

THE CHINA SOCIETY

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SYMBOLISM IN CHINESE ART

BY

W. PERCEVAL YETTS

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[Read before the Society on January, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1912]

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

One of the most distinctive and striking features of Chinese Art is the symbolic character of its expression.

From the earliest times the Chinese artist has exerted his skill with the intention of producing not merely objects pleasing to the eye, but at the same time emblems conveying a definite meaning.

Another essential feature is adherence to ancient types; and hence it follows that to understand Chinese symbolism our study must be largely retrospective. Unfortunately there exist but scanty data for investigating the origins of the national Art. The remnants of a once voluminous classical literature afford us very meagre information, and, owing to the insubstantial nature of Chinese building, few architectural monuments of extreme age survive to the present day. Happily we do possess some examples of culture which date back to a remote period of Chinese history, and help to illuminate the dim past of this the oldest existing civilization.

I refer in the first place to the bronze vessels and bells that archaeologists assign to the time of the Shang and Chou dynasties, i. e. B. C. 1766-249. There seems little doubt that here we find the national art in its primitive stage, and perhaps also in its most characteristic stage, because as yet unmodified by foreign influences.

Second in importance only to the bronzes must be classed

the carved and inscribed fragments of bone and tortoise shell discovered about a dozen years ago buried in the north of Honan. These fragments number several thousands, and are considered by competent authorities to date from a period certainly not later than the Chou (B. C. 1122-249). We shall see that the few of them that are decorated show designs identical with those found on the early bronzes.

During the Chou period national life and culture reached a high pitch of development. Traditions handed down in the old historical records formed a basis for the evolution of ceremonial and art. However, this state of things did not long survive the ruin of the house of Chou, for soon after the self-styled First Emperor (3<sup>rd</sup> century B. C.) established himself on the throne, he sought to destroy the people's veneration for the past. Obsessed by vanity, this tyrant innovator attempted to wipe out all evidence of culture anterior to his own reign. Not only the classical literature but also the bronzes came under his ban, and possessors of these precious relics of the past were obliged to conceal them as best they could in order to save them from destruction.

From time to time during the succeeding centuries hidden bronzes were discovered, and as each came to light it was considered a happy omen of great importance, and the event was duly chronicled in the national annals as a sacred prodigy. Gradually a critical study of ancient bronze developed, and in A. D. 1092 an illustrated book on the subject was published. Some 15 years later there appeared the famous classic on bronzes, the *Po-ku-t'u* 博古圖. It contains over 900 illustrations, and, besides, a text full of most valuable information concerning the symbolic meaning of various forms of ornament.

The compiler of this work, Wang Fu 王黼 by name, was an archaeologist and art critic of repute, and his opinions may be accepted as embodying the most reliable traditions



of his day. I propose, therefore, to follow his explanation of designs decorating the early bronzes, and I should like to take this opportunity of acknowledging the valuable advice kindly given to me by Mr. Lionel Giles in the translation of several difficult passages of the *Po-ku-t'u*.

The simplest ornament and the one most frequently met with not only in ancient but also in modern art is that commonly known as the meander or key-pattern. The Chinese call it "cloud and thunder pattern" 雲雷紋 or simply the "thunder pattern" 雷紋. As the author of the *Po-ku-t'u* points out, this design was evolved from archaic pictographs representing clouds and thunder (see Fig. 1). The meander in its primitive form, such as found on the bronzes attributed to the Shang period, consists of a non-continuous pattern formed by separate pairs of the simple spiral figure. Later the separate elements became joined together and elaborated, till in the course of time the "thunder pattern" was often represented by a most intricate form of decoration. To an agricultural people such as the Chinese this emblem possessed a significance of supreme importance. Rain was essential to their very existence, and the symbol for thunder typified the down-pour that brought the heaven-sent gift of abundance.

Knowing this, it is possible for us to appreciate the eulogistic remarks made by Wang Fu concerning a certain bronze caldron of the Chou dynasty, which to the uninitiated might appear commonplace and even ugly (Fig. 11). He says in the course of his description — "The lozenge-shaped spaces are occupied by the 'cloud and thunder pattern' surrounding a small nipple in the centre. For the nipple nourishes mankind, while clouds and thunder fertilise growing things. The *k'uei* 夔 dragon, moreover, exerts a restraining influence against the sin of greed. Here we have but a single vessel, yet all the eternal principles are there complete! How excellent was the philosophy of the ancients!"

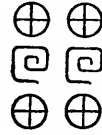
雲  
CLOUD

雷  
THUNDER

"ANCIENT SCRIPT" 古文  
FORMS OF THE  
CHARACTERS FOR  
"CLOUD" AND "THUNDER"




From the  
dictionary  
*Shuo wên*.




From  
*Shuo wên*.



Cited in *Shuo wên*  
*ku chou pu*, II, 65.  
Also found in an in-  
scription on a Chou vessel re-  
produced in a Japanese publica-  
tion, *Collection of Chinese Bronze*  
*Antiques*.

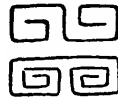
NOTE.— In *Shuo wên* 

is given as the "ancient script"  
form of  "to revolve".

PRIMITIVE ORNAMENT  
TAKEN FROM SHANG  
AND CHOU BRONZES  
AND FROM THE HONAN  
CARVED BONES



Identified with 雷  
in *Po ku t'u*, V, 8.



MEANDERS OF  
THE CHOU PERIOD



On a carved bone from  
the collection of Mr. L.  
C. Hopkins.



From *Po ku*  
*t'u*, VII, 23.

MODERN MEANDER

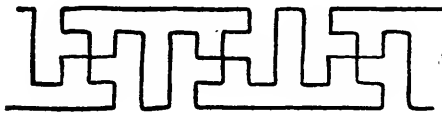


Fig. I. Table to explain the evolution of the Chinese meander.

## NOTE TO FIG. I.

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As Dr. Hirth first pointed out, the recognition by Chinese archaeologists of the pictographic origin of the meander goes back to early times. (See *Über den Mäander und das Triquetrum in der Chinesischen und Japanischen Ornamentik.*) For proof he quotes a book that appeared some fifty years before the *Po-ku-t'u*. From this passage Dr. Hirth infers that, though the symbolic meaning of the meander had never been forgotten, the derivation of the pattern from ancient characters had been lost sight of and was rediscovered about the middle of the eleventh century.


There seems no doubt that the "thunder" element in the meander was evolved chiefly from forms symbolising the rolling or reverberating quality of thunder. In a letter to the present writer Mr. L. C. Hopkins says,

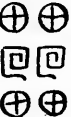
"Strictly speaking,  and  are the early forms of  *hui*, to

revolve, and when alone do not represent the word *lei*, thunder, though used decoratively they may have symbolised it. I believe the true early character

for *lei*, was three (or four) wheels  (wrongly supposed by many Chinese

to be  *t'ien*, fields) with or without the zigzag for the lightning flash. I imagine the wheel was adopted to symbolise the rolling of thunder, and

that later, to make assurance doubly sure, the character  *hui*, was

added, as for example in the character  ."

The dragon referred to is represented in a conventional manner, but in the next illustration it appears in a more realistic and terrifying form (Fig. III). We see besides two other symbols designed to carry out the same mission as the *k'uei* dragon. They are the hideous mask of a creature called the *t'ao-t'ieh* 饕餮 and a pattern representing the

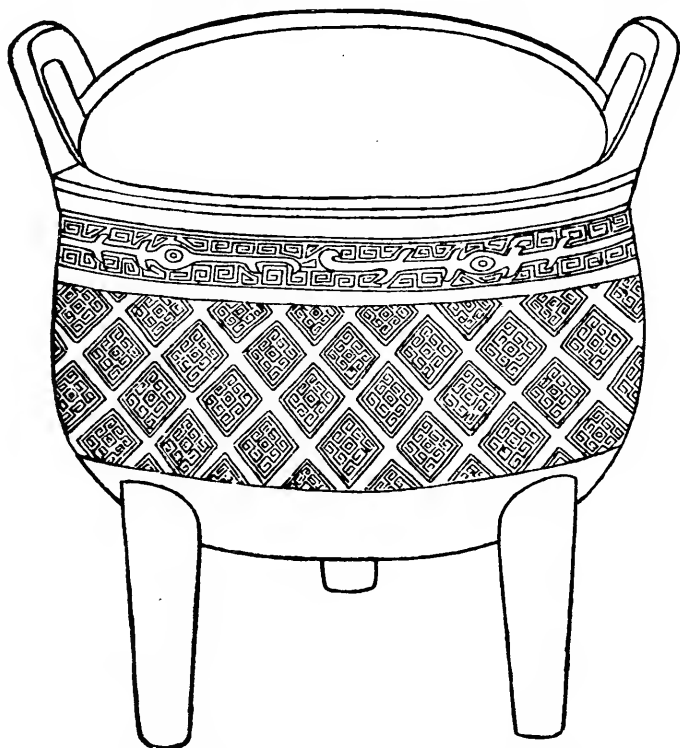


Fig. II. Caldron of the Chou period (from *Po-ku-t'u*).

cicada. As is usual, the meander is employed to fill up the intervening spaces.

The name *t'ao-t'ieh* has been translated by Dr. Legge as "glutton". Much might be said about this curious figure, but time does not permit of more than a statement that it represents no specific individual or animal, but merely stands for an embodiment of and a warning against the vices of sensuality and avarice.

It is more easy to recognise the cicada 蟬 in this cloisonné

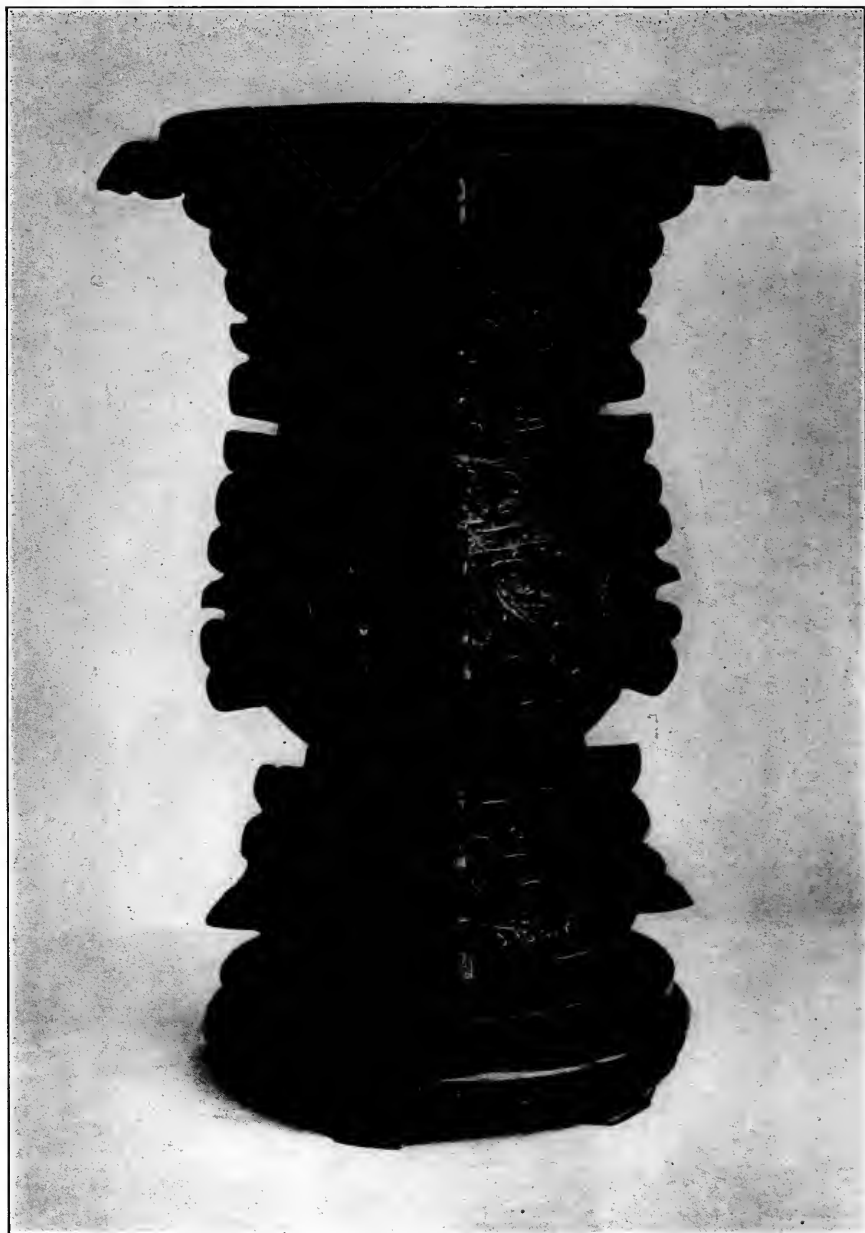


Fig. III. Bronze sacrificial wine vessel of ancient type.  
(Property of Capt. Evans, R. A.)

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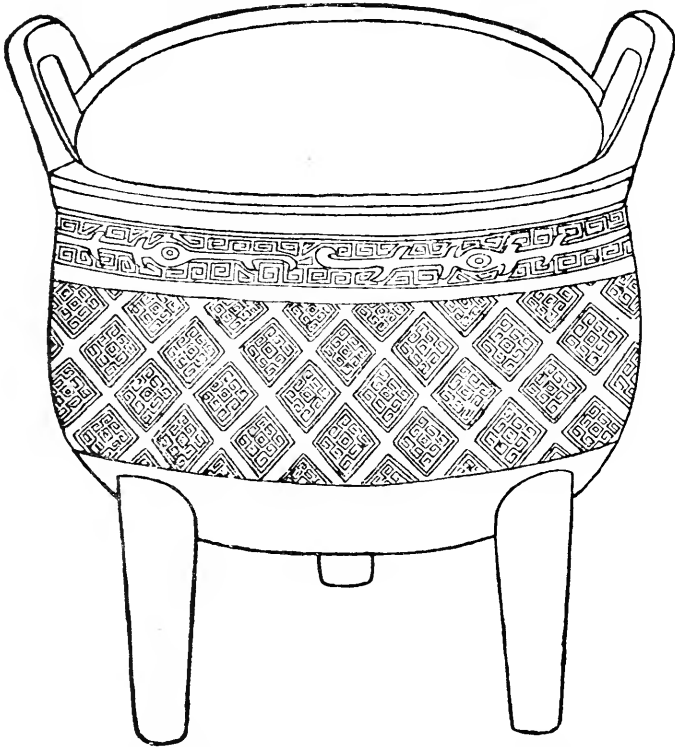


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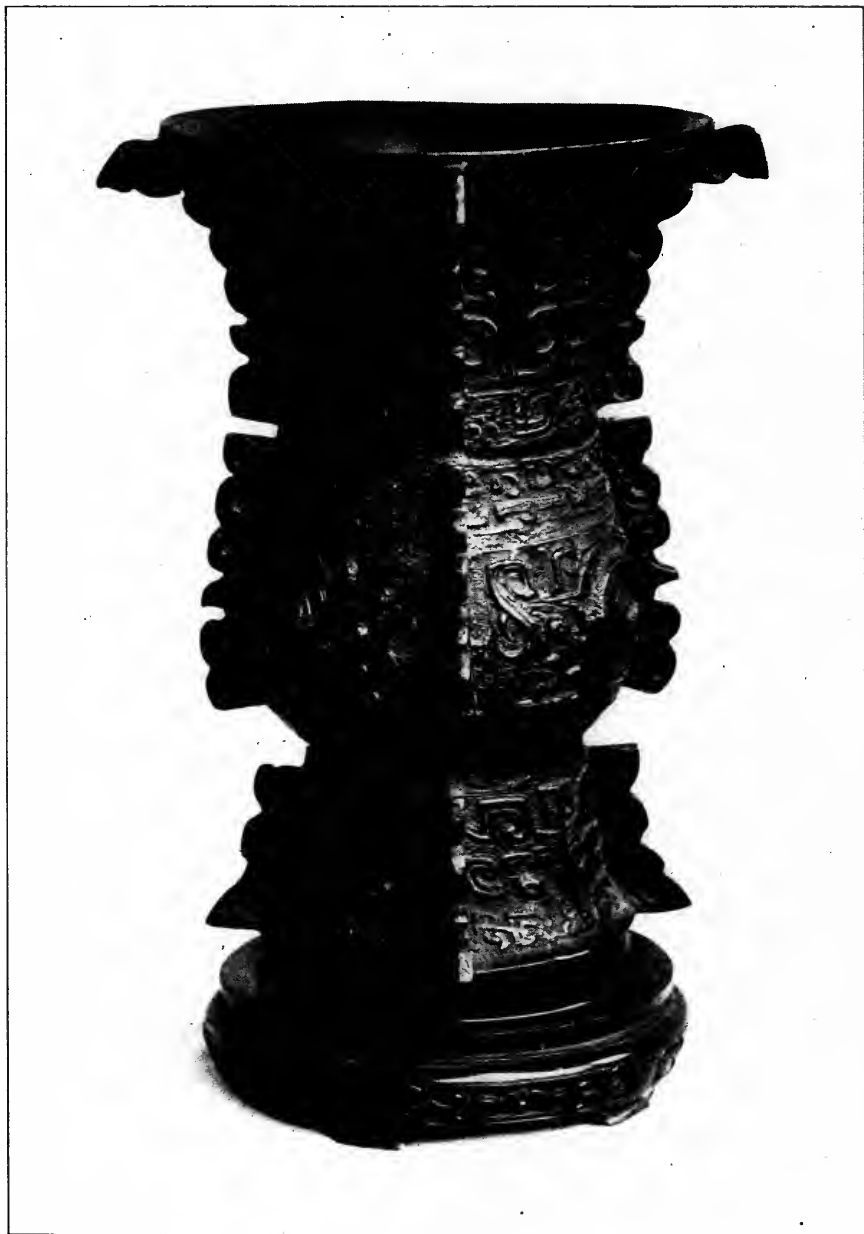


Fig. III. Bronze sacrificial wine vessel of ancient type.  
(Property of Capt. Evans, R. A.)



Fig. IV. Cloisonné censer.  
(Victoria & Albert Museum.)

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censer of comparatively modern date (Fig. iv). The *Po-ku-t'u* says of the cicada that "tiny creature though it be, it may nevertheless serve to illustrate great ideas, signifying as it does the restraint of cupidity and vice." An ornament as ancient yet not so common as those already described is that known as the "fish" 魚紋 or "fish-scale pattern" 鱗紋. It is well shown in the celebrated caldron preserved in the monastery on Silver Island near Chinkiang. Much antiquarian literature has been devoted to this famous vessel. It possesses an interesting inscription of which Dr. Bushell published a translation together with a picture of the caldron in his well known book on Chinese Art. The inscription seems to indicate that its date is not later than about 800 B. C.

Again we turn to the *Po-ku-t'u* for an explanation, and we find that fish are compared to a king's subjects, and the art of angling to that of ruling. An unskilled angler will catch no fish, nor will a tactless prince win over his people.

These few examples I have shown may be taken as typical of the early bronzes. Examination of a large number proves that the range of decorative motives employed by the ancient Chinese was limited. It is difficult to find any ornamented bronze of great antiquity that does not bear one or more of the three commonest symbolic forms, viz. the meander, the *t'ao-t'ieh*, and the primitive dragon. This repetition would be monotonous did they not recur in endless variations and combinations.

Less commonly met with are a number of other figures which I have not yet mentioned. For instance, there is the "recumbent silkworm" 臥蠶, which perhaps alludes to an ancient national industry, and also various representations of thunder which differ from the meander. There are besides a vast number of animal forms which it is impossible to consider here in detail. The significance of some that appear on sacrificial vessels was to indicate the kind of meat



Fig. IV. Cloisonné censer.  
(Victoria & Albert Museum.)

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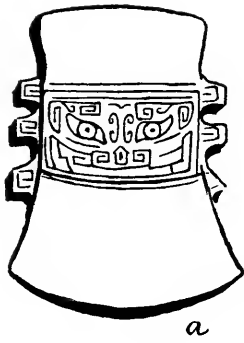
for which the utensil was intended in the ritual worship of ancestors.

As is well known, reproduction of ancient objects has continued to the present day. They are manufactured not for purposes of deception, but to satisfy the demand for mementos of an antiquity of which the nation is justly proud. Many exact copies in bronze or porcelain are still made of the earliest specimens of national art, and often designs of 3,000 years ago may be found applied to objects of comparatively modern type. It must be remembered, too, that many of these replicas of ancient sacrificial vessels have been made since the first century B. C. to act as censers for the aromatic substances first imported about that time.

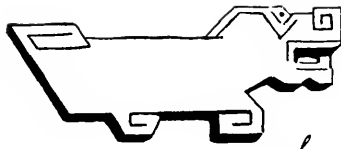
Some sceptics have challenged the antiquity of the designs which I have described as forming the basis of indigenous Chinese Art. To meet these doubts I would advance the fresh evidence afforded by many bone objects forming part of the recent discovery in Honan. Nearly all these carved bones are inscribed with archaic characters, and we have the authority of Mr. L. C. Hopkins for assigning them on epigraphic grounds to a period not later than that of the Chou dynasty. My thanks are due to Mr. Hopkins for the opportunity of making drawings of a representative group of these important relics (Fig. v), the full ethnological significance of which remains to be determined.

Possibly some of them represent insignia of rank, or else they may belong to the category of "Marvellous Objects of Good Augury" such as are figured in the famous Shantung sculptures of the second century A. D. Some we will leave to consider later with the rebus type of symbols. Others bear the same designs we saw decorating the bronzes. Here are the *t'ao-t'ieh*, *k'uei* dragon, meander, and "recumbent silk-worm". Also we find the tortoise, tiger or leopard, and fish (see Note, Fig. v).

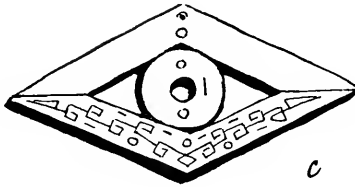




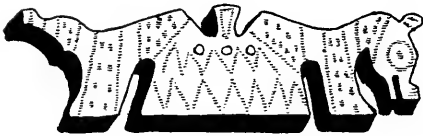
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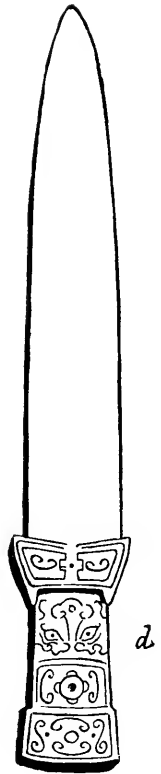
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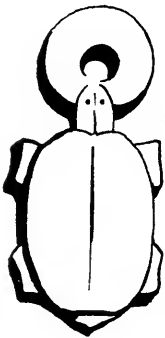
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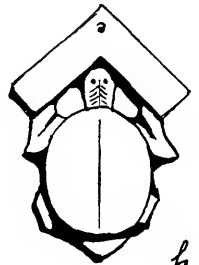
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h

SCALE  
ONE INCH

W. PERCEVAL YETTS  
del.

Fig. V. Carved and ornamented bone objects of the Chou period.  
(From the collection of Mr. L. C. Hopkins.)

## NOTE TO FIG. V.

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This group is selected from a large number of carved bone objects which formed part of the collection discovered in Honan. They are covered, except on the decorated parts, with incised characters of the type characteristic of the Chou period. These characters are omitted in Fig. v, since they do not help to illustrate our subject.

- a. A flat bone carved in the shape of a sacrificial wine vessel, and, like most ancient bronzes, decorated with a *t'ao-t'ieh* mask.
  - b. A grotesque animal. It can be identified from its resemblance to figures described as *k'uei* dragons in the works on ancient bronze.
  - c. Probably an amulet in rebus form. Two musical stones (*ch'ing*) are joined with a disc (*pi*) between them, the three together meaning, "May doubled good fortune certainly be attained" (see p. 27). The lower *ch'ing* is decorated with what probably is one of the earliest known examples of the primitive continuous meander.
  - d. Model of a two-edged sword. The hilt is ornamented with a *t'ao-t'ieh* and several examples of the "recumbent silkworm". It is interesting to note that this model bears a close resemblance to a sword of the Chou period pictured in the well-known catalogue, *Hsi ch'ing ku chien*, XXXVIII, 5.
  - e. This carving probably represented the heads and fore quarters of two tigers or leopards. One head has been broken off. The bone is stained green and the markings are painted on in reddish brown. Its shape and the presence of holes in its lower edge suggest that it may have been a handle fixed to the lid of some vessel.
  - f, g, h. Amulets of the rebus type as explained in the text (see p. 27). It should be remarked that g is probably one of the oldest extant examples of a very common Chinese symbol, the "couple of fish" 雙魚.
-

If we are to believe classical literature, the arts of weaving and embroidering silk are quite as old if not older than any practised in ancient China. Unfortunately there are no known examples extant older than about the sixth century A.D.

Many of the designs still used to decorate textile fabrics must date back to very remote antiquity. Among the earliest is a group of symbols known as the "Twelve Ornaments" 十二章 (Fig. VI). According to the *Shu-ching* they were

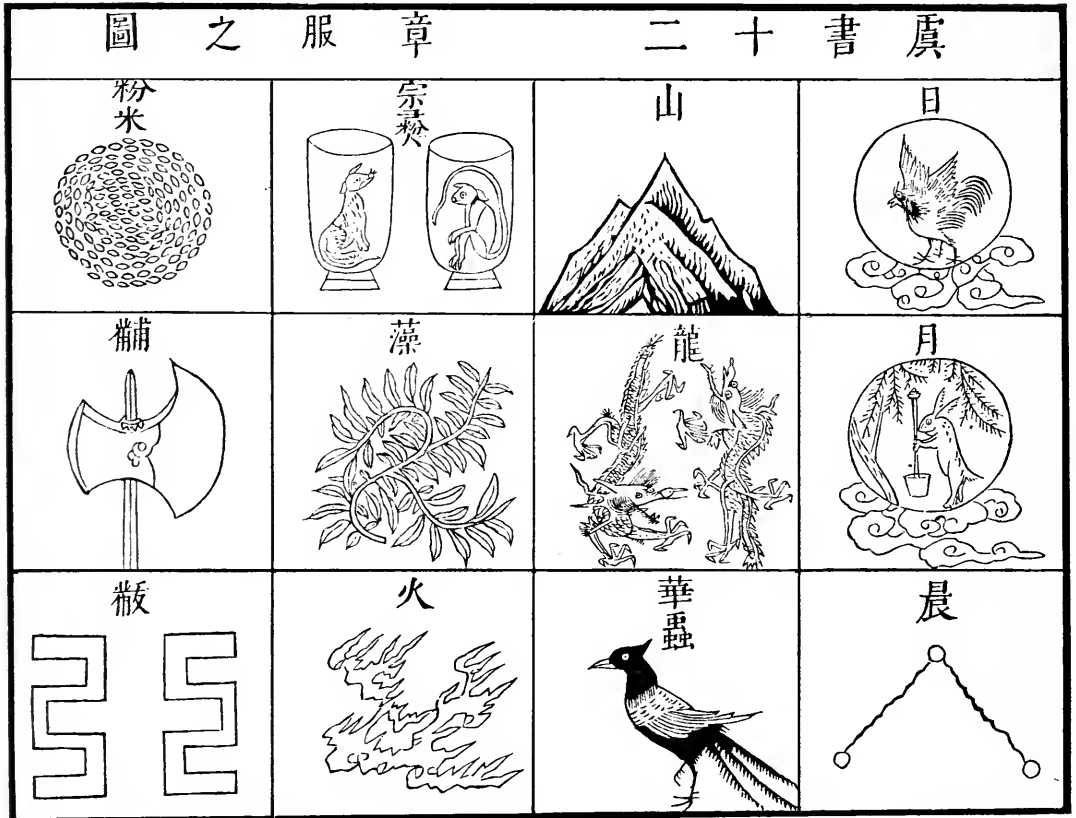


Fig. VI. The Twelve Ornaments (from *San ts'ai fu hui*, Section on Dress).

referred to by the Emperor Shun 舜 as being ancient even at that distant date — more than 2,000 B. C. The passage as translated by Dr. Legge runs thus: — "I wish to see the emblematic figures of the ancients, — the sun, the moon, the stars, the mountain, the dragon, and the flowery



fowl, which are depicted *on the upper garment*; the temple-cup, the aquatic grass, the flames, the grains of rice, the hatchet, and the symbol of distinction, which are embroidered *on the lower garment*: — *I wish to see all these displayed with the five colours, so as to form the official robes; it is yours to adjust them clearly.* (*Chinese Classics*, Vol. III, Pt. I, p. 80).

Only the Emperor had the right to wear the complete set of twelve painted or embroidered on his sacrificial robes. The nobles were restricted to the use of certain of the symbols according to their rank. These archaic figures still decorate state vestments, and some of them are often found on porcelain and on other works of art. The two *fu* are among the commonest. The axe 黼 may be taken as the emblem of a warrior, but the original meaning of the other 黻 is doubtful. It is used at the present day to signify "embroidered".

Many of the fundamental inventions of Chinese civilization are attributed to the legendary Yellow Emperor who is supposed to have reigned two and a half millennia B. C., and included among his reputed achievements is the institution of a systematic study of astronomy. At any rate we know that the division of the celestial sphere into twenty-eight constellations was conceived more than 3,000 years ago, for it is mentioned in the *Chou Ritual*.

The character 宿 used for these constellations is taken to mean the "mansions" or "resting-places" of the sun and moon in their revolutions. Seven of these stellar "mansions" were allotted to each of the four quadrants of the vault of heaven. The quadrants were associated with four animals (often called the "Four Supernatural Creatures" 四神) which, as we all know, maintain their importance and exert an influence over national life to the present day, especially in the domain of geomancy. They are represented with considerable artistic merit on this bronze mirror (Fig. VII).

The "Azure Dragon" 青龍 presides over the eastern quarter, the "Vermilion Bird" 朱鳥 (i. e. the Chinese phoenix) over the southern, the "White Tiger" 白虎 over the western and the "Black Warrior" 玄武 (i. e. the tortoise) over the northern (see Fig. XIII). From an analogy between a day and a year, it can be understood how these animals further



Fig. VII. Mirror of the T'ang period, A. D. 618-905. (From *Hsi ch'ing ku chien*).

symbolised the four seasons. The morning sun is in the east, which hence corresponds to Spring; at noon it is south, which suggests Summer. By similar parallelism the west corresponds to Autumn, and the north to Winter.

A consideration of the primitive age of Chinese Art would be incomplete without mention of the familiar set of symbols called the *pa-kua* 八卦. This group is constantly employed

as a decoration, and perhaps it surpasses in antiquity all other designs. Legend dates its origin about 5,000 years ago, when it was revealed to the mythical Fu Hsi 伏羲 by markings on the back of a creature called a "dragon-horse" 龍馬.

The *pa-kua* formed the basis of ancient philosophy and divination. They are represented on both sides of this amulet (Fig. VIII). The centre is occupied by a circular



Fig. VIII. Amulet bearing the "Eight Trigrams" and the common felicitous phrase, "Happiness as the Eastern Sea; Longevity like the Southern Mountain."

figure used to symbolise the "Great Ultimate Principle" 太極 or "Source of Existence". It is divided into the "Two Regulating Powers" 兩儀, the *yang* 陽 and the *yin* 陰, which together create all the phenomena of Nature. Around the central emblem are grouped the eight trigrams themselves, composed of unbroken and broken lines. The former stand essentially for the *yang*, the latter for the *yin*. Hence the three whole lines, (called *ch'ien* 乾), correspond to the unalloyed *yang* or male principle, and thus to heaven and creative power; while the three broken ones, (called *k'un* 坤) correspond to the *yin* or female principle, and so to terrestrial matter and productiveness.

From the *pa-kua* as a starting-point the imaginative ingenuity of sages evolved an endless series of permutations

and combinations of linear figures, which were supposed to provide a clue to the mysteries of Nature.

So far we have had to deal with an indigenous growth, but now we come to an age of foreign influences that so added to and modified native traditions that it may be said to have brought about a renaissance of Chinese Art.

Under the great Han dynasty, which reigned for about two centuries before and two centuries after Christ, the barriers were broken down that had hitherto isolated the Middle Kingdom from the rest of the world. No doubt some intercourse of a commercial kind with outside nations had taken place before 126 B. C., but that was the date when regular communication with the West was first established. In that year the famous minister Chang Ch'ien 張騫 returned from his mission to the Indo-Scythians, and brought back with him much alien knowledge collected during his travels. He had learnt something of Buddhism and had come in touch with Grecian culture. He also carried back to China several plants, of which the grape-vine and pomegranate are most important for our purpose. Thus we see that foreign civilization first made its influence felt through the channels of trade and diplomacy.

Since the beginning of our era this transmission of ideas was aided by a still more potent agency — that of religion. Missionaries of Christianity (Syrian and European), of Manichéism, of Islam, and — above all in importance — of Buddhism, received a welcome in China, where they inevitably became apostles not only of their respective creeds but also of their national culture.

Buddhism was not firmly established in China till A. D. 67, and for several centuries made no great headway. A revival took place about the middle of the fifth century and the whole country was flooded with examples of Buddhistic Art. Most important remains belonging to this and to several following centuries have been excavated in Eastern





Fig. IX. Blue and white porcelain dish decorated with the "Eight Lucky Emblems" and the conventional lotus design.

(Author's Collection.)

Turkestan during the last twenty years. These discoveries, in connection with which the name of Dr. Stein is familiar, viewed together with the results of Prof. Chavannes' recent archaeological survey in Northern China, demonstrate in the clearest manner the transmission of ancient Mediterranean Art to the Far East *via* Assyria, Persia, Bactria, Gāndhāra and Turkestan.

An image found by Prof. Chavannes in one of the grottos at Yün-kang 雲岡 in Shansi illustrates to what an extraordinary extent the practice of indiscriminately copying Greek models existed at the time of the great Buddhist revival. This figure is endowed with attributes of no less than three distinct deities. The *thyrsus* of Dionysus is held in its right hand, the trident of Poseidon in its left, while the winged *petasus* of Hermes crowns its head. (See *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, Plate 117.)

Thus we see that Buddhism not only introduced a whole world of alien mythology which for centuries provided a favourite theme for Chinese painters, sculptors, and designers in every branch of Art, but it also directed the very expression of these new ideas along the lines of Western tradition. To the present day Greco-Indian and Persian elements are found mingled with the purely native decoration.

Perhaps no symbols are more often employed by the Chinese artist than those called the "Eight Lucky Emblems" 八吉祥, a group taken mainly from the numerous objects supposed to have figured on the sole of the Buddha's foot. They form the chief decoration on the back of this dish (Fig. 1x).

At the top is the canopy, an attribute of royalty. Next, surrounded with flames, is the "Wheel of the Law", which heralds the coming of a Chakravarti or Universal Monarch. Sometimes the wheel is replaced by a large bell such as is used in Buddhist temples. Next comes a state umbrella employed throughout the East as a symbol of high rank.

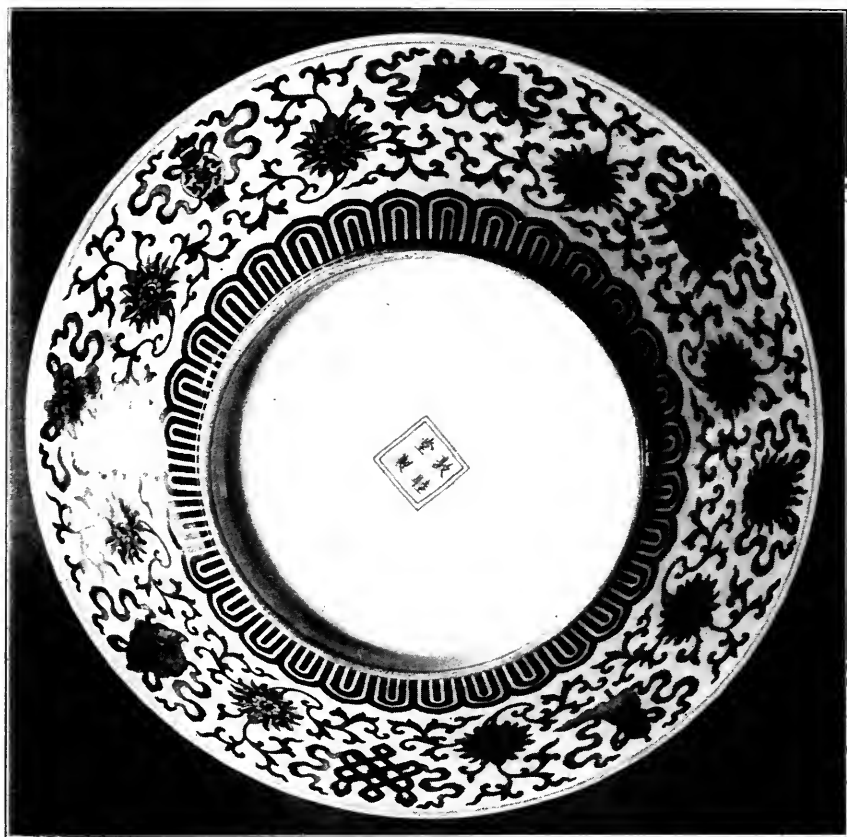


Fig. IX. Blue and white porcelain dish decorated with the "Eight Lucky Emblems" and the conventional lotus design.

(Author's Collection.)



Turkestan during the last twenty years. These discoveries, in connection with which the name of Dr. Stein is familiar, viewed together with the results of Prof. Chavannes' recent archaeological survey in Northern China, demonstrate in the clearest manner the transmission of ancient Mediterranean Art to the Far East *via* Assyria, Persia, Bactria, Gāndhāra and Turkestan.

An image found by Prof. Chavannes in one of the grottos at Yün-kang 雲岡 in Shansi illustrates to what an extraordinary extent the practice of indiscriminately copying Greek models existed at the time of the great Buddhist revival. This figure is endowed with attributes of no less than three distinct deities. The *thyrsus* of Dionysus is held in its right hand, the trident of Poseidon in its left, while the winged *petasus* of Hermes crowns its head. (See *Mission Archéologique dans la Chine Septentrionale*, Plate 117.)

Thus we see that Buddhism not only introduced a whole world of alien mythology which for centuries provided a favourite theme for Chinese painters, sculptors, and designers in every branch of Art, but it also directed the very expression of these new ideas along the lines of Western tradition. To the present day Greco-Indian and Persian elements are found mingled with the purely native decoration.

Perhaps no symbols are more often employed by the Chinese artist than those called the "Eight Lucky Emblems" 八吉祥, a group taken mainly from the numerous objects supposed to have figured on the sole of the Buddha's foot. They form the chief decoration on the back of this dish (Fig. 1x).

At the top is the canopy, an attribute of royalty. Next, surrounded with flames, is the "Wheel of the Law", which heralds the coming of a Chakravarti or Universal Monarch. Sometimes the wheel is replaced by a large bell such as is used in Buddhist temples. Next comes a state umbrella employed throughout the East as a symbol of high rank.

The so-called endless knot is taken to be an emblem of longevity, though it was probably derived from the mystic sign of Vishnu. The conch is used as a wind instrument at religious festivals; it is also one of the insignia of royalty. Here is the familiar sacred lotus, and here the jar used for containing relics. We find the Buddhist fish has taken on the guise of a very ancient Chinese symbol — a pair of fishes representing marriage and hence fertility.

The Han period was remarkable for another religious impulse which profoundly modified national art. I refer to Taoism, a religion supposed to have been founded by the sage Lao Tzŭ 老子 about the seventh century B. C.

However lofty and spiritual the original teaching of this philosopher may have been, the doctrine of *Tao* 道 did not survive many generations before it sank to the level of mere materialism. The promise of a blissful immortality to be attained after a life of virtue and self-sacrifice suggested the artificial prolongation of earthly existence. Under the cloak of Taoism charlatans multiplied who pandered to the popular longing. Alchemists declared that cinnabar was transmutable into gold, and that immortality might be gained by eating and drinking out of vessels made of gold thus produced.

Further, it was believed that "Three Isles of the Blest" 三仙山 existed in the Eastern Sea opposite the coast of China. In these supposed abodes of immortals the sacred fungus (*ling-chih* 靈芝) grew, and wine flowed from a fountain of jade. Whoso ate and drank of them attained eternal life.

Just before the Han period the famous "First Emperor" despatched an expedition of several thousand boys and girls to search for these marvellous islands. Less than a century later, under the Han Emperor Wu, another mission set out with the same purpose, and the Emperor himself travelled to the coast hoping to catch a glimpse of the islands in the far distance.





Fig. X. Bronze hill-censer of the Han period.

(Victoria & Albert Museum.)





Fig. XI. Brocade.

(Victoria & Albert Museum.)

About this time (i. e. the first and second centuries B. C.) was first made the type of censer called *po-shan-lu* 博山鑪. In a learned essay Mr. Berthold Laufer has shown that a hill-censer such as this (Fig. x) probably represents one of the "Isles of the Blest" rising out of the sea, which is typified by the large open dish at its base. (See *Chinese Pottery of the Han Dynasty*, pp. 174-198).

Later these island abodes of Immortals and the marvels they contained became a favourite theme for artists and poets, who delighted in portraying a mysterious world of fantastic palaces, set in romantic scenery and peopled with members of the Taoist mythology.

The acquisition of an extensive pantheon was another materialistic feature of later Taoism. In order to compete successfully with Confucianism and Buddhism the votaries of the church of *Tao* during the early centuries of our era found it necessary not only to adopt favourite deities of the two rival systems, but also to canonise many of their own celebrities.

Though it is outside my subject to go into questions of mythology, mention must be made of a group known as the *pa-hsien* 八仙 or "Eight Immortals", because their attributes are very commonly employed in all forms of decoration. In this piece of brocade four members of the group are represented by their emblems — a pair of castanets, a crutch and a pilgrim's gourd, a magic sword, and a lotus bloom (Fig. xi). The remaining attributes comprise a fan, a bamboo tube and rods, a flute, and a basket of flowers. Without going into the meaning of each one separately, it is sufficient to state that they symbolise Taoistic principles. The cult of immortality led to a number of objects being used as emblems of longevity. In the same piece of brocade we find a vase containing sacred fungus, narcissus flowers 水仙花, bamboo twigs, and a bunch of peaches. Several of these serve separately to typify immortality, but

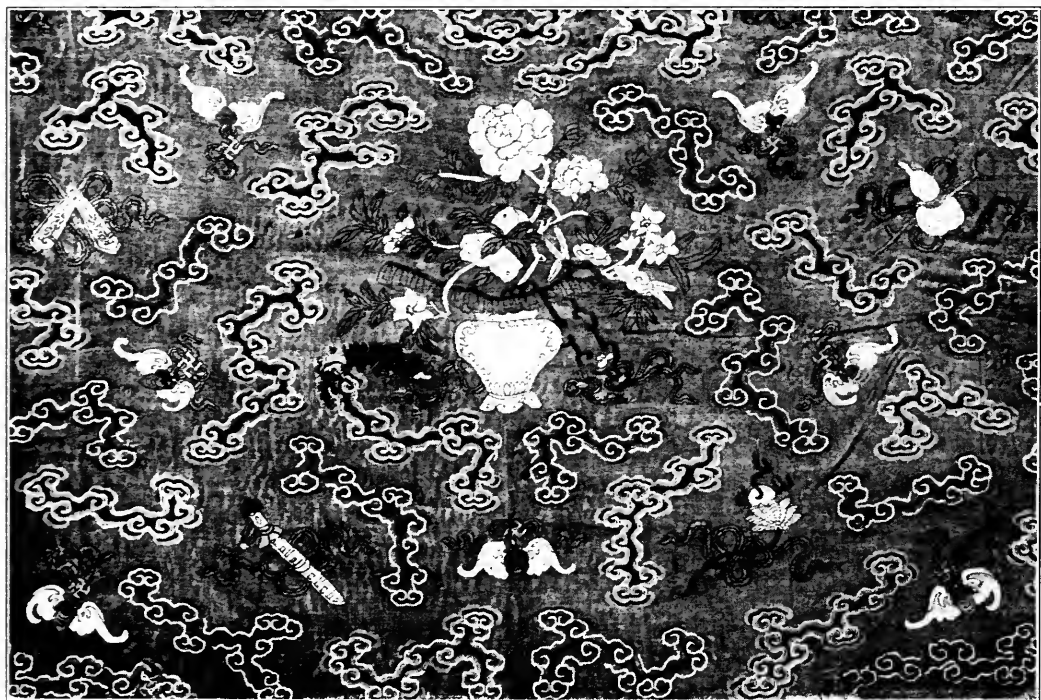


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probably they are associated here in order to form a rebus — a kind of symbolism we shall consider later. It must suffice to state that this combination is emblematic of a scene often portrayed in Chinese Art. It is called, “Divine Genii worshipping the God of Longevity” 靈仙祝壽. The same popular subject is represented in the next illustration (Fig. XII), which is one of a set of paintings by a Ming artist. The venerable being here depicted forms the central figure to a procession of Taoist notables shown wending their way amid romantic scenery to pay him respect. Shou Lao 壽老, bent with years, sits surrounded by attendants holding various of his attributes. There is a dish of peaches placed in front of him, and in the foreground stands the patriarch of the feathered tribe. The stork is credited with extraordinary powers of longevity, and is therefore often represented as the aerial messenger of Taoist deities, bringing from paradise in the clouds the tablets of human fate which it carries in its beak.

In his right hand the God of Longevity holds an object very familiar to all acquainted with things Chinese. It is called *ju-i* 如意, meaning “as you wish”. Shaped like a much elongated letter S, its essential feature seems to be that its head is fashioned like the sacred fungus. Whatever its original use may have been, at the present day it is often sent as a gift by one friend to another as a token of good will.

Frequently the pine, bamboo, and prunus are represented grouped together as emblems of longevity. The two former because they are evergreen and flourish throughout the winter; the last because blossoms appear on leafless and apparently lifeless branches of a tree till it reaches an extreme old age. It is hardly necessary to point out what a favourite motive of decoration is the prunus blossom, a flower which, by the way, Western dealers in porcelain will persist in calling “hawthorn”.



Fig. XII. Picture of Shou Lao by the Ming artist Sung Mou-chin.

(Author's Collection.)

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唐二十八宿竟一  
本縮



是鏡包括乾象制作甚鉅可云二十八宿羅心肖矣面運建初尺一尺三寸三分書不能容故縮成六寸六分其第一層為四神次層為八卦三層為十二生肖四層倍符似字不能盡識五層二十八宿之象六層二十八宿星君之名與博古齒中二十八宿竟畫星文者不同其第四層篆文亦大同小異殊不可考

Fig. XIII. Mirror of the T'ang period, A. D. 618-905.

(From *Chin shih so.*)

Let us turn again to the Han period in order to consider another foreign importation. Prof. Chavannes has written a learned article to prove that the group known as the "Twelve Animals" was borrowed from the Turks, and was used in China certainly as early as the first century of our era. (See *T'oung-pao*, Vol. VII, 1906.)

This zodiac of twelve is common to many nations of the East. In China it is held to correspond to a set of characters known as the "Twelve Earthly Branches" which together with the "Ten Heavenly Stems" form a series of sixty combinations used for naming the years, months, days and hours. Each year, month, day and hour, therefore, is associated with one of these twelve animals; and every Chinese knows well under which animal he was born. It is essential that he should do so, for no important step throughout life is taken unless under the auspices of his particular animal. Indeed, this mysterious influence extends even beyond his life, and is taken into consideration in the disposal of his corpse.

A mirror of the T'ang dynasty shows this and other zodiacal groups executed with considerable skill (Fig. XIII). We see in the centre a plain circle or button, perhaps representing the "Great Ultimate Principle". Next are the animals of the "Four Quadrants". Outside these the "Eight Trigrams", and next to them the "Twelve Animals", viz. — dragon, hare, tiger, fox, rat, pig, dog, cock, monkey, goat, horse, and snake. The outermost zodiac is composed of twenty-eight animals, each corresponding to one of the ancient constellations already described. This series of twenty-eight animals is not mentioned in the ancient classics. Perhaps it is coeval with the duodenary group, and probably there is some connection between the two. Certainly, the same animals that appear in the group of twelve figure also in the larger zodiac.

The Chinese craftsman constantly makes use of certain fabulous animals for decorative purposes. The group known

as the "Four Supernatural Creatures" is the most common; it comprises the dragon, phoenix, unicorn, and tortoise.

First and foremost comes the dragon. It is essentially a national emblem and deserves much more attention than I have time to give it.

There has been much speculation as to the zoological identity of the Chinese dragon. Briefly, the various theories come under four headings: — First, that it is based on fossilised remains or represents a vague memory of some pre-historic monster, such as the ichthyosaurus.

Secondly, that it has no prototype in nature, but is merely an imaginative creation.

Thirdly, that it has been borrowed from foreign mythology.

And last and most likely, that it is nothing else than a modified form of the alligator found to the present day in the River Yangtse. Several different kinds of dragons have been described and pictured. They may be said to fall into two groups — the primitive and the modern.

We have seen specimens of the *k'uei* dragon decorating ancient bronze and carved bone (Figs. II, III, v6). Another primitive form, without horns or scales, is called the *ch'ih lung* 螭龍. It is still frequently reproduced. Intermediate in type between the primitive and modern is the "Yellow Dragon" 黃龍 found in the Shantung sculptures. The dragons decorating this modern censer (Fig. XIV) appear to belong to this class.

The modern dragon is described by a Chinese author as follows: — "It carries on its forehead horns resembling the antlers of a stag. It has the head of a camel, the eyes of a hare, the ears of a bull, the neck of a snake, the belly of a frog, scales like a fish, talons like an eagle, and paws like a tiger." (Quoted in the great *Materia Medica*, 本草綱目.) Another writer states that it has no ears, but hears with its horns.

Perhaps the earliest known example that answers to this





Fig. XIV. Modern censer decorated with archaic dragons.



Fig. XV. Bronze decorated with modern dragons.



Fig. XVI. Tile discs from the Ming Tombs at Nanking.



Fig. XVII. Carved wood supports to screen.  
(Author's Collection.)

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Fig. XVIII. *T'an* painted on *yamén* wall.  
(From Wei-hai-wei.)



Fig. XIX. Sacrificial wine vessel.  
(From Officers' Mess, R. M. B., Chatham.)

description is the one found pictured in the Shantung sculptures of the second century A. D. (See Chavannes, *Mission Archéologique*, Plate 30.) Everyone is familiar with this class of dragon; indeed, most people expect to find it on everything emanating from China. Near its mouth is generally represented a ball surrounded with flames and clouds (Fig. xv). This ball is commonly called a "pearl"; some have described it as the sun; and Dr. Hirth has brought evidence to show that it is an emblem of thunder (*Chinesische Studien*, p. 232, *et seq.*).

The symbolic meaning of the dragon is a wide subject. We saw that native archaeologists have assigned to the *k'uei* variety the rôle of admonisher against greed and avarice. In this connection I would venture to suggest that the familiar monster found painted on the screen-wall in front of every *yamên* is a direct descendant of the *k'uei* dragon. It is designated by *t'an* 貪, the same character as that for "avarice". Standing as it does for the embodiment of this vice, it cannot fail by reason of its hideous aspect to convey a salutary warning to the official, who must encounter it every time he enters or leaves his *yamên* (Fig. xviii).

The dragon, besides being associated with the Eastern Quadrant, is considered the representative *par excellence* of the watery element. That it should typify Spring, Rain, and Flood is consistent with its identification with the alligator, for the latter's emergence from hibernation synchronises with the coming of Spring and the rainy season.

As an emblem of royalty the dragon has been used from the earliest times. Why it should have this meaning is not apparent, unless as bringer of rain it was regarded by an agricultural people as of paramount importance. The dragon on this tile from the tomb at Nanking of the first Ming emperor figures as a sign of imperial rank (Fig. xvi).

The other tile (Fig. xvi) is decorated with the fabulous bird which we are accustomed to describe as the "phoenix". Its Chinese name is *fêng* 鳳. It seems that this designation

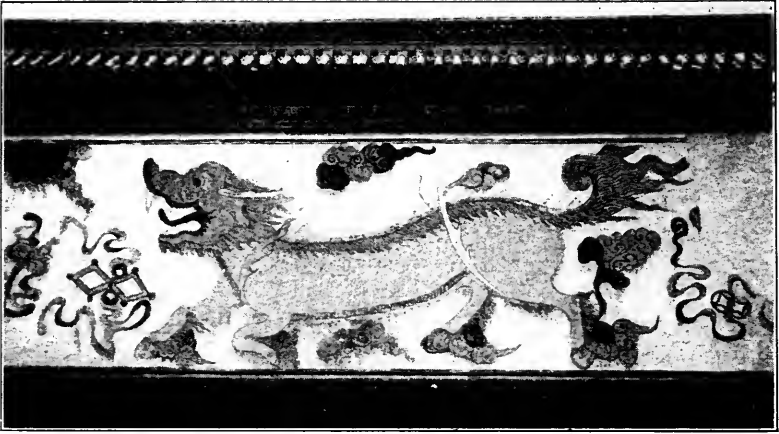


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includes two distinct varieties, an archaic kind like a pheasant found on ancient bronzes, and a later representation which apparently combines the characteristics of pheasant and peacock. Prof. Giles has made out a strong case for identifying the latter variety with the peacock attendant on the Greek goddess Hēra, whom he believes to have been sinicised in the person of Hsi Wang Mu 西王母. (See *Adversaria Sinica*, Nos. 1, 9.)

Under the name of the "Vermilion Bird" we have seen the *fêng* presiding over the southern quadrant of the uranoscopes. Hence it stands for the sun and warmth, and for summer and abundant harvests. These felicitous associations may explain why the ancient classics describe the advent of a *fêng* as heralding some particularly auspicious event. The *fêng* was employed by the Empress of China as her special badge. Our tile shows a simple conventional form of this motive, but often it is elaborated and provides a highly decorative design.

The next supernatural animal is the *lin* or *ch'i-lin* 麒麟, the Chinese unicorn (Fig. XIX). There seems little evidence to connect it with any actual animal, though quite possibly it may have been some rare kind of quadruped now extinct but of which a few examples still remained at the time of Confucius. Tradition states that the sage actually saw one that had been captured. The earliest mention of the *lin* occurs in the *Book of Odes*. Several centuries later it was described as having the body of a deer, the tail of an ox, and a single horn. Its body is said to be sometimes covered with scales like a fish.

The predominant quality of the *lin* is its perfect goodwill and benevolence to all living things. As examples of this we are told that it will not even tread on growing grass, and that the end of its horn is covered with flesh to show that, though able for war, it wishes for peace. It is believed that when this amiable creature appears it portends some



auspicious event, such as the birth of a sage or the rule of a wise sovereign. There is a legend that one was seen when Confucius came into the world.

The tortoise has been credited from the earliest times with being a messenger to the human race, conveying by the markings on its shell a clue to the mysteries of the universe. It is well known that one of these sacred creatures collaborated with the "dragon-horse" in revealing the "Eight Trigrams" to Fu Hsi; and that the shells of tortoises were anciently employed as one of the chief elements in the art of divination.

We have seen the tortoise under the name of the "Black Warrior" presiding over the Northern Quadrant and standing as a symbol for Winter.

Its well-known powers of longevity cause it to be frequently employed as an emblem of that much desired possession. It is probably to act in this capacity that a tortoise is often sculptured to carry on its back an inscribed stele, for by this means the subject of the monument becomes endowed with the stable and everlasting qualities characteristic of the animal.

Zoological symbolism must not be left without saying something more about the tiger, and a few words about the lion.

Just as the dragon is chief of all aquatic creatures, so is the tiger lord of all land animals. These two share the position of prime importance in the mysterious pseudo-science called *fêng-shui*. The tiger is figured on many of the most ancient bronzes, and its head is still reproduced as an ornament on the sides of bronze and porcelain vessels, often with a ring in its mouth. It frequently appears in a grotesque form which native archaeologists designate a "quadruped" 獸. The tiger symbolises military prowess. It is an object of special terror to demons, and is therefore painted on walls to scare malignant spirits away from the neighbourhood of houses and temples.

The lion motive was unknown in ancient Chinese Art,

and probably its earliest appearance was on pottery of the Han period. History tells us that in 87 A. D. lions were sent to China as tribute, but, according to Mr. Laufer, those found on pottery and bronze mirrors of the Han time were not copied from life but derived from Mycenaean and Greek models. When occurring in company with the grape-vine, as it does on the mirrors, the lion doubtless stands for an attribute of Dionysus. The kind borrowed from European Art bore a strong resemblance to nature. In contrast to it, another lion that appeared later seems to have no living prototype. I refer to the snarling monster loaded with shaggy mane and fantastic curls so often represented in pairs at the entrances of temples and other buildings. This is the conventionalized lion of India, one of the followers in the wake of Buddhism and one which by virtue of its religious significance has persisted to the present day. At first no doubt employed as defender of the Law and protector of sacred edifices, it soon became popular for secular use. Fig. xvii shows a pair of lions decorating side supports belonging to a large carved-wood screen.

Apart from the plants possessing religious significance, Chinese Art shows a wide range of floral symbolism. It is sufficient for our purpose to notice a constantly occurring group called the "Flowers of the Four Seasons". The tree-peony represents Spring, the lotus Summer, the chrysanthemum Autumn, and the wild plum Winter.

The Chinese language being monosyllabic and having but few vocables to express a vast number of written characters, it offers great scope for the employment of the rebus. This class of symbolism is varied and large, but time does not permit of more than a few representative examples.

Returning to the bone carvings of the Chou age, we find proof of the extreme antiquity of the rebus. One of the most frequently occurring emblems is the musical stone called *ch'ing* 磬 (Fig. v, c, g, h). *Ch'ing* has a homophone 慶 which



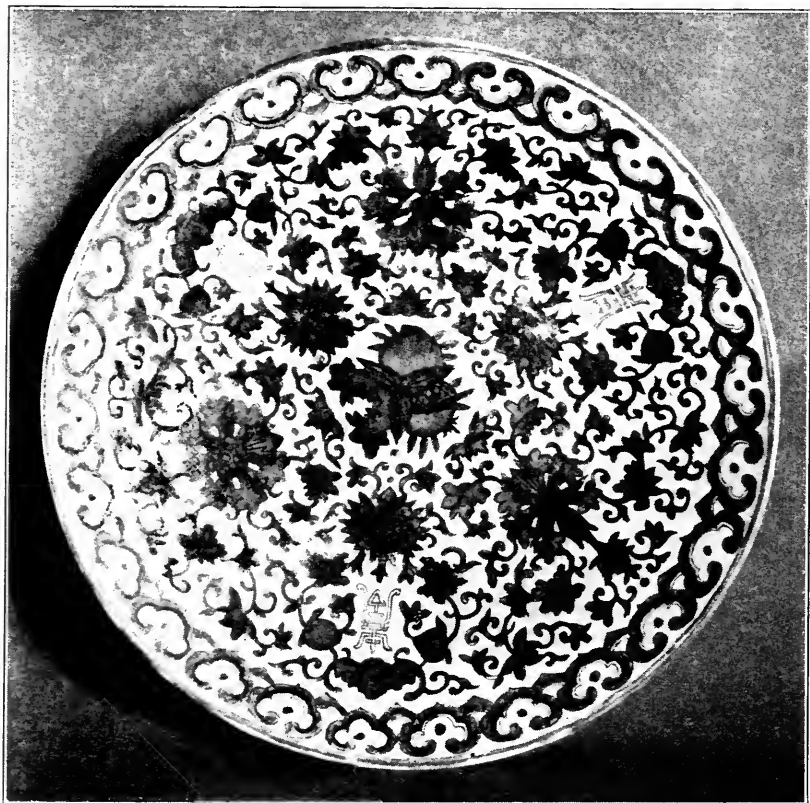


Fig. XX. Porcelain plate painted in copper-red.  
(Author's Collection.)





Fig. XXI. Porcelain beaker.  
(Salting Collection.)

means "good luck", hence we are justified in believing a carving, shaped like a musical stone and tortoise combined, to have been an amulet designed to bring its wearer success and longevity. The disc with a round hole in the middle seems to have been a favourite shape. Besides being a badge of rank and one of the group known as the "Marvellous Objects of Good Augury" its name *pi* 璧 has the same sound as the word used for "must" 必. Now, another homophone, *pi* 筆 a "pen", is still frequently used to represent *pi* "must". On the strength of this fact it seems justifiable to suppose that the combination of a disc and a tortoise (Fig. v f) is a rebus meaning — "The certain attainment of old age".

This beautifully decorated plate is a mass of symbolism (Fig. xx). Longevity is trebly represented, by a fanciful variant of the character 壽, by a peach in the centre, and by a border of conventionalised heads of the sacred fungus. Happiness, *fu* 福, is typified by its two homophones, the bat 蝠 and "Buddha's hand" citron 佛手. A numerous progeny is symbolised by a pomegranate because it is a fruit conspicuous for its multitudinous seeds. The conventional lotus 蓮 decoration forms a rebus signifying "combination" 連. Thus, to make a gift of such a plate is equivalent to wishing that the recipient may attain the threefold blessing of happiness, long life, and many children, the *summum bonum* of all Chinese desires.

This graceful vase illustrates two common forms of the rebus motive (Fig. xxi). At the top a group composed of magnolia 玉(蘭), cherry apple (海)棠, and tree-peony 富貴花, represents the sentence: *yü t'ang fu kuei* 玉堂富貴, "(May you dwell in) jade halls (and enjoy) wealth and honours". Below, herons 鷺 among a luxuriant growth of lotus plants 蓮生 suggest the wish, *Lu lien shêng* 路連陞 "(May you follow) the road that leads to continuous promotion".

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Fig. XXI. Porcelain beaker.  
(Salting Collection.)



means "good luck", hence we are justified in believing a carving, shaped like a musical stone and tortoise combined, to have been an amulet designed to bring its wearer success and longevity. The disc with a round hole in the middle seems to have been a favourite shape. Besides being a badge of rank and one of the group known as the "Marvellous Objects of Good Augury" its name *pi* 璧 has the same sound as the word used for "must" 必. Now, another homophone, *pi* 筆 a "pen", is still frequently used to represent *pi* "must". On the strength of this fact it seems justifiable to suppose that the combination of a disc and a tortoise (Fig. v f) is a rebus meaning — "The certain attainment of old age".

This beautifully decorated plate is a mass of symbolism (Fig. xx). Longevity is trebly represented, by a fanciful variant of the character 壽, by a peach in the centre, and by a border of conventionalised heads of the sacred fungus. Happiness, *fu* 福, is typified by its two homophones, the bat 蝠 and "Buddha's hand" citron 佛手. A numerous progeny is symbolised by a pomegranate because it is a fruit conspicuous for its multitudinous seeds. The conventional lotus 蓮 decoration forms a rebus signifying "combination" 連. Thus, to make a gift of such a plate is equivalent to wishing that the recipient may attain the threefold blessing of happiness, long life, and many children, the *summum bonum* of all Chinese desires.

This graceful vase illustrates two common forms of the rebus motive (Fig. xxi). At the top a group composed of magnolia 玉(蘭), cherry apple (海)棠, and tree-peony 富貴花, represents the sentence: *yü tang fu kuei* 玉堂富貴, "(May you dwell in) jade halls (and enjoy) wealth and honours". Below, herons 鷺 among a luxuriant growth of lotus plants 蓮生 suggest the wish, *Lu lien shêng* 路連陞 "(May you follow) the road that leads to continuous promotion".

Lastly we have to consider a numerous class which comes

under the generic term of the "Hundred Antiques" 百古. It includes an indefinite number of objects drawn from all sources, — Buddhist, Taoist, and secular. For purposes of decoration they seem to be mixed up indiscriminately.

The *pa-pao* 八寶 or "Eight Precious Things" are often represented. They comprise a jewel, cash, lozenge, pair of books, painting, musical stone, pair of rhinoceros-horn cups, and an artemisia leaf.

A large vase from the Salting Collection shows a curiously heterogeneous collection of objects (Fig. xxii). Most prominent is an archaic vase holding two peacock's feathers symbolical of official rank and a branch of coral typifying longevity. Attributes of the "Eight Immortals" and some of the "Eight Lucky Emblems" represent respectively Taoist and Buddhist elements. We find also the paraphernalia of the scholar's study, a lute to stand for the art of music, various antique bric-à-brac such as the connoisseur loves, and at the foot of the vase a portrait of the God of Longevity.

In conclusion, it is hardly necessary to point out that my paper has touched merely the fringe of this vast subject. Enough has been said, however, to indicate that from the earliest times symbolic motives have formed the basis of Chinese decoration, and, farther, that the greater part of this symbolism has been concerned with the happiness brought by material prosperity.

What is the explanation of this quality so characteristic of Chinese Art?

It is found in the national belief, first, that emblems of happy import themselves help to confer the blessings they represent; and, secondly, that the benefit derived from the good things of this world is more tangible than problematic bliss beyond the grave.

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Fig. XXII. Porcelain vase decorated with the  
"Hundred Antiques".

(Salting Collection.)

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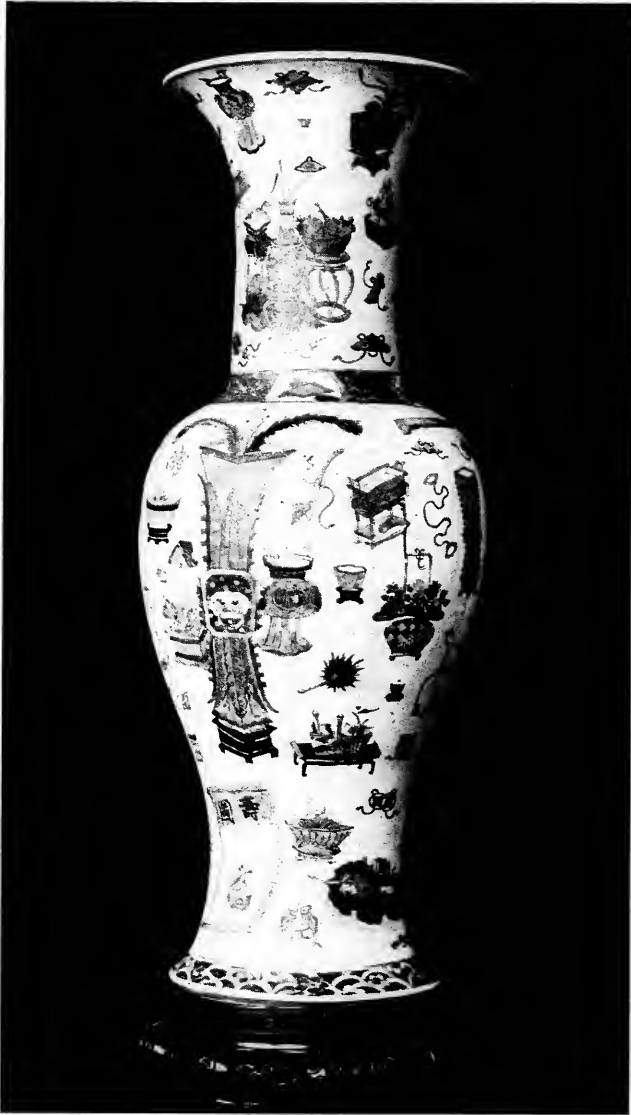


Fig. XXII. Porcelain vase decorated with the  
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