

DIVINE SAVING IN CHINESE RELIGIONS

Chinese gods have the power to protect individuals and communities from dangers and crises. They generally have their special areas of competences, but different gods' powers may overlap. Some gods may be more effective in certain areas than others. The following are the most common fields in which the gods help people.

FIELDS OF DIVINE SAVING

Life issues:

- Health issues – illnesses, childbirth, and plagues.
- Safety issues – dangers on land and at sea, robbery, murder, riots, warfare, animal attacks, and other accidents.
- Natural disasters – droughts, flooding, locust, and hurricanes.
- Other misfortunes – lawsuits, imprisonment, and dire poverty.

Otherworldly issues:

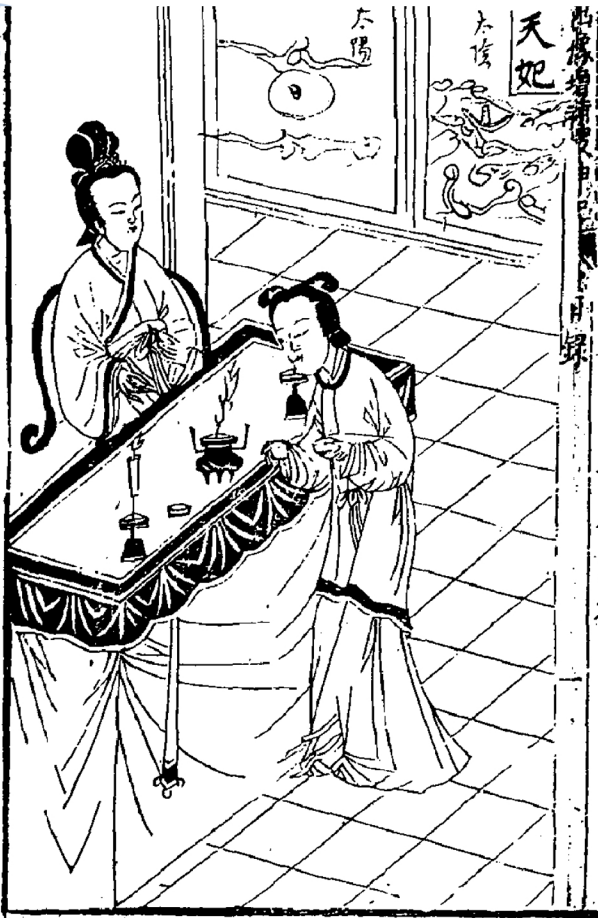
- Afflictions by ghosts and spirits – such as haunting and recurring nightmares.
- Sufferings in the underworld – undeserved death, rebirth as animals, and punishment after death for bad behaviours in life.

GODS AND THEIR METHODS OF INTERVENTION

Some Chinese gods might manifest themselves when coming to people's rescue; others might send their assistants to help. Some could perform miraculous rescue or healing; others could act in ways that are more intelligible to humans, such as giving therapies like a medical professional.

ACTIVITY I: MEET A SAVIOUR GODDESS

The Heavenly Consort is one of the most popular saviour goddesses in Chinese religions. She saves people from many different situations but is especially well-known for her protective power in maritime travel. She is kind and compassionate in nature. For example, a stone tablet established at the goddess' palace in Southeast China in 1763 AD bears testifies to how the goddess "protects maritime merchants like a loving parent protecting a child."



A 16th or 17th-century AD print image of the Heavenly Consort, in *Expanded Records of Seeking the Gods, New Edition with Portraits* 新刻出像增補搜神記, author unknown, Fuchun tang imprint, late Ming dynasty.

Digital copy shared by Chinese Text Project.



A late 19th-century wooden statue of the Heavenly Consort.

Image by Mary Harsch (24 March 2016), licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia.org.

(1) **Compare the images.** Try to spot as many similarities and differences in the details as possible. Examples are given below. Put them in the right circle(s). What else can you find?

Image on the left




1. A peaceful look
2. Seated in a chair
3. Formal gown with patterns and a belt
4. Casual, perhaps more comfortable clothing
5. Golden headdress

Image on the right



6. A desk perhaps to work on
7. A maid attending to her
8. Small feet from foot-binding, a practice for women of status
9. Open arms and a friendly hand gesture
10. A less-decorated hair style



Various Chinese dynasties have awarded titles to the goddess for saving people and the state from danger. For this purpose, an official document called the 'Imperial Edict' would be issued. These official documents often praise the goddess' power and at the same time pray for ever-lasting protection from her. *The Records of the Heavenly Consort Showing Her Powers* 天妃顯聖錄 is a 19th-century collection of such honours awarded to the goddess. Here are some examples:

Edict of 1190: "For many times, the goddess have prevented disasters and protected people from misfortunes; she now shows power in relieving droughts and saving the crops for the people."

Edict of 1281: "The goddess protects maritime routes and ships, thus helps with water transport."

Edict of 1289: "The goddess gives blessings by regulating days of rain and sunshine."

(2) Find out three major roles for which the goddess was praised.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

ACTIVITY II: READ STORIES

Task: In groups of three or four, complete the following tasks:

- a) make notes on the gods' actions of saving;
- b) answer the questions in the quiz.

(1) Anecdote One

Context: Guanyin is a popular healing goddess in Chinese religions. In this story, she approaches an old woman and makes a deal with her.

An old woman from a village suffered from an ailing arm for a long time. One night, she dreamt of a woman dressed in white coming to visit her and said: "I also suffer from a broken arm. If you heal my arm, I shall heal yours." The old woman asked: "Where do you live, my young lady?" "I stay in the west chamber of the Temple of Promoting Peace." The old woman woke up and went to town to visit the temple. She told her dream to the temple monk, who thought for a while and said: "She must be Guanyin. I have a statue of her in white in my room. During house repair, her arm was damaged by accident." He led the old woman to the room. It was indeed. The old woman then asked a craftsman to repair the statue. Once this was completed, her arm healed immediately.

Source: 'Guanyin heals an arm,' in *Record of the Listener* 夷堅志, a 12th-century Chinese collection of accounts about gods and spirits, *jia*, *juan* 10.

a) Notes:

Who is saved? _____

Saved from _____

The god saves by _____

b) Quiz: In this healing story, who helped to identify the goddess?

- A. the old woman B. the young woman C. the monk D. the craftsman

(2) Anecdote Two

Context: A group of gods is worshipped in a household, and they fight to defend the family from robbers.

An old man worships the All-Heaven Gods, who have shown great powers. Robbers once broke into his house without being noticed. The man dreamt of robbers coming in but were chased away by giants holding long spears. He woke up in fright and got up to check it. The outer door was open but nothing in the house was taken. The next morning, he saw a spear outside the main gate and wondered where it came from. As he entered the chamber of the All-Heaven Gods to burn incense, he found the spear that used to be held in the god's hand missing. Only then did he understand the dream previous night.

Source: 'Divine action from the All-Heaven God,' *Record of the Listener*, *bing*, *juan* 6.

a) Notes:

Who is saved? _____

Saved from _____

The god saves by _____

b) Quiz: What is concrete evidence of the gods' action? (more than one answer)

- A. the dream B. the spear C. the chamber D. the door E. the giants

(3) Anecdote Three

Context: A knowledgeable man tells his friend about the goddess Heavenly Consort.

The goddess' traces of miracles are many in Taiwan. The local people call her "Mother Ancestor." At times when they meet dangerous winds and waves on the sea, if they call "Mother Ancestor," the goddess will appear with her hair still hanging loose; her power will show immediately. If, instead, people call "Heavenly Consort," then the goddess will arrive in her headdress and formal gown and therefore causes delay (in the rescue).

Source: 'The Heavenly Consort,' from *Many Scholarly Inquiries amid Filial Duties* 陔餘叢考, a Chinese scholar's collection of notes and anecdotes written in the 18th century, 1790 imprint, *juan* 35.

a) Notes:

Who is saved? _____

Saved from _____

The god saves by _____

b) Quiz: According to this story, which is a more effective way to call the goddess for help?

A. "Heavenly Ancestor!" B. "Heavenly Mother!" C. "Queen Mother!" D. "Mother Ancestor!"

ACTIVITY III: LET'S TALK!

Task: In groups of three or four, choose from the topics below or raise your own questions. Jot down some notes if you can.

- What are the most common areas of saving for Chinese gods? Give a few examples.
- Do you have any life problems that the Heavenly Consort might be able to help you with? If so, how would you call upon her for help?
- What are the different ways in which Chinese gods save people? How do they manifest themselves? What do they do?
- Do the ways in which Chinese gods save people make sense to you? Why or why not? In what ways do they differ from other religions you are familiar with?
- Your own questions?

ANSWER KEY

ACTIVITY I: MEET A SAVIOR GODDESS

(1) Compare images

Image on the left: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10.

Image on the right: 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9.

(2) Find divine roles

Preventing disasters and protecting people from misfortune.

Protecting maritime routes and ships, thus helping with water transport.

Regulating days of rain and sunshine, thus helping farmers.

ACTIVITY II: READING STORIES

(1) Anecdote One

a) Notes:

The old woman.

Suffering from an ailing arm.

Miraculous healing./Making a deal to heal each other.

b) Quiz: C

(2) Anecdote Two

a) Notes:

The old man.

Robbery.

Fighting the robbers.

b) Quiz: B, D

(3) Anecdote Three

a) Notes:

People travelling at sea.

Dangerous waves.

Showing up to calm the waters.

b) Quiz: D