenticity of the *zhiguai*-genre. The second part, comprised of stories about the natural, starts with narratives about the interests of the elite. Here, Ji Yun’s reflections on all kinds of topics, his broad knowledge and many interests become apparent. Following the interests of the elite, stories about humans and their social classes are explored. Subsequently, these stories will be compared with the characterization of humans and their social classes in the stories about the supernatural (parts three and four). The supernatural is divided into “ordinary” and “extraordinary” beings and phenomena. The ordinary supernatural is not only familiar to the protagonist, but also a part of the natural order, clearly defined and understood by everyone. Alternatively, the extraordinary supernatural is seldom occurring or rarely mentioned in the collection. It is either not understood or belongs to a species that is defined as being unusual, like the magic fox. The second part of the present survey analyzes 296 narratives about the natural, of which 161

²⁸ Wolfram Eberhard has examined ten percent of the collection and a divergent definition of the social ranks.

²⁹ Wolfram Eberhard, *Die chinesische Novelle des 17.–19. Jahrhunderts: Eine soziologische Untersuchung* (Ascona, 1948); Olga Fisman, *Czi Jun*.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

stories are about humans. The third part, which addresses the supernatural comprises nearly half of the whole collection. Here, heaven, the highest in the supernatural realm, is followed by the gods who are directly subordinated to him. The stories about human destiny are also included in this category, as fate is individually determined by heaven and the underworld. Humans can acquire knowledge about their future through gods, immortals, and ghosts by way of fortune telling and sometimes gossip. Finally, there are the ghosts. Each human becomes a ghost after his death and has to appear in the underworld, where he will be judged accordingly. In contrast, the particular supernatural, which is analyzed in the fourth part, is not directly related to human destiny and generally not of practical benefit to society. The following figure shows the different categories and number of narratives:

Figure 1. Classification of the 1,259 narratives

<i>Extraordinary Supernatural</i> (386) part IV	<i>Natural</i> (296) part II	<i>Supernatural</i> (577) part III
		Heaven (61)
		Gods (59)
		Predestination and Fortune Telling (80)
Strange and obscure Creatures and Phenomena (128)	Foxes (197)	the Individual (161) Human Interests (135)
		Underworld and Rebirth (79)
Demons (61)		Ghosts (298)

It can be expected that Ji Yun's moral messages are in accordance with his biography, which exemplifies him as a successful member of the traditional elite. Considering the different criticisms of the YWCT,³⁰ it might further on be expected that the didactic messages displayed in his collection should be unchanging, whether the stories are about the natural or supernatural. The focus of this study is to analyze the portrayal of the individual and his

³⁰ For the different criticisms see also chapter I.B 3.

Between Heaven and the Underworld – the Individual and Social Order in
the *Yuewei caotang biji* by Ji Yun (1724–1805)

social class in relation to the moral instructions contained within the different categories of stories.

The explanations of the supernatural in the YWCT are not necessarily always logical.³¹ Resulting inconsistencies might seem irritating at times, but are a part of what makes the stories distinctive and are in accordance with a living tradition.³²

A revised English version of the Ph.D. is forthcoming. Should you be interested in the topic, have any questions or suggestions; please do not hesitate to get in contact with me (clea.walford@gmail.com).

³¹ See also Leo Chan, *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts*, p. 130.

³² See for example Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Albany, 2002), especially “Problems of Definition”, pp. 16–21; David Jordan, *Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors: The Folk Religion of a Taiwanese Village* (Berkeley, 1972), p. 38.