

Imperial robe



In this ancestral portrait of an official of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the first-rank civil official is wearing a red robe with long voluminous sleeves and on the badge a pair of cranes, symbols of longevity and highest official rank.

In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the court attire of flowing, voluminous Chinese Ming dynasty (1368–1644) robes and flamboyant slippers was replaced with boots, trousers and coats modelled on the Manchu riding habit.

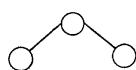
The Manchu tight-fitting costumes (e.g. Emperor's semi-formal court robe), which were suited to an active lifestyle of hunting and riding, replaced the loose-fitting Chinese garments, designed for a more sedentary life.

An ancestral portrait was painted after a person's death. It was placed on the ancestral altar in the home, to be commemorated and to also present sacrifice on important occasions such as the Chinese New Year.

CHINESE

Portrait of an official
Ming dynasty 1368–1644 China
pigments and ink on silk
136.0 x 91.5 cm
Felton Bequest, 1946 (1028-D4)

THE TWELVE SYMBOLS OF SOVEREIGNTY



The sun is represented by a red disc on which is found the legendary three-legged crow.

The moon is represented by a light-blue or green disc enclosing the legendary hare pounding the elixir of immortality.

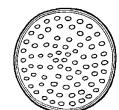
A constellation of **three stars**. The sun, the moon and the constellation of three stars are symbols of enlightenment, heaven and the cosmic universe.



Mountains are symbols of stability and the earth.

Dragons are symbolic of adaptability because of the transformations of which they are capable.

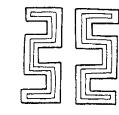
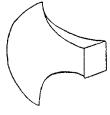
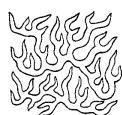
The pheasant is symbolic of literary refinement. The symbols of the dragon and the pheasant represent the animal and bird kingdoms, and hence the whole natural world.



The pair of bronze sacrificial cups symbolise filial piety (respect of one's parents). In one cup is a tiger and in the other cup a monkey with long hair. The tiger represents physical strength and the monkey cleverness.

The waterweed represents purity.

Grain represents the country's capacity to feed its people.



Fire represents intellectual brilliance. The last four symbols, together with the mountain, represent the five elements of the universe: earth (**mountain**), metal (**the bronze cups**), water (**the waterweed**), wood (**grain**) and fire (**flame**).

The axe represents the power to punish.

The fu symbol represents the power to judge. The twelve symbols were reserved exclusively for the robes of the Son of Heaven. As a symbolic interpretation of the universe, these symbols of imperial authority assumed a cosmic significance and represented the emperor as the ruler of the universe.

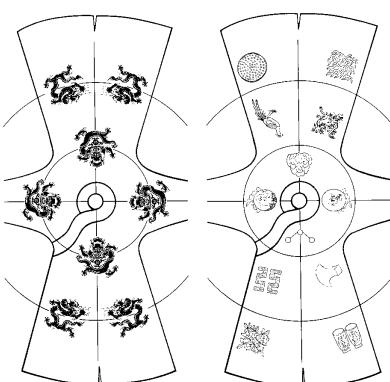


Diagram of the emperor's bright yellow semi-formal robe (acc. no. 983-D4) showing position of dragons.

Diagram of the emperor's bright yellow semi-formal robe (acc. no. 983-D4) showing position of the twelve symbols of sovereignty.

SYMBOLS OF GOOD FORTUNE

Chinese characters used as ornamental designs

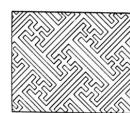


Shou. Various forms of the written character shou, which stands for longevity, were used for decoration.

Wan, meaning 'ten thousand'.

Xi, meaning 'joy'.

Shuangxi. This character means 'double happiness' which was a favourite wedding symbol. 'Double happiness' means happiness and also longevity.



Swastika. Originally the swastika was a mystic symbol of Buddha's heart. It was a Sanskrit term, an ancient language of India, and was adopted into the Chinese language to mean 'ten thousand' and also longevity.

Ji, meaning 'luck'.

Patterns of the Swastika-Fret.

Mountain of sea: clouds and wave: isles of the immortals.

THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE EIGHT IMMORTALS



The fan carried by Zhongli Quan



The sword of Lu Dongbin.



The double gourd and crutch of Li Tieguai.



The castanets of Cao Guojiu.



The basket of peaches (or alternatively of flowers) of Lan Caihe.



The bamboo tube and rods of Zhang Guolao.



The flute of Han Xiangzi.



The lotus pod of He Xiangnu.

HARMONY WITH NATURE: THE BOTANICAL WORLD, FRUITS AND FLOWERS



Peaches

According to tradition and folklore, the peach has long been a symbol of longevity and immortality in China.



Pomegranate

The pomegranate symbolises fertility in one's offspring, long considered a virtue in China.



Buddha's Hand Citron

The shape of this lemon-like fruit resembles the fingers of the Buddha, hence its name. The components of this name: *fu*, meaning 'Buddha', and *shou*, meaning 'hand', also play on the words of happiness (*fu*) and long life (*shou*).



The Three Plenties

The peach, Buddha's Hand Citron and pomegranate have been combined into a motif known as 'The Three Plenties', representing long life, happiness and many children.

THE EIGHT BUDDHIST EMBLEMS OF GOOD FORTUNE



The canopy is a symbol of a monarch, who shelters all living things.



The conch shell symbolises the call to worship.



The sacred vase holds the water of life. The vase (pronounced 'ping') is a rebus for peace (also pronounced 'ping'). (As mentioned, a rebus is an image that speaks for an object or idea with the same or similar verbal pronunciation).



The royal umbrella is a symbol of the incorruptible official.



The wheel of the law, the ever-turning cycle of the transmigration of souls. A bell is occasionally substituted for the wheel.



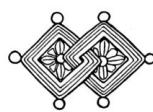
The lotus flower, a symbol of purity, rises unblemished and unsullied through muddy water.



The pair of fish are symbols of abundance. Fish ('yu') is a rebus for abundance ('yu').



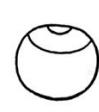
The endless knot or 'intestines', represents the everlasting love of Buddha and is a symbol of long life. *Chang*, meaning 'intestine' is a visual pun on *chang*, meaning 'long and continuous', hence a long life.



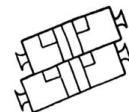
A pair of rectangular gold ornaments.



A pair of circular gold ornaments.



A pearl or jewel.



A pair of scrolls.



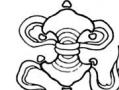
A musical stone.



A pair of rhinoceros horns.



Coral.



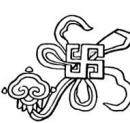
An ingot.



The lingzhi fungus. This fungus is a symbol of longevity for the Chinese because when dried it keeps for a long time. It was believed that by eating the sacred fungus one could ensure a long life.



The Ruyi Sceptre. *Ruyi* means 'as you wish'. The head of this sceptre resembles the *lingzhi* of 'longevity fungus'.



The Ruyi Sceptre with swastika. As already noted, the swastika stands for *wan*, or 'ten thousand', and combined with the Ruyi Sceptre this forms the rebus: 'May you have everything you wish'.



The scroll motif. This motif, in the shape of the head of the Ruyi Sceptre, conveys 'good wishes for a long life as all you desire'.



The cloud, a symbol of peace and good fortune.

FLOWERS OF THE FOUR SEASONS

Spring: Peony (Tree peony)

Summer: Lotus

Autumn: Chrysanthemum

Winter: Prunus



Prunus
The prunus symbolises winter and the first month of the year. It is a symbol of perseverance and purity, because it blossoms at a time when cold and bleakness prevail, and when the branches of this tree are flecked with ice and snow.



Peony
The peony symbolises spring and the sixth month of the year. It also symbolises wealth and advancement in life.



Orchid
The orchid represents the eleventh month of the Chinese lunar calendar. Orchids are noted not only for their exquisite delicacy, but also for their sweet and pleasant fragrance.



Chrysanthemum
The chrysanthemum symbolises autumn and the tenth month. As the only notable flower of late autumn, when few flowers are in bloom, the chrysanthemum is symbolic of the recluse.



Lotus
The lotus represents summer and the seventh month of the year. The lotus is a symbol of purity and nobility, as it emerges from muddy water unstained and radiantly beautiful.

HARMONY WITH NATURE: THE ZOOLOGICAL WORLD; ANIMALS, BIRDS, INSECTS



The crane
The crane is the most venerated bird in China, supposed to live to an age of six thousand years. Long considered a symbol of longevity in Chinese art and folklore, it was associated with tales of the mystic isles of the immortals.



The peacock
The lofty position of the peacock among birds is just like that of the peony among flowers. It has long been a symbol of splendour for the Chinese. Peacocks and peonies are thus frequently seen together in the pictorial and decorative arts.



Mandarin ducks
Mandarin ducks were thought to mate for life and thus symbolised faithfulness and happiness in marriage. As an extension of this idea, all pairs of motifs came to symbolise marital happiness.



Butterfly
Butterfly (*die*) is a rebus for 'die', meaning seventy or eighty years of age or a long life. The butterfly is also a symbol of summer and of happiness in marriage.



Bat
The word 'bat' (*fú*) is a visual pun for the word happiness (also *fu*). When a bat is depicted with peaches, which are symbols of longevity, the rebus means: 'May you live long and be happy'. When a bat is depicted with a swastika, meaning *wan* or 'ten thousand', the rebus means: 'May you have the greatest joy'.

