

Five Auspicious Animals of Ancient China

The five auspicious animals in ancient Chinese myths and legends commonly refer to the dragon, turtle, phoenix, Pixiu and Qilin.

The word “auspicious” means lucky, so auspicious animals are mythical creatures of good fortune. The veneration of auspicious animals by people in ancient China represents their simple and pure desire for peace, health and luck. Worshipping the images of auspicious animals has been a common cultural phenomenon in the history of humanity since ancient times.

Dragon. The dragon is a mythical animal originating in ancient China. It has scales like a serpent, horns like a deer, whiskers like a carp, and claws like an eagle. It is said to be able to fly among the clouds and bring down rain. The dragon of China should not be confused with the dragon of the West as the latter breathes fire. As an important symbol of the Chinese since ancient times, the dragon represents power, authority, excellence, generosity, rationality and luck. The Chinese consider themselves “descendants of the dragon” and every Chinese emperor proclaimed themselves the “heavenly son of the dragon”. There are several Chinese expressions associated with the dragon. For example, parents “wish their children to be a dragon” (aspiring their children to become an elite with great success); people like to “paint the dragon, dot the eyes” (painting the dragon’s eyes with a single brush stroke to give it life); and wish someone to be “the flying dragon and the leaping tiger” (wishing him/her good health and prosperity).

Turtle. The turtle, being one of the Four Celestial Animals in ancient China along with the dragon, phoenix and Qilin, is highly revered by the Chinese. In one Chinese legend, Nuwa, the Goddess of Creation, asked a turtle to carry the “stones of five colours” to the place where part of the sky had fallen in order to repair it. After fulfilling Nuwa’s request, the turtle volunteered to sacrifice its four legs to support the sky to facilitate its repair. The legend won the turtle public admiration for its bravery and sacrifices in joining efforts with Nuwa to save the world. In another legend, a turtle carried on its back the “Book of Luo” to help the governor Dayu to tame the great floods that happened in China thousands of years ago. Dayu finally tackled the floods and consequently the turtle was seen as a sign of auspiciousness. The turtle shell, also called the “dragon bone”, is a valuable Chinese medicine and was used in ancient times as a means of payment and divination. Moreover, the turtle shell was a material for recording Chinese writing, which is why oracle bone script has always been known in China as writing on shells and bones. Since the turtle lives a long life, it has become, along with the crane, a symbol of longevity, as seen in the expression “living as long as turtles and cranes”.

Phoenix. The Chinese equivalence of phoenix is “Fenghuang”, which can be abbreviated to “Feng”, denoting the male, and “Huang”, denoting the female. Considered the king of birds, the phoenix is known in legends as the bird rising from the ashes. Widely regarded as an auspicious bird in ancient China, the phoenix is a symbol of luxury, majesty, progress and peace. There are several Chinese expressions related to the phoenix. For example, an outstanding person among ordinary people is called “dragon and phoenix amongst mankind”; a person of exceptional qualities or a valuable and rare object is known as the “phoenix feathers and Qilin horns”, and a talented person who finds the right moment or opportunity to demonstrate his/her abilities is like the “phoenix singing in the morning sun”.

Pixiu. The Pixiu is depicted in ancient Chinese books and legends as an auspicious animal that can expel misfortune and attract good fortune. The Pixiu is said to have a large mouth but no anus, so it can swallow everything but excrete nothing, metaphorical of wealth accumulation. Therefore, the Pixiu is believed to bring prosperity to a family or a business. In addition to bringing wealth and prosperity, the Pixiu is believed to swallow everything bad, thus helping to ward off bad energy and attract luck.

Qilin. The Qilin is an underrepresented mythical animal. It looks like a larger version of an elk with horse legs and an ox tail. The male, with a single horn, is called Qi, while the female, without any horns, is called Lin. Possessing a mild temperament, the Qilin poses no harm to humans, other animals and plants. Therefore, it is known as “an animal of mercy”. The age-old saying that “the Qilin appears in prosperous times” induces peace and longevity. It is no wonder that the Chinese regard the Qilin as an auspicious animal that is able to ward off disasters and troubles, expel evil spirits and bad luck, help accumulate wealth and attract good energy for personal success and longevity.

Five auspicious animals of good fortune. The souvenir sheet of the stamp issue is comprised of five auspicious animals, including the flying dragon and dancing phoenix, turtle, Pixiu and Qilin, which all use their strength to deliver wealth, health, peace and prosperity to everyone.

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