

DEATH BEYOND DEATH: *JIAN* SPIRITS IN CHINESE POPULAR BELIEF

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ABSTRACT

This article* examines the origins and development of notions about *jian* spirits, beings into which, according to Chinese folk tradition, the souls of the dead transform after their demise. An analysis of the few available references to *jian* in Chinese literature and folklore suggests that the first mention of *jian* as ‘ghosts of ghosts’ appears relatively late, in the 13th century, as the result of a combination of two independent traditions: the written *jian* formula used in apotropaic practices from at least the Tang period (618–907), and a complex of ideas about the mortality of ghosts and their posthumous fate that took shape in the early Middle Ages, possibly under the influence of Buddhism. A detailed development of the ghosts of ghosts motif occurs as part of High Qing supernatural discourse in the works of writers Pu Songling and Yuan Mei. By the end of the 19th century notions that had been created by such literary representation were inherited by the popular belief system. The evolution of ideas about *jian*, which continues to the present, as far as one can judge from the supply on the market of magical paraphernalia and the material of modern supernatural web novels, provides a vivid example of how new concepts of Chinese folk religious tradition emerge and transform.

KEYWORDS: *jian* • ghosts • exorcism • netherworld • Chinese folklore • Chinese popular religion

INTRODUCTION

One of the most intriguing concepts in the traditional Chinese belief system is the concept of ‘death beyond death’, the idea that the spirits of the dead can die again and transform into other beings, *jian*. This immediately raises a whole series of questions.

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What can cause the spirits of the deceased to die? What do the *jian* look like? How do they interact with ghosts and with people? Where do they reside and how does their plane of existence fit into the overall architecture of the underworld of Chinese tradition? What keeps them 'alive'? Can they change their status? How and why does such an unlikely concept, which has no obvious parallels in other belief systems, appear?

This article traces the origins of this rather obscure concept, provides a context for its emergence and development, and characterises the place that *jian* spirits occupy in the hierarchy of supernatural beings in Chinese popular religion.

JIAN AS AN APOTROPAIC FORMULA

The earliest mentions of *jian*¹ are found in Tang era (618–907) narratives, where it refers to a protective formula placed over doors to protect the dwelling from malevolent spirits. Duan Chengshi (803–863) relates in his *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*:

Commoners like to paint a tiger head over doors and write [the character] *jian*, which means the name of a spirit with a sword from the Yin [world] and can stop pestilence. In *Han jiu yi* [*Old Regulations of the (Early) Han*],² I read about the ceremonies to drive out the plague spirit, and also about [people] setting up peach wood men, reed ropes, [the characters] *cang er*,³ a tiger. *Jian* is a combination of the [characters] *cang* and *er*. (Duan 2018: 919)

Duan here links the apotropaic practice, widespread in the Tang period, of placing the character *jian* over doors along with the image of the tiger's head (later the character was often written on the tiger's forehead) with the Han period (206 BCE–220 CE) custom of protecting the home, described in several sources and sometimes cited as the origin of the Menshen (door gods) cult. For example, Wang Chong (27–97) in his *Discussive Weighing* cites *Classic of Mountains and Seas*⁴ to explain the custom:

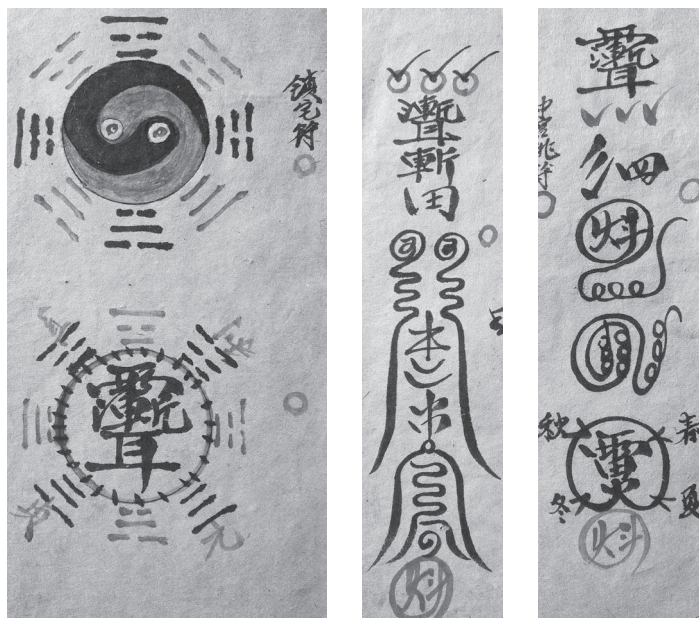
In the vast sea lies Mount Dushuo. On the summit stands a great peach tree, winding and twisting for three thousand li. The north-eastern side of its branches is called the gate of spirits; myriads of spirits pass back and forth through this gate. On the [mountain] there were two immortals, one called Shenshu, the other Yülü; they had the task of inspecting and commanding the myriads of spirits. They bound evil and harmful spirits with reed ropes and fed them to a tiger. For this reason, the Yellow Emperor introduced a ritual [to be performed] in the proper season. [This involved] erecting large human figures [made of] peach wood, painting the images of Shenshu and Yülü, together with a tiger on doors, and hanging reed ropes to keep [the spirits] away. (Wang 1985: 241)

This custom was popular throughout the imperial period and well into modern times. In the *Gazetteer of Linjin County* (Shanxi Province, 1773), we read:

On New Year's Eve, people put the image of Zhendian jiangjun,⁵ or the image [of the door gods] Shenshu and Yülü, or the character *jian*, on doors to drive away evil spirits. (ZDMZ 1989: 715)

And again, in the *Gazetteer of Yicheng County* (Shanxi Province, 1929):

On New Year's Eve, each family completes the year's chores, renews peach talismans, puts up Spring Festival couplets, hangs the image [of the door gods] Shen-shu and Yulü and the image of Zhong Kui⁶ on the wall, or sticks the character *jian* on the doors to drive away the evil spirits. (ZDZM 1989: 659)



Photos 1–3. Talismans with the character *jian* to guard dwelling. Woodcut print collection of talismans (obtained by the author in Guangzhou, China, 1999).

At least since the Qing period (1644–1912), the character *jian* has also appeared on various forms of exorcising talismans and protective amulets; however, its original meaning remained elusive. The difficulties of commentators (from medieval to contemporary) in tracing the origins of the *jian* formula led most of them to regard it as a combination of characters and to attribute any discrepancies in interpretation to a scribal error or even a series of errors. We can roughly divide the interpretations into two groups: the first, which associates the origin of the formula with the name of a spiritual being or authority, and the second, which associates the formula with an exorcism practice.

The Name

In the 9th century *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*, *jian* is said to be “the name of a spirit with a sword from the Yin [world]” (Duan 2018: 919) who can stop pestilence. However, Duan also considered *jian* to be a corrupted combination of the two characters *cang* and *er*. The problem with *cang er* is that it is not mentioned in any of the Han texts describing the custom of protecting the dwelling or its origin myth – not in

the two corresponding passages of *Discussive Weighing* (Wang 1985: 172, 241) and not in Ying Shao's (150–203) *Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Mores* (Ying 1980: 306). The only exception is the fragment from Wei Hong's (first century AD) *Old Regulations of the [Early] Han* cited above by Duan (2018), and even this volume does not explain what exactly *cang er* is. Jan Jakob Maria De Groot (1910: 1047), in his classic work *The Religious System of China*, tentatively suggested that *cang er* could stand for the plant *Xanthium strumarium*,⁷ but added that it had never been known for its exorcising functions. Zhang Junru (2012: 66) proposed a different interpretation, arguing that *cang er* in itself was the result of a scribal error: the phrase in the *Discussive Weighing* quotation from *Classic of Mountains and Seas* "feed them to a tiger" (Wang 1985: 241) may have been changed to the phrase "*cang er*, a tiger" during the transmission of the text.

In another story from the same 9th century, found in the *Records from Xuan Hall* collection, by Zhang Du (833–889) (Li and Zhang 1983), the origin of the formula is presented differently. According to this source, people began to use the combined characters *jian'er*⁸ as an exorcising talisman on their doors because they borrowed them from the phrase "Nowadays, when it comes to subduing ghosts no one is better than Jian, that's it!" (*Dangjin zhi gui, wu guo Jian er*),⁹ where *Jian* referred to a famous exorcist Feng Jian and *er* is a sentence-final particle that can be translated as "that's it!" or "that's all!" (Li 1986: 470).

Feng Jian of Hedong, scion of a noble house, entered service after receiving the degree of *mingjing*,¹⁰ but by nature was turned away from earthly turmoil. Then he left the service and lived as a hermit on the Yishui River. There was a certain Taoist Lord Li, well-versed in the art of the Way and particularly good at seeing ghosts. All the courtiers admired his abilities. Later, when Lord Li returned to Ruying, he happened to meet Jian between the Yi and Luo Rivers. He knew that Jian possessed rare abilities and respected him greatly. In the time of the Dali reign [of Emperor Dezhong, 766–780], there was a Duke Cui of Boling who took Lord Li into his service and treated him very well. Lord Li wrote to Cui, saying, "Nowadays, when it comes to subduing ghosts no one is better than Jian, that's it!" At that time, all the courtiers knew that Jian possessed various divine abilities and often spoke of him. Later, people in Chang'an began to write the character *jian* on their doors; this is the reason for the use [of this character]. (Ibid.)

Liu Ruiming suggests that *jian* may be a substitute for the word *jian* ('lowly', 'humble') or rather *tianjian* ('the one whom Heaven humbles').¹¹ He quotes the *Book of Orders* from the *Dunhuang Texts* 6216 (see Liu 2001: 108):

The name of the ghost is Tianjian. It has four heads and one leg. If the sick person makes this talisman and consumes it and also hangs [another] on the door, the ghost will see the name and go a thousand li away.

Perhaps the most recent attempt to associate the formula *jian* with a powerful spirit or deity is found in the commentaries on contemporary apotropaic products sold on e-commerce websites among various magical paraphernalia. In these products (amulets, pendants, bracelets, etc.), a slightly different form of the formula *jian* is used. Here, another component is added on top of the character, namely *yu* ('rain'), or sometimes *liang* ('double'). *Yu* is an element of the characters *lei* ('thunder'), and *dian* ('lightning'),

both powerful exorcistic forces in Chinese folk religious tradition. *Liang* is either a common error in writing *yu* or perhaps an attempt to make the character doubly effective. The form *yu (liang)+jian+er*¹² has appeared on talismans since at least the Qing period (see, for example, Fang and Thierry 2018: 221) and is still widely used today. A common commentary on these contemporary products mentions that the *yu+jian+er* formula is a taboo name of the Great Emperor of the North Star in the Purple Forbidden Enclosure in the centre of Heaven, or the Ziwei Emperor, one of the Four Sovereigns, auxiliary deities of the Three Pures of the Taoist pantheon. The Ziwei Emperor commands all the deities of the constellations, mountains, and rivers and can control spirits and ghosts by means of thunder and lightning. The 28 strokes of the *yu+jian+er* formula, according to the commentary, represent 28 Lunar mansions (see, for example, Yujian'er pendant; Peach wood talisman). It is unclear how recent the association of *jian* with the cult of the Ziwei emperor is, although it is probably a later development in an effort to tie the popular protective symbol to a specific divine authority.

The Practice

De Groot was probably the first to point out that *jian* may be a corrupted combination of the characters *zhan er* ('to cut off ears'), referring to the ancient custom of cutting off the left ears of slain enemies to present as a sign of victory in warfare or the suppression of an uprising. He noted that the character *guo* with the same meaning is quite commonly used in talismans for exorcistic purposes, as are the characters *sha*, 'slaughter', and *sha*, 'kill' (De Groot 1910: 1046, 1043). Zhang (2021) echoes this logic, believing that the characters *cang er*, which derived from the error in *Old Regulations of the [Early] Han*, later underwent a series of transformations again, with *cang er* changing into the similarly spelled *chuang er*, 'to cut off ears', and then into its synonym *zhan er*, which in turn was combined into *jian*. These new variants prevailed, in his view, because of the familiar practice of *er*, the offering of blood and wool from the ear of a sacrificial animal, which served, among other things, to drive away unruly spirits (Zhang 2021: 67–73).¹³

Another play on words suggests that the upper part of the *jian* character¹⁴ is a combination of the characters *sanzhan* 'three choppings', an ancient form of execution that included chopping off the legs, being cut in two at the waist and beheading. This explanation works better with another (seemingly interchangeable) form of *jian*, the character *zhan*, a combination of, perhaps, corrupted *sanzhan* 'three choppings' and *gui* 'ghost', with a possible meaning of 'to execute ghosts using the three choppings'.¹⁵

In summary, in the Tang period, the powerful apotropaic formula *jian* was added to the already widespread custom of protecting the home from evil spirits. The vagueness of its meaning and the variety of written forms it has taken over the years perhaps only contributed to the perception of its power. De Groot (1910: 1042) stated that "charms must present an indefinite variety of forms for the simple fact that the characters, which enter into their composition, are indefinite in number, and may be fantastically written and mutilated in an indefinite number of ways". The character *jian* has been used continuously in Chinese history since the Tang era as a warding off sign on entrances and as one element of exorcising formulas; no wonder it has taken various forms and received different explanations, some more plausible than others. Regardless of the written form

or the authority associated with it, the meaning of the formula seems clear: it is a threat (or command) to subdue, kill, destroy, or execute ghosts.

THE MORTALITY OF GHOSTS

The ghosts of Chinese popular religion lead an existence not unlike that of humans. They need food, clothing, and money, which they receive in the form of sacrificial offerings; they can make a career in the bureaucracy of the underworld or be demoted for their shortcomings; they reward their friends and take revenge on those who have wronged them; they can marry or even have sexual intercourse with humans; they can be injured during exorcism rituals. No wonder this idea eventually led to a logical conclusion: that ghosts can also die. One of the earliest mentions of mortal ghosts is found in the 5th century collection *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms* (*Youming lu*), traditionally attributed to Liu Yiqing (403–444) (Liu 1988). The story “Liu Daoxi” describes two cousins, Liu Daoxi and Kangzu, who hunted ghosts for fun even if they did not believe in them, and their older cousin Xingbo, who had the ability to see ghosts:

[Later] Xingbo said again, “There is a ghost sitting on the mulberry tree on the east side of the hall. He is still very young, but when he grows up, he will surely harm people.” Kangzu did not believe it and asked where in the tree. [Xingbo] pointed it out clearly. After more than ten days, on the night of the last day of that month, [Liu] Daoxi hid in the dark and stabbed the place where the ghost [was hiding] with a long halberd. Then he returned [home], and no one knew [what he had done]. The next day Xingbo came early and suddenly said in horror, “Who stabbed the ghost last night? He is almost dead, he could not move and will surely die soon.” (Li 1986: 2540)

Here we see the idea that ghosts can grow old and evolve with time. This was not a new idea. *The Commentary of Zuo [on the Chronicle] Spring and Autumn Annals* (Hong 1987), traditionally attributed to Zuo Qiuming (c. 502 – c. 422 BC) but probably completed around 300 BC, mentions the evolution of ghosts during their existence:

In autumn, in the eighth month, on *dingmao* day,¹⁶ the great ceremony took place in the grand temple, in which [the tablet of] Duke Xi was placed above [that of Duke Min]. This was a violation [of the order] of worship. Thereupon, out of respect for Duke Xi, Xiafu Fuji, the minister of the ancestral temple, proclaimed what he saw clearly: “I see that the new ghosts are large, and the old are small. [Putting] the large first and the small after is the proper order. To advance sage and worthy, is wise. [To act] wisely and properly is [to act according to] the ritual.” (Hong 1987: 354)

The progression described here (“new ghosts are large, and the old are small”) looks more like a deterioration; the spirits of the recently deceased diminish over time. Do they disappear altogether when enough time passes? The ghost in the 5th century story of Liu Daoxi develops in a completely different way: we know nothing about its size, but the older it gets, the stronger it becomes and acquires the ability to harm people. It can also be physically wounded and killed by a human weapon.

Later, the idea of the mortality of ghosts becomes more elaborate, possibly as Buddhist doctrine spread and attempts were made to link its provisions to the traditional Chinese concept of the soul. In one of the earliest collections of Buddhist novels from the Tang period, Tang Lin's *Records of Retribution from the Dark World* (Tang and Dai 1992), there is a conversation between Mu Renqian and an underworld official Cheng Jing in which the latter attempts to provide a consistent picture of the afterlife:

[Mu Renqian] asked Jing, "Buddhist teaching says that there are three planes of existence; is that true or false?" [Jing] replied, "True." Renqian asked, "If that is so, and people enter [one of the] six paths of [rebirth] after death, how do they become ghosts?" Jing said: "How many households are there in your county?" Renqian said, "More than ten thousand households." [Jing] asked again, "How many people are in prison?" Renqian replied, "Usually less than twenty." [Jing] asked, "How many of the ten thousand households are officials of the fifth rank?" Renqian said, "None." [Jing] asked again, "How many people are officials of the ninth rank or higher?" Renqian replied, "Several dozen." Jing said, "The six paths of rebirth are like this. None of the ten thousand will reach the path of Heaven, just as there are no officials of the fifth rank in your county. Only a few people out of ten thousand reach the path of humans, just as there are a few dozen officials of the ninth rank or higher in your county. Dozens out of ten thousand will go to Hell, like those in your county jail. Most of the people will become ghosts or beasts, just like the tax-paying households of your county. On the latter path, there are also different degrees of status. Renqian asked, "Can ghosts die?" [Jing] said, "Yes." Renqian asked, "When they die, which path do they take?" [Jing] replied, "I do not know, just as people know life but do not know what death is." (Li 1986: 2364–2367)

The path of the dead ghosts may have been unknown at that time, but towards the end of the Tang period they acquired their own plane of existence, which contributed significantly to the architecture of the Chinese underworld. In Xue Yusi's lost (9th century) *Records from East of the River* (*Hedong ji*), we see for the first time a description of the land where such 'ghosts of ghosts' might dwell. In the "Xu Chen" story (Li 1986: 3066–3067), a garrison scribe named Xu Chen is taken to the underworld and falsely accused of killing crows while alive. When the mistake is corrected and Xu Chen is allowed to return to the human world, he is given the opportunity to ask about the strange land he passed through on his way to the Hall of Justice. There are no houses in this land, only thousands of ancient locust trees, and the trees are full of crows that caw so loudly that people cannot hear each other talking. That is what he is told:

"The Country of the Crows' Cawing [Yamingguo] extends over several hundred li; sunlight and moonlight do not penetrate it; darkness always reigns here. Day and night are usually distinguished by the call of a crow. Although [crows are] birds, they too can be punished and banished. When their lifetime expires in the world of the sun, they are caught and brought [here] and allowed to caw." [Xu Chen] asked again, "Why is the Country of the Crows' Cawing so empty?" The two men replied, "When a person dies, he becomes a ghost, but ghosts also die. If this land did not exist, where would they be placed [after death]?" (Ibid.: 3067)

Interestingly, in the entire Tang period, the word for dead ghosts is never mentioned, and in none of the texts is this type of being associated with *jian*. It is only when those two concepts combine that the idea of the mortality of ghosts undergoes a new and fruitful development.

COMBINING IDEAS ABOUT *JIAN* AND THE POSTHUMOUS EXISTENCE OF GHOSTS

The first known mention of the apotropaic formula *jian* as a name for the class of spirits into which ghosts transform after death comes from the Jin philologist Han Daozhao (c. 1170 – c. 1230) in his *Collection of Rhymes of the Five Classes of Sound*:

People die and become ghosts, people see [ghosts] and are terrified of them. Ghosts die and become *jian*, ghosts see [*jian*] and are afraid of them. If this character is [written in] *zhuanshu* [script]¹⁷ and pasted over the door, all ghosts will respectfully keep a distance of a thousand li. (Han: volumes 7–8)

Here, at last, we see the reason why the formula frightens the ghosts so much: since they are comparable to humans in every way, ghosts are not only mortal like them, they also have the same kind of fear as humans. Yet the nature of these terrifying *jian* spirits and the connotations of ghost mortality remained unexplained until the time of the great Qing writers Pu Songling (1640–1715) and Yuan Mei (1716–1798), who virtually reinvented and reordered the Chinese world of the supernatural.

The High Qing period (18th century) was the time when debates about the nature of ghosts and their existence became very popular and were conducted in both philosophical and literary forms. Leo Tak-hung Chan (1999: 77–110), in his work on Ji Yun and storytelling in the 18th century, devotes an entire chapter to the Qing discourse on ghosts, in which he lays out the arguments of both sceptics and believers in the supernatural. One of the arguments in defence of the existence of ghosts was provided by the scholar-official Yao Ying (1785–1853), who, following the Song philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), believed that both ghosts and deities (*guishen*) were created from *qi*, a universal life force. In his essay “On Ghosts and Deities”, Chan (ibid.: 91–92) points out that due to the constant flow of *qi*, all phenomena are subject to constant transformation (*huaqi*): “Things are self-transformed, and they also transform into each other. For a while one is human, then one is a ghost.” Following this line of reasoning (which was popular long before it was summarised by Yao Ying), both Pu and Yuan took Han Daozhao’s brief notion and built upon it a complex supernatural landscape in which the posthumous transformation of a ghost into *jian* is as natural a part of the cosmic flow as the transformation of a human into a ghost.

In the story “Zhang Aduan”, from the *Strange Stories from the Liao Studio* collection (Pu 2015: 1231–1242), a young scholar named Wei Huiqi has a passionate love affair with two ghosts – his deceased wife and Zhang Aduan, a ghost girl who has helped reunite the spouses. They spend days and nights together in the haunted pavilion on Wei’s estate until Zhang Aduan falls ill with “ghost-induced sickness” (*gui bing*): she feels “weak and dizzy, anxious and delirious, as if she had seen a ghost” (ibid.: 1238).

The scholar said, "Lady Duan is already a ghost, how can a disease [sent] by a ghost be possible?" The wife replied, "It is not so. Humans die and become ghosts, ghosts die and become *jian*. Ghosts are afraid of *jian*, just as people are afraid of ghosts." (Ibid.)

It turns out that not only is Zhang Aduan in danger of becoming a *jian* due to disease, but the disease itself is induced by her abusive and jealous husband, who already drove her to her death 20 years before and has since managed to die twice and turn into a vengeful *jian*. Here we have three types of actor, human, ghost and *jian*, and two levels of interaction that mirror each other. To continue the parallel with a human, Zhang Aduan dies and even leaves behind remains in the form of bones wrapped in clothing, which Wei dutifully buries next to the graves of his ancestors with a ritual befitting a living woman. After her second death, she appears to Wei's ghost wife in a dream and asks that a Buddhist funeral ceremony be held for her; she then announces that she will soon be reincarnated as the daughter of the city god (*chenghuang*) – *jian* apparently can also be reincarnated into a ghost. (Ibid.: 1239–1241)

If Pu's "Zhang Aduan" is a story of mourning – that of a living man for both his dead wife and twice dead lover –, Yuan's tale involving *jian* is a horror story turned into a legal drama. It is titled "Chenghuang Kills the Spirit and Prevents It from Becoming a *Jian*" and is part of the famous *New Records of Qi Xie: What the Master Would Not Discuss* collection (Yuan 2004). In it, a woman suffers greatly from mistreatment by a ghost who first raped her, then, when she and her family tried to fight back, beat her severely and finally tried to kill her (ibid.: 60). Salvation came when she wrote a complaint and burned it in the temple of Chenghuang, which she had to do twice because after the first light punishment of the culprit ghost, the abuses were continued by the ghost's angry wife. Finally, Chenghuang sentenced the ghost's wife to exile and corvee labour, and the ghost itself was cut in two at the waist:

Only a black vapor poured out, no trace of entrails or blood. The two yamen runners¹⁸ standing on either side asked, "Would you allow us to escort him to the Country of the Crows' Cawing to become a *jian*?" Chenghuang did not allow this and said, "When this slave was a ghost, he harmed people; when he becomes *jian*, he will surely harm ghosts. Extinguish and air out this noxious vapor so that [his evil will be] cut off at the root." The two yamen runners called two long-bearded men, who each took a large fan and began to fan the corpse. Immediately, [the corpse] turned into black smoke, which vanished without a trace. (Ibid.: 61)

As we can see, Yuan incorporated into Pu's vision of the afterlife a concept of Yaming-guo, the Country of the Crows' Cawing, which he borrowed from *Records from East of the River* (Li 1986: 3067). Except that this is not only a separate plane of existence, a land where the *jian* live, but also a place of punishment for malevolent ghosts after their execution by the proper authorities of the underworld. Interestingly, according to Yuan (2004: 61), the officials of the underworld also have the power to obliterate ghosts completely, without transforming them into other life forms.

Due to the popularity of Pu's and Yuan's prose, some of the plots, ideas, and characters created by their literary imagination were readily adopted by the folk religious tradition. Only a few decades after Yuan introduced the motif of a ghost's transformation into *jian* as a punishment by courts of Hell, it found its place in the various accounts of

the bureaucratic practices of the underworld. The illustrated tracts, called *Jade Records* (Yuli 2019), which list the tortures of the ten courts of Hell and have been in circulation since the 19th century, include such punishment in at least some of their versions:

The Tenth Court. The Realm of Lord Zhuan Lun (He who turns the wheel)

The netherworld regulations provide every beast, bird, fish, or insect, whether without feet, or with two feet, or four feet, or many feet, shall after death become a *jian* or a ghost. But it shall, according to its sins or merits be reborn. Some live for but a year, or but a season, or but a day, and undergo change again and again. (Jordan 2022)

Those who cannot control themselves, who confuse and frighten people, who cause trouble until the day when the measure of iniquity is full, [those will be] struck by lightning and transformed into *jian*, forever unworthy of being reborn (Yuli 2019).

All those who were not filial during their lifetimes and those wicked souls who killed many living beings, after suffering the torture imposed by all the courts of Hell, are taken to the reincarnation bureau and first beaten to death with peach branches. After their death, they transform into *jian*, and if the transformation succeeds, they are allowed to enter the meandering path and be reborn as animals. (Ibid.)

The punishment of transformation into *jian* seems to surpass all the terrible torments that the souls of the dead can suffer for their crimes in the ten courts of Hell. Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) in his essay “Ghosts That Die” notes that the sinners of Hell in Western traditions beg for the second death to end their suffering, but are unable to die, whereas in Chinese popular belief, there remains a way out. He remarks that “Western beliefs, whether Buddhist or Christian, do not evidence this type of devious conceit” (Qian 1998: 351). However, it seems that the transformation into *jian* is not really a chance to escape eternal torment, but only the way to transfer it to a new plane of existence from which there is truly no escape unless the soul of the sinner is allowed to reincarnate.

The motif of *jian* as the being who leads the most miserable existence in the universe is found in a number of 19th and 20th century literary works. In the story “Liu Qing”, from Wang Tao’s (1828–1897) short story collection *Trivial Words from the Bank of the Song River*, two ghosts discuss the advantages and disadvantages of being a ghost and a human, with one of them crying, “I would rather turn back into a human than be a *jian*” (Wang 2004: 52). Kou Mengbi (1917–1990), a renowned theorist of *ci* poetry,¹⁹ wrote a chilling cycle of poems called “Fifteen Verses on the Theme of Ghost Amusement Scroll” during the Cultural Revolution, with one of the poems comparing the fate of intellectuals in the 1960s to existence in the Country of the Crows’ Cawing, something that is much worse than death (Kou 2009; Krisskoy 2016):

Desolate are the Three realms: that of men, gods, and ghosts,
Under the realm of ghosts, I now know, there is one of *jian*.
I have already sunk into the Country of the Crows’ Cawing,
And envy your comfortable sleep in the coolness of the maple roots.

The *Ghost Amusement* painting referred to by Kou in the title of his collection was created by Luo Ping (1733–1799), a master of ghost painting. Unfortunately, he mentioned the *jian* only briefly in one of his colophons and never dared to actually portray them; nor did any of the popular prints depicting the underworld ever include a visual representation of the *jian*. Nevertheless, we can assume that the concept of the *jian* as ghosts of ghosts was firmly embedded in popular belief by the end of the Qing period, reinforced by the never-forgotten practice of warding off evil spirits by placing the *jian* character over doors.

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF *JIAN*

An intriguing notion of other planes of existence beyond the underworld found its development in contemporary popular culture, particularly in web novels. In one such novel, *Fatal Impulse*, a 2,061 chapter epic by author Wangji lichou (2018), a high school student faces the supernatural after a mysterious user named Gatekeeper of the Underworld joins the class WeChat group and issues a challenge that goes horribly wrong. The plot of the novel takes place in a universe with different planes of existence, including the human world, the ghost world, the underworld, the world of immortals, the *jian* world (ruled by the King of *jian*), and also a *xi* world and a *yi* world. The latter two dimensions are explained by the following passage, found in various Internet publications (such as Ya 2019; Humans... 2021) and usually attributed to *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms: Third Continuation*²⁰ 14: “Humans die and turn into ghosts, ghosts die and turn into *jian*, *jian* die and turn into *xi*, *xi* die and turn into *yi*.”

As a commentary these publications quote *Daodejing* vol. 14 (Chen and Wang 2000: 101): “Looking at it and not seeing it, we call it *yi*, listening it and not hearing it, we call it *xi*.”²¹ And further, they quote the classic *Heshang Gong* commentary on *Daodejing* (ibid.): “Colourless is called *yi*” and “Inaudible is called *xi*”. Thus, it is understood that the transformation cycle does not stop with the *jian*. They can also die and apparently lose the ability to produce sounds in the new form of existence, called *xi*; the *xi*, in turn, can transform into *yi* after their own demise and lose visible form. Could this be the logical end of the transformation cycle?

The *Daodejing* quote in these publications is certainly genuine, but the *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms* quote is definitely not. It is unclear whether this passage was originally created to provide a foundation for the universe of the *Fatal Impulse* novel (Wangji 2018), but since its appearance it seems to have taken on a life of its own and is frequently quoted in connection with *jian*, adding two more layers to the Chinese underworld in popular perception.

In another web novel *My Death God Roommate* by Qing jun mo xiao (2018), a girl named Sang Yu, who has gained the ability to see supernatural things after a car accident, meets a *jian*, and we finally get to see what it looks like. The *jian* woman is dressed in Tang dynasty clothes with Tang heavy white makeup, rouge on her cheeks, wide and short eyebrows and bright red lips.

The woman looked at Sang Yu with a strange smile on her face. The small red lips looked as if they could part at any moment to reveal an unnatural mouth full of shark-like fangs that could swallow Sang Yu in one gulp. There was a blooming

sadness in the woman's eyes, two conflicting emotions coexisting on her face as if she were a puppet manipulated by others or an evil spirit with two manifestations [...] Suddenly, two bloody tears rolled down the cheeks of the ghost woman, leaving bloody traces on her snow-white face... (Qing jun mo xiao 2018)

Later, Sang Yu is told that bloody tears distinguish *jian* from ghosts, who cannot cry at all. Being *jian*, according to the novel, is the most tragic form of existence, resulting from ghosts either killing themselves or being killed by others. (Ibid.)

The popularity of the concept of *jian* in contemporary culture is illustrated by the wide range of *jian* products available on online shopping platforms. I have already mentioned that there is a considerable e-market for *jian* amulets, which can be used to protect one's home or office from evil spirits. But there are also T-shirts, hoodies, smartphone cases, backpacks, keychains, rings, bracelets, etc., all bearing the character *jian*. With such a diverse market and correspondingly high demand, the concept of *jian* seems to be right on trend and could undergo new transformations in the future.

CONCLUSION

There are very few mentions of *jian* spirits in Chinese literature of any kind. The reason for this obscurity is that the concept of *jian* probably arose from a corrupted combination of several characters that had apotropaic properties and served to protect dwellings from evil forces. The original meaning of the characters is not clear. They could stand for the command to execute demons, for the ritual practice of blood sacrifice, or for the name of a being (divine or spectral) with the authority to drive away malevolent spirits. The apotropaic practice associated with *jian* had been widespread since at least the Tang period (and is still popular today), but its true meaning has been lost over time, leaving a void that needed to be filled.

The explanation was found relatively late, in the 13th century when the name with no known meaning was combined with an idea with no name: the notion that ghosts could be as mortal as humans and transform into another, as yet unnamed, form of being after death. The resulting concept of *jian* – ghosts of ghosts – was not fully explored until it became the subject of the literary imagination of the great writers of the 17th and 18th centuries.

Due to the flourishing genres of *chuanqi* and *zhiguai*²² stories, the Chinese world of the supernatural is described in such vivid detail that the ghosts often feel as real as humans. Their lives are filled with career difficulties, dealings with corrupt officials, love affairs, family problems, deep emotions, and acts of violence; no wonder they began casting a shadow in the underworld. And this shadow – the *jian* – is not yet fully formed.

We know very little about them: mainly how they come into being (when ghosts die of diseases or injuries or are executed for their crimes in the afterlife) and how they can change their status (by being rewarded with reincarnation for their merits or by disappearing without a trace). We also know that they behave toward ghosts just as ghosts tend to behave toward humans: they harass them, haunt them in their dreams, cause illness, and wreak havoc in other ways. Their existence is miserable and they dwell in the Country of the Crows' Cawing, a desolate place of constant darkness, filled with the

deafening cries of crows. We do not know what they look like, what characteristics or abilities they have, or how they interact with humans. Ordinary ghosts in Chinese tradition are very familiar, too human-like in their passions, needs, ambitions, problems, and injuries, so in a sense they have ceased to be a mystery. *Jian* are still a mystery, and this is what makes them so uncanny and so fascinating.

The concept of *jian* continues to evolve; we can see it in the new interpretations of the apotropaic formula for talismans sold through e-commerce, in the web novellas that add new characteristics to the elusive image of a *jian*, in the invented quotes circulating on the Internet that attempt to continue the line of human – ghost – *jian* transformations by providing additional forms of beings following that line. The result of this evolutionary process – from the scribal error to a fully recognised part of the supernatural hierarchy of Chinese tradition – would need further assessment based on contemporary sources.

NOTES

1 According to the *Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang 1958 [1716]), when referring to the world of the supernatural the character 響 has two pronunciations, *jian* and the less used *ji*. It also has the pronunciation *ni* with two different meanings. The first meaning is defined as “the appearance of things”. The *Guangyun* dictionary (compiled in 1007–1008) is given as the source for this definition (Chen 1982: 234), but no examples of its use are given, which, among other arguments, has led several researchers to doubt the validity of this entry (Liu 2001: 107; Qian 2001: 475; Zhang 2021: 64). The second definition is a modal particle at the end of the sentence, used mainly in Chan Buddhist koans written after the Song Dynasty (960–1279) (Qian 2001: 474–475; Zhang 2021: 63–64).

2 *Old Regulations of the [Early] Han*, later also called *Old Regulations of Han Officials* (*Hanguan jiuji*), is a fragmentary collection of administrative rules of the Early Han period (206 BCE–8 CE). The book was compiled by Wei Hong during the Later Han period (25–220 CE), but it was lost early on. Now some of its text survives in the several collections of fragments.

3 滄耳。

4 *Classic of Mountains and Seas* is a classic Chinese text describing the real and mythical geography of China and neighbouring lands (Shanhaijing 1994). This passage is not found in its surviving versions (Yang et al. 2005: 200).

5 Zhendian jiangjun – a general who guarded the palace hall during the New Year ceremony at the imperial court.

6 Zhong Kui – a deity in Chinese popular religion who possesses the ability to command ghosts and vanquish evil spirits.

7 Chinese *canger* 蒼耳。

8 漸耳。

9 當今制鬼，無過漸耳。

10 *Mingjing* (expert in the Confucian classics, ‘classicist’), during the Tang period a category of candidate recommended for appointment to state office.

11 *Jian* 賤; *tianjian* 天賤。

12 兩(兩)+漸+耳。

13 *Zhan er* 斬耳; *guo* 馘; *sha* 殺 and *sha* 煞; *chuang er* 創耳; *zhan er* 斬耳; *er* 岬。

14 漸。

15 *Sanzhan* 三斬; *zhan* 斃。

16 *Dingmao* is the fourth term in a sexagenary cycle, the method of recording days in early China.

17 *Zhuanshu* script, or sigillary script, is the ancient Chinese style of writing, used primarily for seals and sometimes for talisman writing.

18 Yamen runners were low-ranking employees of government offices (i.e. messengers, guards, policemen, etc.).

19 *Ci* poetry is a genre of Chinese poetry characterised by lines of unequal length that drew inspiration from folk tradition. It appeared in the Tang era (618–907) and developed further during the Song period (960–1279).

20 *Youming lu*, by Liu Yiqing (403–422), is a collection of tales of the supernatural that was lost sometime during the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) and was reconstructed from the fragments preserved in later texts. Though there was a sequel, *The Continuation to the Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms* (*Hou youminglu*), written during the Tang period by an unknown author (and also lost), there was never a text called *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms: Third Continuation*.

21 Yi 夷; xi 希.

22 *Chuanqi* and *zhiguai* are genres of Chinese fiction dealing with phantastic or supernatural events and phenomena.

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