

Auspicious Designs of China

Text and designs by Ye Yingsui, Ye Shuqin and Ye Duyi



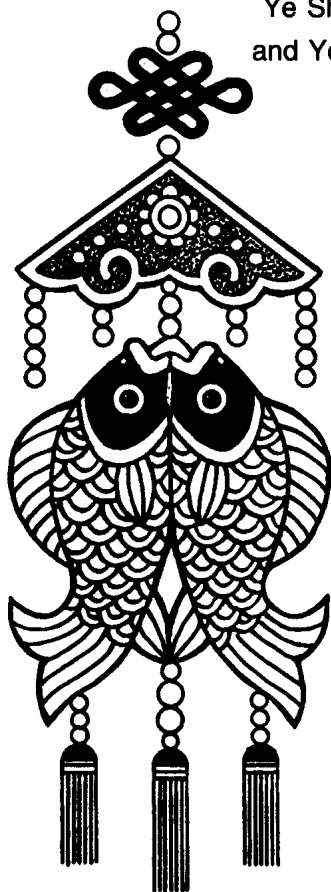
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Text and designs by Ye Yingsui,
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and Ye Duyi

of
China

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Foreword

In the long process of China's several-thousand-year history and culture, auspicious words and designs have remained the most popular content and forms loved by the Chinese people and known by every household. They have taken a deep root among the people. For instance, spring festival couplets, the character of 福 (happiness), and paper-cuts are pasted on door panels and windows at all households to bid farewell to the outgoing year, ringing in the new year, and pray for the arrival of happiness at the doorway. On New Year's Day, people greet one another by saying "May you be happy and prosperous," or "Happy New Year." When a relative or a friend goes out on a journey, one may wish him or her a "safe trip" or "good luck." When a man and a woman get married, people extend congratulations, wishing them to "remain devoted to the end of their lives" or "be a happy marriage." When an elder celebrates his or her birthday, the juniors wish him or her to "live a life as long as South Mountain" or "enjoy both felicity and longevity." When one opens a business, one's friends wish "one's source of wealth is abundant," and "one makes a dipperful gold as daily profits." In this way, people express their desires for auspiciousness and happiness.

The ancients said, "The character 吉 means good, happy, and not disadvantageous," and "祥 also means good, happy, and beneficial." It is a lifelong pursuit for

the people to promote the good and repress the evil, avoid disasters, and pray for happiness. But the road in life is arduous. From the day one is born onward, one is nagged by various problems in life. Birth, senility, illness, death, and hardships are life's inexorable law, and nobody can succeed in escaping. Life is hard and short, and there is no highboard to happiness and misfortune. Nobody can make an overnight prediction of the good or evil luck, happiness, or misfortune. To seek peace and safety, good luck, and happiness, people use propitious words and designs for comfort at heart. For several thousand years, the auspicious designs have been widely disseminated and admired in China because they are in the demand of the people for happiness, peace and safety, longevity, and wealth and honor. It shows that the auspicious designs have a strong vitality and a deep mass foundation. They belong to the folk culture that has found its root among the populace. As a culture and an art, the auspicious designs surely will make new development both in content and forms.

The forms of auspicious designs are concise and explicit, elegant, and in good taste. Their content is conveyed by various means, sometimes with beautiful words, sometimes through expressions with double meanings, and sometimes by resorting to metaphors, the aid of other things, or homophonic. In this way, ornamental designs with certain propitious meanings were created so as to attain the objective of "designs that must have a meaning and the meaning must be auspicious." Homonyms are often used to convey certain meanings. For instance, 蝙蝠 (bat) is used to imply 福 (happiness); 鹿 (deer), to

mean 禄 (wealth); 桃子 (peach), to refer to 寿 (longevity); 金鱼 (goldfish), to represent 金玉 (gold and jade); 桂子 (laurel), to compare to 贵子 (adorable children); 瓶 (bottle), to represent 平 (peace); 穗 (crop ear), to 岁 (year); 柿 (persimmon), to 事 (thing or event); 梅 (plum), to 眉 (eyebrow); and 磬 (chime stone), to 庆 (celebration). In some cases, a 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 (marriage) for one hundred years; 喜 of 喜鹊 is used to form the phrase of 喜上眉梢, meaning happiness that appears on the eyebrows; and 天 of 天竹 (nandina) is used to form 天长地久, a phrase that means everlasting and unchanging. In other cases, Chinese characters or phrases are selected and used to similize certain meanings. These include 牡丹花 (peony flower) that symbolizes wealth and rank and 白头翁 (gray starling) that forms the composition of 富贵白头 meaning riches and honors that accompany one till one reaches old age. 鹤 (crane) is the symbol of longevity, and 鹿 (deer) is homophonic of 禄 (wealth). 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 spring. Another example is the combination of 月季花 (monthly rose) and 古瓶 (classical vase or bottle) that symbolizes safe and sound all the year round. The design of 万事如意 (everything goes as one wishes) is made up of 万年青 (*Rhodea japonica*),

柿子 (persimmon), and 灵芝 (glossy ganoderma). There are numerous things that are used as metaphors or symbols in the formation of auspicious designs. Plants are widely used in this aspect. These include the ginkgo tree that 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; glossy ganoderma, clean and healthy trends; the yellow monthly rose, victory; love pea, lovesickness; azalea, home return; bamboo, uprightness and modesty; maple, revolutionary enthusiasm; camellia, a combat hero; sago cycas, solemnity; the sensitive plant, feelings of shame; the cotton tree, a hero; lotus, purity; chrysanthemum, mobility and cleanness; pomegranate, prosperous descendants; *Rhodea japonica* or evergreen, everlasting friendship; honeysuckle, good luck and propitious omen; and the fingered citron, happiness and longevity. Olive branches are a symbol of peace; Chinese redbud flowers, harmony between brothers; day lily blossoms, forgetting worries; pine and cypress trees, staunchness and greatness; plum blossoms, firm and unyielding; lily flowers; unity and friendship; and twin lotus flowers on one stalk, an affectionate couple. Animals are also extensively used to form auspicious designs. For instance, *kylin* (the Chinese unicorn) symbolizes benevolence, mercy, and auspiciousness; the dragon, authority and respect; the deer, prosperity and abundance; the tiger, 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 lion,

dignity and jubilation; the phoenix, good prospect; the crane, noble moral integrity; the mandarin duck, happiness and perfect satisfaction; the dove, peace and loyalty; the magpie, an approaching happy event; the bat, the arrival of happiness; and the turtle, a heavy burden bearer and longevity.

The auspicious designs composed of Chinese characters, animals, and plants are works of high artistic quality, with a healthy content. They were created by our ancestors with their wisdom and rich imagination in the past generations and loved by the people. They express aspirations of the people and embody an 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 heart and pleasing to the eye. They help people find spiritual sustenance, draw enlightenment, and obtain a sublimation of vitality.

Chinese auspicious designs have a long history. With unique forms and techniques of expression, such as using Chinese characters, animals, or plants to express people's aspirations and feelings, they embody people's minds and sentiments of loving life and seeking for happiness and serve the people and society. But times are marching forward. With the progress and change of the times, auspicious designs surely will change their content and forms, so as to suit the times and the demand of the people's life and their aesthetic consciousness. As an art firmly based on the folklore culture, the auspicious designs have been invented by the people through long social practice, and some of the

content has stood the test of time, completely found its way into the daily life and consciousness of the populace, and formed a profound connotative meaning.

The Party's principles of "Letting a Hundred Flowers Blossom, Making the Past Serving the Present-Day Needs," and "Weeding Through the Old to Bring Forth the New" give us guidances in our endeavor to carry on and create new content and forms of art. To this end, we should not only enrich and improve the content of the auspicious designs but also make bold innovations and changes to the forms of expression so that the auspicious designs, as a time-honored culture, will give out an even more extraordinary splendor on the land of China.

Motivated by a desire to carry on, innovate, and heighten the auspicious designs, authors of the book tried their best in the creation of and exploration in the content and forms of expression within the limits of carrying forward traditional ideas, enabling Chinese auspicious designs to take on a new look and suit and satisfy the habit and demand of appreciation of the people in modern times. The strength of individuals is certainly limited. What the authors did is to cast a brick to attract jade. It is hoped that Chinese auspicious designs, as a long-standing culture, will give forth the brilliance of the new era with the common effort of the people from various parts of China just like a Chinese idiom goes, "The fire burns high when everybody adds wood to it."

Finally, many thanks to the comrades at the China Travel & Tourism Press for their hard work and warm support to the publication of the book.

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