

## CONTENTS

Preface . . . . .	7
Foreword by John Blofeld . . . . .	15
Acknowledgements . . . . .	21
Introduction . . . . .	23
PART ONE: The System	
Fung-shui, Temples, Cities and Squares. . . . .	31
Hsing T'ien Temple . . . . .	37
From Myth to History . . . . .	42
The Strange Case of Confucius . . . . .	47
The Problem of Lao Tzu . . . . .	56
Nature Cults, Alchemists and Gods . . . . .	61
Ancestor Worship . . . . .	71
PART TWO: The Gods	
Kuan Ti: God of War . . . . .	79
Pak Tai: Emperor of the North . . . . .	89
The Purple Planet . . . . .	105
Kuan Yin: Hearer of Cries . . . . .	112
Monkey: Great Sage Equal to Heaven . . . . .	120
Na Cha: The Third Prince . . . . .	126
Tin Hau: Queen of Heaven . . . . .	138
Tam Kung: The Boy God . . . . .	153
San Chou Niang Niang: Mother of the Three Islands . . .	158
The Jade Emperor . . . . .	167

Pao Kung: Magistrate Pao . . . . .	172
Hung Shing: Hung – The Holy One . . . . .	178
Ts'ai Shen: God of Wealth . . . . .	182
T'ao Hua Hsien Nu: The Peach Blossom Girl . . . . .	188
Chang Hsien: The Immortal Chang . . . . .	193
Lu Pan: Patron of Builders . . . . .	202
Lei Kung: God of Thunder . . . . .	211
Chung K'uei: The Exorcist . . . . .	214
Wong Tai Sin: The Great Immortal Wong . . . . .	220

HUNGRY GHOSTS:

The Cheung Chau Bun Festival . . . . .	223
--	-----

Glossary of Alternative Names and Spellings . . . . .	234
---	-----

Table of Dynasties . . . . .	238
------------------------------	-----

## PREFACE

When I first sat down to try and disentangle the life stories of the gods of the pictures I had bought – the pictures that illustrate this book – I had no idea where this journey would lead me. I just knew it was fun. Something that appeared simple on the surface became labyrinthine in complexity once I began to ask questions. And time seemed endless to me then as I turned 30 years of age. I was in no hurry to make my name or establish my fortune. I was never wise in these matters. Instead, I sat in my eyrie just below the weather station on the island of Cheung Chau, Hong Kong. From the room I had nominated my study I looked out across Nam Tam Bay towards the large peak of Mount Stenhouse on Lamma Island. From time to time I would shout a question to Bernadette, the girlfriend I was ignoring – who later became my wife. She told me later she was impressed by my persistence, even if she found my curiosity strange, and not one she shared. But she was patient with me and pandered to my perpetual need to have things – things that were utterly obvious to her – explained.

When I realised I had not just a project but a book on my hands I became excited. The folly that had led me into the quagmire of Chinese folk beliefs led me further on into believing I could write the book that explained the whole thing. The depths of my ignorance can be guessed at when one of the first people I approached with the first attempt at a manuscript suggested that it might be better organised in the form of chapters. Chapters? What a brilliant idea. This hadn't occurred to me. Once I had reworked the material according to the requirement of chapters, I came to the problem of finding a publisher. I approached the Government publishing house. There a friendly publisher sat me down

and told me he had once put a journalist on the job. The journalist had returned with the statement that it was impossible. So there it was. It was simply not possible to put together a book on Chinese gods. “But...” I started to pull out my manuscript. He patted me sadly on the arm and dismissed me.

I did get a bite of interest from a British publishing house and an editor went so far as to commission someone knowledgeable in Bangkok to read it. The report that came back was positive and we were all set to discuss terms when my editor was sacked. That was the end of that avenue.

Like many an author before me, convinced of the vital importance of what I had written – and remembering that old Quaker admonition, *live adventurously* – I decided the only thing to do was to self-publish. I brought to this project all the ignorance that had fuelled the research and writing. The result was a book overflowing with typographical errors. For those who bought this first edition I can only offer my most profound apologies.

Finally Pelanduk – a Malaysian publishing house – took me out of my misery and republished the book. However, as I had cleverly retained the Hong Kong rights and given my ineptitude as a publisher, the result was that the book remained unavailable in Hong Kong for the next 25 years. Pelanduk compounded all this by never once paying me a royalty despite putting the book through at least three print runs.

Somewhere along the line, the idea emerged that I should ask John Blofeld, the great sinologist and writer on the arcane world of Chinese Taoism, to write a foreword. I discovered that he lived in Bangkok and became convinced that he was the nameless reader who had commended the book a few years previously. I managed to trace him by the simple trick of asking for his telephone number from the Secretary of the Asia Society. In those less security-obsessed, more gentlemanly days, the telephone number and address were provided without a murmur of protest. I phoned and was invited to lunch.

I found John Blofeld living in a remote suburb of the city in a traditional Thai house. He explained that a Thai house consisted of a number of teak

buildings all of the same size, each one on its own being a housing unit known as a roof. His was a five-roof house – small but adequate to his needs. He was looked after by an adopted daughter.

When I met him he was clearly ill and he told me without any form of sentimentality that he was dying of cancer. I was early on my arrival so waited in a small alcove outside his front door. When he finally emerged I saw a slight man with short silver-grey cropped hair and a face of electric quizzical humour.

I spent four hours with him in his darkened bedroom – he was most comfortable lying down. It was clear that he was in virtually constant pain. Our chat rambled from subject to subject. He told me his name was a venerable English one from Norfolk and not German as I had surmised. At one point he looked up an arcane reference to a mythical Chinese bird that had only one wing and could only fly when mating. This wonderful image has stuck with me ever since. He admitted that he had written, under a pseudonym, a number of erotic Chinese tales, drawing on his knowledge of esoteric sexual practices among various Taoist sects and invited me to rummage through a box and to take any of which I could find duplicates. However, when we came to the subject of my own book, *Chinese Gods*, he denied having ever read it. He agreed to do so and if he felt moved and, more pertinently, if he still had the energy for the project, he would write a foreword. A month or so later I received the foreword that you can read on the next few pages and, a few months after that, the news that he had died – so this foreword is almost certainly his last published work.

Returning to the subject of this book, I do believe that, for all its faults, it is a valuable one. I hope its enthusiasm for its subject is evident. Someone once likened it to the Pompidou Centre in Paris – as it displayed its infrastructure on the surface. Certainly I spell out each step in my various analyses so it will be easy for anyone following to see where I have gone off the track.

Someone else gave me the compliment that I wrote in the same way I spoke. At least, I think it was a compliment. Re-reading this book now,

there is much that I would prefer to express differently but I have resisted the urge to rewrite it. No doubt I speak differently now too.

Is there anything that with the benefit of hindsight I would like to change? The truth is I am not wiser now than I was then. In one or two places I have made small changes and additions but this book, in all its essentials, is the same book I wrote close to 30 years ago. It is a work of an enthusiastic maverick who was unafraid to draw possibly outrageous conclusions. However, if I have made any truly original contribution to advancing knowledge, it is in what I have said about the god Na Cha (see page 126).

This book should be treated as a journey, a gradual unfolding of the universe of Chinese beliefs. I have tried to share my excitement and I hope I have succeeded. This is certainly not one of those formal ‘objective’ books – the kind that bore the pants off the reader.

A word on the glass paintings. When I started to become interested in them they were already a dying art. You can still find pictures of two or three of the most famous gods (Kuan Kung and Kuan Yin, for example) but the others have disappeared from the shops. This means that the photographs here are the last record of some of these god images. Certainly the pictures in the style of Chung K’uei and the Peach Blossom Girl were the last of their kind even when I was able to buy them. The photographs in this book may be the only record extant that this art form ever existed in these different styles.

Finally, the republication of *Chinese Gods* has allowed me to reprint a related essay on the subject of the Cheung Chau Bun Festival. This was first commissioned by Ian Lambot, who was publishing a photographic essay on the festival and wanted an introduction to accompany it. I was the resident expert so the job fell to me. Bernadette and I asked around and found that our plumber knew everything about everything. He was our ‘deep throat’. Along with Mr Man’s testimony I had copies of everything else that had been written on the subject so I can justly claim that this essay contains the best description of the festival to date.

Of course, year by year changes occur – some big, some small. The

festival you witness today will not be an exact replica of the one I witnessed in 1989, the one on which the description in my own essay was based. It seems that a rather sterile and limited competitive climb is allowed again with climbers securely attached to safety ropes. (For a long time, this competitive climb was not allowed because the funding for the towers traditionally came from various competing triad societies. The accident that caused a tower to collapse gave the authorities the opportunity to clamp down by banning the climb.) How this festival, in all its complexity, survives the changes ahead is something no-one can predict. Nevertheless, it remains a colourful event – and an annual reminder of the potency of traditional beliefs.

It remains for me to wish you *bon voyage* and I hope that you find this book useful to your own adventures in the world of Chinese folk religion.

*Jonathan Chamberlain*  
*Brighton, England*  
*December 2008*