

What Does It Mean?: Chinese Number Culture

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Language Education; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

The case is set at ABC University in Shanghai. In a recent semester, Miss Chen, a bilingual teacher from the International Education Department of ABC University, taught Basic Chinese III for the sophomore international undergraduates majoring in Business Management, Finance, and Hospitality Management. Basic Chinese is a national compulsory course for international students when they study in Chinese universities or colleges. When teaching Basic Chinese, English is used as the medium of instruction.

Traditional Chinese number culture is closely related to Chinese philosophy, folk beliefs, literature, arts, religions, social customs, and educational inheritance. Some numbers are sought after by the Chinese, while some numbers are taboos. When it comes to teaching basic Chinese to international undergraduates, although it can be a challenge to understand the connotations of Chinese number culture and the multiple meanings expressed by numbers in different contexts, it is essential to let the students know the implication of numbers in diverse Chinese contexts.

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Some numbers, such as 9, 6, and 8, are loved by the Chinese. In Chinese culture, 9 symbolizes forever, 6 means smooth/lucky, and 8 stands for making a fortune. The number 250 has a negative meaning in Chinese culture, because it implies a fool when used for describing a person. Other numbers like 4 and 7 are also bad numbers in Chinese number culture because the words for 4 or 7 sound similar to death in Chinese.

It is necessary to teach international students the connotation of Chinese number culture and how to correctly use numbers in different Chinese contexts such as gift giving, naming, labeling, etc. However, it should be noted that in math or prices, numbers are numbers without cultural meanings.

Case

One fall day, early in the semester, Miss Chen walked into the classroom to teach Basic Chinese III to international undergraduates as usual. She was going to teach the topic of shopping in Chinese stores, so she began by asking the students to share stories about their shopping experiences in China. A U.S. student was eager to tell his shopping story. The story is shown below:

Last weekend the student went to Yu Garden, a place famous for street foods, handicrafts, and clothing in Shanghai. He stepped into a hat shop, attracted by a yellow hat. "How much is it?" he asked the shop owner in Chinese while pointing to the yellow hat.

"250 Yuan," said the shop owner in Chinese.

After hearing the number 250, the student angrily replied "Do you think I'm stupid?" He then walked out of the hat shop without hesitation, having bought nothing.

"You know, Miss Chen, I remembered that the number 250 implies being stupid in Chinese culture. That's why I got mad and refused to buy the yellow hat, even though I liked it," said the student proudly because he thought he did the right thing.

After listening to the shopping story, Miss Chen wanted to laugh and weep all at once. She wanted to laugh because she was glad that the student understood part of the meanings of the number 250 in Chinese culture, but she also felt sad because the student didn't know how to properly use the number 250 in different Chinese contexts.

Miss Chen paused for a while, and then said "Thank you for your story!" She continued: "Although numbers contain multiple meanings in Chinese culture, based on this case, the price of this yellow hat is 250. In this Chinese context the number 250 doesn't have a cultural connotation, it merely refers to the actual price of the yellow hat. The shop owner doesn't have any intentions to insult customers. The price of the hat happens to be 250 Yuan."

After class, Miss Chen reflected on the challenges of teaching the many connotations of number culture. She wondered how and when to incorporate complex cultural lessons into foreign language education.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Do numbers contain cultural meanings in your culture? If yes, what do numbers mean in your culture?
- If you were the language teacher, what would you say at that moment in class to the international student who refused to buy the hat?
- What contextual clues could the student have observed in the interaction with the shopkeeper to help interpret the shopkeeper's intention?
- Are language teachers responsible for teaching about body language, tone of voice, and other nonverbal aspects of communication? Does culture affect these aspects of communication?
- What is the best way to teach cultural nuances in the classroom? How about outside the classroom?