

# A Near-Death Experience in Pu Songling's *Strange Stories from Liaozhai's Studio*

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**ABSTRACT:** I present in this paper a tale from Pu Songling's "Strange Stories from Liaozhai's Studio." This story seems to contain the following key elements of a near-death experience: the life review, travel through a spiritual world, and a pilgrimage to obtain a healthy physical body "to return to life." I discuss the content of the life review in terms of emotionally tagged souvenirs. Other contents of the story are clearly culturally dependent and I discuss them within the framework of Oriental thought.

**KEY WORDS:** near-death experience; Pu Songling; culturally-shaped experience; field of consciousness; long-term memory.

Pu Songling (P'u Sung-ling, 1640–1715), the great Chinese writer, was born in Zibo and lived in Pujia Village, south of Zichuan District (Shandong in the Qing Dynasty). He became a famous literary figure in his youth but he never passed the imperial examinations to become an official scholar. At the age of nineteen he received the *xiucai* degree in the civil service examination, which entitled him to an appointment only as a government official in a township or city. It was not until he was 71 that he received the *gongsheng* degree. He never became wealthy in his life and he made a living as a private tutor.

To the east of Pujia Village is the Manjin Well, where, according to the legend, Pu Songling offered tea to passers-by in order to collect

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strange tales of different places. Later he compiled the tales and wrote them in the masterpiece called *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (*Strange Stories from Liaozhai's Studio*). It contains 474 histories of various types. There are several versions in the English language (Giles, 1880; Hsien-yi and Yang, 1981; Nyren, 1995; Page, 1991; Qingnian, Ciyun and Yi, 1997; Quong, 1946; Ruoqiang, Lunzhong and Lunjun, 1988; Soulie, 1913; Wanruo, Lee and Chingwen, 1990; Yunzhing, Tifang, Liyi and Zhihong, 1982). Some of his tales have been made into films (Ching, 1987).

In a Spanish version of *Liaozhai Zhiyi* (Rovetta and Ramírez, 1985), I found a short story that undoubtedly contains key elements of a near-death experience (NDE), which I now present.

### **The Report of the Near-Death Experience**

The story is entitled "Dr. Tang." I present it below, separated into steps in their order of appearance.

- (1) Tang was in bed for a long time because of an illness.
- (2) Suddenly he felt an intense wave of heat rising gradually from his lower extremities.
- (3) When the heat wave arrived at his hips his feet were already numb, and when the wave reached his stomach his legs were numb.
- (4) When the heat arrived to his heart all the episodes of his life appeared in front of him, transported in his blood.
- (5) If he remembered a commendable action he had a delicious sensation of peace; but when a reprehensible one appeared he felt grieved and stifled as if his body were a brimming cauldron of boiling oil.
- (6) Once all the episodes of his life had passed in sequence in his memory, the heat went up through his throat, entered his brain, and left it through the top of his head.
- (7) Several hours later his spirit abandoned his body and began to roam in the outskirts of the village.
- (8) The story runs here through a series of adventures. He found a giant who put him inside his sleeve in the midst of a crowd of spirits. Tang found this situation horrible and stifling. He appealed to Buddha to get out of his situation. After the encounter with the giant, he found a *bonzo* who informed him

that the Record of Life and Death was in the hands of King Wen Yang and Confucius the Wise. He then met Confucius, who sent him to Wen Yang's palace.

- (9) The King said to Tang that he had the right to live many years more but that his mortal body had decomposed. He sent Tang to see Buddha to get help.
- (10) Tang arrived in the presence of Buddha (Guanyin/Avalokitesvara, Rovetta and Ramírez, 1985) and exposed his situation.
- (11) After a number of requests, Buddha created a body from a willow branch and clay, and then ordered an acolyte to bring the body to "where it should be."
- (12) At this moment, Tang's family heard a moan from inside his coffin, opened it, and found him resurrected. He had been dead for seven days.

### **My Interpretation of the Report**

I suggest that the above report contains three central elements of an NDE. Points (4) and (5) correspond to the life review. Points (7) to (11) contain the almost common travel through a "spiritual world" together with the pilgrimage to obtain a healthy physical body "to return to life."

It is not known if the story was related to Pu Songling by the original experiencer or by someone who had heard about it. Another aspect that I cannot infer is if Pu Songling or another person added their own elements to the narration to interpret it in accordance with the beliefs of their time.

It seemed that Tang was already inside the coffin when he had his experience. This meant that people around him saw that he showed no signs of being alive and therefore they put him in a coffin to follow the proper religious rituals. Moreover it is reasonable to think that Tang had the experience not long before he began to sigh inside the coffin. How long was his experience? I cannot answer this question. Was his body really decaying? In spite of the fact mentioned in point (9) above, my answer is negative, because he was alive. If not, we should have had no report at all.

Are there any possible illnesses involving a wave of heat and numbness of the lower extremities? We should consider a sickness beginning with symptoms obliging the sufferer to rest in bed for "a

long time” and ending in a cataleptic state lasting several days. I could not find any that would produce all of Tang’s symptoms, but, as an example of the type of illness, I will cite transverse myelitis. This is a neurological disorder caused by inflammation across both sides of one level or segment of the spinal cord. Affected people sometimes report abnormal sensations such as burning in the legs, sensory loss, and paraparesis, or weakness of both legs. Paraparesis often progresses to paralysis of the legs and lower trunk. I cite this example to show only that a syndrome characterized by burning in the legs and progressive paralysis from the lower extremities to the lower part of the trunk is possible. The progressive loss of sensation of the body is one process that may lead to dissociation of mind from body. But the question of whether we are dealing with one illness followed by another one cannot be ruled out. This said, I suggest that points (1) to (3) are the prelude to the beginning of a near-death experience.

The classical life review of NDEs appears well described in point (4). Note that the episodes of his life appeared “in the front of him,” which probably means “as if watching a film.” The transportation by the blood of the episodes deserves a comment within the frame of traditional Chinese medicine. Traditional Chinese medicine views the human body as a dynamic energy system, in which a particular kind of energy or life force, known as *qi*, the equivalent of *pneuma* in ancient Greek medicine (Unschuld, 2003), is created and transformed. There are several varieties of *qi* but I will not enter into details (Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shanghai College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Nanjing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Acupuncture Institute of the Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 1980). In traditional Chinese medicine, the vessels transport blood and *qi*, the latter probably transporting the life episodes.

In traditional Chinese medicine one of the three main functions of the heart is housing the mind. The heart is considered to be the main organ governing mental activities and generalizing the physiological function of the brain. Spirit, consciousness, memory, thought, and sleep are all dominated by this function of the heart (Beijing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Shanghai College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Nanjing College of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Acupuncture Institute of the Academy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, 1980). In this context it is possible to think that the heat wave is a reinterpretation, in terms of traditional Chinese medicine, of

an ascending burning sensation starting in the lower extremities. This is also supported by the statement in point (6) that the heat wave left Tang's body through the top of his head. This place is close to the crown chakra (called *Bai Hui*/One Hundred Meetings or Kun Lun Mountain/The highest peak of heaven in Taoist tradition, *Sahash-rara/Bodhini* Chakra in Tantra). Within the framework of Oriental thought, on the top of the head lies a secondary chakra called the *Brahmarandhra* or nirvana chakra, the crown chakra being located some distance above the top of the head. I mention this because in Indian thought, at death, the spirit leaves the body through a tiny hole at the top of the head, called the *Brahmarandhra*. Similarly, in Taoist esoteric systems that teach the cultivation of an immortal spirit body, this body exits through the crown center. Therefore, it is natural that an ascending heat wave should leave the body through that place.

Point (5) is very interesting because it shows a series of pleasant and unpleasant phases in the life review. The unpleasant phase of the life review is not sufficient ground to classify this NDE a distressing NDE (Atwater, 1992; Bonenfant, 2000, 2001; Greyson and Bush, 1992; Irwin and Bramwell, 1988; Ring, 1994) because it seems to involve only events stored in one of the memory subsystems (Eichenbaum, 1997; Squire, 1992; Squire and Zola, 1996). What this specific report seems to show is that Tang was recalling only those events recorded in long-term memory and rendered recallable only after they had been tagged with emotional meanings (Richter-Levin and Akirav, 2003). This leads to the idea that the near-death experiencer recalls those events associated with strong emotional feeling and not, for example, every time he washed his face or ate a meal.

Points (6) and (7) seem to indicate that a certain interval of time passed between the life review and the beginning of the culturally-shaped phase of the NDE. I choose to call points (8) to (11) the "culturally-shaped" phase of the NDE for the following reasons. In this phase near-death experiencers describe religious, philosophical, and personal aspects of their own time and geographic places (Counts, 1983; Gómez-Jeria, 1993; Kellehear, 1993, 2001; Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986; Schorer, 1985). If we consider all the content of this phase to be accurate descriptions of real places, we are in the presence of an amazing number of "worlds beyond death." On the other hand several religious systems consider their teachings to be the authentic truth and label all others as "lies." Therefore I prefer to consider this phase as a special hallucinatory process. This hallucination is built as

a logical history, mixing actual events with elements coming from the person's beliefs and stored in long-term memory.

Why does this happen? Evolution and natural selection provide one plausible answer (Eccles, 1992; Gómez-Jeria and Madrid-Aliste, 1996; Aboitiz and Garca, 1997; Preuss, Cáceres, Oldham and Geschwind, 2004). At any given moment of consciousness I have what is called the field of consciousness (Searle, 1992). The world, as seen in my consciousness field, is a construct sustained through the neurological processes contained within the brain. Within that field people normally pay attention to some things and not to others. Right now I am paying full attention to writing this paper, but in the periphery of my field of consciousness, for example, I am also paying some attention to the phrases coming from the television. Because of primary survival needs, our field of consciousness needs to be continuously updated. If not, we shall not survive for long. This updating is carried out by using raw data coming from the senses, previous contents of the field of consciousness, data from our memory banks, and so on. I suggest that the brain imposes the presentation of a logical and coherent updated content on the field of consciousness. Therefore, it is the breakdown of the normal connections in the brain or its abnormal functioning during the NDE (Saavedra-Aguilar and Gómez-Jeria, 1989) that alters the content of the experiencer's field of consciousness. Points (8) to (11) support the above model because the narration presented in them is logical and coherent, even if its contents are unbelievable.

The logical construction of points (8) to (11) is very interesting for the following reason. The usual NDE discovery that "it was not the time" for Tang to die was not openly stated, but was found split in two parts of points (8) to (11). Tang was "informed" that a certain Record of Life and Death was in the hands of King Wen Yang. Nothing was said about the content and the function of the Record. However, when the King informed Tang that "he has the right to live many years more," we can assume that the King obtained this information from the Record of Life and Death. In this sense the function of this Record is similar to the Book in the Mapuche NDE (Gómez-Jeria, 1993), in that it contained the lifespan of the individual. But a new element appeared in the present case. Tang's mind believed that he had been inside the coffin for too long and combined that perception with knowledge of the time a corpse takes to begin to decay. The conclusion that his body would have already started to decay contradicted the

previous information that he was to live many years more. The only logical and coherent way to avoid this would be through the fabrication of a new physical body, the task carried out by Buddha in point (11) of the report.

Point (12) was the logical ending of points (8) to (11). Tang awoke. I cannot comment on the seven days he was apparently dead because I am not aware of cataleptic states lasting so long, and I am not sure that seven days is the right time.

Nevertheless the report contained some inconsistencies. For example, there was no logical pathway from the moment Tang felt uncomfortable in midst of the throng of spirits to the moment he was informed by a *bonzo* about the Record of Life and Death. No reason was provided as to why he would need that Record. Finally, the appearance of a giant, a *bonzo*, King Wen Yang, Confucius, and Buddha was a good example of how mythical, religious, historical, and philosophical elements can be pragmatically mixed in a way that is typical of the Chinese people.

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