

Six New Symbols from Chinese Folk Religion

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Background

Chinese folk religion is the collection of ethnic religious traditions of China which consists of the worship of the *shen*¹ which can be patron deities (of nature, cities, or other human agglomerations), national deities, cultural heroes and demigods, ancestors and progenitors, and deities of the kinship². According to statistics, 22% of Chinese population (6% of global population) are practicing Chinese folk religion³.

Over the ages, this belief system, like many others, incorporated a fair amount of symbolism specifically for good fortune and auspicious thought. The first appearances of such symbols were found on vessels and utensils from Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). Use of these symbols later spread to other forms of decorative arts⁴.

This document proposes six of the most prominent of such symbols. The symbols proposed here were first considered for addition to complement the set of existing emoji and symbols for religions and religious structure to cover major belief systems worldwide⁵, but due to the

¹ “神” = “expressions” (literal), “spirit”, “god”.

² Wikipedia contributors. “Chinese folk religion”.

³ Pew Research Center. “The Global Religious Landscape”.

⁴ Sung. “Five-Fold Happiness: Chinese Concepts of Luck, Prosperity, Longevity, Happiness, and Wealth”, pp. 11-12.

⁵ Afshar, and Pournader. “Emoji and Symbol Additions - Religious Symbols and Structures”.

opportunity to receive wider feedback, the authors decided to develop a separate proposal document for the consideration of the UTC.

Cultural Context and Significance

Five most common of these felicitous symbols are referred to as “Five-fold Happiness”⁶ and are Luck (福, *fú*), Prosperity (禄, *lù*), Longevity (寿, *shòu*), Happiness (喜, *xǐ*) and Wealth (財, *cái*). A sixth symbol, Double-Happiness (囍, *shuāngxǐ*) which is a variation of 喜, is used as a symbol of love and marriage. Each of these symbols also have their respective deity. Traditionally, the deities for *fú*, *lù*, and *shòu* form a group of three revered stellar gods⁷.



These symbols and their underlying ideographs are usually represented in numerous calligraphic variations and sometimes repeated a hundred times on a single canvas to create talismanic and decorative artifacts.



Variations of *fú*⁸



100 *fú* (*bǎi fú*)⁹



100 *shòu* (*bǎi shòu*)¹⁰

⁶ Sung. Ibid.

⁷ Sung. p. 28.







⁸ <http://www.nipic.com/show/9175922.html>

⁹ Welch. “Chinese Art: A Guide to Motifs and Visual Imagery”.

¹⁰ Guenot. “100 talismanic forms of the character Shou, representing long life”.







In spite of existing calligraphic and decorative variations, there are common and widespread visual representation for these symbols which are collected and annotated in the next section.

Symbols

Pinyin	Han	Symbol for	Symbol	Notes ¹¹
<i>fú</i>	福	Luck		Representing good fortune, blessings, and luck. Used in doorways (particularly during New Year) since Ming Dynasty.
<i>lù</i>	祿/禄	Prosperity		Representing status, honor, advancement to high office, and rank. Literally means “official salary”. Differs from <i>cái</i> which is wealth gained through doing business.
<i>shòu</i>	寿/壽	Longevity		Representing longevity, long life, and respect for elders. One of the most central values of life in ancient China was to live long and die of natural causes.
<i>xǐ</i>	喜	Happiness		Representing joy. Also see <i>shuāngxǐ</i> .
<i>cái</i>	財/财	Wealth		Representing material wealth, flourishing business or trade, and good harvest.
<i>shuāngxǐ</i>	囍	Double-Happiness		Representing love, marriage and marital bliss, and fertility. Appears on wedding decorations.

¹¹ Sung. Ibid.

Symbols Proposed for Encoding

	Symbol	Proposed name
X650		SHENISM SYMBOL FU
X651		SHENISM SYMBOL LU
X652		SHENISM SYMBOL SHOU
X653		SHENISM SYMBOL XI
X654		SHENISM SYMBOL SHUANGXI
X655		SHENISM SYMBOL CAI

Discussion

Although the proposed symbols can be classified as non-notational and non-compatibility, but considering the Unicode Consortium criteria and guidelines for proposing new symbols^{12 13}, the

¹² Unicode Consortium. "Submitting Character Proposals".

¹³ Freytag. "Towards criteria for encoding symbols".

authors find these characters to have a compelling case to be incorporated into the Unicode Standard:

- The proposed symbols are a limited set of letterlike symbols with a very widespread and common usage by a large community;
- Although mostly considered decorative, these symbols complement a set of existing religious symbols;
- These symbols have well-defined semantics which is non-ignorable in processing including searching and indexing.

Naming

As mentioned in the Background section, Chinese folk religion is a belief system based on the worship of *Shen*. “Anthropologist Allan [sic.] Elliott, who studied spirit mediums in Singapore in the 1950s, concluded that the term *shen* could not be translated into English, and chose to call Chinese popular religious culture ‘shenism’”¹⁴.

The authors prefer the names starting with SHENISM SYMBOL, but SHEN SYMBOL would also be acceptable.

Character Properties

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X650;SHENISM SYMBOL FU;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
X651;SHENISM SYMBOL LU;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
X652;SHENISM SYMBOL SHOU;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
X653;SHENISM SYMBOL XI;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
X654;SHENISM SYMBOL SHUANGXI;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
X655;SHENISM SYMBOL CAI;So;0;ON;;;;N;;;;;
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¹⁴ DeBernardi. “The Way that Lives in the Heart: Chinese Popular Religion and Spirit Mediums in Penang, Malaysia”. p. 135.

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