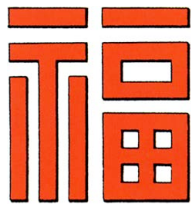


# Hidden Meanings in Chinese Decorative motifs

Many decorative motifs found in Chinese visual culture convey good omens or wishes. They represent auspicious sayings that originated in ancient China. Homophones (characters pronounced like other characters) in the Chinese language fired the imagination of artists and wordsmiths, inspiring creative motifs and compositions applying intimate knowledge of language and symbolism. Rebuses (words represented by symbols), for example, often used words that shared the same sounds but differed in meaning and form.

## Motifs for Blessings

**The character *fu*** (福) stands for blessings, good luck, and good fortune.



**The Chinese word for bat** (*fu* 蝠) has the same sound as the character *fu* (福) and therefore is a symbol for blessing. Bats pictured upside down indicate blessings have arrived!



**The *ruyi*** (如意) is a ceremonial scepter and a wish-granting wand, and its characters are translated as “as you wish” or “according to your desires.” The object itself or an image of the object creates a pun, conveying the meaning “May you have blessings as you wish.”



**The Three Abundances** (*sanduo* 三多) is a group of three fruits—the Buddha’s-hand citron, the peach, and the pomegranate—formed from puns. The citron represents blessings; the peach long life; and the pomegranate many sons.



**The sheep, ram, and goat** share the same name, *yang* (羊). This word is a homophone with *yang* (陽) meaning both sun and positive force or energy, as expressed in the phrase “*yin* and *yang*.” Images of the sheep, ram, and goat have several auspicious associations, including blessings for the New Year.



# Hidden Meanings in Chinese Decorative motifs

## Motifs for Prosperity

The character *lu* (祿) implies rank, success, good fortune, and wealth.



The peony and osmanthus are associated with nobility, high rank, and wealth.



The character for deer (鹿) is also pronounced *lu*, and so deer symbolize wealth and longevity.



The word for rooster can be a pun for luck, fortune, and rank.

Golden ingots and coins are symbols of riches and wealth.



# Hidden Meanings in Chinese Decorative motifs

## Motifs for Longevity

The word *shou* (壽) means longevity and eternal life, as its character combines the symbol of nobleman with the symbol of time.



The peach is a symbol for longevity.



Depictions of the Daoist god and goddess of longevity represent attributes of long life.



The pine tree and the crane, individually or together, represent longevity and express "May you live long."

The fungus of immortality (*lingzhi* 靈芝) is a symbol of longevity. Believed to have medicinal properties that revived the dead, the woody fungus was considered to be food of the divine and the immortals.



# Hidden Meanings in Chinese Decorative motifs

## Motifs for Happiness

The character for happiness is *xi* (喜), and two of them placed side by side form a character for “double happiness” (囍), a common symbol at weddings.



The magpie (*xique* 喜鹊), sharing the first character with the word for happiness (*xi* 喜), heralds blessings and good news in spring. Magpies on plum blossoms, translated as *xi shang mei shao*, are a homophone for the saying “Happiness up to one’s eyebrows.”



The lotus, a pun for harmony and alliance, conveys “May you have a harmonious marriage and family.” Images of young boys playing with lotuses impart “May your descendants live in harmony and peace.”



The character for chime stones (*qing* 磬) sounds the same as that for celebration (*qing* 慶); thus, chime stones suggest a celebration of life, success, and happiness.

Mandarin ducks are believed to mate for life. Pictured with a lotus, they suggest “May you be paired in love forever.”

