

## Chinese symbols

Since Neolithic times, symbolism has played a significant role in the lives of the Chinese. All societies have their own forms of symbolism, but it is the nature of the writing system and the Chinese language itself that have contributed to the rich vocabulary of symbolism found in China. The large number of homophones in the Chinese language means words with different meanings become associated with each other simply by referring to the sound of the individual characters. As well as linguistic symbolism, there are also many symbols in China which originated from ancient cosmological and mythical beliefs. Symbolic meanings form such an intrinsic part of the culture that they tend to be readily understood by Chinese people and have needed little or no explanation.

### • Plants

#### **Pine** (*song* 松)

Because it is evergreen, the pine is regarded as a symbol of longevity. Unlike most other trees, the pine does not wither during winter and thus represents noble endurance in the face of adversity. Thus, the pine is often depicted as a popular and auspicious motif in Chinese decorative arts.

#### **Bamboo** (*zhu* 竹)

The *zhu* for “bamboo” serves as a homophone for “congratulate” (*zhu* 祝). Bamboo is another symbol of longevity and vitality because it is able to survive in the hardest natural conditions and remain green all year round. It also represents the qualities of durability, strength, flexibility and resilience as it bends in a storm but does not break.

#### **Plum blossom** (*meihua* 梅花)

As the first flower to bloom each year, the plum blossom represents renewal and heralds the arrival of spring. The blossom is emblematic of perseverance and purity, and its appearance while the weather is still cold means it is the flower of winter; likewise, spring belongs to the peony, summer to the lotus and autumn to the chrysanthemum. The five petals of the plum blossom are regarded as auspicious because the number five is sacred in China.

### **Pine, bamboo and plum (*song* 松, *zhu* 竹 and *mei* 梅)**

When shown together, the pine, bamboo and plum are known as “The Three Friends of Winter”. The Three Friends flourish even under adverse conditions and so are symbols of longevity and perseverance, representing the virtues of the scholar-gentleman.

### **Chrysanthemum (*juhua* 菊花)**

The chrysanthemum is a symbol of autumn and the flower of the ninth moon. The first character of its name, *ju* (菊) is a homophone for “dwell” (*ju* 居). The chrysanthemum is also a symbol of longevity because of its health-giving properties. During the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), people drank chrysanthemum wine on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in order to prolong their lives. Even today, in order to reduce heat from the body, the Chinese drink tea brewed solely from chrysanthemum petals, which also lowers blood pressure and cholesterol.

### **Lotus (*he* 荷 *lian* 蓮)**

The lotus is the flower of the sixth month and of summer. It is a symbol of purity because it rises out of the mud to bloom. For this reason, lotus blossoms are often depicted in the form of a throne for the Buddha, and the lotus is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

### **Peach (*tao* 桃)**

A symbol of longevity along with the venerable God of Longevity, Shoulao (壽老), the peach is of paramount importance in Chinese culture and is one of the most popular motifs found in art. The peach is a symbol of immortality, and the immortal Dong fangshou (東方朔, 154-93 BC) is always depicted running away with peaches that he stole from the orchard of the Queen Mother of the West (*xiwangmu* 西王母).

### **Peony (*mudan*, 牡丹)**

Known as the “king of the flowers”, the peony is a symbol of royalty and [virtue](#). It is also called the “flower of wealth and honour” (*fuguihua* 富貴花) and therefore it is widely used to represent wealth and honour when it refers to high rank, having an official position, or high social status.

## • Animals

### **Bat (*fu* 蝠)**

The bat is a symbol of happiness and joy. The Chinese word *fu* (蝠) for bat sounds identical to the word *fu* (福) for good fortune, consequently making the image of the bat one of the most popular rebuses in Chinese symbolism. Five bats shown together represent the Five Blessings: a long life, wealth, health, love of virtue and a peaceful death.

### **Crane (*he* 鶴)**

The crane is a symbol of longevity because it lives a long life and its white feathers stand for old age. It also represents high status as the crane is regarded as “a bird of the first rank”. Flying cranes in particular can be seen as a wish or hope to become an official in a higher position.

### **Dragon (*long* 龍)**

The Chinese dragon is the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy *qi* (氣) and is believed to be the most powerful symbol of good fortune. Ranked first among mythical beasts, it has the power to bring rain to parched lands, which in turn stands for abundance and relief. Together the dragon and the phoenix - the king of all winged creatures - symbolise the emperor and empress as well as marital bliss. In addition, the dragon is often depicted as an emblem of high rank and power on the robes of emperors and princes as well as on imperial art objects.

### **Phoenix (*feng* 鳳)**

The phoenix is regarded as the king of birds and symbolises good fortune and opportunity as it appears only in times of peace and prosperity. In Chinese mythology, the phoenix is considered a benevolent bird since it does not harm insects, and its tail of five colours is named after the five cardinal virtues of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), knowledge (*zhi* 智) and sincerity (*xin* 信). In addition, the phoenix is the symbol for the empress of China and when shown together with the dragon is a wedding motif symbolising a perfect marriage.

## **Fish (*yu* 魚)**

The fish symbolises wealth as the *yu* for “fish” sounds like the *yu* (餘) for “abundance and affluence”. It also represents a sign of rank and a permit to enter the court precinct; consequently officials of the fifth rank and above wore fish ornaments during the Tang dynasty (618-906 AD). In addition, due to its reproductive nature the fish signifies marriage and the birth of many children.

### **• People**

## **Eight Immortals (*baxian* 八仙)**

The Eight immortals (Zhongli Quan, Zhang Guolao, Lu Dongbin, Cao Guojiu, Li Tieguai, Han Xiangzi, Lan Caihe and He Xiangu) are legendary beings of Daoism, said to have lived at various times and attained immortality through their studies of nature’s secrets. The Eight Immortals each represent a different condition in life: poverty, wealth, aristocracy, plebeianism, age, youth, masculinity, and femininity. In addition, they are popular themes in Chinese art as altogether they are considered to be symbols of prosperity and longevity.

## **Three Star Gods (*Fulushou* 福祿壽)**

The Three Star Gods are the God of Blessings (*fulixing* 福星), the God of Rank (*luxing* 祿星) and the God of Longevity (*shouxing* 壽星), and each can be recognised by its own characteristic image. The God of Blessings is often depicted as a man carrying a young boy, for the highest form of blessing is the birth of a male child to carry on the family name. The God of Rank holds a sceptre of power symbolising the ability to reap high rewards, while the God of Longevity carries a tall staff and a peach to represent immortality, and is sometimes accompanied by a crane or deer. The Three Star Gods are often represented together, which is considered an auspicious symbol in Chinese culture and art.

### **• Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism (*Bajixiang* 八吉祥)**

The Eight Auspicious Symbols, which were introduced to China with Tibetan Buddhism during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), are the wheel, conch, canopy (standard of victory), parasol, lotus blossom, vase, twin fish and endless knot. The symbols have been used in decorative arts such as porcelains, cloisonné and textiles, and are believed to bring peace and blessings.

Eight Auspicious Symbols	Symbolic meaning
Wheel of the Law ( <i>lun</i> 輪)	The turning wheel of Buddhist doctrine, which leads to perfection
Conch ( <i>luo</i> 螺)	The far-reaching sound of the Buddha's teaching
Standard of Victory ( <i>san</i> 傘)	Victory of the Buddha's teaching, victory over all hindrances, and thus attainment of happiness
Parasol ( <i>gai</i> 蓋)	Protection as well as spiritual power
Lotus ( <i>hehua</i> 荷花)	Purity
Vase ( <i>guan</i> 罐)	The elixir of life, the container of treasures that stands for the fulfilment of all wishes
Twin fish ( <i>yu</i> 魚)	Freedom from restraint
Endless knot ( <i>panchang</i> 盤長)	The infinite wisdom and compassion of the Buddha

#### • Written characters

The written Chinese character has both decorative and symbolic motif by itself. For instance, during the New Year celebration, Chinese families display the character for “blessing” (*fu* 福), written on red paper, on the walls of their homes. The paper is sometimes turned upside down to mean that “blessings have arrived” since “upside down” (*dao* 倒) is a pun for “arrived” (*dao* 到). Chinese characters which express a concept such as happiness and longevity (*shou* 壽) are often used as auspicious symbols through both their meaning and their visual appearance.

#### • Numbers

##### Four (*si* 四)

The number four (*si* 四) is considered unlucky by most Chinese people since it has the same pronunciation as the *si* for “death” (死). Businesses and house numbers will often avoid using four in numerical sequences.

### **Five (*wu* 五)**

The number five is associated with the Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行) which are Water (水), Fire (火), Wood (木), Metal (金), and Earth (土), essential for a good life and historically linked to the Emperor. The Tiananmen gate, marking the main route to the Forbidden City, is built with five arches.

### **Eight (*ba* 八)**

*Ba* (八) for “eight” has a similar pronunciation to *fa* (發) for “expand”, as in “expand in wealth” (*facai* 發財). Due to this connection, Chinese people like to include the number eight in items such as telephone numbers, street addresses and car registration plates as they believe it will bring good fortune.

### **Nine (*jiu* 九)**

The number nine is the highest single digit number and was traditionally associated with the Emperor. In addition, the *jiu* for “nine” has the same pronunciation as the *jiu* (久) for “long lasting” and is often used at weddings.

### **References**

Williams, C.A.S. *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, Tuttle Publishing, 1974.

Bartholomew, Terese Tse. *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art*, The Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006.

Eberhard, Wolfram, *A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1983.