



The Hopping Dead. Zombies in the Chinese Culture. Translation into English¹

Asia A. Sarakaeva (a) & Elina A. Sarakaeva (b)

(a) Hainan University. Haikou, China. E-mail: asia-lin[at]mail.ru

(b) Hainan Professional College of Economics and Business. Haikou, China.
Email: 2689655292[at]qq.com

Received: 1 August 2023 | Accepted: 1 September 2023

Abstract

The article examines the image of zombies in Chinese culture, the traditional perception of their appearance and internal characteristics. A wide scope of written sources served as the basis of the study: inscriptions on oracle bones, ancient fortune-telling calendars, historical treatises, chronicles and commentaries on chronicles, essays on geography and medicine, fiction of old and modern China, as well as entries and comments from the Chinese blogosphere.

The authors examine how the idea of evil spirits (with a body or bodiless ones) first appeared in the religious worldview of the ancient Chinese, and trace its origin to the doctrine of existence of multiple souls in one person. The article also details the formation of the pictorial image of Chinese zombies: animated corpses covered with hair or dressed as government officials, with their arms extended forward, hopping on straight legs unable to bend their knees. As for the functional characteristics of zombies, the authors discuss not only their well-known features (e.g., cannibalism), but also their deep inner connection with water and drought. In conclusion, the authors explore the evolution of zombies in modern urban legends and demonstrate the continuity of traditional demonology that develops into modern narrative.

Apart from that, the article contains a number of analogies and comparisons of the Chinese image of zombies with other nations' mythological tradition.

Keywords

Zombies; Chinese Culture; Demonology; Thanatology; Folklore; Chinese Literature of the Late Imperial Period; City Legends



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons «Attribution» 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

¹ The following is a translation of an article that was originally published in Russian
Sarakaeva, A., & Sarakaeva, E. (2021). Прыгающие мертвецы. Зомби в китайской культуре.
Corpus Mundi, 2(4), 60-111. <https://doi.org/10.46539/cmj.v2i4.54>



Прыгающие мертвецы. Зомби в китайской культуре. Перевод на английский язык¹

Саракаева Ася Алиевна (a), Саракаева Элина Алиевна (b)

(a) Хайнаньский университет. Хайкоу, Китай. E-mail: asia-lin[at]mail.ru

(b) Хайнаньский институт экономики и бизнеса. Хайкоу, Китай. Email: 2689655292[at]qq.com

Рукопись получена: 1 августа 2023 | Принята: 1 сентября 2023

Аннотация

В статье всесторонне рассматривается образ зомби в китайской культуре, его канонический облик и внутренние характеристики. Материалом для исследования послужил широкий и разнообразный круг письменных источников: надписи на гадательных костях, древние прорисовки, исторические трактаты и комментарии к летописям, сочинения по географии и медицине, художественная литература старого и современного Китая, а также статьи и комментарии китайской блогосферы.

Авторы исследуют происхождение самой идеи о злых духах, имеющих или не имеющих телесную оболочку, в религиозной картине мира древних китайцев и возводят ее к учению о двух или более душах у каждого человека. В статье также подробно рассматривается складывание канона представлений о внешнем виде китайского зомби: покрытого шерстью или одетого в форму чиновника, с вытянутыми вперед руками, подпрыгивающего на прямых ногах и неспособного согнуть колени. Говоря же о функциональных характеристиках зомби, авторы останавливаются не только на его качествах людоеда, но и на внутренней глубокой связи этого мифологического персонажа с засухой. В заключение авторы исследуют эволюцию образа зомби в современных городских легендах и демонстрируют преемственность современного фольклора с традиционной демонологией.

Кроме того, в статье содержится ряд аналогий и сравнений китайского образа зомби с мифологическими конструктами других народов.

Ключевые слова

китайская культура; зомби; демонология; танатология; фольклор; китайская художественная литература позднеимперского периода; городские легенды



Это произведение доступно по [лицензии Creative Commons «Attribution» \(«Атрибуция»\) 4.0 Всемирная](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

¹ Ниже приводится перевод статьи, которая первоначально была опубликована на русском языке
Sarakaeva, A., & Sarakaeva, E. (2021). Прыгающие мертвецы. Зомби в китайской культуре. *Corpus Mundi*, 2(4), 60-111. <https://doi.org/10.46539/cmj.v2i4.54>



“When ghosts have no home”. Prologue.

In 536 BC a resident of the ancient Chinese state of Zheng had a terrible dream: a nobleman Liang Xiao, killed as a result of a plot some seven years before, appeared to him in armor and with weapons and announced that he would avenge his murderers – one this year, another next year. When the named dates arrived, the assassins indeed were dead, which horrified the people of Zheng and made them await further troubles from the vengeful spirit. Then the wise Chancellor Zichan appointed the son of the murdered Liang Xiao to a high position, and the terrible apparitions ceased. Zichan explained the reason for this, saying: “When ghosts have a place to come home to, they do not become a menace. I offered him a home” (cited in Goldin, 2015, Pp. 61-62).

Later Zichan was asked if Liang Xiao could really become an evil spirit, and he answered: “When people are born and start to develop, they have what is called a *po*-soul. Once a *po*-soul has been born, its *yang*-counterpart is called *hun*-soul. ...When ordinary men and women die a violent death, their *hun* and *po*-souls are able to encroach on other people, and become licentious menaces. How much more so Liang Xiao, the progeny of our former Lord Mu...!” (cited in Goldin, 2015, pp. 61-62).

This story is found in the *Zuo*zhuang, an ancient commentary to the Annals of Spring and Autumn, and is thus one of the earliest Chinese texts, stating the existence of not one but at least two souls in a single human body, telling of the dead rising from the graves as evil spirits to harm the living, and of the ways to disarm them. But these ideas themselves were not new even by that time, dating their origins to the depths of the Bronze Age.

Dualism of Souls in Chinese Culture

Archaeological data show that during the first Chinese dynasty – the Shang (1600-1066 BC), people made sacrificial offerings to the souls of former kings both at the place of their burial and in the ancestral temple: pits containing ashes, human and horse remains, chariots and bronze vessels were found near both locations. The sacrifices were made not only during the burial ceremony of a deceased sovereign, but also repeatedly many years after his death. This raised an important question for Chinese archaeologists: why did the people of the ancient Shang establish a double system of sacrifices which seem to duplicate each other? A possible answer to this question suggests that rituals on the royal tombs were dedicated to the former kings (*wang*) seen as individuals with their earthly habits and deeds, while on the ancestor altars they were honored as depersonalized entities, as the protective forefathers of the ruling family and the entire population of Shang Kingdom. Consequently, a ruler who died young and childless was entitled only to the graveyard sacrifices, but not the temple worship (Liu, 1996, p. 40).



Fig. 1. Although sacrifices to deceased rulers have not been performed for a long time in republican China, ritual worship with food offering to deceased ancestors is a widespread tradition.

And yet, we find this answer true, but insufficient, as it does not reveal the inner logic of such double worship. Why would personalized royals be venerated separately from the collective ancestral spirit? Why not, say, entrust the function of an ancestor-protector to a deceased king without depersonalizing them? We suppose that the answer to these questions is to be found in the beliefs about dual souls in a single human body.

It is worth noting that the idea of a plurality of human souls and their separation after death cannot be called exclusively Chinese. Citing but one example, there is a widespread belief among the Australian aborigines that one part of a person's soul is "the eternal soul of the Dreamtime" and the other part after death "may move into another person or live in a bush..., frighten or even kill their ...relatives" (Eliade, 1998, P. 84). With some tribes the idea of transmigration of a part of the soul into another person was described in further detail: the soul had to migrate into one of former host's descendants, most often into a grandson or great-grandson. The same expectation of revival of the soul of a deceased person within his clan is found, for example, among the Khazi people of Northern India, which let anthropologist H. Goettner-Abendroth to a broad conclusion: "...honoring the ancestors, or "ancestor worship" is not a cult, but the outer shell of a reincarnation religion" (Goettner-Abendroth, 2012, p. 60). We believe the custom of early medieval European dynasties to name children after their grandfathers follows the same logic. A.F. Litvina and F.B. Uspensky who examined this custom in the Russian house of Rurikids in 10th-16th centuries, note that at the early stage a child in a princely



family could get only his grandfather's and never father's name, and only if this grandfather had already died (Litvina, Uspensky, 2006, Pp. 11-12). The transition of the name probably symbolized the transition of the deceased prince's soul into another, newly born body.

Since any intellectual borrowing between these nations is improbable due to the geographical and chronological distance, one can only assume a universal principle, an idea that has been independently conceived many times throughout human history: if a person's soul after death can return to the world of the living, it will most likely be reborn in the body of his grandson. However, empirical observations must have proved that grandson was often very different from grandfather in character and tastes, besides he did not possess the grandfather's skills and memory of past life, which could only be explained by incomplete presence of grandfather's soul in the descendant's body. The other part of his soul including personality and memory had to be in some other place – whether it be a spiritual space like Heaven and Hell, or near his own grave.

Of course, this hypothesis cannot be verified on the material of the Shang state, because the written sources of that period are very scarce and utilitarian, they only address the ancestors for predictions, but allow very little ground for suppositions of how exactly these ancestors were seen and conceptualized. But accepting it as an assumption, we could explain the origins of the ancient Chinese belief in plurality of human souls.

Taming the Dead

Judging by the inscriptions on the oracle bones, the Shang people attached extreme importance to the communication with the souls of the dead, and these souls were considered as the bearers of both good and evil. It is known that in the later period of the Shang dynasty the main state-religious ceremony was ancestor sacrifice; but in the early period, according to E. Childs-Johnson, more important was the exorcism ritual, during which the Shang ancestors were asked to distance themselves from living people. To make the ghosts more willing to stay away, a Shang king would even frighten them by wearing a mask of a monster or a beast that swallowed a person. This ritual was called “gui” and was indicated in writing by the grapheme 鬼 depicting a kneeling man with a huge mask on his head (Childs-Johnson, 1995, pp. 88-90), nowadays this word is used to record the concept of “devil, evil spirit, ghost”.

The need for such an exorcism was explained by the fact that an ancestor – or a recently deceased member of the royal family in general – could for some reason harm the health of the living members of the family. For example, there is an oracle bone dating from the time of the most prominent Shang ruler Wu Ding (circa 1200 BC) that contains the following answer to the question of a fortune-teller: “The Child's ears are ringing; it is due to harm [inflicted by] Child Gui”¹. P. Goldin

1 In this case “Gui” is a name, it is written in a different character than the word “evil spirit”.

suggests that the Child in this text is one of the sons of Wu Ding, and the Child Gui must be some prince who died in infancy. As a result of the divination Child Gui received a propitiatory sacrifice (Goldin, 2015, p. 75).



Fig. 2. Samples of “jiaguwen” – fortune-telling inscriptions on the shells of turtles, sheep's shoulder-blades and animal bones. These inscriptions were a prayer appeal to higher powers with questions about the pressing problems of the princely court. They are the oldest type of writing in China.

If a dead person could either protect or destroy their living descendants, then, of course, care had to be taken to strengthen their benevolence and weaken their evil potential. To this end, the Shang developed a whole set of rites designed to “create an ancestor”. When the ruler or his spouse died, they did not automatic-



ally become venerated ancestors, recipients of the Five Rituals¹. First they lost their lifetime names, a special day of the calendar was chosen for them, and they began to be called by the name of that day. And it was only a generation later, when their grandson ascended the throne, that they began to be called 祖 “zu” (grandfather, ancestor) or 妣 “bi” (grandmother), and were offered sacrifices together with other ancestors. Thus, Wu Ding's famous wife Lady Hao was given the title 母辛 “Mu Xin,” that is “Mother Xin,” after her death, and in the next generation her posthumous title was changed to 妣辛 “Bi Xin”, where “xin” was the name of the day allocated to honoring her memory (Guo, 2018, p. 238). And until “fathers and mothers” had time to become “grandfathers and grandmothers,” special prayers were pronounced to persuade them to “receive” the ancestors of previous generations and to serve them (Puett, 2019, p. 450).

M. Puett explains the necessity of this gradual “taming” of the dead by the fact that the newly departed spirit, freed from the human body with its orderliness and subordination to the cosmic and social laws, but not yet submitted to the civilizing power of ritual, is especially dangerous – it no longer feels attached to its loved ones, but is still troubled by human emotions, like anger, resentment or envy of the living people. And it is only gradually, under the wholesome influence of the rites, that it renounces its anger and forms a new bond with its descendants – the bond which is not emotional any longer, but ritual (Puett, 2019, p. 441). If our hypothesis about the reincarnation belief among the ancient Chinese is true, there might be even more reason for the living to fear their newly dead fathers: until the soul of a deceased person was not yet reborn in the body of his descendant, it could not yet fully become a protective ancestor of the family, and so remained a dangerous spirit dwelling near its former home and pursuing the inhabitants.

Anyway, regardless of the interpretation, there is no doubt that the people of Shang feared the *gui* and ascribed to them the ability and desire to destroy their kin.

In the Zhou (1066-256 BC), the (probable) belief in the transmigration of a king's soul into his grandson was reduced to the custom of impersonation, when in a number of important ceremonies the grandson of the deceased *wang* represented his grandfather; it was believed that at such moments the grandfather's soul actually entered the grandson's body and temporarily replaced his own consciousness. *Liji*² describes the role of the impersonator in such a ceremony as follows: “... the grandson acted as the impersonator of the king's father. He who was made to act as an impersonator was the son of he who made the sacrifice. The father

1 The Five Rituals were: *rong* – drumming; *yi* – a feather dance; *ji* – a meat offering; *huan* or *zai* – a grain offering; and *xie* – a miscellaneous food offering. Each of them was accompanied by the offering of wine as a sacrifice to the ancestors.

2 Book of Rituals which codified the traditions and etiquette of the Zhou aristocracy. This book was attributed to the disciples of Confucius, but most likely it was written in the 3rd to 1st century B.C. It is a part of the classical Confucian canon.



faced north¹ and served him” (cited in Puett, 2019, p. 443). Another example of the late *wang*'s participation in a state ritual can be found in *Shijing*—the Book of Songs². In the “Tian Bao” ode in the “Minor Court Hymns” section, the poet wishes the monarch to sacrifice to his ancestors peacefully and orderly, so that the impersonator on their behalf would promise him perennial success and prosperity (The Book of Songs, 1996, P. 311).

It is worth noting here that the term “impersonator” is a Western attempt to convey the function of this character in a descriptive way, whereas in the original it is called by the word 公尸 that can be literally translated as “grandfather's corpse” or “princely corpse”. This shows that the ancient authors and the audience of the Odes believed that it was possible for the spirit of a deceased to return from the other world and enter the body of a living person transforming this body in the process, turning it into a moving and talking corpse of a royal ancestor.

Inner Spirits and Outer Ghosts

Unlike the Shang that left us only oracle bones, the Zhou writing is represented by a wider range of sources. And therefore we have an opportunity to learn not only about royal rituals, but also about religious and thanatological ideas of commoners. In recent decades in Hubei Province which in the Zhou era was the territory of the Kingdom of Chu, numerous texts, sometimes entire collections of books on bamboo plaques, have been found in the graves. Though the owners of these graves must have been literate people, some of them did not belong to the aristocratic stratum of society. One of these bamboo slips³ dating back to the beginning of the 4th century BC contains the following classification of spirits: “upper, lower, inner and outer spirits”.

While all modern scholars interpret the upper and lower spirits as spirits of Heaven and Earth, there is no consensus between researchers on the essence of the inner and outer spirits. E.g., Chen Wei suggests that this text refers to the souls of relatives as inner spirits and to outsiders as outer spirits. Guo Jue offers a different and more insightful explanation: souls were categorized as inner or outer according to the circumstances of a person's death, and if they died outside the family residence, especially in distant lands, they became an outer ghost. This theory is confirmed by the fact that according to some other texts of the same period, death away from home is sometimes referred to as 外死-“external death” or “death outside”, and a person who died such a death is called 外鬼- “outer *gui*” (Guo, 2018, p. 244). Characteristically, the language and the worldview of the ancient Chinese labelled the person who died outside their home and was buried in a foreign land, not just as an outsider, but specifically as an evil spirit.

1 In the traditional Chinese topography, the northern side was associated with the sovereign and the southern side – with subjects, accordingly in audiences the sovereign would sit facing south and the ministers would stand facing north.

2 A collection of folk songs and dynastic hymns selected by Confucius. It is a part of the Confucian canon.

3 Found in Geling, grave 1.



Fig. 3. Family tree with images of several generations of ancestors, the period of the Qing dynasty.



A similar interpretation of the concept of “outer spirits” is suggested by the *Shuihudi calendar*¹ – a collection of divinations predicting auspicious and unfortunate days, the misfortunes awaiting the client of these divinations, as well as the causes of the misfortunes and the ways to eliminate them. Among other things, the owner of the calendar was foretold a number of illnesses caused by deceased members of their family, such as grandfather and great-grandfather, but there are also references to “the outer spirit of the grandfather’s generation,” “the outer spirit of the father’s generation,” “the outer spirit of the mother’s generation”², “the outer spirit of the generation of one’s brothers,” etc. Basing on this, Guo Jue concludes: “Clearly, these “outside human spirit/dead” of father, mother, and brothers’ generation are kin; therefore, here “outside” most likely refers to their death occurring outside their normal residence or home place, which was another reason they were especially susceptible to become trouble-causing spiritual agents” (Guo, 2018, p. 245).

In the early imperial period the religious as well as philosophical ideas of ancient China underwent the process of unification and acquired more syncretic character. In the Han Empire (206 BC – 220 CE) which left a great number of written sources of various genres, the belief in multiple human souls and their separation after death was still preserved. At the same time, the specific characteristics of these souls are often difficult to distinguish, and it is not always possible to understand from texts what their functions were. For example, the medical treatise *Ten Questions*³ that describes a certain breathing technique for gaining longevity, promises that a person practicing it “...has both *hun* and *po*, and the person is healthy”(Brashier, 1996, p.140). It is clear from this paragraph that *hun* and *po* are seen as different entities, and at the same time one can lose them both or only one of them, and still not die, at least for some time, just fall ill.

In other sources these two characters are used together without opposition, in a meaning close to our concept of “soul”. For instance, there are reports that Han emperors made trips to the graves of their predecessors to report to the *hunpo* of previous sovereigns (Brashier, 1996, p.136). Finally, there are also texts stating that the human soul is divided into a noticeably larger number of parts, and apart from *hun* and *po* includes also 气 “the original *qi* energy” or 神 “the pure *shen* energy”. “The *po*-soul is the outer shell, the *hun*-soul is the source of the living *qi* energy. The *shen*-spirit rules the quintessence of living *qi*, the *po*-soul rules the midpoint of the dead *qi*,” states the Eastern Han historical treatise “Glory of Yue” (Ji&Yu, 2001, p. 253). This text shows that although the association of *hun* with the light force *yang*, and of *po* with the dark force *yin* is preserved, their dualism is made less straightforward by the introduction of additional religious or philosophical concepts.

1 Yunmen, Hubei province, grave 11. Written no later than 217 B.C.

2 It means that this spirit belongs to the customer's kin on his mother's side, one generation older than the person.

3 Found in grave 3 in Mawendui.



Fig. 4. Most modern Chinese families do not have a temple of their ancestors, therefore, sacrifices to the spirits of ancestors with the burning of ritual paper are performed right on the street

The same violation of the dualistic scheme can also be found in Han poetry, epigraphy, magical practice which often fail to distinguish between the posthumous fate of *hun*- and *po*-souls. In these texts graves are sometimes mentioned as the dwelling place of not only *po*, but also *hun* of the buried people. E.g., in 172 the governor of Nanyang forbade the excavation of a certain grave for fear that “...the bones would be exposed and the *hun* would weaken.” The Late Han poet explicitly states that the *hunpo* dwell in graves forever. There is both textual and archaeological evidence that people tried to preserve the *hunpo* of the deceased in their coffins, or made posthumous masks and summoned the *hunpo* to inhabit them and then bury these masks in the coffins alongside the corpses (Brashier, 1996, pp.136-137). This concern for the soul preservation within the grave was usually interpreted in the Confucian way – as a manifestation of filial piety, as the descendants’ desire to protect everything left of their ancestor from decomposition. But there is another explanation of this phenomenon: descendants were simply afraid of the deceased ancestor and preferred them to stay in their grave (Puett, 2019, p. 442). That would be quite



a reasonable concern because after the departure of the more rational part of the soul (whether it is called a *hun* or pure energy *shen*) all that remained could be reborn as an evil spirit-*gui* and cause considerable damage to their kin.

The Unhappy Afterlife

The fear of the *gui* was always widespread, and during periods of economic and social instability became even more intensive than ever. Thus, at the end of the Han era, in the 2nd century CE, tax oppression and the constant increase in the costs of ancestor worship led to a popular movement for the complete abolition of sacrifices. This idea was propagated by the followers of the millenarian sects that later, in 184-205, constituted the driving force behind the Yellow Turbans Rebellion. For justification of abolishing ancestor sacrifices they did not cite economic factors, but described the murderous attacks by the ghosts on the people. According to their sermons, violations of morality became so numerous that the ancestors could no longer come and eat the sacrificial food brought to their graves, and so the evil spirits started coming instead of them. By appropriating sacrifices the *gui* became stronger and stronger, they could kill more and more people, and the victims became new *gui* (Puett, 2019, pp. 439-440).

However, despite the superhuman power inherent to the evil spirits, the existence of the *gui* was believed to be hard and unhappy. It is not without reason that the word “evil spirit” was often replaced with the expression “hungry spirit”. After all, the *gui*, the “outer ghost,” did not receive the sacrifices due to each person from his relatives. To condemn wrongdoers to such posthumous suffering, the Han law forbade mourning executed criminals and convicts, while reburial in the family cemetery, mourning ceremonies, sacrifices, and reporting the death of the wrongly condemned to the god of their native area were part of the posthumous rehabilitation process (Guo, 2018, p. 246).



Fig. 5. On the day of commemoration of the dead, believers bring food to Buddhist temples for nameless “hungry ghosts”, while offerings to the spirits of their own ancestors are made in domestic temples, or, if there are none, in secluded places on the streets and in parks (see Fig. 4)

To sum it up, in ancient times, during the first millennium BC and the beginning of the Common Era, the Chinese people formed a canon of ideas about afterlife and the evil dead. Of course, it could not remain unchanged for such a long historical period, but its main features were still intact. According to this canon, after a person's death one or more of their souls gradually transform into an ancestor benevolent to their lineage, while other souls acquire dangerous potential and the desire to take revenge on their enemies and even harm the surviving members of their own family. Several categories of the dead pose a special danger in this respect:

- those prominent by their deeds or background;
- those who died recently;
- those who left no descendants in whom they could be reborn or who could offer sacrifices to them;
- those who died far from their homes;
- those who died a violent death, especially those executed and deprived of a proper burial, mourning ceremonies and sacrifices.



It was possible to prevent attacks of such *gui* by offering sacrifices to them or, otherwise, by “giving the ghost a home”, (as the wise Chancellor Zichan once did) i.e. providing their descendants with sufficient position and fortune for sacrifices.

What Shall We Call Them

For native speakers of Chinese the semantic field of the concept *gui* (鬼 鬼) contains the seme “return” (gui 归), at least at the connotation level. Both of these words, “devil” and “return” have the same phonetic form; they are almost homophones¹. The earliest Chinese glossary, compiled in the third century BC, links the two concepts directly: “ghost means that which returns”; the *Suowen Encyclopedia* (“Complete Compendium of Literature”) adds the meaning: “that to which people return” (cited in Huang, 2016, p. 151). This definition illustrates the close relationship between the living and the dead: the transformation and continuation of the circle of life from humans to the souls of the dead, from the material “We” to the immaterial “Other” without complete loss of corporeality and bodily vitality. Thus, dead people turn into ghosts and continue to live in another form, in another realm to which the souls of the dead return.

The emphasis on corporeality, on the preservation of physicality plays an essential, even decisive role in Chinese thanatology. In this worldview, the souls of the dead have physical and material needs that express their intimate connection with worldly life. Souls need food, need some otherworldly yet material goods, need energy and energetic substances to prolong existence. And if they do not get it as sacrifice, they have to take this vital energy from the living by force.

These hungry dead can take different bodily forms, and for a long time Chinese demonology did not distinguish malicious *gui* by the form of their bodily manifestation. However, as time went on, gradations of *gui* appeared, the demons began to be divided into:

- 1) demons proper, i.e. the souls of the dead, capable of taking any bodily form for a while;
- 2) shapeshifters – as a rule, they are foxes or, less often, other animals capable of transforming into humans in order to lure the vital substance out of people;
- 3) zombies, walking bodies, most often almost mindless corpses that attack anyone they can reach in search of food. These latter are the direct subject of our analysis.

The word for zombies in Chinese, 僵尸 (“jiangshī”), was not borrowed from the West, nor is it an artificial construct influenced by European linguistic and cultural elements, like the word “vampire” (吸血鬼, literally “blood-sucking demon”).

1 Not full homophones, because the word *gui* “demon, ghost” is pronounced in the tonal Chinese language with a descending fourth tone, while the word *gui* “return” is pronounced with a flat first tone.



The word *jiangshi* is several hundred years old, and means “stiffened corpse” – not just a *rigor-mortis* corpse, but the walking dead.

The translation of the lexeme *jiangshi* sometimes causes difficulties for translators, who do not want to use the word “zombie” even if the meanings coincide, because for Western readers the term itself is associated with Haitian voodoo cults and Hollywood films. Quite often this results in lacunas artificially created by the translator. For example, in Yuan Mei's story *The Affair of Two Corpses* the main character meets a *jiangshi* in a cemetery, but neither the Russian nor the English translator was able to convey this meaning adequately. In the Russian language version, the hero, seeing a strange creature among the graves, “realized that he was facing the spirit of the dead” (Yuan, 2003, P. 219), while in the English translation he “... decided this must be one of the *rigor-mortis* corpses» (Yuan, 1995, p.90). Although the paragraph clearly speaks about a walking body, the Russian text contains the word “spirit” antonymous to “body”, while the English text introduces the Latin medical term *rigor-mortis*. In the original story, the hero realized that this frightening creature belongs to the category of *jiangshi*, i.e. zombies, walking corpses.



Fig. 6. A hungry evil entity attacks a man. Illustrated manuscript from the Kyoto Museum

Even Chinese translators sometimes find it difficult to translate this word. For example, in modern Chinese retellings of Wu Chengyen's great novel *Journey to the West*, in the chapter where the personages are attacked by an evil being called White Bones¹, modern translators turn the attacker into a female ghost, whereas in the original it is a *jiangshi*, a walking corpse, and the author of the novel uses masculine pronouns for it.

1 行者道：他是个潜灵作怪的僵尸，在此迷人败本，被我打杀，他就现了本相” (Wu, 2009, p. 457)



Yuan Mei (1716-1798) was a poet, scholar, and prominent writer in the Qing Dynasty, he made the image of the walking dead a popular literary phenomenon. The writer was a kind of Bram Stoker for Chinese culture of the late imperial period, as he introduced folklore plots into literary circulation and did for zombies what Pu Songling did for fox-fairies: his exciting, sometimes piquant, witty, compositionally flawless stories made the image of zombies popular with the broad audience including the literati. In Yuan Mei's stories, the word *jiangshi*, nowadays commonly understood as “zombie”, is most often used when describing the living dead, for example, in the stories *Flying Corpse* 飞僵 (Yuan, 2021, P. 83), *A Corpse Gets into Trouble because of Greed* 僵尸贪财受累 (Yuan, 2021, R. 89), *A Walking Corpse* 僵尸 (Yuan, 2021, Pp. 232-33), *A Corpse Asks for Food* 僵尸求食, (Yuan, 2021, R. 88) and many others; though more often the writer says simply “corpse” (尸 *shī*). Sometimes he calls the walking dead by the general term 鬼 *gui* “demon” or even takes the words 尸 *shī* “corpse” and 妖怪 *yāoguài* “monster” and constructs the neologism 尸怪 “monster-corpse” (*Corpse from Shimen*, 石门尸怪). Anyway, after Yuan Mei, the term *jiangshi* becomes the literary norm of the Chinese language.

Zombies in Geographical Treatises and Historical Annals

During the Six Dynasties – the era that includes the Three Kingdoms period (220-280 CE), the Jing Dynasty (265-420), and the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420-589), the country was plunged into a continuous chaos of internecine and external wars. In this time of unrest, famine, and devastation, the literary genre of *zhiguai* 志怪, which means “Records of the Strange” or “Records of the Supernatural,” appeared and gained immense popularity. This original Chinese genre is defined as “short stories written in the classical language (*guwen*) that recount events of a supernatural, strange, unbelievable nature”(Chen, 2002, p. 239). As the name suggests, works of this genre were presented as authentic historical and factual records of strange events and supernatural phenomena, in keeping with Gan Bao's proclaimed method of historiography. The eminent Chinese historian and writer Gan Bao (286-336) can be considered the founder of the genre, with his famous *Notes on the Search for Spirits*, in which spirits and ghosts interact with historical characters. For example, Gan Bao does not place the widely known cross-cultural plot about a dead bride into some abstract “ancient times”, but links it to specific historic figures: the dead bride turns out to be the daughter of the Wu king Fu Chai, and the action takes place in his capital Gusu (Gan, 2014, P. 78).

The authors of other *zhiguai* stories use the same method, and in their compendia, tales about ghosts and the dead are historicized and presented as true events. As Huang Minwen notes, “The Six Dynasties period, due to the continuous social and political upheavals and discontinuities in reality, was a time when the strange and supernatural were perceived as real and factual, when the existence of ghosts was not questioned” – during this period, stories of the *zhiguai* genre



began to be classified as “biography” rather than “fiction” in literary collections and historical annals (Huang, 2016, pp. 154-55).

This is how Chinese *gui* gain a foothold in non-fiction: in biographies, historical annals, and works on geography and local history.

Joseph Needham categorizes the geographical works of Chinese authors into eight groups: (1) works dealing with descriptions of people living in different lands and countries; (2) descriptions of China's districts; (3) descriptions of other countries; (4) travelogues; (5) works on rivers; (6) descriptions of coasts and shipping lanes; (7) descriptions of mountain ranges, cities, and palaces; and (8) geographical encyclopaedia (Needham, 1954). In a number of such works, belonging to different genres of geographical writings, one can find references to zombie-like creatures: sometimes the word is used explicitly in the text, or else the creature described in the text might be considered a zombie due to an external resemblance or similarity of lifestyle. Like this, for example: “Their whole body was covered with cracks and stains like scales, like the bark of an old pine tree; their hair was tangled like bird feathers, their eyes bulging, and their skin white as eggshells. They were devouring a runaway horse” (Ji Yun, 2017, Pp. 200-201).

The most famous of Chinese pseudo-geographical works (we say “pseudo” because the content of the book is fantastic), the anonymous *Book of Mountains and Seas* describes, among other monsters and beasts, strange corpses living in different geographical locations: the walking dead or simply the dead whose bodies were untouched by decomposition. It is worth remembering that the Chinese thought that un-decomposed bodies preserved some infernal form of life. In one passage, the word “””””zombie” (*jiangshi*) is explicitly applied to such a corpse: “This zombie is in a cave, its backbone is completely preserved, but it has neither skin nor hair, this corpse is probably hundreds of years old” (The Book of Mountains and Seas, 2014, p. 68). In the *Records of the Hengshan Mountain Range in Huainan* there is a mysterious passage with the same word: “Zombies (?) for a thousand *li*¹, blood oozes for a whole *qing*²”.

Li Xian, a natural scientist and publisher of *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, tells a story of how his publishing work was recognized at the imperial court due to the discovery of such a strange corpse: “In a certain cave they found an un-decomposed corpse, bound, and with an instrument of torture on its body. It was taken to the capital Chang'an. Emperor Xuan-zong asked the courtiers what it is, but no one could give him an answer. Only Li Xian was able to answer, “This is a treacherous minister of the old days.” The Emperor asked how he knew this, and Li Xian said he knew it because of *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. The emperor sent for the book and found confirmation there, and from then on the emperor and courtiers began to read *The Book of Mountains and Seas* (cited in Zhuan&Pan, 2018, p. 88).

1 A measure of length equal to 0.5 km.

2 A measure of area equal to 6.667 hectares.



Li Xian told the emperor about the corpse that, according to the book he had published, this person used to be a minister named Wei, who had lived at a time when gods and spirits ruled the world. He plotted to kill a deity named Ya Yu (this deity had the face of a man and the body of a snake), and together with another deity named Yi, he carried out his treacherous plan. When the Jade Emperor, the supreme lord of Heaven, heard about this, he became angry and ordered to put a *kanga* on the culprit, tie his hands behind his back and hang him on a tree on top of a mountain. Millennia passed, but the body of the villain did not decay, he turned into a zombie and was discovered in the time of the Han Dynasty. Later, during the Tang Dynasty, this story was decorated with more colorful details: when transported to the capital, the corpse allegedly suddenly petrified. The emperor did not believe Li Xian's explanations and threw him into prison, but the scientist was able to revive the corpse by using a young woman's breast milk, and the zombie personally confirmed that Li Xian was right (Zhuan&Pan, 2018, p. 90).



Fig. 7. Modern editions of “The Book of Mountains and Seas”



The Book of Mountains and Seas continues with the zombie conspiracy story: the murdered god Ya Yu could not accept his wrongful death and forced a sorcerer to resurrect his body. This magic of resurrecting a dead led to dire consequences: once back to life, the snake god forgot his good nature, he was reborn as a walking corpse and began to devour people. In the end, the great hero, Archer Yi (Hou Yi) killed this monster (*The Book of Mountains and Seas*, 2014, P. 70).

Ya Yu is not the only resurrected dead of the *Book*. There is also a story about a deity named Xing Tian, who contested the mythical Yellow Emperor for supreme power over the Middle Lands. The Emperor cut off his opponent's head, but death did not stop him: Xing Tian grew eyes on his nipples, his navel transformed into a mouth, and he became a monster even more terrifying and bloodthirsty than before. Ying Gou, Yellow Emperor's another opponent, becomes a zombie too, as well as the Emperor's own daughter, a young princess put to torturous death by a demon and revived as a spirit of drought. It is easy to notice that, according to *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, the attempt to resurrect the dead always ends in disaster, because death obliterates their previous personalities, and they rise to life as bloodthirsty walking corpses. And secondly, all the characters that ended becoming demons had died premature, unnatural deaths, and therefore turned into dangerous revenants bringing nothing but destruction to everyone around them.

Zombies as Demons of Drought

Yuan Mei, in his famous collection of short stories *Censured by Confucius* gives an interesting classification of zombies:

- ossified corpses;
- decayed bones;
- wandering corpses;
- corpses covered in white hair;
- corpses covered in black hair;
- cadavers with purple hair;
- flying corpses;
- spirits of drought (Yuan, 2021).

The living corpses proceed from one category to another in the course of time: the corpse of a newly dead person ossifies and, under unfavorable circumstances, starts moving – it means that his *po-soul* has lingered in the body and the process of “zombification” has begun. Such a corpse can lie in the ground for a long time and not decompose, it can come out of the grave and harm the living. Over time, white or multicolored hair grows on the corpse. After several centuries, the malicious dead acquire the ability to swim and fly and become virtually invulnerable.



The writer himself does not give any explanation for such metamorphoses of zombies, and at first glance they may seem completely arbitrary. But we still can trace inner logic in the sequence of transformations. In the first stage, the corpses stiffen – this is a natural process, but then each subsequent stage marks a new step in the direction opposite to naturalness, increasingly disrupting the normal order of things. Whereas most dead people begin to decompose, the future zombie remains intact, then it overcomes the next limitation of death – it gets up and starts walking. Then its entire body gets covered with hair, visibly indicating its final break with human nature and its newly established belonging with the world of wild creatures. Then its hair turns from white to black: another inversion of the natural course of life, according to which people are born black-haired but turn gray over time. Then its hair turns purple, a color that is never found not only among humans, but also among animals, indicating that the zombie has crossed the boundaries of what is possible for all living creatures. And finally, it begins to fly, that is, becomes a demon.

But the last category highlighted by Yuan Mei can be puzzling: what do the walking dead have to do with drought? Yet the connection turns out to be direct and close. In order to understand how zombies are related to drought and water, let us turn again to *The Book of Mountains and Seas*, especially since the characters described in it are called “progenitors of zombies” by Chinese authors (Zhuan & Pan, 2018, p. 86).

According to Chinese mythology, the Yellow Emperor, the mythical founder of Chinese civilization, waged a long war with Chi You – the ruler of a hostile tribe¹. *The Book of Mountains and Seas* provides details of this war relevant to the walking dead. In particular, the Book tells of the Emperor's struggle with the god Hou: killed in battle, this god found a way to avenge by splitting his soul into four parts. The parts of his soul were combined with the bodies and souls of the commanders who had offended the Emperor and turned into vengeful dead monsters. One of them became a spirit of cholera, another one cast a spell on all the dead people of the Chinese Empire: from now on, any person who has died innocently and resented his untimely death will become a zombie and will harm people (*The Book of Mountains and Seas*, 2014).

¹ Chinese myths refer to Chi You as a monster, but it is clear from the context that he is to be interpreted as the leader of a rival state or chiefdom, of foreign people.



Fig. 8. Monstrous zombies in a modern computer game based on the “Book of Mountains and Seas”

One of the vengeful god's soul parts entered the body of Princess Nüba 女魃, the daughter of the Yellow Emperor. This parts gradually turned the beautiful and virtuous girl into a hideous monster: she became wrinkled, bald, emaciated, and radiated heat. It got to the point that no one could be near the princess, so unbearable was the heat she exuded, and the Emperor banished his own daughter to the desert. Wherever the outcast princess went, the rivers and lakes dried up. Yet, during the decisive war with Chi You, she came to her father's aid, bringing drought upon the enemy army. But she still posed a danger to the people, and the Emperor ordered her to be killed. Nüba's body fell into the sea, and there, joined with the body of another bearer of the cursed soul part, General Ying Gou, it became the drought demon 虐魃 nüeba, one of the four “great progenitors of zombies” (Zhuan&Pan, 2018).

This mythological connection of zombies with drought is confirmed in numerous folklore and literary works of China. For example, a Song period author Hong Mai writes in his book *Records of Yijin*: “A man named Liu Ji'an took a concubine. A certain Taoist looked at his face and saw a demonic spirit¹. He said that the concubine was not a human being. Liu Ji'an didn't believe it. The Taoist came

¹ The astute Taoist guessed from Liu Ji'an's appearance that some sort of gui dwelt near him, and its dark demonic spirit affects the “energy” of this person.



to his house, ordered him to bring a few dozen *dan* of water¹ and pour it on the ground in the garden. All the ground in the courtyard got soaked with water except for one corner. There they started digging and dug up a huge corpse, stiffened but not decomposed. Liu-Ji'an looked closely – it was none other than his new concubine!" (Hong, 1994, P. 89). The point here is that zombies suck up water, so the corpse seemed huge to the people who found it because it was filled up with water, but the facial features allowed the man to recognize his concubine and finally understand she was an evil monster.

The association of zombies with drought and water is demonstrated in a short story *Spreading Water* ("喷水") by the great Chinese writer of the Qing Dynasty, Pu Songling (1640-1715): "An official from Laiyang County named Song Yushu had a mother and two maids living in his house. At night, the old woman heard a sound in the courtyard. One of the maids looked through a hole in the paper covering the window and saw an old woman, hunch-backed and stunted, her hair like a broom, walking in the yard and splashing water. Mother Song also went over to look. The old woman suddenly approached the window and splashed water through the hole in the window; the lady and the maids fell to the floor, and fainted over. When the dawn broke, Song Yushu found them and started mourning for them. One maid gave signs of life. Coming to her senses, she told what had happened during the night. Song Yushu ordered all the ground in the garden to be dug up for 3 *cun*² and there they found a stiffened corpse (a zombie). He ordered the people to burn this corpse. The flesh and bones fell apart and water flowed from under the skin" (Pu, 2021, p. 293).

The legends that connect zombies to drought can be found in different provinces of China. For example, the Ming naturalist and poet Xie Zhaozhe writes: "In the Yangqi region it seldom rains in April and May. Locals then look for the corpse of the spirit of drought in the ground, and having found it, lash it with a whip and then burn it, and then it rains" (Xie, 2021, P. 214). He is echoed by Zhang Dai in his work *The Book of Five Cases*: "In Jinan there is a custom: drought is blamed on the recently deceased, they open the grave and beat the corpse. They call it 'flogging the spirit of drought'" (Zhang, 1997, P.76). Such a custom was especially widespread in Hebei and Shandong provinces. When a drought lasted for prolonged periods of time, peasants searched the burial places for the corpse which seemed the most suitable for the role of the drought spirit, dug it up, stabbed and burned it, and then made a ritual prayer for rain. Finding such a corpse was a state-of-the-art skill which people believed only specially trained Taoist magicians could master. There is even evidence that tomb robbers abused the popular belief in the spirit of drought to dig up graves and steal funerary utensils and valuables under the pretext of looking for a zombie responsible for the disaster. Such facts are known from court cases and litigation between tomb robbers and relatives of the deceased (Zhuan&Pan, 2018, P. 93).

1 A *dan* is a measure of volume, 50 liters.

2 A *cun* is a measure of length equal to 3,33 cm.



In his travelogue, the Ming Dynasty writer Yu Shenxing testifies: “There is a custom in the north: if the sea dries up a lot, a new grave is set on fire; if the sun scorches intolerably, a corpse is dug up. If the dead person has white hair growing all over the body, it is a zombie, a spirit of drought; this corpse is then whipped to make it rain. This is a very old custom and officials cannot eradicate it” (Yü, 1994, p 345). This method of folk magic – flogging the dead to cause rain – as well as the opposition of the local peasantry and the authorities in this matter, surprisingly coincide with a similar custom of the Russian people, recorded in the work of D. Zelenin. In his famous study *Sketches of Russian Mythology* the scholar cites numerous facts of “punishment” of the deceased people who died of unnatural causes. Their neighbours found them guilty of natural disasters, primarily drought. The clergy, in turn, denounced this custom as pagan. As Serapion, the bishop of Vladimir city in central Russia, once angrily exclaimed in a sermon: “Oh the wicked folly! Oh the lack of faith! Do you hope to propitiate God by unearthing a drowning victim or the one who has hanged himself?” St. Maximus the Greek complains about the same custom of digging up dead people as a measure of drought prevention: “...the bodies of drowned or murdered people are denied burial, but dragged into the open and pierced with stakes. We unearth the wretches and then throw them as far away as possible, and leave them unburied” (cited in Zelenin, 1995, p. 93). Zelenin also describes the opposite actions, aimed rather at propitiating the dangerous dead: the grave is filled with water, so that its owner can drink their full and stop sucking water out of the ground, thus depriving people of this life-giving liquid (Zelenin, 1995, c. 104). It is amazing how similar situations give rise to similar customs and perceptions among nations that culturally stand so far apart!

Zombies in Late Imperial Literature

Several plot patterns recur in Yuan Mei's stories¹ about walking corpses. The most recurring motif is the corpse's sudden and unmotivated attack on a human being. Sometimes the moving corpse directly goes on the attack, sometimes its mere approach turns people to flight, and the corpse throws itself in pursuit. Thus, in the remarkable story *A Scholar from Nanshan* an old scholar visits his friend and addresses him with kind speeches: he begs the friend him to take care of the scholar's orphaned family and then starts to reminisce about the past. In the course of the conversation the scholar transforms – his face becomes frightening, then he stops talking and reacting to the conversation addressed to him, does not leave when the frightened man tries to escort him out. Losing self-control, the living man turns to flee – and the dead immediately rushes in pursuit. In the story *Paints a Portrait of a Corpse* a son wishes to capture the features of his late father and hires an artist to paint a portrait of the deceased. The artist takes up the job,

1 The authors take this opportunity to express their love for Yuan Mei's work and their admiration for the writer's rich artistic legacy, which includes a wide variety of material: stories of the supernatural, political satire, Chan Buddhist parables and erotic stories. Yuan Mei's works are imbued with the pathos of true humanism and compassion for the powerless and oppressed. He was also a mocker and joker, a singer of unconventional love.



but the corpse suddenly stands up and attacks him. In the story *Corpse from Shimen* a traveller who has spent the night in the house of a woman who died of an epidemic is attacked by her risen corpse.

Corpses attack passers-by in deserted areas (*Slaps a Corpse* and *The Great Zombie*), inside buildings or in the monastery (*The Corpse Gets into Trouble because of Greed*, *The Corpse Shows Greed*, *The Corpse Embraced Wen-tuo*, *The Transformation of the Corpse* and many others).

In the vast majority of these stories, the hero manages to fend off the ominous dead: to escape from them, to hide in a room, to jump out of a window or jump over a high wall, which the corpse cannot overcome (sometimes even toppling a cupboard onto the dead body would help), so that everything ends happily. But in those cases, when the dead manages to catch up with the living, it becomes clear what kind of misfortune the heroes were trying to evade: in the stories *The Flying Corpse*, *The Great Zombie*, *The Corpse Drinks Human Blood*, *The Strange Story of the Woman from Chuzhou* the walking dead appear as vampires and cannibals. Thus, the ominous dead man from the story *Flying Corpse* terrorizes the local peasants, kidnapping and eating their children. The corpse in the story *The Great Zombie* does exactly the same. Suddenly bursting into someone's house, the corpse from the story *The Corpse Drinks Human Blood* tears off a woman's head and drags it to his grave, where he sucks the blood out of the head, etc. The cannibalistic tendencies of the walking dead have become axiomatic in modern Chinese zombie culture. The zombies of the stories, fables and movies of our time chase the living, bite them, tear out body parts to eat their flesh or drink their blood.



Fig. 9. Zombie literature of varying degrees of artistic value is in high demand in modern China.



Yuan Mei's corpses occasionally show some human traits: they engage in conversation with the living or display earthly passions. The recently deceased dead man from the story *The Corpse Comes to Complain of a Grudge* makes quite human speeches with the hero: he tells that he was killed by his wife, the evidence of which can be found on his body, asks to notify the authorities and restore justice. When the hero tries not to open the door to him, the corpse does not break in by force, like other zombies, but makes the following argument: "If you don't open the door now, I'll turn into a demon, and won't I be able to break down the door and enter?" Realizing the fear of the living before the dead, this resourceful corpse even pretends at first to be a deceased friend of the hero, and only after being able to enter the dwelling, admits that he used someone else's name. The corpses of a man and a woman from the story *The Affair of Two Corpses* make love, the corpse from the story *The Corpse Holds an Ingot of Silver* can not part with his property. The zombies in the stories *The Corpse Shows Greed* and *The Corpse Gets into Trouble because of Greed* show an afterlife interest in money: in the first story the dead attacks a guest in his house, not to devour him, but enticed by his gold; in the second story, having attacked a man, a corpse is distracted by picking up silver ingots (Yuan, 1995; Yuan, 2003).

Like almost all of Yuan Mei's motifs, this motif – greed for money – finds its way in contemporary Chinese zombie culture. For example, in the animated series *Brother Zombie* the protagonist throws a wad of banknotes to a zombie chasing him and addresses Mao Zedong, who is depicted on the 100-yuan banknotes: "Grandpa Mao, help me out!" The zombie is distracted from his chase by picking up the money, and the hero manages to escape.

Ji Yun, a prominent Qing writer, in his book *The Notes from the Thatched Cottage* categorizes zombies into two types: "those who have just died and have suddenly started chasing the living" and "those who have been buried for a long time but have not decomposed". Zombies of the first category, according to Ji Yun, "show an evil disposition, having sensed (coming from a person) the vital spirit". The writer suggests calling such zombies 诈尸 *zhashi*, "reanimated corpses". Zombies of the second category "can turn into monsters, walk at night; when meeting people, grab them with claws" (Ji, 2017, Pp. 253-54).

Pu Songlin's collection *The Tales from the Make-do Studio* tells of an innkeeper's young daughter-in-law who has just died and is placed in a coffin in one of the rooms of an inn. The guests of the inn are then attacked nightly by the corpse, which sucks out their life force. One of the guests manages to escape by climbing a tree. The dead woman stands under the tree all night, clinging to the trunk, but can not climb up. In the morning, people find her in this position – "her fingers had grown into the trunk of the tree, so that several people could hardly pull her off" (Pu, 2021, P. 297).

This story is most likely based on the Chinese custom of keeping a body in a coffin for some time before burial, waiting for an auspicious day, the expiration



of the mourning period, or an improvement in the financial situation of a family that temporarily cannot afford an expensive funeral. The fear of such dead people, who lie in coffins right in the living quarters, turns into zombie legends circulating everywhere and even making their way into the pages of newspapers. Thus, illustrated newspapers of the late Qing Dynasty period occasionally cite reports of zombie attacks as authentic facts: for example, according to one of the articles, the corpse of a recently deceased girl attacked a servant who hid from the zombie behind a door; the zombie then piled its weight on the door and stayed like that all night. The hotel guards are quoted as witnessing the incident (Cited in Zhuan & Pan, 2018, p. 94).

How to escape zombies?

Yuan Mei's stories reflect all the traditional ways of defence against zombies, plus he adds something new.

The folk belief that dog's blood is effective against the walking dead is based, we think, on the universal notion that "one fights fire with fire": whereas Russian beliefs prescribe cursing the evil force with foul language, the Chinese would throw filthy substances on it. Literary sources (Yuan, 2021; Pu, 2021; Ji, 2017, etc.) describe driving away evil entities by emptying the contents of a night pot on them or pouring the blood of an "unclean" creature – a dog (sometimes pig or chicken blood was used for this purpose, although we do not know that a chicken, and even more so a pig, the main meat source of a Chinese household, was considered unclean). In general, dog's blood acts as a universal means of weakening the influence of the chthonic world: if a newborn baby begins to speak in a coherent human language, it means that the soul in its body has not forgotten its former life in another human body. The newborn baby should be given dog's blood to wash away the traces of the realm of the dead and help the soul to restore the correct movement along the karmic circle.

So, zombies, along with other demons, are doused in dog's blood. They can also be burned or driven away with the help of Taoist rituals, including the use of a magic sword made of peach wood (wooden replicas of such swords are still sold on every corner in China), a magic bell, the sound of which penetrate the realm of the dead, and incantations written on yellow paper – they are burned, and the smell of burning paper carries the Taoist's requirement to another world.



Fig. 10. Image of an anime-style zombie pasted over with magical yellow paper.
A lockscreen image for a phone



Hong Kong movies in pursuit of visual effects and dynamics had to abandon such means as dog and bird blood, giving preference to “forceful” methods of confrontation with the evil dead. The artificial universe of the Shaw brothers and other Hong Kong movie producers is a world of martial arts, where even the walking dead turn out to be fist fighters. The protagonists of many early Hong Kong films pound the jumping dead with their hands and feet, chop off their heads, pierce them with stabbing weapons, or, at least, drag them out into the sunlight. However, yellow paper with Taoist incantations written on it remains one of the main ways to neutralize zombies: both the manipulative sorcerer and the good Taoist opposing them stick such a paper on the forehead of the walking dead, making it freeze or, on the contrary, sending it in the desired direction.

Zombie Drivers: “You Beast, Get up and Walk!”

In Chinese folklore and fiction there are numerous references to zombies not acting on their own, but being controlled by malicious people, the so called “zombie drivers”. For example, in Yuan Mei's story *Whipping a Corpse*, an old sorcerer nicknamed Sitting Mountain Tiger scams people's money, threatening to set zombies on them if they refuse. The main character of the story has no money to pay, and at night he is attacked by the corpse of a recently deceased comrade. The trouble is solved with the help of a wise elder who gave the young man a magic whip: by whipping the zombie with it, the personage not only saves himself from death, but also frees the whole neighbourhood from the scourge – having lost his power over the zombie, the sorcerer dies the same night (Yuan, 2003, pp. 199-200). In another story, *Prefect Li*, a sorcerer, with the help of black magic, tries to temporarily turn into a zombie by moving his own soul into the body of a man who has just died. He uses the body of a rich man to get access to his wealth and concubines. However, the magic of the good Taoist destroys his plans, and the sorcerer in the body of the dead man begins to behave like a “wild” zombie – he howls, tears the bed in a frenzy, breaks things and finally dies (Yuan, 1995, pp. 6-7).

The theme of “zombie driver” is described in an even more unique detail in Yuan Mei's story *Soul Hidden in a Jug*: a recidivist criminal, knowing that he will be sentenced to death for his crimes, manages to hide his own soul in a jug with the help of magic. After the execution, his soul returns to his body, but the villain does not resurrect as a full-fledged man – he becomes a zombie and continues to terrorize others. He is caught and his head is cut off, but his soul returns to his body once more, his head grows back, and the zombie does evil again. This continues until people learn the secret and break the jug, and then, when the zombie is caught and destroyed again, his soul has nowhere to hide: “He was beaten to death, and when they examined the corpse, they saw that it had already begun to decompose, although less than ten days had passed” (Yuan, 2003, p. 151).

However, the theme of the “zombie driver” is most elaborate in numerous Hong Kong zombie films, which are a mixture of horror and action. In these movies,



zombies almost never act on their own: the reason for their appearance and attacks on people is an evil sorcerer standing behind them. With the help of magic he resurrects the corpses of his family members or strangers and makes them literally “dance to his tune”: the sorcerer controls the dead with the sound of a magic flute or by sticking spells on their foreheads. There are so many movies following this plot that there is no way to list them all, suffice is to say they are united by one plot formula: the use of zombies for financial purposes. In modern Chinese creepy pasta (i.e. short stories, usually the horror genre fan fiction or pieces by amateur authors), this plot is also frequent, but, unlike Hong Kong movies, usually set in the last years of the Qing Dynasty, the action of these new stories is often transferred to modern China or the Guomindang period. Zombies are fought not by martial artists, like in Hong Kong, but by the Chinese People's Liberation Army. But the image of a villainous sorcerer is also present in these stories – the evil Taoist uses zombies to rob people, or even turns the population of an entire village into zombies in order to take possession of the property of fellow villagers and live surrounded by obedient slaves. This is, for example, the content of a whole series of comics distributed through the Android app 清朝僵尸 (“Qing Dynasty Zombies”).



Fig. 11. A sorcerer controlling zombies. From this screensaver for Huawei phones, it is not clear whether the sorcerer is evil or kind: they usually look the same.



Chinese researchers have suggested that there are historical realities behind the image of the “zombie driver”. This was first emphasized by Shen Cunwen¹, a writer of Miao minority origin. In an early article describing the sights of his native Hunan, he wrote: “Pass Chenzhou (now called Yuanlin), and you will find yourself in a place where cinnabar is produced; some people here know how to drive corpses. If you have a keen eye, you will be able to see a group of corpses walking along the highway” (quoted in Zhang, 2020).

Later, popular science films were shown on Chinese educational TV channels to explain that behind the legend of zombie drivers there is a very real profession of transporting dead bodies from one province to another. The movie 《自然密码之湘西赶尸》 *The Mystery of the Corpse Drivers of Xiangxi*, shown by CCTV in 2010, had a sensational effect. In the movie, an 80-year-old woman from the Tujia ethnic group told reporters that corpse driving was one of the rare but important professions in her hometown in the famous Zhangjiajie Mountains in Hunan Province. She recalls the horror she felt as a little girl when she saw the strange procession of corpses and her father's rebuke: “Children should not look at dead people!” No less vivid are the accounts of other eyewitnesses interviewed by TV reporters for the documentary *Walking Around China* (《走遍中国》 CCTV-10): old Lu Wanjin said he had first seen walking corpses in 1939, when he himself was 8-9 years old, and the sight seemed “strange” to him; old Lei Wangxi assured reporters that most people in his hometown had seen corpse driving back in the Republican period of Chinese history; a native of Xiangxi village named Wu Xianyu said that in 1963, at the age of 15, he was helping his father float wooden rafts down the Youshui River and witnessed a corpse driver say: “Get up, you beast!” – and a corpse got up; the driver said: “Go!” – and the corpse went forward.

So what is the profession behind the legend of zombie drivers? To begin with, it was a Miao man who drew attention to this phenomenon, and this is no coincidence – it is the Miao who are considered the inventors of the art of corpse driving. According to one legend, the monstrous opponent of the Yellow Emperor Chi You was none other than the ancestor of the Miao people (which reflects the reality of the struggle between the two dominant civilizations on the Chinese plains – Miao and Huaxia, the forefathers of the Han Chinese). Having been defeated by the ancestor of the Chinese, the ancestor of the Miao people grieved for his dead warriors and ordered sorcerers to find a means to deliver the corpses to their homeland. The sorcerers used amulets to make the corpses stand up and walk in the right direction until they reached their homeland, where they received a proper burial.

The situation described in the legend happened many times in real life when a person who had died in a foreign land had to be buried in his native village, and so had to be transported there somehow. Travelling through distant dangerous

¹ Shen Cunwen (1902-1988), aka Shen Yuehuan, was born in Fenghuang County, Hunan Province. He is the author of *Border Town*, *Duck*, *Notes on a Walk along the Xiangjiang River*, *Bronze Mirrors of the Tang and Song Dynasties*, *The Art of the Dragon and Phoenix*, *Studies of Ancient Chinese Costumes*, and other works.



places with a decomposing corpse is not an enterprise every family can undertake, yet it cannot be skipped, otherwise the spirit of the dead person will become an unsettled hungry *guy*. If there were many dead bodies, and they had to be sent in roughly the same direction, corpse drivers, sometimes called corpse driving carpenters (赶尸匠), stepped forward. Executions in China were carried out after the fall equinox, and during this period many corpses were collected at once to be transported to distant lands. The same thing happened during seasonal work or large construction projects – workers died, their relatives could not personally come to pick up the corpse, the corpse decomposed rapidly, and something had to be done urgently to ensure the dead person's burial.

Corpse-carriers provided customers with three types of services, differing in the degree of labor intensity, the use of art, and the corresponding pay: 行尸 “driving the corpse,” 分尸 “dismembering the corpse,” and 背尸 “carrying the corpse on one's back.” The latter was the most primitive and lowest-paid: the porter simply hefted the corpse on his back like a bale and dragged it to its destination. It was hard, tedious, dirty, and of poor preservation value; a porter could only carry one corpse to one place, and the result was far from satisfying as the family was left with nothing more than a pile of rotting flesh.

The “dismembering of the corpse” needed a higher level of skills: the insides were removed from the body, sometimes limbs were separated, the frame was stuffed, the body parts were preserved with various substances and all of this was taken to the deceased person's homeland, where the body was “reassembled”: the body parts were sewn together back into a human form. The main point was to keep the bones intact. This work was done by carpenters, which is why their profession was called “carpenter-driver”: the artisan's task was to deliver the body piece by piece and then reassemble it into a whole.

Finally, “driving a corpse” was considered the highest art, it meant the body was delivered to the right place in one piece, without damage or flaws. For this purpose the drivers treated the corpse in a special way: the head, if it had been cut off by a hangman, was sewn back into its place, the body was smeared with cinnabar; yellow paper with spells was pasted on it, which was aimed at preserving the semblance of life in the body, finally, ears and nose were filled with cinnabar – it was believed that the soul leaves the body through these holes, so by filling them with cinnabar, the driver “sealed” three souls inside the corpse (the other four souls left the body at the moment of death). The corpse was dressed in black cloth, crowned with a hat, and then the most unusual thing began – the corpse was tied by its outstretched arms to two long bamboo poles, sometimes another pair of poles supported its legs. More often than not, the drivers prepared not one corpse, but several at a time, and all of them were strung on bamboo poles. The result was a string of dead men standing in a chain one after another with their arms stretched forward. Then the sturdy and strong male carriers put the poles on their shoulders and set off. The leader of the group walked ahead of them, announcing the procession to passers-by by striking a gong or bell. In order to avoid unnecessary attention



and the sunlight unfavorable for the corpses, the procession moved at night, illuminated by the lantern of the chief driver. All this action, of course, was accompanied by spells and rituals designed to protect the drivers and everyone they met on their way from the dangerous antics of the dead. The ominous procession marched along the deserted mountain roads, swaying as it went – from the outside it looked as if the group of dead people were jumping after the leader, arms outstretched forward. The drivers rested in special inns, where living people did not stay. There they had rooms to store corpses and rest during the day, and at night they resumed their journey (Zhang, 2020).



**Fig. 12. A zombie controlled by a driver jumps forward with both hands stretched in front.
A phone screensaver**



Not every corpse could be transported to the homeland in this way. The three categories of corpses that were suitable included the ones:

- executed by beheading;
- executed by hanging;
- who died suddenly and unexpectedly.

These categories of dead people were believed to have died unnatural deaths, and therefore still had a residual life force in them. Such dead people were imagined to be eager to return to their homeland, to their relatives, so they would hurry home and help the driver on the road.

The three categories of dead bodies that the drivers rejected were:

- suicide victims;
- dead of disease;
- corpses with limbs burned by fire or thunder.

These dead people had given up their lives voluntarily, their life energy was completely depleted or, as in the latter case, they had been punished by Heaven, which meant that there was no hope that the dead would help the drivers get to the right place – they were dangerous and unfriendly. The driver himself was also required to meet certain criteria: he had to have strength, stamina, courage, be able to navigate the terrain, and besides he had to be ugly and unmarried (Zhang, 2020), i.e., he was no stranger to the dark yin force. Having treated the corpse properly, given it a semblance of life, the corpse drivers did not call their burden either a human being or a dead person. According to eyewitnesses, they did call the dead with the word 畜生 “beast”, “creature”, but this was, as we believe, not a swear word, but an avoidance of taboo words or a reflection of the incomprehensible, transitional state of the unburied body. The same tactic of avoiding dangerous words was followed by customers: when hiring drivers for work, they never ordered to “deliver a corpse” or “carry a dead person” – they asked the drivers to “walk”, or “to take a walk”.

These professional corpse-carriers with their gloomy night processions along mountain roads, driving the dead who were pasted with spells and bouncing along with arms outstretched, served as the source of the zombie concept in its more modern, Hong Kong form: the dead manipulated by an evil sorcerer, hopping with arms stretched forward.

Zombies and Opium Wars

It seems unbelievable, but zombie mythology played a role in the famous Opium Wars, an attack by imperialist powers on Qing China as a part of colonization campaign in the 19th century. To understand how and why this might have

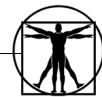


happened, it is worth clarifying how the Chinese imagined the outer appearance of zombies.

When you say the word “zombie,” a very definite image arises in the mind of a modern Chinese: a bluish corpse dressed in the dark blue uniform of a Qing mandarin, with an official belt, a feather-topped hat, and long braided hair. This zombie moves by jumping with both hands in front of him. We already know why it moves in this way: most likely, this style of locomotion originates from “zombie drivers” routine. It is also possible that zombies jump, not walk, because of the custom to bind dead people's legs so that they would not get out of the grave: it is not without reason that traditional Chinese houses were equipped with very high thresholds, over which one can step only by lifting up one's robe with a hand – the walking dead cannot cross such a threshold, because they cannot walk, nor can they jump so high.

But why are the zombies dressed as officials? According to one theory (Yin, 2016), when the famous director Liu Guanwei was making *Mr. Zombie*, his very first zombie movie that started a long series of Hong Kong zombie horror films, he did not know what to dress his characters in. In the traditional view, zombies are covered in fur, but the director did not dare put a naked body, even if covered by hair, on the screen. While he was pondering, his assistants informed him that in one of the city warehouses they found several sets of official clothes, stocked before the fall of the Qing Empire – these sets were needed no more and thus could be purchased cheaply. Liu Guangwei bought up the entire stock, dressed up the actors in these clothes and thus endowed his zombies not only with a peculiar appearance, but also with a metaphorical connection to the degraded, vicious feudal system. Thus, zombies turned out to be not just people coming out of graves – they became a metaphorical image of officials, who are, just like living corpses, not capable of any useful activity, but can only greedily suck the blood of ordinary people. Numerous sequels of *Mr. Zombie* and its imitations have led to standardization of this particular appearance of zombies, and these particular political allusions. It is no coincidence that under the tightening of the political regime in 21st century China, zombie movies were flatly banned from production and screening – dead people in official attire are still perceived as a mockery of officials and power structures.

But that is the matter of 20th century, and in 19th century the ideas about the appearance of zombies were still traditional: a frozen corpse with stiffened limbs, possessing the ability to suck up water, but lacking intelligence and the ability to perform complex motor operations. Zombies cannot step over thresholds, and – which proved particularly important in light of the events described – their knees do not bend. In the literature of the Qing period, and even in the periodicals of late imperial China, one can find descriptions of zombies whose unbending knees give away their essence. For example, the Shanghai periodical *Illustrated Lithographs*, a progressive journal published between 1884 and 1898, during the reign of the reformist emperor Guangxu, posted a note titled *Zombie gets married*. The note



reports that in the city of Ningbo, a family welcomed a young daughter-in-law into the house, but the latter was unable to kneel before the groom's parents in the ritual wedding ceremony, and this brought the family to the conclusion that she was a dead person (cited in Zhuan & Pan, 2018, p. 95).



Fig.13-14. Official attire of Chinese mandarins in the late Qing period



Fig. 15. A bride and groom in their wedding gowns, the late Qing period



In 1793, a British embassy came to Qing China. The visit was marked by a diplomatic scandal when the ambassador refused to kneel before the throne. The imperial government did not know what to do about it: violation of court etiquette by a representative of a “barbarian” state meant loss of state prestige, but it was not easy to exert pressure on a powerful maritime nation. They found an unexpected way out: the public was explained, that the British embassy consisted entirely of ...zombies, so they physically could not kneel before the Son of Heaven. The Chinese periodicals even published articles about zombie British sailors, accompanied by pictures of a grotesque creature: its head was elongated like a bird's, it had claws on its feet, its naked body was covered with hair, and it sucked in water through its long beak.

This fact would have remained an amusing historical anecdote had it not led to a tragic consequence. At the beginning of the Opium Wars, when the British fleet started threatening China's shores, Deng Tingzheng, governor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, wrote a report to Emperor Daoguang, assuring him that there was no cause for concern: “The soldiers of foreign armies are unable to use firearms and stabbing weapons, they can only fire cannons. Their feet and ankles are tightly bound, they cannot bend over and move their limbs. If they come ashore, they will be completely helpless and incapable of active action” (cited in Zhuan & Pan, 2018, p. 97). Needless to say, the governor himself had not seen the British soldiers up close; his description relies on the belief that the British were zombies, and thus must look and behave accordingly. By the time the Chinese realized their mistake, Zhejiang Province had been almost entirely taken over by the British.

However, even this did not dispel the conviction of some Qing officials that the country was being attacked by zombies. A year after the report of the Guangdong governor, after the fall of Zhejiang, an official Lin Jixu sent the court a soothing report: “As soon as the enemy lands on the shore, all their strength will be exhausted: their bodies are immobile, their legs are stiff. Having fallen, they cannot rise. One single soldier is able to defeat the entire enemy army, even a peasant commoner can do it, even one man is enough to destroy them all” (quoted in Zhuan & Pan, 2018, P. 97). Paradoxically, this was written at a time when the greater part of the province had been invaded by the British! What the driving force behind such optimism was, if it was persistent belief in the traditional zombie myth or desire to ward off the wrath of the government – we will leave it to the reader to judge for themselves.

Zombies in Contemporary Urban Legends

Zombies traditionally seen as a special category of *gui* – the walking dead, practically without consciousness, hungry for human flesh and capable of passing their curse to their victims with a bite – are still important characters in Chinese folklore. Interestingly, attention to these frightening visitors from the world of



the dead is not limited to village stories, but also extends to urban legends, and from there zombies find their way into Internet folklore in the form of “creepy pasta”.

Speaking of urban legends, we should first of all mention the stories about the zombie attacks on Shanghai in 1993-95 and on Chengdu in 1995, which have been repeatedly discussed in the Chinese segment of the Internet. However, all articles or forums devoted to these events never use such words as “attack” or “invasion”, everything is called in a more delicate and roundabout way – “zombie incident” or “zombie case”.

The “zombie case” in Chengdu is most thoroughly detailed by one Meng Zimin on his personal website devoted to supernatural phenomena. He claims that in 1995 in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, near its central landmark, the Militant Duke Temple, an archaeological excavation took place in which three corpses in decaying Qing-era clothes were unearthed, but that later, “due to lack of supervision, they disappeared overnight”. Then the citizens started seeing as many as five corpses in different parts of the city; the monsters attacked people and bit them, and if the bitten one did not die immediately, then over the next few days, their physicality and personality changed until they turned into a zombie. According to another version, the walking corpses escaped from the Cave of the Nine Elders located on the famous Qingchengshan Mountain near Chengdu, and afterwards many more human bones whitened by time were found in the cave. Finally, another version names Shiling, a former county now a district within the city of Chengdu, as the site of the zombie origin, an area particularly notorious for the occurrence of various evil things. The very name of the county means “Ten Mounds”, because in the olden days burials were made there, but now there are excavations “of high scientific value, but with a bad reputation”, as Meng Zimin describes them. The end of the Chengdu zombies in all versions of the story looks the same: they were destroyed by the People's Liberation Army of China, which, after spending a lot of effort and suffering significant losses, finally used flamethrowers and burned the zombies.

Besides, Mr. Meng also cites the testimonies of “eyewitnesses”, none of whom actually claim to have personally seen a zombie. In most cases, these accounts boil down to the author's age at the time of the “zombie incident” (usually a child between 5 and 10-12 years old) and a description of their intense fear of the walking dead (“I couldn't sleep for fear”, “I didn't dare go to school alone”, “even to this day I am scared when I find myself in hotel corridors”) (Meng, 2021).



Figure 16-17. Cute little zombie from a modern popular cartoon. A Huawei phone screensaver.

But sometimes new details or even new versions of what happened are also found in the stories of Sichuan witnesses. For example, one of the witnesses says that in the nineties, many people drowned by accident or on purpose in the Fuanhe River, although the river itself was shallow, and then people started saying that there were zombies in the river or near it, so that the local TV station even had to deny these rumours. But “according to the reliable information of police authorities”, the deaths of these people were not due to accidents or suicides, as the bodies were covered with horrible wounds or burns, but the investigation yielded nothing. The informant himself was in the fifth grade at the time, and stories were circulating among his peers that zombies could “dress up as adults” and ride trains. Once they got off at the station, they allegedly wandered the streets, looking for a victim, and “if they see that you are to their liking, they will bite you right away”.

Another commentator lived in Huayang, a small town north of Chengdu in the mid-1990s. They had heard rumours that zombies had left the provincial



capital and moved to Huayang. There was a story of a local resident who went to the public restroom and only when in the stall, he found that he had forgotten the toilet paper. And then someone's hand suddenly gave him a piece of paper. The man looked at the paper and was surprised to realize that it was not a napkin, but a special banknote intended for burning as a sacrifice to the spirits of the dead. Then he looked up at his unexpected helper and saw a zombie in front of himself.

Along with such adventurous plots, similar in form and spirit to the literary anecdotes by Yuan Mei and Pu Songlin, conspiracy theories abound in the “eyewitnesses” stories. Meng Zimin claims that the Chengdu city government at the time set up a special department to fight zombies: “I can’t tell you how I know this, but you absolutely have to believe me!!!” Referring again to some “reliable information”, he claims that someone purposely caused the zombies to destabilize the social situation in the province. “If it wasn’t for the solar flare that weakened the yin power of the zombies, then perhaps in all of China no one would have been able to deal with them!” Meng Ziming says (Meng, 2021).

Such theories could be considered a manifestation of the author's mental disorder, but readers of his website share no less exotic suspicions. For example, one of them, a Chengdu teenager at the time of the events, describes how, while walking with friends by the river, he heard some strange sounds and decided to check out their source. However, police officers who happened nearby did not let the boys go to the river. Instead the police went down to the coastal bushes themselves and what they saw there prompted them to immediately call for reinforcements. “That’s when I realized that zombies really do exist!” – exclaims the witness.

Another one assumes that the zombies who were “making noise” in the city are the escaped members of the White Lotus sect¹; he does not bother to explain where and from whom the adherents of the ancient religious-political doctrine could have escaped in the late 20th century, and how they turned into evil monsters. But the author expresses his belief that it was due to the invasion of zombies that the government shut down about ten TV channels.

Another commentator recalls how Chengdu briefly declared a state of emergency, the official reason being the threat of mudslides, but the real reason was a secret laboratory leak of a virus that turned people into zombies. A reader who has neither seen zombies in person nor heard about them from those close to him nevertheless expresses his opinion about their cause: “America created them to frighten the Chinese government”.

Meng Zimin, on the other hand, paints a picture of a vast government conspiracy to conceal the existence of zombies, a conspiracy dating back to China's unifier Qing Emperor Shihuang, who ordered the burning of ancient Confucian books, thereby destroying the information they contained about zombies and how to fight them (Meng, 2021).

1 Buddhist and Taoist secret societies and sects that existed in China for a long time from about the beginning of the 13th century. During the rule of the Manchu Qing dynasty, the White Lotus became an anti-Manchu organization and raised a number of rebellions under the slogan “Overthrow the Qing, restore the Ming!”



The rest of the online resources recounting this episode in 1995 tend to repeat Meng Zimin's text with abbreviations or additional details. For example, an author under the nickname "Talking Nonsense About Society" in the article *The 1995 Zombie Apparition in Chengdu, Is It True?* adds a description of the outer appearance of zombies recovered by archaeologists from ancient coffins: "They had long protruding fangs, desiccated bodies, and half-decayed clothes that vaguely showed patterns in two places. One of these places was an embroidered breastplate, the other was a ball with a peacock feather on the headdress" (it exactly describes the uniform of a Qing civil official). This author, unlike Meng Zimin, is somewhat sceptical about the reality of zombies and tries to rationalize their appearance and the rumours of their attacks: "The coffins of Qing times may well have survived to this day, and the corpses may not have undergone serious decomposition ... or there may have been some secret to prevent decomposition. Perhaps something unusual could have happened to the tomb raiders, such as they became ill, were maimed, began to speak unintelligibly.... etc. And some explanation was needed" (Speaking Follies, 2021).



Fig. 18-19. Cute little zombie from a modern popular cartoon. A Huawei phone screensaver.



Another online author tells of the zombie invasion of Shanghai, starting with the most plausible part of their story: allegedly in 1993-95 several patients of a psychiatric hospital in the Pudong district went wild, grew long fingernails, hid in the toilet and attacked other patients and medical staff from there. But then, faced with the need to explain where the zombies came from in a modern metropolis, the author sets out two quite fabulous versions. According to the first of them, zombies are the result of some unexplored virus, and the first zombie in Shanghai was a professor, who had returned after completing his doctoral studies in Germany. A failed experiment turned him into a vampire, and henceforth he could only live off the blood of others. The first two policemen who tried to arrest him got killed, and their bodies were found completely exsanguinated. A local TV channel reported the story, but had to issue a denial after the government intervened. The second version looks more cinematic, although it does not really explain anything. According to it, two girls came to a hotel in the Pudong district, and one of them immediately went to the bathroom in the lobby. Her friend waited for her for quite some time and finally decided to check if everything was okay. When she opened the restroom door, an elderly woman in red clothes came out past her, and “there was something strange about her appearance.” When the girl entered the bathroom, she saw her friend, dead and bleeding, lying on the floor, with bite marks on her neck. The woman in red was searched for but could not be found, and several other similar mysterious deaths occurred in different parts of the city (Tell the Strange Stories, 2021).

The Internet post *Zombie Attack on Chengdu and Shanghai* repeats the anecdote about a sacrificial banknote offered to a man as toilet paper, and also develops a conspiracy theme: allegedly, Shanghai's Jingdong Park had to reduce the price of admission tickets from one yuan to five mao precisely because of the zombie invasion (Meng, 2021).

A separate place, transitional from urban legend to literature, is held by the story *The Appearance of Red-Haired Zombies in Shanghai in 1931*, written as long ago as 1932. Though the story is based on rumours and legends of the 20th century, it is still often quoted by our contemporaries on the web. We will not recount all the events of the plot here, as the source of the amazing incidents in the story was not zombies after all, so we will only comment on what is relevant to our topic. The narrator, a Shanghai writer, accidentally falls under the asphalt into the city sewer in the area of the French concession, and when the rescuers free him from there, he suddenly becomes the object of increased attention of journalists, who persistently ask if he saw anything unusual down there. Gradually the narrator learns that in the city there are rumours of zombies living in the sewers – they are said to be more than three meters tall, their skin is very white, they do not wear clothes, instead their bodies are covered with long bloody-red hair. At night they climb out of the sewers and prey on passers-by: grabbing them from behind by the throat, they hack their victims' parietal bone and drink their brains. If they meet



a woman walking alone, they clutch her tightly in their arms and drag her down to their underground hideouts. The narrator, by the way, recalls seeing a newspaper report about a piece of clothing and a fragment of human bone found near a sewer entrance (Beiyang Night Travels, 2017).

It is curious that among our contemporaries, for whom the canons of zombie representation have long been set by Hong Kong cinema, the walking dead are always thought of as dressed in the uniform of a Qing official, whereas for a person of the early 1930s, the iconic image of the zombie was still dictated by tradition and included, first and foremost, abnormal, distorted features or body proportions – in this case, enormous stature, irregular skin and hair colors, and lack of clothing and hairstyles.

Analyzing these zombie narratives in contemporary urban folklore, we find manifestations of several obsessive social phobias in them. These are, first of all, fear and distrust of power circles and scientific organizations: scientific laboratories and hospitals are only mentioned here as a source of dangerous contamination, they manipulate the elements they cannot control; while the state, although it ultimately defeats evil through its military, at the same time is constantly preoccupied with concealing the truth from the population. Even the authors of such rumours are unable to articulate why scientists invent viruses, and why the government should not inform the people of the danger instead of fighting hard against the truth. Of course, our Chinese contemporaries have considerable experience of interaction with the state, which controls information, but conspiracy theories are explained not so much by this, but by the very essence of belief in paranormal phenomena. The fact is that in no country in the world, no matter how open and democratic it is, adherents of paranormal theories believe the governments and official science. The belief that the government is hiding the truth, and the academia is rigid and incompetent, is a generic feature of all pseudoscientific “alternative” theories.

Second, urban legends about zombies occasionally include a natural fear of the Other's sexual aggression. Note how in a legend from the 1930s sewer dwellers are suspected of abducting women, even though they seem to be living corpses and cannot reproduce sexually. Similarly, Sichuan children in the 1990s fear zombies who “disguise themselves as adults” and prowl the streets, looking for a boy or girl “to their liking”. The constant motive of attacks in public bathrooms – hidden places where the victim stays alone and strips – can also be attributed to the same fear.

However, all the phobias mentioned above are not specific to the zombie legends, but rather reflect an underlying fear of the power of the state, the vagaries of nature, and the sexuality of strangers. Therefore, the characteristics of zombies that lie deeper than these superficial similarities are more valuable for our study.

This, first of all, refers to the spatial relatedness of zombies to dungeons, ancient burial grounds (graves near the Temple of the Militant Duke, “Ten Mounds”, The Cave of the Nine Elders) or water bodies (the Fuanhe River, where people often drowned; an unnamed river, where the boys and the police heard strange sounds). The sewers also look like an ideal abode for urban zombies – both a dungeon and



a system of canals. This brings us back to the original, ancient understanding of Chinese zombies as corpses rising from their graves, and at the same time as spirits of drought.

Secondly, it is the extremely archaic way in which they harm humans: sometimes they are described as blood-drinking vampires, sometimes they eat the brains of their victims, or inflict “terrible wounds” on them using “protruding fangs” or “long fingernails” but, in general, their attacks are always about eating human flesh. After all, a zombie is not just a devil or a werewolf, but a specific “hungry spirit”; deprived of the sacrifices of its offspring, it must satisfy its hunger by attacking living humans.

Occasionally, speaking about the nature of zombies the proponents of these theories also cite such a characteristic feature as their subordination to the evil will of someone else (someone created them to destabilize the social situation; or they were created by America to frighten the Chinese government).

And finally, the most important of the specific characteristics of Chinese *gui*, inherent in them from the Zhou era to the present day, is their “foreignness”, their alienness, their origin from some distant land. Zombies were created in America, or by a mad doctor who had just arrived from Germany, or they are fugitive members of a religious sect, or officials sent to Sichuan by the central government of the Qing Dynasty, or zombies came to Huayang County from the provincial capital of Chengdu, or at least they live in the area of Shanghai, which has become a French concession, that is not quite in the land of the Chinese. In these legends, zombies ride trains, wander around stations, attack people in hotels, because they are aliens, wanderers, bound to the road and road infrastructure. “When ghosts have a place to come home to, they do not become a menace”, as the *Zouzhuang* recorded the wise Chancellor Zichan saying (cited in Goldin, 2015, pp. 61-62), but these spirits have no home, having died an “outer death” far from the residence of their families, and this is what makes them a source of a constant threat.

This list of characteristic features of zombies in urban legends shows that the image of the living dead in Chinese folklore and imagination retains an amazing level of stability and continuity with both classical fiction and ancient religious and magical ideas of the Chinese people. The only significant innovation is the belief, which came from European legends and American vampire movies, that by killing a person with its bite the zombie also condemns them to a posthumous wandering in the form of a zombie. However, even this innovation cannot be called completely alien to the Chinese mythological thinking because, as we have already mentioned earlier, as early as the beginning of Common Era the preachers of the millenarian sects who promoted the abolition of mourning and sacrifices claimed that people killed by *gui*, turn into new *gui* too.



Fig. 20. Zombies as characters of computer games for teenagers



Conclusion

Having traced the formation of the canon of zombie representations in the Chinese folkloric, written and cinematic tradition, we can draw several main conclusions.

The zombie image owes its origin to ancient Chinese beliefs in the plurality of human souls, which coexist in the body of a living person, but after death are separated. And some of them, the ones that serve as the focus of morality, reason and the light *yang* force go to heaven, while others – animal, dark, *yin* souls – still dwell near the grave or in the deceased, sometimes making them rise from the ground and attack people. This transformation is especially likely if a person died far from their homeland and was deprived of a proper burial, mourning and sacrifices of their descendants, or suffered an unjust offense before death.

The image of a living corpse as a category of evil creatures has been present in the Chinese culture since ancient times; zombies are described in ancient travelogues and historical and didactic works, but the image got its final form in the late imperial period thanks to the interest in this subject on the part of a number of prominent writers, first of all Yuan Mei. It was he who selected the very name “*jiangshi*” from a multitude of synonymous expressions, and it was under his brush that the idea of a zombie as a corpse covered with fur became firmly established.

It should be emphasized, however, that the zombie as such was by no means the personal invention of Yuan Mei or any other late imperial writer – this terrible image was widespread in popular culture regardless of literary treatments. It was also known to national minorities of China, such as the numerous Miao people, who had a custom (probably adopted from them by the Han Chinese) to “drive” corpses, tying them by their outstretched arms to bamboo poles. We believe that this frightening custom caused such characteristic features in the appearance of Chinese zombies as their inability to step by alternately lifting and bending their legs, instead they jump on straight legs with their arms stretched forward.

In folk legends and literary works inspired by them there is a clear connection between zombies and water, or rather its absence. The zombie is not only a hungry demon that eats human flesh and drinks blood, they are also a spirit of drought, sucking from the earth its lifeblood – water. This seemingly paradoxical combination of functions, nevertheless, finds its direct correspondence in European mythology, e.g. in Slavonic beliefs about the drowning and suicide victims.

The occurrence of the zombie image in Chinese folk demonology was so wide that sometimes, even contrary to empirically observed facts, it dominated people's consciousness and predetermined their most important decisions. In the cases we have discussed, Chinese officials in the 18th century chose to interpret the difference between Chinese and Western diplomatic etiquette as the English embassy belonging to the zombie race. A century later this interpretation led to the absurd assumption that, as zombies, the English soldiers could not walk normally or use



weapons, and this greatly reduced the imperial government's ability to resist the colonizers' invasion.

In 20th century, under the influence of Hong Kong cinema which quite accidentally began to dress up zombies in the uniform of Qing mandarins, the iconic appearance of the zombie changed: along with unbending knees and arms stretched out in a grabbing gesture, there appeared the obligatory silk uniform with an embroidered breastplate and a hat with a peacock feather. Respectively, such a traditional characteristic as the hair covering the whole body disappeared. But the internal, essential characteristics of the Chinese zombie have remained unchanged up to the present day.

The analysis of modern urban folklore has shown a significant stability of the whole complex of ideas about zombies as the cannibals, often subjected to someone else's evil will, gravitating to rivers and urban sewers, and invariably labelled as aliens who have no genetic connection with the place of their death and postmortem existence. And the sense of lively and genuine fear that colors eyewitness' accounts of zombie attacks indicates that this ancient embodiment of evil is still alive in the minds of the people, and still lurks in the dark corners of the Chinese culture.

References | Список литературы

- Allen, J. R. (1996). *The Book of Songs*. Grove Press.
- Brashier, K. E. (1996). Han Thanatology and the Division of "Souls." *Early China*, 21, 125–158.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362502800003424>
- Chen, F. (2002). Archetype and Aesthetics of the Fantastic: The Narrative Form in Chinese and French Fiction. *Comparative Criticism*, 24(24), 239–254.
- Childs-Johnson, E. (1995). The Ghost Head Mask and Metamorphic Shang Imagery. *Early China*, 20, 79–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362502800004442>
- Eliade, M. (1998). *Religions of Australia*. University Book. (In Russian).
- Gan, B. (2014). *In Search of Spirits*. Chengdu Ming Dynasty books. (In Chinese).
- Goldin, P. R. (2015). Consciousness of the Dead as a Philosophical Problem in Ancient China. In *The Good Life and Conceptions of Life in Early China and Greco-Roman Antiquity* (pp. 59–92). De Gruyter.
- Göttner-Abendroth, H. (2012). *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures across the Globe*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Guo, J. (2018). The Spirit World. In P. R. Goldin (Ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Early Chinese History* (pp. 229–261). Routledge.
- Hong, M. (1994). *The Notes of Yijiang*. Zhongzhou Publishing House "Ancient Books". (In Chinese).
- Huang, M. (2016). From Cultural Ghosts to Literary Ghosts – Humanisation of Chinese Ghosts in Chinese Zhiguai. In *Ghosts—Or the (Nearly) Invisible. Spectral Phenomena in Literature and the Media*. Peter Lang AG.



- Is the Appearance of Zombies in Chengdu, Sichuan, Real? Why Do the Village People Never Mention It? (2021). <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1708962802436984777&wfr=spider&for=pc> (In Chinese)
- Ji, Ch., & Yu, J. (2001). *The Glory of Yue*. The People's Publishing House of Guizhou. (In Chinese).
- Ji, Y. (1974). *Notes from the Hut of the Great in the Small*. Nauka. (In Russian).
- Ji, Y. (2017). *The Notes from the Thatched Cottage*. The Publishing House of Beijing University of Science and Engineering. (In Chinese).
- Li, L. (1996). Mortuary Ritual and Social Hierarchy in the Longshan Culture. *Early China*, 21, 1–46. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0362502800003394>
- Litvina, A. F., & Uspensky, F. B. (2006). *The Choice of Name among the Russian Princes in the 10th-16th Centuries: Dynastic History through the Prism of Anthroponymy*. Indric. (In Russian).
- Needham, J. (1954). *Science and Civilization in China*. Cambridge University Press.
- Pu, S. (2021). *The Tales from the Make-do Studio*. Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House. (In Chinese).
- Puett, M. (2019). Life, Domesticated and Undomesticated: Ghosts, Sacrifice, and the Efficacy of Ritual Practice in Early China. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 9(2), 439–460. <https://doi.org/10.1086/706073>
- Shen, Y. (2019). On the Change and Development of Horror Images in Western Vampire Movies and Chinese Zombie Movies. *Journal of Henyang Normal University*, 46–52. (In Chinese).
- Ten Great Cases of Spirits in China. *The 1995 Case of Zombies in Chengdu*. (2021). Meng Zimin. <http://mengzimin.yergoo.com/post/145/> (In Chinese)
- The Beginning and the End of the Zombie Phenomenon in Shanghai. Two Versions of the Vampire Attack in Pudong*. (2021). Telling Strange Stories. <https://www.qiwen8.com/html/54739.htm> (In Chinese)
- The Book of Mountains and Seas*. (2014). The Publishing House of “Guangming Daily”. (In Chinese).
- The whole story of the Shanghai Red-haired Zombie incident in 1931. (2017). In *In Beiyang Night Travels*. Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House. (In Chinese).
- Wang, S., & Si, M. (2019). Zombie Movie Genre in the Cultural Mirror of Hong Kong. *Cinema and Literature*, 3, 17–21. (In Chinese).
- Wu, Ch. (2009). *The Journey to the West*. People's Literature Publishing House. (In Chinese).
- Xie, Z. (2021). *Five Different Trays*. Book Company of China. (In Chinese).
- Yin, Y. (2016). On the Cultural Representation in Hong Kong Zombie Films with “Mr. Zombie” as an Example. *Chinese Information Journal*, 221, 387. (In Chinese).
- Yü, S. (1994). *The Records of Mountains and Valleys*. Book Company of China. (In Chinese).
- Yuan, M. (1995). *Censored by Confucius*. East Gate book.
- Yuan, M. (2003). *The New Records of Qi Xie or What Confucius Didn't Talk About*. Northwest Press. (In Russian).
- Yuan, M. (2021). *Censored by Confucius*. Jiangsu Phoenix Literature and Art Publishing House. (In Chinese).



- Zelenin, D. K. (1995). *Essays on Russian Mythology. Selected Works. Articles on Spiritual Culture*. Indric. (In Russian).
- Zhang, D. (1997). *The Book of Five Shelves*. The Shanghai publishing House of Ancient Books. (In Chinese).
- Zhang, J. (2020). *Revealing a very special profession that was lost a hundred years ago - "The corpse carpenter"*. https://baike.baidu.com/tashuo/browse/content?id=835bbb2f9872dc26a7039dec&bk_fr=planet (In Chinese)
- Zhuan, W., & Pan, W. (2018). *Zombie, the Merciless Stranger*. In *Cultural Heritage of China. The Notes on Demons* (pp. 86–97). The Publishing Society of "Cultural Heritage of China" Journal. (In Chinese).