



Chinese symbolism and culture depicted in museum artefacts

A public talk by Dr ZONG Fang as part of the OCI public talks series

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[Edited transcript]

Dr Fang Zong

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining me. We will start a brief introduction to Chinese symbolic culture. The main body of the talk will be Chinese symbolic motifs and designs and their presentation forms and hidden meanings. This will be explored through a range of museum objects, from auspicious animals to noble plants. A comparison between Chinese and Western symbolic cultures will be discussed in some cases. Later I will show you a couple of objects with complex symbols for you and for the coming Lunar New Year. At the end, we'll finish with an acknowledgement and a test object for you. Don't worry, you will see.

China has one of the world's oldest continuous civilizations with a strong history stretching back for over 5,000 years. Symbolism is central to Chinese culture, art and design, evolving from primitive nature-based pictograms into a sophisticated visual language that integrates philosophy, beliefs and the social hierarchy. Chinese symbolism is mainly an auspicious culture. Chinese imagery must be intentional, and the meaning must be auspicious, so we say **图必有意 意必吉祥**, *tú bì yǒu yì, yì bì jí xiáng*.

One of the most distinctive features of [Chinese symbolism](#) is its connection to language. Many symbols are based on homophones, i.e. words that sound the same but have different positive meanings. Visual images therefore function almost like spoken blessings. This close link between language, imagery and meaning help explain why symbolism is so systematic and widespread in Chinese art and design. When compared with British symbolic traditions, both similarities and contrast emerge. While British culture also employs symbolic animals and plants - such as the lion for courage and royal power, the rose for love and national identity - British symbolism tends to focus on heraldry, religion and moral allegory, and is less reliant on linguistic homophones. Chinese symbolism is more systematically tied to word play, homophones and beliefs. Chinese motifs often convey clear wishes for happiness, wealth, longevity and success. Chinese symbolic imagery is woven into everyday objects and imperial treasures. Museum objects are rarely purely decorative or functional. They are messengers of cultural values, moral ideas.

Bats! Is that a surprise? In many Western cultures, bats are associated with darkness or fear. In the [Bible](#), [bats](#) are recorded as unclean and linked with evil spirits at night. In Eastern European countries, bats are related to vampires. [Shakespeare](#) associated bats with witches, spells and curses in his play Macbeth, but in Chinese culture, bats are extremely auspicious. The word for bat 蝠 *fú*, sounds the same as the word 福 *fú* for 'blessing' or 'good fortune'. This is a typical example of a Chinese symbol derived from linguistic homophones.

This dish belongs to the [Palace Museum, Beijing](#). It was made in the Qing Dynasty, during [Tongzhi's](#) reign. The decoration are red bats on a yellow background showing the highest royal auspiciousness. As we know, bats represent blessing and good fortune by pronunciation. Here the [colours](#) add more layers of meaning. We also know that in Imperial China, yellow was the colour of the emperor. The colour red will be explained in the next slide.

This Chinese porcelain dish is from the [V&A Museum](#), London. It depicts lots of red bats flying amongst the colourful clouds. The word for the colour red, 红 *hóng*. Sounds the same as the word 洪 *hóng*, literally translated as flood, means 'vast' and 'abundant'. The clouds represent the sky, here they're green, blue and purple, so colourful clouds are also auspicious. These red bats and the cloud pattern is a pun for 'lots of good fortune fills the heavens': 洪福齐天, *hóng fú qí tiān*. It symbolizes boundless blessings and supreme blessings.

If lots of bats is auspicious, how about one bat or two bats? They are also very auspicious. What's on the left plate? A small boy and a figure of the God longevity holding a peach. The peach is a symbol of longevity. What else? Yes, it's a bat, a red bat is flying in front of the God of longevity. A single bat flying in front of your eyes, as in the image on this plate, means good fortune is imminent: 福在眼前 *fú zài yǎn qián*. On the red dish, we can see a pair of bats and a spotted deer - another example of symbolic word play. The word 鹿 *lù* for deer sounds the same as the word 祿 *lù* for official salary. As a result, a deer symbolizes 'wealth', 'high rank' and 'career success'. They were very popular among scholars and officials hoping for promotion in government service. So, the combination of bats and deer means a happy life and a prominent career coexisting: 福禄双全 *fú lù shuāng quán*.

Now we have the very popular grouping of five bats known as the [Five Blessings](#). They collectively represent the wishes for: longevity, wealth, health, virtue and a natural death. These are considered the five ideal conditions of a fulfilled life. Both dishes are from the V&A collection. The one on the right shows five red bats around three peaches. On the one on the left, the decoration is made from a combination of the character 寿 *shòu* depicting longevity in the centre surrounded by five bats, five further 寿 *shòu* (longevity)characters and five swastika symbols. The swastika was originally a Buddhist symbol but evolved to represent 'ten thousand'. Together, the bats, the 寿 *shòu* character and the swastikas form the decorative scene, 'ten thousands, happinesses and longevity'. The mark on the base indicates it was made for the use of [Emperor Xianfeng](#), as it is inscribed as 'made for the Hall of Faith-Keeping', which is a variant name for the Emperor's study room.

This gourd-shaped vase holds multiple layers of meaning. It is entirely decorated with red bats. The turquoise background represents clouds and sky. We know that this pattern signifies boundless blessings and supreme bliss. Here the gourd shape adds an important layer of meaning to this vase. There are several reasons: Firstly, a gourd has many seeds, implying many children and grandchildren and continuous human reproduction. Secondly, the pronunciation for gourd: 葫芦 *hú lú* sounds like: 福禄 *fú lù* for blessing and prosperity. Thirdly, the gourd is a sacred object in Taoism which believes the gourd is a magical object leading to the fairyland and a container for storing the medicine that can lead you to live forever. So, the pattern and the shape reflect the understanding and pursuit of 'Fu Culture' in Chinese tradition.

Bats are common in Chinese art, not just on ceramics. They can be highly stylised. For example, this Chinese kingfisher-feathered headdress, can you see bats on its decoration? A stylised bat is shown above and below the central decoration piece. The blue kingfisher feathers formed the bat's body and the red gemstones form its eyes.

This is another example of a stylised bat pattern. On this late 19th century or early 20th century Chinese export porcelain dish, we can see many auspicious motifs, such as the 灵芝 *líng zhī*

mushroom or 如意 *rú yì* pattern, the red longevity character. The white motif pattern above the red longevity character is a stylised form of bat.

We have had so bats, lots of blessings, shall we move to something else? Fish. As one of the important traditional Chinese decorative patterns, fish imagery first appeared on pottery made during the Neolithic period, like the famous pottery basin with a human face and fish pattern, in the National Museum of China. Over the past several thousand years, the fish pattern has been widely used on wares made of bronze, porcelain, jade, gold and silver, and sculptures, and even buildings, as well as paintings and papercuts. This poster was made in 1974, the late stage of the Cultural Revolution. It is a typical [Huxian Peasant Painting](#), showing a harvest scene of the *Commune Fishpond*. It was one of the most famous Huxian peasant paintings, especially popular in the West. The artist [Dong](#) said: 'We artists paint the future and also the revolutionary ideal, not just things as they are. To express the big harvest, all the fish are jumping, all their scales are bright and shining. The little fish are escaping from the net. The net lets them through. The little fish are the new generation growing up. This is intended to show development; we don't eat all the fish.'

The primary symbolic meaning is based on homophones: The words for fish 鱼 *yú* and surplus 余 *yú* sound the same. The fish symbolizes a good harvest and abundant wealth. Fish are naturally productive. Two fish are a powerful fertility charm for couples wishing to grow their family. Fish also symbolize class uplifting and Daoist ideals. We will talk this through object analysis shortly.

鱼跃龙门, *yú yuè lóngmén*: *Carp Leaping over The Dragon Gate*. On this jar, held in the British Museum, one side depicts two carp cresting waves towards the sun, the opposite side shows a dragon emerging from clouds. 'The carp emerging from the waves to be transformed into a dragon is a metaphor for scholastic success in the civil service examinations – that is the note from the Museum's Chinese collection curator [Jessica Harrison-Hall](#). Indeed, the visual images of *Carp Leaping over the Dragon Gate* act like spoken blessings, as a fixed phrase 鱼跃龙门 *yú yuè lóngmén* to encourage students to achieve success through hard work and perseverance.

So, double fish now. Chinese people regard paired fish as a visual pun for happy marriage. Two fish swimming together in harmony is one of the strongest symbols for a happy, faithful, and fulfilling marriage. It is a classic wedding gift for this reason. Here we can see double fish patterns on the republic period porcelain dish from the British Museum, and the contemporary embroidery piece from a private collection. You might notice the colours of the fish, one in black and the other in red or reddish pink, which represent husband and wife, respectively. The embroidered double fish is actually a real wedding gift.

Large, lidded jars of this type were used to store water or alcohol and would have been used at court during celebratory events. The pattern of fish and waterweeds is one of the popular fish patterns in Chinese decorative art. This pattern is simple, just fish and water plants. Fish swimming freely and happily among the waterweeds, showing the harmony of living together, signifying the virtues of Daoism: effortless action, naturalness, simplicity. The base has the reign mark of the [Emperor Jiajing](#), Ming dynasty. Emperor Jiajing, a devout Daoist, named himself the 'fisherman of the Heavenly pond.' Here, I would like to highlight the technique used to paint the red carp: firstly, the yellow colour is applied, then the red colour is applied on top of the yellow colour, creating the so-called *Huang Shang Hong, Emperor's Red*, it conveys the highest auspiciousness: 'Emperor's fortune as vast as Heaven'. You might remember the yellow dish with red bats in an earlier slide, probably the same case. This dish is very important. It was made in [Jingdezhen](#), in late [Emperor Kangxi](#) era. This pattern has fish and waterweeds, lotus and other aquatic plants. We can see seven fish including carp, catfish, mandarin fish and crucian carp swimming freely in the lotus pond. It is also called the *Joy of Fish* pattern reflecting the freedom of Daoism, which we will discuss more in the next slide when we see the mark.

The mark is 在川知樂 *zài chuān zhī lè*, literally translated as: *knowing happiness in the stream*. The fish pattern was popular, but this mark was rare. It is derived from the fourth century BC book [Zhuangzi](#) (《庄子》), one of two foundational texts of Daoism, alongside the *Tao Te Ching* (《道德经》). Daoist master *Zhuangzi* and the Confucian scholar *Huizi* were strolling on the bridge over the River *Hao*, and having a conversation about the pleasures of fish, *Zhuangzi* started:

“The fish are out swimming about. That is the 'Joy of Fish'”

“You are not a fish; how do you know the joy of fish?”

“You are not me; how do you know whether I know the joy of fish?”

“I am not you, and so I can't know. It follows that since you are not a fish, you can't know the joy of fish. So there!”

“Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy – so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here on the bridge over the River *Hao*.”

This is the famous [Hao Liang Debate](#) in Chinese philosophy. 'Liang' is the ancient name for bridge. The Joy of Fish mark has always been an extremely rare variety in the Kangxi official kilns, as it reflects Emperor Kangxi's own philosophical thoughts.

The fish pattern is combined with characters and calligraphy: the four red carps surround the artistic form of the longevity character. The blue and white plate depicts eight 福 *fú* characters surrounding a single cup leaping from the waves.

Now we move onto the Chinese unicorn, 麒麟 *qílín*. The unicorn is very familiar in Western culture. The unicorn is a legendary creature with white horse-like body and a single horn. It is a symbol of Scotland, featured on the royal coat of arms, like the one shown on the slide. It is a symbol of purity, innocence and power in Celtic mythology.

Now back to the Chinese qilin. A qilin is a magical creature in Chinese mythology, the saddle horse for immortals. A qilin has a dragon's head, a deer's antlers, a horse's body, an ox's tail, the hooves of the horse, and the scales of a fish. A qilin often has two horns, so it is not always a unicorn. It is said that qilin can live as long as 2,000 years. It is an auspicious creature, they are friendly to all creatures, it is known as a benevolent creature. While the dragon was a symbol of emperor, the qilin was related to outstanding generals or officials.

It is often associated with sages. It is said that on the night before Confucius was born during the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC – 476 BC), a qilin appeared in the courtyard of his parents' home. The qilin spat out a jade scroll from its mouth. On the scroll was written: 'A man of extraordinary good moral character and talent, an exemplar of human excellences. Although he is not on the throne, he has the virtue of a king.' Not long after the qilin's appearance, Confucius was born. This is the story behind the symbolic image of the 麒麟送子 *qílín sòng zǐ*: the qilin delivers a son, and saying 'qilin in heaven, genius on earth'.

The jar depicts stories of the 麒麟送子 *qílín sòng zǐ*: the qilin delivers a boy, a son, showing the desire for an official career for male children, and also the 状元及第 *zhuàngyuán jí dì*: Ranking first in the imperial examination

Here is a pair of New Year prints with qilin motif. One is with the inscription 麒麟送子 *qílín sòng zǐ*, the other 状元及第 *zhuàngyuán jí dì*. These woodblock prints are part of the British Museum collection and were loaned to the Manchester Museum in 2010 for their Lunar New Year exhibition [China: Journey to the East](#) [Note: the speaker said 'West', which was a slip of tongue.].

Like auspicious animals, flowers and plants are also a common decorative motif in Chinese art, appearing extensively in paintings, porcelains and textiles. Let's start with the peony. Peonies have various names indicating their cultural significance: The herbaceous peony [*paeonia lactiflora*] is called the *Chinese peony* or *common garden peony*, 芍药 *sháoyào* in Chinese, known as 'the Minister of Flowers'

The tree peony [*paeonia x suffruticosa*], its common name is 牡丹 *mǔdān* in Chinese, known as 'the King of Flowers', also called 富貴花 *fù guì huā*, the flower of wealth and rank, symbolising wealth, social status and honour. 国色天香 *guó sè tiān xiāng*: 'national beauty and heavenly fragrance', due to their lavish flowers and profound scent.

This painting of a peony was by Lang Shining [[Giuseppe Castiglione](#)] who was an Italian missionary in China, where he served as an artist at the Imperial Qing court. He painted in a style that is a fusion of European and Chinese traditions. The other one was by the Modern/Contemporary Chinese artist [Yu Feian](#), depicting a tree peony.

The Chinese porcelain dish with the image of a peony and quail is another metaphor of homophone: 富貴平安 *fù guì píng ā*, 'Living and working in peace and contentment', represents a life of wealth and stability. The Chinese silk embroidery of peony flowers, actually forms a Chinese character *double happiness*, used as a wedding present.

The yellow bowl is a Kangxi Imperial enamel porcelain bowl represents the highest porcelain craftsmanship in 17th century China and the world. The blue and white one is a famous English Worcester porcelain. Both used the peony as the dominant decorative motif: different cultures at different ages, but showing their shared love for the peony due to its beauty and symbolic meanings.

Now for the chrysanthemum. Chrysanthemums have been cultivated in China for more than 3,000 years. In the [Tang Dynasty](#) (around the 8th century), the chrysanthemum was passed from China to Japan via Korea. At the end of the 17th century, Dutch merchants introduced them to Europe. In the mid-19th century, they reached North America and then the rest of the world. Chrysanthemums have different symbolic meanings in different cultures. In China, they signify longevity and joy because, firstly, the linguistic link, chrysanthemum (菊 *jú*) sounds like both the word 居 *jū*, meaning 'to reside' and 久 *jiǔ*, meaning 'long enduring'. Secondly, they have health-giving properties, have been used in traditional Chinese medicine and food. Thirdly, the chrysanthemum is tightly associated with a special festival to respect the elderly, called [Double Ninth Festival](#) in the late autumn. On this day, people appreciate chrysanthemum flowers; drink chrysanthemum liquor and tea; eat chrysanthemum cakes. Chinese people love chrysanthemums so much, and the chrysanthemum flower show has been a tradition for centuries. The picture here is the *Shanghai Chrysanthemum Show* in 2019. In Japan, one more layer of meaning was added: it is a symbol of royalty, the Imperial Family emblem. In Europe, it is a flower of death and mourning, used in funeral services to symbolize eternal life and the cycle of nature. It is also November's birth flower. In Australia: It is the Mother's Day flower, because chrysanthemums are known as 'mums' for short in Australia.

The chrysanthemum is featured in art and craft in many forms. For example, the object itself is in the shape of chrysanthemum flowers - you can see many petals - the materials used range from bronze, porcelain and jade. The blue and white dish is a 16th century vase, fully decorated with chrysanthemum flowers.

In the Japanese teacups, the chrysanthemum motifs not only add artistic beauty to the teacups, but also convey cultural meanings: 'culture in a cup'.

The chrysanthemum represents a tranquil mind of indifference to fame and fortune of Chinese scholars. [Tao Yuanming](#) (陶渊明 *Táo Yuānmíng*) was a 3rd century Chinese poet and politician. He spent much of his life in seclusion, living in the countryside, farming, gardening, reading, drinking wine, and, of course, writing poems in which he reflected on the pleasures and hardships of life and

his decision to withdraw from civil service. He was recognised as the pioneer of the 'Fields and Gardens' poetry. His most well-known lines of poetry are:

While picking asters (chrysanthemums) beneath the Eastern fence,

My gaze upon the Southern mountain rests. (采菊东篱下, 悠然见南山)

[translated by Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang]

The chrysanthemum reflects Chinese scholars' spirit.

Now for seasonal plants: 岁寒三友 *suì hán sān yǒu*, the [Three Friends of Winter](#). These are Japanese porcelain teacups from Manchester Museum, with pine, bamboo and plum blossom images respectively and collectively. Pine trees are evergreen and grow for many years, representing stability and longevity. Bamboo is vibrant green all year round with upright stems and being hollow inside, symbolising a virtuous person. An ideal scholar should be like a bamboo stem, bending not breaking in adverse conditions, and being humble even though very knowledgeable. Plum blossom is the first to bloom in late winter, signifying resilience and renewal. The ancient Chinese celebrate pine, bamboo and plum blossom collectively as the 'Three Friends of Winter'. It was a favourite design throughout Chinese history. It also spread to the East Asian countries and influenced other cultures. We will see in the next two slides.

The Three Friends of Winter design on the Ming Dynasty porcelain bowl and the Qing Dynasty porcelain teapot are both on display at the British Museum in the gallery dedicated to the famous [Percival David](#) collection of Chinese ceramics.

On the left is the mid-18th century English teacup, teacup and saucer with the motif of plum and bamboo. On the right is the [Edo period](#) Japanese dish with this Three Friends of Winter pattern. This pattern became a common subject through the ages in Chinese literature, painting and calligraphy. [Zhao Mengjian](#) made this group popular in painting. [Lin Jingxi](#) is the first person recorded in literature using the phrase 'Friends of Winter'. So together they symbolize resilience, perseverance and integrity, the Confucian virtues of the ideal scholar-gentleman: 君子 *jūn zǐ*.

Ancient Chinese people created complex patterns by combining animals, plants and landscape and so forth, to enrich their symbolic meanings. For example, this Qing dynasty dish has red bats, peaches, cliffs and waves. This grouping conveys a very special auspicious message: 'May you have happiness and fortune as boundless as the East Sea, and may you live as long as the Southern Mountain'.

Last slide. This is a pair of traditional textile fish pendants, symbolising abundance, especially for the Lunar New Year celebrations. It demonstrates the complexity and creativity of Chinese cultural symbolism: it is a combination of shape, form, homophone, character and colour.

- 吉 *jí*: in the shape of the Temple of Heaven, meaning auspicious.
- 庆 *qìng*: a pun for 磬 *qìng*, a traditional Chinese musical instrument, used for celebration.
- 有 *yǒu*: the Chinese character meaning 'to have'.
- 余 *yú* : surplus, in the form of fish 鱼 *yú*.

The combination is a pun on the expression: 'May you have a surfeit of happiness and joy, 吉庆有余 *jí qìng yǒu yú*. A good wish for you all for the lunar New Year.

So, it's the Year of the [Horse](#), 马到成功 *mǎ dào chéng gōng*: The horse arrives, success follows, wish you all success. The small figure - the Ming Dynasty tile - depicts a soldier on a galloping horse, maybe on the way to report good news for success. Below the tile is the flyer for a special exhibition

at the [Xu Beihong Memorial Museum](#) in Beijing. The exhibition will showcase his masterpieces of galloping horses.

Last but not least, the [Chinese Lunar New Year of the Horse Celebrations at the Open University](#)!

Thank you very much for listening. I hope this talk encourage you to look more carefully or closely at museum objects and to discover the stories hidden within the symbols.

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