

DENIZENS OF MOUNTAINS & SEAS

Fantastic Creatures of Ancient China

VOL 2



Daniel H. Kwan

THANKS

Denizens of Mountains and Seas was made possible due to the feedback, support, and assistance of my Patreon supporters.

Immense gratitude goes to my Champion Patreons:

Andreas Walters, Adam Mansfield, Amanda Chew, Andrew Quon, “Artdork”, Arvey Basa, Christine Scherer, Dan Cox, Dustin Hill, Eugene Marshall, Franz Jundis, Genevieve Fitzsimmons, James Introcaso, JoAnne Monroe, Jonathan Moua, “Josie”, Kevin Nguyen, Marty Chodorek, Michael Bowman, Michael Lombardi, Michelle Shepardson, Morgan Gate-Leven, Peter Cargill, Peter Larsen, Anthony Nomo, Robert Middlemas, “Ting”, Toni Kraja, Walter German, Paulina Przystupa, and Marcela Lopez.

Special thanks goes to my lovely partner Sarah for putting up with all of my late nights obsessing over the *Shanhaijing*.

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DESIGN NOTES

This document was made using Julius Sans One by Luciano Vergara and Crimson Text by Sebastian Kosch. These fonts are free under the *Open Font License*.

Illustrations of *Nüwa*, *fenghuang*, *gudiao*, *Xiangliu*, *changfu*, and *foxi* are from the *Shanhaijing (Classics of Mountains and Seas)*.

Illustrations of the *mingshe*, *goushe*, and *Qionggi* were done by Dot Valledor (@dottobotto).

All the creatures listed in this document are compatible with old school RPGs and D&D 5th edition through minimal conversion. The stat notes in this zine are also found in *Denizens of Mountains & Seas Vol. 1*, but with some minor amendments for clarity and playability.

REFERENCES

The Snake in Chinese Belief by Denise Chao - *Folklore* vol. 90(2), 1979, pp. 193-203.

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CREDITS

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CHINESE MONSTERS

In Chinese mythology and folklore, strange entities lurked in the space between the familiar and unfamiliar realms of existence. From the early “pig dragons” of Chinese Neolithic art, to the iconic *taotie* of the Early Bronze Age, strange animal hybrids have been common in artistic depictions and tales throughout China’s long history. These creatures (*Guaiwu* or “strange creatures”) breach the normative categories known to humanity. This often involves the transversal of natural boundaries such as human and animal, life and death, or even Chinese and foreign. As such, unlike creatures of western fantasy, which may exist in realms parallel to that of humanity, strange creatures dwell alongside humanity. Strange creatures, unusual flora, and celestial phenomena lived in parallel to the dynasties that documented their peculiarities. These entities are not supernatural or otherworldly, but rather a part of the natural world – living just outside the fringes of common knowledge.

HOW TO USE THIS ZINE

Like *Denizens of Mountains & Seas Vol. 1*, the *Shanhaijing (Classics of Mountains and Seas)* serves as the foundation of this zine. Commonly referred to as one of the great literary treasures of Chinese mythology, this ancient text collected stories and observations of the mythical geography and fantastical creatures from the Chinese worldview.

The best way to use the creatures described in this zine (and *Denizens vol. 1* as well) is to make them part of the natural world. Avian *gudiao* soar through the skies and prey on small animals much like eagles, while their feline counterparts hunt in forests for deer and maybe even adventurers. .

You’ll notice that *Pangu*, *Nüwa*, and the *fenghuang* have been described in detail, yet feature no stat blocks. I have done so with the intention of encouraging readers to avoid using them as adversaries to the players or narrative devices for combat. *Pangu* and *Nüwa* are both worshiped at shrines and in

festivals in contemporary China, where they are viewed as the mythological creators of the world and humanity. As such, I have provided a lot of context of their meaning to Chinese people and culture, but not how they may directly be used in your game outside of worldbuilding activities. While it might be tempting to remove them from their cultural context and provide game masters with tools for them to face-off against the players, changing the cultural meaning of these particular figures is disrespectful and harmful to those who still worship them.

The *fenghuang* is an immortal bird and a symbol of both imperial and conjugal harmony. It is an omen of peace and a creature that does not engage in combat. For those reasons, I omitted adding stat blocks. As with *Pangu* and *Nüwa*, my intention here is to provide information that can be used to flesh out Chinese fantasy worlds. As people did in the past, these entities are to be revered, not destroyed.

STAT NOTES

Apart from **alignment**, **special attacks**, and **treasure type**, every creature has the following attributes: **descriptors**, **frequency**, **size**, **number appearing**, **movement**, **armour class**, **resistances**, **HD**, **attacks**, **to hit**, **damage**, and **morale**.

Descriptors: Key words that describe how the creature may interact with PCs or be perceived by others.

Frequency: Indicates the rate at which the creature occurs in the wild. Options include common, uncommon, rare, and legendary.

Number Appearing: This value represents the number of creatures encountered during a wilderness encounter.

Alignment: Contrasting characterizations of monsters in Europe, Chinese creatures are not allegorical representations of religious virtues or evils. While some may be listed as evil or chaotic due to their malevolent behaviour, the alignment of non-evil creatures is irrelevant. Non-evil creatures thus do not have a listed alignment.

Movement: The distance (measured in feet) that a creature can move per turn during combat. This also includes any unique movement abilities such as flight.

Armour Class (AC): The number that an attack roll must exceed to score a hit.

Resistances: These are any damage/effect immunities possessed by the creature. If a creature has a specified “resistance”, it takes half damage from that source.

HD: HD indicates the number of hit dice that must be rolled to determine the total hit points of a creature. Unless otherwise stated, d8s are rolled for HD. The HD value also represents the saves (ability save = +HD) and ability defence (10 + HD) of the creature.

**For example, a gudio (eagle-type) has 2 HD. This means that the GM rolls 2d8 to determine its hit points. The creature has +2 to all saving throws and an ability defence of 12.*

Attacks: Any conventional attacks that the creature may use in combat.

To Hit: The attack bonus of the creature.

Damage: Is represented by a series of dice separated by “/” to indicate the appropriate dice to roll for each attack if they come from different sources.

Special Attacks: These may include unique abilities (magical or otherwise) or equipment that a creature may have.

Morale: Is a measure of whether a creature will yield or flee. When faced with insurmountable danger, such as having been reduced to half hit points or having half of their group killed, creatures must make a *morale check* by rolling 2d6. If the result is higher than their morale score, the creature will attempt to yield or flee.

Treasure Type: The creatures in the book have value to the players beyond the experience gained from slaying them. Their hides, adornments (feathers, horns, claws, etc.), other body parts, and nests are of medicinal, martial, magical, or even social value. This allows for your players to interact with them in unique and non-combative ways. As such, the creatures in this book have value in “treasure” rather than experience.

SNAKES IN CHINESE MYTH

From the giant sea serpent Jörmungandr to the gorgon Medusa's hair, snakes are a common symbol in the belief systems and legends of cultures around the world. Their appearance and deadly abilities often associate them with horror and death, while the ability to shed skin and emerge anew regard them as symbols of rebirth. In China, there is no shortage of stories featuring snakes. The myths of *Pangu* and *Nüwa* demonstrate the life-giving belief in snakes, while the *bashe* represents their fearsome side.

Pangu, the mythological creator and first living being, was said to have slumbered at the core an egg representing the universe for eighteen thousand years. When he awoke, *Pangu* emerged and with him came murky (Earth) and clear (heaven or sky) elements representing Yin and Yang. Fearing that they would coalesce, he separated them using an axe, stood between them, and began pushing up the sky.

For another eighteen thousand years, *Pangu* grew and grew as the sky and the earth parted exactly eighteen thousand feet. When this was complete his body, which once looked like a hairy man, resembled a serpent with a dragon's head. When he died, his breath became the winds, clouds, and mist; his voice became thunder; his right eye the moon and left eye the sun; his chest, hands, and feet the mountains and ends of the world; his blood the rivers; his nerves the paths; his muscles the fertile fields; his moustache the stars in the night sky and body hair the flowers, grasses, and trees; his bones, marrow, and teeth became valuable minerals and stones; his sweat became the rain and morning dew.

Humanity did not exist when *Pangu* created Heaven and Earth. That was the work of *Nüwa*, a half-human, half-snake mother goddess and heavenly repairer. After the death of *Pangu*, *Nüwa* used yellow mud and water to mould the first human. Fond of her own work, she crafted more, and they danced naked around her. But the world created by *Pangu* was too vast for the small number of humans she created by hand, so she dipped a string in the mud and trailed it around.

The drops that fell off the string became the humble commoners while those crafted by her hand became the nobility. Satisfied with her work, *Nüwa* taught her creations about marriage and procreation – allowing humanity to grow on their own.



Nüwa Mends the Heavens by Xiao Yuncong, a famed late Ming and early Qing dynasty painter, calligrapher, and poet.

BASHE

“A man who is never content is like a snake trying to swallow an elephant” - a Chinese idiom rooted in legends of *bashe*.

In Chinese classical literature, no true snake is more fearsome* than the *Bashe* (or *ba-snake*) - massive green, yellow, black, or red serpents said to grow up to 600 feet long**. Some are known to display different combinations of these four colours. *Ba*-snakes are known to swallow elephants whole, taking three long years to digest their meal before expelling the bones through their scales.

Hou Yi, the god of archery from Chinese mythology and husband of the lunar goddess *Chang'e*, was said to have killed a *bashe*. He buried its corpse under a large hill, where a temple was later built for people to worship its spirit.

*While the appearance of a *bashe* might cause trouble for the characters of your story, they need not be depicted as “evil” in nature.

**Tales of creatures like the *ba-snake* were likely the result of exaggerated encounters with Burmese pythons (*Python bivittatus*) in Southern China and Southeast Asia. These snakes are known to eat a variety of prey, from birds and vermin to alligators and deer! There is even a lesser serpent known as a “black snake” that devour deer.

Descriptors: serpent, greedy, insatiable, powerful, constrictor

Frequency: legendary

Size: gargantuan

Number Appearing: solitary

Movement: 20 ft.

Armour Class: 20

Resistances:

HD/HP: 15/70

Attacks: 1 (bite)

To Hit: +12

Damage: 3d12

Special Attacks: swallow whole, trample

Morale: 10

Treasure Type: G (Magical Flesh + gut contents)

Swallow whole. When a *bashe* rolls a natural 20 on a bite attack, it may swallow a creature of size huge or smaller. When inside the *bashe*, suffer 1d10 bludgeoning damage per round (until the creature dies). Target may attack with bladed weapons at a -5 penalty.

Trample. Due to its massive size, there is a chance 50% chance that a *bashe* might trample nearby creatures when attacking with its bite. +5 to hit (2d8 damage).

Magical Flesh. The raw flesh of these serpents and the elephant bones they digest can be used as powerful catalysts for healing medicines. The skin of a *bashe* will protect the wearer against effects targeting the heart and lungs. If fashioned into a suit of leather armour, the item grants the wearer with immunity to bleeding effects and the ability to survive without air.

GOUSHE

Goushe, also known as the horse-stumbling snakes or hook snakes, were 60 ft. long serpents that had hook-like tails that lived in mountainous rivers. Fierce and cunning predators, *Goushe* used their tails to grab hold of people, oxen, and horses resting along riverbanks. Using their immense strength, these creatures dragged their victims into the water to devour them whole.

Descriptors: fierce, aggressive, cunning, water-dwelling

Frequency: rare

Size: huge

No. Enc.: 1

Alignment: chaotic

Movement: 30 ft./50 ft. (swim)

Armour Class: 13

Resistances: none

HD: 6

Attacks: 1 (bite)

To Hit: +8

Damage: 1d6 + venom

Special Attacks: tail hook

Morale: 8

Treasure Type: none

Tail hook. The *goushe* uses its hooked tail (+5 attack) to grab distant prey and drag it into its mouth. If the attack succeeds, the target and the *goushe* roll opposed STR rolls. If the *goushe* succeeds, it can make an automatic bite attack.

Venom. Causes death in 1d6 rounds (save vs. poison).

MINGSHE

Mingshe, also known as chiming or sound snakes, are serpents with four wings that live in mountains rich in gold and jade. Their voices sound like brass bells and are often interpreted as signals of nearby treasure.

Descriptors: peaceful

Frequency: uncommon

Size: small

No. Enc.: 1

Movement: 15 ft./20 ft. (flying)

Armour Class: 14

Resistances: none

HD/HP: 1

Attacks: 1 (bite)

To Hit: +2

Damage: 1d4

Special Attacks: none

Morale: 6

Treasure Type: *treasure scent

Treasure scent. *Mingshe* are naturally attracted to the gold veins and jade deposits of their mountainous homes. If captured, a *mingshe* can be used to locate hidden natural wonders.

JADE IN CHINESE CULTURE

In Chinese culture, jade is valued as gold is in the West but also elevated to a higher position of reverence for its moral properties. In the Han Dynasty text *Shuowen Jiezi* (“*Discussions of Writings and Explanations of Character*”), author Xu Shen defined jade as a material representation of five virtues:

- Benevolence, for its warm lustre and billiance
- Righteousness, for its translucence
- Bravery, for its ability to break yet never twist
- Purity, for its sharp edges that are never used for violence
- Wisdom, for its tranquil tone

Nüwa (pg. 5) is said to have gifted humanity with jade after she mended the sky. The *Huainanzi*, an ancient philosophical text, contains a story about how the pillars supporting the sky crumbled, causing a hole in the sky to form and the earth to be plagued by wildfires and floods.

To save her creations, *Nüwa* gathered five stones (red, blue, black, yellow, and white) from a riverbed and melted them into a material she then used to mend the heavens. Once humanity was saved, she scattered the remaining material upon the earth and it turned into jade, the stone of heaven. Due to this belief and its indestructibility, jade has been lavishly used for nearly 10,000 years in China as ritual objects, symbolic weapons, and ornaments.

When featuring a *mingshe* in an adventure, I recommend you introduce one in a way where the characters also interact with sacred or profane jade items. For example, a local lord tasks the characters with tracking down a rare jade hairpin for his wife. Capturing a *mingshe* would be the perfect way to accomplish this task!

XIANGLIU

Xiangliu is a monster with nine human heads and the body of a black or green snake. It is said that he serves a water god known as Gonggong. Unlike the hydra of Greek and Roman mythology, the heads of Xiangliu are commonly depicted as a cluster on a single neck in ancient art. Despite this, legends say that he was able to eat foods from the mountains of Chinese mythical geography.

This entity was famed for his noxious presence. Wherever he passed, the land became stained by his presence – transformed into gullies and marshes where no animal can survive. Even in death, Xiangliu was fearsome. Yu the Great, the legendary sage king and founder of the Xia Dynasty, was said to have slain Xiangliu. Every place stained by his noxious blood became corrupted. Plants, especially the five important crops (soybean, wheat, foxtail millet, broomcorn millet, and rice), would no longer grow. The corruption caused by Xiangliu's blood could not be undone by the work of any mortal.

Yu even ordered an excavation of the land soaked by the blood of the creature and found that even to a depth of 24 feet, the land remained contaminated.

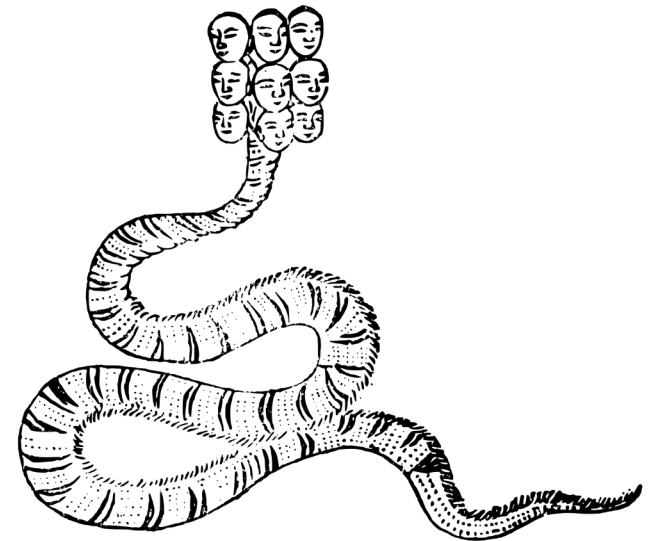
Stories of Xiangliu are seldom told in present day China. In Sichuan Province, there was a local myth that Xiangliu brought floods to the region, and devoured livestock and humans. For his malevolent behaviour, Xiangliu was killed by the gods twice – once by Zhurong (the god of fire) and once by Nüwa.

Descriptors: gluttonous, vile, noxious, loyal
Frequency: legendary
Size: huge
No. Enc.: 1 (unique creature)
Alignment: chaotic
Movement: 20 ft. (climb and swim)
Armour Class: 14
Resistances: immune to poison and necrotic
HD: 16
Attacks: 9 (bites from each head)
To Hit: +10
Damage: 1d12
Special Attacks: tainted blood
Morale: 10
Treasure Type: H (lair)

Noxious presence. Xiangliu's body has a pungent stench. Upon death, the ground surrounding Xiangliu's corpse will be rendered barren – all plant life will die, and animals will flee the area.

Tainted blood. Anytime *Xiangliu* is wounded by a piercing or slashing weapon, a spray of toxic blood spurts 10 ft. in the direction of the damage source. When struck by the *Xiangliu's* blood, save vs poison, or become sickened (unable to act for 2 turns).

Awareness. *Xiangliu's* nine heads allow him to see in all directions. He cannot be flanked.



BIRDS IN CHINESE MYTH

Birds have had significant cultural importance to Chinese belief systems since the emergence of complex societies. In the middle to late Neolithic, avian and other zoomorphic motifs can be found on ceramics, carved stone, ancient divination scripts, and even wood. For instance, a dagger attributed to the 7,000-year-old *Hemudu* culture featured carvings of twin birds carrying the sun. This motif is later mentioned in ancient texts as a three-legged crow that carries the sun across the sky.

To this day, birds continue to hold a variety of meanings in Chinese culture and art. There are those that visit and aid the virtuous, and those that bring ill omens. One of the most well-known birds of important in contemporary Chinese culture is the rooster – one of the twelve zodiac animals. They are revered as benevolent, honest, and fierce creatures that protect households from evil spirits. As ghosts are only powerful during the night, the call of a rooster banishes them by signaling the coming daylight.

Deities and symbols in Chinese folk religion and Taoism also have avian elements. *Leigong* is the half-eagle god of thunder who punishes guilty mortals and malevolent spirits. The *Vermillion Bird of the South* represents its namesake direction, the summer, and the fire element in the Wu Xing (Taoist five-elemental system).

One of the most iconic birds in Chinese mythology are *Fenghuang* - stoic, immortal creatures with brilliant, five-coloured (black, white, red, yellow, and green) plumage that serve as guardians of the Kunlun Mountains of northern China and the ruler of all birds. In Chinese culture, a *fenghuang's* body parts hold different meanings – the head represents virtue, wings represent duty, back represents propriety, the stomach represents trust, and the chest representing benevolence. *Fenghuang* are often mistranslated in the West as a form of Chinese “phoenix” due to the superficial similarities they have with the *Vermilion Bird of the South*.

The song of the *fenghuang* is said to be exceptionally beautiful and meaningful. In fact, wherever a *fenghuang* chooses to eat, sing, and dance, peace is believed to be on the

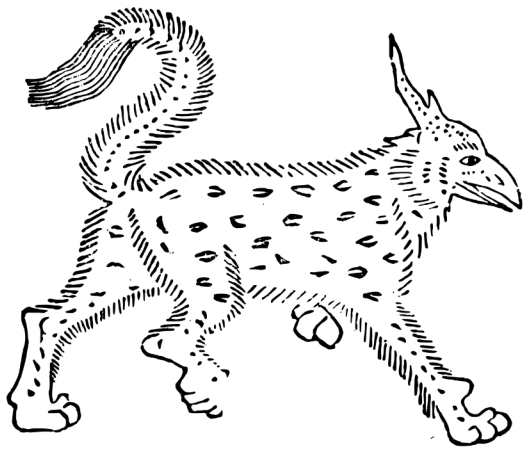
horizon. Indeed, the presence of this mythical bird has been considered an omen of political harmony foretelling the ascent of a new emperor to the throne since the Shang dynasty (c. 1600 BCE). It is this association with nobility that has resulted in *fenghuang* being paired with dragons in imperial art to denote the yin-yang duality. When paired with the dragon, a symbol associated with the Emperor, the *fenghuang* becomes associated with the Empress.



A *fenghuang* depicted in Ming and early Qing dynasty versions of the *Shanhajing*. Its literary origins from encounters with real birds like ostrich, pheasant, peacock, and crane are very apparent.

GUDIAO

Gudiao are carnivorous beasts resembling giant eagles with a single horn on its head. In some versions of the *Shanhaijing*, *gudiao* are depicted as wildcats with a body that resembles a wildcat. Despite its avian features, Han Dynasty scholar and esoteric master *Dongfang Shuo* characterized *gudiao* as beasts rather than birds in his classic text the *Shenyijing* (Classic on Divine Marvels or Classic of Gods and Wonders). This was based on descriptions of its physical power and malevolence.



A cat-type *gudiao* from a Ming dynasty version of the *Shanhaijing*.

GUDIAO (EAGLE-TYPE)

Descriptors: predatory, aggressive, powerful, tenacious
Frequency: rare
Size: small
Number Appearing: solitary, bonded pair, convocation (group of 1d6)
Movement: 60 ft. (flying)
Armour Class: 13
Resistances: none
HD: 2
Attacks: 2 x talon or horn
To Hit: +3 (talon) or +5 (horn)
Damage: 1d4/1d6
Special Attacks: none
Morale: 6
Treasure Type: none

Territorial. *Gudiao* are extremely territorial creatures and often build their nests in mountainous regions near rivers. They will attack if approached. When defending a nest, *gudiao* do not make morale checks.

GUDIAO (CAT-TYPE)

Descriptors: predatory, aggressive, powerful, tenacious
Frequency: rare
Size: small
Number Appearing: solitary or bonded pair
Alignment: chaotic*
Movement: 40 ft.
Armour Class: 14
Resistances: none
HD: 7
Attacks: 2 x claw
To Hit: +5
Damage: 1d6
Special Attacks: Rend
Morale: 8
Treasure Type: E (~2,300 gp worth of coins, jewelry, magic items, and weapons from poachers and adventurers)

Rend. When a *gudiao* makes two successful claw attacks, it can make an extra attack (+5) with its beak and tear into the target for 2d8 damage.

*For storytelling purposes, I've attributed the malevolent nature of the *gudiao* to the wildcat-type.

CHANGFU

A mountain-dwelling bird that resembles a three-headed chicken with six feet (four for walking and two for grasping) and three wings. Eating the flesh of a *changfu* can prevent sleep.

Descriptors: avian, peaceful, cautious

Frequency: uncommon

Size: small

Number Appearing: solitary, pair, or flock (6-10)

Movement: 20 ft., 40 ft. (flying – poor)

Armour Class: 13

Resistances: none

HD: 3

Attacks: 2 x claws

To Hit: +3

Damage: 1d4

Special Attacks: Take Flight

Morale: 6

Treasure Type: none

Take Flight. If a *changfu* does not make a move action, it can make a leaping attack – jumping into the air, furiously flapping its wings, and attacking with all six claws.

FUXI

A *fuxi** is a bird that resembles a rooster with a fierce human face. Its name comes from the sound it makes when it attacks people who look defenceless. Whenever a *fuxi* appears, war follows - making them a great narrative tool for military campaigns.

*Although they have similar names, *fuxi* (鳧溪) should not be confused with *Fuxi* (伏羲) – one of the most powerful primeval gods and *Nüwa*'s half-snake husband (and brother).

Descriptors: omen

Frequency: rare

Size: small

No. Enc.: 1

Movement:

Armour Class: 11

Resistances: none

HD/HP: 1

Attacks: 1 (talons)

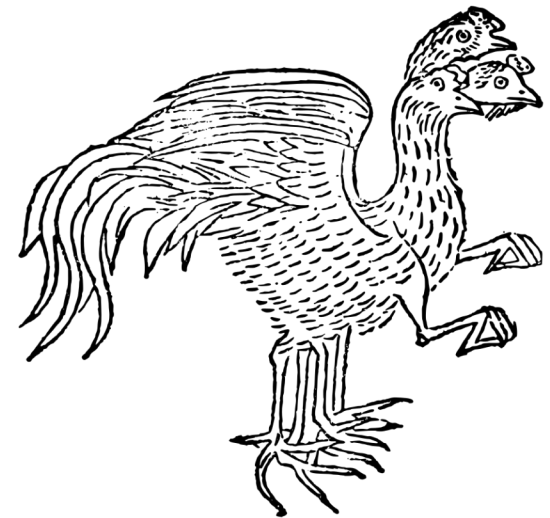
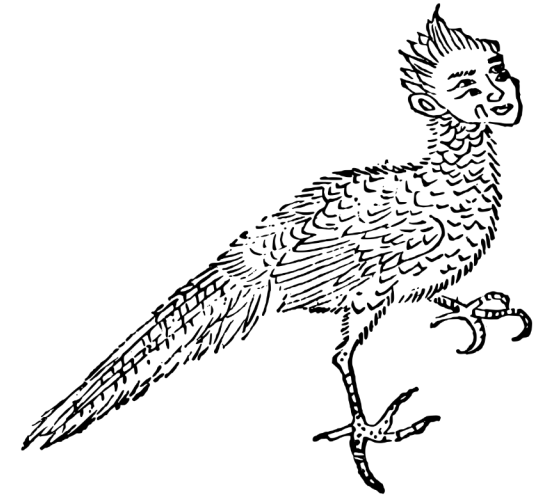
To Hit: +1

Damage: 1d2

Special Attacks: none

Morale: 7

Treasure Type: none



Changfu (bottom) and *fuxi* (top) as they appear in 17th and 18th century versions of the *Shanhajjing*.

QIONGQI

The *qiongqi* is a beast that resembles a tiger with falcon wings. Some say that their fur resembles the spines of hedgehogs. They are malevolent creatures that hunt and devour people headfirst – particularly those with long hair*. Fortunately, these dangerous beasts dwell outside of the settled regions of China, in the northern lands with the *taotie* (see *Denizens* vol. 1).

In the *Shenyijing (Classic of the Divine and the Extraordinary)*, a text by Han Dynasty exorcist Dongfang Shuo, it is said that *qiongqi* understand human languages and when they hear people quarrelling, they devour whoever is right. Furthermore, when they hear the voice of someone loyal or trustworthy, a *qiongqi* will be compelled to kill. If a *qiongqi* encounters someone with a rebellious or evil spirit, it will present that person with a dead animal as a form of tribute.

*The *qiongqi*'s preference for human prey with long hair may indicate that historically, these creatures were perceived as threats to shamans.

Descriptors: aggressive, predatory, evil

Frequency: uncommon

Size: huge

No. Enc.: 1

Alignment: chaotic evil

Movement: 40 ft./50 ft.(flying)

Armour Class: 13

Resistances: none

HD/HP: 8

Attacks: 3 (2 claws, 1 bite)

To Hit:

Damage: 1d8/1d8/2d8

Special Attacks:

Morale: 9

Treasure Type: V (pelt)

Favoured prey. *Qiongqi* prefer to consume magic users and those who seek to protect the weak. They will chase after fleeing prey.

Keen Hearing. *Qiongqi* have advanced hearing that give them advantage when trying to listen for prey.

Pounce. When a *qiongqi* successfully strikes with both of its claw attacks, the hit PC is knocked prone and receives a bite attack.



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