

Jinmenju

人面樹

Pronunciation:

(JIN-men-joo)

English Name:

Literally, “Human-Faced Tree”; Tree With Human Fruit

Height:

6 ft. to 35 ft. (2 to 10m)

Locomotion:

Essentially immobile

Distinctive Features:

Fruit-laden branches

Tiny human face on each fruit

Offensive Weapons:

None

Weaknesses:

Laughter

Abundance:

Extremely rare

Habitat:

Isolated mountain valleys

Claim to Fame:

Japan’s densely forested mountains are home to a great variety of yokai and other mysterious creatures, including the elusive Jinmenju, or the Tree With Human Fruit. It takes the form of an exotic but otherwise natural looking tree, its branches laden with what appear to be oversized fruits. Upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that each bears a human face, complete with eyes, ears, mouths, and noses.

Some variations of the story claim that these fruit are capable of speech, either individually or en masse. Usually, however, they are described as totally ignoring attempts to communicate, simply chuckling or giggling as humans pass by. Whether this is perceived as creepy and sinister or simply silly depends entirely upon one’s frame of mind.

Jinmenju are said to live in valleys, suggesting that they prefer lower elevations, and resemble trees found in tropical Habitats; some accounts describe them as being superficially similar to *Artocarpus incisa*, the breadfruit tree.

Believe it or not, the fruit of the Jinmenju is apparently edible. It is said to have a citrus-like sweet and tangy flavor, though we wonder what kind of person would bite into the head of a tiny human in order to obtain this information.

The Attack!

While you probably wouldn’t want to have a constantly chortling Jinmenju living next to your window, they are not dangerous in any sense of the word. They are essentially gentle beings whose interactions with humans are limited to voyeurism.



Sekien's illustration of a Jinmenju tree

Surviving an Encounter:

Relax. You are in no immediate danger, and in fact have the upper hand. For if Jinmenju fruit laugh too hard, they fall off their branches. Humans with a mischievous bent might try a little stand-up routine to shake the laughing fruit from their precarious perches.

Scholars Believe:

That the Jinmenju's roots extend abroad, specifically to Chinese folktales (which, in turn, appear to originate with Indian and Persian legends). Indeed, an entire book could easily be compiled about the convoluted path by which tales of the Jinmenju made their way to the Japanese islands.

The Jinmenju was first officially cataloged in a 1712 encyclopedia called *Wakan Sansaizue*, a mixture of myth and practical knowledge compiled over the course of thirty years by an Osaka doctor. He described it as originating

“in valleys on a island some 1,000 ri [some 2,500 miles] to the southwest,” which corresponds to somewhere in the Indian Ocean. It is believed that this could be an indirect reference to the legendary island of Waq-Waq, referenced in a Persian tale from *The Thousand and One Nights* as home of the Waq-Waq tree, which produces human-shaped fruit. Some believe Waq-Waq refers to the Seychelle Islands off Madagascar, others to a forgotten island in Indonesian or Chinese waters. (A few theories tie it to the Korean peninsula or even Japan itself.)

Another potential source of information about the Jinmenju can be found in the sixteenth-century Chinese classic *Journey to the West*. It mentions a tree called the Ninjinka, which is said to “bear thirty fruit that resemble human infants once every three thousand years, which in turn take three thousand years to mature, and then ten thousand to become edible.” If indeed related to the Jinmenju, this incredibly long incubation period could explain the lack of any sightings in recent years. Eating the fruit of the Ninjinka is said to extend an individual’s life to some 47,000 years, which sheds some light on the otherwise disturbing accounts of the flavor of Jinmenju fruit.

Are the Waq-waq tree and the Ninjinka ancestors of the Jinmenju? Are the Jinmenju reported in Japan a distinct indigenous species, or were they imported from China or some mysterious island in the distant past for reasons unknown? We will probably never know for certain, but circumstantial evidence makes for a compelling argument that the Jinmenju is among the most international of the yokai.