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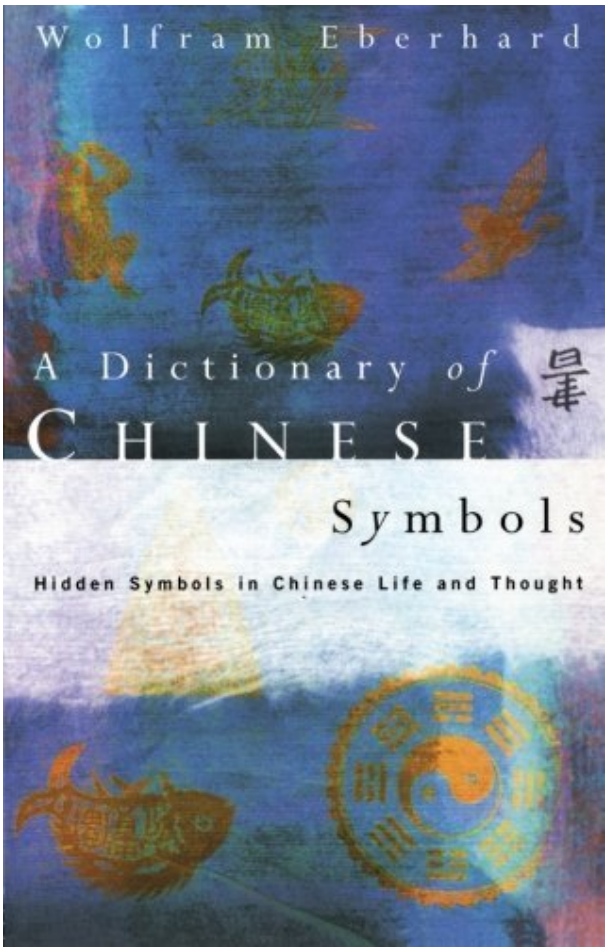

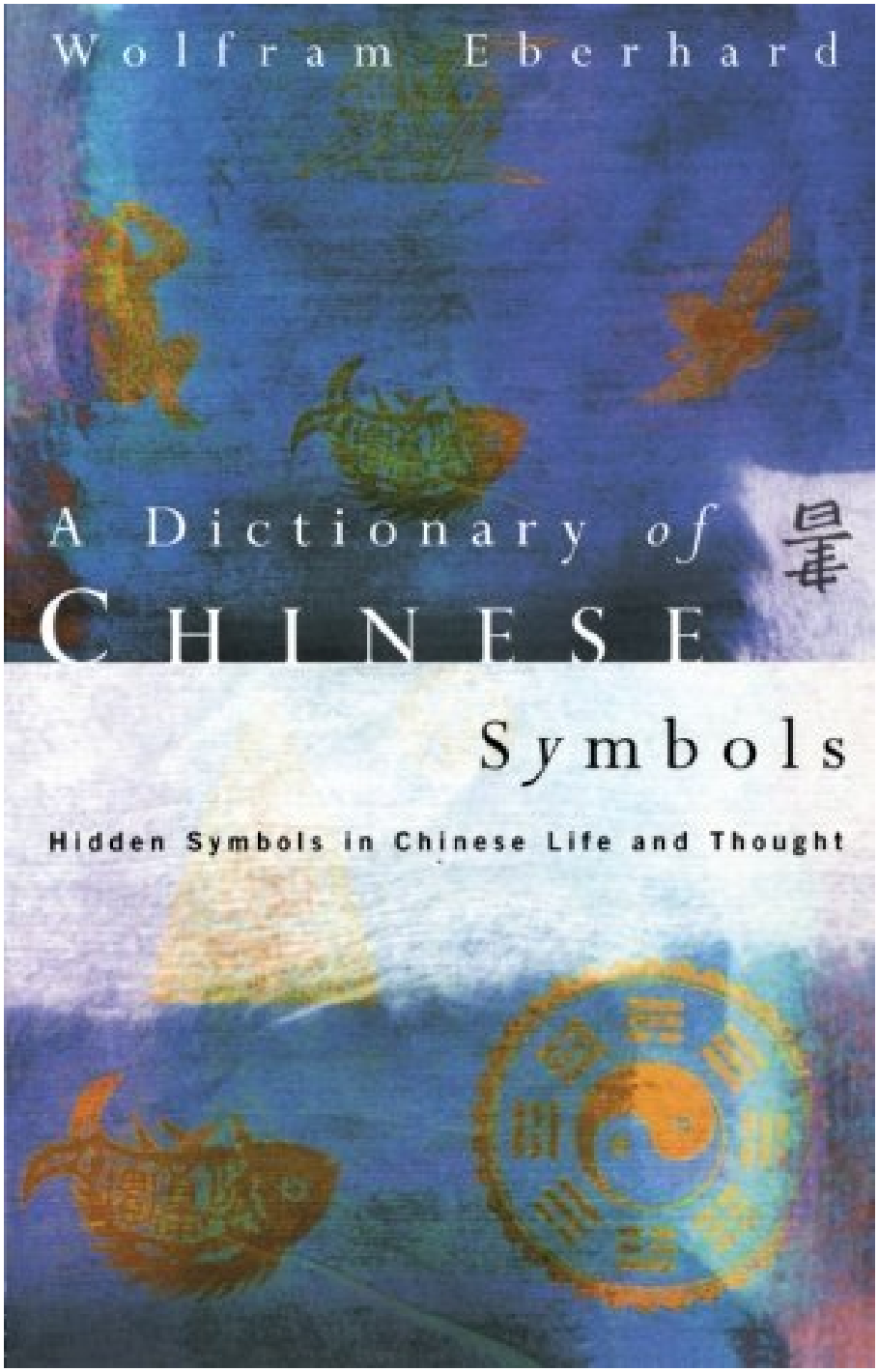

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Review
"An ideal reference book to help one learn and explore further, while simultaneously giving greater insight into many other aspects of Chinese life. . . . The most authoritative guide to Chinese symbolism available to the general reader today. . . . [A] well researched, informative and entertaining guide to the treasure trove of Chinese symbols."
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Language Notes
Text: English, German (translation)

From the Back Cover
This book contains some four hundred symbols, and even a casual runthrough will show how many of these are concerned with the same few basic themes. These were the things that mattered to the Chinese in their everyday lives, their heart's desires-to live a long and healthy life, to attain high civic and social rank, and to have children (i.e. to have sons).

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This unique and authoritative guide describes more than 400 important Chinese symbols, explaining their esoteric meanings and connections. Their use and development in Chinese literature and in Chinese customs and attitudes to life are traced lucidly and precisely.
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Most helpful customer reviews

34 of 35 people found the following review helpful.
Essential to understand Chinese culture.
By A Customer
I am half Chinese and lived in Taiwan for a few years. Growing outside Chinese culture, I found this

dictionary very informative on learning about the meaning of many things I saw in Taiwan. For example, why fish are seen in many stores, why is there a phoenix and a dragon at every wedding, who are the different Chinese deities and gods, why is eight such a popular number, what does it mean to give oranges to someone, why you shouldn't wear anything white on your hair, etc. Until a better dictionary of symbols comes out, this one is essential to your understanding of Chinese culture.

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.
slipshod editing, uneven scholarship
By Brian Watson
Although an excellent broad approach to Chinese symbolism, the reader is subjected to horrific type layout issues, with a myriad of misplaced hyphens making each page a veritable minefield of visual assault.

To make matters worse, the author is wonderfully detailed on some subjects, and then worse than cursory on others.

And for some reason, we're subjected to handwritten Chinese characters. Surely this book needs a major overhaul.

26 of 26 people found the following review helpful.
Ian Myles Slater on: Revealing Meaning
By Ian M. Slater
"A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols" is the work of Wolfram Eberhard (1909-1989) A German-born Sinologist and sociologist, and a political refugee from Hitler, he spent eleven years in Turkey introducing Sinology to that country at Ankara University, and then most of the rest of his career (1948-1976) at the University of California at Berkeley, in the then-new Department of Sociology. He published in German, English, and Turkish, on both standard Sinological subjects and Chinese and comparative folklore, and the local cultures of China and adjacent areas. His "Dictionary of Chinese Symbols" is based on a lifetime of study, and an unusual diversity of experience.

The bulk of Eberhard's publications (thirty-five books, 195 articles, 300-some book reviews) are usually fairly technical, or, if popular, rapidly becoming obsolete. (His "History of China," first published in German in 1948, was last revised in 1977, just before an explosion of archeological and other work.) However, his "Folktales of China" (1965), part of University of Chicago Press series aimed at both college students and the general public, should be accessible to most readers, if a copy is available. The present volume was also apparently aimed at a wider public, although it was well-received by Sinologists.

The 1983 German edition of "Lexicon chinesischer Symbole," translated by G. L. Campbell, as "A Dictionary of Chinese Symbols," was his last major work. It is the condensed -- in some ways perhaps too condensed -- product of a lifetime of study. It is organized not around the meaning of Chinese art motifs as such, but around the symbolic associations of the written characters of classical China, with their fully pictorial counterparts as supporting data; and it includes primarily verbal symbolisms as well. (More exactly, while the Chinese script isn't pictographic, some pictures are "read" as if they were phonetic -- so that a picture of a "lu" (a deer), which often stands for "longevity," may also be seen instead as "the exact phonetic equivalent" word "lu" meaning "good income," and interpreted as "riches" instead (see Deer, page 79, and cross-references.)

It is primarily historical, and, inevitably, very selective: "no more than an introduction to the subject," according to the author. A topic is always given its Chinese character, or set of characters; and many are illustrated from traditional art, mostly reproduced rather well. Eberhard uses the traditional, or "full" forms of Chinese characters, rather than the recent simplified forms, pointing out that the symbolic associations

may depends on the perceived imagery of at least part of the character, as well as on, or in addition to, its phonetic reading. (He doesn't get into the real history, which may be different, given shifts in the spoken language and development of the written forms.)

Eberhard does use survival of ideas into modern times -- by which he apparently means the first part of the twentieth century -- as an important criterion of selection. There is, however, no attempt made to include specifically *modern* China, whether the mainland or Taiwan, in any systematic way. The reader who is interested in classic Chinese literature, or traditional art probably will be far better served than those interested in twentieth-century innovations or drastic adaptations. A history encompassing millennia is given priority over recent decades. But, if modernity as such is given short shrift, Eberhard often notes the geographic and cultural distribution of a concept or image within China, instead of offering an impression of "all Chinese ... at all times." To those without access to the primary and secondary sources (the latter of which include some of Eberhard's own publications), this feature is very important all by itself.

First published at a time when the mainland government was pressing the claims of its official "Pinyin" system for Romanizing Chinese as the international standard, the transliteration used in the book, at least in its English-language version, represents a compromise. It uses the character set of Pinyin, instead of the old Wade-Giles system (or a German equivalent), but breaks up the long polysyllabic forms of the official version with hyphens, in the Wade-Giles manner. This is, I am sure, annoying to those who know and like the Pinyin system, but it is a practical compromise. The uninitiated, faced by, say, "huijiaotu" (Muslims) are, I would think, at least as likely to try pronouncing it as huiji-aot-u as they are to read it as hui-jiao-tu, the form given here.

Eberhard was very much aware of theoretical issues, and raises some in his brief Introduction, which deals with written Chinese as itself a symbolic system. He mentions, with regret, that he was not able to include the symbolic systems of Chinese craftsmen, and explains that Buddhist and Taoist symbols are included only if they are meaningful to ordinary Chinese. He adds that the full range of Chinese symbolism, and its functions, remains to be explored and evaluated, but he does not turn a dictionary into a vehicle for promulgating his own theories.

The main purpose of the "Dictionary" is to present useful information in a condensed fashion. It succeeds at this quite brilliantly. While not as all-encompassing as Williams' antiquated (and not always reliable) "Outlines of Chinese Symbolism," and lacking the sheer beauty of Fang Jing Pei's "Symbols and Rebuses in Chinese Art: Figures, Bugs, Beasts, and Flowers," it is dense with relevant, and authentic, information. The simple indication of a cross-reference, an arrow pointing at the head-word of another article, is usually less distracting than common alternatives, such as the use of italics, small capitals, or boldface, although in a few articles their abundance becomes an obstacle to reading.

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