

# 汉英数词与数字习语文化义探析

## 内容提要

[内容提要]本文试图采取对比的方式，从文化的角度探讨汉英两种语言中的数词和汉语数字成语与英语数字习语的异同，旨在推动翻译学和跨文化交际学的研究。本文引言部分首先介绍文化的定义、中西文化差异以及语言、数词、数与文化之间的关系。第一章主要论述数与文化的关系。第二章探讨汉英数字习语在生成性、结构、来源、修辞方面的异同。第三章探讨汉语数字成语的翻译方法，探讨直译、意译(借用法、省略法、融合法、虚化法、抽象法)以及注释等方法。通过对汉英数词与数字习语的比较研究，本文希望能够促进翻译学和跨文化交际学领域的相关课题的研究。

[关键词]：数词 数字成语 数字习语 文化 翻译

# **A Cultural Interpretation of Numerals and Numerical Idioms in Chinese and English: A Comparative Study**

**Abstract:** It is the major concern of this paper to explore cultural similarities and differences in numerals and numerical idioms between Chinese and English, and to discuss the strategies of translating them with a view to further research on translation and intercultural communication. Introduction of this paper enumerates and discusses definitions of culture, then explains cultural differences between Chinese culture and Western cultures, and explores the relationship between language, numerals, number and culture. Chapter One takes upon itself to expound the relationship between number and culture. Chapter Two goes into the details of the similarities and differences in the structure, productivity, sources and rhetorical devices between Chinese numerical idioms and English ones. Chapter Three discusses the strategies of translating Chinese numerical idioms such as literal translation of one-to-one correspondence, free translation (borrowing, omission, fusion, fuzziness, abstraction) and explanation. It is hoped that the present study, with its obvious limitations, will be a step further towards translation studies and intercultural communication studies.

**Key words:** Numerals; C-idioms; E-idioms; culture; translation

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# 汉英数词与数字习语文化义探析

## 摘要

本文从文化比较的角度探讨汉英两种语言中的数词所具有的神秘意蕴，简要介绍现今数词应用于网络、经济金融领域的情况以及奇妙数字诗、数字对联，分析涉及数字的汉语成语与英语习语的生成性、结构、来源、修辞，找出两种语言在这些方面的异同，从而促进翻译和跨文化交际的理论研究与实践。本文除引言和结语外，共分为三章。

引言部分介绍文化的定义、中西文化差异及其原因、语言及语言中的数词、数与文化的关系。“文化是一种复杂体，它包括知识、信仰、艺术、道德、法律、风俗以及其余社会上习得的能力与习惯。”由于自然环境、生活方式、生产方式、行为方式、历史背景、政治制度、经济制度、风俗习惯、宗教信仰、思想观念等诸多方面的差异，中国文化与西方文化存在着差异。语言既是文化的一部分，又是文化的载体。语言中语音、语调、句法结构相对稳定，而词及词义随时间的变化而变化。数词是语言的组成部分。任何表示数的符号、字、词都可以称为数词。数与文化或文明密不可分。

第一章主要论述数的起源、玄数、神秘数字中的几个所谓幸运数字应用于经济金融领域的情况、年轻人中流行的新鲜网络语言，即数字或数字与英语字母结合、具有中国特色的奇妙数字诗以及数字对联。数何时产生无法可知。人类最初并无数的概念，但人类发达的大脑使其对计数有了一定的认识。《易·系辞下》说

“上古结绳而治……。”古人在绳上打结、在树皮或兽皮上作记号、在地上放木棍，用这些方式来计算天数，记录所发生的事件或分配捕获到的猎物，于是在日常生活的实践中逐渐产生数的概念。汉英语言中有些数词具有神秘色彩，从 1 至 10 都有不少例子，西方文化中典型的禁忌数“13”等经常被称为“神秘数字”或“玄数”。中国文化中的玄数主要与《易经》有关，词的谐音是其中原因之一。而西方文化中的玄数主要与《圣经》有关。这些数字给人带来凶吉联想因地而异、因民族而异、因文化而异。从纯粹科学的角度看，自然数或序数可用于计数来表达准确的意义。从社会文化角度看，它们还承载着种种神秘的文化含义。这些带有强烈民族特色的数字文化在不同的民族中代代相传，有的还通过跨文化交流不断地传播、渗透、深入到其他国家民族中去，逐渐为人们所接受，成为世界文化的一部分。比如，西方文化崇尚除 13 外的奇数，而中国文化一般崇尚偶数。此外，3、8、9 在中国文化中被视为所谓的“幸运数字”，在人们的日常生活、经济活动中倍受青睐。其重要原因是人们相信话语的魔力。这几个数词与“生”、“升”、“发”、“久”这些表达吉利的字的音相似或相同。现今中国上网者往往是年轻人。他们喜欢新鲜事物，有他们自己独特的表达方式。为加快交流信息，利用汉字的谐音他们发明了一种新奇的网络语言：数字或数字加英文字母，其特点是省时省空间。独具中国特色的数字诗和数字对联初看平淡无奇，细品之后会惊叹其构思巧妙、寓意深刻。以上都与汉字的谐音分不开。

第二章探讨涉及数字的汉语成语与英语习语在生成性、结构、来源、修辞方面的异同。汉英两种语言都有大量的成语或习语。许多成语或习语来源于历史事件、文学作品、人们的日常生活，

体现人民的智慧，具有地方性、民族性、历史性、文化性。作为其中重要组成部分的数字习语亦是如此。据估计汉语数字成语约占成语总量的十分之一。数字成语中的数字主要是从“一”到“十”以及“百”、“千”、“万”、“半”。经过比较研究，可以发现汉语数字成语要比英语数字习语生成性更强。此外，不同的语言文化使得汉语数字成语与英语数字习语在结构、来源、修辞方面存在不少差别。大多数汉语成语，包括数字成语，是四音节或四字格，具有对称、音韵美的特点。这类数字成语主要有三种形式：数字单用，即数字处在第一位或第三位；两个数字连用；奇位嵌数字，即两个数字分别处在第一位和第三位。了解汉语数字成语的来源有利于理解其真正意义。大部分汉语数字成语出自典籍、历史事件、汉民族的日常生活，一部分是古代政治、经济制度的产物，一部分与军事有关，还有一部分与佛教、中国古代哲学有关，甚至有一些来自中医学。英语数字习语多数出自文学作品、《圣经》。一些英语数字习语与运动、游戏有关。在公认的汉语成语词典《中国成语大词典》中未见与运动、游戏有关的数字成语，可能是不同的生活方式使然。

汉语成语简洁生动，带有浓厚的修辞色彩。常见的修辞手段（隐性重复、夸张、对偶、平行、明喻、暗喻、借代）等都可以在汉语数字成语中找到，或言多，或言少，或言乱，或加强语义，或求平衡对称、或求音韵悦耳。

第三章主要探讨汉语数字成语英译问题。基于第二章的分析，本文认为，由于汉语数字成语带有民族文化色彩，因此在翻译中可主要采取以下几种方法：若译入语有对应的表达法，可直译；若无现成的对应习语，可意译，包括借用法、省略法、融合法、

虚化数字法、抽象法等以及注释法。汉英两种语言及其反映的文化迥然不同，很难找到完全对等的表达法，故翻译过程中增减、妥协、牺牲源语文化的特点是不可避免的。

在结语中，我们认为，尽管汉英语言文化之间存在种种差异，但我们要面对生与死、爱与恨、希望与恐惧、工作与娱乐等等，异中有同，同中有异。正是由于文化共性，我们才能够相互交流、相互理解、相互尊重。

# **A Cultural Interpretation of Numerals and Numerical Idioms in Chinese and English: A Comparative Study**

## **Introduction**

### **0.1 Defining Culture**

The British cultural anthropologist, Edward Tylor, offers us the classic definition of culture:

Culture or civilization... is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Miller, 1999:14)

To this concept of culture the American sociologists, William F. Ogburn and Frank H. Hankins, added objects. (Gu Jiazu, et al., 2002:73) As defined in *Longman Dictionary of English Language & Culture* (2004), culture is the customs, beliefs, art, music, and all the other products of human thought made by a particular group of people at a particular time. Apart from the classic definition of culture and the definition in *Longman Dictionary of English Language & Culture*, there are still innumerable definitions, not yet to everyone's satisfaction. However, one thing is certain: cultures vary in many aspects such as physical environment, ways of life, mode of production, manners, history, economic system, political system, customs, religion, ethics, ideology and language.

## **0.2 The Relationship Between Language and Culture**

Language is a system of symbols for human communication in a society. By communication is meant that language serves not only as a means for conveying ideas and feelings, but also as a semiotic system for storing information. In the course of its development, a language has been deeply ingrained with traces of a particular society, reflecting unique cultural heritage. Therefore, language and culture are inextricably intertwined. On the one hand, language is one and most important part of the organic components of culture. Every language is, to a certain degree, peculiar to a community that uses the language. In other words, it is the crystallization of a culture. In a word, culture or society shapes a language and language mirrors culture or society.

## **0.3 Number and Numerals: A Cultural Symbol of a Language**

To be more exact, a language mirrors a given culture in many aspects, with its vocabulary standing out for our special attention.

Among lexical items of a language, its numerals form a very important part. A numeral is a sign, word, figure or character used to express a number in a systematic way. There are such systems as Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, etc.), Roman numerals (I, II, V, X, L, D, etc.) or Chinese numerals (一, 二, 三, 千, etc.). Adrian Room said: “Numbers are not only functional, but are a real part of the English language.” (Adrian Room, 1989:7) It is also true for the Chinese language. Most striking is that civilization and number go hand in hand. Since the vocabulary of a language mirrors the culture in which the language is used, numerals and numerical idioms must be a vivid picture displaying cultural features.

## **0.4 The Purpose and Significance of the Present Study**

This paper takes upon itself to compare and contrast the use of numbers in English and Chinese, to demonstrate cultural similarities and differences in various uses, and finally apply our analysis to translation of numerals from Chinese into English. It is believed that the present study, taking number as its major concern, will shed some new light in the theory and practice of translation and intercultural communication studies.

## **0.5 The Scope of the Present Paper**

Apart from this Introduction and a Conclusion, this paper consists of the following three chapters.

Chapter One, *Numerals and Culture*, traces the origin of number in human society, explains the “magic power” of numbers, and their actual realization in economy, a witty Cyber-language on the Internet and some aesthetic expressions like Chinese *Duilian* or couplets on ceremonial occasions.

Chapter Two, *Numerical Idioms and Cultural Features*, explores the productivity, structure, sources and rhetorical devices of numerical idioms in English and Chinese with emphasis on Chinese idioms.

Chapter Three, *Translation of Chinese Numerical Idioms*, discusses some strategies of translating Chinese numerical idioms.

In Conclusion, a summary of the main points of this thesis is highlighted, and further studies are to be suggested.

## **0.6 Limitations of the Present Paper**

As an important subject of research in the relationship between culture and language, particular between English vocabulary and

Chinese vocabulary, the present study focuses on the use of numbers and numerical idioms in cross-cultural perspective. Due to the lack of materials, I find it impossible to make an analysis in an exhaustive manner. However, it is hoped that the present paper will pave the way for our future more detailed studies in this field.

# Chapter One

## Numerals and Culture

### 1.1 The Origin of Number

We do not know the exact time when numbers were invented, but we do know that numbers play an essential part in science and our daily life. According to Adrian Room, “The concept of number arose in prehistoric times, although originally the numbers themselves would not have been understood abstractly, as they are today. This does not mean that primitive man could not count or reckon — he was almost certainly able to judge the quantity of individual members of a group, such as people or animals, if only by naming each one separately and nothing when one or more were missing.” (Adrian Room, 1989:8)

Human beings did not know the concept of number at the very beginning. But with the well-developed brains they had some knowledge of counting the number. Ancient people recorded in different ways what had happened in their daily life and allocate what had been captured or hunted, one stone for one prey and three stones for three preys, for example. In remote antiquity people tied a knot in a rope to keep a record of events. (*The Book of Change*, 《易·系辞下》“上古结绳而治，后世圣人易之以书契。”) In the same way Persian Emperor counted the days when in war. Ancient people applied other ways, such as making marks in bark or hide, or putting sticks on the ground. The concept of number developed from practice. Necessity is the mother of inventions.

### 1.2 Magic and Mystic Numbers

There are numbers with mystical appeal. They are named “神秘

数字或玄数” in Chinese, in English “magic and mystic numbers”. They are studied in terms of astrology and numerology. Generally, there are dozens of mystic numbers, especially the figures from 1 to 10. These mystic numbers are universal phenomenon that arose from human ignorance of number and the world, and pervade through many branches of traditional culture, such as philosophy, religion, history, art, politics, customs, mythology, witchcraft. (Zhao Shikai, et al., 1999:185) The mystic numbers in Chinese culture and Western culture are mostly connected with *The Book of Changes* and *the Bible* respectively. *The Book of Changes* is to Chinese civilization what *the Bible* is to Western civilization.

The Chinese numeral for the Arabic numeral “0” is “零”. “零” is zero, nought, and nil. The Chinese character “零” is seen in *the Book of Songs* several times with a meaning of “falling” (滴落). It was not used as a numeral until the Song Dynasty. It expresses meanings other than zero. One is “fractional, fragmentary or part 零碎; 小数目”. Here are two examples: retail 零售; break up the whole into parts 化整为零. Another is “extra, odd lot 零头”. For example, 年纪已经八十有零 80-odd years old. And it can be placed between two numbers to indicate a small number or amount following a larger one. For example, 一年零三天 (a year and three days), here “零” functions as “and”. It is more productive than English word “zero” and it can form many set phrases by combining with other words.

In addition, “零” has rich specific cultural connotations. Thousands of years ago Lao-tse, the originator of Taoism claimed that nothing was the beginning of everything, that is, everything began with nothing. In a sense, “零” (nothing) is existence.

The Arabic numeral “0” was introduced into China from India in

the sixth century. It is said that at first people there used a black dot (•) and the black dot gradually became “0”. Our ancestors held the belief that Heaven was circular and Earth square. So in our country the Arabic numeral “0” has usually been written as a small circle “O” instead of an oval “0”. “O” is a circle that symbolizes both ending and beginning, just as one begins his journey, the process completed, the loop is closed. “O” means being complete or coming to a full cycle and that the universe is in motion. (See *Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*, Chen Xiyi and Zhou Yuangong)

There are six English words for “0”, namely, nought, naught, zero, nil, nix, zilch. The words for 0 vary in origin. ‘Nought’ is really ‘no aught’, or ‘not anything’, as in the slightly different spelling ‘naught’. To ‘come to naught’ is to end as nothing. ‘Nil’ is a contraction of Latin nihil, itself from ni hilum, ‘no small thing’. ‘Nix’ comes from German nichts, ‘nothing’.

‘Zero’ and ‘cipher’ are words of related origin, both ultimately originating in Arabic sifr, ‘cipher’ (compare French chiffre, ‘figure’, and the English ‘decipher’). The basic sense of the Arabic word itself was ‘empty’.

‘Zilch’ is a slang word of uncertain origin, but it was probably influenced by the z-of ‘zero’ and the word ‘million’. (‘Zillions’ is a similar slang term for the opposite: ‘many millions’.) (Adrian Room, 1989:23)

In saying a number, “zero” is generally used for 0 in science. 0, pronounced ‘oh’, is generally used after a decimal point, as in 1.04, and in telephone numbers. “Nought” (old use or literary, nothing) has the same meaning and sound as “naught” (old use or literary), which are more common in British English. “Nought” might be used before

and after a decimal point, as in 0.06; and “nil” might be used, especially in sports results. “Nix” (informal) is American English, especially used in newspapers to answer no to a plan or something. So in the English language genre is taken into consideration in choosing different words for “0”.

“0” is a mythic number for Americans, especially for American Presidents. Since 1840, American presidents elected in years ending in zero have been destined to die in office, except Ronald Reagan. William H. Harrison, died of pneumonia on April 4, 1841, several weeks after his inauguration. He was the first president to die in office. Abraham Lincoln was one of the five presidents who were assassinated. He was elected in 1860, and his untimely death came just five years later. James A. Garfield, a former union army general from Ohio, was shot several months after the inaugural ceremony (1881) by a man to whom he wouldn’t give a job. While in his second term of office (1901), William McKinley, another Ohioan, attended the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo, New York. During the reception, he was assassinated while shaking hands with some of the guests. Three years after his election in 1920, Warren G. Harding died in office. Although it was never proved, many believed he was poisoned. Franklin D. Roosevelt had been elected four times (1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944). He had contracted polio in 1921 and died of the illness in 1945. John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, only three years after his election. Ronald Reagan, the only man who did not die in office, had been elected twice (1980 and 1984). He, the last of the line, was shot in 1981 by a young man who only desired to be famous and, fortunately, survived the murder and died last year. Might the disasters of the presidents elected in the years ending in zero be coincidences or

would they result from the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn just as astrologers have suggested?

The Chinese numeral “一” for “one” is not only a word that stands for a number. It is also the origin of everything in terms of ancient Chinese philosophy. It represents unity or the whole Universe which is not divided into Heaven and Earth. Lao-tse said: “ Tao breeds ‘一’ (道生一), and ‘一’ in turn breeds ‘二’ ...” Ancient Chinese worshipped the Lord of Heaven that ruled the universe. They believed it was the Lord of Heaven that created everything. In a sense, “一” is identified with the Lord of Heaven so that the latter has another name “tian yi” (天一) or “tai yi” (泰一). “一” is “tian” (Heaven) or the supreme that is omnipotent and omnipresent. In Western culture God is “the Holy One”; Satan (the Devil) is “the Evil One”; Oneself is “Number One”, which is also a euphemism for ‘urination’. It is sometimes stated that urination is our most compelling bodily function.

The Chinese numeral “二” is the counterpart of the English numeral “two”. As Lao-tse said, ‘一’ breeds ‘二’, which means a whole is divided into two parts: Heaven and Earth. As what has been discussed, “一” represents “Heaven”, and then “二” represents Earth. In the mean time, “一” refers to unity, while “二” refers to contradictions. From the written form , we see “二” is formed by adding one ‘一’ to ‘一’, so it implies contradiction. According to the fundamental law of materialist dialectics, everything in the universe contains contradictions. Between the opposites in a contradiction there is at once unity and struggle, and they convert to each other under certain circumstances, thereby impelling things to move and change. Such conflicting concepts as “yin” and ‘yang”, “circle” and “square”,

“up” and “down”, “even” and “odd”, “day” and “night” are among the examples of “二” which brings changes. It is changes that underlie the diversity of the world. Shao Yong (邵雍), a mathematician in the Song Dynasty, thought of “二” as the beginning of changes.

The Han people hold “二” in regard and believe “二” highly auspicious. Everything in the universe is competing and interdependent, such as heaven and earth, life and death, husband and wife, male and female. “二” is considered to symbolize harmonious coexistence and carry better luck than a single item. This idea is demonstrated in our daily life. For example, 喜喜 (double happiness) is attached to almost anything for blessing on one’s wedding day. And Chinese People like to send gifts in pair.

While in the eyes of ancient Romans, “two” was an unlucky number, so they decided to hold a memorial ceremony for Pluto, god of the underworld, in the second month of the year. And the second of February was the day for the soul of a deceased person. Pythagoras held that ‘two’ meant variation and disorder. Also, it is considered bad luck in many European cultures to present an even number of flowers. There is luck in odd number. Therefore, they always present an odd number with the exception of the number 13. Traditionally, “13” became an unlucky omen in the West due to Jesus Christ’s unfortunate death. According to the *Bible*, Judah, one of Jesus’s disciples, betrayed him for thirteen silver coins, finally leading to Jesus’s Crucifixion. On the eve of Jesus’s arrest, which happened to be the Passover of the Jews, Jesus invited his disciples to dinner, during which Judah the traitor chanced to be sitting on the thirteenth seat. (Zhang Congyi, Zhong Quli & Wang Shuaili, 2000) Hence, the number 13 has been considered to be an unlucky number and avoided as taboo.

The Chinese character “三” not only denotes a number but also has some other meanings, such as “ending” and “several times”. Like another two characters “一” and “二”, “三” is not a simple cardinal number or ordinal number. “三” is a sacred and mystic number in ancient times. Its mystery originates from the times when the sum never went beyond “三”.

“一” represents “Heaven” and “二” represents “Earth”, and then naturally “三” represents “humanity”. Seen from the written form, “三” contains “一” and “二”. With “一” (Heaven) and “二” (Earth) and “三” (humanity), “三” breeds everything. This is what Lao-tse claimed — “三生万物”. This is why “三” has been used to express infinitude or multitude as is implied in Chinese characters, e.g. 森, 森, and 磊 and the expressions “三思而行” (think twice before you act) and “吾日三省吾身” (I examine myself many times a day.) (See *Analects* 《论语》)

“三” is trinity: Heaven + Earth + humanity in Chinese culture. As Dong Zhongshu, a sage in the Han Dynasty, said, if a monarch could orchestrate Heaven, Earth, humanity, he was in power as “王”; if not, he was doomed to fall out of power, that is, “亡”. The ancient monarch “王” was deified to hold power over his subjects’ life and property. So ancient people held “三” and “王” in high reverence, which is also shown in such fields as politics, religion, art, education, military service. According to Confucian ethics, a woman should act in obedience to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son after her husband’s death. In the feudal society the official system was established by “三” and its multiples: three Gongs (三公 the first rank that is similar to duke), nine Qings (九卿 high court official and chief minister), twenty-seven Dafus (大夫 grand

master, below a minister and higher than a councilor), eighty-one Yuanshi (元士). Three religions (三教 Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism); tripitaka in Buddhism (佛教三藏); three armed services (上中下或左中右三军); the three administrative organs: Zhongshu (中书省) for making policies, Menxia (门下省) for review and Shangshu (尚书省) for execution, and Six Ministries were under Shangshu (尚书省) .

“三” was and has been used in astrology as a predictor for good luck or ill luck. A solid line represents ‘yang — ’, while a broken line represents ‘yin - -’. When yang meets yin, things would go off without a hitch. In other words, yang (—) + yin ( - -) = 三 ( good luck).

The numeral “three” that corresponds to Chinese character “三” is also regarded as a lucky number and a symbol of deity, honor and fortune in Western culture. For example, ancient Greek Pythagoras spoke of ‘3’ as a perfect number. 3 (trinity) = 1 (unity) + 2 (diversity), which indicates beginning, middle and ending. In Christian religion Trinity refers to the union of three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in one God. In the Christian teachings there are three virtues: faith, hope and charity. “The world is threefolded (earth, sea and air)”; “Man is threefolded (body, soul and spirit)”; “the enemies of man are threefolded (the world, the flesh and the devil)”; “the Christian graces are threefolded (Faith, Hope and Charity)”; “the kingdoms of Nature are threefolded (the mineral, the vegetable and the animal)”. (See *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 1963) Yet “三” is considered as an unlucky number in India, where people try to avoid “three”.

According to Shao Yong's explanations of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate, “两仪”gives rise to “四象” (两仪生四象), of

which ‘两仪’ refers to Heaven (yang) and Earth (yin); ‘四象’ refers to four seasons: spring (wood), summer (fire), autumn (metal) and winter (water). “四” comes from “两” (yin and yang; Heaven and Earth; odd and even). With Heaven, there exist four seasons; with Earth, there exist four dimensions (east, south, west and north). Four seasons and four dimensions underlie the greatness of the Universe. Ancient Chinese people loved “四” that implied greatness and balance. This idea is mirrored in many respects, such as arts, literature, religion, and architecture. They called the whole country or the whole world “四海”. The four-character verse, the earliest Chinese verse form, is popular before the Han Dynasty. Most of the poems in *The Book of Songs* are written in the four-character verse form. There are four main styles of Chinese calligraphy, namely, regular script, cursive script, official script and seal characters. In religion, there are Four Books, the main Confucian classics, namely, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*. Also in the Confucian ethics are four virtues: morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. Buildings take a square or rectangle with four corners in a room. A Palace has four gates. These are just some of the examples. Furthermore, “四” is the square root of two, and the first square root among the first ten figures. So it is thought that this may be another factor for its mystery.

As everything has two sides, because “四” has the similar sound to “死” (death), superstitious people try hard to avoid this number as their car number, telephone number and house number. It is the “bad luck” number in many parts of our country, like the number 13 in Western countries.

There are quite a few English idioms with “four”, such as the four

elements; four fluids (humors); four last things; four-leaf; four freedoms put forward by former American president Franklin D. Roosevelt on the sixth of January in 1941 (the freedom of speech and expression, the freedom of worship, and the freedom from fear and want); Four Hundred (the most fashionable or exclusive social set). Of course, we have to avoid the taboo four-letter words.

“五” for “five” is one of the most important mystic numbers in Chinese culture. Its significance and mystery lie in the influential theory of the five elements, namely metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Ancient Chinese thinkers tried to use these five substances to explain the origin of all things in the world. Traditional Chinese medicinal practitioners use the five elements to explain physiological and pathological phenomena. Superstitious people used the principle of the five elements producing and overcoming each other to tell the fate of a person. (See *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary*, 2002) According to the hexagram statement in *The Book of Changes*, without earth nothing could survive and thrive. “土” is essential and “五” corresponds to “earth” (土). So it is obvious why “五” is of vital importance. The feudal rulers advocated the ethical code: Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues (三纲五常). Five chief forms of punishment were enforced in ancient China. Five cereals were mentioned in ancient books. Five emphases and four beauties (五讲四美 the norms of conduct for socialist ethics) and Five Loves (referring to love for the motherland, the people, labor, science and socialism) are advocated in the social life of the Chinese people. Others are like Three Wise Kings and Five August Emperors and Five Holy Mountains.

Ancient Kings or emperors divined what the future held for their

dynasties by “六” (the equivalent to the English word “six”), so did common people their own fate. Among all the emperors, Qinshihuang (the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty) could serve as a devout believer in “六”. His carriage was drawn by six horses; his tools or vessels were six chi or six cun in width, height or length; his country was divided into thirty-six counties. The list goes on. “六” gained popularity especially in the Qin Dynasty. In many parts of our country “六” (六六大顺) means going smoothly. For example, for Baizu minority in Dali of Yunnan Province, one customarily gives gifts in the number 6. Some words or phrases with “六” are listed as follows: six root sources of sins (六根) and six desires originating from six senses (六欲) in Buddhism; six arts or six classics (六艺) in education or literature; six Ministries (六部) in political system; six hollow organs of stomach in traditional Chinese medicine.

In Western culture “six” has the meaning of “extraordinary”. In *the Bible* “666” refers to devil.

“Seven” is the most mystic odd number in Western culture. The reasons why “seven” is filled with wonder and awe are as follows: one explanation is that among the numbers from 1 to 10, only “seven” is neither a multiple nor a quotient, which is mysterious. Another explanation is that “seven” is the sum of “three” and “four”, and according to the Pythagoras school, these two numbers “3” and “4” are sacred, so is the number “7”. According to the first part of *the Old Testament of the Bible*, known as *Genesis*, God created the world and everything in it in six days and on the seventh day God rested. The seventh day, the Sabbath Sunday, is a day of rest. Our country gave up our specific method of arranging the month, ten-day pattern (旬制), and have followed the Christian or Western seven-day pattern (星期).

制), which shows the cross-cultural influence. In addition, “seven” usually indicates an indefinite amount in English. In *Job, the Books of the Old Testament*, Eliphaz spoke to Job, “He (God) will deliver you from six troubles; in seven no harm shall touch you.” So for English-speaking peoples both virtues and sins are seven in number. “seven virtues” (七大美德), “seven deadly sins” (七宗罪), “the seven gifts of the spirits” (七大精神财富), “the seven spiritual works of mercy” (七大精神善事), “the seven sacraments” (七大圣礼), and so on. (Liao Guangrong, 2001:342)

The Chinese numeral “七” for “seven” is also held in awe in Chinese culture. The Han people hold a memorial ceremony for the deceased seven times at intervals of seven days. We call it “做七” in Chinese. The seventh day after one’s death is called “一七” (also “头七” in Fuzhou, Fujian). The last service is held on the forty-ninth day after one’s death, as is named “断七”. The seventh of the seventh lunar month is celebrated as “七夕节” (the Chinese counterpart for St Valentine’s Day), when the legendary Herd-boy is said to join the Weaving-girl for their annual tryst. It is a happy and lucky day for lovers. “七” plays an essential role in the passages of a woman’s growth, generally, teeth growth from the seventh month of the first year of her life, menarche at the age of fourteen ( $2 \times 7$ ) and menopause at the age of forty-nine ( $7 \times 7$ ). It seems that “7” is connected with life and death in both Chinese and Western cultures.

In addition, “七” has the same sound as “凄” in the words “凄凉” and “凄惨” (misery or miserable), so some people avoid “七” in their daily activities. However, other people find the Arabic numeral “7” looks like a golden hoe which could bring good fortune. The associations that a numeral brings us vary from person to person, from

culture to culture. Whether a number is lucky or not is a relative matter. There is not definite relationship between numbers and fortune or misfortune.

The Chinese numeral “八” for the Arabic numeral “8” is a mystic number of mystic numbers. When we speak of “八”, we can not help thinking of “the Eight Trigrams” (八卦), a set of symbolic signs created in ancient China. The Eight Trigrams are said to be invented by Fuxi and used in divination. The words with “八” provide much food for thought, such as the Eight Characters (命里的八字, used in fortune-telling), the Eight Immortals in Taoist mythology (古代神话中的八仙), the Eight-legged Essay — the literary form prescribed for the imperial civil service examinations in the Ming and Qing dynasties, known for its rigidity of form and poverty of ideas (科举的八股). An old saying has circulated among the people, that is, no ‘八’, no prosperity (要得发, 不离八). This will be elaborated in Section 1.3.

The Chinese character “九” is the biggest odd number and positive number. So “九” is called “tian shu” (天数), with a meaning of extremity. Loftiest is “九霄云外” (beyond the highest heavens); greatest is “九州方圆” (the nine continents that referred to China) (See *The Songs of the South* 《楚辞》, translated by Yang Hsian-yi and Gladys Yang); Deepest is “九泉之下” (the nether world); coldest is “数九寒天” (the coldest days of the year). “九” was and has been regarded as a lucky number. Ancient kings or emperors, who wished to be immortal and to rule their states forever, loved “九” very much, because “九” sounds the same as “久” which means “long life, permanence, or lasting a long time”. This idea can be seen in buildings. There is a wall with nine dragons in the Forbidden City where three big palaces are of the same height — 9 zhang and 9 chi (九丈九尺).

Another palace, the Paiyun Palace, which is a part of the Summer Palace, is 9.9 zhang high. There are eighty-one disc-shaped decorations on the gate of a palace, with nine in a row and another nine in a line. The steps of a palace are nine in number or the multiple of nine. On Valentine's Day these years some young men send 99 or even 999 red roses to their sweethearts to indicate their love everlasting and unchanging. Because of homophony — a special quality of the Chinese language, its speakers tend to express their minds or wishes by humorous use of **different** words that have the same or similar sound but different meaning. Here the Chinese numeral “九” and another character “久” are an example. Of course, it is also a pun that seven days without water makes one weak (week). Here the **same** word “one” is used to express different meanings and it does not function as a numeral but a pronoun. So it is quite different.

This Chinese character is also used to express the meaning of “bending, winding or curving”. There are only two strokes in its written form, but the first stroke contains three bendings: horizontal line, vertical stroke with a bending tip and hook stroke at the end. For this reason, it is often used in the idioms that describe a winding river or road. 九曲黄河 (the winding Yellow River); 九曲桥(a zigzag bridge); 漳河水, 九十九道湾 (The Zhanghe River has ninety-nine turns.) (Li Guonan, 2004:440)

In addition, it usually means being numerous, which will be illustrated in the second chapter. English idioms with the word “nine” have the same implication. Here are some cases in point:

A stitch in time saves nine. (及时一针省九针)

A cat has nine lives. (猫有九条命)

Nine tailors make a man. (绅士要注意穿着的考究)

Possession is nine points of the law. (占有者在诉讼中十有九胜)

In Greek mythology “the Nine” refers to “the Muses”. There are two more idioms with the word “nine”. One is “be dressed up to the nines” (dressed very elaborately) and the other is “a nine days' wonder” (a thing or event that attracts attention for a short time and then is forgotten, “轰动一时的事件”; “昙花一现的新鲜事儿”)

“Number begins with ‘一’ and ends in ‘十’.” (*Annals of Han*)  
Because the numeral “十” for the English word “ten” is the last number from ‘一’ to ‘十’ in the decimal system, it is often used to express the meaning of “complete, full, perfect or highest in degree”, which is clear in the following words or idioms, like 十全十美 (be perfect in every way), 十分 (very, highly), 十足 (full, complete), 十万火急 (most urgent), 十万八千里 (an extremely long distance or a great difference), 十拿九稳 (practically certain). “十” means ‘perfect’, as is indicated in the appraisal practice. We often hear of the top ten in the billboard, and the ten best (十佳). Ancient Chinese people divided a month into three Xuns (旬, ten days). According to ancient criminal law, there were ten major indictments that could not be pardoned (十恶不赦). According to the *Bible*, God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses.

It is pure science that these numbers, cardinal or ordinal, when used in counting, express exactness. But when it comes to culture, they carry specific connotations, which are more superstitious than scientific or reasonable. Ancient people had to turn to the supernatural power because they had limited knowledge of the world, and in their lives there were too many uncertainties over which they had no control. Anyway, the strong national number culture is rooted in different areas, handed down from generation to generation, and even

spread to other parts of the world by intercultural communication. A knowledge of the culture-specific connotations of these numbers will help us to overcome the obstacles to successful intercultural communication and foreign language teaching.

### 1.3 Chinese Lucky Numbers in Economic Activities

Just as what has been discussed in Section 1.2, “三” is regarded as a lucky number. And “三” has the similar sound to Chinese character “生”. So in Fuzhou the bridegroom presents the bride's family with uncertain amount of betrothal money, and the last number is usually “3”, such as ￥3333 or ￥13333, which usually has two meanings: one is “to give birth to more children” (生子), and the other is “to make fortune” (生财). Currently in the stock market “三” is one of the numbers that investors love best because it is pronounced similar to another Chinese character “升” which means “to go up”.

People believe in the magical power of utterances. In some parts of China, “8” is similar in sound to “发” (to make fortune). So the number “8” is considered to be a lucky number. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ￥138 (一生发) or ￥168 (一路发) was wrapped in a piece of red paper as a wedding present in Fuzhou with the best wish that the receiver would make much money. The Olympic Games in 2008 will be held at 8 pm on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August. Public companies obtain an approximate value in the financial reports by changing the last number to “8”, wishing for good luck. A man in Wenzhou of Zhejiang Province liked an apartment on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. Later he was told that most Chinese idioms with “八” (七上八下, 乱七八糟, 八病九痛) have the negative meanings: mess, disease or nervousness. For him “8” is a totally unlucky number. “18” (要发) is also considered to

be a lucky number. But also in Wenzhou some people dislike it. They seem to associate “18” with hell (十八层地狱). So they label Building 18 as Building 17.1 or E8. The letter “E” sounds similar to Chinese character “一” for Arabic numeral “1”. An expert in Wenzhou University commented: “Numbers are mere numbers. They are not necessarily connected with ‘fortune’ or ‘misfortune’. The buyers and sellers of houses should give priority to quality rather than play number games.”

Some listed companies take so-called lucky numbers like “三, 八, 九” as their code number. For instance, the code number of a pharmaceutical company “三九胃泰” is “000999”. We know the Chinese characters “三” and “九” are “three” and “nine” respectively. And the day, **March 9**, 2000, was thought to be a lucky day when the company went public. Those companies that make alcoholic drinks prefer the number “9”, because the Chinese character for alcoholic drinks is “酒” that has the same sound as “九”. The code numbers of Guizhou Maotai (贵州茅台), Shanxi Fenjiu (山西汾酒) and Xiangjiugui (湘酒鬼) are “600519”, “600809” and “000799” respectively. (He Guowei, 2003:55) On one hand, the listed companies take “9” as their code number because both “九” and “酒” have the same sound as the Arabic numeral “9” in Chinese so that the code number is easy to remember. On the other hand, both “九” and “酒” have the same sound as another Chinese character “久” that has a meaning of “long life, permanence, or lasting a long time” and all the people concerned wish for a long-term development (expansion).

#### 1.4 Numbers Used as a Cyber-language on the Internet

It amazes us that students are so clever at applying homophony to

please the listener. In China, people surfing on the Internet are 27 of age on average. (He Guowei, 2003:162) Most of them are teenagers or students, who are active, creative and ready to embrace novel things and create their own special ways to express their mind. To increase the speed of communication or information exchange between those people who are surfing on the Internet, a special form of language, “Cyber-language”, is developed with the birth of the Internet. It is characterized by economy of time and space. It is concise and vivid. It takes the following forms: numbers or numbers + English letters. The following are examples: 56 (无聊 bored); 666 (溜溜溜 I'm leaving or going off.); 065 (原谅我 Forgive me.); 786 (吃饱了 I'm full.); 9494 (就是就是 Yeah, yeah.); 7456 (气死我了 I was made very angry.); 886 (拜拜啦 Bye-bye.); 5555 (呜呜呜呜 I'm crying.); 668 (聊聊吧 Let's talk.); “B4” means “before” (以前). “F2F” stands for “face to face” (面对面). “4a4a” means “Yes, yes.” (是啊是啊). (He Guowei, 2003:161-162)

Strictly speaking, the expressions mentioned above are not words. Signs are better.

Here is another example for the humorous use of homophony. Some students say: “The guy is really 3.14.” At first glance, we are confused about the meaning. In Chinese “π” (3.14) is pronounced just the same as another Chinese character “派”. One dialectal meaning of “派” is “chic” or “stylish”. So here “3.14” is equal to “chic” or “stylish”. Some people criticize such new expressions. They find it hard for them to live with such strange expressions. Some people even say teenagers are murdering our language. These people just make too much fuss. These new expressions are spread or spoken within a particular group and difficult to understand for people who are not

within the group. Frankly speaking, they have enriched our language. With them, spoken language in particular is full of fun and vitality. At the same time they reflect the sense of humor and active mind of the younger generation. In this respect, we can also introduce “the market system” into the language. The students have fresh creative ideas. They coin words, and then bring them to society just as factories put their products to market. If these words meet consumers’ needs and satisfy their tastes, naturally they can be diffused through society. If not, they easily become out of style and forgotten. Only the fittest survive.

## 1.5 Chinese Numerals in Poems and Couplets

At first glance, we do not think much of the following Chinese numerical poems and couplets, but on second thoughts, we will be greatly impressed by these wonderful works. For example,

Source text:

“三五明月满，四五蟾兔缺。” (*Nineteen Ancient Poems ·Winter Comes in the Tenth Lunar Month* 《古诗十九首·孟冬寒气至》)

Target text:

“On the fifteenth, the moon is full again; on the twentieth, the moon begins to wane.” (Wang Rongpei, 1997:365)

Here ‘三五’ ( $3 \times 5$ ) refers to the fifteenth day in a month, and ‘四五’ ( $4 \times 5$ ) refers to the twentieth day. There are two adjacent digits, one multiplying the other, which is one of the characteristics of Chinese language, as in another example 二八佳人 (a beauty of sixteen years old). Such expressions are usually used in literary works.

A story goes that Lv Meng (吕蒙) in Beijing composed a couplet to bemoan the poor life as follows:

Source text:

上联: 二三四五, (缺一 (衣))

下联: 六七八九。 (少十 (食))

横联: 南北 (没东西 (财物)) (Zhang Dexin, 1996:376)

Target text:

The first part: 二 (two) 三 (three) 四 (four) 五 (five), no 一 (one)

The second part: 六 (six) 七 (seven) 八 (eight) 九 (nine), no 十 (ten)

Top: 南北 (south and west), no 东西 (east and west)

The Chinese numeral ‘一’ has the same sound as ‘衣’ (clothing), the Chinese numeral ‘十’ has the same sound as ‘食’ (food) and ‘东西’ has two main meanings: one is ‘east and west’, the other is ‘things’. Here ‘东西’ takes the second meaning, to be exact, that is, money and goods. This is a couplet that describes penniless people who have no clothing, no food and no money. And this is another example in which homophony is used creatively.

## Chapter Two

### Numerical Idioms and Cultural Features

#### 2.1 Productivity of Numerical Idioms

Both English language and Chinese language are noted for their wealth of idioms. Idioms form an essential part of the general vocabulary. They reflect the environment, life, history, and culture of the native speakers, and are closely associated with their innermost spirit and feeling. That is why idioms are said to be the sinew of the language, and, as indicated by P. Cowie and R. Mackin. (Zhang Yun-fei, 1988:294) Idioms are local, national and historical. They have been accepted and handed down from generation to generation because they express some obvious truth or familiar experience in a concise and witty style. They are plain, short and vivid. They embody the wisdom of the people who speak the language. Many idioms originate from historical events, literary works (fables, poems, stories, legends, myths, folklores, etc.), even from people's daily lives. Take Chinese idioms for example. It is estimated that idioms from ancient books account for 60% of all the idioms. Numerical idioms play an important part, which is in particular true with Chinese language. For example, according to Lou Zhixin (楼志新) and Zhang Ju-e's (张菊娥) estimate, in *A Dictionary of Idiomatic Chinese* (《汉语成语词典》, 四川辞书出版社, 1985) there are 10158 idioms, out of which are 1012 idioms with numerals, about 10%. In *Chinese Idioms Dictionary* (《中国成语大词典》, 上海辞书出版社, 1987) there are about 18000 idioms, out of which are 1497 idioms with numerals, about 8%. And Chinese numerical idioms usually contain Chinese numerals from '一'

to ‘十’ (that is, from one to ten) and 百,千,万,半 (hundred, thousand, ten thousand and half respectively). Are Chinese numerals or their English counterparts more productive in forming idioms? Please look at the statistics in the following table. The number of Chinese numerical idioms is taken from *Chinese Idioms Dictionary* (Wang Tao, et al., 1987), while the number of English numerical idioms is taken from *A dictionary of Current Idiomatic English* (Qin Xiaobai, et al., 1999).

item \ number	—	one	—	two	三	three	四	four	五	five
idiomatic expressions with the numeral at the beginning	414	71	10	37	78	17	25	21	28	10
	六	six	七	seven	八	eight	九	nine	十	ten
	19	10	21	11	12	1	17	5	37	4
	百	hundred	千	thousand	万	million	半	half		
	109	4	102	2	59	2	23	70		

Viewed as a whole, Chinese numerals are more productive in forming idioms than their English counterparts. In addition, because of different cultures there exist more differences than similarities between Chinese numerical idioms and those in English in structure, sources and rhetorical uses, etc. Quite a number of English idioms are slangy, and what is slangy today may be informal tomorrow. Stylistic features of idioms are constantly shifting and semantic changes are going on and on. This is also true with Chinese idioms. For example, the

Chinese idiom “一塌糊涂” means “in a mess”, “in utter disorder”, but now in Shanghai it sometimes is used, especially colloquially, to express “compliment” or “to a high degree”, (He Guowei, 2003:45-46) which is shown in the following examples:

- a 好得一塌糊涂 (very good or excellent)
- b 那姑娘漂亮得一塌糊涂。 (The girl is so beautiful.)
- c 她爱他爱得一塌糊涂。 (She loves him very much.)

This poses problems to translation, intercultural communication and foreign language teaching. Because English numerical idioms are relatively small in number, more weight will be put on Chinese numerical idioms in this chapter.

## 2.2 The Structure of Numerical Idioms

Both Chinese idioms and English idioms are characterized by their semantic unity and structural stability. Idioms are structurally fixed, and as a rule one is not supposed to change any element in an idiomatic expression. But it is not unusual for writers to give a new twist to an old saying by making slight changes for rhetorical effect. (Zhang Yun-fei, 1988:314) For example:

A word in time saves nine. — Galsworthy, a British writer  
(from ‘A stitch in time saves nine.’)

Of course, changes in idiom structure should be made with the utmost caution.

Most Chinese idioms, including numerical idioms, of course, are typically quadrisyllables (four-syllable idioms), well-matched in sound and sense for rhetorical purposes. Generally, there are three main written forms as follows:

- 1) There is only one numeral in an idiom and the numeral is

usually put at the beginning or at the third place, such as 一针见血, 两全其美, 狡兔三窟, 四面楚歌, 五体投地, 六神无主, 七窍生烟, 独树一帜, 不远万里.

2) There are two numerals in succession, such as 三三两两, 千千万万, 三五成群, 乱七八糟. This type is relatively small in number.

3) There are two numerals in an idiom, with one in the first place and the other in the third place. So some scholars name it “奇位嵌数成语”. This type is more common, about 300 in number. (Zhang Zhanshan, 2000) According to whether the two numerals are the same or not, this type can be subdivided into two smaller groups. One is that the two numerals are the same, like 一心一意, 百发百中, 十全十美, 半信半疑. The other group is that the two numerals are different, following an order from small to large or vice versa. In some idioms the two numerals increase successively, like 一穷二白, 三从四德, 七手八脚, 五颜六色, while in others the two numerals decrease successively, like 三心二意, 三长两短, 三言两语, 五讲四美. And there are still some other cases in which the second numeral is a multiple of the first one or the first numeral is ten times the second one, like 五光十色, 三教九流, 四面八方, 千方百计, 万水千山, 万紫千红.

### 2.3 The Sources of Numerical Idioms

A knowledge of the sources of these idioms may help us to comprehend what they really mean. There are many different sources of idioms. The classical works of great writers form the rich literary source of Chinese idioms. Many idiomatic expressions come from the social life of the Han people. Chinese numerical idioms can be

classified into the following main groups according to their sources. Some of them fall into two groups.

### 2.3.1 Allusive Numerical Idioms

Most numerical idioms come from historical events, fables, legends, myths, stories, etc. These idioms are called allusive idioms that reflect the Han people's values and philosophy. Take “朝三暮四” for example. According to *Liezi · Yellow Emperor*, a monkey raiser fed acorns to the monkeys and told them three for the morning meal and four for the evening meal. At this the monkeys were angry. Then he reversed the allocation, four acorns for the morning meal and three for the evening meal. The monkeys were pleased. Originally this idiom is used to show that the wise are good at playing tricks, while the foolish are slow to perceive. Its current meaning is “to change one's mind frequently”. Another example is “一字千金” (Each word is worth a thousand pieces of gold.). It has been said that Lv Buwei (呂不韦), prime minister of the state of Qin in the late Warring States Period, asked his hangers-on to write the Lv's Spring and Autumn Annals. After it was finished, he announced that whoever could add or delete one word, he would be awarded one thousand pieces of gold (*Records of the Historians · Biography of Lv Buwei*). Since then, “一字千金” has been used to praise a fine piece of literary work. “三顾茅庐” (to make three calls at the thatched cottage — repeatedly request sb. to take up a responsible post). Towards the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Liu Bei paid three consecutive visits to Zhuge Liang, a master strategist who lived in a thatched cottage near Xiangyang in present-day Hubei Province, to show his sincerity for Zhuge to end a life seclusion and become his strategic advisor. (See The

Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, 2002, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press). There are many other examples like “一衣带水 (a narrow strip of water)”, “功亏一篑 (fall short of success for lack of a final effort)”, and so on. We can't possibly list all of the allusive idioms here. What has been mentioned above is only a drop in the sea.

### 2.3.2 Idioms Related to Ancient Economical and Political System

We note that the old economical and political system can be seen in the idioms. Although the system has been discarded, its products are still in existence. For example, we know, in the traditional Chinese weight system, one jin equals sixteen liang, so half a jin equals eight liang. This idiom “半斤八两” is used to describe “two of a kind” or “not much to choose between the two”. It is similar to the English idiom “six of one and half a dozen of the other”, but the former usually suggests derogatory sense. The current weight system is that one jin equals ten liang, so half a jin equals five liang. This old system is used only in herbal medicine shop and jeweler's shop. Perhaps it is not known to many young people that such weight system was once practiced in our country, however, the idioms related to the system are still in style. Another example is “千钧一发” (a hundred weight hanging by a hair). One jun (钧), a unit of weight in ancient times, equals to thirty jin. This idiom is used to describe “in imminent danger” or “in an extremely precarious situation”. China has been an agricultural country, so a number of idioms are connected with agricultural life, e.g. “五谷丰登, 六畜兴旺” (An abundant harvest of all food crops accompanies the thriving of all domestic animals.), “三天打鱼, 两天晒网” (go fishing for three days and dry the nets for two days; lack perseverance).

Idioms tend to reflect law, morals, belief, customs and so on. With the progress of human society, our ways of looking at things are changing. So are words. Words once respectable or neutral may shift to a less respectable or even derogatory meaning. For instance, the neutral idiom “三宫六院” originally meant the place where the ancient emperor lived was so big with many palaces, gardens and yards. Later it referred to the women, especially the emperor's wives who lived there. Since polygamy was illegal, if a man has “三宫六院” (several concubines), he will be condemned for his infidelity. And this idiom has been degraded. Social prejudice against certain classes and occupations, or rather, against women, has also caused the meaning of many words or idioms to degenerate. One example is “三姑六婆” that referred to three kinds of middle-aged women (nuns, female Taoists and women fortune-tellers) and six categories of elderly women (women traffickers in human beings, matchmakers, witches, procuresses, women quacks and midwives) according to *Talks in the Intervals of Ploughing · Vol. 10* by Tao Zongyi of the Yuan Dynasty (元陶宗仪《辍耕录》卷十). In ancient times these occupations were acceptable and even legal. The idiom covers much more than what it originally conveyed. Its sense has been generalized and degenerated into its modern sense: women of dubious character who make a living by dishonest means. “三从四德” (Three Obediences and Four Virtues), according to Confucian ethics) a woman should obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son after her husband's death. Besides, she should have four virtues — morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work. “三纲五常” (Three Cardinal Guides and Five Constant Virtues), by the feudal ethical code, the ruler guided his subject, the father guided his son, and the husband guided

his wife. The basis for the harmonious personal relationship was that a person should have benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity). From these idioms we can see sexism and hierarchy in feudal society. “十恶不赦” originally referred to 10 major indictments that could not be pardoned according to ancient criminal law, i.e. conspiring against the state, plotting high treason, plotting a rebellion, plotting treason, being immoral, high treason by showing contempt for the monarch, failing to practise filial piety, being unfriendly, showing no benevolence, and creating internal disorder or turmoil.

### 2.3.3 Numerical Idioms Related to Military Life

We know the history of ancient China is the history of warfare. The Han people fought against other minorities in the civil war, or our ancestors defended our country against the foreign invaders, or warlords fought for power. So military life has given rise to many idioms, e.g. 七擒七纵 (The troops of the Kingdom of Shu Han captured and released seven times Meng Huo, the head of a minority in present-day Yunnan Province. In the end he submitted himself to Shu Han.), 身经百战 (take part in many battles), 四面楚歌 (be besieged on all sides), 百发百中 (shoot with unfailing accuracy), 百万雄师 (a million bold warriors), 百战不殆 (fight a hundred battles without a single defeat).

### 2.3.4 Numerical Idioms Related to Religion

It's known to all that *the Bible*, Christian classics, has a great influence on English language. Many English idioms come from it. It is also true with Buddhism. Quite a few words and idioms are connected with Buddhism, of which some are numerical idioms. Here

are some examples:

**三生有幸** In Buddhism “三生” refers to previous life, this life and afterlife. “三生有幸” means being extremely fortunate. This idiom has usually been used as a formula in introduction or on some other occasions to describe somebody who considers himself/herself most fortunate to make acquaintance of somebody else.

**一尘不染** (spotless; maintain one's pure character) Buddhists consider the objects of the senses (form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and perception of character) as the ‘six worldly environments’, and a Buddhist not contaminated by these worldly environments is described as ‘一尘不染’.

**五体投地** (the highest form of admiration or esteem for sb.) “五体投地” originally is the movement of some parts of one's body, that is, to prostrate oneself with all limbs and the head touching the ground . It is the most respectful form of etiquette in Buddhism.

**四大皆空** In ancient India, the universe was thought to comprise four elements — earth, water, fire and wind, called 四大, meaning the world. “四大皆空” means all physical existence is a vanity according to Buddhism.

There are many other idioms like ‘六根清净’ (be free from human desires), ‘万劫不复’ (lost forever), and so on.

### 2.3.5 Numerical Idioms Related to Ancient Chinese Philosophy

Ancient Chinese thinkers tried to use the theory of the five elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth) to explain the origin of all things in the world. They believed that the heart instead of the brain is the very organ for thinking or mental activities. The importance of the organ is shown in Chinese vocabulary in which there are quite a

few words and idioms with the morpheme “心”, like 一心两用, 一心一意, 三心二意, 心口如一. These numerical idioms carry the meaning of “single-minded” or “hesitation”.

There are similarities and differences between Chinese and English numerical idioms in terms of their source. In broad line, they both largely come from literary works and people's everyday life. In narrow line, some English idiomatic expressions are related to sports and card games, such as the eight ball, five hundred. As far as we know, no sports-related or game-related numerical idioms are listed in *Chinese Idioms Dictionary* that is recognized as one of the comprehensive dictionaries. It may be due to different ways of life. Besides, some Chinese numerical idioms come from traditional Chinese medicine, e.g. 五劳七伤, 六阳会首.

## 2.4 Rhetorical Devices in Numerical Idioms

Rhetorical devices are also used in English idioms, but English numerical idioms are relatively small in number, so this section deals with the main rhetorical devices of Chinese numerical idioms.

### **Covert Reiteration (隐性重复)**

Some numeral idioms contain two pairs of words which are so close in meaning even though they are totally different words that they are twins in fact, such as 千姿百态, 五颜六色, 一干二净, 三言两语, 一心一意, 半斤八两, 一模一样. This is one of the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese language — to avoid ambiguity, to reinforce meaning, to provide balance and symmetry, or just to satisfy the ear. (Joan Pinkham, 2000:63)

### **Exaggeration**

We know exaggeration is applied to make something seem larger,

smaller, better, worse, etc. than it really is. Seen superficially, the numerals in these idioms express exactness, while they actually suggest vagueness or fuzziness, with the meaning of a large amount or a small amount. Chinese numerals '三', '九', '百', '千', and '万' are usually used to describe 'multitude'; Chinese four-syllable idioms with nouns or verbs inserted in the combination '七...八...' indicate a large amount or a mess; Chinese numerals '一' and '二' usually suggest a small amount, which is similar to their English counterparts. The following are some examples:

一毛不拔 unwilling to give up even a hair

一知半解 have scanty knowledge of

一窍不通 be utterly ignorant of

三言两语 in a few words

千方百计 by hook or by crook; by every possible means

千头万绪 too complicated to unravel

百折不挠 be undaunted by repeated setbacks

七手八脚 with everybody lending a hand

七零八落 scattered here and there

乱七八糟 at sixes and sevens

杂七杂八 mixed; assorted

七嘴八舌 with everybody trying to put in a word or two

垂涎三尺 drool with envy

一目十行 take in ten lines at a glance; read quickly

七窍生烟 livid as if one's ears, eyes, mouth and nose are spitting rage

### **Antithesis and Parallelism**

It is one of the main characteristics of Chinese idioms, that is, symmetrical in form, similar in meaning or opposite and supplementary to each other. It involves rhythm and wording. As in

一人传虚，万人传实, ‘一’ (one) and ‘万’ (ten thousand) denote a small amount and a large amount respectively; ‘虚’ means something invented or rumor, while ‘实’ means something believed to be true. So here ‘一’ and ‘万’, ‘实’ and ‘虚’ are two pairs of opposites. Contrast is used for emphasis. Observing the idiom ‘经一事，长一智’ (Wisdom comes from experience.), we'll be amazed at the wisdom of our people. 经 (verb) + 一 (numeral) + 事 (noun), 长 (verb) + 一 (numeral) + 智 (noun). ‘经’ and ‘长’ are falling-rising tone (上声), ‘一’ is level tone (阴平), but ‘智’ and ‘事’ are falling tone (去声). The above analysis and the following examples that are only the tip of the iceberg show that Chinese idioms, including numerical idioms, contain logic, rhythm, symmetry and philosophy.

九死一生 survival after many perils

九牛一毛 a single hair out of nine ox hides

聪明一世，糊涂一时 smart as a rule, but this time a fool

十年树木，百年树人 It takes 10 years to grow trees, but 100 to cultivate people.

百万买宅，千万买邻 It is hard to buy a house and even harder to find a good neighbor.

一失足成千古恨 A single slip may bring a lifelong regret.

三天打鱼，两天晒网 lack perseverance

养兵千日，用兵一时 The maintenance of an army for a thousand days boils down to a single battle.

下笔千言，离题万里 a thousand words from the pen in a stream, but ten thousand li away from the theme.

四体不勤，五谷不分 One can neither toil with his/her four limbs nor tell the five cereals apart.

祸不单行，福无双至 Misfortunes never come singly; blessings do not

come in pairs.

### **Simile or Metaphor**

There are a number of vivid Chinese numerical idioms that carry rhetorical devices — simile or metaphor. Here are some examples:  
一日不见，如隔三秋 One day's separation seems as long as three years; miss somebody very much

九牛二虎 strength of nine bulls and two tigers; tremendous effort

四面楚歌 be besieged on all sides

一贫如洗 penniless

四海之内皆兄弟 All the people in the whole world are brothers.

### **Metonymy**

It is a figure of speech by which an object or idea is described by the name of something closely related to it. That is to say, a transfer of names occurs between two things associated by actual contiguity. (Zhang Yun-fei, 1988:286) Here are two common kinds: the concrete for the abstract and a thing for the person who has it or does it. For example:

三寸(不烂)之舌 (eloquence) ‘三寸之舌’ that is the equivalent of the English word ‘tongue’ originally refers to something concrete, but the idiom has been used to describe the eloquence of the person who has the organ.

The idiom “三宫六院” that has been discussed in Section 2.3.2 is another example of metonymy.

## Chapter Three

### Translation of Chinese Numerical Idioms

#### **3.1 The Criteria and Strategies of Translation**

Any translation may follow the three criteria by Yan Fu: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance. It is important to be faithful to the original. But in some cases it becomes more important to be expressive. Of course it is perfect to be faithful, expressive and elegant, which is an elusive goal, especially for the translation of culture-specific idioms. This part covers the main strategies for the translation of Chinese numerical idioms into English.

#### **3.2 Literal Translation of the Numeral**

Both Chinese language and English language have a tremendous number of idioms, some of which are similar to each other in form and implication. We can translate the numeral in an idiom literally if there is a ready equivalent in English. It is the easiest way. The following are some examples:

古稀之年 three score (years) and ten

半途而废 give up halfway

三三两两 in twos and threes

一箭双雕 kill two birds with one stone

Some typical Chinese numerical idioms have no match in the target language. In this case, we can also translate them literally and spread our unique culture. Here is a case in point:

俗话又说：“女大十八变”。况且有本事的，未免就有些调歪……。(《红楼梦》)

As the saying goes, “A girl changes eighteen times before

reaching womanhood.” And the smarter the girl, the more out of hand she’ll get... (Translated by Yang Hsian-yi and Gladys Yang, Vol.II-652)

### 3.3 Free Translation of the Numeral

Since cultures and languages vary greatly, there is no one-to-one correspondence in most cases. If there are no ready identical idiomatic expressions in the target language, we can take the following strategies.

#### 3.3.1 Loan Numerical Idioms

Idioms are always associated with culture. And they are often used for rhetorical purposes, e.g. metaphor, exaggeration. The strategy of translation using a loan idiom is particular common in dealing with culture-specific items. For example, what the Chinese idiom ‘冰冻三尺非一日之寒’ implies is the same as the English idiom ‘Rome was not built in a day.’. We can loan the idiom when in translation. And ‘一丘之貉’ originally refers to jackals from the same lair and is used to describe bad people who are alike. An English proverb ‘Birds of a feather flock together’ means people, especially bad people, of the same sort. These two idioms mean the same and carry derogatory sense. Another English idiom ‘have one foot in the grave’ and Chinese idiom ‘半截入土’ mean the same — near death because of old age. They both are neutral. In this situation we can safely borrow the target-language idioms.

There exist similarities and differences between Chinese and English in expressing fuzziness of numerals. It is impossible to translate idioms word for word. What does a translator do when there

is no identical idiom in form in the target language which expresses the same meaning as the source language idiom? We can make some change in numerals on condition that the translated text is accessible to the target-language readers. Here are some examples:

乱七八糟 at sixes and sevens

百里挑一 one in a thousand (The English idiom ‘one in a thousand’ is the same as ‘百里挑一’ in meaning.)

三思而后行 think twice before one takes action.

For different physical environment, cultural background and social customs in different countries, the connotation that an idiom carries varies from country to country. So it is hard to find a precise English idiomatic expression to match Chinese idiom in both propositional and expressive meaning. We have to resort to compromise by using a more neutral/less expressive English idiomatic expression when in translation. For example,

“普及工作若是永远停留在一个水平上……那么教育者和被教育者岂不是半斤八两?” (毛泽东《在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话》)

If popularization remains at the same level forever... will not the educators and those being educated be six of one and half a dozen of the other? (MIII-83)

The difference between ‘six of one and half a dozen of the other’ in English and ‘半斤八两’ in Chinese does not lie in their respective propositional meanings; both items basically mean ‘there is very little difference between the one and the other’. It lies in their expressive meanings. ‘Six of one and half a dozen of the other’ is neutral in English: it has no inherent evaluative meaning or connotation. ‘半斤八两’, on the other hand, is potentially evaluative and can be readily used

in some contexts in a derogatory way. This expressive meaning is often lost in translation because it is not always possible to find exactly the same expression with the same meaning in the target language.

### 3.3.2 Omission or Fusion

In Section 2.4, we have mentioned one of the distinguishing characteristics of Chinese language, that is, some numerical idioms contain two pairs of words that simply duplicate the sense each other even though they are totally different words. This sort of duplication is apparently acceptable in Chinese. It may even be necessary for rhetorical emphasis or necessary recapitulation — to avoid ambiguity, to reinforce meaning, to provide balance and symmetry, or just to satisfy the ear. But the presence of two pairs of words in Chinese is never in itself a sufficient justification for using two pairs of words in an English translation. English has no ready mechanism for producing such forms and so they are often replaced by appropriate deletion or fusion. For example, in the idiom ‘一干二净’, ‘一干’ and ‘二净’ are close in meaning, so in this context the best way to deal with this type of idioms is simply to delete one of the twins. ‘一干二净’ is ‘neat’ or ‘tidy’. It is not necessary to translate the idiom into “neat and tidy”. The temptation is to remain both pairs, on the grounds that they do not mean exactly the same thing. But no two words in English ever do mean exactly the same thing. (Joan Pinkham, 2000:63) It is neither possible nor desirable to reproduce every aspect of meaning for every word in the source text. Likewise, ‘五颜六色’ means ‘of various colors’. If it is translated into ‘five colors and six colors’, it will confuse the reader. A word ‘colorful’ is enough to express the meaning.

### 3.3.3 Fuzziness

The numerals in many Chinese numerical idioms are used to express fuzziness, a large amount, a small amount or a mess. In most cases we can leave out the numerals and translate them with some fuzzy words that denote an indefinite amount, like ‘many’, ‘several’, ‘all’, ‘repeatedly’. In a sense, this is really faithful to the original.

百川归海 All rivers flow to the sea.

九死一生 survival after many perils

三番五次 repeatedly; time and time again

四面八方 all directions

问遍千家成行家。Learn from numerous advisers, and you'll become a master.

门口放着一堆雨伞, 少说也有十二把, 五颜六色, 大小不一。In the doorway lay at least twelve umbrellas of all sizes and colors.

### 3.3.4 Transformation from the Concrete to the Abstract

In Chinese language the concrete are used to express the abstract, as in 三天打鱼, 两天晒网. If we place too much emphasis on faithfulness to the original and translate this idiom into ‘go fishing for three days and dry the nets for two’, its metaphorical meaning might not be understood by non-native speakers. A better way is to transform the concrete to the abstract, that is, from exactness to fuzziness. So the version ‘lack of perseverance’ is preferable. Another example is:

他这一阵心头如同十五个吊桶打水, 七上八下。老是宁静不下来。(周而复:《上海的早晨》)

His mind was in a turmoil these days and he was quite unable to think straight.

Of course, the strategy in which the vivid numerical idioms are

left out will definitely sacrifice the unique Chinese culture. It is a great pity, but in some cases it is unavoidable, just as Yan Fu stated, “Translation has to do three difficult things: to be faithful, expressive, and elegant. It is difficult enough to be faithful to the original, and yet if a translation is not expressive, it is tantamount to having no translation. Hence expressiveness should be required too ...”

(Translated by Wang Zuoliang)

### 3.3.5 Cultural Substitution

This strategy involves replacing a culture-specific item or expression with a target-language item which does not have the same prepositional meaning but is likely to have a similar impact on the target reader. The main advantage of using this strategy is that it gives the reader a concept with which s/he can identify, something familiar and appealing. (Mona Baker, 2000:31) Chinese idiom 四面楚歌, for instance, is not known to most foreign readers. According to *Records of the Historian · Official Records of Xiang Yu*, during the war between the Chu and the Han, Xiang Yu’s troops at Gaixia were besieged by Han troops, and soon ran out of ammunition and provisions. That night they heard the Han troops singing Chu folk songs on all sides. Xiang Yu was shocked, saying, ‘Have Han troops occupied all the territory of Chu? Why are there so many Chu people?’ In the end Xiang Yu killed himself with his own sword. English readers, even Chinese readers, are familiar with English idiom ‘meet one’s Waterloo’ which is connected with the Battle of Waterloo in which the Duke of Wellington leading the British and the Prussians defeated Napoleon and the French. It was Napoleon’s final defeat, and he never regained power after it. So in a sense, ‘四面楚歌’ corresponds to ‘meet one’s

Waterloo'. We can use 'meet one's Waterloo' when translating '四面楚歌' to express one's final defeat. Another example is '多此一举'. We can use English idiom 'carry coals to Newcastle' to express the meaning 'to make an unnecessary move'. It is advisable to use this strategy only as a last resort, when the advantages of producing a smooth, readable translation clearly outweigh the value of rendering a particular meaning accurately in a given context. (Mona Baker, 2000:42) Just as H. Sweet puts it, "Often in speaking a foreign language we seek in vain for a precise equivalent for some native word or idiom, and find that there is not any definite equivalent, and that we must content ourselves with a vague periphrasis." (H. W. Fowler, 1965:554)

### 3.4 Explanation

This strategy is particular common in dealing with culture-specific items. Just as what has been discussed, Chinese idioms embody Chinese tradition, like the numerical idioms related to traditional Chinese medicine, e.g. 五劳七伤, 六阳会首; the idioms from military life, e.g. 七擒七纵; the idioms about ethical code, e.g. 五讲四美, 三纲五常, 三从四德. Only a few have been mentioned here. Necessary explanations should be given in translation, otherwise the target-language reader may be confused about these culture-specific idioms.

It is a blessing for a translator that the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning. However, this ideal cannot always be achieved. Because cultures and languages vary so greatly that there are no one-to-correspondence idioms in most cases, a certain amount of loss, addition or some

change in meaning is unavoidable and acceptable in translation. For example, the Chinese idiom “经一事，长一智” is translated into “Wisdom comes from experience.”, and the rhetorical effect and rhythm have lost or have been sacrificed. And the numerical poem and couplet mentioned above are hard or even impossible to translate. It is a great pity. Furthermore, ‘have one foot in the grave’ is translated into ‘行将就木’ in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English with Chinese Translation* and ‘已是风烛残年’. (Chen Ding-an, 1998:258) These two versions are elegant. There are some other colloquial versions such as ‘黄土已埋了一截’, ‘一只脚已踏进棺材’. Which version is appropriate depends on the stylistic variety.

## Conclusion

From the above analysis, we know that there are similarities and differences between Chinese mystic numbers and English mystic numbers and that the associations with mystic numbers vary from culture to culture and from place to place. One of the reasons is that homophony plays an important part in Chinese mystic numbers. It is by humorous use of homophony that many vivid numerical expressions are created and used on the Internet. It is common that numerals are used in literary works for rhetorical purposes. However, it may be a unique feature of the Chinese language that numerals are used in poems and couplets with two adjacent numbers multiplying each other to express a date, age, a larger amount or something else.

Idioms are the gem of any language. They are a mirror of a given culture and a mirror of the wisdom of the people who speak the language. We are amazed at the abundance and variety of Chinese idioms consisting of numbers. It is necessary to explore the sources and rhetorical devices of these idioms if we aim at a better appreciation and a thorough comprehension. Only in this way can we employ right strategies to translate them from Chinese into English for successful cross-cultural communication.

It must be pointed out that both Chinese speakers and English speakers, though different in many ways in terms of language use, still share lots of things in common. We all have to face life and death, love and hate, hope and fear, work and play, etc. And it is these cultural universals that enable us to communicate interculturally. It is the same case with the use of numbers, numerical idioms and their translation.

The present paper has mainly looked at the cultural differences in

the use of numbers and numerical idioms between English and Chinese and the C-E translation strategies of these expressions. Due to limited space and lack of more data, there must leave a lot to be desired. However, it is hoped that the present study has paved the way for our further studies on this topic in the future.

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