Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 19 (2): 68–84
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2025-0018

MONEY AND WEALTH IN QING TEXTS ON FOX SPIRITS*

KONSTANTIN TERTITSKI
Associate Researcher
Department of East Asian Studies Tel Aviv University
Gilman Building for Humanities
Tel Aviv 69978, Israel
e-mail: ktertitski@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2491-9244

ABSTRACT
This study analyses the rules of circulation of money (and wealth in general) in Qing-era (1644–1911) Chinese texts on the supernatural. It is based on the popular collections of stories by writers Pu Songling, Ji Yun and Yuan Mei.

Ever since the 19th century, when sinologists started field studies on Chinese religions, there was much discussion about the extent to which literary texts can be used as sources on Chinese religions. Indeed, in each instance it is difficult to separate the product of the literary imagination from its possible folklore basis. However, as this study shows, literary texts were usually created within the framework of a certain system of ideas, which determines the nature of the characters and their modes of interaction with each other, including the financial aspects of these relations. Given the large scale of the Chinese pantheon, the object of study was limited to one class of supernatural being, fox spirits.

It appears that in Qing texts on supernatural world and associated folk beliefs of that time, silver, which served as currency in China, as well as property, was found, lost, borrowed, stolen, sold and bought by fox-spirits according to a changing system of rules inherent in the worldview of the period. Objects (including silver) can have their own predetermined fate which can influence the fate of characters interacting with them. The boundaries of possibilities in such interaction are often set by cultural norms and can't be broken even by supernatural beings. In many respects tales of the supernatural from the Qing period, despite the specifics of the subject, promote traditional ethics and social order.

KEYWORDS: Chinese folk belief • fox worship • Qing literature • Pu Songling • Ji Yun • Yuan Mei

* I am grateful for the support of Meir Shahar's Israel Science Foundation, Breakthrough Research Grant no. 2717/22: Environment and Religion in China. Special thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

ISSN 1736-6518 (print), ISSN 2228-0987 (online)

It is quite likely that nearly every researcher who has studied the history of popular religious life in China has encountered the problem of sources. Folk beliefs and related practices in China are sparsely represented in the surviving written materials, such as official documents or geographical manuals (*difangzhi*, official complex accounts of localities, so-called local gazetteers) and others. However, descriptions of these folk beliefs are quite frequently found in literary texts. Chinese literature, especially the part of it that is commonly referred to as "vernacular", undoubtedly had a significant influence on the formation of Chinese religious beliefs (Shahar 1996), although it is often unclear how this related to the existing religious practices of the time. This is especially true for texts in classical Chinese, a language that was not known by the majority of the Chinese population before modern times, when secondary education, which included the teaching of classical Chinese among other subjects, became nearly universal.[1]

This article examines one aspect of supernatural belief in China: the transfer of money and valuables. Specifically, it focuses on how such transfers were described in Qing-era (1644–1911) texts. The study of this topic allows us to extend the field of research of Chinese religious life from characters and their relations to a new area that has rarely attracted the attention of researchers, i.e. the rules and norms that governed the functioning (initial appearance, increase in quantity, lending, theft, loss) of money and valuables used by these characters. Such an analysis and a comparison of the results with corresponding ideas within literary texts will also help to address a more general problem and will offer the possibility to understand how different the perceptions of the supernatural were in religious literature on religion issues as opposed to the actual religious practice, and whether these two shared any common principles.

Given the vast scope of the Chinese religious world, where the pantheon includes hundreds of deities, this study focuses on one particular group of beings, fox spirits, commonly referred to as *hu-xian* since the late Ming period. The Ming period in general is dated from 1368 to 1644, with the late Ming conventionally referring to the last hundred years.[2]

There are several reasons to choose the fox cult as the subject of analysis. The religious worship of foxes became an integral part of popular religiosity in China as early as the Tang era (618–907). Descriptions of fox spirits can be found in numerous literary texts, especially those written during the Qing period. The fox spirit cult persisted until the fall of the Qing Empire and survived to this day. This allows us to compare descriptions of fox spirits in literary texts from this time with descriptions of the popular religious practices conducted by Qing literati, as well as with field materials collected by scholars shortly after the fall of the imperial regime. In some cases, fox spirits were regarded as deities of wealth and thus had a direct connection to the theme of money.

The image of the fox spirit in Chinese belief and culture has been analysed many times by researchers in China and beyond. There are now more than a dozen books and dozens of articles in Chinese, English, German, Japanese and Russian dealing with this phenomenon.[3] However, the topic of money and wealth has unfortunately not been the focus of sinologists' attention. The most important works in recent decades on the cult of the fox in the late imperial period are the books by Huntington (2003) and Kang Xiaofei (2006 [2005]). The first book focuses primarily on a detailed description of the fox image in literary texts, while the second deals with its numerous religious aspects.[4] The development of the image of the fox in Chinese culture is thoroughly examined

in the work by Li Jianguo (2002). In this book, the author pays special attention to the influence of changes in China's social structure, world of ideas, and culture on the fox's image.

The fox cult, as mentioned, continued to exist in China after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, although this article does not aim to cover the PRC period. It should be noted, however, that an overview of several works from the last decades that discuss contemporary state of the fox cult is presented in an article by Donald Hong Yin Chan (2022), dedicated to a new aspect of the issue, the fox cult in Hong Kong and its adaptation to modern conditions in the region, where it was not prevalent before.

FOXES IN THE CHINESE RELIGIOUS WORLD

The cult of the fox and the sources of information about fox spirits were undoubtedly influenced by the status of foxes in the Chinese belief system and the structure of the Chinese religious world. China's religious system, as known, differs radically from the so-called Abrahamic religions. There is no dominant faith, and the number of those who strictly adhere to institutionalized religions (such as Buddhism or Christianity) is relatively small. The majority of Chinese believers follow a complex set of syncretic folk beliefs, partially connected to the "great tradition" and partially incorporating elements originated outside of the elite culture. In different situations, most Chinese could turn to different deities and practices belonging to various religions and traditions.

The Chinese pantheon, for the most part, though not entirely, was formed and expanded by figures who were previously human (officials, military leaders, literati) and achieved their status through some lifetime achievements. However, some figures in the pantheon were plants, reptiles, or animals. Among the latter were foxes, who attained this status through self-cultivation practices. According to folk beliefs, not all animals, and in particular, not all foxes, were capable of such development, but some could progress along this path through their own efforts.

The majority of popular religious practices existed outside of state regulations. The state sometimes combated some of them, occasionally integrated them into the 'great tradition', but more often simply tolerated or distanced itself from them. The absence of a unified official assessment in this sphere allowed observers to use a wide range of interpretations for phenomena in religious folklore.

Simultaneously, because a significant portion of these cults operated outside institutionalised structures, their activities were often poorly documented in official records and publications. In these conditions, information about Chinese religions from any other sources becomes especially valuable.

As is known, the boundary between the earthly and the otherworldly in traditional Chinese culture is highly conditional.[5] It is no surprise that classical Chinese literature contains a significant number of texts about contacts with the supernatural. This relates to the genre of 'the tales of the strange' (*zhiguai xiaoshuo*), which developed approximately from the 3rd to the 7th centuries, and 'strange stories' (*chuanqi*), which developed during the Tang period. If we were to schematically define the difference between them, we could say that tales of the strange are shorter and claim to be records of real events, while strange stories have more complex plots. Additionally, during the Tang

period, a genre called 'written notes' (*biji*) emerged. These could be the authors' musings on various topics, quotes, records of what they had read, stories about events in their lives and the lives of others. These were often claimed to be authentic.

In summary, fox spirits (*hu-xian*), a *hu*-manity or 'fox-kind', so to say, described in China for centuries as a community existing parallel to the human world, became one of the most extensively described clusters of the Chinese supernatural in literature, perhaps second only to the Chinese underworld. The characters in most of the texts under consideration, alongside foxes, include Confucian literati[6] and peasants. The currency they used consisted of silver ingots,[7] and their possessions could include gold items.

THE HISTORY OF FOX WORSHIP

The earliest accounts of fox worship date back to the Tang period. Already in the early years of the Tang, a *Short Report on Current News* ("Chao ye jian zai") by Zhang Zhao (658–730) emerged, a quote from which is now essential in nearly every study on fox spirits:

> Since the beginning of the Tang, many common people have worshipped fox deities. They made offerings in their homes, seeking mercy, and the food and drink [offered] were the same as for humans. There was no single central figure [in this worship]. At that time, there was a saying: 'Where there are no fox spirits, there will be no village'. (Cited in *Taiping guangji huijiao* 2008: 8000.)

If domestic fox worship was practiced during the Tang period, by the time of the Song (960–1279) large temples dedicated to fox deities were established. The foxes within these temples could even hold the title of prince (*wang*). During the Ming period, texts noted the widespread worship of foxes in the North,[8] especially in the regions of modern-day Hebei and Shandong, among other places[9] (Li 2002: 113–114, 127–129, 156–160).

Information about fox worship at the time of the Qing is more extensive. There are three main sources of information on this period: the above-mentioned local gazetteers; geographical tests, prepared by the authors privately; and descriptions of the cult made by scholars shortly after the fall of the empire and before Chinese villages underwent modernisation.

Mention of temples and fox worship is found in several local gazetteers of northern Chinese counties, although the information about what foxes could do is brief and similar. The data from local gazetteers from various counties mainly published in the early Republic period[10] can be summarised as follows: "Fox spirits often transform into old men or beautiful youths and maidens, mingling among humans. Those who oppose them will surely face punishment" (Shuangcheng 1997 [1926]: 426); "fox-spirits, attaining the Way and spiritual force, can ward off human misfortunes and cure illnesses", "during the former Qing [Empire], they were particularly revered and believed in; they were worshipped as protectors in all state treasuries and grain storehouses" (Haicheng 1997 [1937]: 83). Additionally, some sources mention either that mediums worship foxes or that they are possessed by deities from among the "great families", including foxes (*Andong* 1997 [1931]: 169; *Hulan* 1997 [1920]: 413; *Wankui* 1997 [1919]: 457–458; *Xian* 1997 [1911]: 359; *Yi* 1997 [1931]: 215).

The most comprehensive description of fox worship in China can be found in the work of Chinese researcher Li Weizu (1941; published in Li and Zhou 2011).[11] Li shows that foxes were part of the so-called four or five 'great families' (also called 'great transcendent (*xian*)'), which included animals and reptiles that humans most often came into contact with in northern China.[12]

There was belief that foxes could be "the ones of a purely profane character" or "those who possess higher, supernatural qualities" (Li 1948: 1), with these qualities being either good or wicked. 'Good' foxes could change through self-cultivation and by performing "virtuous deeds". At a certain stage, they could gain the ability to take on human forms and speak, eventually reaching the level of transcendence. The most important part of self-cultivation looked as follows: the fox would emit and then swallow a fiery sphere; this was its "original vital force" (*yuan qi*, where *qi* is a vital force that has certain qualities of a material substance).[13] "Virtuous deeds" could be quite peculiar, for example, a fox could send illnesses to people and then heal them. However, a fox could infect no more than one person per family (ibid.: 4–6).

Fox worship took place both in the homes of local residents (*jia-xian* '*xian* of the family') and in temples (*tan-xian* '*xian* of the altar'). In the first case, foxes were seen as givers of prosperity to the family, and in the second, they were turned to for healing or for predictions of the future (ibid.: 2).

Local residents classified the diverse Chinese pantheon into three categories: 'Buddhas' (*fo*, literally 'Buddha', but in practice both Buddhist and Taoist deities were included), 'deities' (*shen*), and 'immortals' or 'the transcendent ones' (*xian*). Among them, Buddhas held the highest position, while deities held a lower one. People believed that only humans could become deities; to do so, they had to perform good deeds or engage in ascetic practices. Foxes and other animals could also become transcendent, but the transcendents occupied a much lower status than deities (ibid.: 49–53).

Wicked foxes could syphon the vital force of a partner through sexual contact. Both good and wicked foxes, at a certain stage, could acquire the ability to transform into humans and possess humans. After this, the possessed individual would behave strangely: "quite mad, he talks nonsense, runs and jumps around with all his strength and changes abruptly from laughter to weeping" (ibid.: 4–5).

Local residents perceived the "four great families" primarily as deities of wealth and referred to them as 'venerable deities of wealth' (*cai-shen-ye*); the use of the character 'deities' here instead of 'transcendents' did not seem to bother them and indicates a certain conventionality of popular classification. People believed that these deities could "keep the house in peaceful and prosperous condition" (ibid.: 11). However, offerings, prayers, and the construction of appropriate altars were required from the peasants in this case. Local residents had the following opinion about their actions:

> The gods of wealth are incapable of producing goods, but they can transport goods from one farm to another. The natives call this … to make one family prosperous by ruining the other. The prosperity of one family may last for several years before it is bestowed upon another family. The losing family loses much more than it has gained through the grace of an animal's spirit. (Ibid.: 8–11)

A similar view of foxes is seen in the Qing description of Tianjin, compiled in the late 19th century by Zhang Dao (1970 [1885]: 204), where foxes and other great families are

primarily described as deities bringing wealth to humans, which disappears when their connection with humans is severed.[14] Fan Dirui (2014: 351), who conducted a survey of villages in eastern Shandong in the late 1920s, describes similar beliefs and practices related to fox worship:

> Rural residents believe most in the fox because he is very skilful, and they believe that he can bring both misfortune and blessings. Some people worship him, respectfully calling them 'third grandfather Hu' (*Hu-san-taiye*), and turn to him for healing if they have any illness.

Raymond De Loy Jameson (1933: 50), who was in northern China around the same time, described fox worship in a similar way:

> Fox worship is widespread in north China, and most farmsteads have a small fox shrine which may or may not be used for active worship at any given moment. The worship appears to be incidental to the kind of luck the farmer is having. If he is having bad luck, he pacifies the fox, and if he is having very good luck, he may offer worship in the hope that the luck will continue. Others keep the shrine clean and offer small sacrifices at irregular intervals.

FOXES IN LITERATURE

In literary texts, the image of the fox had certain internal constants on the one hand, largely determined by the content of a small set of regularly reproduced quotations, and on the other hand, it was constantly evolving. The earliest mentions of foxes in Chinese literature date back to ancient times. By the early Middle Ages, the main stereotypes associated with foxes had already emerged. In *Records from the Hidden* ("Xuan zhong ji") by Guo Pu (276–324), the fox is described as having the ability to transform, change appearance, cast spells, engage in sexual relationships, and gain knowledge inaccessible to humans:

> At the age of fifty, the fox can transform into a woman, at a hundred years into a beauty, it can become a medium [*shenwu*] or a man and engage in relationships with women. It can possess knowledge about events thousands of *li* [576 metres] away, be skilled in enchanting, deceive people, and drive them insane; when it reaches a thousand years, it can unite with Heaven and become a celestial fox. (Cited in *Taiping guangji huijiao* 2011: 7989–7990.)

Even in texts predating the Tang, foxes often engage in sexual relations with humans as seductresses, draining their victims' vital force. Extraordinary qualities attributed to the fox, as it was said, also include a special ability to know. In *In Search of the Spirits* ("Sou shen ji", 4th century), there is a character who can be called Purveyor the Fox.[15] The knowledge possessed by foxes in different historical periods could include insights into human destinies, medicine, literature and Confucian canons.

During the Tang and Song, alongside the image of the seductive female fox, the image of the fox as a committed mistress emerged in literary texts. The she-fox in these texts, who is sometimes described as educated and diligent, entered into quasi-marital relationships with humans, helping rather than harming her partner, occasionally pro-

viding valuable advice.[16] In Tang period texts there is also a plot related to the fox's aspiration to become a *xian*, fox, although the theme of extracting the vital force from a partner to create elixirs of immortality had not yet appeared (Li 2002: 111–112, 119–120, 131–132).

The image of the fox also transformed under the influence of changing ideological and political backgrounds. During the Song, when the influence of the bureaucracy and bureaucratic machinery grew stronger, foxes in texts were subject to celestial bureaucracy (specifically, city gods (*chenghuang*) to which one could complain about their actions) (ibid.: 133–134).

By the Ming, following the rise of internal alchemy during the Song and subsequent eras, narratives about foxes increasingly featured themes resembling Taoist internal alchemy practices aimed at achieving immortality. Sexual contact between foxes and their male partners was now often seen as a means to extract the vital force of the latter to attain the status of *xian* and immortality. Additionally, during the Ming period, the theme of money and wealth became more prominent in fox narratives. A category of story emerged that involved male foxes engaging in sexual relationships with women and bringing prosperity to their families (ibid.: 156, 160–161, 165–169).

As noted by Huntington (2003), there was initially limited interest in fox-related themes in Chinese literature during the Ming. Texts about them began to appear only in the late Ming, especially in the early 17th century. Huntington associates this with the reissue of the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* ("Taiping guangji huijiao") in 1566. Even in the Ming anthology *Collected Stories of Fox Seduction* (*Humei congtan* n.d.), which was specifically dedicated to foxes, most of the material was taken from the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* (Huntington 2003: 9, 25–26).[17]

THE WORLD OF FOXES IN QING LITERATURE

During the Qing period, the number of texts related to foxes significantly increased, expanding the panorama and presenting a wider range of human–fox relations. If we focus on texts by the most famous novelists of the early Qing period, we find dozens of texts about foxes, including works by Pu Songling, Yuan Mei, and Ji Yun.[18]

The earliest texts from this period were written by Pu Songling (1640–1715), the author of *Strange Tales from the Studio of Conversation* (also *Studio of Leisure*; "Liaozhai zhiyi"; Pu 2000). While this book is regularly reprinted and adapted for films in China, and has now been translated into dozens of languages, it was not published in the Qing Empire until 1766. However, it was widely circulated in manuscript, indicating its popularity. The author passed only the entry-level imperial examination and had to make a living mainly as a private tutor.

Two other writers, Ji Yun (1724–1805), the author of *Jottings from the Grass Hut for Examining Minutiae* ("Yuewei caotang biji"; Ji 2007), and Yuan Mei (1716–1797), the author of *What the Master Does Not Speak Of* ("Zi bu yu"; Yuan 2004), were already well-known during their lifetimes, both as writers and poets. Their texts were also extremely popular in China during that period. The popularity of Ji's and Yuan's works was sometimes referred to in Chinese culture with the phrase "Yuan of the south and Ji of the north".[19]

It was during the Qing period, primarily through the efforts of Ji, that a relatively detailed picture emerged of the place of foxes in the worlds of the living and the spirits, as well as a typology. People were naturally associated with the force of *yang*, spirits (*gui*) and foxes with the force of *yin*. However, foxes were seen as intermediaries between humans and spirits. Fox–human relationships, as was believed, had two types: "enchantment" (as Ji writes, in nine out of ten cases) and "fate", which was determined by the events of a past life (in one out of ten cases). In the first type of relationship, the *yang* in a person is disrupted by the *yin* of a fox. In the second type, both forces can harmonise and coexist peacefully for a long time. (Ji 2007: 88–89)

The description of the fox world in the text resembles accounts from Li Weizu's informants (Li 1948: 1–16), but it also implies the existence of a social hierarchy among foxes. All foxes can engage in self-cultivation, but special foxes possess the greatest amount of spiritual power (*ling*). The storyteller compares this to the difference in education between peasant families and literati families (different commentators have different opinions about the status and nature of the above-mentioned type of fox-spirit). Some foxes are born into families that have already "attained the *dao*" and can change their appearance from the very beginning, while others are ordinary foxes. But most of those who have "attained the *dao*" can merely acquire the "*dao* of a human" and live like humans ("they drink and eat, there are men and women [among them], they are born and grow old, get sick and die, the same as humans"), with only some of them achieving the status of "transcendent", just as a few individuals among humans become officials. Foxes have two paths to success: self-cultivation, similar to Taoism, and the absorption of their partner's vital essence. A fox explaining this compares those following the first path to humans (presumably literati) who "accumulate knowledge and thereby establish their reputation", and the second group to those who seek success "through the shortest route", meaning they resort to various illicit means. In the latter case, foxes usually violate heavenly laws and face punishment from "senior" foxes or the bureaucracy of the underworld. (Ji 2007: 216–217)

Ji's texts also talked about the distinction between good and evil foxes, saying there are those who are "evil spirits (*yao*) causing harm" and those who are "foxes reading books and understanding rituals": the former dared not approach righteous people, while the latter were eager for such interactions (ibid.: 313). Another text mentions a fox who lived in an empty room in a human house and interacted with the householder. They could "exchange gifts or borrow things from each other and live peacefully like neighbours" (ibid.: 443).

The texts sometimes not only mention, but also describe, very positive and even 'Confucianised' foxes. In a story by Yuan (2004: 429), there is a family of foxes led by a head who studies Confucian texts and punishes with death one of the family for violating established norms, leading the protagonist of the story to say: "Many officials fall far short of this fox". The same plot appears in other fox-related texts of the period (Huntington 2003: 118). In one of the later texts, the "chief fox superintendent" of Beijing (see note 20) similarly punishes another fox who kidnapped and nearly caused the death of the son of the house owner where this fox had settled. At the end of this story, the author makes an important concluding statement: "The fox deity and the wise mouse also have their ethical foundations" (Yu 1986: 107).

Many elements of this representation, or its basis, were formed in the preceding period. In these texts, as before, foxes are depicted as subordinate to the otherworldly bureaucracy and legal system.[20] Foxes are also concerned with self-cultivation and can disrupt a person's consciousness. For example, in one of the stories, the characters steal the elixir of immortality[21] from a fox engaged in self-cultivation (Pu 2000: 148), and in another story the protagonist is a human who behaves strangely after a fox spirit possesses him (ibid.: 1268). Foxes can drive an entire family insane, punishing them for mistreating a relative (Ji 2007: 454). In some texts we again encounter a fox connoisseur. A fox could be highly knowledgeable about local governance and would severely criticise local officials in conversation with people (Pu 2000: 2451). Foxes can have the skills needed to write compositions for imperial exams and can teach a person how to write them (ibid.: 1048–1049) or how to play the Chinese board game *weiqi* (ibid.: 934–935).

The belief that foxes can extract the vital force of their partner also persists. In one of the texts, a fox openly admits that her goal was to extract this vital force, comparing it to relationships aimed at gaining power or money (Ji 2007: 241–242). From the extracted vital force, the fox, as before, creates the medicine of immortality (Pu 2000: 198), sometimes, as mentioned earlier, losing it (see also ibid.: 148). Mentions of such popular folk religious practices as medium sessions involving a fox spirit or appeals to the fox for the provision of medicine are extremely rare in texts (one of the few exceptions is in ibid.: 1041–1042).

FOXES AND WEALTH

In these texts there are also classical plots in which a human who lives with a fox receives material blessings from it, and when the fox leaves for another partner, the family loses the blessings it brought with it, with the family's possessions appearing among the property of the fox's new lover (Pu 2000: 1630–1631).

At the same time, as in texts from earlier times, the fox can be a lover for a poor intellectual without causing harm to him. In one such text, a female fox utters a noteworthy phrase: "My fate is to be with [the name of the person]" (Pu 2000: 932). A similar judgment expressed by a fox can also be found in a Ming period text by Lu Can (1987: 24–25; 1494–1551), in which the fox says that her "fate is to be with the gentleman (with [you], sir)". In Qing texts such declarations by the foxes about their relationship with humans became relatively frequent, and 'fate' in this context can be named in various terms, the typology of which deserves its own study. Sometimes this refers not only to quasi-married couple relationships but also to the subsequent reincarnation of a fox in a particular family. The idea of fate that appears here is also found in texts that relate to money and wealth, which will be discussed further.

What is remarkable is the appearance of new stories about foxes that have to do with money, but are no longer constrained to the image of a fox stealing things and transferring them from one household to another. The fox can find treasures and offer advice on managing finances (Pu 2000: 319–320),[22] or it can help a human gather money, part of which goes towards repairing the Guan Yu temple, while defrauding unscrupulous people in the process (Yuan 2004: 286–287).

A new kind of situation is also described in the texts. Sometimes the fox refuses to give money to a person when asked directly. The intellectual fox is willing to befriend a human and engage in philosophical and literary conversations, but when asked to bring wealth to his companion, he can only create the illusion of raining coins, saying that otherwise he would have to steal (Pu 2000: 753–754). A fox can live near a man, gladly accept the food he offers, but sincerely claim that he has no means of returning the favour because he lacks the resources (Ji 2007: 518).

In a text by Pu Songling (2000: 608), a fox suggests that wealth can only be acquired if the object has no owner: "Under heaven there are objects without owners, take them – you would not be able take everything. Why steal?" However, Ji presents a different perspective when it comes to ownership of objects. In one of his other stories, he writes: "Every object has its owner, and people are not allowed to manage it" (Ji 2007: 352). Ji thus implies that inanimate objects are also subject to fate[23] – a concept that extends the traditional belief of fate's influence over living beings to include non-living things.[24]

Even if foxes sometimes take something that does not belong to them, this is not necessarily theft. For example, a fox family takes antique bowls for their daughter's wedding, but later returns them. The most interesting part happens at the end of the story: even when a human steal one of the bowls that ended up at a fox's wedding, he later returns the item to the owners because he is assigned to work in the area where the bowl's owners live and ends up visiting them (Pu 2000: 79–81). In a way, these foxes resemble the fox or foxes from Ji's (2007: 443) text, mentioned earlier, who lived in an empty room in a human house, where foxes and humans "borrowed things from each other". These stories, to a certain extent, illustrate narratives about 'good' foxes.

A person's fate can also take on a financial dimension, that is, it can be interwoven with the fate of money. In one of Pu's texts, where a fox is linked to its marital partner because of the events that took place in a previous incarnation (*suye*, meaning sins and injustices committed in a previous life), it even brings money into the house ("gold and silk continually filled the boxes and closets, and it was not known whence they came") (Pu 2000: 1031). Then, when *suye* is exhausted, the fox departs.

In Yuan's (2004: 48) text, the fox also expresses a similar judgement: "the amount of wealth is fixed". In this text, the fox says this to a human and tells him that his human interlocutor is destined to be poor and that wealth will only bring him misfortune. The human does not believe him and thereupon receives silver from the fox, but it turns out to be stolen silver from the state treasury.

This same judgement of predestination can also explain why attempts to become rich with the help of a fox fail, as according to this belief these efforts are an attempt to violate this law. Apparently, a similar conclusion was reached in China at the time, because in the 19th century this conception apparently became part of the religious beliefs associated with the fox cult. It is precisely through such a judgement that one could explain the main model of the relationship between man and fox where a person or family first receives wealth from a 'great transcendent' and then the wealth vanishes. In the cited description of the fox cult in Tianjin, those connected with the *xian* by fate (*yuan*) first received a large income, and then, when the fate was exhausted, the funds received also disappeared (Zhang 1970 [1885]: 45).

Mentions of the fate of things can also be found in other texts unrelated to foxes. Yuan, for example, writes about an old servant who prepared himself a coffin with thin

walls. To make them thicker, he lent it to those who urgently needed a coffin on the condition that they would give him back a coffin one *cun* (about 3.7 cm) thicker in return, whereupon he eventually received a coffin nine *cun* thick. Then a fire breaks out in the house of the family he is serving, but the house remains intact and only the coffin burns and the walls returns to their original size. (Yuan 2004: 148)

Ji (2007: 185) also mentions a fire in his relative's house in which everything burns except for a scroll with rare and valuable calligraphy. The text also poses a very notable question about the reasons for what happened: "Perhaps the number of creations and destructions is definite, and this book should not have been destroyed in that fire?" (ibid.).

In general, some assessments and models of behaviour in this sphere were borrowed from earlier mainstream texts, some represented an actualisation of ideas that had not previously been the focus of the authors' attention, and some judgements became a new stage in the development of the relevant beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS

The comparison of the image of foxes and their behaviour in Qing literature and the popular belief of the Qing and early post-Qing period shows that they overlap in many ways. In both cases we see foxes as givers of wealth that disappears when they leave, as being capable of changing their appearance, stealing their partner's vital force, seeking immortality and the status of transcendent, and being endowed with the ability to know what is unknown to humans, as well as possessing the ability to induce madness. However, there are also significant differences. In folk belief, the fox often acts as a healer, which is an extremely rare motif in written sources. The ability of foxes to know what is unknown to humans becomes the basis for mediumistic practices in religious rituals, and there are almost no descriptions of mediumistic sessions with foxes in the texts. According to the beliefs, the main condition for obtaining wealth is worship and offerings, while literary texts focus on the model in which foxes bring wealth to their sexual partners.

Although these images do not completely overlap, they generally share the same value paradigm. As for money and property, the circulation of these objects is based on the principle that has already been noted by researchers: foxes generally cannot generate wealth, they can only transfer it from one owner to another. In the stories from the Qing period, they could also borrow things, find treasures and lost items, and earn income because of their ability to know the future or to know hidden things, but they do not create new wealth.

If we compare the representations of foxes in the literature of the Qing period with the texts of earlier periods, we see that Qing texts are, in general, a synthesis of an old mainstream concept, an activated old marginal concept, and new ideas. Additionally, over time, there are foxes who can simply refuse to provide money or wealth to people, sometimes due to ethical limitations. This happens in parallel with the emergence of images of foxes that are oriented towards traditional values.

In the texts on foxes, along with general beliefs about human fate, belief in the fate of things also became widespread in this period, merging the Chinese concept of fate and

Buddhist ideas of karmic retribution. This apparently also became part of the beliefs associated with the religious cult of the fox.

Such an attitude is not something unique; it also occurs in stories that have nothing to do with foxes (sometimes as a belief in the 'countability'[25] of certain aspects of human life) and was a characteristic of the mentality of at least part of the Chinese population at that time. This judgement served to legitimise social division and explain the punishment of those who tried to disrupt the established order, and could explain many events that happened to foxes in texts related to property.

NOTES

1 Certainly, these factors have been repeatedly considered by researchers, including discussion in the context of the fox cult examined in this article. Most of scholars regard religious texts not so much as literary works but as reflections of the religious life of the period, although they acknowledge their uniqueness. As Rania Huntington (2003: 129) notes,

> the patterns and lore of popular religious practice, however distorted, intertwine with other elements to form the Qing literary fox story. The divergence between the demand for regularity and that for exception complicates the overlap between the lore and patterns of worship and the practices of narrative.

Adding to the complexity of the analysis is the fact that some Chinese prose collections contained texts that claimed to describe reality, including stories from the author's personal experience, stories of their acquaintances and descriptions of geographical or cultural realities. Considering that even such descriptions bear the imprint of the writer's personality, this article will classify them mainly as fiction texts. The analysis of the history of religious belief here is based primarily on texts with minimal fictional components (historical chronicles and geographical descriptions).

2 *Hu* means 'fox'. The Chinese term *xian* was traditionally translated or described as 'an immortal', but is now more commonly rendered as 'a transcendent'. It should also be noted that, in reference to foxes, it is not always clear whether *xian* implies that the fox itself is a transcendent being or whether the term is used as an honorific. For this reasons, this paper predominantly uses the Chinese transliteration of the term rather than its translation.

At times, when referring to foxes, the Chinese surname Hu, which is homonymous with the Chinese word *hu* (fox) was used. They were also referred to as *hu-yao* (fox demon, lit. 'fox evil spirit'), *huli-jing* (fox spirits, lit. 'fox [spiritual] essence', a term that later became derogatory in colloquial Chinese), and rarely as *hu-shen* ('fox deity').

3 First and foremost, see Li 1948; Monschein 1988; Shan Min 1994; Li 1995; Li 2001; Huntington 2003; Kang 2006 [2005]; Li and Zhou 2011. Russian researchers working in Manchuria, apparently, were primarily in contact with the cult of the fox, whom Li Weizu (1948: 2) refers to as '*xian* of the altar' (*tan-xian*). For an overview of Russian scholars' studies of the fox cult, see Tertitski 2006.

4 Comparing their approaches, Huntington (2003: 128–129) noted, "Whereas she uses narrative to cast light on popular religion, I use popular religion to cast light on narrative." Both authors emphasise the wide range of beliefs and practices associated with fox worship, write about the liminality of the fox image, with Huntington also highlighting its ambivalence. She analyses the fox image as a literary scholar but also considers the fox world as a reflection of Qing society and as a realised opportunity for the author and readers of that time to view the world of humans from an alternative perspective. Huntington also seeks to place the fox image in a broader field of world literature, comparing it, for example, with the world of fictional beings

coexisting with humans, such as the world of elves in European literature. Kang, on the other hand, focuses on the connection between the fox image and phenomena within Chinese society, especially those who were marginalised and suppressed within society and who could be expressed and discussed through fox texts.

5 During a telephone survey conducted by Charles Emmons in Hong Kong in 1980–1981, over 50% of respondents answered affirmatively when asked about their belief in ghosts (*gui*); in response to a question about their experiences with paranormal phenomena, interviewers received numerous accounts from informants (Emmons 1982: VI–VIII, 274).

6 A significant number of literati in fox texts, especially in the works of Pu, belonged to the lower stratum of this social class or its peripheral layer. As is known, after successfully passing the first-level examinations and obtaining the first degree, the persons changed their social status, moving into the social class of literati (*shenshi*). However, before passing the examinations at the following level, they usually did not serve as officials and did not gain access to financial resources, as those who held bureaucratic positions did. Holders of the first degree were formally considered students of a local school and had to confirm their title through periodic examinations every few years. Additionally, on the fringes of this social class, there were many who were still preparing for the exams or had already taken them but failed, as well as those who did not serve for various reasons.

In general, the system of education and recruitment to the Chinese elite led to the formation of a specific social stratum with its own way of life, centred around scholarly pursuits and using a language rich in quotations from classical texts. However, the lower echelons of this stratum often had very limited means of subsistence and spent their lives waiting for the opportunity to pass the next exams and obtain positions. This liminality of lower-stratum literati and the liminality of foxes, which existed between humans and the world of the supernatural and aspired to attain the status of transcendent, could provide the basis for some narratives.

7 When necessary, silver ingots were cut into pieces. Bronze coins were used for small purchases (they are often referred to as copper coins in literature, but in reality they were a copper-tin alloy).

8 In China, the conventional boundary of the North was considered to be the Yangtze River or the Huaihe River, depending on the historical period.

9 The presence of fox spirits was perceived by authors as a reality. For example, according to an assessment in the text *Five Miscellaneous Offering Trays* ("Wu za zu") by the late Ming author Xie Zhaozhe (1935: 14, 22), "fox evil spirits" or fox demons lived in six to seven out of every ten houses in Beijing, and in one to two out of every ten dwellings of common people in northern China.

10 In earlier local gazetteers mentions of foxes are scarce. Authors mainly talked about separate fox temples and cases of human contact with foxes, but the place of fox worship in the beliefs of local populations is practically not discussed in these texts.

11 This text was originally a diploma thesis presented by Li at Yanjing University in Beijing during the Japanese occupation (1941). See its modern reissue with additions in Li and Zhou 2011. An exact description of the diploma thesis in not available and the present place of its preservation is unknown. Only a later reprint exists, possibly with elements of editorial intervention. In 1941 Beijing was under the control of the pro-Japanese collaborationist government of the Republic of China in Nanjing and of Japanese occupation forces, which were at war with the internationally recognised government of the Republic of China in Chongqing. All matters related to the activities of Chinese intellectuals in this period are still regarded as a sensitive topic to some extent.

12 For example, these could be foxes (*hu*), badgers or marmots (*huang*), hedgehogs (*bai*), snakes (*liu*), small poisonous snakes (*hui*) (Li 1948: 1–2).

13 The innate part of a person's vital force (*qi*).

14 The chapter "Families of *Xian* and Their Moving" says:

> In the north, there is various evil spirits (*yao*), as numerous as stars. There are the so-called 'big *xian*', namely foxes (*hu*), badgers or marmots (*huang*), hedgehogs (*bai*), snakes (*liu*), small poisonous snakes (*hui*). The local residents offer sacrifices to them, fearing only to allow disrespect. There are those whose fate (*yuan*) connected with the *xian*, and then *xian* becomes the bringer of luck. This is called 'engaging in business of a *xian* family (*xian-jia*)', in this case, the merchant's profit in the market triples, farmers become wealthy with thousands of granaries, and money comes without cause (origin). In the storerooms, the purchased grain sparkles, and there is no end to it. Relying on a single *xian*, people lead a prosperous life, and then when their fortune (*yuan*) is exhausted, everything falls apart, and it falls apart so much that revenge (reprisal for the past) ensues. Or a wayward son appears in the family, or at some point that family encounters an unexpected disaster (misfortune), [everything] departs without cause (deserts the beneficiary for no reason), and the family inevitably reaches the point where nothing is left. It is usually said that wealth and nobility do not last longer than three generations, and what comes wrongly will go wrongly, such is the law of reason, probably. (Zhang 1970 [1885]: 204)

15 It is noteworthy that in one case, this was a mentor who had taught many students and was caught when lecturing other foxes in his original true form (Gan 1992: 504–505), and in another, it was the fox's extensive knowledge, when in the form of a young man, that allowed an official to recognise him: "Can there be such young people in the Celestial Empire! If this is not a demon (*guimei*), then it's a fox" (ibid.: 492–496).

16 Interestingly, the image of the positive fox, apparently, could be perceived with scepticism by some readers. Jameson (1951: 277) provides the following testimony from his own experience:

> My tutor said not to believe any stories about good foxes. All foxes were bad, and being invisible, they could read anything written about them and took malicious revenge. In self-protection, writers invent stories about good foxes. They are all lies. Because my tutor was a consistent student of the classics, he could not be attacked.

17 An additional issue concerns the reader's perception of these texts and the question of their perceived credibility. To some extent, this question can be explored through commentaries on the works of Pu Songling. For example, as evidenced in the commentaries of Dan Minglun, at least some of these texts were regarded with considerable trust. In his commentary, Dan recounts his own experience with supernatural forces in an empty house, an encounter similar to the one described in the story (Pu 2000: 29). He accepts Pu's claim regarding the ability of foxes to take and return others' belongings and even contextualises this belief within a broader framework (ibid.: 81). Furthermore, he offers an insightful observation about the relationship between ghosts, foxes, and humans, noting that "ghosts and foxes do not fear prominent people but fear righteous people" (ibid.).

18 The analysed texts belong to the 17th and 18th centuries, while the information about beliefs dates back to the 19th and early 20th centuries. In these conditions, one can formally speak both about the influence of texts that appeared earlier on beliefs described later and about the reflection of beliefs in texts because beliefs apparently did not change much during this time. In the latter case, the argument 'pro' would be the fact that texts in classical Chinese were not accessible to most of those who practiced the cult of the fox. The 'contra' arguments are the presence of dynamics in Chinese religious beliefs, the presence of people among the followers of the fox cult who were proficient in classical Chinese language, the emergence of adaptations of texts by Pu for the theater, and the fact that the analysis focused on the books of the three authors with the largest readership. Unfortunately, the materials currently available to the researcher are not sufficient to provide an answer to this question. This article therefore addresses only the problem of the relationship between the two images in two systems of imaginary reality.

19 For more information on these texts and their authors, see Zeitlin 1993, Chan 1998 and Schmidt 2003. According to Li's (2002: 207, 225) calculations, Pu's texts on foxes in *Strange Tales from the Studio of Conversation* account for about 1/7 of their total number (more than 70 out of over 500). For Ji, there are around 190 out of approximately 1,200. Yuan has significantly fewer texts about foxes (28 out of about 1,000 texts), but his works are interesting because of their popularity and because he comes from the south of China, where the fox cult was less widespread. Pu's texts combine elements of 'strange stories' and 'tales of the strange' stylistics, Yuan's are closer to the 'tales of the strange' and Ji's to the 'tales of the strange' and 'written notes'. The 'written notes' genre allowed these issues to be addressed without formally questioning old ideologies or proposing new ones. This is particularly evident in Ji's works, where he likes to explain and rationalise imagined reality. In some cases, important judgements could be made there by the characters rather than the author. For example, in one of Ji's texts the response to the extremely important question for Chinese beliefs and worldview of how to reconcile the idea of reincarnation with the existence of spirits of the dead is given by an official from the afterlife world, where the author's cousin was mistakenly taken for a short time (Ji 2007: 87–88).

20 For example, when a deceased official becomes an official in the afterlife, foxes come under his authority and must assist him (Pu 2000: 805). In another text, a fox that had stolen others' vital forces was brought to court after his death (ibid.: 198). However, when in the position of victims, for example having lost his elixir of immortality, the fox might consider it futile to file a complaint with the gods because the "material" for the stolen elixir was previously obtained through criminal means (Ji 2007: 177–178, 337). In a later Qing text, *Written notes from the Immortal's Studio in the Youtai Mountains* ("Youtai xianguan biji") by Yu Yue (1986: 107), there is even mention of a "chief fox superintendent" in Beijing, who oversees all the foxes in the capital; complaints about their actions can be addressed to him.

21 According to Li's (1948: 6) version, her "original vital force (*qi*)".

22 To some extent, one can consider that here, the idea that had already manifested itself in the Tang period was further developed. Back then, in *The Biography of Lady Zhen* ("Zhen-shi [zhuan]") by Shen Jizhi (740–805), a fox advises the protagonist to buy a horse, which he then sells at a profit (*Taiping guangji huijiao* 2011: 8059–8069).

23 The origins of this judgment can also be found in a Tang text from the *Broad Records of Strange Stories* ("Guan yi ji") collection, which also survived in *Taiping guangji*. There is the story in which the protagonist points to treasures lying in a lake and says, "You can see this, but you can't obtain it, [things] have a predetermined fate" (*Taiping guangji huijiao* 2011: 8038).

24 In the Tang period, this view was already fairly clearly formulated in the well-known poem "Pavilion of the Immortals" ("Feixiange") by Du Fu (2015: 592–593): "In an unstable life, we have a predetermined fate, and can one escape hunger and fullness?" It can also be found in earlier texts. The idea of fate was the basis for divination practices with a history comparable to that of Chinese civilisation. On beliefs about fate in Chinese popular culture, see Harrell 1985.

25 The idea of countability itself is not something new in Chinese culture. It was already quite clearly presented in Zhu Xi's (1986: 81) *A Collection of Conversations of Master Zhu* ("Zhu-zi yulei"): "the vital force, inherited by humans, wealth and nobility, poverty and lowly status, long and short, everything has a definite quantity and is contained within it".

REFERENCES

Andong. 1997 [1931]. *Andong xian zhi* (1931). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 157–170.

Chan, Donald Hong Yin. 2022. Huxian chuanshuo yu xianggang huxian xinyang chutan. – *Huaren zongjiao yanjiu* 12: 157–196.

Chan, Leo Tak-hung. 1998. *The Discourse on Foxes and Ghosts: Ji Yun and Eighteenth-Century Literati Storytelling*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press.

Du, Fu. 2015. *Du's Poems with Detailed Notes* 2. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Emmons, Charles F. 1982. *Chinese Ghosts and ESP: A Study of Paranormal Beliefs and Experiences.* Metuchen, NJ; London: Scarecrow Press.

Fan, Dirui. 2014. Liuxing lu dong nongcun zhong de mixin he jinji. – *Minguo shiqi shehui diaocha cong bian. Er bian. Zongjiao minsu juan*, edited by Li Wenhai. Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu chubanshe, 347–359.

Gan, Bao. 1992. *Sou shen ji quan yi*. Guiyang: Guizhou renmin chubanshe.

Haicheng. 1997 [1937]. *Haicheng xian zhi* (1937). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 65–83.

Harrell, Stevan. 1985. The Concept of Fate in Chinese Folk Ideology. – *Modern China* 13 (1): 90–109. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/009770048701300105.

Hulan. 1997 [1930]. *Hulan xian zhi* (1930). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 399–413.

Humei congtan. No date. *Humei congtan*, edited by Pingxuzi [Ming Wanli period (1573–1620)]. 5 juan. Woodblock edn.

Huntington, Rania. 2003. *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9781684173822.

Jameson, Raymond De Loy. 1933. Shape-Shifting Foxes in China. – *Man* 33 (March): 49–50.

Jameson, Raymond De Loy. 1951. The Chinese Art of Shifting Shape. – *Journal of American Folklore* 64 (253): 275–280. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/536153.

Ji, Yun. 2007. *Yuewei caotang biji*. Jinan: Qilu bingshe.

Kang, Xiaofei. 2006 [2005]. *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China*. New York: Columbia University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7312/kang13338.

Li, Jianguo. 2002. *Zhongguo hu wenhua*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Li, Shouju. 1995. *Huxian xinyangyu hulijing*. Taibei: Taiwan xuesheng shuju.

Li, Weizu. 1948. = Li, Wei-tsu. 1948. On the Cult of the Four Sacred Animals (Szu Ta Men) in the Neighborhood of Peking. – *Folklore Studies* 7: 1–94. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1177454.

Li, Weizu and Zhou Xing. 2011. *Sida men*. *Bu bian*. Beijing: daxue chubanshe.

Lu, Can. 1987. *Geng yi bian*. – Lu, Can. *Geng yi bian*. Gu Qiyuan. *Ke zuo zhui yu*. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

Monschein, Ylva. 1988. *Der Zauber der Fuchsfee, Enstehung und Wandel eines „Femme-fatale"-Motivs in der chinesischen Literatur.* Frankfurt; Haag: Herchen.

Pu, Songling. 2000. *Zhu quanxiao hui zhu ji ping Liaozhai zhiyi*. Jinan: Qilu bingshe.

Schmidt, Jerry. 2003. *Harmony Garden: The Life, Literary Criticism, and Poetry of Yuan Mei (1716–1798)*. New York: Routledge Curzon.

Shahar, Meir. 1996. Vernacular Fiction and the Transmission of God's Cults in Late Imperial China. – *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, edited by Meir Shahar and Robert Weller. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 184–211.

Shan Min. 1994. *Huli xinyang zhi mi*. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.

Shuangcheng. 1997 [1926]. *Shuangcheng xian zhi* (1926). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 413–427.

Taiping guangji huijiao. 2011. Edited by Zhang Guofeng. Beijing: Yanshan Chubanshe.
Tertitski, Konstantin. 2006. = Tertitskiy, Konstantin M. 2006. Kul't lisitsy v Man'chzhurii v 1920–40-e gody. – *Religioznyy mir Kitaya, 2005. Trudy Instituta vostochykh kul'tur i antichnosti: seriya Orientalia et Classica* 9. Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Rossiyskogo gosudarstvennogo gumanitarnogo universiteta, 273–305. [Тертицкий, Константин М. 2006. Культ лисицы в Маньчжурии в 1920-40-е годы. – *Религиозный мир Китая, 2005. Труды Института восточных культур и античности: серия Orientalia et Classica* 9. Москва: Издательство Российского государственного гуманитарного университета, 273–305.]
Wankui. 1997 [1919]. *Wankui xian zhi* (1919). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 444–458.
Xian. 1997 [1911]. *Xian xian zhilue* (1911). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 357–359.
Xie, Zhaozhe. 1935. *Wu za zu* 2. Shanghai: Zhongyang shudian.
Yi. 1997 [1931]. *Yi xian zhi* (1931). – *Zhongguo difangzhi minsu ziliao huibian*: *Dongbei juan*. Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 194–215.
Yuan, Mei. 2004. *Xin Qixie*. Jinan: Qilu bingshe.
Yu, Yue. 1986. *Youtai xianguan biji*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe.
Zeitlin, Judith T. 1993. *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Zhang, Dao. 1970 [1885]. *Jin men za ji.* Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe.
Zhu, Xi. 1986. *Zhu-zi yulei* 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.