

Fu Lions

Chinese guardian lions, also called Fu (Foo) Lions, lions of Buddha, or sometimes stone lions (石獅, Pinyin: Shíshī) in Chinese art, are a common representation of the lion in pre-modern China, which is believed to have powerful mythic protective powers that has traditionally stood in front of Chinese Imperial palaces, temples, emperors' tombs, government offices, and the homes of government officials and the wealthy from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), until the end of the empire in 1911.

Lions of Fo are always created in pairs, with the male playing with a ball and the female with a cub. They occur in many types of Chinese pottery and in Western imitations.



Pairs of Chinese guardian lions, also called Chinese stone lions are still common decorative and symbolic elements at the entrances to restaurants, hotels, supermarkets and other structures, with one sitting on each side of the entrance, in China and in other places around the world where the Chinese people have immigrated and settled, especially in local Chinatowns.

In Tibet, the guardian lion is known as a Snow Lion and similar to Japanese shishi. In Myanmar they are called Chinthe and gave their name to the World War II Chindit soldiers.

Appearance

The lions are traditionally carved from decorative stone, such as marble and granite or cast in bronze or iron. Because of the high cost of these materials and the labor required to produce them, private use of Imperial guardian lions was traditionally reserved for wealthy or elite families. Indeed, a traditional symbol of a family's wealth or social status was the placement of Imperial guardian lions in front of the family home. However, in modern times less expensive lions, mass produced in concrete and resin, have become available and their use therefore no longer restricted to the elite.

The lions are always presented in pairs, with the female on the left and the male on the right. The male lion has his right paw on a ball, which represents the "Flower of life" The female is essentially identical, but has a single cub under her left paw, representing the cycle of life. Symbolically, the female fu lion protects those dwelling inside, while the male guards the structure. Sometimes the female has her mouth closed, and the male open. This symbolizes the enunciation of the sacred word "om". However, Japanese adaptations state that the male is inhaling, representing life, while the female exhales, representing death. Other styles have both lions with a single large pearl in each of their partially opened mouths. The pearl is carved so that it can roll about in the lion's mouth but sized just large enough so that it can never be removed.



According to feng shui, when facing the entrance the male lion with the globe should be placed on the right with the female on the left.

History

Interestingly, the lion is not indigenous to China; however Asiatic lions were once quite common in neighboring India. These Asiatic lions found in nearby India are the ones depicted in Chinese culture. As Buddhism was spread in China by traveling Buddhist priests and monks from India, they brought with them stories about stone Asiatic or Indian lions guarding the entries to Indian Buddhist temples & monasteries and the palaces of Indian Kings. Chinese sculptors modeled lion statues after native dogs for use outside their temples and palaces, as nobody in ancient China had ever seen a real lion before. The mythic version of the animal was known as the Lion of Fo, the word Fo 佛 being Chinese for Buddha. The Chinese word for lion is "Shi" which was adopted from their Sanskrit name "Sinh" in the neighboring India.

The Buddhist version of the Lion was originally introduced to Han China as the protector of dharma and these lions have been found in religious art as early as 208 BC. Gradually they were incorporated as guardians of the Chinese Imperial dharm. Lions seemed appropriately regal beasts to guard the emperor's gates and have been used as such since.

The mythic Lion is sometimes associated with feng shui, and are often called Fu Lions. Fu means 'happiness' in Chinese; however, the term "Fu Lion," and its variant Foo Lion, are not used in Chinese. Instead, they are known as Rui Shi (瑞獅) ("auspicious lions") or simply Shi ("lions").

There are various styles of imperial guardian lions reflecting influences from different time periods, imperial dynasties, and regions of China. These styles vary in their artistic detail and adornment as well as in the depiction of the lions from fierce to serene.

It is believed that the Chow Chow breed of Chinese dogs is one of the native dogs used as the original model for the creation of Chinese guardian lions. No one in China had ever seen a real lion before. Hearing the stories carried by Buddhist monks, Chinese sculptors modeled statues of Fu or Foo lions, the lions of Buddha, after these native dogs, thus creating an icon of an animal never before seen in China, the Chinese guardian lion. Chow Chow is a breed of dog that was first developed in Mongolia about 4,000 years ago and was later introduced into China, where it is referred to as *Songshi Quan* (Pinyin: sōngshī quǎn 鬆獅犬), which literally means "puffy-lion dog."