

# UNDERSTANDING CHINESE GODS

There are many gods and goddesses in Chinese religions. They play a wide range of roles that are related to human life. Many gods only show power in their local areas, whereas others can extend their power to other places. In such cases, they become regional or state-wide gods. Unlike Greek gods, Chinese gods are rarely family members with each other.

## WELL-KNOWN CHINESE GODS AND THEIR ROLES

Some gods are known by their main roles:

**Door God:** Guarding the entrance of a house.

**Stove God:** Protecting a household and overseeing people's daily deeds.

**Ancestral God:** Overseeing the well-being and safety of a household generally.

**God of Wealth:** Giving wealth and prosperity.

**Earth God:** Ensuring the safety of a household or a neighbourhood.

**Temple Guardian Gods:** Protecting a particular temple.

**City God:** Ensuring the safety and order of a city.

**Dragon God:** Giving rain.

**God of the Eastern Peak:** Administering life, death, and underworld justice.



**Stove God 竈君, woodblock print, 1873 AD, China.**

The British Museum 1954,1113,0.6. Shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence.



**God of Wealth 財神, sculpture, 1662–1722 AD, China.**

Metropolitan Museum of Art 61.200.11. Open Access image.

Other gods are known as individual gods, usually with unique stories of their own:

**Emperor Guan:** Also known as the God of War, who protects the state in military campaigns.

**True Warrior:** A stellar god who protects people's safety and known to be holding a sword.

**Wenchang:** Helping with exams and official career.

**Five Sinister Gods:** A group of five gods doing both harm and good to people.

**Guanyin:** Well-known for her compassion, she offers cures, offspring, and other blessings.

**Heavenly Consort:** A goddess who offers safety in maritime travel in particular.

**Jade Maiden:** A goddess on the Eastern Peak, who gives offsprings and presides over human life and death.

**Jade Emperor:** The ruler of the gods; the top god in Chinese religions.

And many more...



**Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音, a localized Buddhist god), painting, 910 AD, Dunhuang, China.**

The British Museum 1919,0101,0.14. Shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 licence.



**Heavenly Consort 天妃 (Mazu 媽祖), depicted in the *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.

## HOW PEOPLE CHOOSE THEIR GODS

Given that there are so many Chinese gods (only a small number of whom are introduced above!), how do the Chinese people choose which god to turn to in times of need? People's choice of gods can be affected by different factors, such as the following:

- **Specific life problems.** Such as illness, safety, poverty, exam stress, etc.
- **A god's expertise.** Some gods are better at solving certain issues than others.
- **Physical distance.** Local gods' temples are easier to access than the temples of gods faraway.
- **Existing belief.** One's existing religious belief may limit one's choice of gods.
- **Social relations.** Family and friends may also influence one's choice of gods.

## ACTIVITY I: WHO DOES WHAT?

**Task:** Draw lines to match the gods with their functions.



DOOR GOD	Protecting a temple
STOVE GOD	Safety in maritime travel
GOD OF WEALTH	Guarding a house
TEMPLE GUARDIAN GODS	Overseeing people's deeds
DRAGON GOD	Giving wealth
WENCHANG	The ruler of the gods
FIVE SINISTER GODS	Helping with exams
HEAVENLY CONSORT	Giving rain
JADE EMPEROR	Doing both harm and good





## ACTIVITY II: READING STORIES

From the *Record of the Listener* 夷堅志, a 12th-century Chinese collection of accounts about gods and spirits.

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

- a) make notes of the gods and their powers or actions;
- b) answer the questions in the quiz.

### (1) Anecdote One

Context: A man's deceased father comments on the powers of different gods worshipped in the household.

[Mao's father] pointed at the Five Sinister Gods outside the door and said: "Their divine powers are great. Wandering ghosts are not allowed in." He then pointed at the True Warrior God and said: "If you worship him with caution, you may escape from going to hell after death; instead, you will go directly to be a disciple of the North Dipper [a stellar god]..."

Source: 'The father and grandfather of Mr. Mao' 毛氏父祖 (*jia, juan 15*).

a) Notes:

Gods

Actions/Powers

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b) Quiz: What are the father's criteria of choosing a god?

- A. a god's merit      B. a god's power      C. both      D. none of the above

### (2) Anecdote Two

Context: This passage concerns a household worshipping many different gods. It gives vivid portraits of the gods through the eyes of a ghost.

My father said, "I worship the True Warrior God because he is very effective, and I also have images of the Buddha, and of the earth god and stove god. How is it that you come here?" The ghost said, "The Buddha is a benevolent deity who does not concern himself with such trivial matters; every night the True Warrior unbinds his hair, grasps his sword, and flies around the roof. I carefully avoid him, that's all. The earth god behind your house is not easily aroused. Only at the small temple in front of your house [to the stove god] am I reprimanded every time I'm seen. I just entered the kitchen, and His Lordship asked, 'Where are you going?' I answered, 'I'm just looking around.' He upbraided me, 'You're not allowed here.' I said, 'I do not dare,' and came here..." (Trans. Valarie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China*, pp. 171-172)

Source: 'The Records Office at Xiuzhou City' 秀州司錄廳 (*yi, juan 8*).

a) Notes:

Gods

Actions/Lack of action

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b) Quiz: Which of the gods did well in protecting the household, and which did not? Give them a tick or cross above.

### (3) Anecdote Three

Context: This is a rare account about the dangers of worshipping many gods.

A very wealthy man ... deeply believed in ghosts and spirits. Wherever he went, near or far, for big or small events, he would always consult the gods. If the gods said yes, he would go; otherwise, he would not. He also believed in seers and ritual masters, and he worshipped unlawful gods with special care. But months and years passed by, most of his prayers did not work. So, he neglected his worship and it ultimately turned into disrespect ... After that, various strange things started to happen in his house ...

Source: 'Nie Gongfu' 聶公輔 (*zhiyi, juan 1*).

a) Notes:

Gods

Actions/Powers

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b) Quiz: From all three stories above, when people worship many gods at the same time, what could happen?

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|--|----------------------|
| A. people will be blessed                  | C. gods become angry |
| B. people become careless or disrespectful | D. all of the above  |

### 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.

- Which of the Chinese gods do you think are the most popular to different groups in society? Why?
- Which of the Chinese gods do you think might help you with your problems? Why would you choose this god/goddess?
- In what situations do Chinese gods' roles overlap? Can you give examples?
- Compared with another religion you are familiar with, do you think the world of Chinese gods is orderly or confusing?
- Your own questions?

## ANSWER KEY

### ACTIVITY I: GODS AND FUNCTIONS

Door God	Guarding a house
Stove God	Overseeing people's deeds
God of Wealth	Giving wealth
Temple Guardian Gods	Protecting a temple
Dragon God	Giving rain
Wenchang	Helping with exams
Five Sinister Gods	Doing both harm and good
Heavenly Consort	Safety in maritime travel
Jade Emperor	The ruler of the gods

### ACTIVITY II: READING STORIES

#### (1) Anecdote One

Gods	Actions/Powers
Five Sinister Gods	Stop wandering ghosts from entering a house.
True Warrior	Save people in their afterlife.

**Quiz:** B (The gods' merits are not mentioned.)

#### (2) Anecdote Two

Gods	Actions/Lack of action	Effective?
True Warrior	Fly on top of the house with a sword.	x
The Buddha	Does not care about small offences.	x
The earth god	Not easily aroused.	x
The stove god	Active and reprimands intruders.	√

#### (3) Anecdote Three

Gods	Actions/Powers
Gods in the house	Answer the man's questions.
Unlawful gods	Cause harm in the house.

**Quiz:** D