

# A Comparative Study of the Meanings of Numbers in English and Chinese Cultures

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to provide an approach to teaching numbers in English class, so as to arouse the interest of students for learning English. Numbers are considered an appropriate topic, rich in depth and broad in usage. The use of numbers is more than a convenient measure of the physical world. In many traditions they are linked with cosmic principles that give order and structure to the universe. Human beings have been fascinated by the numerals which have been used as symbols to represent certain ideas within the folklore of every culture. The paper aims to (1) explain the general meanings of numbers, trace their origins, and analyze their superstitious or mythical associations, and (2) proposes an approach to teaching Chinese students how to understand the meanings of numbers and make further use of them.

**Key words:** number, mythology, superstition, symbolism, religion

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# 數字意涵在中、英文化中的比較

## 摘 要

本文主要目的係提供語文中的數字作為一種教學內涵，藉此引發學生學英文的興趣。數字被認為具有深、廣度討論的內涵；而數字的用途，不限於在物質世界測量的方便性。在許多傳統文化中，數字構成宇宙次序和結構，因而彼此有密切關係；在不同民俗文化中，人類對數字的符號與其所代表的意涵常感到困惑。本文架構，首先說明數字的意義並追溯其來源，分析迷信和神話對數字的聯想；然後提出一種教學法，讓學生瞭解數字在文化中的意義，及其進一步的應用。

**關鍵字：**數字，神話，迷信，象徵，宗教



## **I. Introduction**

Numbers are more than a convenient measure of the physical world. Numbers are not merely quantitative, but also qualitative. Numbers have two distinct characteristics: they are concrete, and associated with quantity; they are also non-concrete (abstract), implying a qualitative expression which changes across cultural and historical contexts. In many traditions, numbers are linked with cosmic principles that give order and structure to the universe, governing the movement of the moon and planets as well as plant, animal, and human life. “Numbers are seen as universal templates of creation, and therefore as symbols of perfection and of the gods” (Fontana, 1994, p. 64). Human beings have been fascinated with numerals, which are often used as symbols representing certain ideas, and they appear in the folklore of every culture. Numbers have been imbued with complex symbolism across different cultures since the earliest recorded events. The cultural acquisition of meaning like this provides the potential for great variation internationally in the symbolism of numbers. This potential of numerical symbolism is quite consistent worldwide. From mythology to astrology to religion, numbers play a conspicuous role in our daily lives. Some non-concrete numbers can attain cross-cultural recognition through the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges. The mystical numbers have been considered feminine and masculine, holy and evil, auspicious and inauspicious. Number superstition is often based on the traditional symbolism of numbers (such as sacred seven and unlucky thirteen). The Chinese language has the distinctive feature of having an abundance of number words that can have many different meanings. “These homonyms in linguistic terms, which give either a good or a bad connotation to the number itself, have led to the emergence of some superstitions or taboos related to numerical symbols” (Bjorkell, 2012).

The main purpose of this paper is to explore the meanings of numbers, and to make it more interesting and easier for Chinese students learning English to understand their uses in different cultures and languages. The paper includes the relevant literature on numbers and the theoretical considerations of numbers. The sources of their symbolic meaning within a mythical context will be explored. In order to interpret these symbols, a comparison will be made between Western and Chinese scholars of the meaning and cultural usage of the numbers.

## **II. Review of the Relevant Literature**

It is rather difficult to find resources on the subject of numbers in a comparative

way. Certain works which address this topic and explain the various meanings of numbers will be introduced in this section.

### **A. Western Literature**

*The Mystery of Numbers* written by Schimmel (1993), a highly respected scholar of Islamic culture, shows that numbers have been filled with mystery and meaning since the earliest times, and that the meanings change across all societies. Beginning with an informative and often surprising introduction to the origins of number systems, the author reveals how our fascination with numbers has led to a rich cross-fertilization of numerical and mathematical knowledge. The heart of the book is an engrossing guide to the symbolism of numbers, which has deep roots in Western culture. The author examines individual numbers ranging from one to ten thousand, not only discussing the meanings they had mainly for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions, but also adding examples from Indian, Chinese, and Native American cultures as well. Ranging from the Bible to the Mayans to Shakespeare, the author shows how numbers have been considered feminine and masculine, holy and evil, lucky and unlucky.

*The Anthropology of Numbers*, written by Crump (1990), describes how and why numeric systems are integrated into the cultures in which they are embedded. Numbers play a part, often quite central, in almost all known cultures. However, before this book appeared, the subject had never been examined in detail from an anthropological perspective. This book was the first attempt to explain how people in a wide range of diverse cultures, and in different historical contexts, use and understand numbers. The opening chapter provides the basis for looking at the way numbers operate in different contexts, by looking at the logical, psychological, and linguistic implications. Each of its eight chapters deals with a specific theme: ethno-science, politics, measurement, time, money, music, games, and architecture. The final chapter relates such operations to social, economic, and cultural factors.

*Words and Numbers*, written by Merriam (1990), explores how numbers function rhetorically by influencing persuasive appeals, the structure of messages, and the use of language. The author argues that “three” is the dominant numerical motif of numerical rhetoric in the English language. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the overlap between rhetoric and numbers by investigating the uses and significance of numerical phenomena in human discourse. This demonstration in turn suggests that words and numbers serve complementary rather than competing ends.

## B. Chinese Literature

This section discusses the contributions of Chinese scholars of symbols referring to numbers. *An Analysis of English Idioms and Proverbs in the Bible and Their Relation to Numbers* 〈「聖經」中與數字有關的英文諺語與習語賞析〉 was written by Lan (2011). The Bible has had a great influence on English literature, its words are gentle, its phrases are simple, and its implications are sharp. Its proverbs and idioms are both used. A number of proverbs and idioms which come from the Bible have been widely employed. Understanding the background of proverbs and idioms related to the Bible and their application in English is beneficial. Xiu's article especially deals with idioms and proverbs in the Bible which is related to numbers.

*A Study on National Cultural Psychology by Comparing and Analyzing Chinese and French Number Idioms* 〈中法數字習語的民族文化心理對比與研究〉 was written by Guan (2009). Numbers are carriers for expression and communication. One nation's numerical culture is often distinct from another's due to differing sociocultural contrasts. The paper aims at improving cross-cultural communication by analyzing some typical Chinese and French number idioms and through which the similarities and differences between the cultural psychology of the Chinese and French people can be found.

*On the Relationship between the Chinese and English Numerical Idioms and Their Respective Cultures* 〈英漢數字習語與文化關係〉 was written by Yong (2010). The author indicates that language is the carrier of cultural heritage, especially in Chinese and English numerical idioms. Idioms have played a significant role in the development of the two languages, which bear distinct national characteristics and unique thinking patterns in their respective cultures. These two kinds of numerical idioms, with their own cultural connotations, exist in religious beliefs, aesthetic perceptions, mythologies, social customs, and living conditions, and deeply reflect the tradition and features of both Chinese and Western culture.

*Number World* 《數字乾坤》 was written by Wu (1995). This book deals with the relation of numbers to Chinese traditional culture and emphasizes the application of numbers in many aspects, such as personal names, place names, time names, medicine names, boxing names, and essay names. Numbers are also used in the names of books, phrases, idioms, poems, prose, songs, puzzles, and abacuses. Numbers are particularly popular in poems and prose. The application of numbers never considered which numbers were lucky or unlucky before the 20th century. However, in phrases, the numbers one, three, ten, a thousand, and ten thousand, are more widely used while zero is not as common.

The above literature has dealt with numbers and how the meaning of numbers

differs among geopolitical places in one country. They usually represent different meanings, which are closely associated with various peoples and religions. Obviously, of all the above resources, only one uses a comparative approach, considering differences between Chinese and French contexts.

### III. Issues in Number Belief Systems

In cultural theory, three aspects concerning numbers are important: the cognition of numbers, the meanings of numbers in philosophy, and numbers and superstition.

#### A. Cognition of numbers

In prehistoric times, human beings started to hunt. People did not have any knowledge of numbers; they didn't know how to count the numbers of the animals which were used for food and clothing. They had no concepts such as hours, weeks, or months. Finally, there came a time when people did need to count. Perhaps it was when they learned to tame animals and to keep herds. They wanted to know how many sheep or goats they had. "Fingers were the first symbols for numbers. Because people have ten fingers, they counted things in tens" (*Mathemagic*, 1987, p. 21). Besides fingers, pebbles, notches on sticks, or marks on rocks is a good way to keep a record of the number of things counted. "Nomadic tribesmen originally developed a spoken system of number; but when man began to settle into agricultural communities, they felt a need for numerical records. Therefore, it became necessary to develop systems of written numerals" (Johnston, 1995, p. 8).

Numbers are ideas which have no physical existence. People are unable to touch them, but they can be represented by symbols called numerals.<sup>1</sup> For instance, "8 p.m." represents eight o'clock in the evening. As a symbol, "7-11" represents a chain of popular convenience stores. Each number can be written in a variety of ways, depending on the numerical system used. A spoken number can be a word in a language, but a written number can be recognized as either a word, a symbol, or a group of symbols, for example, 1, 2, 12, or 21. Western and Chinese cultures share some common cognition of concrete numbers. Some non-concrete (abstract) numbers can also attain cross-cultural recognition through the increasing frequency of cultural exchanges and mutual communication. However, the nature of numbers is neutral, neither good nor bad. Originally, numbers were tools used to record human behavior. Over a long period, numbers have become the most important element of

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<sup>1</sup> In the Western and Chinese numerical systems, ten symbols are called digits, namely 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10; combinations of these digits are also employed.

culture, the bridge of communication between human beings, and the mother of computers.

## **B. The meanings of numbers in philosophy**

Numbers originated in the study of philosophy. As Philolaus (5th century B.C.) pointed out, numbers are not simply organizing tools introduced by humans, but are actually primal realities of universal “absolutes,” the traces of superhuman forces, and are thus sacred symbols of the gods (Biedermann, 1994, p. 240). Pythagoras (6th century B.C.) claimed that all things were numbers and that numbers influenced the essence of things. Thus, numbers served as mediators between the divine world and earth. From this assumption it follows that if one performs various operations with numbers, these operations affect the things themselves which are related to these numbers (Cummings, 1998, p. 543).

Numbers have intrigued people through the ages. The ancient Greeks were particularly fascinated by the characteristics of numbers. To them, different numbers had special qualities. For example, the Greeks thought of odd numbers (1, 3, 5, 7, 9) as breakable, weak, and feminine, while they thought of even numbers (2, 4, 6, 8, 10) as unbreakable, strong, and masculine (Virginia, 2001, p. 378). Similarly, Chinese numerals are classified as having either *yīn* (feminine) or *yáng* (masculine) characteristics; even numbers are *yīn* and odd numbers are *yáng*. Chinese numbers also represent direction and orientation (Lip, 1996, p. 11).

## **C. Numbers and Superstition**

If numbers were only a concept associated with quantity, there would be no difference between the meanings of numbers; if they are connected to superstition, they represent a deeper level of significance. Historians suggest that superstitious beliefs originated during the earliest days of humanity.<sup>2</sup> The savage’s imagination was excited by the pressing needs of his life in hunting, love, war, agriculture, and therefore by hunger and emulation, hate and grief, fear and suspicion (Read, 1920, p. 86). Imaginings spring up in his mind by analogy with experience, but often by remote or absurd analogies; and there is no logic at hand and not enough common sense to distinguish the wildest imaginative analogies from trustworthy conclusions. The earliest superstitions were created as a way to deal with the ignorance and fear of the unknown. Imagination-beliefs depend chiefly upon the influence of desire and

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<sup>2</sup> Superstition came from ignorance or the unknown (Superstition, n.d.). The term superstition is thought to derive from the Latin *superstitio*, meaning “to stand over in awe.” The term is also related to the Latin word *superstes* (“outliving” or “surviving”), and in this sense it refers to the remains of ideas and beliefs that continued long after the original meanings had been forgotten. For this reason, superstitions are often considered relics of outmoded ways of thinking.

fear, suggestibility, hasty generalization, and the seduction of reasoning by analogy. Chance misfortunes could be ascribed a cause, and the potential to avoid or control them was created. Sometimes, superstitions are born from causal coincidence. The origins of certain superstitions can be centuries old, having been passed down from generation to generation through such an observation learning process.

In ancient times, the Greeks and many other ancient peoples believed that numbers had magic powers. Chinese culture has so many superstitions and beliefs such as numerology, using the laws of heaven and earth (astronomy and geography). Some superstitions assigned good or bad luck in numerical terms. For example, breaking a mirror is supposed to bring seven years of bad luck. Since a mirror reflects the self, the distortion of one's image caused by the breakage is considered a sign of coming trouble. The Romans allotted the human body seven years to renew itself after a mirror was broken (Good, 1991, p. 516). Finding a four-leaf clover means good luck.<sup>3</sup> The number 13 is regarded as the number one taboo in English culture. The origin of the negative symbolism of the number 13 is often ascribed to the New Testament. "The origin of the number 13 being an unlucky number goes back to the time of Jesus' death. At the last supper, Jesus gathered his 12 followers for a special meal, but, including him, there were a total of 13 people at the table. Therefore, the number is related to the betrayer, Judas, the thirteenth disciple of Jesus"(Goetz, 1991, p. 517). It is definitely viewed as an unlucky number and people always try to avoid the number in number plates, floors and phone numbers. Thirteen flowers are unacceptable. Engagements and weddings should never be held on the thirteenth. The taboo regarding 13 becomes dreadful and irrational for some people. However, the number 13 was not regarded as unlucky by the ancient Chinese or Egyptians.

Odd numbers are better than even numbers in Western culture, excluding 13. Odd numbers are considered auspicious, but even numbers are considered to be infernal. For example, in Russia the number of flowers should be odd in celebrations, and it should be even in mourning (Russian superstitions, n.d.). Three and nine are good signs. Seven is a sacred number for western people. In Chinese culture, even numbers, except four, are better than odd. In Chinese tradition, certain numbers are believed by some to be auspicious or inauspicious based on the Chinese word that the number's name sounds similar to. For instance, the number *sì* (四) is considered an unlucky number in some Chinese regions because it is nearly homophonous to the word *sǐ* (死) "death". The number four is avoided when sending money for certain occasions. In the past, it was more common among

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<sup>3</sup> In Irish tradition the shamrock or 3-leaf clover represents the Holy Trinity. When a shamrock is found with the fourth leaf, it represents God's grace. See Dale (2002) p. 995.

Chinese people to regard the number nine as taboo. The older generation, for example, do not celebrate their birthdays and men do not marry when their age includes a nine, and any time they encounter the number nine, older people are very careful to prevent any accidents from occurring (Svensson, 2009). Above all, whether for wedding days, or any important events (such as moving house or opening up a new business), there are numbers and dates that are important. People used to consult the “Yellow Calendar”<sup>4</sup> to see which date was suitable for the occasion. The unflinching faith in “lucky” numbers can be found everywhere in China.

From the above examples, it can be understood that the connection of numbers to superstitions stems from ancient beliefs; gradually, the origin of a superstition is lost to history, but some old beliefs still found their way into broader culture.

#### **IV. Symbolic Meanings of Numbers**

Numbers can be readily explained by science, but in the ancient world, they were simply mysteries. As the use of numbers increased, people used their experience and imagination as tools to create myths so as to explain them.<sup>5</sup> Because the ancients endowed natural phenomena with will and feeling, they spun a common thread connecting number and myth. Early people symbolized everything that appealed to the human mind. Accordingly, early people are linked with cosmic principles that give order and structure to the universe, governing the movement of the moon and planets as well as plant, animal, and human life (O'Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 28). In many religions, they also regarded numbers as mysterious things.

In the sequence of numbers, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10, each number may represent many different meanings, not only in different cultures but also in the same culture.<sup>6</sup>

**0(Zero)**—This symbol is derived from the Arabic word “sifra” (cipher), which has no value of its own, but supplements the values missing in other numbers (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 1144). From the viewpoint of man's existence, zero symbolizes death, i.e. the state in which the life-forces are transformed.

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<sup>4</sup> The “Yellow Calendar” which is said to have been written by the Yellow Emperor, is a Chinese divination guide and almanac.

<sup>5</sup> This would confine imagination to visual representations, to the exclusion of auditory, olfactory, or other experience, which are all a man born blind can have, and which sometimes occur to those who can see, though the visual is the most common. The word “images,” therefore, is sometimes used to cover all these modes of representation, although “phantasmata” would be better. Imagination represents not abstract sensations, but perceptions. See Read (1920), pp. 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> Many other numbers which have significant symbolic values and very interesting meanings are omitted here because of the limitation of space. The most important symbolic associations, however, lie within the numbers from zero to ten.

Because of its circular form, “0” signifies eternity (Cirlot, 1962, p. 221). Pythagoras saw zero as the originator, containing all things. In Taoism and Buddhism, it symbolizes the void and non-being (Cooper, 1978, p. 113). The Chinese believe that *líng* (零), which means nothing, is too negative to be considered as a starting number. Therefore, in Chinese literature, it is difficult to find any phrase or idiom using zero.

**1(One)**—From the Western anthropological point of view, one symbolizes “homo erectus,” as human beings are the only species to walk upright (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 719). In monotheistic religions one is the number of God. The Pythagoreans referred to number one as the “Monad”.<sup>7</sup> It symbolized the creator, and represents the male principle (O’Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 28). In Western tradition, being “number one” is synonymous to being the best.

In Chinese culture, the number *yī* (一) symbolizes the beginning of all things, and all numbers begin at “*yī*”. The Chinese saying *yī-yuán-fù-shǐ-wàn-xiàng-gēng-xīng* (一元復始，萬象更新) means that as the New Year begins, everything starts anew, and the *yī* is indivisible because it is a perfect entity, just as Confucian thinkers and Lao-zi alike stressed in their own ways (Lip, 1996, p. 216). As a result, *yī* (一) has been widely used in many phrases and idioms. Traditionally, people prefer one to other numbers.

**2(Two)**—Two is symbolic of conflict and opposition.<sup>8</sup> According to Pythagorean principle, two (the Duad) represented diversity, and had the potential for disorder and evil (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 294). In mythology, the second day of the second month was considered evil and dedicated to Pluto, god of the underworld. In the Biblical account of the Great Flood, only the unclean animals went into Noah’s Ark in twos. For this reason some consider two to be unlucky (Kenner, 2006, p. 19).

The number two is also a symbol of order and balance in philosophies. In Taoist belief, the universe is made up of polarity, expressed in the complementary forces of yin and yang. Two is a lucky number in Chinese culture, on the basis that “good things come in pairs”. This might be due to the fact that a person has two hands, two legs, two eyes, and two ears. While two is not popularly used in phrases or idioms, it is a common number. The number two means being double; a couple is a good thing.

**3(Three)**—Three is the most positive number in symbolism. The “power of three” is universal and is the tripartite nature of the world.<sup>9</sup> In Pythagorean theory (6th century B.C.), three represents harmony, the union of unity (one) and diversity

<sup>7</sup> According to the Pythagoreans, the Monad was a term for Divinity or the first being.

<sup>8</sup> Two is the number which separates creator and creature, black and white, male and female, matter and spirit, and so on. See Chevalier & Gheerbrant (1996), p. 1050.

<sup>9</sup> The nature of the world includes heaven, earth, and the waters; it is man as body, soul, and spirit; birth, life, and death; beginning, middle, end; past, present, future.

(two) (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 294). Three is a sacred number in most religions. The Ancient Greeks and Romans had a powerful trinity of gods. The Greek (Roman) trinity was: Jupiter (Zeus), Neptune (Poseidon), and Pluto (Hades). Jupiter's symbol was three-forked lightning, Neptune's a trident, and Pluto's a three-headed dog. Christians believe in a Holy Trinity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and the Christian theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 294). Other mythological figures also frequently come in threes, such as the Fates, the Furies, and the Graces. Three is usually seen as a lucky number, possibly because it symbolizes the resolution of a conflict or a decisive action that may lead to success or disaster. In folk tales, wishes are customarily granted in threes. Heroes or heroines are allowed three choices, set three trials, or given three chances to succeed. In rituals many actions are performed three times. The tradition of "third time lucky" is very old (Tresidder, 2000, pp. 165-166).

The Chinese call *sān* (三) a perfect number, an expression of wholeness and fulfillment, to which nothing can be added (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 993). According to *Lǐ-jì* (禮記) "Book of Rites", man, by virtue of his intermediate position between heaven and earth, corresponds to the number three (Eberhard, 1990, p. 288). Similarly, Lao Tzu believed "the Tao produces unity, unity produces duality, duality produces trinity, and the triad produces all things" (*Tao Te Ching*, p. 42). Likewise, three is used as a symbol by Confucius. According to *The Sayings of Confucius*, *siān-rén-xíng-bì-yǒu-wú-shī-yān* (三人行，必有吾師焉), "when three of us are walking together, I am sure to have a teacher. Having noted his competencies, I imitate them; his incompetencies I avoid" (Transmit 7, *Analects*). According to Granet (1924), the number three is used as the standard emblem of any arrangement embodying hierarchical organization (as cited in Eberhard, 1990, p. 290).

**4(Four)**—A symbol of wholeness and universality, the number four is related to the cardinal directions, the seasons, the elements, and the phases of the moon. Its symbolism is connected with both the cross and the square, suggesting order, stability, and solidity (O'Connor & Airey, 2009, pp. 27-28). To Pythagoreans four symbolized perfection, being the first square number. From almost prehistoric times, the number four was employed to signify what was solid, and what could be touched and felt. In Chinese mythology, the four Dragon Kings rule the four seas, each sea corresponding to one of the four cardinal directions. For American Indians four symbolizes organization: space is divided into four regions, time into four units (day, night, Moon, and year), and human life into four ages (childhood, youth, maturity, and old age) (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 294).

Four also has plenty of religious significance attached to its symbolism of stability and completion. For example, in Christianity, there are four archangels,

four cardinal virtues, and four rivers of paradise. There are also the four boundless wishes of Buddhism, the four faces of Brahma in Hinduism, and so on (Kenner, 2006, p. 20).

**5(Five)** — According to Pythagoras, five is the number of humanity, representing the human body with its four limbs and head, while the body fits inside a pentagram (O'Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 28). In Mexican mythology, it was the Aztec god of the morning star, Quetzalcoatl, who was associated with the number five. He rose from the underworld on the fifth day, traditionally the day the first corn shoots appeared after sowing. In addition, the Aztec people believed they lived in the age of the “Fifth Sun”, which was the image of the sun god Tonatiuh (Tresidder, 2000, p. 169).

Five is associated with the Five Directions. In addition, there were said to be five elements, senses, metals, colors, tones, and tastes. According to Lao Tzu, “the five colors make man’s eyes blind; the five notes make his ears deaf; the five tastes injure his palate” (*Tao Te Ching*, p. 16). Buddhists emphasize *wǔ-jìè* (五戒) “five prohibitions”, namely, do not kill, do not steal, do not lust, do not drink wine, and do not eat meat (Eberhard, 1990, p. 109).

**6(Six)**—The number six is a symbol of completeness. The Pythagoreans considered six to be a perfect number. There is, however, ambivalence associated with the number six. In fact, six may have as strong a tendency towards evil as towards good, and towards rebellion against God as towards union with Him (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 885). The number six is also the number of the Old Testament Hexameron, the world being created in six days.<sup>10</sup> In Buddhism, there are several groupings of six, including the six realms of existence. To the Mayans six was an unlucky number, signifying death. Six is associated with sin in the New Testament book of Revelation (13:18), the number of the Beast (Satan) being “666” (Tresidder, 2000, p. 167).

In China, the celestial influences are six in number. It might be said to be the hexagram K’ien, “the chariot drawn by six dragons” of *I Chin* (Ming, 1997, p. 18). People speak of *liù-gèn* (六根) “six roots”, which means the eyes, the nose, the ears, the tongue, the body, and lust. *Liù-qīn* (六親) “six relations” means father, mother, elder brothers and sisters, younger brothers and sisters, wife, and children. Six is an auspicious word in many phrases and idioms. The number six also represents wealth in Cantonese, as this number is a homophone for *lù* (祿). In Mandarin *liù* (六) sounds similar to the Chinese word *liú* (流) “fluid” and is considered good for business.

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<sup>10</sup> The creation of the world is the result of the “hexameron” (six days’ labor) after which God “rested on the seventh day” (Genesis 2:2). See Carroll & Prickett (1997), p. 2.

7(Seven)—Seven has widespread significance in magic and divine mystery. It is the number of the planets known in antiquity (Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) and of the days of the week (O'Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 28). When a Chinese person speaks of the *qī-xīng* (七星) 'seven stars', it may be in reference to what is called "the Plough" in the West—that is, part of the constellation of Ursa Major. The seventh day of the month in the old lunar calendar is the day of the waxing half-moon, and on the seventh day of the seventh month is held a festival which is one of the significant events in the Chinese year, (The day of the Spinning Damsel and the Cowherd) (Eberhard, 1990, p. 261). In mythology, the seven sisters were the daughters of the Titan Atlas and the sea-nymph Pleione. The seven sisters were also known as "The Pleiades".<sup>11</sup>

In the Bible, having created the world in six days, God rested on the seventh day and made it holy (Genesis 2:2-4). For Christians, it is the number of heavenly virtues as well as deadly sins (O'Connor & Airey, 2007, p.29). In China, seven is associated with the cult of life after death and with death festivities. The term *zuò-qī* (作七) "make seven" refers to the seven-day periods following a death, during which the soul of the deceased gradually severs itself from this world and from its relatives (Eberhard, 1990, p. 262).

8(Eight)—Almost universally, eight is the number of cosmic balance. Eight symbolizes abundance and power. The Pythagoreans called the number eight "Ogdoad" and considered it the "little holy number". For Native Americans, it is the number of all natural laws. For Buddhists, the eight spokes of dharmachakra, or the wheel of Law, symbolize the eightfold path to enlightenment. Taoists revere the Eight Immortals who have mastered the Way (O'Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 29). Christian tradition makes eight the number of fulfillment and completeness. As for the Eighth Day, following the six days of creation and the seventh day of rest, this day is the symbol of resurrection and of transfiguration and heralds an age of eternity which is to come (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 343).

The word *bā* (八) represents luck to the Cantonese because it sounds like *fā* (發) which means prosperity, and consequently they like the number very much (Lip, 1996, p. 32). Recently eight has also come to be considered as a lucky number in Taiwan.

9(Nine)—The number nine relates to the symbolism of the triple power of three. Nine is the number of completion and fulfillment. Nine is considered lucky in China,

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<sup>11</sup> In Greek myth, the seven daughters (Maia, Electra, Taygete, Alcyone, Calaeno, Sterope, Merope) of Atlas, with Merope the only one among them who married a mortal. Zeus placed all seven of the sisters in the sky to sparkle as stars. Merope, ashamed of her mortal husband, hid her head in shame, which was why, the Greeks said, only six sisters sparkled visibly. Andrews (1998), p. 152.

where it sounds like the word *jiǔ* (久) “longlasting” (Wilkinson, 2008, p. 295). Furthermore, the Double Ninth festival is an old Chinese tradition celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. A well-known saying is that “A cat has nine lives,” which means cats are lucky to escape death often. It is highly auspicious because it is the number of the celestial spheres (O’Connor & Airey, 2007, p. 29). This is also why there were nine steps leading up to the Chinese imperial throne and nine gates shutting it off from the external world. In Buddhism, nine is the celestial number of supreme spirituality. In contrast with the Nine Heavens were the Nine Springs (the abode of the dead) (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1996, p. 702). The Aztecs considered it unlucky, symbolizing the gods of night.

**10(Ten)**—Ten is the mystical number of completion and unity. In the Biblical tradition, it is the number of God’s commandments (Tresidder, 2000, p. 169). Ten is symbolic, in decimal systems, of the return to unity. Based on the two hands, it is completeness and the foundation of all counting. By implication, ten contains all the digits from zero through to nine, which emphasizes its completion. Pythagoreans considered ten to be a holy number, symbolizing universal creation. The decade symbolizes a turning point in history, or a cycle in myth. Odysseus wandered for nine years and returned on the tenth; Troy was besieged for nine years and fell on the tenth (Cooper, 1978, p. 119). The number *shí* (十) in Chinese, is the perfect figure. *Shí-quán-shí-měi* (十全十美), the Chinese idiom, indicates “perfect in every way.” The Ten Celestial Stems are the ten primary signs which, when used in combination with the Twelve Terrestrial Branches, form the Cycle of Sixty (Williams, 1999, p. 392)

For a long time, people in different regions shared beliefs about the uses of numbers and their basic meanings. Most people still have their traditional cultural values, so superstitions continue, even though science has shown that they are false.

## **V. A Comparison of Numbers in English and Chinese in Special Contexts**

It is rather easy to make use of single numbers, such as one, two, three, and so on, even if they have symbolic meanings. However, it is very difficult to determine the meaning of numbers in special contexts, such as when they are used for describing nouns or when they are combined together. They usually imply something else. These implications are usually related to a people’s culture and habitual usage. A comparison between English and Chinese concerning the general meanings of numbers is as follows.

### **(1) ZERO**

### **Zero hour**

In English: a dangerous time

In Chinese: 緊要關頭 *jǐn-yào-guān-tóu*

Symbolically, zero represents absence and unimportance. However, it can also represent the ideas of an infinite void and by extension anything. In such situations, both English and Chinese phrases suggest a particular time is more important than other times. Number zero is used as an adjective in English, but not in a similar way in Chinese.

### **(2) ONE**

#### **Become one flesh**

In English: husband and wife

In Chinese: 合而為一，結為夫婦 *hé-ér-wéi-yī, jié-wéi-fū-qū*

One describes a single thing or person. It is also a symbol of creation and the human species. According to Genesis 2:24, “Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall be one flesh” (Carroll & Prickett 1997, p.3). Similarly, *fū-qī-běn-shì-tóng-lín-niǎo* (夫妻本是同林鳥), the Chinese proverb, signifies “husband and wife are meant to be one”. Both the Chinese and English uses have equivalent meanings.

### **(3) TWO**

#### **Two heads are better than one.**

In English: One’s abilities are limited. It is always better to consult with others before reaching an important decision.

In Chinese: 三個臭皮匠勝過諸葛亮

*sān-gè-chòu-pi-jiàng-shèng-gè-zhú-gě-liàng*

Both the English and Chinese phrases have a similar meaning. In the English phrase, the number two is exactly used as an adjective, but not in a similar way in Chinese. The number *sān* (三) is expressed in a Chinese proverb. In translation, the two phrases are different expressions.

### **(4) THREE**

#### **When three know it, all know it.**

In English: A secret between more than two is no secret.

In Chinese: 三人知，天下曉 *sān-rén-zhī, tiān-xià-xiǎo*

Both the English and Chinese phrases have similar meanings. The number three represents many or all instead of only three. In translation, the phrases are interchangeable.

## (5) FOUR

### **The four corners of the world**

In English: the most distant parts of the world

In Chinese: 四面八方 *sì-miàn-bā-fāng*

The number four is related to the four cardinal directions (north, east, south, and west). Both the English and Chinese phrases have similar meanings. In translation, they are equivalent phrases.

## (6) FIVE

### **Give me five**

In English: used for asking someone to hit their open hand against yours, usually as a way of celebrating

In Chinese: 跟我擊掌 *jēn-wǒ-jī-zhǎng*

In both English and Chinese phrases, five represents the five fingers, and it symbolizes the hand. American people use this type of body language, and it has become part of American culture. The Chinese have followed it.

## (7) SIX

### **Six of one and half a dozen of the other**

In English: The two alternatives are equivalent; it matters not which one is chosen

In Chinese: 半斤八兩 *bàn-jīn-bā-liǎng*

Both the English and Chinese phrases have a similar meaning. The number six is used as adjective in English, but not in a similar way in Chinese.

## (8) SEVEN

### **Seventh heaven**

In English: a state in which one is completely happy; bliss

In Chinese: 七重天 *qī-chóng-tiān*

Both the English and Chinese phrases have a similar meaning. The meaning of this phrase in English directly corresponds to the Chinese phrase.

## (9) EIGHT

### **Behind the eight ball**

In English: in an unfavorable or uncomfortable position

In Chinese: 處於不利的位置 *chǔ-yú-bù-lì-dē-wèi-zhì*

In certain games of pool or billiards, a player whose cue ball (the ball that

strikes the other balls) is behind the 8 ball is unlikely to make any shot. Therefore, to be behind the eight ball is to be in a losing situation. The number eight is used as an adjective in English. However, it is rather difficult to translate from English to Chinese.

#### (10) NINE

##### **A stitch in time saves nine.**

In English: Any damage or mistake should be corrected immediately in order to prevent it from becoming worse.

In Chinese: 小洞不補，大洞吃苦 xiǎo-dòng-bù-bǔ, dà-dòng-chī-kǔ

The number nine is used in English, but not in a similar way in Chinese. The meaning of the number does not directly correspond to a Chinese expression. Instead, it is explained by the Chinese saying “A small hole not plugged will make you suffer a big hole.”

#### (11) TEN

##### **Ten to one**

In English: very likely

In Chinese: 十之八九 shí-zhī-bā-jiǔ

Both the English and Chinese phrases have similar meanings.

Overall, there are few idioms and proverbs concerning the number zero and number five, but numerous uses of numbers one and two can be seen. Similarly, there are many interesting Chinese phrases with numbers, but it is rather difficult to find appropriate English phrases for them. For more examples, see the appendix.

### **VI. A Three-Step Approach to Teaching Numbers**

Trying to make sense of the meanings of number phrases in different languages and in different cultures has to do with translation. It is rather difficult to translate phrases containing numbers from one language to another. To overcome this difficulty, a general three-step approach to teaching number expressions is suggested here.

#### **A. Arousing student interest**

To arouse students' interest, a teacher should give students many examples concerning numbers and provide more information about their origins. The symbolic meanings of numbers in English usually have interesting origins. Many

numbers appear in myths, fables, and religion, especially in the Bible. Explaining their origins to students can increase their understanding of the implications of numbers, such as *dì-liù-gǎn* (第六感) “sixth sense”; *qī-niǎn-zhǐ-yǎng* (七年之癢) “a seven-year itch”; *tán-huā-yī-xiàn* (曇花一現) “a wonder lasts but nine days”; *yī-zhī-tú-huà-shèng-guò-qīān-yán-wàn-yǔ* (一張圖畫勝過千言萬語) “a picture is worth a thousand words”; and so on.

## B. Intensive practice in the classroom

During classroom practice, we could divide the students into two groups, one group representing Chinese-speaking students, and the other representing English-speaking students. The Chinese group asks the meaning of certain numbers in Chinese, and the opposing group responds with the meaning of the numbers in English, and vice versa.

For instance:

Group A	Group B
Question	Answer
think twice	仔細考慮 (zǐxì kǎolù)
in threes and fours	三五成群 (sānwǔ chéngqún)
two and two make four	非常明顯 (fēi-chāng-míng-xiǎn)
nine times out of ten	十之八九 (shí-zhī-bā-jiǔ)
二一添作五 (èr-yī-tiān-zuò-wǔ)	split (something) fifty-fifty
一個樣 (yī-gè-yàng)	like two peas in a pod
盤問某人 (pán-wèn-mǒu-rén)	give (someone) the third degree
朝九晚五 (zhāo-jiǔ-wǎn-wǔ)	nine-to-five job
一個巴掌拍不響 (yī-gè-bā-zhǎng-pāi-bù-xiǎng)	It takes two to tango.

## C. A general memory technique for number phrases

It is true that there is no short-cut to learning languages. However, for

learning number phrases, one effective way is to memorize the meaning of numbers. The more frequently one can make use of the number phrases, the better one can remember them. As we know, some numbers constitute phrases, which have specific meanings in English culture and which have no rules governing them. Since these phrases cannot change at all, it is very important to memorize them and know how to use them in an appropriate context. For example: “She dressed herself up to the nines to meet her future father-in-law,” and “one’s number is up”.

## **VII. Concluding Remarks**

In conclusion, we would like to make two significant points: (1) The number is considered an interesting topic to help Chinese students to overcome their fear in the early stages of learning English. Since fear is the biggest obstacle to learning, this topic, which can be combined with instructions concerning mythical and folklore associations and superstitions could help students’ to overcome their fear in learning English to some extent. (2) Both the Chinese and English languages are rich in number phrases. A cross-cultural comparison of the symbolism of numbers could arouse students’ interest, which, in turn, could arouse students’ imaginations. J. K. Rowling addressed “the importance of imagination” at the Harvard commencement: “Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not, and therefore the fount of all invention and innovation,... it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared” (Rowling, 2008).

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## Appendix

### (1) ZERO

(a) zero growth

In English: not growing any more

In Chinese: 零成長

### (2) ONE

(a) one and all

In English: everyone

In Chinese: 每個人

(b) one after another

In English: used for saying that actions are completed or things happen with very little time between them.

In Chinese: 一個接一個

(c) One swallow does not make a summer.

In English: In forming an opinion on a particular issue, one should not jump to a conclusion prematurely.

In Chinese: 一燕不成夏，不要以偏概全

(d) Once bitten, twice shy.

In English: If anything bad happens to you, you will remember the cause and avoid it the next time you come across the same situation.

In Chinese: 上一次當，學一次乖

(e) One good turn deserves another.

In English: If someone does you a favor, you should do a favor for that person in return.

In Chinese: 善有善報

### (3) TWO

(a) in two minds

In English: one cannot decide

In Chinese: 三心二意

(b) by twos and threes

In English: with no sequence

In Chinese: 三三兩兩

(c) put two and two together

In English: to guess what is happening or what something means based on what you have seen or heard.

In Chinese: 二加二等於四，非常明顯

(d) two's company, three's a crowd.

In English: a situation in which two people desire privacy when a third one is present.

In Chinese: 兩人成伴，三人不歡

(e) to kill two birds with one stone.

In English: to achieve two aims with one effort or action

In Chinese: 一舉兩得

**(4) THREE**

(a) three sheets to the wind

In English: unsteady from too much liquor, drunk

In Chinese: 酒醉

(b) in threes

In English: misfortunes occur in sets of three

In Chinese: 接二連三

(c) give three cheers

In English: to give praise of approval to someone who has done well.

In Chinese: 歡呼三聲

**(5) FOUR**

(a) on all fours

In English: down on one's hands and knees

In Chinese: 爬行

(b) four-letter word

In English: One of the short words considered rude or offensive by most people

In Chinese: 髒話

(c) Four eyes see more than two.

In English: observation by two people is better than by one alone

In Chinese: 一人技短，二人技長

**(6) FIVE**

(a) take five

In English: take a brief rest

In Chinese: 休息一下

**(7) SIX**

(a) six to one

In English: it is likely

In Chinese: 十之八九

(b) deep six

In English: to take no notice of or to dispose, bury or reject something

In Chinese: 置之不理

(c) six feet under

In English: dead and buried

In Chinese: 九泉之下

**(8) SEVEN**

(a) seven day wonder

In English: someone or something causing interest for a short period but quickly forgotten

In Chinese: 七天奇蹟

**(9) EIGHT**

(a) have one over the eight

In English: getting drunk

In Chinese: 喝醉

**(10) NINE**

(a) on cloud nine

In English: very happy about something

In Chinese: 九重天

(b) nine times out of ten

In English: almost always

In Chinese: 十之八九

**(11) TEN**

(a) take ten

In English: to take a rest

In Chinese: 休息

