

## Review of New Gods: Yang Jian

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### *New Gods: Yang Jian*

Yimin Xu



*New Gods: Yang Jian*. Dir. Ji Zhao. Bona Film Group, 2022.

*New Gods: Yang Jian* (hereafter *New Gods*) is a Chinese 3D animation movie that tells the story of Yang Jian (Wang Kai), a legendary Chinese deity. Taking place in a Ragnarök-like fictional universe where most gods have lost powers, Yang Jian, the former God of War, now works as a bounty hunter on his steamboat. On his way to a mission, however, Yang encounters his lost nephew Chen Xiang (Li Lanling). Together, Yang and Chen embark on a journey and uncover the truth behind the Yang family's tragedy—Yang Jian's mentor Master Yuding (Li Lihong), who sacrifices the Yang family for his own achievements.



The movie draws its inspirations from two related 17th century traditional Chinese novels, 封神演义 (*Fengshen Yanyi*, Investiture of the Gods) and 西游记 (*Xi You Ji*, Journey to the West). Together, the two novels exemplify a unique Chinese speculative genre—神魔 (*shenmo*, gods and demons), with the terminology derived from modern Chinese scholar and literary historian Lu Xun. As Lu Xun points out, *shenmo* fiction features a dynamic theological and philosophical background of Confucianism, Taoism and Chinese interpretation of Buddhism (104). *Shenmo* fiction arranges gods and demons in the following orders: celestial court for deity, mortal world for humans and underworlds for demons, echoing to a Confucian power hierarchy of 君 (*jun*, ruler) and 臣 (*chen*, subject).

Moreover, *shenmo* fiction often concentrates on the contradiction between deity and demons, but this opposition is not strictly dichotomous, due to the Taoist yin-yang philosophy. The yin and yang concepts can be understood as any set of opposites, including dark and light, female and male, good and evil. However, the yin and yang are not seen as in a dichotomy, but instead “in constant interaction, yin merging with yang and yang with yin in endless dynamism” (Kam and Edwards, 139). Therefore, in *shenmo* fiction, a god can transform into a demon and vis-à-vis.

In *Journey to the West*, Yang Jian is said to be the nephew of 玉帝 (*Yu Di*, Jade Emperor) the highest ruler of the celestial court. His mother, after having affairs with a mortal man and violating the Confucian power hierarchy, is confined to Mountain Tao. As he grows up, Yang Jian becomes the God of War and splits the mountain to free his mother. Despite his seemingly rebellious behavior, Yang Jian is portrayed as a guardian of celestial court order in *Investiture of the Gods*.

In the film, the director explores a new matriarchal god order by externalizing the rebellious spirit coded in Yang Jian from the original texts. Unlike his cruel maternal uncle Jade Emperor from *Journey to the West*, film-Yang Jian assumes a caring and nurturing role as a maternal uncle and mentor to his nephew, Chen Xiang. Such a familial relation evokes of what Bertrand Russell describes in his *Marriage and Morals* that:

in a matrilineal society a man inherits from his maternal uncle; the functions which we naturally attribute to the father are divided in a matrilineal society between the father and the maternal uncle, affection and care coming from the father, while power and property come from the maternal uncle (28).

With no reference to Chen Xiang's father throughout the movie, Yang Jian is the sole provider of both affection and power to Chen Xiang, reinforcing the matriarchal discourse in the movie. Moreover, they become more bound to each other through their shared loss of mothers. As the film unfolds, we learn more about the Yang family. Yang Jian and his younger sister Yang Chan (Qiu Qiu) come from a matriarchal deity family, whose female members are burdened with the task of settling down evil forces for the sake of humanities. Therefore, their mother, the first-generation of matriarchal god, sacrifices herself and following their mother's footsteps, Yang Jian's younger sister, (Chen Xiang's mother), the second generation of matriarchal deity, dies in the same manner.

The movie ends shortly after Yang Jian regains mighty power and defies Master Yuding, who is not only responsible for the Yang family's tragedy, but as the movie narrative implies, related to the fall of the deity. Moreover, the morally corrupt Master Yuding embodies a transformation from a god to a demon, reenforcing my earlier statement. Yang Jian's deifying Master Yuding, therefore, foreshadows the overthrow of the entire collapsing patriarchal god order in the movie's sequel, and replaces it with a new matriarchal one, as suggested by the title *New Gods*.

The movie points out a potential new direction in re-representing traditional Chinese fantasies on modern-day big screen: gender. Significantly, this necessity of a gender perspective applies to broader speculative genres across languages. Indeed, as Veronica Hollinger points out "although sf has often been called 'the literature of change', for the most part it has been slow to recognize the historical contingency and cultural conventionality about gendered behaviour and about the 'natural' roles of women and men" (126). Yang Jian's role as a maternal uncle, not as a father or a sexual partner of others, challenges the audience to rethink the often taken-for-granted family concept in speculative literature and film that a family must consist of a couple bounded by sexual relations.

Moreover, the Taoist yin-yang philosophy embedded in the movie can help to diversify, in particular, Anglo-American fantasy and science fiction movie industry. We have seen Hollywood's efforts to increase diversities in recent years, for instance, Marvel Studios' *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* features a superhero from Chinese background. Despite their efforts, however, we still see, at least, one of problematic dualism that Donna Haraway pinpoints in *A*

*Cyborg Manifesto*: technology/nature. In Hollywood-made superhero movies, the technology/nature dichotomy is often associated with an implicit orientalist discourse that represents the non-West others as mysterious and supernatural. In Marvel's case, American-born heroes, including Ironman and Captain America, are often equipped with high-tech weaponry. The Chinese protagonist Shang-chi, however, attains his super-human abilities from "mysterious" ten-rings. This dichotomy is more evidenced in James Cameron's *Avatar 2: The Way of Water*, in which the human colonists, primarily white Americans, use high-tech powers to occupy the planet, whereas the indigenous habitants of Pandora utilize natural resources to defend themselves: extra-terrestrial animals and weaponry made out of wood.

In the film *New Gods*, the director intentionally blurs the boundary between technology and nature and other dichotomies. Yang Jian, as we see earlier, operates a Western-style steamboat that runs on 混元气 (hunyuan qi, mixed energy), an essentially Taoist element of nature. I should also call attention to Yang Jian's look here, in that he has three eyes, with the third on his forehead. The three eyes represent 天 (tian, celestial court), 地 (di, underground) and 人 (ren, humans). Thus, the character himself carries a sense of non-binary seeing-it-all. Additionally, the character development of Master Yuding highlights the delicate balance between evil and goodness.

Granted, increasing racial representation, to certain extent, does introduce a different voice to the dominating English-speaking speculative literature and movies. However, that does not necessarily challenge the many problematic dichotomies that distort the representation of the other and will continue to do so. In this sense, the yin-yang philosophy provides another mode of thinking that goes beyond the Westernized binary-mode and transforms "Western" science and politics—the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other" (7).

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**Yimin Xu** is a Ph.D. student in the School of Humanities and Languages at UNSW Sydney. Her research interest is gender in Chinese science fiction, Chinese fantastical literature and Chinese popular culture in general. Her current PhD project focuses on the modernity rhetoric behind the gender representations in contemporary Chinese science fiction and the resurfacing of the late 19th century national memory of Western semi-colonisation in current Chinese science fiction writing. With her project, she hopes to contribute her own part to the great effort of de-colonisation studies in China. Besides her works, she is also the country representative of Australia for the Science Fiction Research Association.