This research in *histoire de la mentalité* was started in 1990, and the project has been formulated on the basis of seminars and exchange of opinions with specialists of psychology and Chinese literature. It resorts to psychology and literary criticism as ancillary disciplines, and concerns the evaluation and presentation of emotions in Ming-Qing literature (mainly fiction). The field of observation concerns dreams and nightmares, illusions and fears, ways of perceiving oneself and the external reality, and covers feeling and reacting, attitudes, desires and abhorrence, moral, religious and aesthetic sensitivity, and the world of the imaginary: these elements form the mental sphere of a certain culture in a certain period. They are based on everyday habits and on pre-eminent values, on individual behaviour and emotional attitude.

Man is not in fact a passive object of external stimuli but plays an active role in selecting and appraising the external world, despite the fact that emotive expression is the result of interaction amongst behavioural modalities reflecting different stages of the evolutionary scale, from the most archaic responses to the most sophisticated. Such appraisal also includes interpretation - at the intuitive and often unconscious level - of the significance of the
Pu Songling, Pingzhu Liaozhai zhiyi, Shanghai Saoye shanfang, 1922