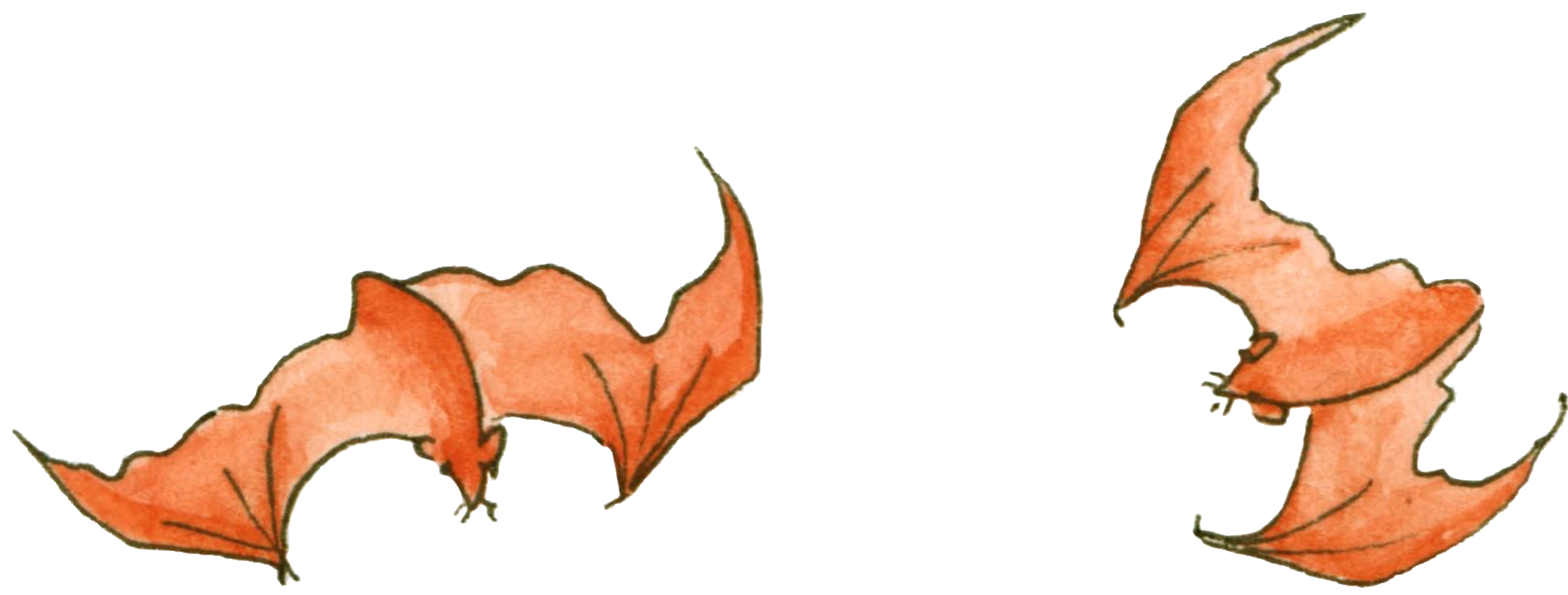


Blessings

福

Fu



The Star God Fuxing, who bestows blessings (*fu* 福)—which encompass everything auspicious—is usually portrayed as an ordinary man carrying a baby boy. In traditional Chinese culture the epitome of blessings and of marital happiness was having male children to carry on the family name. Motifs for a harmonious marriage and numerous male offspring therefore come under the heading of blessings.

Foremost among motifs related to blessings in general is the bat, the word for which is also pronounced *fu* but is written differently (蝠). Among bat motifs, the most popular is the image of five bats, a rebus (visual pun) for the Five Blessings: longevity, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a peaceful death—the most cherished aspirations of many Chinese people through the centuries.



WISHES FOR A HARMONIOUS MARRIAGE

The most popular motif for a happy marriage is the lotus, as this plant's seed-bearing stage comes early, suggesting the early arrival of sons. One of the many names for the lotus (*he* 荷) sounds like the word for harmony (*he* 和).

Images of fish, which are seen as living in tune with their surroundings, convey wishes for a long and happy marriage—as do mandarin ducks, which mate for life.



WISHES FOR MANY SONS

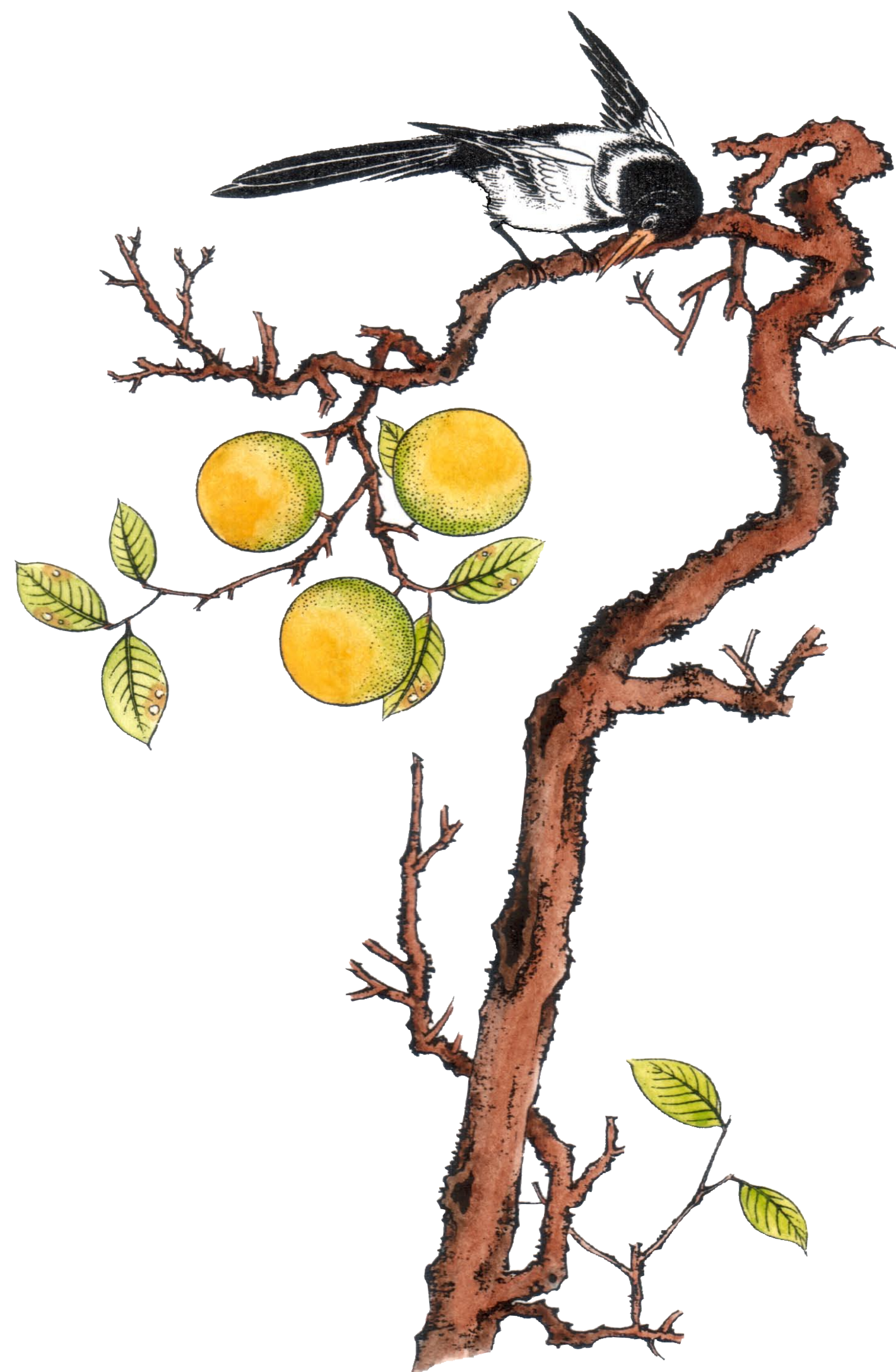
In Chinese tradition, sons were expected to perpetuate not only the family name but also the worship of ancestors. Not producing a son was considered a failure in one's duty to one's parents and ancestors. Sons were strongly urged to excel in the civil service examinations so they could become high officials and bring glory and wealth to the family.

The popular “boys at play” and “hundred boys” motifs, which convey wishes for many sons, can be seen on women's ornaments and clothing and on decorative objects—as can fruits and vegetables that bear many seeds, such as pomegranates and gourds. Butterflies (*die* 蝶) and gourds (*gua* 瓜) together form a rebus for the wish “May there be ceaseless generations of sons and grandsons” (*guadie mianmian* 瓜瓞綿綿). And the fertility theme applies to the newlyweds' bed; it is common practice to prepare the bed for the wedding night by scattering on it dried fruit and seeds.

Rank and Wealth

祿

Lu



WISHES FOR PASSING EXAMINATIONS

Passing the civil service examinations was important in dynastic China: It opened the door to attaining rank and wealth, which would bring honor to one's family. Though traditional Chinese society was class conscious, the exams were in principle open to all. So a young man from an obscure village might, by years of intense study, propel himself—and his family—into a much higher socioeconomic situation.

Students were recruited into the state bureaucracy through a series of rigorous nationally administered tests based on knowledge of classical texts and on literary skills defined centuries before. Civil service candidates might compete at as many as four levels of examination, the first three being local or prefectural, provincial, and metropolitan. A final exam for a select group would take place before the emperor; from this group, the First Scholar (*zhuangyuan* 狀元) would be chosen.

The expression “three successive firsts” (*liangzhong sanyuan* 連中三元) implies a wish for candidates to successfully pass the three highest levels of examination (provincial, metropolitan, and imperial). In decorative arts, this wish is conveyed through the image of three citrons (*sanyuan* 三椽), a pun for wishing the candidate to come first in all three exams (*sanyuan* 三元).

Other images associated with this theme that can be seen on objects in this exhibition include a scholar plucking a branch of osmanthus blossoms from the moon, which is a pun on the phrase “becoming the First Scholar in the imperial exam”; lotus and egrets, a pun on “passing exams all the way”; and swallows and apricot blossoms, a pairing that represents successful candidates attending the imperial banquet in their honor.

祿

Lu



WISHES FOR RANK

Luxing (祿星), the Star God of Rank and Official Salary, is usually depicted as an official on his way to court wearing a brocade robe and a jade-encrusted belt and carrying a tablet (an item of court paraphernalia). Sometimes, he is represented as a deer (*lu* 鹿), as the word for this animal sounds like “official salary” (*lu* 祿)—the money that arises from having governmental rank.

In ancient China, rank was equated with wealth; once a man became an official he was more or less set for life. Parents ardently wished their sons to become scholars in order that they might pass the civil service examinations and become officials. This wish extended to rising in rank and to keeping an official position in the family.

The monkey (*hou* 猴) is an important symbol of rank because its name is a pun for a high-ranking noble (*hou* 侯). The dragon and phoenix, emblems of the emperor and empress, also suggest rank and power.



WISHES FOR WEALTH

Prosperity could be accumulated not only from the official salary (the most prestigious means), but also through business ventures, inheritance, and so on. Wealth and honor are symbolized by, among other things, the peony (*mudan* 牡丹, *fugui hua* 富貴花) because this flower was first cultivated in the imperial gardens. Wishes for wealth can also be represented by gold ingots and coins, or fish (*yu* 魚), a pun for abundance (*yu* 餘). Variations on the fish motif include a pond filled with goldfish (*jinyu* 金魚), which signifies a household filled with gold (*jin* 金) and jade (*yu* 玉). This association is one of the reasons some Chinese keep goldfish in their homes and offices.

Longevity

壽
Shou



Longevity ranks first among the Five Blessings, which also include wealth, health, love of virtue, and a peaceful death. The Star God Shoulao (壽老), a popular god of longevity, is depicted as a benevolent old gentleman who has a large cranium and holds a staff and the peach of immortality.

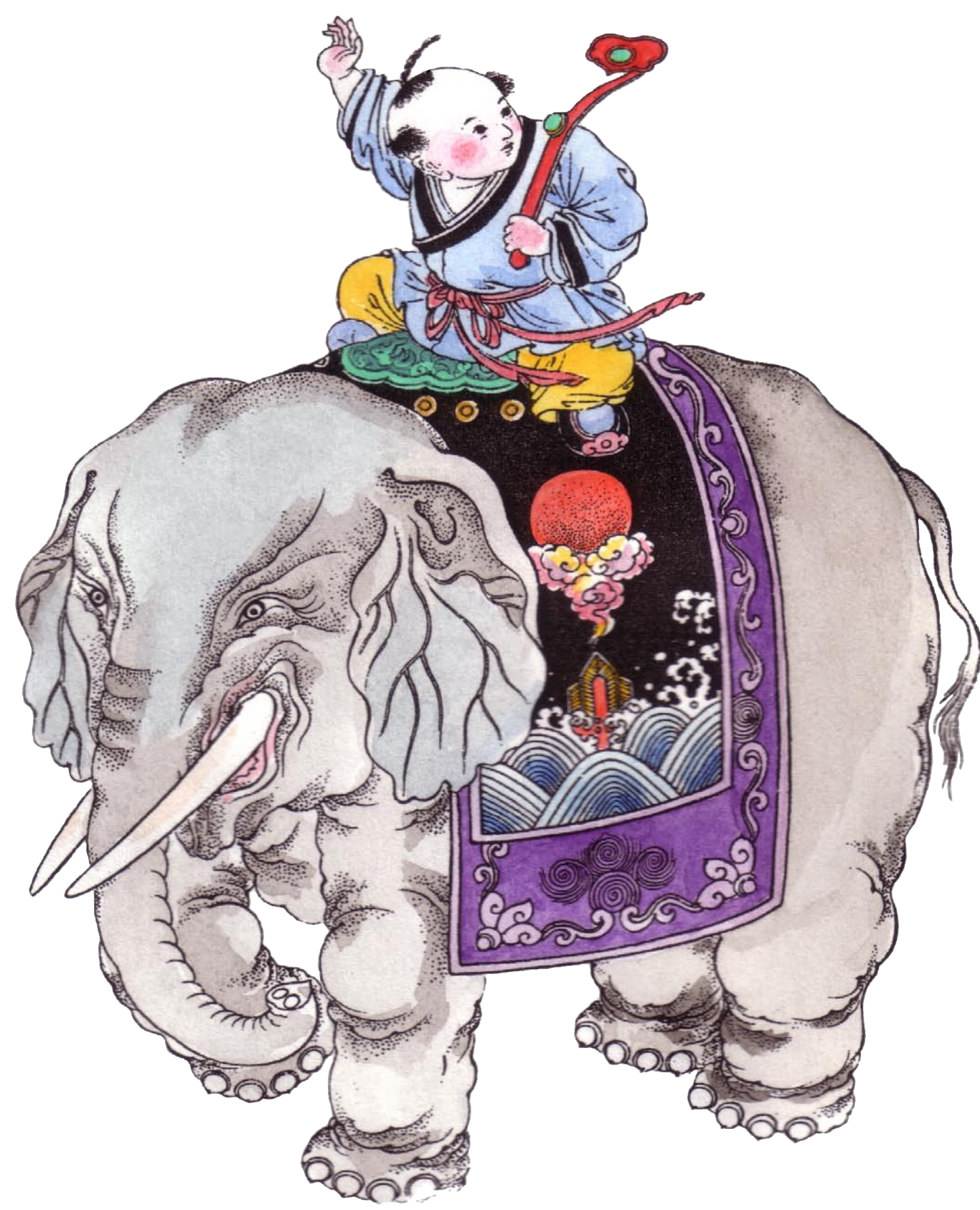
As the primary symbol of longevity, the peach is of paramount importance in Chinese culture, and it is one of the most popular decorative motifs. The peach brings to mind Xiwangmu (西王母), the Queen Mother of the West, who had a peach orchard in her mountain abode. Her peach trees would bloom every three thousand years, and the fruit took just as long to ripen. Harvesting these peaches was cause for great celebration; many of the immortals—also regarded as gods of longevity—were invited to attend the Queen Mother's Peach Banquet and to partake of the fruit of immortality.

Other prominent symbols of longevity include the long-growing pine and cypress, the supposedly long-living crane and deer, the ribbon-tailed bird, and the sacred fungus of immortality.

Peace and Wish Fulfillment

平安
Ping'an

如意
Ruyi



In traditional China, often several generations of a family lived under one roof, so wishes for peace and harmony in marriage and family relations were especially important. Emperors wished for a peaceful reign and for their descendents to stay on the throne forever.

The elephant, through a rather complicated pun, is associated with peaceful and harmonious times. Before the invention of paper, strips of bamboo (*zhu* 竹) were used for sending messages of peaceful tidings, which is how bamboo came to be associated with peace.

The Chinese term *ruyi* (如意) means “as you wish,” which is shorthand for “May all your wishes come true.” In China people customarily express wishes for others to have good fortune and for all their wishes to be granted (*jixiang ruyi* 吉祥如意).

The wish-granting wand (also *ruyi* 如意), whose head resembles the sacred fungus of immortality (*lingzhi* 靈芝), is the most important symbol for the granting of wishes. Sometimes the wand’s head is used as a motif to embellish porcelains, furniture, and other decorative arts. This popular motif takes a variety of other forms, including clouds.