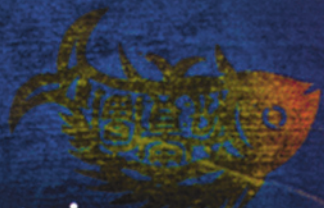
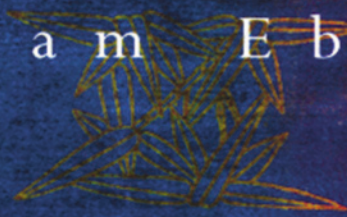


W o l f r a m E b e r h a r d



A Dictionary of
CHINESE

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Symbols

Hidden Symbols in Chinese Life and Thought



**A Dictionary of
Chinese Symbols**

A DICTIONARY OF CHINESE SYMBOLS

Hidden Symbols in
Chinese Life and Thought

WOLFRAM EBERHARD

Translated from the German by G. L. Campbell



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INTRODUCTION

The Symbolic Language of the Chinese

i

European notions about China and the Chinese have changed more than once over the centuries. In antiquity, China was a mysterious place about which little was or could be known. Through the Middle Ages and up to the end of the 18th century, it was known as a huge country with a stable administration and refined customs and manners: a country which one might well admire. In China, wrote Leibniz, even the peasants behave with a dignity and a reserve which in Europe we find only among the nobility; and they never lose their temper.

There followed a period in which China's military weakness made her an easy prey for the colonialist powers. The Qing rulers and administration were vicious and corrupt, and sought to keep themselves in power by means of drastic, indeed savage, laws. It was around the turn of the century that individual Europeans began to realise that if we in the West are to understand China, knowledge of the Chinese language, and especially of Chinese literature with its rich legacy of poetry and prose, is indispensable. Thus it was that Richard Wilhelm, who began his career as pastor and missionary in the German colony of Kiaochow, was able, thanks to his translations and his original writings, to transform the German view of China within two decades. He was convinced, and he succeeded in convincing others, that we in the West could learn much from Oriental ways of life and thought. He saw himself as a mediator between two cultures. Now, fifty years after his death, the question still remains open: are Chinese thought processes different from ours? Several scholars in this field think that they are, and adduce the Chinese language itself in evidence. Chinese has no declensions or conjugations, in our sense of these words. Basically, a Chinese 'word' consists of one immutable phoneme: and there are some 400 of these basic phonemes. Two or more phonemes may, however, be combined to form new 'words'; and, as North Chinese has four tones (i.e. each base phoneme can be pronounced in four different tones, with consequent change of meaning) this gives a four-fold extension of the available phonemes. Even allowing for all of this, however, the number of homonyms remains very high. On the other hand, Chinese exhibits a certain economy in comparison with Western languages equipped with an elaborate morphological apparatus. Why is it necessary to say 'three books' when the word 'three' already indicates the plural? And why should we have to say 'I was at the theatre yesterday' when the word 'yesterday' makes it clear that we are speaking of a past event? And why should languages have to express grammatical gender?

Of course, grammatical brevity has its own drawbacks. Taken out of context, a Chinese utterance can be very difficult to understand. And yet, it may even add to the charm of a love poem if we do not know whether a man is addressing a woman or another man.

From what we have said, it follows that Chinese words cannot be ‘spelled’. If a Chinese sees that a word he has used in conversation has not been understood he will write the character he means on one hand with the index finger of the other. All Chinese characters are essentially pictures, and appeal therefore to the eye. In comparison, Westerners are ‘people of the ear’ rather than of the eye. Only a very small proportion of Chinese characters – some 200, perhaps – are simple representations of natural objects; all the others (and an educated Chinese will use up to 8,000 characters) are composite signs. Each sign is, broadly speaking, divisible into two components: a graphic component (representing a man, a woman, a tree, a fish, etc.) and a phonetic component, giving some indication as to how the character should be pronounced. This phonetic element is provided by a sign whose pronunciation is well known, and whose own inherent meaning can be disregarded in so far as the sign is playing a purely phonetic role in the composite character. To take an example: as soon as I see a particular Chinese character I can tell two things: first, from the graphic element (the root) I can see that the character denotes a plant of some kind, i.e. not a tree, a person or anything else; secondly, from the phonetic component I can make a guess as to the pronunciation.

All this is true of Chinese writing as used up to modern times. The latest script reform, however, has introduced radical changes. Abbreviation of characters means that many of the familiar graphic elements – the ‘pictures’ – are no longer recognisable, and far more characters have to be learnt off by heart. Let me emphasise once again, however, that Chinese are ‘people of the eye’: to them, the characters are symbols, not ways of notating sounds, which is the usual function of writing. Until quite recently, the Chinese had no separate word for ‘symbol’, for which they used the word *xiang*, meaning ‘picture’. But what is a symbol? Instead of a long-winded discussion on a conceptual level, let us content ourselves with C. G. Jung’s short definition: ‘A word or a picture is symbolic if it contains more than can be grasped at first glance...’ (*Man and His Symbols*, London, 1964). The symbols we shall be concerned with in this book express more or less realistically, but always indirectly, something which could be directly expressed but which, for certain reasons, cannot be put into words.

It is almost fifty years since Ferdinand Lessing spoke of the ‘symbolic language’ of the Chinese as a second form of language which penetrates all communication in Chinese; which is, as it were, a second-tier communication level, of greater potency than ordinary language, richer in nuances and shades of meaning. It is this second tier of communication that the present book seeks to elucidate.

In some respects, I am also taking my cue from Emil Preetorius, who assembled one of the finest collections of Far Eastern art. As he puts it: ‘All Oriental paintings are meant to be viewed as symbols, and their characteristic themes – rocks, water, clouds, animals, trees, grass – betoken not only themselves, but also something beyond themselves: they mean something. There is virtually nothing in the whole of nature, organic or inorganic, no artefact, which the Oriental artist does not see as imbued with symbolic meaning, in so far as it can be represented and interpreted in one sense or another.’ He adds: ‘picture and script resonate with each other in form and content so much that often they interpenetrate each other completely’ (*Catalogue of the Preetorius Collection*, Munich, 1958).

ii

Pretorius would seem to be suggesting that learning to write in China is intimately connected with learning to paint. No doubt this is true up to a point; but there is a fundamental difference between the two, when we consider them as modes of communication. Writing conveys information which the reader is expected to understand or, at least, to try to understand. But when the educated Chinese sends a picture or a piece of calligraphy to a friend, the ‘message’ contained therein will not be expressed in so many words: often it will take the form of a quotation from classical literature – that is to say, the message is retrievable only if the recipient knows the source of the quotation and what it refers to. We may say that the picture contains a symbol, or that the symbol takes graphic form: in either case, the picture can be ‘read’ in two ways – as a work of art which is intended to give aesthetic pleasure to the beholder, or as an expression of good wishes concerning the recipient’s longevity, progeny, etc. The picture as a whole, and the symbolical detail, are both designed to give a third party pleasure and to transmit a message to him, albeit in cryptic form.

The cryptic nature of the communication has much to do with the Chinese attitude to the human body and to sex. In all sexual matters the Chinese have always been extraordinarily prudish. It is true that recently texts dating from before 200 BC have been unearthed in which sexual behaviour is discussed in simple words and in a very down-to-earth manner. In later texts, however, anything of a sexual nature is expressed in terms of innuendo and elaborate metaphor, and all Chinese governments down to the present have been at pains to suppress and eradicate what they invariably see as ‘pornography’. Confucius in his wisdom took a positive attitude to sex, though even he saw it primarily in terms of marriage, and best confined to the intimacy, the secrecy indeed, of the connubial chamber. Later Confucianism went so far as to advise husbands to avoid, as far as possible, physical contact with their wives. We may well doubt whether such advice was ever honoured in practice; but it remains true that the open display of love and eroticism was something deeply offensive to the Chinese in that it offended against propriety, against good behaviour. In literature as in art, if erotic matters had to be mentioned, this was done in periphrastic fashion and with the greatest subtlety, through an arcane secondary use of symbols, which the recipient might well understand but to which he would never explicitly refer. For the sender of the message, it was always a particular pleasure to see whether or not the recipient had understood the hidden meaning. The interplay of erotic symbols is accompanied by a kind of counterpoint of puns – something particularly easy to do in Chinese with its plethora of homonyms. To take an example: the utterance ‘you yu’ can mean ‘he has an abundance of...’, ‘he has... in abundance’ (e.g. riches) or ‘there is/are fish’. Hence a picture showing a fish is a pun, and the recipient of such a picture knows at once that the sender is wishing him ‘abundance of wealth’. In most languages, the notion of ‘abundance’ would have to be derived from such considerations as ‘fish occur in shoals’ or ‘fish lay vast quantities of eggs’; in Chinese, it is generated by simple phonetic equivalence.

Puns like this appeal to the Chinese ear, though they may also, and often do, appeal to the eye. Puns which depend not on Mandarin (High Chinese, or the language of the officials) but on a dialect pronunciation are often difficult to understand. For this reason, the Chinese prefer their puns to be eye-catching rather than ear-tickling.

The art of portrait painting has never been developed in China. This is of great significance, not only because of the contrast vis-à-vis Western practice. In part, the absence of portraiture in China has to do with the fact that in ancient times when a person of high rank died a painter was brought in to provide an image of the deceased. The painter arrived with a readymade picture of a man in official garb or of a lady in court dress, and all he had to do was add a few lineaments of the deceased's face to complete the picture. There were virtually no likenesses of living persons, if we disregard emperors, and a few famous philosophers. Whether of living or dead persons, however, these likenesses eschew anything that smacks of eroticism. Men and women alike are always depicted clothed. What a contrast with the West, where even in religious iconography nude men and women, and infants being suckled at the naked breast, are the order of the day.

For the Chinese, nakedness is a mark of barbarism; and even where some attempt is made to produce 'pornography', the scenes are – in stark contrast to Japanese erotic art – of an almost juvenile innocence. Shame and virtue are as indissolubly linked in the modern Chinese mind as they were in the days of Confucius. Sexual matters can be referred to in symbolic form or in oblique metaphor, and in no other way.

iii

How is this reticence to be explained? Why this reluctance to do or say what one wants to do or say? In this connection I would like to point to one factor which seems to me to be of great significance. Already in the days of Confucius (c. 500 BC) we find the Chinese living huddled together in cramped quarters and in crowded villages. In these villages the houses were as close to each other as possible so as to leave the maximum amount of land for agricultural purposes. In the towns the houses were just as closely crowded together (as in European towns in the Middle Ages) so as to keep the defensive radius to a minimum: the shorter the town walls, the easier they were to defend.

The huts of the poorest people were made of straw and twigs; a better-class house had clay walls and a tiled roof. Until fairly recently, the windows were simply openings in the walls, covered perhaps with paper if one could afford it. Indoors, the rooms were divided by thin walls – again, often of paper. Every word spoken in such a room was audible in the rest of the house. There was no question of separate rooms for individual members of the family, so no one had any privacy. The people next door could also hear every word that was spoken.

For many centuries, no less than five families were held legally responsible for any crime or offence committed in their immediate surroundings; and they had to account for themselves to the state police in every detail: they could never plead ignorance. So, it is not difficult to see why it was held advisable to say as little as possible and to avoid anything that might lead to dissension within the family or in its immediate neighbourhood. In the same way, in art, overt statement of eroticism was avoided, lest others come to harm. For these reasons too, landscape was preferred to portrait or genre painting. Through adroit use of symbols, social content could be infused into landscape painting: some beholders would miss the point, others would understand and smile inwardly. Landscape appears as a cosmos, ordered and harmonious: life was a question of

give and take, and if you wanted consideration from others, you had to show them consideration. It is small wonder that the European travellers and missionaries who visited China in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries described the Chinese as an 'old' people – tranquil and serene in their wisdom, no doubt, but lifeless.

What the European travellers saw as 'lifelessness' was, in fact, reticence: extreme reticence, as the Chinese always had to bear in mind how others would react to any attitude they might adopt or any opinion they might utter. Thus they came to form a society which used symbolical forms and modes of expression, reinforced by ritual, to integrate the individual with public order and morality.

It is significant that until very recently there was no word in Chinese for what we call 'freedom', either in the political or in the philosophic sense. The word *zi-you*, which is still used for 'freedom', really means 'to be on one's own', 'to be left alone' – i.e. it has a negative connotation. Similarly, there was no word for 'individualism' and no word for 'equality of rights'. As the Chinese saw it, no man is equal to another: he is older or younger than another, superior to women in that he is male, or more highly placed in the state hierarchy. 'Brotherliness', as it was grasped in early Christianity, did not exist in China, for the individual saw himself as a member of a family, and not obliged to do anything for someone who had no family of his own. The Confucian ethic which ruled society prescribed man's duties but had little to say about his rights. The permanent guide-line of education was to regulate behaviour so that it should never offend against *li* – good custom and propriety.

Life, whether of the individual or of society, proceeds in cycles. From the cradle to the grave, a man goes through a number of eight-year cycles, a woman through cycles of seven years. The year comprises four periods (in some cosmologies, five). 'The year is articulated by festivals, experience is ordered by custom' (Richard Wilhelm, *Die Seele Chinas*). The purpose of the great seasonal festivals is to renew and reinforce the harmonious understanding between man and nature.

Among the cycles which generate order or symbolise order are the year with its 2×6 months or 24 divisions, the month with its 4×7 days, the five celestial directions (the fifth being the middle) and the five planets or the three degrees of the cosmos – heaven, earth and, in the centre, man. The gods themselves are part of this ordered world: formerly they too were men who, by virtue of their good deeds, were elevated to the highest degree. Below them are placed ordinary mortals, and, right at the bottom, the dead who can turn into evil demons or who stew in purgatory until their sins are purged away. All three worlds are ontologically of equal status, and differ from each other only in rank.

iv

If we try to classify the objects which the Chinese use as symbols into various groups, some interesting results emerge. The most important object, central to the whole taxonomy, turns out to be man: man in his bodily existence and in his social setting, and with him his artefacts, the things that he makes. This corresponds very well with the basic

principle of the Chinese Weltanschauung: man as the cardinal being in this world. To man are subordinated and subjected the animals and the plants, even heaven and earth (a way of looking at things which is not far removed from the account of creation given in Genesis).

In the realm of animate nature, animals are more important than plants. Domestic animals, however, do not figure so often as wild animals. The same goes for the analysis of dreams in China, in which the ox, the pig and poultry rarely occur. With regard to plants, the situation is the exact opposite: almost all the trees and shrubs are of significance in everyday life, being used as sources of fruit, as raw material for perfumes, or as building material.

Such natural phenomena as clouds, rain, dew, thunder also make a deep impression on man. Animals are seen in an ambivalent light – many of them threaten him physically, or have properties which he admires or envies.

The concept of dao – usually rendered in English as ‘principle’, ‘reason’, – has many layers of meaning, and it is from one set of these that the Taoism propagated by Lao-zi has developed. Yet even this densely significant word goes back to simple observation of nature. After heavy rains in the clay and loess areas of North China, it was impossible to walk through the morass: only when a way (dao) was constructed was there ‘order in the land’. Most of the symbols beloved of the Chinese relate to things that can be observed with the eye, and these we may denote as ‘formal symbols’. Often, however, the Chinese word for the concept which it is desired to symbolise is phonetically equivalent or, at least, close to the word for the symbol itself (thus fu = good luck, and fu = the bat: so the bat symbolises good fortune); in such cases we can speak of ‘phonetic’ or ‘aural’ symbols.

Other symbols have to do with smell or taste. It is only recently that we have come to realise how important the sense of touch is for the Chinese. What does something feel like – is it cool and smooth like jade? Is it smooth, hard, malleable? This last group of symbols can be called ‘qualitative symbols’: certain properties are ascribed to certain objects, particularly to animals and birds (e.g. the eagle is believed to retain its strength till a ripe old age).

V

This book contains some four hundred symbols, and even a casual runthrough will show how many of these are concerned with the same few basic themes. These were the things that mattered to the Chinese in their everyday lives, their heart’s desires – to live a long and healthy life, to attain high civic and social rank, and to have children (i.e. to have sons).

Comparatively little attention is paid to other-worldly matters – what happens after death, the chances of rebirth, divine benevolence or the avoidance of sin. The ancient Chinese pantheon comprised literally hundreds of gods, virtually all of whom had lived as human beings on earth, and who were not deified till after death. As gods, they are more powerful than ordinary humans (with the single exception of the Emperor), but they

can be manipulated, even bribed, like earthly officials. In the Chinese scheme of things, the relationship between man and god is totally different from that obtaining in Christianity, Judaism or Islam.

There were good practical grounds for desiring sons in traditional Chinese society. It was up to them, after the death of the father, to care for the mother and their younger brothers and sisters, and they had to make sure that due sacrifice was made to their dead father, who otherwise would become one of the 'hungry spirits'. The Chinese male in traditional society could imagine nothing more terrible than dying without leaving a son or sons behind. This is one reason why polygamy was allowed (until 1928); though it was never widespread, as only rich men could afford to keep more than one wife. A simpler way out for the average man was to adopt a boy from within the extended family, perhaps a nephew. It was understood that childlessness could be due to physical causes; and such considerations are not unconnected with the mass of rules prescribing when and how marital intercourse should take place. The desire to have sons underlies the sexual connotation of many of the symbols discussed in this book.

One of the first things to strike the reader who looks at any of the older books on Chinese symbolism, e.g. those by Williams or Yetts, is the almost total absence of any reference to this sexual connotation. It seems to me that these writers either drew exclusively on classical literature or consulted Chinese scholars in the selection and interpretation of their material.

The fact is that there is an astonishing amount of sexual symbolism in the popular novels and in folk-literature, and in my book I have tried to indicate at least some of the main themes and symbols in this field. Many of these symbols are used in a harmless sense, and accordingly found their way into older works like those of Williams and Yetts. Over and above this innocuous sense, however, there may be a second, more erotic connotation which most Chinese will be aware of: they are, in fact, not so 'tranquil in their wisdom' as one used to imagine. It is only classical literature and philosophy that are serene and tranquil. Poetry on the other hand swarms with sexual innuendo, though this may be very adroitly covered up.

Study of Chinese symbolism can be enlightening in yet another field – the study of categories of Chinese thought, at present largely a virgin field but one of enormous importance for a genuine understanding of the Chinese. Let us take for example the contrastive pair *chao-ye*. *Chao* is the court of the Emperor, *ye* is the wilderness; *chao* is the court and the capital city surrounding it, *ye* includes country villages and the land whether cultivated or uncultivated. But *ye* is also used of wild animals or of a 'wild' cult – that is to say, the cult of a god who is not recognised by the Emperor. Formally, we might translate *chao-ye* as 'town and country', 'Stadt und Land' – but the underlying concepts are totally different. Again, *shan-hai* means, literally, 'mountains and sea', but the compound really refers to what is enclosed by mountains and sea – i.e. the whole country. The compounds *shan-jing* and *hai-gui* – 'mountain-spirits' and 'sea-spirits' – refer to all spirits, whether more or less dangerous. The expression *shan-shui* can refer to 'flowing water and high mountains' but is usually the ordinary word for 'landscape' in painting; for such a picture will almost invariably depict a mountainous landscape with rivers or brooks.

An earthquake is expressed as *shan yao, di dong* = ‘the mountains shake, the earth moves’. Many more examples could be given based on such contrastive pairs as ‘pure-impure’, ‘high-low’, etc. In all of these compounds based on antithesis the first word is felt as masculine, the second as feminine. Investigation of these semantic fields is only in its infancy.

For these reasons, it is not only symbols ‘in themselves’, symbols pure and simple, that have been selected for discussion; wherever it seemed necessary I have included objects which are not in themselves symbols but which crop up again and again in symbolical metaphors: e.g. the eye. In the Chinese context, the eye is not itself a symbol, in contradistinction to its role in some other countries where the ‘evil eye’ can be warded off by a picture of an eye. But the Chinese are fond of describing the eye in symbolic or periphrastic terms. The eyebrows, on the other hand, symbolise certain traits of character, and these will be ‘legible’ to someone who knows how to read the symbol.

vi

In sharp contrast to the symbols so familiar to us in European religion and art, few Chinese symbols are used in a religious sense. Their function is rather a purely social one. A visitor is expected to bring a gift: this may even be money, and the recipient will not automatically feel that he is being bribed. As we take flowers to a friend or a relative, the Chinese take a vase, a painted dish or an embroidered purse; whatever it is, it is likely to be decorated with symbols.

The symbols express what the giver could very well express in words; but in such situations the Chinese regard the use of words as too ‘primitive’. The symbol is far more subtle. The recipient has to inspect and study the gift; only then will he find the two or three symbolic clues which will identify exactly what ‘good wishes’ are being transmitted. One starts with the wrapping-paper (if any): this must be red if the occasion is a birthday or a wedding, but red would be a frightful faux pas if the visit and the present are to express sympathy over a bereavement. Often, wrapping-paper is not just red or green but is covered with a pattern which the European might well ignore, but which is also there to transmit a message – to express the wish for long life, for a happy married life, etc. Thus even the primary colours have symbolic significance.

The same goes for behaviour in society. Regardless of whether the person I speak to is older or younger than I am, I address myself to him as to a superior. (Though here we must point out that in the course of the 20th century the old forms of polite and ceremonial address have tended to become obsolescent.) It is not done to tell someone he should be ashamed of himself, in so many words. But a slight gesture with the index finger on the lower part of the cheek will convey this message to the culprit, without bystanders being aware of it. Thus the culprit is not publicly shamed, he does not lose face; after all, perhaps I was just scratching an itchy spot...

There is always a certain amount of tension in the use of symbols in everyday life – is the other person astute enough to grasp the meaning of the symbols I have chosen, or is his understanding of them only partial?

The genesis of this book goes back to the studies which my teacher, Ferdinand Lessing, published in the periodical *Sinica* in 1934–5. To him also I owe my first introduction to modern colloquial Chinese. For the lexical material in my book I have drawn to some extent on Western and Japanese specialist literature, in so far as it was available to me, but the main source has, of course, been Chinese literature itself, the novels, the theatre and, on occasion, the erotica. I have also learned much from paintings and frescoes, from folk-art and from popular beliefs. It is impossible to list all my sources: they would add unacceptably to the book's length, and in any case, most of these sources are accessible only to sinologists.

My selection of symbols is limited to those which are still in active use today, or which are, at least, still understood. The symbolism used in ancient China – i.e. the China of some two thousand years ago – differed quite widely from that described in my book; and in the absence of elucidatory source material, the meaning of this ancient symbolism must remain doubtful. Attempts have of course been made to decode it: it is enough to mention the names of Carl Hentze and Anneliese Bulling. In very many cases, however, the researcher is left with nothing more to go on but his own more or less inspired guesswork; and the Chinese experts to whom appeal is often made rarely have anything better to offer. As an example, see the article in this book on Tao-tie – an extremely frequent symbol in ancient China, for whose use no satisfactory explanation has been found in the intervening two thousand years.

Furthermore, my book is concerned only with those symbols which were and are familiar to all Chinese. Specifically Buddhist and Taoist symbols are only occasionally mentioned. There are indeed many of these special symbols, but they are familiar only to a restricted circle of adepts and specialists. Such an avowedly specialist work on symbolism as that by Erwin Rousselle, breaking as it does completely fresh ground, deserves very special praise.

I have not attempted to deal with the corpus of symbols developed and used by carpenters, masons and smiths in the course of their work. My book is intended to be no more than an introduction to the subject, and much remains to be done before the treasure-trove of Chinese symbolism can be thoroughly evaluated.

It now remains for me to express my thanks to all those who have helped me in this enterprise: first and foremost, my publisher, Mr Ulf Diederichs, who not only improved the text stylistically but also provided many quotations from scholarly works in the sinological field. My thanks are also due to my friend and colleague, Professor Alvin Cohen, to Mrs Hwei-lee Chang for the Chinese calligraphy in each article, and to the *Ostasiatisches Museum* in Cologne for help in providing the illustrations.

Wolfram Eberhard

A

Amber

hu-po

琥珀

As far back as the Middle Ages, the Chinese knew that amber was ancient pine resin and that the remains of insects could sometimes be found in it. Amber was imported from what is now Burma, and from parts of Central Asia. It symbolised ‘courage’, and its Chinese name hu-po means ‘tiger soul’, the → tiger being known as a courageous animal. In early times, it was believed that at death the tiger’s spirit entered the earth and became amber.

Amulet

hufu

護符

Amulets and talismans are referred to in the oldest Chinese texts. All sorts of materials were used to fashion them; in later times, however, they were made principally from paper, on which a message to the evil → spirits was written, adjuring them not to harm the bearer of the amulet. Since this message was addressed not to men but to spirits, it was written in ‘ghost script’, a form of writing whose characters bear a certain similarity to ordinary Chinese characters, but which is fully accessible only to Taoist adepts. Some Taoists claim that a handwritten amulet warding off fire can be understood by the spirits in the Western world as well, as one and the same ‘ghost script’ is uniformly used and understood all over the world. The script is in fact very old. The work known as Bao-po ze by Go Hung (AD 281–361) contains a dictionary of it.

The ancient Chinese regarded the → calendar as enormously influential and, in practice, indispensable; so the paper of a calendar that had served its turn was often used as an amulet. For example, old calendars were hung up over pigsties, or they were burned and the ashes mixed into the swill as a tried and proven specific against diseases.



An amulet bearing the eight trigrams and the all-purpose benediction
 ‘(May you have) good fortune like the Eastern Ocean and long
 life like the mountain of the South!’

Ancestral Tablet

zu

祖

The memorial tablet is a small wooden board, often lacquered; it is about 10–20 cm broad and at least twice as high. On it are inscribed the name and often the title of the deceased, whose soul, it is popularly believed, lingers on the tablet, especially during sacrifices when it has been ‘revived’ by means of a little chicken blood. In well-to-do families the tablet is placed in a special temple dedicated to the ancestors in which all the members of

the clan are assembled together. Poor families make do with a small table placed against the north wall of the living room and surrounded by incense burners and other objects. The tablets are arranged according to position in the family hierarchy; and the tablet in memory of a man is usually flanked by that of his principal wife. Homage is paid to ancestors on certain days of the year, and people turn to them for help and advice. Family pride in its ancestral line can be measured by the number of memorial tablets displayed.

In the case of a → married daughter, her memorial tablet after death will be placed next to that of her husband if he has pre-deceased her. However, a tablet referring to an unmarried daughter cannot be placed among those belonging to her own family. In such cases there are two possibilities: a so-called ‘nominal marriage’ (ming hun) can be arranged – i.e. asking a family whose son has died before marriage to agree to a retrospective marriage with the dead girl; alternatively, a living man can be asked to marry her. He is then, in a certain sense, a widower and can take another daughter of the family to wife. In these circumstances, the normal wedding gifts for the bride’s family are dispensed with – on the contrary, the bridegroom is financially rewarded for his help in a difficult situation.

There was a third possibility: the tablet could be placed in an area specially designated for this purpose in a Buddhist temple, a procedure involving considerable financial outlay. In the People’s Republic of China the ancestor cult in temples has been vetoed, and it is being discouraged in private dwellings. Politically, this is a question of strengthening state solidarity vis-à-vis family solidarity.

Angler

yu-fu

漁夫

When the first → Emperor of the Zhou Dynasty (c. 1050 BC) was looking around for a wise counsellor, he noticed, so the legend has it, an old man dressed in very simple clothes fishing on a river bank. This was Jiang Ze-ya (also known as Jiang Tai-gung) and it is in this form that he is always represented. The Emperor-to-be ‘fished’ the old man in: that is to say, he made him his chief strategist in his fight against the decadent Shang Dynasty. The story is told in the novel *Feng-shen yanyi*, which appeared in the early 17th century.



A stroke of luck for the angler

Animals

shou

獸

The Chinese divided animals up into five classes, each of which had its representative: the feathered creatures were represented by the → phoenix, the furry creatures by the → unicorn, naked creatures by → man, scaly creatures by the → dragon, and creatures with shells by the → tortoise.

When a woman was granted an audience at court, she wore a skirt embellished with a design showing the qi-lin (the unicorn) receiving the obeisance of the other classes of animal – though man himself was absent from the group.



Phoenix, dragon, unicorn and tortoise, the representatives of their animal kinds; they are also symbols of the four directions

Five or six kinds of domestic animal were distinguished – horse, ox, sheep, pig, dog and hen (see separate entries). All of these were regarded as edible, though horse-flesh was only eaten on ceremonial occasions.

The five noxious creatures are the → snake, the → centipede, the scorpion, the lizard or → gecko and the → toad. On the 5th day of the 5th month, magical means were invoked to rid human settlements of these creatures. → Zhong-kui is the god mainly charged with operations against them, and he is helped by the → cock.

Ant

ma-yi



The second component of the Chinese word for ‘ant’ – yi – is phonetically close to the word yi meaning ‘virtue’ (the words differ only in tone), and this is probably the reason why the ant figures as a symbol of right conduct and of patriotism. It also symbolises self-interest.

In the Shanghai hinterland, the village broker with a finger in every business deal is called an ‘ant’, a reference no doubt to his unfailing attention to his own interests. In general, however, the ant plays no great part in Chinese symbolism.

Ao

Ao



The Ao is usually said to be an enormous sea turtle, though another tradition describes it as a giant fish. Once upon a time, so it is said, the goddess → Nü-gua repaired one of the four pillars which bear the earth with one of the turtle’s legs. Again, it was widely believed that the earth itself rested on the back of the huge turtle. There was a long-lasting belief among the Chinese that they could make the ground they stood on firmer and more secure (i.e. against earthquakes) if they fashioned → tortoises out of → stone, and placed heavy slabs on their backs. In this way, it was believed, heaven and earth were more securely bound to each other.

The Ao-shan, i.e. the Ao mountain, lies in the ‘Islands of the Blessed’, the paradise → islands in the Eastern Ocean. It was the practice from the 12th century onwards to mark the → New Year Feast by building large figures consisting of lanterns and models, representing the Ao mountain.

The man who came first in the final and most demanding literary examination was known as ‘Ao-head’. The wish to excel at something is represented as a woman bearing a staff, who holds a → peach in her hand: at her feet, a child is reaching for an Ao. This group symbolises the wish to be supremely successful in the state examination.

The Ao is also sometimes represented as an animal which eats → fire. Accordingly, it is often shown as a roof finial fending fire away from the roof ridge.

Apple

ping-guo

蘋果

The best apples used to come from Korea and Japan; the Chinese apple was not so tasty. Even today, apples are relatively dear, and therefore an acceptable gift, especially since the apple (ping) can stand as a symbol for 'peace' (ping). On the other hand, one should not give apples to an invalid, since the Chinese word for 'illness' – bing – is very similar in sound to the word for apple. Apple blossom, however, symbolises female → beauty.

In North China, the wild apple blossoms in → spring, and is therefore a symbol for this season of the year. The wild apple (hai-tang) may also symbolise the → hall of a house (tang): a picture showing wild apple blossom and → magnolias (yu-lan) in such a room can be interpreted as meaning 'May (yu) your house be rich and honoured!'

The celebrated beauty Yang Gui-fei, the concubine of one of the Tang emperors, was known as 'Paradise-apple Girl' (hai-tang nü).

Apricot

xing

杏

The apricot stands symbolically for the second month of the old Chinese calendar (corresponding roughly to our March). It is also a symbol for → a beautiful woman; a red apricot stands for a married woman who is having an affair with a lover.

The apricot may also be called bai-guo-z (= white fruit) or bai-guo zhi (= hundred fruit branch). It then symbolises the wish to have a hundred sons (bai-ge zi). Apricot stones are sometimes compared to the → eyes of a beautiful woman.

Arrow

shi

矢

From the very earliest times arrows have been in use in China in various forms – e.g. as a kind of harpoon, and, fitted with a pipe-like gadget at the point, as a ‘singing arrow’ which was used in signalling.

Breaking an arrow in half signalled confirmation of a deal. Very well known in China – and elsewhere – is the story of the old father who summons his sons and gives each of them an arrow which he asks them to break. This they do without difficulty. Then he gives each of them a bundle of arrows with the same command. But none of them is able to break the bundle. Thus are the sons taught that only in unity can they be strong.

In a modern Chinese film, a → girl who is looking for a man shoots an arrow, saying, ‘No arrow comes by itself: if it comes, it comes from the bowstring’, by which she means that she will marry the man who finds the arrow: a profoundly erotic metaphor.

Ashes

hui

灰

Since ashes are a darkish grey, like the so-called ‘raven’s gold’ (a mixture of gold and copper), they symbolise riches. They are also used to keep → spirits and ghosts away, especially spirits of dead people. The expression ‘to scrape ashes’ refers to incest between father-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Astrology

zhan xing xue

占星學

Chinese astrology is very closely bound up with Chinese natural science and philosophy. ‘→ Heaven, → earth and → man are the three forces in nature, and it is man whose task it is to bring the other two – heaven, the creative power of the historical process, and

earth, the receptive power of spatial extension – into harmony. “The configurations are shadowed forth by heaven; it is for the adept to realise them,” says the “Book of Changes”, which is based upon the realisation that ultimate reality is not to be found in static conditions of existence but in the spiritual laws from which everything that happens draws its meaning and its impulse towards lasting effect’ (Richard Wilhelm).



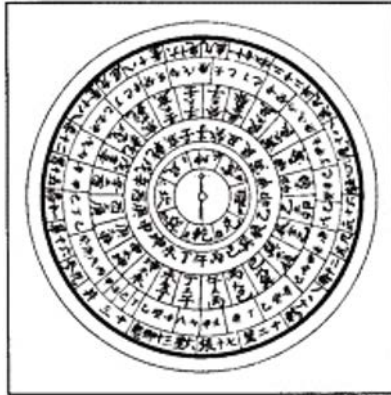
A professional astrologer casts a horoscope for a proposed marriage: are the pair well matched?

The Yi-jing (‘Book of Changes’) is the best-known of the Chinese → oracle books. About two thousand years ago it acquired canonical status and was used as a sort of handbook in the identification and interpretation of the reciprocal relations between the heavenly and the earthly powers. Transgression of the moral law on earth is followed by unnatural manifestations in the heavens. If the → Emperor was immoderately influenced by the Empress, the (male) → sun was darkened, or even eclipsed.

To the ‘Twelve Stellar Stations’ or the ‘Twenty-eight Lunar Stations’ there corresponded on earth twelve or twenty-eight regions – parts of China, or, in earlier times, tributary states under Chinese sovereignty. A display of shooting stars in one of these regions was interpreted as meaning that the people were no longer loyal to a ruler (or an → official) who was negligent in the discharge of his duty.

To the twelve stellar stations, Chinese astronomers gave names derived from the → Twelve Branch cycle, consisting of symbols which have so far not been explained. The twelve stations are not related in any way to the → zodiac of Western astronomy, although this was well known to Chinese astronomers from the Middle Ages onwards.

Irregularities – i.e. geocentric anomalies – in the movement of the → planets were precisely observed and explained.



A compass as used by astrologers and geomancers (baked clay)

Many → Immortals were imagined as ‘emanations’ of stars; but, in general, the → constellations were not thought to have any direct influence on individual lives. The amalgamation of the ‘Ten Celestial Stems’ (i.e. the → Five Changes in their positive and their negative aspects) with the ‘Twelve Branches’ (or stellar stations) gives rise to cycles of → sixty years which are of basic importance in Chinese astrology. A horoscope always consists of eight symbols – two each for the year, the month, the day and the hour of birth.

Over the centuries the astrological way of thought gradually spread to virtually every area of Chinese culture. Before concluding a → marriage under the old system, it was especially necessary to have horoscopes cast, in order to see whether they were in harmony or otherwise. In this respect, the Twelve Branch cycle was used in its other form as a cycle of twelve symbolical creatures. Could a man born under the sign of the Cock expect to live harmoniously with a woman born under the sign of the Dragon? Would he perhaps not do better to seek a partner born under the sign of the Rat? Statistical investigation has shown that ‘favourable’ and ‘unfavourable’ combinations came up in about equal proportion. An unfavourable combination meant that the proposed marriage could be called off without further ado; nor would the family of the rejected suitor feel in any way insulted.



The Duke of Zhou, who is supposed to have invented the astrological calendar 3,100 years ago

Aubergine

qiez

茄子

The Chinese aubergine is long and unrounded. Together with its calyx it looks like a man wearing a → hat, and so in the popular mind it came to symbolise the → official with his cap of office. Its presence in a picture expresses the sender's wish that the recipient may soon be rewarded with an official post. In Taiwan the aubergine is eaten particularly towards the end of the year; it is then supposed to make the lips red.

Its phallic form has led to its being used as a symbol for the penis in the whole of East Asia, especially in China, Korea and Japan.

Axe

fu

斧

The axe is one of the twelve → insignia of the imperial power. At the same time, it symbolises Lu Ban, the patron saint of carpenters, and also the village broker or male or female go-between.



Buddhist axe

Azalea

du-juan-hua

杜鵑花

A → beautiful woman is often compared to an azalea, which is also known as the 'cuckoo flower'. The Chinese cuckoo (du-juan) plays a very big part in the folklore of Sichuan. They say that the cuckoo sings all night through until its throat is bloody; and whoever hears its first cry in the morning is about to be separated from his sweetheart. The azalea is very common in Sichuan, and it is probable that it gets its Chinese name from its resemblance to the → red colour of the cuckoo's throat.

B

Back-scratcher

sao-zhang

搔杖

Many folklore museums have examples of this object. Usually it consists of a bamboo handle to which the scratcher itself – shaped like a claw or a hand – is fastened. The instrument seems to have another function as well: that of ‘talk-stick’ (tan zhu, literally ‘talk-help’). Often this was no more than a pine twig, sometimes a → sceptre, which the teacher placed before him: a student wishing to initiate a discussion picked it up and began to speak. It seems likely that this usage came with Buddhism from India at an early date.



Vase with back-scratcher and staff of office:
‘(May you have) the peace you desire!’

The back-scratcher plays a part in the legends associated with the goddess → Ma-gu.

Badger

huan

獾

The badger is not an animal that has appealed to the Chinese imagination. In Japan, on the other hand, the tanuki, the badger, plays a part equivalent in importance to that of the → fox in China. They differ very much, however, in character. Thus, the fox likes to turn into a seductive girl or an enticing woman, while the badger prefers to masquerade as a fat-bellied abbot or a ragged mendicant monk:

The badger is out of his mind with excitement,
Beating on his stomach.
That's what he likes to do –
Otherwise... he doesn't think of much else. (Shikitei Samba)



Badger and magpie: 'Joy from heaven – joy on earth'

The Chinese word for 'badger' is phonetically identical with the word meaning 'to enjoy oneself, to be glad' (huan). Hence, badger and magpie are shown together to symbolise the wish 'may you experience great happiness'.

Bald Head

tu

秃

'Baldy' or 'Bald-headed Ass' is a rude way of referring to Buddhist monks, who all have to shave their heads. But the word tu may also mean 'penis'.

Even as novices, young monks have to have their heads shaved. At a later stage, when they have vowed to take the way of → Buddha, they have to prove their steadfastness by undergoing various forms of self-inflicted mortification of the flesh. The usual way is for a piece of charcoal which has been dipped in a certain fruit sap to be placed on the bald head and set alight. It is allowed to burn itself out and the deep scars thus obtained are exhibited with pride thereafter.



Two bald-headed monks

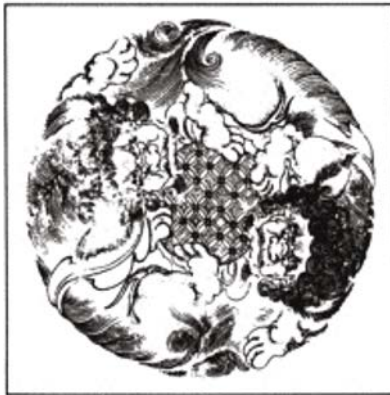
Ball

qiu

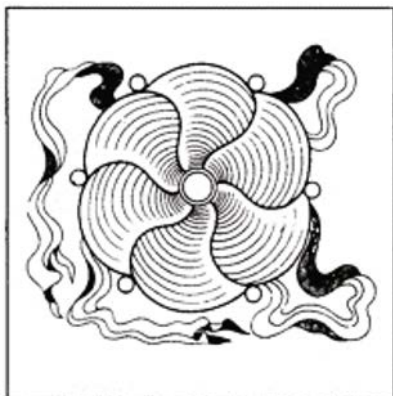
球

A ball made from red material or from feathers plays a very big part in the Chinese opera and in many popular traditions. In South China it was customary for a girl, on reaching marriageable age, to invite suitors to present themselves before her balcony on a given day: she then threw down a ball, and the man who caught it became her husband. The favourite day for this ceremony was the 15th day of the 8th month – that is to say, the day of the ‘Mid-autumn Festival’ (a sort of harvest thanksgiving) and also a lunar Festival (→ moon). In many parts of Central China, a red ball was fastened to the roof of the litter which bore the bride to the home of her bridegroom.

At the ‘Dragon-lamp Festival’, held on the 15th day of the 1st month, the → dragons (made from cloth and paper) played with an ‘embroidered ball’. This was a fertility festival marking the end of the long-drawn-out → New Year Feast, and the dragons symbolised the rain-bearing clouds of spring. A ball is often found in association with the group of two stone lions which guard temple gates against demons. The eastern lion rolls the magic sphere under his left paw, while the western one suckles its cub (according to popular tradition) with the right paw. Like an egg, the magic sphere contains the lion cub; rolling the ball helps the cub to hatch out. It is also said that the hairs torn out during love-play between the lions form the magic ball. So, here again, the ball serves as a symbol of fertility.



Two lions play with a ball



An embroidered ball

Bamboo

zhu

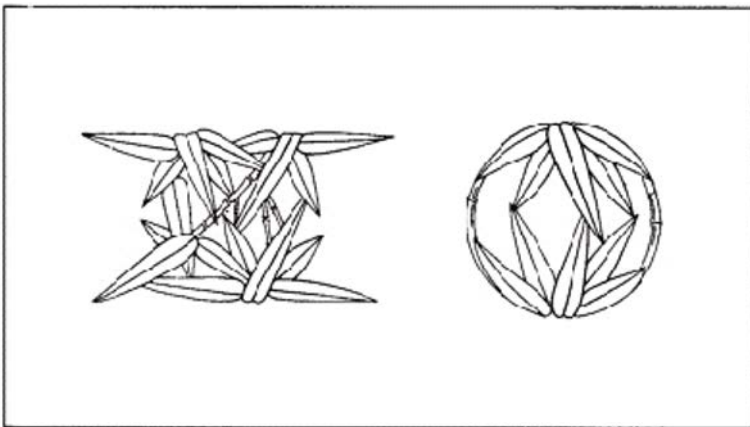
竹

The bamboo is one of China's most important natural products. It provides building material for houses and scaffolding, and raw material for paper. There is a saying: 'May his name be preserved on bamboo and silk' – a reference to the handle of the calligrapher's brush and to the brownish paper which is made from bamboo. Bamboo shoots are a delicacy, → wine is spiced with bamboo leaves, bamboo discs were sometimes used for money, and the Chinese counterpart of the hobby horse has always been made from bamboo (zhuma): it symbolises youth. In addition to its practical uses, the bamboo is a motif in many Chinese poems. Su Dong-po writes, 'One can manage without eating flesh; but one cannot manage without the bamboo'; and Bo Ju-yi, 'Everyone has worries in time of drought: for my part, when it is dry, I am anxious about pine trees and bamboos.'

The leaves of the bamboo droop because its inside (its 'heart') is empty. But an empty heart is equivalent to modesty, so the bamboo symbolises this virtue. On the other hand, the bamboo is evergreen and immutable, and hence a symbol of old age – in addition, it is gaunt like an old man. When the wind blows, the bamboo bends 'in laughter'; and the character for 'bamboo' looks very much like an abbreviation of the character for 'to laugh'. An underlay of bamboo which is put under the legs in bed during hot weather, in order to keep them cool, is called 'bamboo-wife' (zhu-fu-ren).



The bamboo – model and guide-line in Chinese calligraphy



Stylised bamboo leaves: something that does not die in winter

Fireworks used to be made from bamboo, which explodes with a loud bang when put into a fire. It was supposed to ward off demons, and its use in fireworks at → New Year and other festive occasions was for this purpose. With the departure of the demons, peace and contentment are supposed to enter, and so it is fitting that the Chinese words for 'bamboo' and for 'to wish, pray' are homonyms, as are the words for 'to explode' and for

‘to herald, announce’ (bao). A picture showing children letting off bamboo fireworks can be interpreted by the recipient as meaning ‘We wish that there may be peace.’ To make the good wishes even clearer, a → vase may be added: for a vase (ping) symbolises peace and quiet (ping-an). Bamboos and → plums together represent man and wife: if the picture also contains parents the wish is for → married bliss. Bamboos, pine trees and plums are the → ‘Three Friends in winter’. A bamboo twig or branch is one of the emblems of the goddess of mercy, the white-clad → Guan-yin.

The young bamboo shoots are yellowish like asparagus and pointed at the tips, and they were accordingly compared to the artificially deformed feet of Chinese women – also sometimes with their slender figures. In paintings of plants, the conventional grouping of the ‘Four Noble (plants)’ – plum-blossom, chrysanthemum, orchid and bamboo – plays a big part. A celebrated saying has it that the artist must himself become a bamboo before he can begin to paint one. As Roger Goepper has said, ‘for Oriental painting, conceived as it is in terms of calligraphy, the bamboo is both model and guide-line’.

Banana

ba-jiao

芭蕉

In Japan, poets make much of the banana, which is – thanks largely to Basho’s influence – understood in a symbolic sense. In China on the other hand, it is little more than a symbol for self-discipline. The banana figures in the head-hunting ritual on Taiwan. The banana leaf is regarded as one of the fourteen → precious things of the scholar. It is noteworthy that in China the emphasis is always on the leaves of the plant – never on the fruit, which alone has symbolical value for Europeans (and the Japanese).

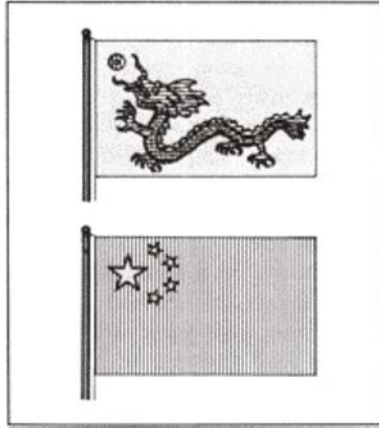
Banner

qi

旗

Banners were used in war from a very early time. From 1205 onwards Chinggis Khan used a white banner into which a black moon was inserted. The banners of the government troops are said to have been white, according to another text.

The armies led by Zhu Hong-wu, the founder of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), had red banners; when Zhu was proclaimed Emperor, these were replaced by yellow banners. Subsequently, yellow became the colour symbolising the → Emperor.



The Imperial Flag (up to 1912) and the flag of the People's Republic of China

On the Chinese stage, generals carry banners on their backs. These are richly decorated and their number indicates the size of the armies under the generals' command.

The flag of Imperial China had a five-clawed → dragon and a red sun or a pearl on a yellow background. Since 1949, the flag of the People's Republic has had a large yellow star flanked by four smaller stars which stand for the four classes – workers, peasants, petty bourgeois and 'patriotic capitalists'.

Bao

報

This word has a wide variety of meanings. It may mean 'retribution', in the sense of taking revenge. But we often come across such an expression as 'recompensing the favour shown by the state' (often, i.e., the ruler of the state). Underlying this is the idea that each citizen receives so much bounty from the state in the shape of admission to the state examinations, appointment, etc., that he must in due course repay these favours, if necessary with his death. In this case, 'the loyal heart' is praised of the man who is 'making recompense' to the state.

A newspaper reported on the case of a blind widow who had sold lottery tickets to raise money in order to see her son through his schooling. On qualifying, the son had to excuse himself: he was not yet in a position to repay his mother for her bounty and kindness which was as deep as the sea. Another newspaper report concerned an adulterous union between a man well on in years and a woman who was no younger: 'above, hot steam was rising; down below was just recompense'.

Basket

lan

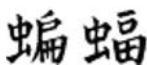


A decorated basket of fruit or → flowers symbolises → Lan Cai-he, one of the eight → Immortals. The contents of the basket represent riches and the motif is therefore a popular one in New Year pictures: a young man stands before an older one to whom he presents flowers in a basket.

A basket or box is also an attribute of one of the Heavenly Twins → He-he. Here, the written character he = basket may be used, which also means ‘agreement’.

Bat

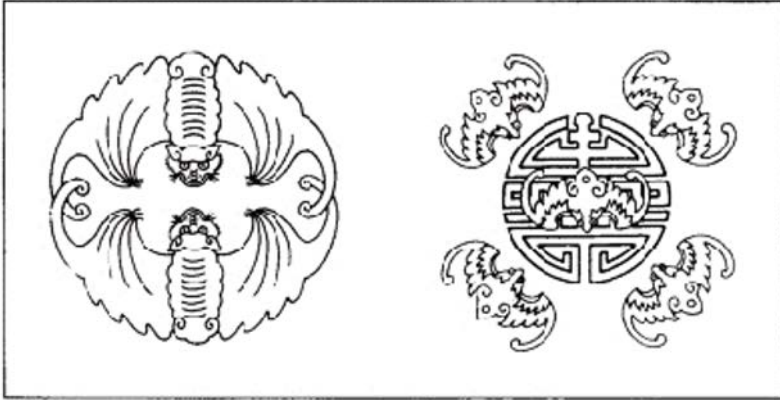
pian-fu



In European folklore the bat is a sinister creature, associated with evil and the powers of darkness. In China, on the other hand, it has few rivals as a symbol of good luck and happiness. Again, the reason for this must be sought in a phonetic parallel: the word for ‘bat’ (fu) is identical in sound with the word for ‘good fortune’ (fu). Very often, five bats are shown together to represent the Five Blessings – a long life, riches, health, love of virtue and a natural death. Another way of expressing this wish is to depict a magician with a jar from which five bats are emerging. In another representation of this motif, one or two children are trying to put bats into a → vase (ping: phonetic parallel with ping = peace and quiet). Even a picture showing → Zhong-kui striking bats down with his sword can be interpreted as meaning he will ‘bring good luck down to you’.

According to a medieval source, bats which are a thousand years old are white and hang from their boughs head downwards. If you can catch them, dry them and eat them, you will live to a great age. A → red bat is a harbinger of especially good fortune, not only because red is the colour which wards off demons, but also because the Chinese word for ‘red’ (hong) sounds the same as the word for ‘enormous’.

An interesting folk-tale relates how all the birds came to the → phoenix’s birthday party, but the bat did not come, on the grounds that it was not a bird but a quadruped. Later, however, it also failed to appear when the → unicorn was giving its party – claiming, this time, that since it had wings and flew, it was not a quadruped but a bird. All the phoenix and the unicorn could do was admire its cunning.



Left: Two bats – redoubled good fortune. Right: the Five Gifts and the symbol of longevity



Five bats are caught: 'May every sort of joy come your way'

Bath

xi-zao

洗澡

It is principally the South Chinese who make a fetish of cleanliness, taking a bath every day or at least pouring water over themselves. They also do a lot of bathing in the sea and in rivers. Men and women bath together, and the South Chinese see nothing improper in this; but we find North Chinese criticism of this 'southern' fashion in very early texts. Well-to-do families had their own bath-houses from very early times; public bath-houses began to spread in about AD 1000.

The bath 'purifies' in a symbolic sense as well. A woman bathed before entering a nunnery. It is customary to → wash oneself before going on pilgrimage; and both bride and bridegroom take a bath on the eve of the wedding. In the Middle Ages, statues of Buddha in temples were washed on the 8th day of the 12th month; and the bath-houses in monasteries were open for public use on the same day – the day when, according to tradition, Prince Gautama became the Buddha. It was also the eve of the great annual rite of exorcism, when the city was washed clean of evil.

Bathing had particular symbolical value at key moments in a person's life. It was also connected with fertility; and the Amazons who appear in Chinese myths became pregnant when they bathed.





Bath-house scenes (late 18th century)

Bean

dou

豆

Its protein content makes the soya bean one of the most important items in Chinese food. From it are made the bean curd (dou-fu) and the liquid extract which looks like milk and is a popular breakfast drink. 'Eating bean-curd' is a metaphor for sexual intercourse. At weddings in Taiwan, the mother-in-law gives her new daughter-in-law a cake made from dried bean-curd (dou-gan) symbolising the wish that one day her sons will be high → officials (da-guan). (In the Taiwan dialect, dou-gan and da-guan sound very similar.)

Bear

xiong

熊

The bear symbolises → man, just as the → snake symbolises woman. The bear stands for strength and courage. The birth of a → son is presaged by dreaming of a bear. ‘The Great Yu’, the mythical hero who diverted the great flood which his father had been unable to stem, was – like his father – a bear.

The constellation of the Great Bear (bei dou) is of special interest and significance. The literal translation of bei dou is ‘Northern Dipper’, but the word dou = dipper refers also to an altar vessel used in religious ceremonies. Its handle corresponds to the shaft in our ‘Great Wain’. This part of the constellation of Ursa Major is also known as the ‘Cloud Dipper’, and symbolises the penis in the marriage ceremony. In Chinese astronomy the constellation consists of these seven stars, and it is consequently referred to as the ‘Group of Seven (stars)’.



Panda in bamboos

The constellation is regarded as the seat of Shang-di, the supreme god in Chinese popular religious belief. When it is portrayed as an emblem on ships, it symbolises the goddess Tian-hou, the Empress of Heaven who protects seafarers. A square tile bearing the character for ‘good fortune’ symbolises the ‘Northern Dipper’, and is often set into an inner wall of a house.

In the ideological quarrel between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union, the Russian bear has come to symbolise the aggressor. Mao Ze-dong referred to it as a 'polar bear'. In Chinese versions of the Little Red Riding Hood story, the wicked bear replaces the wolf.

Beard

hu-z

鬍子

A beard is a sign of supernatural power or of bravery, especially when it is red or purple. Headhunters in the borderlands between Burma and China were particularly on the lookout for men with flowing beards. It is several hundred years since a writer pointed out that while distinguished Chinese are very deficient in the matter of beards, painters always portray them with a manly growth. On the Chinese stage as well, it is customary for important male characters to have long beards.

Beauty

rangmao

容貌

Female beauty was a subject of considerable interest to the Chinese from the earliest times, and there was even a special handbook specifying the qualities a young woman had to have if she was to be considered for the imperial harem. As in medieval Europe, the catalogue of female attractions begins at the head and works downwards: thus, → eyes, → eyebrows, → face, → hair, → nose, ears, thence to hands and fingers... and so on.

The observations arrived at by the aesthetician Li Yu (or Li Li-weng) (17th century) are, in part at least, still valid. Colour of hair plays little part here, as all Chinese have strong, straight, black, smooth hair, in so far as it is not lightened to a reddish hue by reason of malnutrition and vitamin deficiency. 'Cloud hair', i.e. hair that seems to float lightly on the head, is particularly admired. A high brow is also considered beautiful, so many women still pluck their hairline – a process which has to be repeated every two weeks. The face should be egg-shaped, not round: the eyebrows should be lightly curved like the leaves of the willow-tree.

According to Li Yu, the most beautiful women come from two cities, Suzhou and Hangzhou, and the women of Hunan province were renowned for their romantic ardour. Good wishes addressed to a man can be expressed in a picture showing three beautiful

women, bringing → bamboo, a basket with → flowers and a basket of → fruit as gifts. Another popular picture, suitable as a gift for a man, shows eighteen celebrated beauties of antiquity.

The plant and animal world is drawn on very heavily for comparative purposes: a woman is beautiful if her mouth is as small as that of a → fish, and her eyes are like the fruit of a → lichee, or like → flowers. ‘Dove’s eyes’ indicate intelligence and charm: ‘mussel-eyes’ or red eyes are regarded as ugly, while blue eyes find no admirers. The → nose is compared with the stalk of an onion; a snub nose (known as ‘lion-nose’) does not make a woman attractive, but might bring her luck. The ears should be like tree fungus (mu er), neither too thick nor too thin, and slightly lustrous; a ‘rat-ear’ is too small, and an ‘earth-god-ear’ far too long.

The mouth and lips should resemble a cherry, that is to say, small and not protruding; women have always been expected to improve on nature here with the help of make-up. Teeth must be white and even, like the seeds in a → pomegranate. Small, uneven teeth are known as ‘rat’s teeth’. Protruding teeth are considered as particularly hideous, and they are compared to the little chips of wood which used to be used instead of toilet-paper. ‘Fragrance’ is a word that crops up a great deal in Chinese descriptions of the female body (→ odour).

The ‘red face’ of a beautiful woman, as lauded by the great Tang poet Li Tai-bo, has given rise to the adage ‘Red face – short life’: i.e. a beautiful woman lures a man into sexual intercourse too frequently, so that he soon dies. In general, female nakedness is still taboo. The small ivory figures of naked women which one sometimes finds, date from a time when no male doctor could examine a woman, whether married or unmarried. The sick woman was supposed to show the doctor where she felt pain by pointing to the place on the little figure: the doctor could then take her pulse (often by indirect methods also) and make a diagnosis.

Nowadays, small silver figures of naked women have appeared on the Chinese art market. These were, it seems, to serve the dead as servants.

While the paragon of the clothed female beauty has remained constant, ideas of female attractiveness have changed quite considerably over the centuries. In Tang times (618–906), a woman had to be rather plump to rate as attractive; a hundred years later, in the 11th century, the slim line was all the rage. Until the beginning of the 20th century, women’s feet were supposed to turn men on when they had been shrunken ‘to three inches’: they were then known as ‘golden lotus’ or ‘golden lily’. Originally this was an upper-class affectation only, which started in about the 7th century. By the 19th century the custom was widespread among middle- and lower-class women as well. Today, it has vanished completely, and so, of course, has the ‘fetishism of the foot’ associated with it.

The whole body of a beautiful woman should look like a → willow-tree: slim, supple and curved, with only a suggestion of hips. Standards are set even for → pubic hair: every woman should have some, it should not be overlong, nor should it be yellowish – as was apparently the case with the hated Empress Wu.

Ideals of male beauty have been largely ignored by Chinese aestheticians, both in general and in particular. Remarkable features of certain emperors were praised by comparing them to mythical ancestors: the optimum was to have eyebrows like Yao’s, eyes like Shun’s, a back as straight as Yu’s and shoulders like Tang’s.

It was desirable that a → scholar should have feminine traits in his appearance. However, fat men in general – military men and wrestlers, for example – have never been regarded as handsome: even → Fat-belly Buddha stands for merriment, not for beauty. In the erotic ‘Spring pictures’, male breasts often outdo those of the ladies.

Bee

mi-feng

蜜蜂

South Chinese tribes used to hunt for bees’ nests in old trees and smoke them out to get at the honey. Bee-keeping proper is scarcely attested. On the whole, the bee does not play a very important role in Chinese symbolism. However, as the word for ‘bee’ (feng) is phonetically close to the word for preferment to a noble rank (feng), a picture showing a → monkey and a bee together can be taken as meaning ‘preferment to noble rank’ (the monkey – hou – symbolising ‘award of a fief’ – hou). As in the West, the bee may also stand for industriousness and thrift. Like the → butterfly, the bee also represents a young man in love, and the → peony on which it sits, or round which it flies, represents the girl he loves. The expression ‘to call the bee and bring the butterfly’ refers to an extramarital affair: successful conclusion of such an affair is described as ‘the bee rolls up, the butterfly picks’.

A South Chinese legend, which is known also in Japan, tells how a bee helps a young man to choose the right bride for himself out of a whole row of beautiful girls.