Eight Auspicious Symbols

The eight auspicious symbols of the Buddhism of East Asia and the Himalayan region are the wheel, the conch, the parasol, the victory banner, the lotus, the vase, the two fish, and the endless knot.

Illustration: Terese Tse Bartholomew, Hidden Meanings, Asian Art Museum.

The wheel symbolizes the turning wheel of Buddhist doctrine that leads to perfection.

The conch symbolizes the far-reaching sound of the Buddhist teaching.

The parasol symbolizes protection as well as spiritual power.

The victory banner symbolizes the victory of the Buddhist teaching.

The lotus symbolizes purity.

The vase symbolizes the elixir of life.

The two fish symbolize freedom from restraint.

The endless knot symbolizes infinite wisdom.
Motifs for Blessings

The Chinese word *fu* (福), translated as blessings or happiness, encompasses all that is auspicious in life. Foremost among the motifs related to blessings is the bat, also pronounced *fu* (蝠) but written with a different character. Many other traditional symbols for blessings, such as the Buddha’s-hand citron and the sheep, extend their cultural context to popular beliefs and the cult of Daoism.

1. **Plate with peaches and bats**  
   China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province  
   Qing dynasty (1736–1795)  
   Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60P1707  
   The five bats (two on the back of the plate) stand for the Five Blessings—longevity, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a peaceful death.

2. **Bat carrying a swastika**  
   China; approx. 1900  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60J166  
   The bat carries a swastika, the symbol of ten thousand, portraying a wish for ten thousand blessings.

3. **Saucer with birthday greeting**  
   China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province  
   Qing dynasty (1723–1735)  
   Porcelain with underglaze blue and overglaze multicolor decoration  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60P1579  
   The decoration here forms two visual puns: “May your blessings be as deep as the eastern sea” and “May you live to be as old as the southern mountain.”

4. **Wish-granting wand**  
   China; Qing dynasty (1644–1911)  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60J499  
   This wand, bearing a head that resembles the lingzhi mushroom (the fungus of immortality), is basically a wishing wand, suggesting “May all your wishes come true.”

5. **Buddha’s hand citron**  
   China; approx. 1800–1900  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B69J1  
   The name of this fruit (foshou 佛手) has almost the same pronunciation as the words for blessings (*fu* 福) and longevity (*shou* 寿).

6. **The Three Plenties**  
   China; Qing dynasty (1644–1911)  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60J327  
   The Buddha’s-hand citron, peach, and pomegranate together form a pictorial pun for the Three Plenties (Three Abundances), implying a wish for an abundance of blessings, longevity, and sons.

7. **Fungus, lily, persimmons, and oval box**  
   China; Qing dynasty (1644–1911)  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B65J5.a-b  
   The lily, the persimmon, and the wand with a mushroom head ruyi (a pun on “as you wish”) form the four-character idiom: “May a hundred of your wishes come true.”

8. **Three sheep**  
   China; Qing dynasty (1644–1911)  
   Nephrite  
   *The Avery Brundage Collection*, B60J397  
   Vapor rises from the mouth of the large sheep, amassing as a cloud formation on its back and supporting the taiji (yin-yang) emblem. The sheep and the taiji form a pictorial pun to express the desire that the New Year will bring in prosperity.
Motifs for Prosperity

The Chinese words for deer, official salary, benefits, and emoluments all share the same sound *lu*. Images of the deer, for example, symbolize good wishes for a government title with a high rank and salary. Such symbols of prosperity and glory related to educated men serving or hoping to serve the court by passing the civil service examinations.

**9**
玉堂富貴 (牡丹玉蘭)二甲歸錦 (蟹、錦雞) 絲織紋

Octagonal plate
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Qing dynasty, reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722)
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P127
Depictions of the peony and white magnolia convey: "May your noble house be blessed with wealth and honor." The colorful birds and double crabs indicate: "May you have a bright future with a high rank."

**10**
指日高升圖盤 明天啟朝 景德鎮青花瓷

Dish
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Ming dynasty, reign of the Tianqi emperor (1621–1627)
Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration
Effie B. Allison Collection, Gift of J. V. West and B. V. Gewald, B81P7
Pointing at the sun signifies a wish for imminent elevation to the rank of marquis.

**11**
二甲傳臚 (螃蟹蘆葦)荷葉筆掭

Ink palette with motif of two crabs
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Qing dynasty, reign of the Yongzheng emperor (1723–1735)
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2368
An image of two crabs clinging to a stalk of grain is a visual pun signifying a wish for a high score on the final civil service examination.

**12**
連生貴子 (蓮、笙、桂枝) 萬代繁衍圖屏

Plaque with boys at play
Approx. 1900–1949
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
Bequest of Drs. Ben and A. Jess Shenson, 2002.26
The sweet olive tree (*guihua*, also a homophone for "noble blossoms") on the left of this plaque proclaims that all the boys under the tree are "noble sons," who will pass their civil service examinations with flying colors and bring honor to their families.

**13**
連生貴子 (嬰戲荷花) 圖果盤  明萬暦朝

Compartmented covered dish with boys at play
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Ming dynasty, reign of the Wanli emperor (1573–1620)
Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62J5.a-.b
A depiction of boys playing various games implies a wish for the owner of the vessel to bear numerous sons.

**14**
馬上封侯(馬、蜂、猴)擺件

Monkey riding a horse
Approx. 1850–1900
China
Nephrite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B64J5
The monkey riding on a horse is a pictorial pun for "May you immediately be elevated to the rank of marquis!"

**15**
鹿祿蓋盒  清末民初  玉石

Box in the shape of a deer
Approx. 1900–1949
China
Nephrite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62J57.a-.b
The deer, whose character *lu* (鹿) is pronounced the same as the character for salary (*lu* 賴), is a pun for wealth and rank. This box therefore conveys a wish for high rank and great wealth.

**16**
功名富貴 (公雞牡丹)圖紋杯碟

Teacup and dish depicting flowers, rock, and animals
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B70P30.a-.b
The rooster among peony blossoms and rocks conveys: "May you be granted official rank and honors."

**17**
童子戲如意、算盤、書劍、元寶圖紋小碟

Square dish with a scene of a boy playing with lucky symbols
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Brass with enamel
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2200
An infant holding a wish-granting wand plays with an abacus, a book, a sword, and an ingot. These motifs imply two wishes: "It will be as you wish" and "To achieve all in academics, martial arts, and fortune."

**18**
刘海佩錢戲蟾像  清末  景德鎮五彩瓷

Figure of the deity Liu Hai and his toad
Approx. 1850–1900
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1497.a
Liu Hai, the god of wealth, dances on his three-legged toad while waving a string of coins. The Chinese word for toad and frog, *wa*, is a pun for dig. Together with the images of Liu Hai and coins, the subject matter is associated with the desire for seeking wealth, as in digging for treasures.
Motifs for Longevity

In the Chinese religion and practice of Daoism, some advanced practitioners of the Way (dao) tried to attain immortality. Many Daoist deities were worshiped as divine saints, protectors of life, and granters of longevity. Beginning their lives as human beings, they underwent a spiritual and physical transformation and were believed to attain a perfect existence as adepts or immortals. In their meditative practice and daily diet, certain natural ingredients, believed to confer health and longevity, functioned as symbols of immortality.

19. 道教張天師布陣圖瓷片 明成化朝
   Plaque with Daoism’s founder Zhang Tianshi and his attendants
   China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
   Ming dynasty, reign of the Chenghua emperor (1465–1487)
   Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration
   Gift of Roy Leventritt, B69P25L
   The central figure is Zhang Tianshi, the founder of Daoism, who established the religion and philosophy with a focus on perfecting the self in order to attain immortality.

20. 麻姑獻壽圖紋盤 清康熙朝
    Dish decorated with Magu, goddess of longevity
    China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
    Qing dynasty, reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722)
    Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
    The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P376
    Chinese women prayed to goddess Magu, identified by the gardening hoe and a basket of the fungus of immortality, for long life.

21. 麻姑獻壽福（桃、鹿、緞帶鳥）清晚期
    Plate with symbols for celebrating birthday and long life
    China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
    Qing dynasty, reign of the Yongzheng emperor (1723–1735)
    Porcelain with underglaze blue and overglaze multicolor decoration
    The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P192
    The fungus, narcissus, and rocks form the auspicious phrase, “Fungus fairy offers birthday greetings!”

22. 群仙供壽圖葫蘆壁瓶 明崇禎朝
    Wall vase with the Eight Daoist Immortals and Shoulao, god of longevity
    China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
    Ming dynasty, reign of the Chongzhen emperor (1628–1644)
    Porcelain with underglaze blue decoration
    The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2051
    The creatures and birds here form several pictorial rebuses implying prosperity, happiness, and longevity.

23. 紫芝祝壽（靈芝水仙天竺壽石）紋盤
    Plate with symbols for celebrating birthday and long life
    China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
    Qing dynasty, reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795)
    Porcelain with bluish glaze and crackles
    The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P171
    Lingzhi, the fungus of immortality, is also a wish-fulfilling symbol because the head of the wish-granting wand ruyi resembles the fungus in shape.

24. 靈芝形筆掭 清乾隆朝
    Ink palette in the shape of a fungus
    China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
    Qing dynasty, reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736–1795)
    Porcelain with bluish glaze and crackles
    The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2051
    The fungus, narcissus, and rocks form the auspicious phrase, “May you have blessings and longevity, and may all your wishes come true.”

25. 鶴鹿同春、喜福雙降（蝠、鹿、松、喜鵲）圖紋手爐
    Handwarmer with deer, cranes, and pine trees
    China
    Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
    Enamel on metal
    The Avery Brundage Collection, 1999.34.a–c
    The creatures and birds here form several pictorial rebuses implying prosperity, happiness, and longevity.
Motifs for Happiness

The character for joy or happiness (喜) is associated with pleasant events, such as weddings and the arrival of newborn sons. Throughout Chinese history, boys were regarded as vital to the preservation of the patriliny, because they would carry on the family name and continue to worship ancestors. In imperial society, men of the educated class sacrificed their childhood for the study of the classics, and their success in the civil service exams brought the greatest imaginable joy to the family.

28
母子團圓和諧圖盤 清康熙朝
Plate with mother and her son
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Qing dynasty, reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722)
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P243
The central scene depicts a mother and her son surrounded by crabs, shrimps, and vases of lotus and peony. This scene conveys: “May your family have numerous descendants, harmony, nobility, and happiness.”

29
雙蝶（疊）圍喜雕空佩飾 清代 玉石
Circular plaque with butterflies flanking the character for happiness
1800–1900
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Nephrite
Gift of R. W. Winskill in Memory of Lionel H. Fries, B86J16
Mandarin ducks are traditional motifs for a harmonious marriage. They usually swim among lotus plants, representing harmony in marriage as well as many sons.

30
幸臨春宴（杏林、燕）圍紋盤 清康煥朝
Plate with swallows and apricot blossoms
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province
Qing dynasty, reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662–1722)
Porcelain with overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1534
Swallows and apricot blossoms shown together form a visual pun (rebus) implying that success in the final level of the civil service examination shall be honored by an invitation to attend the spring banquet.

31
荷塘鴛鴦紋碗 清雍正朝 景德鎮斗彩瓷
Bowl decorated with mandarin ducks and lotus
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, Qing dynasty, reign of the Yongzheng emperor (1723–1735)
Porcelain with underglaze blue and overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60J426
Two jolly beings—Hanshan, paddling a boat using a broom, and Shide, holding a fan—were poet-monks of the Tang dynasty (618–907) and regarded as the patron saints of harmony.

32
六方喜慶雙聯（喜字、石磬、繩紋）圖樽
Imperial spittoon with rope pattern
China
Qing dynasty, reign of the Jiaqing emperor (1796–1820)
Nephrite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60J452
The sides are decorated with the character for joy (喜) and images of stone chimes (淸), forming a pun for “joyful celebration” (喜慶).

33
荷塘鴛鴦紋碗 清雍正朝 景德鎮斗彩瓷
Bowl decorated with mandarin ducks and lotus
China; Jingdezhen, Jiangxi province, Qing dynasty, reign of the Yongzheng emperor (1723–1735)
Porcelain with underglaze blue and overglaze multicolor decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60J426
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34
喜上眉梢圖紋瓶 清代 套色玻璃
Vase with magpies and plum tree
1700–1800
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Glass
Gift of Ashkenazie and Company, 1988.37.1
Magpies shown together with the plum tree form the pictorial pun “happiness up to one’s eyebrows,” because the Chinese words for eyebrow and plum tree share the pronunciation mei. This is a typical Chinese expression meaning one is happy indeed!

35
子孫萬代繁衍和諧鴨形蓋盒 清代 玉石
Mandarin duck container
1700–1800
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Nephrite
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60J975.a–b
Ducks are thought to mate for life. This container was once a wedding present expressing a wish that the couple have a long and harmonious marriage.

36
喜上眉梢圖紋瓶 清代 套色玻璃
Vase with magpies and plum tree
1700–1800
China
Qing dynasty (1644–1911)
Glass
Gift of Ashkenazie and Company, 1988.37.1
Magpies shown together with the plum tree form the pictorial pun “happiness up to one’s eyebrows,” because the Chinese words for eyebrow and plum tree share the pronunciation mei. This is a typical Chinese expression meaning one is happy indeed!