The Kitchen God of Chinese Lore

The winter air churns billows of gray smoke and blackened flakes up over the Chinese courtyard and into the evening sky. Light catches on specks of red, gold, and green as the cinders swirl, sending the Kitchen God on his annual journey to report on the family’s activities and ensure blessings for the months to come.

The Kitchen God of traditional lore is sort of like Saint Nick in that he keeps careful score of who has been naughty and who has been nice. His picture is inevitably pasted to a wall near the stove for a whole year, a place where he can observe and take note of the family’s activities. The Kitchen God is there simply to watch and report.

But then there is that inevitably wonderful Chinese twist: just before he is about to submit his report to the Supreme Being, the family makes very sure he is not only paid off with gifts, but his mouth is also sealed with a bit of sticky sweetness so that nobody will ever hear the truth of what went on within their four walls (Fig. 1).

All year long, two red strips on either side of the Kitchen God remind him of what will be expected: “Say good things when you go up to the heavens and bring good fortune when you return to this abode.” As he watches silently near the stove for twelve months—errant tendrils of steam corrugating the paper and the occasional drop of flying grease spattering his simple unframed visage—he is privy to everything that goes on. He then gathers all that is good or bad into a list, one that the family hopes to turn into a non-report.

A week before the end of the old lunar year, as he is sent on his annual journey to visit the Jade Emperor, those wisps of burned paper offerings remind the Kitchen God of where his friends and loyalties lie. He is given a new set of paper clothes in order to appear appropriately magnificent in front of the head deity of Taoist (i.e., folk) creed, make-believe gold and silks are prepared to send him off in style, sometimes even a horse is provided (Fig. 2), and massive handfuls of funerary offerings called hell notes are set aflame as a sort of legal tender to smooth the way in the spirit world.

The dollop of maltose that coats his lips bursts into a blazing puff of smoke as the image of the Kitchen God is consumed in the fire. Ensuring that he says nothing but sweet words in the event that he ever manages to pry his lips open, the air is perfumed with the scent of roasted marshmallows and burning paper.
Origins of the Kitchen God

Traditional homes throughout China have, over the millennia, paid respect to the Kitchen God, a deity whose Chinese name, Zaoshen, actually means Stove God. Nowadays he is called by other appellations in diverse corners of the land—Lord of the Stove, King of the Stove, the Decider of Fates in the Eastern Kitchen, and even the married couple Stove Father and Stove Mother—but referring to him in English as the Kitchen God will do, since that room is where this beloved god of Chinese folklore has invariably resided.

Zaoshen has been the link between the human and the divine worlds for countless centuries, and this probably started long before the age of Confucius during the Zhou dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE). But like so many of China’s deities, his past is unclear and his origins are disputed. Some say that during the time of legends, around 2600 BCE, the mythic Yellow Emperor was in fact the Kitchen God. Yet others believe that the original Kitchen God was a different ruler in China’s most distant past, the son of Zhuanxu, one of the legendary five emperors of ancient times. However, the philosophical classic Huainanzi of the Western Han dynasty says that he was actually one of the ancient fabled emperors himself, Yandi, because he was the first to tame fire and so is believed to have transmogrified into the Kitchen God after his death.

This idea that celestial beings such as the Kitchen God started out mortal like the rest of us is one of the most striking aspects of Chinese mythology, for the deities of most other cultures—such as Greece and Rome—were divine creatures who occasionally took human form, not the other way around. In reasoning that their gods started out as men and women, it would have been only a short leap for the ancient Chinese to think that these deities suffered from the same foibles as they did and so could be tempted by generous payoffs.

But some gods, like the Kitchen God in particular, did not always take the form of individuals once they became supernatural beings, occasionally turning instead into lowly creatures that existed only at the edges of human life.

Animal Forms of the Kitchen God

One of the first images we have of the Kitchen God is as an insect called a chan, which was a form of cicada. As these insects lived in the warm crevasses of early stoves, some Paleolithic ancestors might have believed these tiny animals embodied the spirit who protected their homes, and so by the Shang (c. 1600 - c. 1046 BCE)—during the early Bronze Age of China—these little creatures came to decorate vessels placed on stoves, such as the elaborate bronze tripods known as ding.

The natural shapes of cicadas evolved into intricately stylized, elongated triangles, their beautiful patterns nestling up against each other as they circled the pot bellies (Fig. 3). Similar designs embellished ancient stoves. These creatures, though, were not the common cicadas that trill in trees during Asia’s long hot summers, but were shaped more like cockroaches, insects that some locales came to refer to as “stove horses” due to their preference for burrowing inside of the family stoves. It was this habit that led them to be seen as metamorphoses of the Kitchen God.

The other animal thought to be an earthly incarnation of this deity was the toad, and this can still be seen in the ancient characters for zao or “stove,” which has a toad crouching inside a cave. Some people, however, believe that this actually depicts a frog and is meant to counteract the fire’s dangers, since this aquatic creature is most closely related to water in Chinese mythology (Fig. 4). Certain stories related to the Kitchen God read very much like Grimm Brothers fairy tales, particularly in a remote mountainous area of south-central China: a frog enters a home, sloughs off its skin in the hearth’s ashes, appears as a man, and helps this family in some way. When the master of the house—or the frog’s wife—discovers what has happened, these mortals try to burn up the frog skin so that the deity is trapped in its human form and must stay with them forever. But this is not possible, the god always tells them, for his skin can only be incinerated on a sacred mountain.
The great Chinese dictionary *Shuowen jiezi* had a much different explanation and notes that early stoves were called “well stoves” (*jingzao*), a name that came about probably because as long ago as the Stone Age these square pottery cookers looked much like wells with their round openings on top and deep centers (Fig. 5). And so—although this is pure conjecture—it is possible that since frogs lived in active wells and thus were believed to be water spirits, toads might have been considered their fiery counterparts for the family hearth, as the brown round circles on the animals’ backs mimicked the openings on primitive stoves.

The Kitchen God that we know of today evolved, then, from a rich tradition of folk culture and beliefs. And although this deity might once have been described as having the form of an animal, nowadays he almost always appears as a kindly man (Fig. 6).

**The Many Human Incarnations of the Kitchen God**

The great Taoist classic *Zhuangzi* says, “In the stove is Ji”, Sima Biao explained, “Ji is the Kitchen God, wearing crimson clothes and appearing as a beautiful woman.” The Tang dynasty writer Duan Chengshi wrote, “The Kitchen God is named Wei and looks like a beautiful woman,” with six
daughters all named Cha.\textsuperscript{11} But these are rarities, as just about all other descriptions of the Kitchen God describe him as male.\textsuperscript{12}

Long before that, though, the Kitchen God probably evolved from the Fire God into a separate deity. A being with the face of a man and the body of a beast, the Fire God was endowed with all the fierceness that fire demanded.\textsuperscript{13} Later, as China’s civilization grew and expanded, the being that had once represented unimaginable powers to prehistoric minds was transformed into a more refined bringer of unequalled comfort and protection. Moreover, this new god was thought to have once been a man, placing him closer to mankind on the mortal/divine scale, and thus more responsive to our needs.

The era when the Kitchen God is held to have actually walked the Earth as a human is problematic, and few sources for this legend agree even with each other. The various dates suggested in China’s ancient books do not, of course, correspond in any way to what we now know about the age when the Chinese first began using fire, and are in fact off by hundreds of thousands of years, as archaeological finds in Zhoukoudian near Beijing show hearths and burned bones that date from an astonishing 230,000 to 460,000 BCE.\textsuperscript{14}

Because he developed out of the Fire God into an individual entity, the importance of the Kitchen God even at the very beginning of Chinese history must have had something to do with the taming of fire, for that was what allowed man to ward off night terrors and make animal flesh delicious. Fire also gave our earliest ancestors the ability to cook vegetable matter and release their nutrition, permitting an evolved version of man to rely on starches as the bedrock for most diets and in turn provide the necessary environment for agriculture to be invented. Agriculture led to cities, cities led to civilization, and the rest is, literally, history.

Once fire had been introduced into the homes of early man, the hearth became the heart of these abodes. Soon enough in China, this deity became worshipped as a giver of light, heat, and warmth, and the god who presided over the stove became synonymous with home. The Kitchen God, having been a man at one time like any other man, was thought to need a family, so in many areas of China the Kitchen God is depicted with a wife, and when they appear together, they are called Zaogong and Zaomu (Stove Father and Stove Mother). Other stories must have felt this was still not enough and say that this god was not only married, but agreed with that Tang dynasty writer that he had in fact six daughters.

\textbf{FIG. 5.} Line drawing after a funerary clay stove dating from the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), Carolyn Phillips, ink on paper, 2012.

\textbf{FIG. 6.} Kitchen God picture from the 1960s, Taiwan, offset print on newsprint paper, courtesy Mrs. Florence Lin.
In short, and as with everything else, nobody agrees on any point except one: the Kitchen God protected the family and reported back to the Jade Emperor at the end of the year. He often has simple admonitions printed around his image, such as “those with virtue may control the fire” and “the selfless may reach the heavens,” or wishes that he grant good luck and peace in the coming year, but other than that, this deity’s life has served as a blank canvas for clever tellers of tales to embroider.

Kitchen God Folklore

Perhaps the most charming story of all about this deity comes from the eastern seaboard of China around the province of Jiangsu. Part of the necessary preparations throughout China for the New Year is a thorough housecleaning, for every Chinese person is taught from an early age that good fortune in the coming year depends upon having a spotless home. No one really ever says why this is so, but in the lands near the mouth of the Yangtze River, one folktale provides a delightful explanation:

According to folk Taoist beliefs, an invisible spirit, called a sanshishen, lived in each and every person. Once a month, these spirits would report to the Jade Emperor on all that had gone on in the world of man. However, these spirits were pure evil and thus would only badmouth their corporeal husks.

Naturally, after hearing nothing but horrible things about mankind, the Jade Emperor became disgusted with the human race, and he ordered the spirits to write the names of all these alleged malefactors on the walls of their mortal homes so that when the Jade Emperor descended to Earth at the end of the year, he could once and for all wipe the land clean by personally seeing that every bad person was killed. The evil spirits quickly set out to ensure that the names of absolutely every mortal was so recorded, no matter how good or bad, how young or old. The happiness of these malevolent sprites was at last complete, for they soon would no longer be trapped inside humans.

Word leaked out, and before long the Kitchen God that resided in every home became aware of this nefarious plan. As these paper gods were but temporal manifestations of a benevolent soul who knew for a certainty that mankind was not uniformly bad, the Kitchen God came up with a plan to save the human race. Without going into details, he made each family understand that it was imperative for them to clean their homes from top to bottom, scrub every inch of their walls, and make every surface gleam during the week when the Kitchen God was up in Heaven.

The humans thus thoroughly scoured their homes and so unwittingly washed away their names from their walls while the Kitchen God was busy reporting on how good they had been during the past year. A short while later, as the Jade Emperor traveled through these mortal houses, not a single name could be found. The Jade Emperor was so enraged at the duplicity of the evil spirits that every one of them was punished, and mankind has not been bothered with those sprites again.

Almost always depicted as a compassionate deity concerned with his family’s welfare, the Kitchen God’s status and responsibilities waxed and waned over the centuries. By the mid-Han dynasty, for example—which corresponded more or less to the time of Christ—he was worshipped as one of the five minor gods responsible for the well-being of the home.

It was not until around the fourth century CE, though, that he took on the responsibility of describing the family’s behavior over the preceding year. A book dating from that time warns, “On an evening when the moon is dark [i.e., two weeks before the Lunar New Year], the Kitchen God will also go up to Heaven and report on the transgressions of man. For great offenses, 300 days will be deducted [from that person’s life], and for small ones, the adjustment will be three days.”

He was accorded a much more benign nature in a later book devoted to him, which said that rather than meting out justice, he merely recounted what a given family had been up to over the past year: “The Kitchen God receives the incense and fire of a family and safeguards the family’s health and good fortune. He observes the good and bad in a family, and reports on the family’s achievements and indiscretions.”

Spring Festival Celebrations

In most of China, and almost always in the southern areas, the Lunar New Year celebrations begin a week before the end of the old year, on the twenty-third of the last lunar month when the Kitchen God is sent off to the heavens. This Spring Festival (Chunjie), as the Chinese call it, therefore lasts for about three weeks and ends on the Lantern Festival, which is the evening of the first full moon (the fifteenth day of the first lunar month).

But no matter what day is the appointed time in that particular region, each family sees the Kitchen God off on his journey with gifts and prayers for favorable reports. Sweets like that maltose, as well as candy and sweet stuffed rice paste balls, ensure that his lips are pleasurably sealed. And as he is bid adieu, ringing in his ears are the final admonitions to “chi
tiantian, shuo haohua” (eat sweets and say good words) and “haohua chuan shangtian, huaihua diu yibian” (relay good words up to the heavens and toss bad words aside). Tradition holds that the Kitchen God reports to the Jade Emperor the following day, but families entreat him to maintain strict silence by reminding him that “xin gan chou la, Zaojun mo yan” (pungent, sweet, funky, spicy: the Kitchen God mentions none of these).

As Ogden Nash once famously said, though, “Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker.” Some folks therefore prefer to smear a bit of fermented wine lees on the Kitchen God, leading him to be called the Zui siming, or “Drunken Keeper of Fates.” If he could be befuddled by wine, the thinking goes, he would have less to report.21

While his earthly house is given that thorough spring cleaning to ensure good luck in the coming months,22 the Kitchen God spends a few days in Heaven, kept silent via those liberal applications of wine or sweets, and the Jade Emperor remains unaware of any misdeeds by his human family. Carefully timed to correspond with the Jade Emperor’s visit to Earth (on the twenty-fifth of the last lunar month), the Supreme Being is received with incense. On New Year’s Eve, the Jade Emperor is returned to the heavens and the Kitchen God is welcomed back into the family with a new picture and much ceremony.

The Kitchen God’s Temple and Birthday

And so it is appropriate that the Kitchen God is worshipped almost nowhere but in the family home, the few exceptions being the temples dedicated to this domestic deity. Sometimes the Kitchen God shares a site with two other deities—the City God (Chenghuangshen) and the God of Wealth (Caishen)—but every so often he is allowed his very own place.

The most famous of all these Kitchen God temples used to be in Beijing. Part of a collection of minor shrines near the great Confucius Temple on Imperial College Street in the nation’s capital, it originally dated from the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and was located within the courtyard of the Great Bell Temple, or Dazhongsi.23 However, as the temple was destroyed, the only remaining evidence is a collection of six stone steles and fragments (Fig. 7), as well as a pair of iron lions.

One description still remains of what the largest Kitchen God temple in Beijing once looked like. A Qing dynasty author24 noted that it was “a Ming dynasty construction...with a lone ancient cypress. Rebuilt during the Kangxi reign25 of this dynasty, it has...two iron lions outside the gate that were cast during the first year of the Kangxi reign.” These lions—one male and one female, as is always the custom—are about two feet high behind fierce expressions, and they have proved to be great draws for tourists who come to look at and stroke them, so much so that over the years they have become polished by the caresses of innumerable hands and the tiny bottoms of the children who ride them. One of the few reminders of what used to stand here, the lions now guard the entrance to an elementary school.26

In addition to his ceremonial sendoff at the end of the year, this deity is also honored on his birthday, which falls on the third day of the eighth lunar month.27 According to the remembrances of one online writer, the Kitchen God celebrations that used to be held in the three days running up to his birthday were exciting events, with the chefs of all the great restaurants—as well as lesser cooks and commoners—entering the temple to burn incense and worship the Kitchen God.28 It was also at this time that some apprentices held ceremonies prior to entering into the service of a cooking master, while others thanked their present masters or left their employ. Because this was less than two weeks before the Mid-Autumn Festival (the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month), the streets around the temple would be filled

with items such as rabbit statues and fruit, in addition to household items more related to the Kitchen God himself, such as “woks, bowls, ladles, platters, stir-fry spatulas, and cleavers.”

Two strange facts about this place make it particularly unique. First, the name on this temple reads, literally, “Soap God Temple” (Zaojun miao); the characters for stove and soap are very different, but they have the same pronunciation. Why it has the name “soap” on it is a mystery because the ancient steles preserved inside it all refer to the Kitchen God using the character for stove rather than soap.

The second is that this is where the ashes of imperial eunuchs were placed during the Qing dynasty. What they had to do with the Kitchen God is also unknown, as it is very unlikely that they ever even set foot in the royal kitchens!

Paper Images and Wooden Effigies

The vast majority of Kitchen God images are on thin paper, and the reason for this is, naturally, very simple: they are meant to be burned at the end of every lunar year. Until modern times, these pictures were usually very colorful wood-block prints with black outlines. Once in a while, though, the portrait of the deity is a simple one in black ink on a colored background (Fig. 8).

All of these images differ to reflect local customs and beliefs in an especially vivid way. Some are simple portraits of the god, others have him next to his wife, some have the god surrounded by attendants or children, and yet others are complicated household scenes, with the god (and sometimes his wife and even a consort) in the center.

Taiwan has perhaps one of the most unique and complex of all images: called Guanyin Malian, these are detailed depictions of a large Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin) above a grouping of lesser deities: the Earth God (Tudigong), the Kitchen God, and often Mazu, Taiwan’s beloved patron saint of fishermen.

The other two forms in which the Kitchen God appears in homes are permanent depictions, either as a simple plaque with four characters or as a wooden statue. A plaque is the less expensive of the two, and sometimes it has a small platform at the bottom to hold offerings, such as incense, some food, or even flowers. The wooden or metal plaque customarily says ding fu Zaojun, or “the Kitchen God who ensures good fortune,” and this is either hung on a kitchen wall or placed near an area dedicated to the deity. Statues, though relatively rare, traditionally have been carved and painted; they generally are small in size, as befits a household deity.

Offerings to the Kitchen God

Religions and beliefs tend to codify over the years, and traditional offerings to the Kitchen God have taken on many of the characteristics of ancestor worship and other Taoist devotions. A packet of joss paper dedicated to the Kitchen God purchased in Los Angeles Chinatown in January 2012 provides interesting clues to current beliefs and traditions.

Almost everything in the packet is made of thin paper so that it can be easily consumed by fire. Most charming of all are a pop-up hat with the character for “longevity” stamped on it, a printed pair of boots, and a long black robe embellished with
As China continues to modernize, the understandable desire for microwave ovens and large refrigerators by those with the means to buy them is causing traditional kitchens to be remodeled into shiny replicas of the average American home. The Kitchen God is in danger of becoming a relic of a past when these rooms were heated by coal stoves and foods were preserved by salting and drying.

Perhaps his time is at its end. But it is also possible that renewed pride in an ancient culture will lead a new generation to seek the cultural footing that was lost in the political shuffles of the past hundred or so years.

No matter what the future may hold, this kindly immortal reminds us that few deities in the history of man have ever consistently taken the side of humans against the forces of Nature and the whims of malevolent spirits. Tattered though the Kitchen God may have appeared by year’s end, his families knew that they could count on him to keep their dirty laundry secret even in the face of a stern Supreme Being, to protect them from the ravages of fire, and to preside over their hearths and homes.

In the end, it does not really matter whether one actually believes that there is a Kitchen God, because what he symbolizes surpasses conviction. He is nothing if not, in many ways, a very mortal man who would always be lovingly persuaded to never tattle. Much like a doting grandparent, he could be counted on to look on our faults with a benign smile, gently admonishing us to do little more than to at least try to behave.

Alone among the gods, he has always been on our side, and he embodies all that is good in this world of ours.

Long may he reign.

NOTES
1. Xi Kun 席坤, Zhangguo yinshi 中国飲食 [Chinese dining], vol. 1 (Changchun [Jilin, China]: Shidai, 2010), 3. The Yellow Emperor was believed to be the first one to have controlled fire; through teaching people to use a stove instead of an open flame, he is attributed with guiding the early Chinese on their first steps toward developing a culture. Some even credit the Yellow Emperor with devising different uses for such grains as rice and millet—ensuring that there was tipple on the table as well as food—when he said that one should “steam grain for beverages and cook grains for porridge.”

2. Li was this son’s given name, and he was renowned as a regulator of fire, which led him to be revered as the Kitchen God. Known as the Liji 嘉禮 in Chinese, the Book of Rites is one of the “Five Classics” that discusses traditional standards for conduct during Confucius’s era, which was about the fifth century BCE.

3. “Fanlun” 演論: “Yandi zuo huo er si wei Zao” 炎帝作火而死為灶. Gao You’s 姚頡 annotation says, “Yandi used the virtue of fire to oversee all under Heaven, and after death he assumed the position of Zaoshen to receive ritual offerings.” (The Han dynasty lasted from 206 BCE to 220 CE.)
4. Zhuangzi, “Dasheng” 道可致，生，the line, “Zao you Ji” 姬有祭祀 (a stove has Ji); Sima Biao’s 司馬彪 annotation: “ji means the Kitchen God,” with the character ji 賈 being an alternate form of the character jia 房, which means “cicada” or (chan) 蝉 (Guangyu Shi chong 《廣雅·釋蟲》).

5. As the Chinese scholar Ding Shan 丁山 noted, “The red-carapaced insects commonly seen on stoves represent the Kitchen God.” Zhongguo gudai zongjiao yu shenhua kao 中國古代宗教與神話考 [A study of ancient Chinese religion and mythology] (Shanghai: Shanghai Cultural, 1988), 324–325.

6. 這些 and 這些, both of which are pronounced 200.

7. “Water is the consort of fire” intones a narrative history from Confucius’s age; during the Spring and Autumn Period, the Zuozhuan 論語記 explained that “fire fears water.” and a few pages later the same book noted that “fire is the male of water.” In other words, water is the female (or yin) counterpart of the male (or yang) nature of fire, and this symbol of a water deity acts as protection against the danger of fire, which is also why the frog sometimes appeared on roof tiles.


11. Yoyang zazu 酆陽雜俎 [Miscellany from Yoyang], a literary sketchbook by Duan Chengshi 達成石, the ninth century. This book is most remarkable for its contents on food, both of which are pronounced 200.


13. “The Shanhaijing 山海經 says that the Fire God rode a pair of dragons, was named Jurong, and was the son of the legendary emperor Yandi; a Han dynasty title that means the Classic of Mountains and Seas, this book discusses ancient geography and myth alongside almost psychedelicly strange pictures.


15. According to the esoteric “Inner Chapters” of the Taoist work Baopuzi 拿樸子 俄祅 these texts are inscribed in Chinese as a supernatural creature that wanders unencumbered while causing trouble, going so far as to lure people to their deaths so that it can enjoy the offerings made to these dead souls (Eastern Jin) Ge Hong 郭洪, “Neipian: Weizhi” 《內篇·位致》, and Duan Chengshi (op. cit.) even went so far as to describe these spirits as being composed of three destructive spirits: “In the upper body was the Green Lady 葛素 who afflicted people’s eyes, in the middle body was the White Lady 白由 who afflicted people’s internal organs, and in the lower body was the Body Lady 《內篇·位致》 who afflicted people’s stomachs and lives” (Yoyang zazu, “Yunge” 《 Removes}}.

16. "Legends about Housecleaning before New Year’s Eve” 除夕習俗禮儀的傳統 (Chu xian qian dan danzhong de chuanshuo), Local Annals 鄉村志 (Xiangzhencun...
Revolution when a teacher at that school tracked them down at a cultural artifacts shop.  
27. Ibid.  
29. Mao Zifang. Rabbits are symbols of the Mid-Autumn Festival, as it is believed that a rabbit can be seen on the full moon’s face, pounding out the elixir for immortality.  
30. "Guanyin Malian nei" 觀音馬淋巴 [Inside the Guanyin Malian], http://content.edu.tw/local/taipei/chenshui/earth/46.htm, n.d. (accessed 1 September 2012). Guanyin Malian is the name for a Taiwanese-style portrait of the Goddess of Mercy, usually with attendants on either side of the goddess and any number of lesser deities below her, making this a vivid combination of both Buddhist and Taoist imagery.  
31. Hungry ghosts, or egui 饑鬼, are unappeased spirits who lack the descendants necessary to provide them with sacrificial offerings, meaning that they must steal whatever food and riches they can find. The Hungry Ghost Festival (Yulanpen 元宵盆) is held on the fifteenth (or sometimes fourteenth) day of the seventh lunar month, when ancestral spirits visit the earthly realm and are welcomed by their descendants with food and incense. On that day even the ghosts of strangers can look forward to being fed by these same families, if only to appease them and ward off misfortune. In some areas, visiting spirits are then shown the way home though the beautiful custom of setting lighted lanterns on the water that float up into the night sky.  
33. All of these are first placed in front of either the statue or plaque dedicated to the Kitchen God before a pair of candles are lit and placed in an incense burner. Three large “longevity” incense sticks are placed alongside the candles. One then lights three smaller incense sticks; these are held in both hands while one bows three times, expresses gratitude, and makes requests before placing these incense sticks beside the candles. The paper offerings and the deity’s paper image are then individually placed in a metal container and burned (outdoors is best), while the food and beverages are offered in front of the statue or plaque next to the incense burner.  

Mao Zifang recalls that after 1949 when the People’s Republic was established, the Kitchen God temple was turned into an elementary school, but the lions still sat at the entrance. Then, in 1958, during the Great Leap Forward, anything viewed as scrap metal was thrown into backyard steel furnaces in a mis-

As always, no one seems to agree about anything.  
21. (Northern Song) Meng Yuanlao 孟元老, Dongjing meng hua lu 東京夢華録 (a record of local life and customs from around 1020-1126).  
22. In addition, the New Year must be started out with literally a clean slate, and anything viewed as scrap metal was thrown into backyard steel furnaces in a mis-

China’s Kitchen God Stories: New Year Traditions and Ancestral Mythology in Beijing and Shanghai

In order to understand the almostybde of the Kitchen God temple, it is necessary to provide them with sacrificial offerings, meaning that they must steal whatever food and riches they can find. The Hungry Ghost Festival (Yulanpen [盆]), while the

Guanyin Malian niehui 觀音馬淋巴會 [Inside the Guanyin Malian temple], Baike (i.e., a Chinese Wikipedia counterpart) web site, http://baike.baidu.com/view/418051.htm, 4 May 2012 (accessed 1 September 2012). However, the

Baopuzi. “Neiqian WeiZhi.”

mysterious disappearance, only to return to their original stations in 1986 after the Cultural Revolution when a teacher at that school tracked them down at a cultural artifacts shop.

The others were the gods of the double doors, single doors, wells, and toilets.

As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

zhi). Chapter 1: Folk Legends; Suzhou government web site, www.szgh.suzhou.gov.cn/szgh/szgh0572.htm (accessed 28 August 2012). However, the Baopuzi says that the sanxishi reported to the Keeper of Fates (Simingshen 司命神), while the Kitchen God personally proffered his own observations at the end of each month. As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

In order to understand the almostubdates of the Kitchen God temple, it is necessary to provide them with sacrificial offerings, meaning that they must steal whatever food and riches they can find. The Hungry Ghost Festival (Yulanpen [盆]) is held on the fifteenth (or sometimes fourteenth) day of the seventh lunar month, when ancestral spirits visit the earthly realm and are welcomed by their descendants with food and incense. On that day even the ghosts of strangers can look forward to being fed by these same families, if only to appease them and ward off misfortune. In some areas, visiting spirits are then shown the way home though the beautiful custom of setting lighted lanterns on the water that float up into the night sky.

The others were the gods of the double doors, single doors, wells, and toilets.

As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

zhi). Chapter 1: Folk Legends; Suzhou government web site, www.szgh.suzhou.gov.cn/szgh/szgh0572.htm (accessed 28 August 2012). However, the Baopuzi says that the sanxishi reported to the Keeper of Fates (Simingshen 司命神), while the Kitchen God personally proffered his own observations at the end of each month. As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

In order to understand the almostubdates of the Kitchen God temple, it is necessary to provide them with sacrificial offerings, meaning that they must steal whatever food and riches they can find. The Hungry Ghost Festival (Yulanpen [盆]) is held on the fifteenth (or sometimes fourteenth) day of the seventh lunar month, when ancestral spirits visit the earthly realm and are welcomed by their descendants with food and incense. On that day even the ghosts of strangers can look forward to being fed by these same families, if only to appease them and ward off misfortune. In some areas, visiting spirits are then shown the way home though the beautiful custom of setting lighted lanterns on the water that float up into the night sky.

The others were the gods of the double doors, single doors, wells, and toilets.

As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

zhi). Chapter 1: Folk Legends; Suzhou government web site, www.szgh.suzhou.gov.cn/szgh/szgh0572.htm (accessed 28 August 2012). However, the Baopuzi says that the sanxishi reported to the Keeper of Fates (Simingshen 司命神), while the Kitchen God personally proffered his own observations at the end of each month. As always, no one seems to agree about anything.

In order to understand the almostubdates of the Kitchen God temple, it is necessary to provide them with sacrificial offerings, meaning that they must steal whatever food and riches they can find. The Hungry Ghost Festival (Yulanpen [盆]) is held on the fifteenth (or sometimes fourteenth) day of the seventh lunar month, when ancestral spirits visit the earthly realm and are welcomed by their descendants with food and incense. On that day even the ghosts of strangers can look forward to being fed by these same families, if only to appease them and ward off misfortune. In some areas, visiting spirits are then shown the way home though the beautiful custom of setting lighted lanterns on the water that float up into the night sky.

The others were the gods of the double doors, single doors, wells, and toilets.