Creative Writing Essay

虎褫礉: What is 虎, anyway?

Llinos Evans

University of Essex

Abstract

This paper uses cosmic horror tropes to resurrect the Chinese lexical fossil 虎 *sī*, a mythical creature of no narrative, through a One-Syllable Article Chinese Poem that aims to marry Lovecraftian cosmic horror with Chinese 志怪 *zhìguài* traditions. This, coupled with linguistic and philological study, will demonstrate the ability to use horror aesthetics to revive cultural memories long forgotten.

Keywords: Semantic shift, Poetry, Classical Chinese, Wenyan, 虎, phonetics, mythology, philology, lexical fossil, cosmic horror, zhìguài fiction

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DeepSeek DeepThinkR1[1] was run locally for structural and literary criticism and advice. It otherwise had no influence in the development of this paper.

Introduction

This is a Classical Chinese poem that is constrained strictly to the Mandarin syllable /sz/, represented in 漢語拼音 Hanyu Pinyin with /si/ and hereto referred to as such. Said poem sets out to marry linguistics, cosmic horror, 志怪 *zhìguài*, and Classical Chinese literature. The poetic register is known as a "One-Syllable Article," making use of a single syllable to create vocally incomprehensible poems; said register was mimetically popularised by Yuen Ren Chao's 施氏食獅史 *Lion-Eating Poets in the Stone Den* (Chao, 1968). It was originally meant to reflect the disconnect between the liturgical language from the times of Confucius and modern, tonal tongue that exists today, thus arguing against the phoneticization of Chinese languages (Chao, 1968; Ceng and Chu, 2022). I will argue that the character *sī* 虎 is a "lexical fossil" under the definition outlined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* and reasserted by Coffey (2013), tracing its history to

[1] https://chat.deepseek.com/

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Classical Chinese, hoping to illuminate the potential within literature to revive and rejuvenate this cultural memory, doing so in the form of this poem.

Lexical fossils are defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "a word or other linguistic form which has become obsolete except in isolated regions or in set phrases, idioms, or collocations" ('Fossil, N., Sense 3.b.', 2025). In Evans (2025), I apply this to Chinese, noting the existence of classifiers that are otherwise unknown being used in *Chengyu*. However, one may attempt to limit this idea to /sz/ when reviewing *sī* 厩. This is incorrect: the syllable itself is active and productive; the character and its semantic meaning is what we are reviewing. The homophonous character *sī* 思, for example, carries the meaning of "to think (of)" and exists even in modern compounds such as *sīxiǎng* 思想. Therefore, *sī* 厩 is a linguistic sign that has become obsolete except when it is brought up; it only exists in the *Guangyun* 廣韻 and other highly specific rime dictionaries. This will be elaborated on later in the paper.

Methodology

The poem strictly uses characters using the syllable /si/. An initial list of characters was obtained by searching "si" in the dictionary aggregator *Pleco* (Love, 2025), before a shortlist of potential candidates for narrative creativity was drawn up. Thematic focus (dread, ritual sacrifice, water, descent into madness) emerged organically from said shortlist, with *sī* 厩 being the catalyst for the cosmic horror narrative. These characters were then verified in etymology, lexical and grammatical meaning, and historical usage, via classical dictionaries (see Appendix) before being sequenced into a Classical Chinese poem. Sequencing aimed to reflect cosmic horror tropes while adhering to the language's syntax and prose, thus creating a vessel for *sī* 厩's revival.

Because many of these Han characters are extremely rare, all characters were vetted with the Chinese Proficiency Test 3.0 vocabulary list distributed by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021), which was used to make an Appendix for uncommon character annotations.

The translation aims to convey the themes and narrative to non-Sinophone readers while acknowledging the chasmic differences between Classical Chinese and English.

Analysis

Cosmic horror in Classical Chinese

When we discuss cosmic horror, the classical definition as Lovecraft (1927) notes in his 28,000-word long essay in *The Recluse* is used: it is, among other things, an "unexplainable dread […] a hint […] of that most terrible conception of the human brain— a […] defeat of [the] fixed laws of nature." Atmosphere is critical; much of the weirdness must be unconscious. The human is reduced to incompetent madness by recognising something that breaks their reality. While H.P. Lovecraft has left an orientalist and even racist legacy, this work centres *sī* 厩 within the Sinitic

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mythos: it is kept within Chinese aesthetics, history, and culture. While sinology has been wrestling with orientalist problems to this day (Gu, 2012; Xiang, 2023), the future appears bright. *The King in Yellow* (Chambers, 2017) served as an inspiration to me, predating Lovecraft's fiction by several years and possessing similar plot elements to *zhìguài* fiction in its vagaries, tension, and "tall tale" narrative structure. Most importantly, the use of an unknowable play that corrupts its readers and drives them to lunacy was of significant influence.

It is necessary to discuss *zhìguài* and the marrying of these two genres. As discussed in the previous section, *zhìguài* is an ancient genre, having a history of ebbing and flowing in popularity. *Zhìguài's* most recent bout was within the Qing dynasty (Yang, 2015). With the release of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* and later *What the Master Would Not Discuss*, it became a counterculture against Conservatism, deliberately writing about anomalies, violence, disorder, and spirits, all things Confucius said he does not discuss (Yang, 2015; Kong, 2016). Zeitlin (1997; Yang, 2015) notes the controversy between Confucianism and *zhìguài*, where various prefaces for *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* argued that it neither violated Confucian principles nor should be considered taboo. *What the Master Would Not Discuss*, too, saw controversy, being decried as heretical for flying in the face of the precedence of the classics, to the degree that its name was changed to 新齊諧 *New Tales from Qi* before being censored in 1836 for its counterculture (Yuan, 1996). Creatures of vaguely-described form in the ancient *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經 continue to influence modern Chinese folklore to this day, usually in illustrated form (Zhongquan, 2018). The main difference between these genres can be summarised thusly: whereas cosmic horror is "unknowable," *zhìguài* is "uncanny." The existence of *Sī* 厩 at all and the incomprehensibility of the poem are married with the unknowability of *Sì*'s 姒 mental state and *Sì*'s 厩 intentions. Lovecraft's love for watery doom is linked with Pu Songling's tall tales. While not necessarily new – Lovecraft (2020, 2021) did indeed love tall tales – we see a cocktail of themes ripe for analysis.

The syllable /si/, when vocalised in this poem, sounds somewhat like water creeping along a riverbank. If this poem is pronounced in Old Chinese, the homophony would be erased: such is the point Chao made in *Lion-Eating Poets in the Stone Den* (Chao, 1968; Baxter and Sagart, 2014a; Baxter and Sagart, 2014b; Ceng and Chu, 2022). The modern pronunciation, coupled with the incomprehensibility of a spoken One-Syllable Article, goes shockingly well with cosmic horror, of which plays on the incomprehensibility of its otherworldly characters. One could even call these characters forbidden knowledge; obscure as they are, they are necessary to access the meaning, making the poem inherently difficult to read and equally ambiguous, all-in-all playing into the unknowable nature of the genre. Even our protagonist 姒 *Sì* is ambiguous, as we could be using the classical "matriarch" meaning! She could, then, be a named person or nameless matriarch.

The watery /si/ sound is transferred into the text's visual elements, using *sī* 澌 at the end of the first stanza, which describes the ebbing of water. This sonorously links with the character *sì* 咒 rhinoceros, the protagonist, 姒 *Sì,* is tending to. The animal the character *sì* 咒 describes went

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extinct before it could be scientifically documented: indeed, all we know is it was either a rhinoceros, bovine, or lion (see Appendix). The rhinoceros could, then, symbolize China's extinct fauna and give an immediate sense of dread. Sì 姒, feeds this rhinoceros; is she aware of its waning spirit? We do not know, we cannot know.

We are then met with *sī* 虎. I use every /si/ Han character with the tiger as a component while contributing to meaning. We look beyond a tree, only to be stared back at by a strange creature. Synonyms for watching are employed. This indifferent, otherworldly creature, the nature and intentions of which is completely unknown, grant – no, bless – this woman with a stone. What is this stone? An idol in its image? A piece of jade? The syntax of Classical Chinese assists with the tension and ambiguity here, exploiting the notion that even word class is difficult to parse, even for experienced scholars (Dawson, 1984; Vogelsang, 2021); yet this is a feature. Classical Chinese is a language of implication (Li, 2024), which gives its literature a distinct flavour: the 春秋 *Spring and Autumn Annals*, an extremely bare-bones work on its own, merited three extensive commentaries, including the *Zuo Zhuan* 左轉, all in different directions, just to interpret what Confucius meant by his synonyms (Kong, 2017; Zuo, 2018). Looking to this work, consider line 4:

> "*汜榹覩虎，伺褫司礁 / The river overflows, crawling darkness abound. Peering beyond the mountain peach tree, Sì caught a glimpse of Sī. However, Sī had done so first. Indifferent, it granted her a stone.*"

The syntax of 伺褫司礁 obscures who is acting here: does 司 imply Sī is governing the blessing? Is Sī watching, or Sì being watched? Is it indifferent towards her; what does it intend? Is her mind unravelling already? There is no time to interpret this when reading or listening. The spoken language mirrors the incomprehensible nature of the characters involved, and the inability of Sì to process the encounter.

The madness sets in as 姒 thinks about the stone. The thinking turns to 禗 spiritual unease, and then to 肆 unrestrained, reckless, unbridled feelings (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019; Love, 2025). 肆 has a double meaning of "four" here in the banking sense, and an ancient meaning associated with sacrifice (*zi.tools*, 2019). The 柶 ladle in the first stanza is a ritualistic one, but we extend this further with 褫 blessing in the third, before 祀 offering the rhinoceros as a sacrifice to an endless oblivion in the final. These feelings are all for nothing: the rhinoceros dies for no reason; the ritual is futile. The myth and meaning of 虎 is eroding: the water's inherent nature, the death of the already extinct, the decay of sacrificial ritual practice, these feelings and superstitions that she gets from a mere stone. Did Si see Si, or was it just a jaguar? Classical Chinese can express so much through so little, and so it seems more than apt to marry it with cosmic horror. This revives the terror of 虎 in a way otherwise impossible. Lexical fossils consumed by oblivion.

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The Matter of 厩

When considering Han characters for this poem, one stood out: *Sī* 厩. At first, this was thought to be a mistake: 虎 (tiger) with a 广 (cliff) radical slapped on. A quick look in *Pleco* (Love, 2015) claimed it was a "mythical, amphibious tiger." Despite this documentation in historical and modern dictionaries, including works dating back to pre-Qin and Han times, nothing details its behaviour, only a description. Even the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* 山海經 (Zhongquan, 2018), a work notorious for featuring innumerable mythical creatures from all over ancient China, does not document this beast. A cursory glance had quickly turned into a research rabbit hole.

The first port of call for any Han character research is *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字 (Xu, 2015, vol. 2, p. 313):

> "息移切委厩，虎之有角者也。从虎厂聲。
>
> *Pronounced [息移切委, Fanqie notation]. A horned tiger. Derives from the sound of a tiger."*

Commentary written by Duan Yucai notes an evolution of meaning from the 廣韻 *Guangyun* (Xu, 2015, vol. 2, p. 313):

> "厩，似虎有角，能行水中。
>
> *Sī is similar to the form of a tiger, but has a horn, and can travel in water."*

This is the full extent to which we can understand the Sinitic mythos of Sī: an amphibious, horned tiger, whose roar was enough for the character to be made at all. Despite such a concept, it is a creature with no story. There are no tales like that of *Zhen's* deadly poison in *Wunengzi* 無能子 (Meyer, 2023, p. 84), or *Peng's* miraculous metamorphosis from a fish into a roc in *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Zhuang, 2016). Never did this amphibious tiger rear out of the water to disturb Chinese divination; there is no kappa story. Thus, an opportunity presented itself: to implement it into the poem I was writing, wherein the narrative changed completely. This, to me, gave a reason to "revive" the character.

厩 Sī is not a simple "ghost character," though; it has usage as a metaphor within classical texts, such as *Shuo Yuan* (Liu, 2025) and *Records of the Grand Historian* (Sima, 1975). These two texts happen to repeat the same tale, specifically telling of the *Siqi Palace* 厩祁之室 constructed by Duke Ping of Jin. The name is extremely grand: 祁 *qi* here implies a vastness, a grandiosity, and, given this is a tale unrelated to Sī, we must assume its name is used metaphorically; perhaps it refers to its claws, or some sense of roughness. Maybe 虎 "tiger" was not enough, and the myth of Sī was therefore invoked. This is not abnormal: the mythical bird *Zhen* mentioned before is frequently used as a metaphor for poison. It appears that the palace was meant to represent

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authority and ambiguity; a stone is thereafter said to speak, which seems to denote the absurdity of the palace's excess. Duke Ping later dies.

The character for Sī would go on to be used in several placenames; as noted in *Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015, p. 1443; *zi.tools*, 2019), we can find 綿厩 *Miánsī* in modern-day Sichuan, 上厩亭 *Shàngsī Tíng* as a location for a pavilion in 水經注 *Commentary on the Water Classic*, 下厩臺 *Xiàsī Tái* as the name of a terrace in 遂初賦 *Rhapsody on Returning to the Roots* by Liu Xin, and the aforementioned Siqi Palace. We also find a single compound: 茈厩 (zǐsī), a word for unevenness. By the time the dictionary was written in the Qing dynasty, the mythos of Sī had faded. Only one placename remains today: 厩亭 *Sītíng*, Shanxi province, which *Kangxi Dictionary* missed. There must have been something about Sī that made it reasonable to be used in placenames, but that detail is lost to time.

Needless to say, I am not the first to notice this character's odd history: Zhang Zilie (1627), in 正字通 *Zhengzitong*, believed that it was a divine tiger with flowing fur. Shao (2017), on the other hand, believes it could be a synonym for 威夷 *wēiyí*, a beast described as a swamp-dwelling, spined creature.

This is a case of semantic shift: this Han character had gone from a horned, tiger-like creature, to an amphibious one, to a mythological metaphor, to a meaningless placename. As its time in human memory ended, only the voices of the dead remained, among those deceased being other individuals attempting to explain it themselves. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a lexical fossil (term taken from Kerslake, 1872; Coffey, 2013; and 'Fossil, N., Sense 3.b.', 2025) as: "*A word or other linguistic form which has become obsolete except in isolated regions or in set phrases, idioms, or collocations*". 厩 Sī as a Han character is no longer functional, no longer in active use beyond placenames; it has no productivity and has become obsolete, therefore meeting the definition of lexical fossils. Compare it with 龍 *Lóng*, the character for dragon, which is so essential so as to be one of the earliest characters a Chinese learner will study (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021). Mythical creatures *can* have productive Han characters. However, it raises the question: if the character becomes functional again, does it then *cease* to be a lexical fossil? Does it become a learned borrowing? If so, what threshold do we use to measure this? As Coffey (2013) states, the definition of a lexical fossil is not very well-tested, especially in East Asian languages. This hypothesis presented to me an additional reason to use the character: phonetic and semantic shift working in tandem to present a semantic field of erosion and death.

When integrating Sī into this poem, what we do is artificially reactivate its original meaning, its narrative function, and most of all, its lexical *purpose*. This is, however, not a productive return to Mandarin Chinese, not by any stretch. It remains a fossil. It is much like placing *tyrannosaurus rex* into a museum: we reveal the extent to which its bones are drawn, but no muscles or scales can be seen. The difference here is that with written language, one can see this poem, engage with it, and generate new meaning through its fossilised form: be it a learned borrowing or

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something new entirely. Any reader could, then, write the next page in this character's tale, just as I have done by writing its poem. Man cannot resurrect a dinosaur yet, but a mythical creature most certainly can be.

Nevertheless, this ancient creature, whatever it could have been, may have had a story once. Maybe it is still out there, lost in caves not unlike those at Dunhuang. The story of the character Sī 虒 was, and is, an unfinished one. Stories such as these often beg the reader to write the next page. Lovecraft's works, as originally problematic as they were, are excellent examples of this phenomenon. So why not revive this creature in the form of traditional poetry? Give a cultural artifact a chance with a Lovecraft-inspired poem, marrying Western cosmic horror with Classical Chinese prose and *zhìguài*, yet trapping it within the phonetic constraints.

Poem[2]

《虒禠磃·汐洛思》

巳颸峒涘，笥菥柶，姒飼兕澌。

汜榹覗虒，伺禠司磃。

姒⿰忄四思，磃似虒，思禗肆。

姒撕兕嘶, 祀兕死偒。

Translation

Si Blesses the Stone by [Author]

It was the hour of Si, the mid-morning. The autumn wind hisses over the mountain's edge, the river brink. With a bamboo box of oats, a ladle in hand, Sì fed her rhinoceros as its breath ebbed like a dying wave.

The river overflows, crawling darkness abound. Peering beyond the mountain peach tree, Sì caught a glimpse of Sī. However, Sī had done so first. Indifferent, it granted her a stone with a blessing that governed nothing, a thing shaped in its image.

Sì trembled as she thought. The stone looks like Sī. The stone is Sī. Thinking turns to unease, unease turns to fourfold, wanton madness.

Sì tore at her screeching rhinoceros. Offered as sacrifice to the baleful beast, the rhinoceros whines, its soul completely extinguished. The death rang hollow yet will echo forever.

[2] For character definitions with references, see Appendix.

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Appendix: Han character annotations

As has been made clear, this poem uses exceedingly rare characters, which necessitates annotations for readability. They are placed here as is tradition in Classical Chinese texts.

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The criterion for inclusion was whether a character did not appear on the Chinese Proficiency Test 3.0's Band 7-9 list published by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2021). All characters mentioned below are not on the cited list.

Table 1: Annotations for characters not within the HSK 7-9 vocabulary list (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2021)

Character	Hanyu Pinyin	Components	English Meaning	Classical Source(s)	Quote
厩	sī	虎 (tiger) + 广 (cliff)	Mythical horned amphibious tiger	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015) *Guangyun* (Aforementioned Duan Yucai annotation; Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：息移切厩委厩，虎之有角者也。从虎厂聲。《廣韻》：虎，似虎有角，能行水中。
褫	sī	示 (altar) + 厩 (sī)	To bless; bestow	*Erya* (Shao, Li and Zhu, 2017; Wang, 2021)	《爾雅・釋詁》：福也。
磃	sī	石 (stone) + 厩 (sī)	Stone carved in Sī's image	*Jiyun* (*zi.tools*, 2019)	《集韻》：田黎切，音題。磄磃，怪石。 廣韻
颸	sī	風 (wind) + 思 (think)	Autumn wind's hiss	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：息兹切颸涼風也。从風思聲。
峙	sī	山 (mountain) + 司 (administer)	Mountain's edge/cliff; used in placenames	*Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019)	Eg. 峙唔 *Sīwú* in Jiangsu.
涘	sī	氵 (water) + 矣 (final particle)	River brink	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：牀史切涘水厓也。从水矣聲。《周書》曰：「王出涘。」
荸	sī	艹 (grass) + 析 (split)	Oats/wild grain	*Yupian* (*zi.tools*, 2019)	《玉篇》蕘荸草，似燕麥。
栭	sī	木 (wood) + 四 (four)	Ritual ladle	*Shuowen Jiezi*	《說文解字》：息利切栭《禮》有栭。栭，匕也。从木四聲。
姒	sì	女 (woman) + 以 (with)	Matriarch; woman's name	*Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019) *Erya* (Shao, Li and Zhu, 2017; Wang, 2021)	《註》：姒，姓也。

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飼	sì	饣 (food) + 司 (administer)	To feed	*Shuowen Jiezi Zixichuan* (*zi.tools*, 2019)	《說文解字繫傳》：慈例反飼糧也。從食、人。
兕	sì	儿 (legs) + 厶 (private)	Rhinoceros, possibly female-only; sacrificial beast	*Han Duo* (*zi.tools*, 2019)	《漢多》：甲骨文乃獨體象形字，象犀牛一類的動物，頭上有角。後來角形變為「凹」，身體變為四條斜筆，字形寫作「罒」，是「兕」的異體。
澌	sī	氵 (water) + 斯 (this)	Vanishing stream	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：息移切澌水索也。从水斯聲。
汜	sì	氵 (water) + 巳 (6th Earthly Branch)	Flooding river	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：詳里切汜水別復入水也。一曰汜，窮瀆也。从水巳聲。《詩》曰：「江有汜。」
榹	sī	木 (wood) + 厩 (sī)	Mountain peach tree	*Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：息移切榹槃也。[《急就篇》。槫棹榹。榹當與許訓同。《釋木》以爲榹桃字。《夏小正》作柂桃。] 從木。厩聲。[息移切。十六部。]
覗	sì	見 (see) + 司 (administer)	To spy/peer Noted as being specific to the 長江 River Yangtze	*Fangyan* (Yang, 2022, pp. 247–248)	《方言》：朡、韽、闚、貼、占、伺，視也。凡相竊視南楚謂之闚，或謂之朡，或謂之貼，或謂之占，或謂之韽。韽，中夏語也。闚，其通語也。自江而北謂之貼，或謂之覗。凡相候謂之占，占猶瞻也。

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伺	sì	亻 (person) + 司 (administer)	To watch	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字》：相吏切伺候望也。从人司聲。
恖	sī	忄 (heart) + 四 (four)	To sigh; tremble in thought	*Jiyun* in *Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019) *Pleco* (Love, 2025)	《集韻》：許異切，與咝同。息也。
禗	sī	示 (altar) + 思 (think)	Spiritual unease	*Jiyun* in *Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019)	《集韻》：新茲切，丛音思。禗禗，神不安欲去意。
肆	sì	镸 (long) + 聿 (brush)	Wanton madness; four	*Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* (Xu, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019)	《說文解字注》：息利切極陳也。
撕	sī	扌(hand) + 斯 (this)	To tear	*Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019)	《正韻》：先齊切，丛音西。提撕也。
嘶	sī	口 (mouth) + 斯 (this)	To neigh/screech	*Shuowen Jiezi* (Xu, 2015)	《說文解字注》：先稽切嘶悲聲也。从言，斯省聲。
僿	sì	亻 (person) + 斯 (this)	To exhaust completely	*Kangxi Dictionary* (Zhang and Chen, 2015; *zi.tools*, 2019)	《子集中》《人字部》《廣韻》《集韻》：丛斯義切，音賜。盡也。 又《潘岳・西征賦》超長懷以遐念，若循環而無僿。 又《維摩經》缽飯悉飽衆，會猶故不僿。 廣韻

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