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Symbolism in Chinese Art

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The basic wishes for blessings, numerous offspring, wealth, and longevity are represented by the mythological figures and auspicious symbols shown in the decorative arts of China. By surrounding themselves with auspicious symbols, the Chinese believe that their wishes will come true. Chinese auspicious sayings often come in four-character phrases. They can be written out in full, or can be represented by a group of seemingly unrelated objects, such as bats and peaches to represent blessings and longevity. Such grouping are known as rebuses or pictorial puns. They are a combination of well known symbols and of objects having the same sound as those in the auspicious sayings. The Chinese language is conducive to punning; there are many words that share the same sounds as well as tones. As a result, there is much play on words, in daily speech as well as in the decorative art of the Ming (1368 - 1644) and Qing (1644 - 1911) dynasties.

Outline

FU 福 Blessings

1. Symbols for Blessings
1. Symbols for a Happy Marriage
2. Symbols for Sons

LU 祿 Official Salary and Rank

1. Symbols for Passing the Civil Service Examinations
2. Symbols for Official Rank
3. Symbols for Wealth

SHOU 壽 Longevity

1. Symbols for Longevity

PING'AN 平安 Peace

1. Symbols for Peace

RUYI 如意 As you wish

9. Wish - granting symbols

Suggested reading:

Bartholomew, Terese

Myths and Rebuses in Chinese Art (Brochure of the exhibition of July 20th, 1988 at the Asian Art Museum)

“Pious Hopes Carved on Chinese Beads -- A Discussion of Rebuses and Legends in Chinese Art”, *Oriental Art*, August 1988.

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Fruits and Flowers for the Chinese New Year, (brochure). San Francisco: Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

“One Hundred Children: From Boys at Play to Icons of Good Fortune.” in Ann Barrott Wicks, ed. *Children in Chinese Art*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002

Hidden Meanings in Chinese Art. Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 2006.

“The Citron and Other Rebuses.” *Oriental Art*, October 2006, pp. 88-90.

Gong, Rosemary. *Good Luck Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Hong Kong Heritage Museum and Palace Museum, Beijing. *Happy Birthday Emperor Qianlong*. Hong Kong: Leisure and Cultural Services Department, 2000.

Leung, Sally Yu. *Hidden Meanings in Chinese Children’s Clothing and Accessories*. Guangzhou: 2010.

Ni Yibin, “The Anatomy of Rebus in Chinese Decorative Arts.” *Oriental Art* 49, no. 3 (2003 -2004), 12-23.

Nozaki Nobuchika. *Kissho suan kaidai, Shina fuzoku no ichi kenkyu*, Tianjin: 1940.
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Tsang Ka Bo. “Chinese Gifts with Best Wishes,” *Arts of Asia* 24, No. 4 (1994).

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