

# Stitchery Series Part IV – Symbolism in Chinese Embroidery

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Every symbol in Chinese textiles has significance, and evolved from several philosophies and concepts. The Chinese enjoy plays on words, and symbols were often used if their verbal sound or written character related to a quality or virtue. So, because the words for 'bat' and 'happiness' sound similar, the bat became the symbol for happiness.

The invention of the draw loom and the development of jacquards and brocades allowed patterns to be woven into the cloth. Common patterns included checks, diamonds, zig-zags, coins, clouds, dragons, lions, horses, flowers, birds and fish. Brocades were often over-embroidered to augment the woven patterns.

This over-embroidery technique is one I now employ on my hats.

During the Song Dynasty a variety of brocade and jacquard patterns were in common use, including the following motif combinations:

- dragon and flowers
- dragon and phoenix
- dragons in medallions pursuing jewels (this also shows up in Byzantine textiles, possibly as a Chinese import)
- pheasant and stork
- cherries and cherry blossoms
- lotus and tortoise
- tortoise and snake
- lion dogs and balls
- water weeds and fish
- tree peonies
- peacocks (this also shows up in Byzantine and European textiles, possibly as a Chinese import)
- geese and clouds

The listings below will give you an overview of some of the most frequently used designs. It is an incomplete catalog. If you are curious about other symbols that you see in Chinese textiles, including swastikas, scepters, characters, literary and scientific motifs, plants and animals not listed here, I would encourage you to visit the books listed as resources at the end of this article.

## The Twelve Symbols of Authority

Also called the Twelve Ornaments or the Ancient Symbols, these motifs were always incorporated into the emperor's robes to represent his symbolic royal domain over the universe. A story in the Book of Yu tells how Shun, the first legendary emperor of China, ordered Yu to "make clothing depicting the sun, moon, stars, mountain, dragon and pheasant, dyed in brilliant colors and added to dyed cloth to make garments." This edict evolved into the Dragon Robe that became the official court garment of the Emperor, which was worn until the end of the Qin Dynasty in 1912. Those symbols are:



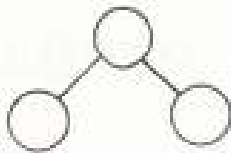
**Sun** - heaven, intellectual enlightenment, sovereign on earth, male attributes.

A red circle enclosing a three legged male phoenix, set over clouds. The three feet signify the masculine essence of the sun; the bird is also known as the Yu Hua, and it often flies to Earth to feed on the Plant of Immortality.



**Moon** - home of the Hare who prepares the elixir of immortality with a mortar and pestle

Pale blue, surrounded by clouds, or greyish pink, over curling waves. Female attributes.



**Stars** - three circles joined by 45-degree lines to form the eternal unity of sun, moon and earth.

Sun, Moon and Stars combined were symbolic of knowledge gained through the understanding of nature.



**Mountains** - earth, steadfastness and longevity  
Mountains are often placed just above the the center of the wave pattern on the hem of court robes (which was embroidered in the twelve colors). It is often depicted in tandem with the Flaming Pearl, symbolic of the eternal pursuit of wisdom.

**Dragon - the most imperial of the twelve symbols**



The five-toed dragon is reserved for the Emperor and his heirs, four-toed for court officials, three-toed for lesser nobility. It is the emblem of strength, goodness, vigilance and safeguard, and when used in tandem with the ax and pheasant, judicial powers of the court are implied.

**The Dragon and Phoenix**

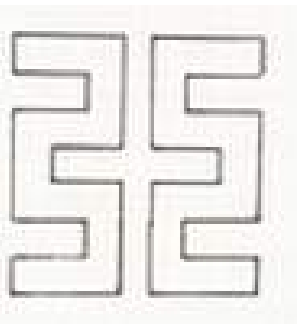
This pairing have long been reserved for the Emperor and Empress, with variants reserved for ranking members of their household. The Dragon and Phoenix were considered two of the four intelligent creatures of China, which I will discuss in greater detail in a separate essay.



**Pheasant** - literary refinement, education. Depicted standing on a rock in the sea, facing the sun.



**Ax** - emperor's power to inflict punishment, also seen as a symbol of warriors



**Fu** - dates from prehistoric times and may have been composed from the lines of the Eight Trigrams. It symbolizes the emperor's responsibility to create a happy nation.



**Bronze cups** - purity, impartiality, and filial piety (a Confucian concept)



**Water weed** - purity and adaptability to changing times

**Grain (not shown)** – symbolizing the emperor's responsibility to feed his people.



**Fire** – zeal, love of virtue, brilliance of spirit and intellect (a Buddhist concept)

## Symbols related to the Military and Civil Service Ranking System

To delineate rank among officials at court, the hereditary nobles of the 1st rank could not wear the sun, moon and stars, but could wear the remaining nine symbols of authority. Officials of the 2nd and 3rd ranks could not wear sun, moon and stars, and additionally, mountains and dragons, but could wear the remaining symbols of authority. The pecking order in embroidered embellishments on court robes followed suite for the remaining official rankings.

During the Ming Dynasty this ranking system evolved into more obvious identifiers for both military and civil service officials. Rank was marked by the button at the top of the hat, and embroidered patches sewn to the front and back of official court robes. Wives of both military and civil service officials wore similar patches to those of their husbands on formal occasions.

Rank	Color of Button	Military Patch	Civil Service Patch
1st	Red and gold	Unicorn	White Crane
2nd	Ruby, gold and coral	Lion	Gold Pheasant
3rd	Blue stone sapphire	Panther	Peacock
4th	Lapis lazuli	Tiger	Goose
5th	Crystal	Black Bear	Silver Pheasant
6th	White Jade	Mottled Bear	Egret
7th	Gold and crystal	Tiger	Mandarin Duck
8th	Gold	Seal	Quail
9th	Gold	Rhino	Flycatcher

## The Eight Precious Things

These symbols signify the spiritual attributes of the enlightened Buddha. They are often seen with ribbons (called fillets) either encircling them or weaving through the motif:



**Parasol (at left)** - nobility that sheds the heat of desire.



**Conch (at right)**- calls the people to prayer, also considered a symbol of royalty and victory, in modern symbology a prosperous voyage.



**Double Fish (at left)** - happiness and utility, wealth and abundance, yin and yang.



**Endless Knot (at right)** - longevity, the path to happiness that knows neither beginning nor end.



**Canopy (at left)** - respect, victory over religions.



**Vase (at right)** - believed to contain the elixir of heaven and immortality, the symbol of supreme intelligence



**Wheel of Chakra (at left)**- also known as the Dharma or Wheel of Law, the Buddhist teachings which lead a disciple to Nirvana



**Lotus (at right)** - divine purity, summer and fruitfulness (as on offspring). It is considered a sacred flower by Buddhists.

## The Eight Ordinary Objects

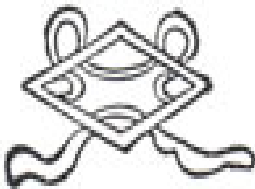
These objects are secular in nature though they may imply Confucian and Taoist concepts. They are commonly mixed in with the Eight Precious Things, and are also usually depicted with a red fillet, which is believed to add efficacy to them when used as charms:



**Pearl (at left)** - believed to be able to grant wishes to the holder. It is also a symbol of genius in obscurity. I believe this evolved into the Flaming Pearl, depicted as a treasure (or perhaps a virtue) chased by the Dragon.



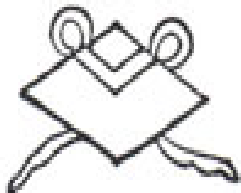
**Coin (at right)** - wealth, prosperity, protection for children when worn on a red cord.



**Lozenge (at left)** - an open lozenge, sometimes with an inner compartment, symbolizes victory.



**Pair of Books (at right)** - scholarly learning



**Painting (at left)** - a closed lozenge is used to symbolize art



**Stone chime (at right)** - honor, musical accomplishment



**Rhino Horns (at left)** - happiness



**Artemisia Leaf (at right)** - a plant of good omen and prevention of disease

## Common flora and fauna



**Plum blossoms** - beauty and winter. As the first flower to bloom after winter, it symbolizes courage and hope. It is also a symbol of longevity, due to a legend about an artist who nearly died of thirst while crossing a desert. In desperation, he painted a plum blossom so realistically, that every time he looked at it, his mouth watered, and it saved his life.

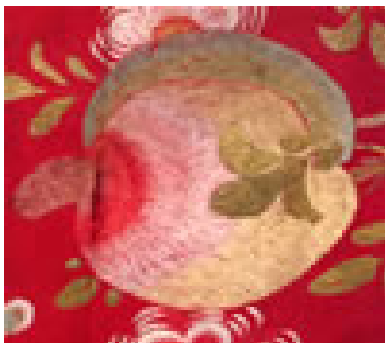
**Plum, Pine and Bamboo**, which all signify longevity, are often combined together as "the Three Friends".



**Peony (at left)** - wealth and spring, riches and honor, and respectability. It is also the symbol of masculine beauty.



**Chrysanthemum (at right)** - mid-autumn and pleasure, also the symbol of feminine beauty.



**Peach** - symbolic of marriage and immortality, figures prominently in the Monkey King stories.



**Butterfly** - joy, summer, marital bliss and fidelity.

The symbolism of the butterfly came from the story of Chuang Tzu, the philosopher who dreamed he was a butterfly, and found great joy in his dreams as he flitted from flower to flower, drinking sweet nectar. When he awoke, he wondered if he was a butterfly, dreaming that he was now a man. It's one of my favorite allegories...



**Lion** - valor and energy. Often shown playing with a ball or a flaming pearl, often mistaken for a fu-dog. Female lions are often shown with cubs.



**Bat** - the character for bat and happiness are both pronounced "fu". It is an especially auspicious symbol of joy when

depicted in red. Five bats joined in a circle, usually around a 'shou' character, signify the five great blessings of Happiness, Wealth, Peace, Virtue and Longevity.

## Color Symbolism and Usage

Colors used to create items for celebrations such as weddings, birthdays and New Year were rich, vibrant and in high contrast. Items embroidered for every day wear in metropolitan areas tended to be softer and more subdued.

Nomads tended towards brighter colors to offset the monochromatic hues of the landscape they lived in. By the Qing Dynasty, dyers had so perfected their art that records reflect the use of 88 colors, with 745 shades, which were especially useful for shading and color blending in both embroidery and weaving.

The Five Colors of the Universe each represented a direction, element and an animal. Specific colors and/or shades were reserved for specific military and civilian ranks during some dynastic rules in both China and Mongolia:

**Red** - *South, Fire, Phoenix* - was a sacred color in Mongolia, and the color of joy and festivals and weddings in China. Red could not be worn for 27 months after the death of a parent. Pinks, peach, apricot and purples were considered shades of red.

**Yellow** - *Center, Earth* - was a sacred color in both Mongolia and China and was reserved for monks and the Emperor. It is the color of measure and balance, eternal light and consummate harmony. Yellow clouds denote prosperity.

**Blue/green** - *East, Wood, Dragon* - blue was reserved for the Prime Minister during the Song Dynasty and was the color of royalty and 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree officials during the Ming Dynasty. Some pale greys and off-whites were categorized as blue or green. The Chinese character 'Qing' means both blue and green; for the sake of color symbolism the two colors are interchangeable.

**White** - *West, Metal, Tiger* - denotes moral purity. It was the color of joy and festival at court during the Yuan Dynasty, but became the color of mourning in



subsequent dynasties to present day. (*I theorize this is a result of the defeat of the Mongolian navy in its attempt to conquer Japan during the Yuan Dynasty.*)

**Black** - *North, Water, Tortoise, Snake* - the color of bruising, vice and evil, and seldom used as it is unpopular.

**Brown** was the color of royalty during the Song Dynasty. Thirty to fifty shades were in recorded use during the Yuan Dynasty.

**Gold and silver** were used to outline other motifs, with gold being the symbolic of greater wealth than silver.

## Sources

- The Art of Oriental Embroidery; Young Yang Chung, Ph.D.; Charles Scribner's Sons, New York
- Chinese Carpets and Rugs; Adolf Hackmack; Dover Publications, Inc., 1972
- Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motives; C.A.S. Williams; Charles E. Tuttle Co., Tokyo 1974