

To Mum, Dad, and my dear friend Basquali.
In memory of Tibor.

five-fold happiness

chinese concepts of *luck, prosperity, longevity,
happiness, and wealth*

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introduction

Good fortune and auspicious thought are central to all aspects of Chinese life and culture. The Chinese believe that by layering their lives with lucky objects and images, they increase their chances of a happy and prosperous existence. Over the centuries, a symbolic language has evolved that expresses these ideas in art, craft, architecture, language, and everyday objects. Lucky words and phrases were used to create an environment protected from misfortune, bad omens, and disaster. In the Han dynasty (206 B.C. – A.D. 220), these felicitous words, phrases, and motifs began to appear on vessels and utensils, and later spread to other forms of decorative arts.

Because the Chinese language consists of many words distinguished by only a slight variation in tone, it is especially susceptible to puns and wordplay. Many of the objects and symbols in this book derive their iconic status from puns with lucky words, depicted visually as rebuses. These pictorial puns, known as *jí xiàng lì ǎn*, developed sometime in the Song dynasty (960 – 1279). Typically, they are represented by four Chinese characters or a combination of objects with little obvious relationship. For example, a picture of a bat with an ancient Chinese coin represents 'luck before one's eyes,' because the word 'bat' sounds the same as the word 'luck,' *fú*, and the coin's square center is known as an 'eye,' *yǎn*.

The symbols in this book represent the five most sought-after values in Chinese culture—luck, *fú*, prosperity, *lì*, longevity, *shòu*, double happiness, *xì*, and wealth, *cái*. The three concepts

fú, *lì*, *shòu* are frequently grouped together and represented by their corresponding deities—the God of Luck, the God of Prosperity, and the God of Longevity. These figures are highly revered, and many Chinese throughout the world display their statues or images in their homes. A multitude of rebuses have been created to represent the three values in combination. Their importance is embodied in the saying 'In Heaven there are three lucky stars, on Earth there are *fú*, *lì*, *shòu*.'

While the majority of the objects and symbols in this book are traditional, more recently developed icons, such as the number eight and the beckoning cat, which both signify wealth, have also been included. Many of the symbols, old and new, encompass multiple meanings and could appear in several chapters. To simplify matters, I have placed each one in the category that has the strongest resonance with that symbol. In retelling the legends behind the symbols, I have drawn on the best-known ones, as the stories vary from dynasty to dynasty and place to place. All references to New Year are to the Chinese Lunar New Year—a celebration that begins on New Year's Eve and ends on the full moon fifteen days later. In the Western calendar, Chinese Lunar New Year falls on a different date every year, between late January and early March. Dates of dynasty periods are A.D. unless otherwise specified. And finally, the Chinese text is an approximate translation of the English. The standard phonetic system of *pīn yīn* has been used to transcribe all Chinese words into English.

rebuses = an illusional device that use pictures to represent words
or parts of words.

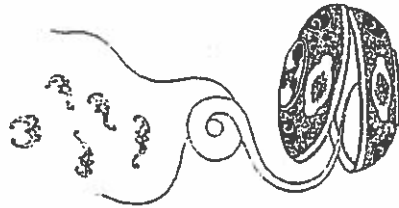
The character *fú* represents 'good fortune,' 'blessings,' or 'luck.' Since ancient times, the desire for *fú* has been widespread, and its popularity is reflected in many applications of decorative arts, architecture, and clothing. Beginning in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a large *fú* character would often be found at entranceways of buildings to

bring a continuous flow of good fortune through the door. Phrases and pictures express this thought, such as 'the God of Luck brings fortune,' *fú xīng* *gāo zhào*, and 'an abundance of luck and long life,' *duō fú duō shòu*. Symbols for luck include the bat, the *rú yì* scepter, the fruit known as Buddha's hand, and the God of Luck.



bat / Five bats grouped together create the extremely auspicious and popular motif 'five good fortunes'; *wǔ fú*—longevity, wealth, health, love of virtue, and natural death. The phrase 'may the five fortunes arrive at one's door'; *wǔ fú lín mén*, is a common wish. When the five bats are arranged in a circle around the Chinese character for longevity, the result is a rebus for *wǔ fú péng shòu*, an extremely powerful motif for good fortune and longevity. An image of five bats flying above a round box or container signifies 'harmony and the five fortunes'; *wǔ fú hé hé*, because 'box' and 'harmony' both sound the same, *hé*.

蝙蝠 ■ 五只蝙蝠圍成一圈，則構成廣為流行的吉祥圖案〈五蝠臨門〉「長壽、富裕、健康、美德和善終」。當五只蝙蝠圍著「壽」字排列，就創造出「五福捧壽」的寓意，成為「福」與「壽」的精彩設計。五只蝙蝠盤旋在圓盒之上，寓意「五福和合（盒）」，因為「盒」與「合」諧音。



五福捧壽

vase / P: pronounced *píng*. the vase represents peace and safety; *píng píng ān ān*, because of a play on the first character in the word 'peace'; *píng ān*. A vase presented to a friend as a gift conveys a wish for peace. A picture of a vase with flowers from all four seasons is a rebus for 'may one enjoy peace in all seasons'; *sì jì píng ān*. The word 'apple'; *píng guō*, sounds similar and is thus another symbol for 'peace'. During the New Year period, if a vessel is broken, the phrase *sù sù píng ān*, meaning 'peace and safety every year', is spoken to offset the bad omen, since *sù* means both 'to break' and 'year'. The vase can be found as a motif in many aspects of folk art, including paper cuts, woodcuts, stone carvings, and New Year pictures.

瓶 ■ 「瓶」與「平」諧音，因此瓶代表著平安與和平，平平安安。送一個花瓶給朋友作禮物，即傳達了平安的祝願，瓶裡插著四季的花卉，寓意「四季平安」。「蘋果」這個詞也因與「平」諧音，被視作和平與平安的象徵。在新年期間，如果打碎一個花瓶，為了抵消不吉利的意思，人們將會說「歲歲平安」，因為「碎」與「歲」諧音。花瓶的圖案，廣泛地應用在中國藝術的各個方面，包括剪紙、木刻、石刻，以及年畫。

peace (*píng ān*)

The second element of the five-fold happinesses—prosperity, or *lù*—embodies status, honor, and advancement to high office. *Lù* literally means 'official salary.' Great importance was placed upon education because anyone who passed the imperial examinations received the honor of becoming a public official.

Achieving this high rank guaranteed an affluent and fortunate life. *Lù* differs from the fifth element of happiness, *cái*, or 'wealth', because *cái* refers to wealth acquired through business. Symbols for *lù* include the deer, the carp leaping over the dragon's gate, the peony, the monkey, and the God of Prosperity.



Longevity is the most highly esteemed value of the five-fold happinesses. The desire for long life is embodied in traditions such as eating longevity noodles and peaches on an elder's birthday. Wishes for longevity are often inscribed on scrolls displayed in homes: 'life as long as the Southern Mountain,' *shòu bǐ nán shān*, 'ten thousand long lives without end,' *wàn shòu wú jiàng*, and 'life as long as the tortoise and crane,' *guī líng hè shòu*.

Expressions of the desire for longevity can be traced back as far as the Shang and Zhou dynasties (1600–256 B.C.), with phrases such as *wàn shòu*, 'ten thousand lives,' and *jūn zǐ wàn nián*, meaning 'nobility and ten thousand years.' The word for longevity, *shòu*, has been found engraved on bronze from the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1027–256 B.C.). Respect for elders, an important Chinese virtue, is documented in texts in the Warring States



period (480–221 B.C.). According to Confucian thought, moral conduct was essential to living a long life, as conveyed in the saying 'compassion brings longevity, immortality brings early death.' Symbols representing the wish for longevity include the peach, the pine tree, the crane, the fungus of immortality, the God of Longevity, and the Queen Mother of the West.



nine (jiǔ)

nine / The number nine is an extremely propitious number as it is a pun on the word 'forever', *jiǔ*. At New Year, the first meal often consists of nine dishes or courses. Many emperors gave the number nine great importance: the total sum of buildings in the imperial palace often added up to a multiple of nine, and in the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), the imperial palace was built with nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine rooms. Objects were given names with the word 'nine': 'nine-dragon wall'; 'nine-dragon cup.' The number also has mysterious properties: when nine is multiplied by any other number, the sum of the digits of the resulting figure, when added together, always equals nine ($6 \times 9 = 54$; $5 + 4 = 9$).

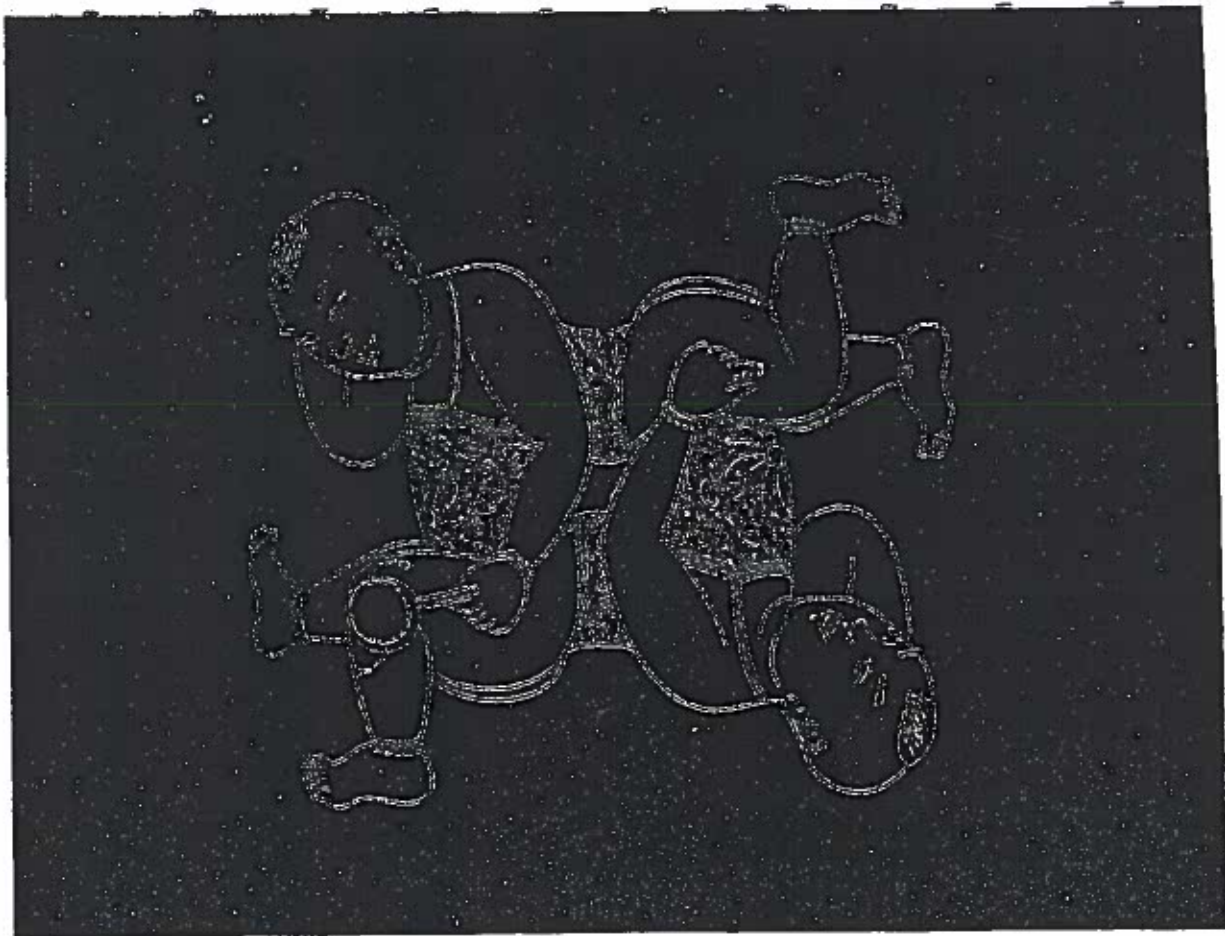
Double happiness is synonymous with one of life's most important celebrations—marriage. Consequently, it is related to the wish for fertility, and is often seen at wedding banquets. The good luck that surrounds this character has made it ubiquitous, and it commonly appears on bowls, glasses, vases, product packaging, and other everyday objects. The character for double happiness is traditionally displayed as a cutout or inscription

on red paper, red being a lucky color. The desire for marital bliss is expressed in numerous proverbial sayings, such as 'may you grow old together in harmony,' *bái tóu xié lǎo*, and 'may you be blessed with one hundred sons and one thousand grandsons,' *bǎi zǐ qiān sūn*. The mandarin duck, the magpie, the lotus, the pomegranate, and the Gods of Peace and Harmony are symbols for marriage and fertility.



四喜娃 ■ 由兩個娃的頭、身、手、足巧妙連接，從上下左右四面可想象成四個娃娃，稱為「四喜娃」，意為四方童子並至，萬子孫承綿延萬代。在明朝，四喜娃曾用青銅或黃銅鑄造。四喜娃的圖畫經常用作結婚禮品。或在嬰兒出生時，祝福其未來吉祥幸福。

four-happiness boys / A picture of two boys connected to create the illusion of four laughing boys is called the 'Four-Happiness Boys', *si xi xi*. Beginning in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), their form was cast in bronze, brass, and copper. The image constitutes a wish for a happy marriage and generations of children and grandchildren. A picture of the four happiness boys is often given as a wedding gift or when a child is born, to wish the newlyweds or the baby a life filled with good fortune and happiness.



Legend of the four-happiness boys / During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a child prodigy by the name of Jie Jin lived in Jishui County, Jiangnan Province. By the age of five, the child had mastered the 'Four Books,' *Si shū*, and the 'Five Classics,' *Wū jīng*, which make up the canon of the Confucian school of thought and are studied by scholars. When the emperor heard of this, he invited Jie Jin to the capital to sit for the imperial exams. He passed the exams without difficulty, then returned home to enter a school where he could study with the county's top scholars.

A teacher at the school thought the boy too young to have risen to such a position and wanted to humble him. One day he asked the students to draw a picture on the theme of the county's bumper harvest—a cause for great happiness. Jie Jin drew a picture of auspicious objects, and titled it 'rú yì scepter with fungus of immortality,' *rú yì líng zhī*. The teacher found fault with his effort. The boy then drew another picture—'beckoning and acquiring good fortune,' *yíng fú nà jí*—but the teacher commented that it lacked originality.

Sensing that the teacher was deliberately making things difficult, Jie Jin then drew a figure with two heads and eight limbs. The teacher now reprimanded Jie Jin in front of all the students for drawing what appeared to be a deformed creature. Jie Jin responded that the picture was of 'four happinesses joined together,' *si xì hé jù*, an image of four boys connected at the waist. The four happinesses, he explained, were the wedding night, passing the imperial exams, running into a friend in a faraway place, and rain after drought—all considered to be among life's major fortunes in ancient China. The teacher was dumbfounded and did not bother Jie Jin after that.

Wealth, *cái*, refers to prosperity attained through flourishing business, trade, or good harvests. It differs from the second level of happiness called 'prosperity', *lù*, which refers to advancement in rank, position, or status. The desire for wealth and success does not have negative connotations but is viewed as a component of

happiness. The Chinese surround themselves with images of wealth in the hope that their businesses will run smoothly, and that profit and fortune will soon come their way. Symbols that represent wealth include the goldfish, the number eight, gold and silver ingots, coins, the *fā cái* plant, and the God of Wealth.