

Chinese Folk Art, Festivals, and Symbolism in Everyday Life



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Cover image: papercut, lion dance performance, 9-15927c

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CHINA

The People's Republic of China is the third largest country in the world, after Russia and Canada. It is slightly larger than the United States and includes Hong Kong and Macau. China is located in East Asia. The capital city is Beijing, which is in the northeast part of the country. China is a country of great geographical contrasts. There are grasslands in Inner Mongolia, snowy mountains in Tibet, and wide plains in the Gobi Desert.

China is the most populous nation in the world, with close to 1.3 billion people. The majority of Chinese people belong to the Han group (about 92%), but there are also 55 ethnic minority groups that live mostly in the west and along the southern border. The official language is Mandarin Chinese, though people tend to speak Cantonese in the south and in Hong Kong.

Chinese civilization is one of the oldest known cultures in the world. Chinese history extends almost 5000 years, for most of which there is a written record. Until the 20th century China was organized according to dynasties and imperial rulers. China was united for the first time during the Qin dynasty (pronounced "Chin") in the 2nd century BC. The massive Great Wall was constructed in this era to keep out enemies from the north. The Chinese writing system was also standardized during this time. The written characters that make up the Chinese language are pictographs, which were created to look like pictures of things in daily life.



Buddha, bronze sculpture. 9–14630

Other notable dynasties are the Han (206 BC–AD 220), when Buddhism began to flourish, the Tang (618–907), commonly regarded as the most glorious period of Chinese history, the Song (960–1279), during which Marco Polo visited China, and the Ming (1368–1644), when Beijing became the capital of the country.

China is a country with many religions. For thousands of years China was an agricultural society based around ancestor worship. Even today, Chinese people believe that ancestors have a close relationship with the living. The two most common religions are Buddhism and Daoism.

Many Chinese practice a combination of Buddhism, Daoism, and ancestor worship.

Throughout different time periods in China's history, many Chinese have emigrated from China to other parts of the world due to various economic or political circumstances. Today, Chinese populations exist in North America, Southeast Asia, Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, and Russia. Over 1.6 million Chinese live in the United States, making it the largest Chinese population outside of Asia.



TAIWAN

Taiwan is a subtropical island consisting of rugged mountains and flat to gently rolling plains. The island is surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, located off China's southeast coast. The capital of Taiwan is Taipei. Taiwan is a democratic society and the official language is Mandarin. Until the mid 17th century only indigenous peoples lived on the island of Taiwan. Indigenous populations still exist in Taiwan; however, they only make up about two percent of the total population. Today, more than 23 million people inhabit the island; the majority of these people are Han Chinese originating from mainland China. Many traditional Chinese beliefs and customs were brought from China and are very much a part of life in Taiwan today.

The Dutch and Spanish both occupied parts of Taiwan in the 1600s. The Dutch were driven out of the country in 1662. Shortly after, the Manchus—the rulers of the Qing Dynasty—took control of Taiwan in 1683. They continued to rule over Taiwan until 1895. Next, Japan conquered Taiwan as a result of the Sino-Japanese war. At the end of World War II Taiwan was finally reunited with China. In 1949, when China became a communist nation, the Republic of China's government moved to Taiwan. Taiwan's new government considered themselves to be an independent republic separate from China. By 1951 Taiwan's economy began to grow at a rapid pace. Taiwan has a dynamic capitalist economy, and public education is widespread.



Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

SYMBOLISM

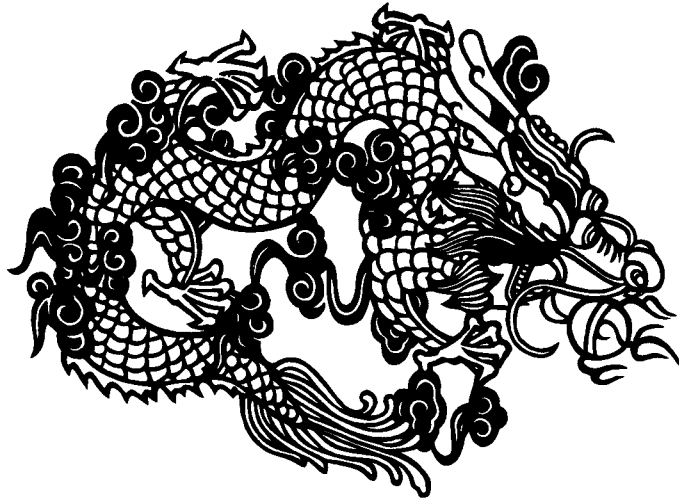
Symbolism is present throughout all cultures. Symbols may be seen in pictures, words, art, architecture, and common household items. Symbols are another way of communicating the thoughts, meanings, and hopes of a particular cultural group. Symbolism representing luck, prosperity, long life, happiness, and wealth are all important aspects in Chinese culture. Symbols representing these virtues are often seen in everyday life and appear during holidays and festivals. There are also deities that represent some of these virtues: the God of Luck, the God of Prosperity, and the God of Longevity, to name a few. Many Chinese hope to increase good fortune in their lives by surrounding themselves with items that represent these lucky signs.

The Chinese language influenced the development of symbolism. Chinese is a tonal language, therefore, depending on how a word is pronounced it could mean several different things. For example, the words for good fortune and bat are pronounced the same way although they are written with different characters. As a result, bats symbolize happiness and good luck in China. When five bats are seen together, they are said to represent the five blessings: health, long life, wealth, love of goodness, and death by natural causes.



Detail on a pewter and brass container. When five bats are pictured with the character for longevity as seen above, it combines to form a strong and potent symbol for long life and good fortune. 9-15907

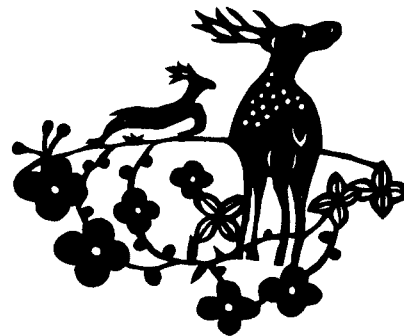
The Dragon is not a sign of terror as it appears in the Western world. On the contrary, the dragon is seen as a symbol of good fortune and protection. He has the power to make himself invisible at any time and can also reduce his size as small as a silk worm or expand in size so great that he fills up the skies.



Fish are a sign of abundance. Two fish paired together symbolize marriage.



The Phoenix is a popular symbol in Chinese culture. Known as one of the most beautiful birds, it represents good fortune, longevity, and abundance.



The deer symbolizes wealth and longevity. It is said to be the only animal that knows how to find the sacred fungus of immortality.

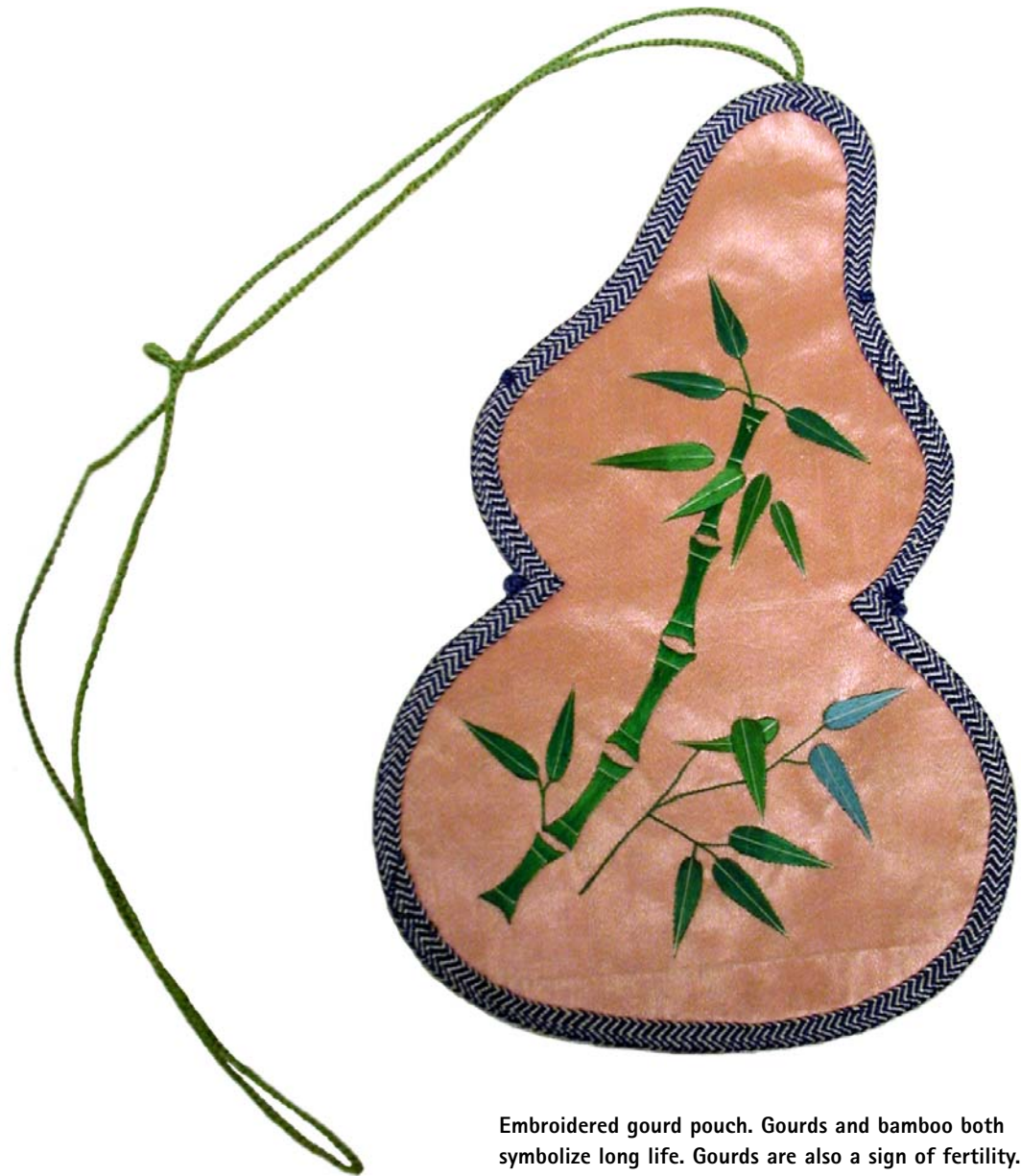
Although not native to China, the horse was imported and quickly adopted into Chinese culture. The horse represents strength, speed, and stamina.



CHINESE FOLK ARTS

Folk arts in China have developed over a thousand years. They include the arts of papercuts, wood-block prints, and embroidered textiles. These objects have been made for centuries by peasants. Paper, wood, cotton, and scissors were used to create these items. In the past, the upper classes in China laughed at such simple art, preferring calligraphy and landscape painting. They gave a name to Chinese folk arts: *diao chong xiao ji*, which means “the small skills of carving insects.” This term was used to poke fun at the folk art of the peasants. However, peasants did not have brushes on hand like the upper classes. They used scissors and knives instead—since they were household staples needed for such things as making a family’s clothing.

Chinese folk arts are not only beautiful, but also important to Chinese religion and beliefs in the countryside. Many items show pictures of gods and spirits along with heaven and earth. In China people believe that pictures have a lot of power to change events in life. Folk arts are used both to decorate homes and to wish for good fortune in all aspects of life.



Embroidered gourd pouch. Gourds and bamboo both symbolize long life. Gourds are also a sign of fertility. Collected in Beijing, China, 1944. 9-21266

PAPERCUTS



Traditional papercuts are made at home with scissors or knives from very thin sheets of colored paper. In the past, people enjoyed making designs from paper because it was quick and did not require many tools. Girls as young as six years old were taught how to cut paper by older family members. Sometimes designs are only cut once. Other times a pattern is used over and over again by placing it on

a clean sheet of paper and putting a smoking oil lamp beneath it. When the smoke has made its mark, it is removed and the outline that is left behind can be cut.

Usually paper cuts are pasted on windows or hung on doors, especially during holidays and festivals. The most important time to make and display papercuts is during the New Year Festival. Each part of China has different styles of paper cuts. However, many paper cuts share two common themes: protection from evil forces and the health and well-being of the family. Papercut designs can be pictures of anything, including lucky Chinese words, animals, children, or illustrations of popular stories. They are often made with red paper, since red is the color that represents happiness in China.

A part of China known as Shaanxi Province is well known for making some of the most beautiful paper cuts. During the winter each household in Shaanxi pastes colorful paper cuts known as “window flowers” (*chuang hua*) on each window in its home.



Top left: fish, painted; watercolor (?), 9-15722n Above: A old man tells tales to two young children as evening falls. 9-15927