

## Chinese symbols

Symbolic meaning has played a significant role in the lives of the Chinese. The nature of their written and spoken language has contributed to the rich vocabulary of symbolism. The large numbers of homophones in the Chinese language means that words with different meanings become associated with each other due to a similarity of sound when spoken. As well as linguistic symbolism, there are symbols which originated from ancient cosmological and mythical beliefs. Symbolic meanings form an intrinsic part of culture and are readily understood by Chinese people.

### 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 and is often depicted as a popular and auspicious motif in Chinese decorative arts.

#### Bamboo (*zhu* 竹)

The pronunciation of 'bamboo', *zhu*, is a homophone for 'to congratulate' (*zhu* 祝). Bamboo is a symbol of longevity and vitality because it can survive the hardest natural conditions and remains green all year round. It also represents the qualities of durability, strength, flexibility and resilience since it will bend in a storm but does not break.

#### Plum blossom (*meihua* 梅花)

As the first flower to bloom each year, the plum blossom stands for renewal and emblematic of perseverance and purity. Its appearance while the weather is still cold makes it the flower of winter while spring belongs to the peony, summer to the lotus and autumn to the chrysanthemum. The five petals of the plum blossom are auspicious since 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' (*suihan sanyou* 歲寒三友). The 'Three Friends' flourish even under adverse conditions and are symbols of longevity and perseverance, which are virtues attributed to the scholar-gentleman.

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Chrysanthemum (*juhua* 菊花)

The chrysanthemum is a symbol of autumn and the flower of the ninth moon. It is a symbol of longevity because of its health-giving properties. During the Han dynasty (206 BC- AD 220), people drank chrysanthemum wine on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month in order to prolong their lives. Nowadays, the Chinese continue to drink chrysanthemum petal tea for its health giving qualities.

Lotus (*he* 荷, *lian* 莲)

The lotus is the flower of the sixth month and summer. It is a symbol of purity because it rises out of the mud to bloom. Lotus blossoms are often depicted as a throne for the Buddha, and the lotus is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism (*ba jixiang* 八吉祥).

Peach (*tao* 桃)

A symbol of longevity along with the venerable God of Longevity, Shoulao 寿老, the peach is one of the most popular motifs found in art. The peach is a symbol of immortality, said to have grown in 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* 富贵花) and is widely used to represent wealth and honour.

## Animals

Bat (*fu* 蝠)

The bat is a symbol of happiness and joy. The Chinese for bat (*fu* 蝠) sounds identical to the word for good fortune (*fu* 福) making bats a popular Chinese rebuses. Five bats together represent the 'Five Blessings' (*wufu* 五福): long life, wealth, health, love of virtue and a peaceful death.

Crane (*he* 鹤)

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' in the imperial hierarchy. Flying cranes symbolises a wish or hope to become an official in a higher position.

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## Dragon (*long* 龙)

The Chinese dragon is the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy *qi* 气 and the most powerful symbol of good fortune. Ranked first among mythical beasts, it can bring rain to parched lands, which in turn represents abundance and relief. A dragon and phoenix (king of all winged creatures) symbolise the emperor and empress as well as marital bliss. The dragon is often used as an emblem of high rank and power on the robes of emperors and princes as well as on imperial art objects.

## Phoenix (*feng* 凤)

The phoenix is 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 a benevolent bird since it does not harm insects, and each of its body parts represents one of the virtues of benevolence (*ren* 仁), righteousness (*yi* 义), propriety (*li* 礼), knowledge (*zhi* 智) and sincerity (*xin* 信). The phoenix is also the symbol for the empress and, shown with the dragon, it stands for a perfect marriage.

## Fish (*yu* 鱼)

The fish symbolises wealth as *yu* for 'fish' sounds like the *yu* 馥 for 'abundance and affluence'. It is also 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 (AD 618-906). Due to its reproductive success the fish also signifies marriage and the birth of many children.

## People

### Eight Immortals (*baxian* 八仙)

The Eight immortals (Zhongli Quan, Zhang Guolao, Lü 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. They are popular in Chinese art as altogether they symbolise prosperity and longevity.

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## Three Star Gods (*fulushou* 福禄寿)

The Three Star Gods are the God of Fortune (*fuling* 福星), God of Prosperity (*luxing* 祿星) and God of Longevity (*shouxing* 寿星), each recognisable by characteristic iconography. The God of Fortune is depicted as a man carrying a young boy (the highest blessing is having a male child to carry on the family name), the God of Prosperity holds a sceptre of power (symbolising the ability to reap high rewards), while the God of Longevity carries a tall staff and a peach (representing immortality) and is sometimes accompanied by a crane or deer. They are often represented together.

## Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism

The 'Eight Auspicious Symbols' (*bajixiang* 八吉祥), introduced to China with Tibetan Buddhism during the Yuan dynasty (AD1279-1368), are the wheel of the dharma, conch shell, victory banner, parasol, lotus flower, treasure vase, fish pair and the endless knot. They have been used in decorative arts to bring peace and blessings and stand for the following virtues:

Wheel of the Dharma ( <i>lun</i> 轮)	Knowledge
Conch shell ( <i>luo</i> 螺)	Thoughts of the Buddha
Victory banner ( <i>san</i> 伞)	Victorious battle of the Buddha's teaching over all hindrances
Parasol ( <i>gai</i> 盖)	Protection as well as spiritual power
Lotus flower ( <i>hehua</i> 荷花)	Purity and enlightenment
Treasure vase ( <i>guan</i> 罐)	Inexhaustible treasure and wealth
Fish pair ( <i>yu</i> 鱼)	Conjugal happiness and freedom from restraint
Endless knot ( <i>panchang</i> 盤長)	Harmony

## Written characters

Written Chinese characters have both decorative and symbolic value. For instance, during New Year celebrations, families display the character for 'good fortune' (*fu* 福) written on red paper. 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 expressing a concept such as happiness and longevity (*shou* 寿 or 壽) are used as auspicious symbols through both their meaning and their visual appearance.

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## Numbers

### Four (*si* 四)

The number four (*si* 四) is considered unlucky by most Chinese people since it has the same pronunciation as *si* 死, death. Businesses and house numbers often avoid using four in numerical sequences and hotels in China are often missing a fourth floor.

### Five (*wu* 五)

The number five is a very auspicious number and associated with the Five Elements (*wuxing* 五行) of water (*shui* 水), fire (*huo* 火), wood (*mu* 木), metal (*jin* 金) and earth (*tu* 土) which are essential for a good life. The *wuxing* are one of the basic organisational principles in Chinese thought, which is why the number five appears ubiquitously as in the Five Blessings, Five Classics or the Five Metals.

### Eight (*ba* 八)

*Ba* 八 for 'eight' is pronounced similarly to *fa* 发 for 'to expand', as in 'to expand in wealth' (*facai* 发财). Due to this connection, 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, *jiu* 'nine' has the same pronunciation as *jiu* 久 'long lasting' and is often used at weddings with the wish for a long and successful marriage.

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