

On Different Numerical Culture between China and Western Country

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Abstract

Being a social ideology, culture is a reflection of certain social politics and economy. It is featured by national and historical continuity. Language is the reflection of culture and studying language can promote the research of culture. However, numbers as a part of language, is important to study numerical cultural differences. With the frequent usage of numbers for communication in daily life between different countries, scholars are focusing on Chinese and Western numbers. Chinese people have different preferences and taboos in numbers from Westerner, affecting people's judgment of the weal and woe. The paper tries to explore the preferences and taboos of number between China and western country. In addition, the reasons of numerical differences including mythology, religious belief, psychology and mode of thinking will be analyzed. It will make people have a profound understanding of Chinese and Western culture by providing a useful reference for cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: numerical culture; preferences and taboos; reasons

I. Introduction

With the rapid development of information and communication technology and traffic technique, it is more convenient for people from different areas and countries to communicate. Faced with dozens of challenges, cross-culture is the basic factor, while people have already overcome the tangible space obstacles that have an influence on mutual exchanges. What's more, language is another obstacle, because language belonging to cultural phenomenon is created by human beings. There are kinds of languages spoken by different people, which makes it difficult for people to communicate. So learning a second language makes it possible for people from different areas to communicate. Learning a new language requires learners to understand its culture. That is because language is the most important part of culture which is a masterpiece of human beings' soul. And all human beings' history is the record of cultural development. Cultural connotations are wide and involved in all aspects of society. Those Arabic numbers express the quantity sequence and hold universal meanings, with which people are familiar. However, the same numbers may express various cultural connotations and implications in different cultural background among countries. What's more, numbers are given all sorts of mysterious luck, taboo and symbolic meanings, which carries a plenty of cultural information and shows vividly cultural features of different nations. That's because it is affected by cultural psychology, religious beliefs and ways of national thinking. Scores of luck and taboo numbers are typical examples.

Numbers are the results of the development of human thinking in a special stage, and it is in need of the production of society. But numbers have got more and more cultural connotations to accompany of the development of society. From ancient times to present, people begin with the different cultural backgrounds to throw the numbers witchcraft, and believe they have trans-natural powers to realize gladness and distresses. From the distinctiveness and differences of digital words, we can find the different cultural historical distinctiveness, the psychic specific of different nations, the habits of different region.

Because of the different geographical environment, religious belief and national psychology between China and Western country, Chinese people have different preferences and taboos in numbers from the Westerners. The preferences and taboos of numbers are an important and indispensable content of language and cultural research in cross-cultural communication. The research of numbers in different languages will promote the comprehension of different cultures and cultural exchange.

II. The expression of numbers

Numbers are used in expressions and idioms in both China and western country, but different religious beliefs and customs have given rise to differences in the expression.

2.1 The Chinese expression

Some numeral words are often applicable to spoken Chinese. For example: “老二” can be used as appellation, indicating the ranking among sisters and brothers; “二百五” represents a stupid person; “十三点” also means a foolish man; “略知一二” refers to the status and the cause of some matters. Other expression: “一字眉” is translated into synophrys, “八字脚” means playfoot, “十字路口” holds a moment or point of decision. In addition, “三七” is a name of Chinese drug.

2.2 The Western expression

In western countries, numbers can signify some affairs or people. For example: 45 implies that a lot of people go to California to find gold in 1849; 89 means the people who have settled down in Oklahoma from 1889 and “one hundred percent” refers to the twelve apostles of Jesus. Besides, one might have several meanings. For example, when it means a noun, it shows a basketball team. When it serves as a verb, to five is equivalent to “I refuse to reply.”

III. The comparison between Chinese and Western numeral culture

Numbers are attached the different meaning to different nations. People may like or hate the same number. The numbers preferences and taboos are evident between China and western country.

3.1 Numbers---worship culture

In people’s life, people believe that a number can bring luck to their activities, so people worship the number. It is a universal phenomenon all over the world. But the preference numbers might not be exactly alike.

3.1.1 The preference of numbers in common

From ancient times to present, in China and western countries, people think that numbers have magic powers and they are able to bring bliss. According to the cultural sources, 3 and 9 are the favorite numbers of the Chinese people and westerners.

In China, the number 3 is written 三, which expresses the relationship of heaven, land and man. Number 3 is the symbols of holiness and luckiness. Number 3 is also a mysterious number, which means consummation and auspiciousness. In Western civilization, number 3 is also the badge of the Christianity Trinity. Number 9 is the multiple of 3. Numbers 8 and 9 are the favorite numbers of the Chinese people and the English speaking countries’ people. In China, number 8 sounds the same as 发, so it means auspiciousness and wealth; and 9 sounds like Chinese character 久, which means longevity and permanence. People all like to have the number 8 or 9 to be number of their telephones, cars, and doors. Some merchandises are priced at 38 or 69. Besides, people also like to choose their wedding ceremony on the date of 8 or 9, because they hope happiness will be with their mate forever.

In Western culture, the number 8 also means auspiciousness. It is also a new outset. According to the narrative of the Bible, number 8 implies longevity, luck, happiness and many descendants. And it also symbolizes the rebirth and eternalness. And the Ptolemaic astronomy has nine days. Number 9 also means many and depth, such as: a cat has nine lives and a stitch in time saves nine.

3.1.2 The preference of numbers in China

In China, people all like numbers 5, 6 and 10. In the daily life, people hope that good things come in pairs and keep the good points of both. Number 5 is mysterious and elegant. It means success, beauty and ambition. Chinese people like to worship the number 6. It symbolizes satisfaction, consummation and health. People also like to use 6 as numbers of phone or car. Number 10 means success, perfection and luck. It is a tradition that national holiday and birthday will have a grand celebration.

3.1.3 The preference of numbers in Western country

Different from Chinese people, the Western people all like numbers of 4 and 7. People think that number 4 is a symbol of justice and strength. In the Western traditional culture, it represents four elements—earth, water, fire and air. Besides, it symbolizes organization, power and wisdom. The number 7 is heavenly, and it represents completion, beauty and auspiciousness.

People think that a week has seven days. Christianity thinks that God creates the world in seven days; Holy Ghost has seven gifts, the seven corporal works of mercy and so on. Besides, some religion languages including seven virtues, the seven sacraments and being in the seventh heaven are typical.

3.2 Different taboos

Like the different numbers preferences, Chinese and Western people also have different taboos.

3.2.1 The taboo of numbers in China

It is wonderful that Western favorite numbers are the taboo numbers in China. Numbers 4 and 7 are two unlucky numbers, because they sound the same of Chinese character 死 and 气. Their Chinese meaning are bad. People do not use 4 as phone numbers, house numbers or the numbers of license plates as much as possible. Besides, people often use number 4 instead of death to chat on the internet, such as: 514, 474, 444 and so on. Number 7 is considered as death. When a man died for seven days, his families and friends are drinking offerings. It is also an argument that the soul comes back in the seventh day. Generally speaking, people can not get married in Lunar July 7. Besides, there are some idioms related to the number 7, such as: seven hands and eight feet means in a state of confusion, anger and so on.

3.2.2 The taboo of numbers in Western country

Numbers 5, 6 and 13 are very horrible for westerners. As is known to everyone, Jesus died on Friday. So Friday just makes people feel fear. On this day, people do not marry, travel, cut nails, or flip the bed, and frighten that bad things will happen. In the light of the Revelations record, number 666 is evil. Later, the "number of the evil 666" evolves into a symbol of the devil, and it means evil.

Number 13 is the top taboo number in the West. In people's life, number 13 is often designated by the name of "a baker's dozen". It is also called ghost number. A long time ago, People began to fear the number 13. A lot of stories are related to number 13. According to the legend of the Bible: the 13th hour is an hour of darkness; 13 means one God and twelve families; Judah sits in the 13th seat. So it is a symbolization of darkness, defection and evil. Westerners escape the 13 to avoid the plague. Nobody likes to use the number 13 as house number, telephone number, number-plate and floor. Besides, nobody like to get marriage on the 13th.

IV. The reasons of numerical cultural differences

There are many kinds of reasons that influence the cultural differences in numbers. Four major reasons of numerical cultural differences are most important, including the effect of mythology, the different religious beliefs, psychological factors of national culture, and way of thinking.

4.1 The reason of mythology

The numbers have close relation to the mythology. The deities of Chinese mythology are often far away from the Earth, but the gods of western mythology have the characters of human beings. And they have human feelings, such as; happiness, danger, enmity and so on. The different mythology can intensely influence cultural development and connotations of numbers. In the myth of China, Chinese deities are the symbols of auspiciousness and virtue, and they are other world embodiment of supreme reign.

From ancient to modern times, Chinese fairy tales and folk tales always include number 7, such as: Dongyong and seven fairy tales, the myth of the Big Dipper. And Nuwa Empress "7th" made man myth. The Western Han Dynasty was discovered on Changsha in the 1970s, and the Warring States recorded that the myth of the Yellow Emperor with four faces were unearthed, which was explained that he sent four persons to govern the four directions and all corners.

In the mythology of China, there is a paranormal man, Nezha. He is in charge of justice. He has three heads and six hands and possesses extraordinary powers. Accordingly, the number 3 is given a strong, powerful and magical meaning. In Roman mythology, Lord god Jupiter's authority comes from the three-pronged thunder-stick in his hand; Pluto is a dog and he has three heads; Sea-god Neptune depends on his three-pronged spear. And the world is ruled by the three gods above.

In terms of the myths of ancient Greek, once there were twelve gods dining together in Heaven for the soldiers who had died in the war. In the course of the dinner, the sinister Rocky who sudden appeared. It was his coming that made the son of the head God die. Since then, the gods have never recovered.

Judging from the above analysis of mythology connecting with numbers in both Chinese and Western cultures, the different mythology can forcefully affect the numbers cultural development and connotations.

4.2 The reason of religion

Religion is the adoration of society behavior standard as well as an important constituent of human ideological culture. According to the attitude of cultural history, religions are often considered to be the core of a national culture. Different religions have different forms of cultural expression, reflecting different cultural characteristics, diverse cultures and cultural traditions. Religion has very strong binds with numbers. In the past, in some developed countries, religion plays a central role in social life. It affects people's daily life impalpably. Out of superstition and fear, the ancestors liked and hated numbers. Some numbers are bewildered to worship or to fear. Numbers can symbolize holyness, consummation, or evil or unluck.

Religion plays an important part in most countries and even can control and dominate the all rights of whole country in the process of historical development. Religious culture gradually becomes the core of a national historic culture, therefore, which has a great impact on the thinking model and cognitive style of whole nation.

As one of the four great ancient civilizations, China has a long history of 5,000 years. The philosophic Confucianism has been dominant for over 2,000 years. For example, Chinese numerical culture is profoundly affected by Buddhism and Taoism. The author of Tao Te Ching writes "Tao gave birth to the one, the one gave birth successively to two things, three things, up to ten thousand" which makes 3 become a holy and perfect number. In addition, some idioms containing numbers that are common-seen in daily life are derived from Buddhism, such as "to consider oneself most fortunate"(三生有幸), San Sheng in Buddhism culture means pre-life, while-life and post-life.

In the Western countries, Christian culture is the social mainstream culture. Many people believe in Christianity and read the Bible. Western cultures originated from ancient Greek and Roman culture, accordingly, Christian culture is the leading form of the culture in people's daily life producing a profound influence on numerical culture in the West. For westerners, numbers are mysterious and unpredictable, and many numbers of associative meaning related to the Bible. Christian believes that the lord God is called the Christian Trinity. According to Christian legend, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is respected as three persons in one God head and they are coequal and indivisible. The Bible records that when Jesus was thirty years old, he came out preaching for three years; Jesus was revived on the third day of affliction; when Jesus died, the sky blacked over three hours. So, in the Western countries, the number 3 is propitious and mysterious.

For example, the admiration of number 3 in the Western countries derives from the trinity that is religious culture of Christian culture. People are accustomed to dividing the number, the development process and the existing ranges of things into three parts for luck. The story of the Bible causes the number 13 evil and ominous. In terms of the Bible, Judah was one of the twelve believers of Jesus. In Passover, Jesus asked his believers to go down and reserve a room in a small inn and they ate all together. In the evening, they sat around a long table and began to eat. Judah looked bland and innocent. Peter asked: "Father, do you have reason to doubt us?" Jesus answered, "Yes, one among you who is now eating at the table will bring mishandle to us." Because of Judah, Jesus was handcuffed and later crucified. In a word, religious beliefs are a moral phenomenon. These impacts are handed down generation by generation.

It also happens to apply to number 7. Consequently, seven days for a week is becoming a tool to measure time in the world. The number 7 is used to express lucky implications originating from Christianity. According to the accounts in "the Creation", god Jehovah spent seven days to make everything. The Bible in the first chapter of Genesis also mentions the number of all kinds of animals on Noah's Ark with the "mother of sevens". The Revelation is also mentioned the number 7, such as seven lamps and seven warriors in front of the throne.

4.3 The reason of psychology

The national cultural psychology of people that is a national intrinsic and relatively stable matter is deriving from the psychological qualities and characteristics formed by cultural inheritance. The national psychology includes a national values, personality and characteristics and so on. Chinese traditional culture has been affected by China's religious culture, native culture of Taoism and Confucianism. The Confucian ethics ideology and the Taoist concept of harmony between man and nature were embodied in Chinese national cultural psychology. From thousands of years of cultural heritage, China is a harmonious society that places a great emphasis on ethics and education, man and nature, man and community.

For example, 'karma' is quiet prominence in the traditional society. In addition, Chinese people advocate even numbers, not only embodying people's auspicious mentality, but also the harmonious world outlook and values advocated by Chinese nation. On one hand, people are fond of even numbers. On the other hand, people also have a strong affectation about symmetry. Those exactly demonstrate Chinese traditional opposed parts.

However, the Western culture is influenced by Bible and Christian doctrine. Therefore, westerners' appreciation for beauty is due to disharmony and asymmetry of things. They advocate individuality, if they were not harmonious with each other conflicts and challenges would come into being. In this way, it can make you out of one million and also embody the existing value of each person. People even think that the society develop under the disharmonious and contradictory conflicts. In cultural psychology, China is so different from Western country. Because Chinese pay attention to ethics, as a value orientation, people always focus more on morality than material. However, westerners are opposite, they take fame, social position and achievements as their own value orientation. That is one of the reasons why westerners advocate odd numbers. By contrast, in Western culture, people believe that odd numbers are associated with good luck except 13. The Western culture under the influence of the Christianity and Bible, people think that the antithesis of things is beautiful, and that the conflict only has fight and defiance. The society develops in the disharmony contradiction. Besides, another psychological factor causes the number connotations. For instance, people like to connect numbers with things. If a certain number happens to be connected with a celebrity, the number will draw people's special attention and become a taboo number. Jesus died on Friday, then westerners just think that Friday is unlucky.

4.4 The reason of thinking mode

Way of thinking being closely connected with culture has been a bridge between language and culture. It could be found out that the living environment in the ancient China and Western countries plays an essential part in differences of thinking way. Chinese people live in the mainland. Hence, people are used to paying attention to the combination of three elements: right time, right place, and right company. People also believe that the opposition and unity of Yin and Yang is the inherent nature of all things. Nevertheless, the Western ancestors live in a rather awful and unsteady ocean environment, which accordingly made westerners attach great importance to the development of the space and forces. They prefer to divide the universe into two completely different worlds. Due to different living environment, way of living is without exception. Material culture, belief and thought are affected by different geographical conditions and ways of living that also affect the way of thinking, characters and life styles of people. Different ways of thinking lead to different cultural psychology among Chinese and Westerners. Such differences reflect on people using numerical idioms. For example, traditional Chinese cultures are always advocating completeness and harmony.

V. Conclusion

Chinese and Western languages, idiomatic expressions and customs are made of many numbers and some related knowledge. Due to cultural factors, a nation always advocates that some certain numbers are defined as holy and lucky signs and other certain numbers are unlucky, which makes certain numbers not only contain its own meanings. Therefore, when a foreign language is learned, careful understanding and contrast researches should be involved. There is an old saying going that when you are in Rome, do as Roman do. People refer to taboos when arriving in a foreign country. A lot of numbers are related to cultural, religious and social taboos among numerical culture. At the same time, the value of Chinese and Western numerical culture should be paid more attention and explored deeply in all aspects. Only in this way, can we avoid touching other's taboos when foreign languages are put into practice in intercultural communication, which is appropriate to make communications with others successfully.

In addition, we should not only attach great importance to the cultural differences between China and West but also focus on the differences of ways of expressions. When we are learning a foreign language, we try to analyze cultural factors in linguistic phenomena, find out the most proper way of expression between the two languages, seek common ground and reserve differences to promote mutual exchanges. Learning differences of numerical culture can help learners understand a language, which is significant to advance intercultural communication. For the past few years, in the wake of the cross-cultural communication, the cross-cultural communication has more and more opportunities. So, it is import understanding the cultural taboos of both countries in intercultural communication.

In a word, we are aware that numbers act an important role in human cultures. The study of the differences of number preferences and taboos is advantageous to avoid unnecessary impoliteness and offense in the intercultural communication.

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