

A Picture Speaks a Thousand Words The Spring Ox

by Beverly Bestpitch



Want to know what the weather will be like at a glance? How about the total rainfall for the year, or even the crop harvest? You can tell all this and so much more by a single drawing. These clever illustrations are depicted in the Chinese Almanac, or Tong Shu. In ancient times, many Chinese could not read, so they used pictures to convey their messages.

One drawing that has stayed with the Chinese over the years is the Spring Ox picture. The symbolism is very strong. Let's take a deeper look at this fascinating drawing. Color, placement of the cowboy, how he is dressed, and information about the cow in the picture all have deep meanings, telling the viewer about the weather and the crop harvest during the year. There are two Spring Ox pictures in the Tong-Shu. The one in the front of the book depicts the weather and harvest for the current year, and the one in the back of the book represents the weather and harvest for the following year.

There are actually two New Year's celebrations in Chinese culture. The first, Lunar New Year's celebration lasts for two weeks. The second is the solar New Year, which always falls on February 4th or 5th. Li Chun is the "First Day of Spring", and is the first day of the year in the Solar Calendar, which is used in Feng Shui and in Four Pillars calculations.

The Spring Ox picture is a symbol of people's wish for a bumper harvest, a happy life and favorable crop weather. There is a poem on both sides of the picture, also telling of the weather and the harvest. The sun in the sky, the flowers & grass on the ground & the crops are fixed in the picture every year so thus have no really significant meaning. The twenty-four solar terms are printed below the illustration for farmers to use as a reference. Hot and Cool weather is defined by the Sun; if it is a cool year, but a little warmer than the previous year, the Sun is depicted brighter and visa versa.

The two most important parts of the picture are the cowboy and the cow. Agriculture was paramount in ancient times, and is still important today. The cowboy's clothes, his age, the fatness of the cow, and the weather portrayed are important clues as to what kind of year it will be. The colors used are important, as well. Five colors are used: red, black, white, green, and yellow, which represent fire, water, metal, wood, and earth, the five elements found in nature.

In the picture, the main things we need to focus on are the ox, and the male figure standing with the ox.

The cowboy, or Spring God is very significant. He is drawn as a handsome herder. Mang Shen can also be thought of as The Guardian of the Field, or "God of Grain". In some translations, grain means "life". Without grain or rice, there is no life. He is responsible for the growth of all earthly things. His height in Chinese is 3 Chi, 6 Cun and 5 Fen, representing 365 days of the solar year.

Where he stands in relation to the ox foretells the timing of the arrival of spring. If the first day of spring falls on the last month of the Chinese Lunar year the cowboy stands in front of the ox. This also indicates spring will come earlier than usual. If spring falls on the first month of the new Lunar year, the cowboy appears behind the ox, signifying the frozen earth would remain longer than normal and is not yet suitable for farmers to plant their crops.

If he stands on one leg that means the weather is very good (no flood & not very dry) all year.

Whether he is shown as a young or old is according to the year of the earthly branch. If he is a young boy, it indicates the years of Chen (dragon), Xu (dog), Chou (ox), or Wei (goat). A middle-aged man indicates the years of Yin (tiger), Shen (monkey), Si (snake), or Hai (pig); or as an old man, Zi (rat), Wu (horse), Mao (rabbit), or You (rooster).

If he is wearing a hat, it will be a hot year, not wearing a hat means a cooler year is ahead.

The hair-buns in different positions of the cowboy's head also signify elements of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, the element of the first day of spring.

The Spring God's footwear forecasts the amount of water in the coming year. If he is bare-foot, it tells farmers to prepare for excessive rain, as there is no point in wearing shoes in wet weather. If he wears grass sandals, people should prepare for prevailing drought; and if he wears only one sandal, the weather in the New Year will be pleasant. If he wears shoes, it means there will be a problem of dry weather (not good for farming). If he has one bare foot, that means there would be enough rain in the year, resulting in a bumper harvest. If he stands on one leg, the weather will be perfect (no floods, and not very dry) all year.

Many clothes indicate cold weather; few clothes indicate heat. The color of the clothing & the belt equates to different energies. A red belt warns of sickness while a white one predicts good health. The knot color represents the branch of the day Li Chun. Blue clothes means subdued times, white belt represents growth. If he rolls up his trousers, that means too much rain, and there would be flooding.

The length of his staff or whip in Chinese is two Chi, four Cun equating to the 24 Jie Qi (the 24 weather periods in the year).

The Spring Ox symbolizes the coming of spring, and the change of the season. The height of the ox is always the same; it is 4 Chi, which represents the four seasons. The length represents the eight season divisions. The weight of the ox shows the extent of the harvest.

The body of the ox is divided into different colored parts according to the "Heavenly Stems" and the "Earthly Branches". The body color shows the year Branch, and will be one of the five colors. The stomach relates to the element associated with the Stem and the Branch, for example if the element were metal, the stomach would be white. If the picture is without color, the explanation will be printed under the picture.

The color of the head, predicts the weather for spring. If the head is red, drought is predicted for spring. Yellow is indicative of heat; green, sickness; white, high winds, and black, means a lot of rain is on the way for spring. The horns and ear colors show the Stem of the year.

If the ox's mouth is open, it corresponds to a yang year; closed mouth is a yin year.

Length of the tail represents the 12 months. The color of the tail represents the day stem. The tail bent to the left is yang year, while the tail towards the right side represents a yin year.

The shin color represents the branch of the first day of spring, and the hoof color represents the element of the first day of spring.

You can see, with all these details the Spring Ox picture is not just another pretty picture! It shows a significant amount of information. The farmers rely on these drawings to know when to plant, insuring a good crop, which in turn contributes to their continued success and prosperity in their lives.