

# Preface

Here in these twenty tales the reader will find practically all the themes of traditional Chinese fiction except that of the historical romance and the realistic novel. The supernatural predominates, probably because it is easier to paint creditable portraits of ghosts and demons than of men—to paraphrase the dictum of an early Chinese art critic. In fact, traditional story tellers scarcely attempt to delineate character or analyze motive at all; incident and moral are about the only things that interest them.

As far as form is concerned, traditional tales are of two types, both represented in this volume. The first type is written in classical Chinese (roughly the kind current in Confucius' time) by and for the literati. It is characterized by extreme brevity and economy of expression, often to the point of incomprehensibility. The second type is written in the vernacular and had its origin in the oral tradition of professional story tellers. The earliest written versions of tales of this type were probably set down by the more literate story tellers to be used as prompt books. It is probably because of this oral beginning that tales of the popular type are apt to be diffuse and repetitious, for it was through these apparent faults that the story teller was able to overcome the hazards that beset the spoken word, to say nothing of the disadvantage of having to contend with an audience that kept drifting in and out.

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