

01 灶君

Stove God

Zaojun (灶君), the Stove God, also known as the Kitchen or Hearth god, is patron deity of the household. Pictures of him were pasted up above the stove so that Zaojun could watch over the family throughout the year, protecting them from harm. Strictly speaking then, this is not a *zhima* – a prayer to a god – but an actual paper representation of him.

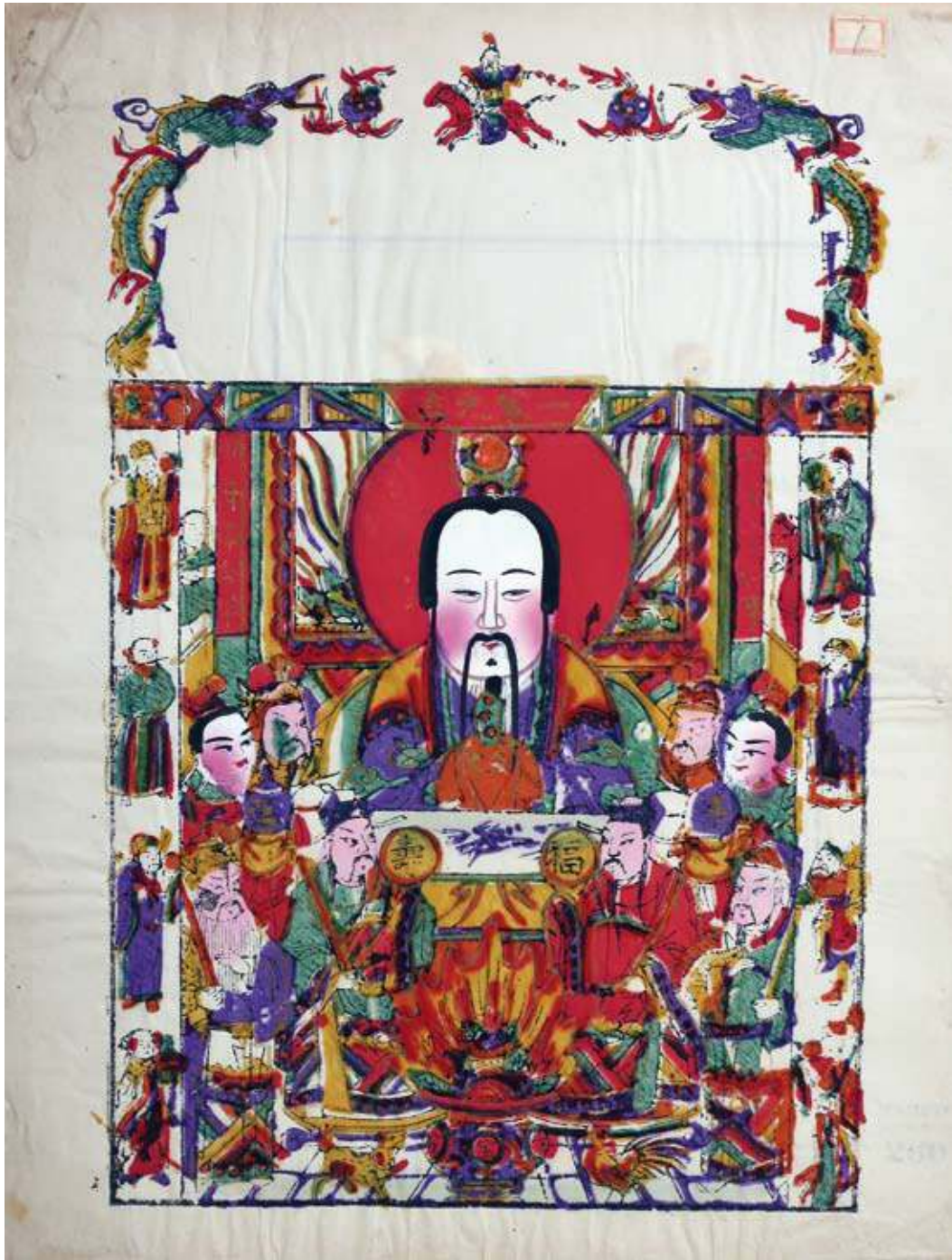
At New Year, Zaojun returned to heaven and reported to the Jade Emperor on how household members had behaved over the previous twelve months. The man of the house took down Zaojun's picture, smeared his lips with honey (either to sweeten his words, or to seal his mouth), and set out water and grass for Zaojun's horse. The print was then burned to send the god on his way, and a fresh image put up a week later.

At the top of the print, the dragon and warrior cartouche should enclose a separately-printed calendar

for the year. The eccentric Eight Immortals, four to a side, border the main panel; on the right, just in from the uppermost immortal in green, Zaojun's horse peeps through an opening. Zaojun himself sits at the altar table, below a red board reading "Head of the Household" and surrounded by officials holding auspicious emblems. In the foreground, a glowing cornucopia overflowing with silver ingots and precious stones is flanked by a dog and a rooster, symbols of the hearth.

Unlike the other initial eighty prints, this one and #74 come from Yangliuqing, southeast of Beijing outside Tianjin city. Typically for the Yangliuqing studios, most of the colours were directly block-printed, with the main faces painted in by hand. The paper is better-quality too; Stove God prints had to last a whole year before being burned.

See also #16 and #74.



02 后土皇帝

Houtu, Queen Empress of the Earth

Every village, town or district in China has its own “Earth God” or *tudi* (土地), the local deity of place. *Tudi* are guardians of all the resources and people who live in their area; businessmen or merchants pray to them for wealth, farmers for healthy crops. Their shrines are still found across rural China, and even as tiny alcoves at pavement level outside shops in downtown Hong Kong.

Though only locals worship their own *tudi*, Houtu is widely seen as their overall representative and ruler, the spirit of the soil and the crops which spring from it. Often depicted holding a millet stalk, she makes fields fertile and is also a guardian of women. Her

home is in the Kunlun Mountains – not the real range of this name in far western China, but a mythological Daoist realm.

Originally a male deity, Houtu was feminised at some point during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD), though her sex in this picture remains ambiguous (she’s wearing a crown, not the usual female headpiece). But – Buddhist images aside – no adult male deity in the collection is beardless, and while 皇帝 is usually translated as “emperor”, China’s sole empress, Wu Zetian (624–705 AD), also used this title.

See also #80.

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03 藥聖韋真人

Medicine Sage Wei

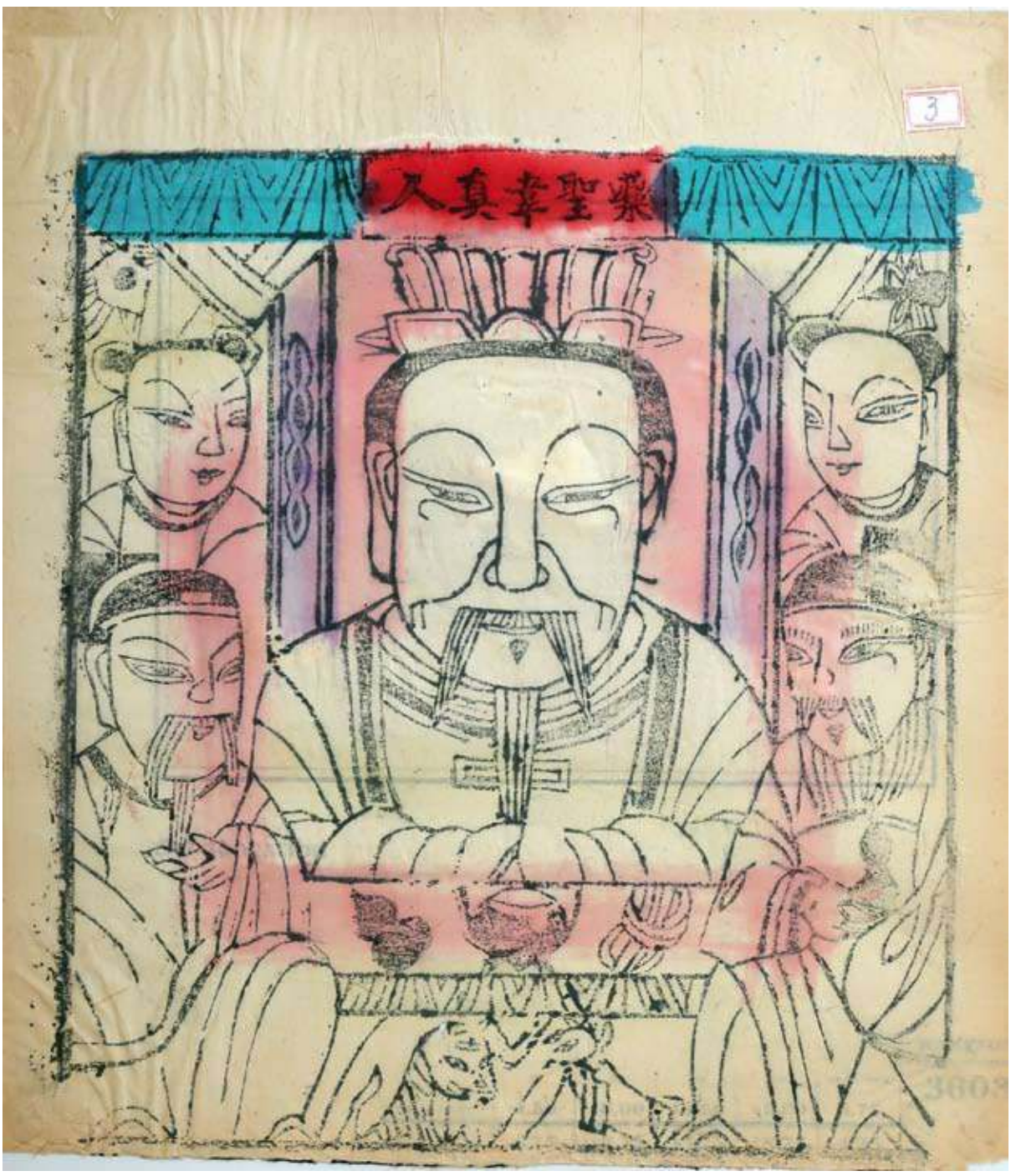
There are several medical deities in Chinese folk religion; this one is Wei Cizang (韋慈藏), also known as Wei Xun, a court physician during the Tang dynasty (618–907 AD). A practitioner of the “external” school, who diagnosed illnesses simply by examining the patient’s outward appearance, he was a specialist in the medicinal use of herbs (there’s a dried bundle of them on the table), and gave his treatments for free.

Underneath the table is a dog which accompanied him on his visits, and a tiger, whose ferocity frightens off any evil, disease-carrying spirits – there’s also play on the Chinese for tiger, which sounds similar to the word for “to protect”. The front right attendant holds a gourd, the traditional container for pills and medicines and an object associated with Daoist alchemists – there’s another on the altar.

See also #12.

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藥聖真入



04 靈應小聖之神

The Young Sage of Efficient Response

Civil and military officials stand either side of a young male deity. The name is obscure but suggests the Young Sage was connected with having wishes come true – there’s the glow from a basket of precious gems and money cut off at the bottom of the print – though other “efficient” deities also protected against bad luck caused by faulty geomancy.

The print historian Wang Shucun, however, identifies this Young Sage as a snake deity in charge of the Grand Canal (whose northern terminus was at Beijing), and who was therefore a patron of fishermen and boatmen. The similar layout of this print to that

of the Supervising River God (#55) does suggest a possible connection with waterways.

This print shows many flaws inherent in *zhima* production. The broad white line running across the print, roughly halfway up, is where the block, made from two pieces of joined timber, has begun to separate from long use; many of the design’s finer lines also show breaks where the wood has disintegrated. Ink has been under-applied, with parts of the image appearing “dry”. And, like many in this set, the lower edge of the image is missing, caused by the paper being placed too far up the block during printing.

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