

CHINESE SYMBOLISM AND ART MOTIFS

A Comprehensive Handbook on Symbolism
in Chinese Art Through the Ages

with over 400 illustrations

Fourth Revised Edition



by C.A.S. WILLIAMS

with an introduction
to the new edition by
TERENCE BARROW



Rat

(鼠)

The written symbol for this animal is derived from the ancient pictogram of a rat, figuring the head, whiskers, feet, and tail.

The rat is one of the symbolical animals corresponding to the first of the TWELVE TERRESTRIAL BRANCHES (*q.v.*), and is an emblem of timidity and meanness. It is also regarded as the symbol of industry and prosperity on account of its ability for locating, acquiring and hoarding abundant supplies of food.

It is a recognised article of diet in Canton, where it is dried and exposed for sale, and chiefly consumed by the boat-population (蛋家), and by persons who have a tendency to baldness, the flesh being considered an effective "hair-restorer."

These vermin are very numerous and act as carriers of a parasite which serves as a host for the plague-germ, which causes so much devastation in North China. The **marmot** or tarbagan, *Arctomys bobac*, for the skins of which there is a great demand, is another rodent believed to be instrumental in the transmission of bubonic and pneumonic plague.

The rat was supposed by the ancient Chinese to turn into a quail in the spring, and quails into rats during the eighth month. The actual date of transformation was recorded in the imperial almanac.

Reed-organ

(笙)

The *shēng*, or reed-organ, is a musical instrument consisting of 17 bamboo tubes of 5 different lengths inserted into the upper part of a gourd, which also contains a wooden mouthpiece in its lower end.

It is said to have been invented by Nǚ Wā (女媧), sister and successor of the legendary Emperor Fú Yì (伏羲), 2953–2838 B.C., and is intended to symbolize the PHOENIX (*q.v.*), the reeds resembling the tail of that bird of good omen. It was formerly used at weddings,