

Seven Lucky Gods of Japan



The Treasure Ship and the Seven Lucky Gods

From bottom left: Daikokuten (with magic mallet), Fukurokuju (with large head), Bishimonten (in helmet), Benten (with lute), Ebisu (with fish), Jurojin (with white beard) and Hotei (with treasure sack)

The Shichifukujin 七福神 are an eclectic group of deities from Japan, India, and China. Only one is native to Japan (**Ebisu**) and Japan's indigenous **Shintō tradition**. Three are deva from India's Hindu pantheon (**Benzaiten**, **Bishamonten**, **Daikokuten**) and three are gods from China's Taoist-Buddhist traditions (**Fukurokuju**, **Hotei**, **Jurōjin**). Each deity existed independently before Japan's "artificial" creation of the group. The origin of the group is unclear, although most scholars point to the Muromachi era (1392-1568) and the late 15th century. By the 19th century, most major cities had developed special pilgrimage circuits for the seven. These pilgrimages remain well trodden in contemporary times, but many people now use cars, buses, and trains to move between the sites.

Today images of the seven appear with great frequency in Japan. In one popular Japanese tradition, they travel together on their treasure ship (**Takarabune** 宝船) and visit human ports on New Year's Eve to dispense happiness to believers. Children are told to place a picture of this ship (**or of Baku, the nightmare eater**) under their pillows on the evening of January first. Local custom says if they have a good dream that night, they will be lucky for the whole year.

Ebisu: origin Japan.

God of the Ocean, Fishing Folk, Good Fortune, Honest Labor, Commerce. Virtue = Candor, Fair Dealing. He is most often shown holding: a tai, sea bream or red snapper which symbolizes good luck and congratulations, fishing rod in right hand, folding fan in the other, grants success to people in their chosen occupation, son of Daikoku. Ebisu is popular among fishing folk, sailors and people in the food industry.

Daikokuten: origin India, introduced into Japan in the 9th century AD.

God of Earth, Agriculture, Farmers, Wealth, Prosperity, Flood Control, The Kitchen.

Virtue = Fortune. As the God of five cereals, he is shown with: rice bales, treasures sack (bag), magic mallet in his right hand, sometimes wears a hood, rat (found around food), often shown with Ebisu, who is said to be his son, merged with Shinto deities of good harvests. Daikokuten is popular among farmers, agricultural workers, businesses and traders.

Benten: origin India.

Goddess of Music, Beauty, Eloquence, Literature, Art.

Virtue = Amiability. She is shown with: a Japanese mandolin that looks like a lute, magic jewel, snake, sea dragon. She is the only female among the seven. Benten is popular among artists, musicians and writers.

Hotei: origin China.

God of Contentment and Happiness.

Virtue = Magnanimity. He is shown with: a bag of food and treasures that never empties, a fan, small children at his feet. Hotei is supposedly the only member of the seven based on an actual person (although Jurojin and Fukurokuju might also be based on real people). He is known as the Laughing Buddha, rubbing his stomach is said to bring good luck. He is also thought to be a reincarnation of the Buddha of the Future Miroku. Hotei is popular among bartenders and all classes of people and the best known of the seven outside of Japan.

Fukurokuju: origin China, Taoist Hermit Sage.

God of Wealth, Happiness, Longevity, Virility and Fertility.

Virtue = Popularity. He is shown with: a huge elongated head, long white beard, carries a cane with a sutra scroll, also shown with a deer, stag, tortoise (symbols of longevity), scroll said to contain all the wisdom in the world. It is said that he inhabits the same body as Jurohin (the pair are two different manifestations of the same deity) and wields the power to revive the dead. Fukurokuju is popular among watchmakers, athletes and others.

Jurojin: origin China, identified with Laozi, the founder of Chinese Taoism.

God of Wisdom and Longevity.

Virtue = Longevity. He is shown with: a long white beard, knobby staff with the scroll of life attached, a tortoise, deer, stag, or crane. It is said that he inhabits the same body as Fukurokuju (the pair represent two different manifestations of the same deity). It is said that his scroll holds the secret to longevity. He sometimes carries a drinking vessel, as he reportedly loved rice wine (sake). Jurojin is popular among teachers, professors and scientists.

Bishimonten: origin India.

God of Treasure, Bringer of Wealth, Defender of the Nation, Scourge of Evil Doers, Healer of Illness.

Virtue = Dignity. He is shown: wearing a helmet and armor, carries a spear and treasure pagoda, the centipede is his messenger. He is also known as Tamoten, the commander of the Shitenno (Four Heavenly Kings). Bishimonten is popular among soldiers, doctors and certain Buddhist monasteries.

TREASURE BOAT

The treasure ship (Takarabune 宝船) is laden with treasure (Takara 宝). Says JAANUS: “The Chinese character **BAKU 狻**, a Chinese imaginary animal thought to devour (i.e. prevent) nightmares, is sometimes found written on the sail. Often auspicious cranes and tortoises are depicted in the sky and the sea. Although the origin of treasure-boat paintings is not clear, one Edo-period record indicates that they were started in the Muromachi period.”

- Hat of Invisibility = Kakuregasu 隠れ笠, and Cloak of Invisibility (Lucky Raincoat) = Kakuremino 隠れ蓑. Allows one to perform good deeds without being seen.
- Robe of Feathers = Hagoromo 羽衣. A long loose flowing garment giving one the gift of flight. Attribute of **Benzaiten**.
- Magic Mallet, Mallet of Good Fortune = Uchide no Kozuchi 打出の小槌. Brings forth money when struck against an object or when shaken. Common attribute of **Daikokuten**.
- Bag of Fortune = Nunobukuro 布袋 (lit. cloth bag). Includes an inexhaustible cache of treasures, including food and drink. Common attribute of **Hotei**.
- Never-Empty Purse or Moneybag = Kanabukuro 金袋. Bag of unlimited wealth, prosperity & fortune.
- Key to Divine Treasure House = Kagi 鍵. The treasure house is symbolized by the stupa (pagoda) held by **Bishamonten**.
- Rolls of Brocade = Orimono 織物. Scarves and clothing were considered treasures in ancient times and used in various rituals. Not sure of its meaning here.
- Scrolls of Wisdom & Longevity = Makimono 巻物. Common attributes of **Jurōjin** and **Fukurokuju**, who are said to be two different manifestations of a single deity (the god of wisdom and longevity).

Source: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/seven.shtml>