

Saggi

MISFORTUNE, DISASTERS, AND CALAMITIES: TALES OF THE
MONKEY SPIRIT IN THE *TAIPING GUANGJI* 太平廣記SVENTURE, DISASTRI E CALAMITÀ: RACCONTI DELLO SPIRITO-SCIMMIA
NEL *TAIPING GUANGJI* 太平廣記

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of monkey spirits in the *Taiping Guangji*, focusing on seven narratives where these entities bring misfortune, disasters, and calamities. These spirits exhibit ambiguous traits, shifting between demonic and divine characteristics, and are linked to death, illness, or large-scale catastrophes. Recurring motifs include their sealing or imprisonment, highlighting their perceived danger, and shape-shifting abilities, reinforcing their role as deceptive and chaotic figures. A comparative analysis reveals both common themes and notable differences: some stories depict monkey spirits as purely malevolent, while others suggest an uncertain nature. These representations align with broader literary traditions in China, where monkeys often appear as liminal beings between humans, animals, and the supernatural. The study sheds light on the evolving perception of monkey figures in pre-modern Chinese literature, an image that would later be reinterpreted in classical narratives such as *Journey to the West*.

Keywords: *Taiping Guangji*; *Zhiguai*; *Chuanqi*; Monkey; Monkey Spirit; Translation.

Il presente articolo esamina la rappresentazione degli spiriti-scimmia nel *Taiping guangji*, concentrandosi su sette racconti nei quali tali entità sono associate a sventure, disastri e calamità. Questi spiriti presentano caratteristiche ambigue, oscillando tra il demoniaco e il divino, e sono collegati alla morte, alla malattia o a catastrofi su larga scala. Tra i motivi ricorrenti figurano la sigillatura o l'imprigionamento, che ne sottolineano la pericolosità, e la capacità di mutare forma, che ne rafforza il carattere ingannevole e caotico. L'analisi comparativa mette in luce elementi comuni e differenze significative: alcuni racconti presentano gli spiriti-scimmia come esseri apertamente malevoli, mentre altri ne evidenziano la natura incerta. Tali rappresentazioni si inseriscono in più ampie tradizioni letterarie cinesi, nelle quali la scimmia appare spesso come una creatura liminale tra l'umano, l'animale e il soprannaturale. Lo studio contribuisce a chiarire l'evoluzione dell'immagine della scimmia nella letteratura cinese premoderna, successivamente rielaborata nel classico *Viaggio in Occidente*.

Parole chiave: *Taiping Guangji*; *Zhiguai*; *Chuanqi*; Scimmia; Spirito-scimmia; Traduzione.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Within the Chinese bestiary, primates have always held a significant place in literature because of both their resemblance to human beings and the diverse characteristics attributed to them. In the artistic and literary context (Hu and Zhang), the monkey icon has historically been divided into two main categories: macaques (*mihou* 獼猴) and gibbons (*yuan* 猿). This classification, initiated during the Zhou (1045 BCE–256 BCE) and Qin (221 BCE–206 BCE) periods, culminated in the belief that gibbons were good and macaques evil during the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties. However, this distinction became increasingly difficult to maintain during the Yuan period (1279–1368) (Van Gulik; Zhang). From an artistic and literary perspective, this process was accompanied by the emergence of a particular monkey-like figure that became prominent after the Tang dynasty, namely the Monkey Pilgrim, who assisted the Chinese monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) on his legendary journey to India to obtain the Buddhist sutras. This character appears in the *pinghua* 平話 (plain tale) *Da Tang Sanzang qujing shihua* 大唐三藏取經詩話 (*Poetic Notes on the Pilgrimage of Tripitaka of the Great Tang to Retrieve the Sutras*) and in the *zaju* 雜劇 (theatre play) *Xiyou ji zaju* 西遊記雜劇 (*Journey to the West: the Zaju Play*). The literary consolidation of the monkey figure took place during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), culminating in the anonymous publication of the novel *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*), later attributed to scholar Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩 (c. 1500–1582). Scholarly research on this novel has often focused on deconstructing the antiheroic icon of the monkey by tracing its origins through the attributes assigned to primates in Chinese narrative traditions.¹

As mentioned, the monkey character in Chinese narrative literature is highly complex, due in part to its multiple positive and negative portrayals. This study aims to examine and analyse a specific aspect of the monkey figure, namely that of the “monkey spirit”, a term proposed by German sinologist and sociologist Wolfram Eberhard (1909–1989) in 1968:

The most eastern documentation known to me of the motif that a marriage occurred between a woman and a monkey referred to Yu-ch'i, Fukien [Youxi, Fujian]. There a monkey seduced the wife of a merchant during his absence. When the husband returned, the monkey was killed. Later on, the woman gave birth to a monkey [...]. In Kuanghsi [Guangxi] there are monkey spirits which are almost invulnerable. They, too, kidnap women and impregnate them [...]. (Eberhard 52)

This passage highlights key mythological themes related to the supernatural, human-monkey interactions in Chinese culture, and the symbolic contamination between the human and animal worlds. The assertion that these beings are “almost invulnerable” suggests a power dynamic in which they exert significant control over human victims, reflecting the fears and conflicts within communities. Eberhard’s term can be summarised by the Chinese expression *houjing* 猴精 (mon-

¹ The earliest research in this field can be traced back to an exchange of letters between critics Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) between 1922 and 1923. See Lu; Hu.

key spirit), where the character *jing* 精 can also mean *jingling* 精靈 (spirit, ghost) and *guiguai* 鬼怪 (spectre, monster). Consequently, *houjing* could serve as an umbrella term encompassing the concepts of both spirit-ghost and spectre-monster. While the former carries no inherently negative meaning, the latter conveys the hostile nature of the monkey figure.² A comparable understanding of *houjing* appears in Xiao's discussion of monkey-spirit worship (Xiao), where *houjing* is treated as a form of *jingguai* 精怪: an anomalous being endowed with spiritual power, capable of transformation, and able to intervene in human affairs either harmfully or beneficially. This broader sense is useful here, since the narratives examined below do not reduce the monkey spirit to the abduction and impregnation motif emphasised by Eberhard, but present it as a more flexible agent of misfortune, disorder, and supernatural disturbance.

However, Eberhard's analysis focuses mainly on monkey-like figures that abduct women to give birth to hybrid offspring,³ with little reference to narratives featuring monkey spirits as bringers of misfortune, catastrophic events, and calamities. In Chinese literature, certain creatures are frequently associated with disasters, as seen in ancient sources such as the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*). Several examples describe monkey-like beings whose appearance signals impending catastrophe:

1. "C'è un animale simile ad una scimmia, con gli occhi e bocca rossi e corpo giallo. Il suo nome è *yonghe* 雍和. La sua comparsa significa grande terrore nello stato" (Fracasso 104);⁴
2. "C'è un animale simile a una scimmia, con testa bianca e zampe rosse. Il suo nome è *zhuyan* 朱厭. La sua comparsa significa grandi guerre" (Fracasso 26);⁵
3. "C'è un animale simile a una scimmia, ma con quattro orecchi; il suo nome è *changyou* 長右, [...] La sua comparsa significa inondazioni [...]" (Fracasso 12).⁶

To contribute to this extensive field of research, this study will focus on selected stories extracted from the *Taiping Guangji* 太平廣記 (*Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*, hereafter abbreviated as TPGJ), an encyclopaedic *leishu* 類書 of the Song dynasty. The compilation of this collection, commissioned by Emperor Song Taizong 宋太宗 (939–997) and completed between 977

² It should be noted that Chinese mythology and literature frequently depict characters that do not appear in a fixed moral framework, but may shift between divine, demonic, and ambiguous modes of representation. This instability is also relevant to the term *shenmo* 神魔 ("gods and demons"), used by Lu Xun to define a literary genre integrating fantastical, mythological, and supernatural elements, where humans, gods, demons, and magical creatures interact. This genre includes *Xiyou ji*.

³ On the broader tradition of *yuanhou dao fu* 猿猴盜婦 ("apes/monkeys abducting women"), see Chen (2013), who reconstructs the development of this narrative complex from Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and Six Dynasties (220–589) records, through Tang literary imagination, to later Buddhist and Daoist religious narratives. Chen argues that the motif is shaped both by literati imagination about anomalous simian beings and by later religious narrative frameworks.

⁴ English translation: "There is a creature resembling a monkey, with red eyes and mouth and a yellow body. Its name is *yonghe*. Its appearance signifies great terror in the state."

⁵ English translation: "There is a creature resembling a monkey, with a white head and red paws. Its name is *zhuyan*. Its appearance signifies great wars."

⁶ English translation: "There is a creature resembling a monkey, but with four ears; its name is *changyou*. [...] Its appearance signifies floods."

and 978 during the Taiping Xingguo era (976–983), was conducted by a team led by the official Li Fang 李昉 (925–996). Structurally, the TPGJ is a 500-*juan* 卷 (chapter) collection divided into 92 categories and 150 subcategories, containing over 7,000 stories, including a significant portion of Tang *chuanqi* 傳奇 (tales of strange events) and earlier *zhiguai* 志怪 (accounts of the strange) materials. As a result, the language of the TPGJ is best understood as Literary Chinese, incorporating materials from different periods, including medieval narratives and earlier texts transmitted through later compilation. The collection features numerous stories related to the supernatural, as well as fictionalized historical events, drawing from historical biographies, unofficial histories, myths, and legends. Among the various thematic sections of the collection, the classification of animals occupies a significant portion and is mostly concentrated in the final *juan*, namely from 418 (*Long Yi* 龍一, “Dragons, One”) to 479 (*Kunchong Qi* 昆蟲七, “Insects, Seven”).⁷ The largest category, spanning thirteen chapters, is *Chushou* 畜獸 (“Domestic and Wild Animals”), which concludes with three chapters (444, 445, and 446) focusing primarily on monkeys and gibbons, containing twenty-five stories. This study will focus exclusively on monkey-related stories found outside these three final chapters, namely *juan* 444 (*Chushou Shiyi* 畜獸十一 “Domestic and Wild Animals, Eleven”), 445 (*Chushou Shi'er* 畜獸十二 “Domestic and Wild Animals, Twelve”), and 446 (*Chushou Shisan* 畜獸十三 “Domestic and Wild Animals, Thirteen”).⁸

The preliminary investigation was conducted by searching the entire collection for occurrences of the character *hou* 猴 (monkey) and all its derivatives. Additionally, the research included passages describing monkey-like creatures using phrases such as *ru hou* 如猴 and *si hou* 似猴, which refer to “monkey-like”, “ape-like”, or “simian.” The following sections will present the selected texts in categorisation tables, followed by translations and commentary.⁹ Stories are classified based on their *juan* number, section title,¹⁰ story number, story title, and source. Once translated, they will be referenced by their *juan* number and numerical placement. Unless otherwise indicated, the protagonists mentioned in the following narratives are not attested in independent historical sources and are treated here primarily as figures within the textual economy of the TPGJ. The individual commentaries following each translation are therefore limited to essential philological, lexical, and contextual observations, while the broader comparative interpretation of the monkey spirit as an agent of disorder is developed in Section 3.

⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the collection’s contents, see Schafer.

⁸ For an analysis of the main themes of the three *juan*, see Ruscica. The study highlights a stylistic heterogeneity (as the stories originate from nineteen different sources) despite thematic coherence, specifically that of *bianxing* 變形 (transformation) in monkeys and gibbons, defining these stories as examples of *bianxing zhiguai* 變形志怪 (anomalous chronicles of transformation). For a broader analysis of *bianxing zhiguai*, see Berry.

⁹ All translations from original Chinese texts are by the author. Due to length considerations, some texts have been summarised.

¹⁰ In rendering these translations, reference was also made to Schafer.

2. CONTENT ANALYSIS

According to a preliminary personal investigation, at least seven stories recount or allude to the monkey spirit as a harbinger of misfortune, catastrophic events, and calamities. This creature appears ambiguously, making its classification particularly challenging. Analysing the titles of the sections and the sources of the stories, it becomes clear that the grotesque and the marvellous play a central role in these narratives.

In the following stories, the monkey spirit does not only appear as a divine entity or a demon but also as a being capable of deceiving humans, often leading to their downfall or weakening. For this reason, the term “monkey spirit” has been preferred over “monkey demon.” The translations will be followed by commentary to enhance reader comprehension.

<i>Juan</i> Number	Section Title	Story Number	Story Title	Source
140	<i>Zheng Ying Liu</i> 徵應六 (Responses as Manifestations, Six)	5	Wang Feng 汪鳳	<i>Jiyi ji</i> 集異記 (<i>Collection of Strange Stories</i>)
318	<i>Gui San</i> 鬼三 (Ghosts, Three)	9	Yang Xian 楊羨	<i>Guang Gujin Wuxing ji</i> 廣古今五行記 (<i>Expanded Old and New Records of the Five Phases</i>)
325	<i>Gui Shi</i> 鬼十 (Ghosts, Ten)	9	Yu Jisui 庾季隨	<i>Shuyi ji</i> 述異記 (<i>Tales of Strange Matters</i>)
355	<i>Gui Shisi</i> 鬼四十 (Ghosts, Forty)	7	<i>Qingyuan Dujiang</i> 清源都將 (The General of Qingyuan)	<i>Jishen lu</i> 稽神錄 (<i>Investigation of Gods</i>)
360	<i>Yaoguai Er</i> 妖怪二 (Uncanny Grotesques, Two)	32	Tian Sao 田騷	<i>Wuxing ji</i> 五行記 (<i>Records of the Five Phases</i>)
366	<i>Yaoguai Ba</i> 妖怪八 (Uncanny Grotesques, Eight)	4	Zhao Shizong 趙士宗	<i>Youyang Zazu</i> 酉陽雜俎 (<i>Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang</i>)
393	<i>Lei Yi</i> 雷一 (Thunder, One)	2	Yang Daohe 楊道和	<i>Soushen ji</i> 搜神記 (<i>Investigations into the Divine</i>)

Table 1. Summary Table of Monkey Spirit Tales in the TPGJ (excluding the three “Chushou” *juan*)

2.1. Wang Feng

During the Tang dynasty, in Wu County, Suzhou, Wang Feng sold his house to Cheng Zhong after losing his family. One day, Zhang Li, passing by, noticed two dark lights¹¹ emerging from the house and suspected the presence of a hidden treasure. He befriended Cheng Zhong and, once inside his

¹¹ The text contains the phrase *qing qi* 青氣. The character *qing* 青 can denote different colours, including green, blue, and black. In this translation, “dark glow” was considered the most appropriate rendering.

residence, began digging at the spot where the lights had appeared. He soon uncovered a stone plate. Upon removing the cover, he discovered a stone chest with seven unreadable crimson characters inscribed on its surface. The chest was bound by iron chains and sealed with metal welds. Zhang Li forced it open and found a bronze cauldron, whose mouth was sealed with a lid welded with molten lead and tin. This lid bore another inscription with nine purple seals, which were different in style from the previous characters and resembled ancient seal script,¹² making them incomprehensible to him. Zhang Li broke open the bronze lid, revealing another barrier: the cauldron's opening was sealed with three layers of red silk. Upon uncovering them, a large monkey sprang out and immediately disappeared. Inside the cauldron, he also found an inscription: "In the first year of the seventh month, on the fifteenth day of the Zhenming era (587–589), the Taoist Bao Zhiyuan, belonging to the Mao Mountain¹³ sect, sealed a monkey spirit in this vessel. Twelve years after its discovery, great military upheaval will arise, and all will be reduced to smoke and ashes. The family of the one who finds it will be annihilated." Zhang Li had uncovered the monkey during the second year of the tenth month of the Tianbao era (742–756). Twelve years later, his entire family was massacred, coinciding precisely with the anniversary of the cauldron's discovery and the moment when An Lushan (703–757) gathered his troops for rebellion.¹⁴ (TPGJ 140.5, 1010)

Commentary: The expression *hou shen* 猴神 may be rendered as "monkey spirit" or "monkey deity." Although *shen* 神 often denotes a divine being, its usage in *zhiguai* and *chuanqi* contexts can be semantically unstable, especially when associated with dangerous or anomalous entities. In this story, the iron chains, metal seals, and bronze vessel indicate that the creature was perceived as a force requiring ritual containment. The dating of the discovery also links the narrative to the An Lushan Rebellion, making the episode a useful case for examining the association between monkey spirits and large-scale historical disorder.

2.2. Yang Xian

During the late Taiyuan era (376–396) of Emperor Xiaowu,¹⁵ in Wu County, a man named Yang

¹² Seal script, dating back to the Qin dynasty, is the oldest form of Chinese calligraphy. It comprises two variants: Greater Seal Script (大篆 *dazhuan*) and Lesser Seal Script (小篆 *xiaozhuan*). The former, older and more irregular, has roots in archaic characters, such as oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文 *jiaguwen*) and bronze inscriptions (金文 *jinwen*). The latter, a standardized refinement of the former, emerged during the Han dynasty and developed into a regular script under the Tang dynasty. Since *Jiyi ji* dates to the Tang period, the seal script mentioned in the text likely refers to Greater Seal Script.

¹³ Present-day Jiangsu province.

¹⁴ The episode clearly references the An Lushan Rebellion (703–757), which broke out in 755. An Lushan led an army of approximately 200,000 men, capturing Chang'an, then the capital of the Tang dynasty, and proclaiming himself emperor of the Wen dynasty. This forced Tang Emperor Xuanzong 唐玄宗 (685–762) to flee to Sichuan. The Tang forces had to collaborate with foreign troops to quell the rebellion, ultimately defeating An Lushan in 757. After the rebellion, the empire entered a prolonged period of internal strife, where the central government lost control over Chinese provinces, leading to instability.

¹⁵ Jin Emperor Xiaowu 孝武 (362–396) of the Jin dynasty (266–420).

Xian encountered a monkey-like being with a humanoid face covered in hair. Each time Yang Xian sat down to eat, the demon would rush in and steal his food. One day, he grabbed a knife and chased after it. The creature ran towards his wife, who was busy weaving, and suddenly transformed her into a demon. In a panic, Yang Xian stabbed his wife multiple times, only to witness the monkey demon emerge from her body, clapping its hands in delight. Only then did Yang Xian realize he had been deceived. Looking down at his wife's dismembered corpse, he discovered she had been six months pregnant, and the foetus already had hair. Stricken with grief, Yang Xian soon died from the trauma. (TPGJ 318.9, 2517)

Commentary: The creature in 318.9 is described as monkey-like rather than explicitly identified as a monkey spirit. Its main function in the narrative is deceptive: it produces a false perception that leads Yang Xian to kill his own wife. The episode is therefore especially relevant for the study of transformation, which recalls the concept of *bianxing* 變形 (shape-shifting), and misrecognition in *zhiguai* narratives.

2.3. *Yu Jisui*

During the Yuanjia era (424–453) of the Song dynasty (420–479), Yu Jisui, a man of exceptional strength and courage, fell gravely ill and was bedridden. One day, a white qi resembling a cloud transformed into a rooster before his eyes. Yu Jisui grabbed a knife and attacked the creature, which vanished, leaving behind a river of blood. Soon after, the wail of an old woman was heard, calling out for her son. The figure she was mourning turned out to be a monkey-like creature, which glared at Yu Jisui before fleeing. Moments later, a group of people stormed into his house and chanted in unison: “Yu Jisui has killed our officer!” Although Yu Jisui managed to drive them away with a loud roar, he soon realized that his father had gone missing. After a desperate search, he found him in a temple, where a ghost was draining his qi through a leather pouch.¹⁶ The father died a few days later. (TPGJ 325.9, 2581–2582)

Commentary: The episode in 325.9 is notable for its emphasis on *qi* 氣 (vital energy) as a vulnerable substance that can be attacked or depleted by supernatural agents. The relationship between the rooster, the old woman, the monkey-like creature, and the later ghost remains deliberately unclear, producing a chain of apparitions rather than a single stable antagonist.

¹⁶ The term *pinang* 皮囊 here may be interpreted as “leather sack”. However, it is highly likely that in this context, it serves as a Buddhist metaphor for the human body. The concept of *pinang*, also written *genang* 革囊, first appears in the *Sūtra of Forty-Two Sections* (*Sishi'er Zhang jing* 四十二章經), believed to be the first Indian Buddhist sūtra translated into Chinese in 67 CE. For further discussion, see Robson.

2.4. *The General of Qingyuan*

In Qingyuan,¹⁷ General Yang Mou went to his office one morning. While he was eating, a goose carrying spirit money¹⁸ suddenly appeared and moved towards the veranda. His family ordered the servants to catch it, but instead, they found an old man with a double topknot and a white beard, who frightened them into fleeing. When Yang Mou returned home, he tried to beat the old man, but the demon managed to escape by changing shape. Unable to strike him, Yang Mou became enraged and exclaimed: “Wait until I finish my meal, then I will deal with you!” The demon appeared before him, bowed, and said: “Very well.” Meanwhile, strange apparitions terrorized Yang Mou’s daughters. The elder daughter was in the kitchen cutting meat when the piece she had just sliced vanished from the cutting board. Terrified, she brandished the knife in the air, and a black-furred hand appeared before her, saying: “Please, go ahead and cut.” The younger daughter went to fetch salt from a jar, but as she reached inside, a monkey leaped out and climbed onto her back before disappearing. Both daughters fell ill, and later, along with their mother, they died. Yang Mou summoned the sorcerer Ming Jiao and asked him to recite scriptures throughout the night. The demon cursed Yang Mou before vanishing. The evil had been eradicated. Yang Mou died that same year. (TPGJ 355.7, 2812)

Commentary: The story in 355.7 presents a sequence of unstable manifestations rather than a single fixed form: a goose, an old man, a black-furred hand, and finally a monkey. The monkey’s appearance is therefore part of a broader pattern of transformation and domestic haunting. The final intervention of the sorcerer Ming Jiao 明教¹⁹ also places the episode within the ritual context of exorcistic response to household disorder.

2.5. *Tian Sao*

In the final years of the Liang dynasty (502–557), a man named Tian Sao was returning home to Nanyang, carrying a bow and arrows. About ten li from his house, he suddenly felt a sense of dread due to his solitude. In the distance, he saw a child in red robes standing atop a hill. Tian

¹⁷ The location of Qingyuan is uncertain. Two cities bear the same name: the first was founded during the Sui dynasty (581–618) in present-day Taiyuan, Shanxi province; the second was established during the Zhou dynasty (690–705) under Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705) in present-day Putian, Fujian province.

¹⁸ During the *shouling* 守靈 (funeral vigil)—a practice where mourners keep watch over the deceased to alleviate their suffering or commemorate them—*zhiqian* 紙錢 (spirit money) is burned, and sacrifices are offered in honour of the deceased’s soul. Spirit money refers to paper reproductions of banknotes, symbolizing currency used in the afterlife. These paper notes are burned at various points throughout the funeral rites, ensuring they reach the spirit of the departed.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that the *Jishen Lu* collection was compiled during the Tang dynasty, when Manichaeism (*Monijiao* 摩尼教) spread in China. Following the great anti-Buddhist persecution led by Emperor Tang Wuzong 武宗 during the Huichang era (841–845), Manichaeism became officially recognized under the term *mingjiao* 明教 (literally “Religion of Light”). It is therefore possible that the sorcerer in question was a Manichaean priest. For further discussion on Manichaeism and its terminology in China, see Lin.

Sao asked where he was from, to which the child replied: “My home is at the treetops.” Thinking the boy was mocking him, Tian Sao moved closer, but the child climbed the tree like a monkey.²⁰ Startled, Tian Sao nocked an arrow and searched around the tree, but all he could see was something resembling a banner. He attempted to climb the tree, but found nothing. Upon returning home, he felt fatigued and soon fell ill, dying a few days later. (TPGJ 360.32, 2859)

Commentary: In 360.32, the mysterious figure is initially described as a child in red robes, but his supernatural nature is revealed when he climbs the tree like a monkey. The connection between the encounter and Tian Sao’s subsequent illness makes the episode relevant to the association between monkey-like beings and fatal misfortune.

2.6. *Zhao Shizong*

During the first year of the Huichang era (841–845), in Rongzhou,²¹ a rise in water levels caused the river to become clogged with floating logs. The governor, Zhao Shizong, organized a fleet to clear the obstruction. The local government office was an old, cramped structure, no longer in use, so it was dismantled to make way for the renovation of the Kaiyuan Temple.²² Over a month later, a traveller encountered a man with monkey-like features, wearing a tattered black robe.²³ The man said: “I was sent by General Guan to gather wood, but I was driven away from this prefecture. I shall return next year.” In the seventh month of the following year, an unexpected flood devastated the region, causing severe damage and loss of life. The ground was left scarred with deep pits filled with boulders, and dark, foul-smelling water remained until nightfall. After ten days, the water receded, leaving behind only the boulders. The only object left untouched was the statue of Emperor Xuanzong inside the Kaiyuan Temple. (TPGJ 366.4, 2999–3000)

Commentary: In 366.4, the monkey-like figure functions primarily as a prophetic apparition. Unlike other stories in which the creature directly attacks or deceives human victims, here its speech announces a future return, which is followed by the flood of the following year. The episode is therefore especially important for distinguishing between the monkey-like being as an active agent of harm and as an omen of natural catastrophe.

²⁰ The text uses the binomial *yuanhou* 猿猴, meaning “gibbons and monkeys”.

²¹ Present-day Yibin, Sichuan province.

²² The Kaiyuan Temple mentioned here should be understood as the local *Kaiyuan si* 開元寺 of Rongzhou 戎州. Its exact location and material continuity with any later or extant temple remain uncertain. The reference is nevertheless consistent with Emperor Xuanzong’s policy of establishing Kaiyuan temples in prefectures across the empire.

²³ The text includes *qingyi* 青衣. Consistent with note 11, *qing* is rendered here as “black”.

2.7. Yang Daohe

During the Jin dynasty (266–420), a man named Yang Daohe lived in the Fufeng area.²⁴ One summer day, while working in the fields, a sudden thunderstorm arose, forcing him to take shelter beneath a mulberry tree. As a lightning bolt struck towards the tree, Daohe attempted to deflect it with his hoe, but the impact broke his arms. The lightning was so sudden and powerful that it knocked him to the ground, leaving him no chance to escape. The entity accompanying the lightning had lips red as cinnabar, eyes shining like a mirror, and a single horn, three *chi* long, protruding from its hair. Its appearance was a composite of multiple creatures,²⁵ featuring the head of a macaque. (TPGJ 393.2, 3136)

Commentary: The entity in 393.2 is not a monkey spirit in the strict sense, but a thunder being whose body combines features of several creatures and includes the head of a macaque. The episode is therefore useful as a limiting case within the corpus: it shows how simian traits could also be attributed to divine or elemental beings, not only to ghosts, demons, or deceptive spirits. This association also recalls broader Chinese representations of thunder beings, including the thunder deity (*leishen* 雷神),²⁶ and earlier mythological descriptions of thunder deities in the *Shanhai jing*.²⁷

3. THEMATIC COMPARISONS

The seven stories examined above do not present a single, uniform image of the monkey spirit. Rather, they show a range of simian or monkey-like beings whose functions shift according to narrative context: some directly attack or deceive human beings, others appear as omens of historical or natural catastrophe, and one case links simian morphology to a thunder deity. The following comparison therefore moves beyond the individual episodes in order to identify the main patterns through which monkey-like figures are associated with disorder, misfortune, and the destabilization of human or cosmic order.

²⁴ Fufeng was a district in Shaanxi province.

²⁵ The Chinese text includes the phrase “*zhuang ru liuchu* 狀如六畜,” referring to the six domestic animals: horse (*ma* 馬), ox (*niu* 牛), sheep (*yang* 羊), rooster (*ji* 雞), dog (*quan* 犬), and pig (*shi* 豕). Literally, the phrase means “its appearance was similar to that of the six domestic animals.”

²⁶ This divine figure has long been venerated in Chinese culture, with sacrifices and offerings made to the *leishi* 雷神 (“Thunder Master”) until the end of the imperial era. In folk and mythological tales, thunder deities were often depicted as mythical creatures or monstrous beings. The account analysed here, dating to the Eastern Jin period (317–420), portrays a thunder deity resembling a monkey. It is possible that this iconography persisted and evolved over time, ultimately influencing the visual representation of Sun Wukong, who was often mistaken for the Thunder Duke (*leigong* 雷公) (Chao 48).

²⁷ For an earlier mythological description of a thunder deity in the *Shanhai jing*, see Fracasso: “[...] ha corpo di drago e testa umana. Si percuote il ventre come un tamburo” (186). English translation: “[...] it has the body of a dragon and the head of a human. It beats its belly like a drum.”

3.1. *Similarities*

A first shared element is the association between simian appearance and the disruption of ordinary order. This disruption may take different forms. In 140.5, the release of the monkey sealed in the bronze cauldron is retrospectively connected with military upheaval and the violence of the An Lushan Rebellion. In 366.4, the monkey-like figure does not directly cause harm, but announces a return that is followed by a destructive flood. In 318.9, 325.9, 355.7, and 360.32, the consequences are instead concentrated on individuals or households, producing illness, death, misrecognition, or domestic collapse. The corpus therefore does not present a single mechanism of disaster, but a recurrent narrative pattern in which simian figures mark the passage from ordinary experience to disorder.

A second shared element is morphological instability. The beings examined here are rarely presented as ordinary monkeys. Some are monkey-like rather than explicitly simian; others appear through partial, composite, or shifting forms. In 318.9, the creature produces a fatal confusion between the human body and the demonic body. In 325.9, the monkey-like figure appears within a sequence of transformations and spectral manifestations involving *qi*, a rooster, an old woman, and a ghost. In 355.7, the haunting unfolds through a goose, an old man, a black-furred hand, and a monkey. In 360.32, the anomalous nature of the child in red garments is revealed only through his simian movement. These examples suggest that the monkey-like figure is less a stable zoological category than a sign of unstable boundaries between human, animal, ghostly, and divine forms. The case of 393.2 is significant precisely because it stands at the edge of this corpus. The entity encountered by Yang Daohe is not a monkey spirit in the same sense as the beings described in the ghost or uncanny sections of the TPGJ, but a thunder being whose body includes a macaque-like head. Its inclusion shows that simian morphology could function beyond the domain of deceptive spirits or household hauntings. In this case, the monkey-like feature contributes to the representation of an elemental and divine force, thereby extending the semantic range of simian imagery from demonic disorder to cosmic violence.

A third shared element is the irreversible chain of consequences set in motion by the encounter with the simian figure. In several stories, the monkey or monkey-like being marks a point after which ordinary order cannot be restored. In 318.9, misrecognition leads Yang Xian to kill his pregnant wife; in 325.9, the apparitions culminate in the depletion of the father's *qi* and his death; in 355.7, the haunting destroys Yang Mou's household before his own death later that year; and in 360.32, an apparently brief encounter is followed by illness and death. In 140.5 and 366.4, the same pattern is displaced onto a larger scale: the discovery of the sealed monkey and the appearance of the monkey-like messenger both precede collective catastrophe. The stories thus construct simian figures not merely as strange beings, but as narrative triggers through which misfortune becomes irreversible.

3.2. Differences

The main difference among the stories concerns the function assigned to the monkey or monkey-like being. In some cases, the creature acts as a direct hostile agent. This is especially clear in 318.9, where deception produces the death of Yang Xian's wife, and in 355.7, where the haunting attacks the domestic space through a sequence of apparitions. In other cases, the simian figure operates less as an aggressor than as a sign or mediator of disaster: in 366.4, the monkey-like messenger announces a future return before the flood, while in 140.5 the released monkey is linked retrospectively to historical violence through the prophecy inscribed in the vessel. Finally, 393.2 stands apart from both models, since the simian feature belongs to a thunder being rather than to a ghost, demon, or household spirit.

A second difference concerns the scale on which disorder unfolds. In 318.9, 325.9, 355.7, and 360.32, the effects remain concentrated on individuals or families: a wife is killed, a father's qi is depleted, a household is destroyed, or a solitary traveller falls ill and dies. In 140.5 and 366.4, by contrast, the consequences are projected onto collective history and the natural environment: the former links the released monkey to the An Lushan Rebellion, while the latter associates the monkey-like messenger with a devastating flood. The case of 393.2 extends the scale further, since the simian feature belongs to a thunder being and thus connects monkey-like morphology with elemental violence rather than with domestic or social disorder.

A third difference concerns the degree of interaction between the simian figure and human characters. In 318.9 and 355.7, interaction is direct and invasive: the creature deceives, transforms, speaks, or enters the domestic space. In 325.9 and 360.32, the encounter is less direct but still physically consequential, since the apparition is followed by illness, depletion, or death. In 140.5 and 366.4, by contrast, the monkey or monkey-like figure operates through mediation: inscription, prophecy, and retrospective correlation connect the apparition to later catastrophe. In 393.2, interaction is almost absent, since the simian trait belongs to the form of the thunder being rather than to a figure that communicates with or deceives human beings.

A final difference concerns containment. In 140.5, the monkey is physically and ritually confined through chains, seals, silk layers, and a bronze vessel, suggesting that its danger can be recognized but only temporarily controlled. In 355.7, by contrast, the haunting circulates freely within the household and requires an exorcistic response rather than prior containment. In 366.4, the monkey-like figure cannot be contained because it functions as a messenger of a future event; in 393.2, containment is irrelevant, since the simian trait belongs to an elemental being. These differences show that the stories imagine simian disorder along a spectrum ranging from sealed menace to mobile haunting, prophetic apparition, and cosmic force.

4. FINAL REMARKS

The seven stories examined in this article suggest that the monkey spirit in the TPGJ should not be understood as a marginal curiosity within the collection's animal lore, but as part of a broader repertoire of supernatural figures through which pre-modern Chinese narrative imagined disorder. The corpus analysed here expands the discussion beyond the more familiar motifs of abduction, sexual violence, and hybrid offspring associated with monkey spirits, showing instead how simian or monkey-like beings could be linked to illness, misrecognition, domestic collapse, historical violence, flood, and thunder. In this sense, the TPGJ preserves a set of representations in which the monkey is not yet the disciplined religious antihero later associated with Sun Wukong, but a more unstable figure situated between animality, monstrosity, divine force, and omen.

The comparison of these narratives also shows that simian disorder operates across several registers. It may appear as a sealed menace, as in 140.5; as an invasive domestic haunting, as in 355.7; as a deceptive or fatal encounter, as in 318.9 and 360.32; as a spectral sequence involving the depletion of qi, as in 325.9; as a prophetic sign of environmental catastrophe, as in 366.4; or as an attribute of elemental violence, as in 393.2. This range is significant because it prevents the monkey spirit from being reduced to a single demonic type. Instead, the figure emerges as a flexible narrative device through which the boundaries between human, animal, ghost, demon, deity, and omen can be tested.

This analysis therefore contributes to the study of monkeys in Chinese literature by drawing attention to a less systematized but significant pre-Ming layer of simian representation. Before the later consolidation of the monkey as a central religious and narrative figure in the *Xiyou ji* tradition, the TPGJ shows monkey-like beings operating within the same imaginative field as ghosts, demons, anomalous animals, thunder beings, and other agents of disorder. Their significance lies precisely in this instability: they do not form a single mythological type, but reveal how simian traits could be used to narrate the breakdown of bodily, domestic, social, natural, and cosmic boundaries. Since this study has focused primarily on occurrences of 猴 and related simian expressions, future research could expand the corpus to include other primate terms and adjacent figures, especially those connected with yuan 猿 and broader traditions of anomalous animals.

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