ABSTRACT

Liaczhai Zhiyi 聊斋志异, by Pu Songling 蒲松龄 (1640-1715), and Rulin Waishi 儒林外史, by Wu Jingzi 吴敬梓 (1701-1754), are considered two of the greatest fictional works that were written in the early eighteenth century. Till today, they have always enjoyed a large readership. One reason is their artistic value. More importantly, however their ability to reflect and criticize social illness have made them appealing.

In this thesis, I shall attempt to compare and contrast these two fictional works in terms of their criticisms on social ills. The topics that are dealt with include issues on civil service examinations, status of women, religious activities and local government. Both authors correctly point out the fact that the civil service examination had not been a fair system. Not only were the examiners incapable of selecting people of talent, most were guilty of corruption as well. On the issue on women, though both authors recognize the independent personality of women of their times, Pu Songling appears to be somewhat "conservative" in terms of his views on women's chastity and concubinage. The qualities in monks, Taoist priests and fortune tellers had deteriorated in a certain number of ways, and both authors expose their offenses to different levels. The practice of geomancy, whose popularity had not only risen over the years, it had also directly caused the breakup of family clans. Pu Songling advise against people being overly superstitious and Wu Jingzi was outraged by the rapidly rising popularity of geomancy practice. As for the ills on local government, both authors were also quick to point out the failures of the system. Not only were the judicial organs unable to uphold justice, most of the government officials, the clerks and the runners that were portrayed in both works were either cruel, greedy or simply irresponsible.
Through examining the similarities of the two works, we can clearly conclude that both fictional works had indeed reflect the society of the Qing period in a most truthful fashion. In contrasting the two works, we can see the significance of the comparative study from a wider perspective. Pu Songling was born half a century earlier than Wu Jingzi. Not only the “ills”, that were evident in Pu Songling’s stories, were seen less grave, more importantly, Pu Songling’s views on certain issues had appeared to be more “conservative”. These differences signify that rapid changes which had been occurring over a short span of time and that environment could shape a person’s thinking.