

AN INTERPRETATION OF AUSPICIOUS PATTERNS DECORATED ON CHINESE HISTORIC FURNITURE

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Abstract:

This paper has explored the kinds of motifs used to create and design the auspicious patterns on Chinese historic furniture, and explained the colorful meanings of these auspicious patterns according to the Chinese culture and customs. Through recognition and comprehension of these meanings, this paper can bring appreciation of the decorative arts from Chinese historic furniture and carry forward this material culture for future use.

Key words: chinese historic furniture; decorative arts; auspicious patterns.

INTRODUCTION

There are numerous carved or painted decorative patterns on Chinese folk historic furniture. This paper focuses on the auspicious patterns. Auspicious patterns are widely used one kind of popular decoration widely used on Chinese articles for daily use life such as bronze, ceramics, porcelain, metalwork, jades, ivory and rhinoceros horns, lacquer-ware, textile, and furniture (Chen 2001). According to the unique techniques of expression, auspicious patterns which include metaphor, analogy, pun, symbol, and euphony, the different motifs which range from imagery of people, animals, flowers, birds and wares to auspicious Chinese characters, proverbs, benedictions and fairy tales. These motifs have been combined together to form meaningful designs which met the demand of the user for happiness, peace, safety, longevity, wealth and honor. In China, this kind of ornamental designs with certain propitious meanings created in this way was called auspicious patterns. It originated from the Shang and Zhou dynasties, took shape in the Qin and Han dynasties, developed in the Tang and Song dynasties, and matured during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In the Qing dynasty, all designs must have a meaning and that meaning must be auspicious, this became the artisan's motto. A single pattern often contains a benediction for happiness or longevity, and can be seen in people's everyday life as well as on jubilant occasions.

As a culture and an art, the auspicious designs have been widely disseminated and admired in China for several thousand years. It is a lifelong pursuit for people to promote the good and repress the evil, avoid disasters, and prey for happiness. Auspicious patterns symbolizing these meanings such as peace and safety, good luck and happiness are inherited from one generation to generation (Clinas 1987). Over time, the contents and forms of auspicious designs have been developed to suit the taste of people in different periods. Furniture is utilitarian and therefore primarily functional, but it also reflects the social influences and tastes of different periods. These tastes being expressed by auspicious patterns represent an important part of the decorative arts in Chinese culture.

CHINESE AUSPICIOUS CHARACTERS TO EXPRESS "GOOD WISHES"

Stylized Chinese characters signifying good health and good fortune appear regularly on lacquer-ware and furniture. The character of 福 (happiness) is carved on door panels of furniture to pray for the arrival of happiness. The character of 寿 (longevity) is decorated on furniture surrounded by some other motifs, which wish the owner a life as long as "South Mountain" or enjoying both felicity and longevity. The character of 吉 means good, happy, and not disadvantageous, and the character of 祥 also means good, happy, and beneficial. The combination of the Chinese characters of 吉 and 祥 is believed to have come from the "Human World" of Chuang-tzu, a famous philosopher in the period of Warring states (475 BC—221BC) in

Chinese history. Cheng Xuanying, a scholar from the Tang Dynasty, explained: "吉 means something good and beneficial, and 祥 means an auspicious sign."



Fig. 1.
Five bats surrounding a character of 寿.

HOMONYMS USED TO CONVEY CERTAIN MEANINGS

For instance, bat (蝙蝠) is used to imply happiness (福), because the 蝠 is the homonym of 福 (happiness) in Chinese, so the design of bat is regarded as punning symbols of happiness (see Fig. 1) 鹿(deer), to mean 禄 (wealth); 金鱼 (goldfish), to represent 金玉 (gold and jade) (Fig. 2); 桂子 (laurel), to compare to 贵子(adorable son); 瓶(bottle), to represent 平 (peace) ; 穗 (wheat), to 岁 (year); 柿(the fruit of persimmon) (Fig. 3), to 事(thing or event); 钱 (money, to 前 (before) ; 梅(plum), to 眉 (eyebrow); and 馨 (a kind of traditional Chinese music instrument made of stone), to 庆 (celebration).



Fig. 2.
A board from Chinese furniture carved with a 馨 and two fishes.

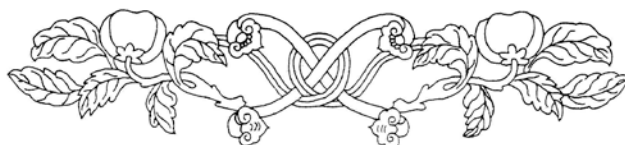


Fig. 3.
The design of Ru-yi (如意) and the fruit of persimmon.

CHINESE CHARACTER IN A PHRASE IS USED TO FORM A NEW PHRASE WITH AN AUSPICIOUS MEANING

For instance, 仙 of 水仙(narcissus)is used to form 群仙祝寿, a phrase meaning immortals offering birthday congratulations; 百 of 百合(lily)is used to form the phrase of 百年好合, meaning a happy union or marriage for one hundred years; 喜 of 喜鹊 is used to form the phrase of 喜上眉梢, literally happiness that appears on the eyebrows means happiness is coming (Fig. 4); and 天 of 天竹 (nandin) is used to form 天长地久, a phrase that means everlasting and unchanging; grey starling (白头翁) that forms the composition of 富贵白头 (Fig.5), meaning riches and honours that accompany one till one reaches old age; the two Chinese characters 鹤 and 鹿 are put together to form the phrase of 鹤鹿同春, symbolizing longevity and wealth that are full of vigor like the season of spring (Fig.5).



Fig. 4.
The pattern of magpies standing on the branch of flowering plum.



Fig. 5.
The pattern of grey starling (白头翁) and the peony.

MOTIFS USED AS METAPHORS OR SYMBOLS IN THE FORMATION OF AUSPICIOUS DESIGN

Plants are widely used in this aspect. The ginkgo tree symbolizes ancient civilization because the tree, known as a living fossil, can grow as long as several thousand years; Peony represents prosperity, wealth, and rank; azalea, home return; bamboo, uprightness and modesty; camellia, a combat hero; the sensitive plant, feelings of shyness; lotus, purity; chrysanthemum, mobility and cleanness; pomegranate, prosperous descendants; Olive branches are a symbol of peace; pine and cypress trees, staunchness and greatness; plum blossoms, firm and unyielding; lily flowers, unity and friendship; twin lotus flowers on one stalk, affectionate couple; "Flowers of the Twelve Months," are as follows, although this group varies in different parts of China: plum (梅花), *Prunus Mumei*, is the symbol of January; Peach Blossom (桃花), *Amygdalus persica*, is the symbol of February; peony (牡丹), *paonia Mutan*, is the symbol of March; cherry (樱桃), *Prunus Pseudocerasus*, is the symbol of April; magnolia (玉兰), *Magnolia Yulan*, is the symbol of May; pomegranate (石榴), *Punica granatum*, is the symbol of June; Lotus (莲花) (see Fig. 6), *Nelumbium speciosum*, is the symbol of July; pear (海棠), *Pyrus spectabilis*, is the symbol of August; mallow (锦葵), *Malva verticillata*, is the symbol of September; chrysanthemum (菊花), *C. indicum*, is the symbol of October; gardenia (栀子花), *Gardenia florida*, is the symbol of November; poppy (罂粟), *Papaver somniferum*, is the symbol of December. Narcissus (水仙) is supposed to confer good fortune for the next twelve months. It is called the Water Fairly flower in China. It is grown from bulbs in bowls filled with pebbles in water, and forced into bloom at the Chinese New Year. The 'Three Friends in the cold of the year', the pine, bamboo and plum, are the three plants which survive through the winter months (Pu 2001). The Chinese plum blossoms in December, so the pine tree, bamboo and plum blossoms are joined as "Three Durable Plants of Cold Winter," indicating people's unyielding and defiant characteristics; peach is the symbol of longevity etc.



Fig. 6.
Zi-tan wood throne with lotus flower carving.

Animals are also extensively used to form auspicious designs. To the Chinese, turtle, white crane, Chinese unicorn (see Fig.7), deer, dragon and phoenix are auspicious and benevolent. The turtle and white crane symbolized longevity in ancient China, as the saying goes like this: "the white crane lives a thousand years and the turtle ten thousand years". In auspicious designs, the turtle is often represented by the patterns on its back; Chinese unicorn symbolizes benevolence, mercy, and auspiciousness; the deer, prosperity and abundance; the dragon, authority and respect; the phoenix, good prospect; traditional auspicious dragon-phoenix designs are: "Dragon and Phoenix bringing prosperity," "Two Dragons playing with a pearl," (Fig.8) "Flying Dragon and dancing Phoenix" and "A couple of Phoenix singing in harmony." They are always seen at the wedding furniture as a wish for happiness in the couple's marriage. Besides these, the tiger represents the power of the dislodgement of evil spirits and guarding the house; the horse, force and speed; the ox, diligence and hardworking; the elephant, kindness, virtue, and uprightness; the sheep, propitiousness and prosperity; the bat, the arrival of happiness.

Birds are also symbolic in Chinese mythology of many attributes: the peacock drives away evil and is a symbol of dignity and beauty; the oriole is the bird of joy and music, and symbolizes friendship; besides these, the dove, peace and loyalty; the magpie, and approaching happy event, whilst the insects of the butterflies are symbolic of love, like Cupid in European mythology.



Fig. 7.
Chinese unicorn pattern on the splat of chair.



Fig. 8.
The carving pattern of two dragons disputing a pearl in imperial furniture.

SYMBOLS OR MOTIFS FROM TAOISM AND BUDDHISM

Taoism and Buddhism are the two main religions, which have influenced Chinese decorative arts throughout history. The woodwork of furniture is sculptured with sacred scenes and figures enclosed in scrolls of flowers, intermingled with the series of conventional emblems, which are related to the two religions. In Taoism the Eight Immortals are the symbols of longevity. The name of the Eight Immortals are: Han Zhong-li (汉钟离), Zhang Guo-lao (张果老), Han xiang-zi (韩湘子), Li Tie-guai (李铁拐), Cao Guo-jiu (曹国舅), Lan Cai-he (蓝采和), He Xian-gu (何仙姑), Lv Dong-bin (吕洞宾). In the Chinese arts, the properties of the Eight Immortals (Fig. 9) are fan, fish drum, flute, gourd, castanets, basket of flowers, lotus and sword (Zu 1989). These symbols have been endowed with auspicious meanings to decorate utensils, such as porcelain, lacquer-ware and furniture, etc.



Fig. 9.
The properties of the Eight Immortals.

The Taoists take the manifold floral emblems of longevity as their sacred plants, such as Ling-zhi fungus, and honeysuckle. Ling-zhi is the sacred branching fungus called the polyporus lucidus of botanists, distinguished by its brightly variegated colours and by its durability (Fig. 10). This was regarded as both an emblem of good luck and a Taoist emblem of immortality; the Ru-yi symbol conveys (Fig. 3) the idea “as you wish”, or “in accordance with your heart’s desire”. Its shape is derived from the head of the Ling-zhi fungus; and the honeysuckle is the symbol of good luck and propitious omen. Two supernatural animals, the dragon-headed horse (龙马), and the divine tortoise (神龟), are also used in Taoism to express auspicious meanings whilst the crane (鹤) is the symbol of longevity (Tilden 1997).



Fig. 10.
The carving pattern of Ling-zhi on the side panel.

Buddhist patterns also have a long history, the introduction of Buddhism in the period of Northern and Southern dynasties (420AD -581AD) had a profound and far-reaching influence on the glyptic art of China. The art of Buddha sculpture in China had been born, cherished, and developed in the service of religion. Buddhist and Taoist shrines are lavishly decorated from end to end, and the demand for idols and images, for the home as well as the temple, gives occupation to a special class of workmen known as carver throughout the country (Soame et al. 1963).

The lotus, a rose-colored variety of the *Nelumbium speciosum* is sacred to Buddhism. It is the hieratic emblem of purity as it develops its delicious jade-white rhizome under the mud and lifts its rosy blossoms unsullied in the air. The happy entrant into paradise is seated upon lotus's broad thalamus; it therefore forms the resting-place of Buddha. Its peltate leaves are usually gemmed after every shower with sparkling rain drops, which are taken by the devout Buddhist as emblematic jewels of his enlightenment; the motif of lotus, intertwined with another water plant with berried fruit, is pleasingly carved on furniture. Furthermore, the religious motifs of Buddhist eight treasures: wheels, shells, umbrellas, canopies, flowers, jars, fish, and ribbons are also decorated on furniture.

The lion is the symbol of dignity, power and jubilation in Buddhism, often seen in pairs flanking a palace gate or a garden gate. Made of bronze or stone, the male lion squats on the left, with one of its front legs stepping on a ball, and the female on the right stroking a cub (Fig. 11). The former symbolizes power, unification and universality, and the latter fertility. The lion as guardian originated from Buddhism. Later, the

lion came to be regarded as a divine guarding animal, so the pair of lions in front of a palace gate is also meant to drive away evil forces; it is also a common motif found as decoration on furniture.



Fig. 11.
The male lion on the left and female lion is on the right.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the auspicious designs composed of Chinese characters, animals, and plants are works of high artistic quality, with a perceived healthy content. They were created by Chinese artisans who were able to project their wisdom and rich imagination. They express aspirations of the people and embody the artistic conception and a taste of the true, the good, and the beautiful in life. With a novel conception and superb techniques of expression, the concise designs are imbued with a profound connotation gladdening the mind and pleasing to the eye. They help people find spiritual sustenance, draw enlightenment, and obtain a sublimation of vitality. Contemporaneous Chinese auspicious patterns have not only been enriched and improved but have also been subject to bold innovations. The resulting forms of expression allow the continuance of auspicious designs, as a time-honored culture, continuing to elevate the symbolic status of this Chinese tradition.

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