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To Be or Not to Be Superstitious—That's the Question

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Abstract

Numbers, to most Chinese, are considered to be auspicious or inauspicious, depending on the sound of the number. This may appear non-scientific and silly to an outsider, yet most Chinese adhere to this belief. Number 8 is believed to have auspicious meaning because this sound has a positive meaning of prosperity, whereas 4, a negative meaning since the sound is phonologically similar to the meaning of 'death', leading to tetraphobia. The objective of this research is, therefore, to scrutinize Chinese perceptions towards numbers in Hong Kong. An exploratory approach and qualitative survey method were adopted in this study whereby 40 Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua speakers) were interviewed to collect their views on odd, even, and combined numbers. The findings depicted that there were significant differences in their notions and interpretations of these numbers; for instance, 54 (=not die) is a good number to a Cantonese speaker but a bad number (=I'll die) to a Putonghua speaker. To conclude, the sound of these numbers may create a positive/negative psychological effect on people. More research is needed to examine different Chinese speakers (Chiu Chow, Hakka, Fukien etc) living in different cities and countries to document their intuitive reaction towards numbers.

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I. Introduction

In Chinese numerology, the odd numbers 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, ... are referred to as Yang (=male) numbers; the even numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, ... are known as Yin (=female) numbers. A 'lucky number' is a number which is based on Chinese words that sound similar to other words. The numbers '6', '8', and '9' are believed to have auspicious meanings because their sounds are similar to words that have positive meanings; for example, number '8' is a lucky number because it sounds like 'prosperous' (in Cantonese).

On the other hand, numbers 4 and 13 are unlucky numbers, according to the principles of Chinese numerology. The number 4 sounds like the word 'death' (in Cantonese). One should notice here that you do not have to worry much about number 4 if the pronunciation of this number in your language does not sound similar to the word 'death'.

In Hong Kong, some apartments such as 'Vision City' and 'The Arch' skip all the floors from 40 to 49. Immediately above the 39th floor is the 50th floor, leading many who are not aware of tetraphobia to believe that some floors are missing. Tetraphobia is not the main reason but rather serves as an excuse for apartments on 'higher' floors, thus increasing the price since higher floors in Hong Kong apartments are more expensive.

In Cantonese-speaking regions in China, 14 and 24 are considered more unlucky than the individual 4, since 14 sounds like 'will certainly die' (實死) and 24 like 'easy to die' (易死). Where east Asian and western cultures blend, such as in Hong Kong, it is possible in some buildings that both 13 and 14 are skipped as floor numbers along with all the other 4's. When Beijing lost its bid to stage the 2000 Olympic Games, it was speculated that the reason China did not pursue a bid for the following 2004 Games was due to the unpopularity of the number 4 in China. Instead, the city waited for another four years, and would eventually host the 2008 Olympic Games. This is because number eight is a lucky number in Chinese culture.

Chinese numerology is based on homophone principles. Homophones refer to having the same/similar sound but different meanings. Therefore, according to Feng Shui (=Chinese philosophical system of harmonizing everyone with the surrounding environment), words with similar sounds make a number lucky or unlucky.

The five elements related to numbers 1 to 9 are shown below:

- Water is associated with number 1
- Earth is associated with numbers 2, 5, 8
- Wood is associated with number 3
- Wind is associated with number 4
- Sky is associated with number 6
- Metal is associated with number 7
- Fire is associated with number 9

Number 3

Number 3 is significant since there are three important stages in a man's life (his birth, his marriage, and his death). 'San' (3) is a yang number categorized with wood and the east. It sounds like 'sheng' (=growth), and therefore is a popular number. Many Chinese people believe that the pronunciation of 4 and 14 are similar to the meaning of 'death' and 8 is linked with wealth. Numbers that start or end with 3 mean alive and bring good luck to home owners. Therefore, many of the newly developed residential towers skip all these so-called unlucky numbers to boost their sales.

Number 6

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