

Chinese Symbols and Art Motifs

Bamboo

Always green in color, bamboo is a symbol of old age and modesty. Bamboo and plums together represent man and wife. Bamboo, pine trees, and plums commonly seen together in a painting are the "Friends in Winter". [Chinese Bamboo Paintings](#)

Banana

Symbol for self-discipline.

Bat

One of the top symbols for good luck. The word "bat" in the Chinese language sounds identical to the word for "Good Fortune." Often five bats are shown together to represent the Five Blessings; a long life, riches, health, love of virtue, and a natural death.

Bear

Symbolizes man and stands for strength and courage.

Beard

A sign of supernatural power or of bravery, especially when it is red or purple.

Bee

Symbolizes industriousness and thrift.

Black

Symbolizes darkness, death, honor.

Book

The book is one of eight symbols of the scholar and represents learning.

Bowl

The bowl is one of the eight Buddhist precious things. It represents the stomach of the Buddha and may also represent the urn into which the bones of the dead are put.

Broom

A symbol for wisdom and insight.

Carp

Similar sounding to the word "Business" in Chinese, the carp symbolizes a wish for benefit or advantage in business.

Chrysanthemum

Symbolizes autumn. Its Chinese name sounds similar to the words "remain, nine, and long time." It is best to pick chrysanthemums on the 9th day of the 9th month.

Clouds

Symbolize good fortune and happiness, especially when they have more than one color.

Cock

Wards off evil. A picture of a red cock will protect a house from fire. A white cock placed on a coffin will keep demons at bay. A cock is never to be killed or bad luck will arise.

Conch Shell

Used by Hindus and Buddhists in religious rites or to call together an assembly. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Crane

Symbol of longevity. It is often shown with other symbols of longevity such as the pine tree. Two cranes flying upward towards the sun has the meaning or wish of "rising high."

Cricket

The cricket symbolizes summer. It also represents courage and a fighting spirit.

Dragon

One of the most complex and multi-tiered Chinese symbols. The dragon is a good natured and benign creature often living in seas, rivers, lakes or clouds. A symbol of male vigor and fertility, the dragon is also a symbol of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven. Paintings often show two dragons playing in the clouds with a ball or large pearl.

Dragon Fly

The Dragon Fly is a symbol of summer.

Eagle

A symbol of strength, an eagle shown perched in a pine-tree is a suitable gift for an older man, wishing him strength of an Eagle and longevity of a pine-tree. An eagle on a rock in the sea symbolizes "hero" who fights a lone battle.

Elephant

The elephant can symbolize strength and astuteness. It is regarded as an animal with very high moral standards and is often shown along with the tiger, lion and leopard.

Endless Knot

Symbolizes long life, eternal love and the interconnection of things. In Buddhism the simple form with no beginning and no end stands for the infinite knowledge of Buddha. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Feng Shui

The art of placing houses and graves in cooperation and harmonization with local currents of the cosmic breath (Yin and Yang). The dousing rod and astrological compass are used in this process. The placement of symbolic figures on roofs and the pictures of spirits on doors and/or placement of stone images in front of buildings are done to achieve a lucky atmosphere in which the cosmic currents can develop a favorable Feng Shui.

Fish

Fish in Chinese sounds like the word for "Abundance and Affluence" so the fish symbolizes wealth. Fish shown with a lotus blossom symbolize "Year after Year may you live in Affluence".

Chinese Fish Paintings

Five Elements

Shown by the colors green, red, black, yellow and white. Green clouds indicate a plague of insects. Red symbolizes virtue, especially truth and sincerity. Black symbolizes guilt and vice. White indicates moral purity. Yellow is a sign of prosperity.

Golden Fishes

The two gold fish are usually shown head to head and represent fertility as fish produce many offspring. They are one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Goldfish

The Chinese words for goldfish are identical with the two words meaning "Gold and Abundance" therefore many Chinese keep goldfish at their homes or in ponds in temple gardens.

Goose

Symbol of married bliss.

Heron

Heron in Chinese sounds a lot like the word for "path or way." A painting of a heron and a lotus has the meaning of "May your path be always upward."

Horse

The horse is a symbol of strength and speed. Eight horses in a painting represent the famous horses of King Mu from the 10th century BC.

Incense

The word means fragrance. Incense is used in homes and temples as an offering to the gods. Usually incense sticks are lit and placed upright inside a round open container.

Jade

The favorite gemstone in China. It is always cool to the touch.

Lily

A lily is a plant that is used to help you forget your troubles. It is also known as the bringer of sons so is often given to a woman at marriage.

Lion

Lions play a big part in Chinese folklore and are usually depicted looking more mythical than real. Pairs of stone lions rival even dragons in popularity as guardians of buildings and temples.

Lotus

Thanks to the Buddhist influence, the lotus (or sea-rose) is of unique importance in Chinese folklore and symbolism. It is the symbol of purity. The lotus comes out of the mire but is not itself soiled. It is inwardly empty yet outwardly upright. It has no branches but yet smells sweet. The words for lotus in Chinese have the same meanings as: to bind, connect (in marriage), one after the other, uninterrupted, to love, and modesty. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Chinese Lotus Paintings**Lute**

Said to have been invented by Fu His, the first legendary emperor, 2953 B.C. It is one of the four signs of a scholar the other three being chess, literature and painting.

Magnolia

There are many varieties both tree and shrub. The magnolia blossom is the emblem of feminine sweetness and beauty.

Mandala

An elaborate diagram used by Buddhists, Hindus and Jains as a visual aid to help people in the search for spiritual enlightenment.

Money

Images of Chinese money including metal coins, gold bars and paper money are regularly seen in Chinese paintings. The word for money in Chinese is similar to the word meaning "before, hence."

Mountains

In most religions mountains have an important symbolic role. They are the geographic point at which followers believe they are the closest to their gods or to the highest points of the universe.

Pagoda

In China, Korea and Japan a pagoda is a structure with several stories containing sacred relics. Maitreya, the Buddha of the Future, is often depicted wearing a small pagoda or stupa on his headdress.

Parasol

A symbol of high rank or royalty. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Peach

A symbol for longevity, the peach is the most symbolic of any tree or fruit. Its tree wood and color keep demons at bay, and its flower petals can cast spells on men.

Peacock

Symbolizes dignity and beauty.

Pear

Symbol of longevity due to the fact that pear trees live very long.

Peony

Queen of Flowers, the peony is an emblem of wealth and distinction. [Chinese Peony Paintings](#)

Phoenix

Commonly seen alongside a dragon, the Phoenix symbolizes the Empress. It is commonly used as a female symbol.

Pine

The favorite tree of Chinese painters, the pine symbolizes longevity and steadfastness. Pine trees rank above all other trees and epitomize self-discipline. Pine, bamboos and plum-trees are the "Three Friends in Winter."

Plum

The five petals of the plum tree symbolize the five gods of good luck. The plum tree, pine, and bamboo are the "Three Friends in Winter." [more](#)

Prayer Beads

Also called rosary, it usually consists of 108 beads and is an essential part of the Buddhist priests' garb. Some are smaller and the number of beads can usually be divided by three. The beads can be made from different materials and are sometimes decorated.

Rose

Symbolizes youth and the four seasons.

Sanskrit

An ancient Indian language in which many of the original Buddhist sutras or sacred texts were written.

Stupa (Pagoda)

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Swastika

One of the oldest symbols in India and China, the Swastika is mainly a symbol of good luck.

In Buddhist symbolism, it is used to symbolize the Buddha's heart.

Tiger

King of the wild animals, the tiger is a symbol of courage and bravery and it can drive off demons.

Treasure Vase

This symbolizes spiritual abundance. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Sword

Many of the gods exhibit swords to show their ability to cut through ignorance and evil.

Vase

Common to Chinese paintings, the word vase in Chinese sounds much like the word for "peace." Flowers are popular offerings to the gods and the vase is an important part of that offering. Shown with a wide variety of plants and flowers, the vase gives rise to a broad field of symbolisms.

Victory Banner

It is composed of a cylinder of cloth which represents a parasol. In the Buddhist religion it represents the victory of the Buddha's teachings, i.e., the victory of knowledge over ignorance and evil. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Wheel

An important symbol in Buddhist art, the wheel represents the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth known as samsara. The wheel can also symbolize the teaching of dharma, of the Buddha, being in constant motion and providing a path towards spiritual enlightenment and eventual release from this cycle. Every Buddhist culture uses the wheel in its art as a motif in sculpture, paintings, architecture and the decorative arts. It is one of the Eight Auspicious Symbols of Buddhism.

Willow

Symbol of Spring.

Yin and Yang

The negative and positive forces of universal life. They are represented by the symbol which is a diagram of an egg showing the yolk and the white, in dark and light colors to distinguish the two principles. The Yin embodies the female principle and is associated with the earth, with the North and the cold. The original meaning of the word means "shady side," the side of the mountain not facing the sun. The Yang signifies heaven, sun, light, vigor. Together the Yin and Yang make up the Tao, the eternal principle of heaven and earth and the origin of all things human and divine. This, in turn, produces Chi, the perfect balance of all things.