

# A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Taboos

Ma Xiaowei<sup>1,a</sup> Liu Zhengbing<sup>2,b\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*undergraduate in Wenzhou University Oujian College, interested in cross cultural communication research.*

<sup>2</sup>*Liu Zhengbing, associate professor in Wenzhou University Oujian College, interested in in cross cultural communication research.*

<sup>a</sup>*maxiaowei2@163.com*

<sup>b\*</sup>*karl1231liu@126.com*

## ABSTRACT

Taboo language is an important part of national culture and customs. It is of great significance to understand the taboo differences between the two sides in cross-cultural communication. The author finds that there are different taboo expressions in death, disease, number, personal privacy, name and appellation between Chinese and British people, and the differences of these taboos are due to the differences in geographical location, thinking mode, customs, religious beliefs and so on. The author believes that Chinese English learners can be familiar with the similarities and differences between Chinese and English taboos, consider for the communication object, and avoid touching the taboo words of the communication object, so as to better promote cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** *Chinese and English nations, Taboo, Cultural differences, Intercultural communication*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's society, with the increasingly frequent exchanges between China and other countries, we need to have a deeper understanding of the culture of the object of communication in order to promote pleasant dialogue and deepen friendship. In cross-cultural communication, it is taboo to touch the taboo in the other culture. Language taboo, as a special cultural phenomenon in society, contains the cultural details of a nation for a long time. Therefore, a comparative study of Taboos between Chinese and English can help to eliminate barriers in cross-cultural communication and promote better communication. By comparing Chinese and English taboos, we can explore the cultural differences hidden in Chinese and English taboos, expand the field of language research, promote the development of cultural linguistics and avoid pragmatic failure.

## 2. DEFINITION OF TABOOS

Language originated from life, is the main way of human communication. Each language has its own background and development, and each language has its own unique characteristics. Taboo is one of them, which reflects a unique cultural phenomenon, including the cultural heritage of a nation. The following is the origin, types and characteristics of taboo.

### 2.1. The Origin of Taboos

The word "taboo" comes from the local language of Polynesian islands in the central Pacific Ocean. In the 18th

century, British navigator James Cook first discovered the taboo customs of Tonga Islanders, and introduced them into English. At that time, people knew little about nature, and had fear and admiration for the natural phenomena. As a result, a series of topics that could not be said directly came into being. Taboos were later widely used in anthropology, ethnology and sociology. Different countries used their own taboos to constrain and shape people's thoughts. Taboos play an important role in Chinese and English cultures. Due to the great differences between Chinese and English, taboos in related aspects will also be different. In China, the ancient feudal society had strict patriarchal clan system and strict hierarchy system. Taboo was a kind of invisible law to another extent, which seriously bound people's daily words and deeds, and people must strictly abide by it. As early as the Western Han Dynasty, the concept of taboo had already existed. Ban Gu's *Hanshu Yiwenzhi* wrote, "If you do it with restraint, you will lead to taboo. If you stick to it, you will be stuck to the taboo. If you do it, you will be able to give up human affairs to ghosts and gods." With the passage of time, the content of taboos will also change.

### 2.2. Classification of taboos

Taboos are very common in our daily life, and there are many kinds of them. We can divide them into pragmatic taboos and non-verbal ones. In daily communication, taboos in pragmatics account for an important part, which can be divided into appellation taboo, lexical taboo, religious taboo, digital taboo, profane language and obscene language. In face-to-face communication, non-verbal taboo is the most direct embodiment of the way that each country deals with things and treats others. It

reflects the current thoughts and states through human body movements.

### **2.3. The Characteristics of Taboos**

Taboo has two characteristics: one is social taboo, the other is pragmatic taboo [1]. Generally speaking, the basic pragmatic features of taboos are universality, nationality, inheritance, epochal, class and implication [2]. Taboo language is the product of the development of every nation and culture. Every country has its own cultural heritage, and then has its own taboo language. In all aspects of life, taboo language is restricting people's life. Due to the different customs and habits, religious beliefs, economic life and social structure of different nationalities, different nationalities have formed their own language taboos in the process of development [3]. The people of this nation are deeply influenced by this culture, and thus evolved into the cultural collision of various nationalities. With the development of society at that time, people's acceptance of things is different. In the early period, people's cultural level and average quality are low, and they have a low acceptance of new things. They think that nature is mysterious and difficult to explore. They also hold a highly reverent attitude towards religious belief. Therefore, there are many aspects about religion in taboos, along with the development of science and technology development, people's cultural level has been greatly improved, and people's acceptance of things has gradually increased, and the corresponding aspects of taboo will also be inclined. In class society, in order to consolidate their power, the ruling class promulgated a series of regulations to restrict people's life style and daily communication, which made them fear the ruling class from the bottom of their heart. In the process of communication, it is difficult to distinguish between euphemism and taboo.

## **3. A COMPARISON BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH TABOOS**

Under the influence of their respective cultures, Chinese and English nations have different taboos in many aspects. Language comes from life and is used in life. In the process of communication, Chinese and English nations display cultural differences through taboo words. This paper compares Chinese and English taboo words from different angles and discusses their mysteries.

### **3.1. About Disease and Death**

Birth, old age, and death are both human nature and natural law. People are more afraid of this topic and can't avoid it. Therefore, both Chinese and English use their own euphemisms to replace death. There are many euphemisms in English, such as passing away, passing on, losing one's life, parting, expiration, perishing, going to meet one's

maker, breathing one's last, meeting one's end and so on [4]. These expressions not only euphemistically express death, but also express good wishes to the deceased. In China, we choose appropriate euphemisms according to one's status, position and relationship with one's own. For example, in ancient times, when the emperor died, it was said that he died; when the nobility of the king, Duke, marquis and uncle died, he was called dead; when he died in his youth, he was called dead; if he died for a just cause, he was called a martyr; if he died for the country and people, he was called sacrifice; The death of Buddhists is called silence and eclosion. Not only that, in modern times, there are many words to refer to death, such as long death, afterlife, farewell, rest, long sleep, gone and so on. These words do not contain the word "death", which can reflect the Chinese people's taboo towards death and death. Besides death, people are afraid of certain diseases, so they choose abstract and ambiguous words.

### **3.2. About Numbers**

Numbers are widely used in human life. Due to the influence of social customs, religious beliefs and other factors, Chinese and British taboos for numbers are different. In Chinese, Chinese people avoid the numbers "4" and "7". Although in ancient China, the number "4" is not an unlucky number. For example, in the "Siheyuan" in old Beijing, people pay attention to giving four kinds of gifts, and the picture is stable. However, the number "4" is homophonic with "death", and its pronunciation is closer to that of daily life. It is very easy to associate people with death. It is a taboo topic to talk about "death" in China. Therefore, people will choose more telephone numbers to void four, the elevators in buildings and hotels will skip "4" directly, or use 3A and 3B instead of the name of the fourth floor. People will also deliberately avoid the fourth floor when they buy a house. The number "7" is similar to Qi pronunciation, and in the eight trigrams, "7" represents gen, which means mountain, and also contains the meaning of inhibition. It is human's instinct to pursue advantages and avoid disadvantages. Everyone thinks that "7" represents bad luck, which means bad luck. No one wants to go through bad luck. So instinctively, they want to avoid "7" and hope to do everything smoothly. On the contrary, English speaking people believe in Christianity and use the number "seven" many times in the revelation of the Bible, such as seven churches, seven souls, lambs with seven horns and seven eyes. There are also seven virtues and seven sins. The worship of the number "seven" originated from primitive astronomy. People's reverence for nature makes it a sacred and mysterious number among English speaking people, which makes it very popular.

In English culture, the number "13" is taboo. When Jesus had his last supper with his disciples, Judas was the thirteenth to be present. Later, Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty silver coins, which led to his death on the cross, and that day was exactly the 13th. Most English speaking people believe in Christianity, so people tend to avoid the number "13" in their life. In the hotel, people will use 12A

or 12B instead of “13”, and people also taboo traveling on the 13th and dining with 13 people at the same table. In China, the number “13” is an auspicious number. Most Chinese Worship Buddhism. In Buddhism, 13 is a lucky number. Buddhism has been introduced into China into 13 sects, which means that they have achieved great merits and virtues. For example, the 13th floor of the Potala Palace and the thirteen powers of Western Bodhisattvas representing Pure Land Buddhism which can be self-interested and altruistic.

### **3.3. About Personal Privacy**

Due to the relatively high mobility of English speaking people, they do not want others to pry into their privacy too much. They have taboos in many aspects of life, such as personal age, property, salary, marriage, love, religious belief, political inclination, etc. A man’s home is his castle. This shows that the English people are more taboo to ask about their home address, and they will not tell each other easily unless they are invited, because the English people do not often visit at will and have no habit of visiting. In English culture, it’s impolite to ask about age. People usually have the psychology of being afraid of old and have a prejudice against it. especially women, they keep quiet about their age and treat it like a treasure of their ancestors. They can never disclose anything to others[4]. Moreover, there are words in the language that specifically describe middle-aged and elderly women with contempt, which deepens women’s taboo against age. The golden rule to treat a girlfriend is “remember your birthday, don’t ask about your age”. You can’t ask, but you can’t find any clues about your age. If you’re not a government official or a financial institution employee, it’s hard to see their birth date documents, such as driver’s license or passport. In China, on the contrary, people don’t have too many taboos about asking about their age, marriage or income, and they think it’s a polite and caring way. If you ask a British person about his / her income, he / she will think that he / she is prying into privacy. For example, in the same office, although colleagues know the general income level, other people do not know the specific income except themselves. According to their historical development, they have a sense of independence and privacy.

### **3.4. About Appellation**

In the history of China’s development, China has been in the feudal society for a long time. Under the dual influence of ideology and politics, the Chinese people have formed a strong sense of hierarchy. The oldest generation is often the elderly with high moral integrity. Moreover, ancient writers are deeply influenced by Confucian civilization. The essence of Confucian advocating strict hierarchy is that The hierarchy system of three cardinal principles and five constancies is deeply rooted in this ideological environment. If you don’t use the same name, you can’t

even use the same name as the elder sister [5]. However, with the development of civilization, although there is no such strict taboo, there are still some taboos in terms of appellation. Up to now, the younger generation still can’t taboo their names directly to their elders, otherwise it will be considered as a manifestation of lack of education. In the first meeting, no matter the peers or the superiors and subordinates use honorific terms such as “you” to show respect.

However, in English speaking families, people emphasize independence and freedom. In English speaking families, children are not dependent on their parents, and they are more equal in family status. It is quite normal for children to call their parents’ names directly. Especially in the United States, they think that the world is a world for young people. With the development of the times, the elderly are eliminated by the market because they can’t keep up with the pace of the times. And in the case of a close relationship, people will call each other’s first name to show their closeness.

## **4. FACTORS ACCOUNTING FOR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE TABOOS**

There are many reasons for the differences between Chinese and English taboos. The following are some of the main reasons.

### **4.1. Geographical Differences**

Geographical location plays an important role in the differences between Chinese and Western taboo words. Because people living in different places need to adapt to different local climate and environment, the so-called “one side soil and one side people”, geographical differences also affect cultural differences. Before the new navigation, China’s geographical position determined that the Chinese nation had the characteristics of relatively closed. As Chinese civilization rose in the Yangtze River and yellow river basins, people were mostly engaged in farming, and the Chinese nation lived in a semi closed continental geographical environment. The climate was mild and pleasant, which made the Chinese people satisfied with the existing state and lacked the spirit of exploration. In this geographical environment, the Chinese people’s thinking would also be limited to the local, good at summing up the experience and lessons of the ancients, and good at “taking history as a mirror”, The Western civilization originated from the Aegean Sea and belongs to marine civilization. Its cultivated land area is very lack, and the land lacks nutrients. Vegetation and crops are difficult to grow. People have to trade with other neighboring countries, so the business is gradually developed and people are in society equal in rank. The Mediterranean region is located in the Mediterranean Himalayan volcanic seismic zone, with more mountains and fewer plains, and more people

scattered, thus forming the later city-state, which laid the foundation for the establishment of a democratic society. On account that the cultural code gene based on agricultural production is contrary to the English nation's spirit of exploring and conquering nature, there are great differences between Chinese and English taboos.

#### **4.2. Differences in Dimension**

The mode of thinking is closely related to culture, which is the concentrated expression of various characteristics of cultural psychology, which in turn restricts cultural psychology [6]. The difference of thinking mode is also an important reason for cultural differences. The mode of thinking is closely related to a nation and a civilization. In ancient China, most of the rulers took Confucianism as the official standard. The "Neutralization" thought in Confucianism emphasized the connotation of harmony, integrity and symmetry. Therefore, for numbers, Chinese also like even numbers. Even numbers have the beauty of symmetry. Since ancient times, the study of natural objects has been focused on in the traditional Greek period. In the face of many unknown natural phenomena in the ocean, the English people have developed the spirit of exploration. They pay attention to personality and emphasize the importance of individuals. For the relationship between man and nature, they think that the two should be independent. Therefore, English people prefer odd numbers. Moreover, the English speaking countries experienced the industrial revolution very early, ended the feudal system earlier, and established a democratic country. The overall quality of the English nation is relatively high, which has created the English nation to act on the principle of independence, freedom and equality. There is no such taboo for the Chinese people to respect the names and titles and pay attention to the hierarchical order. And the "industrial civilization character" has created a strong legal awareness of the English nation to safeguard their own interests. After the industrial civilization developed, the English nation has a great mobility. On the one hand, there are many taboos for the English nationality in terms of personal privacy, which is a kind greeting in China. However, English people may think that this is a taboo and taboo topic.

#### **4.3. Differences in Customs**

The English speaking nation entered the industrial age earlier. In the industrial age, science and technology developed rapidly, and people pursued speed and practicality. Therefore, people also developed a straightforward and direct character. In front of praise, people would readily accept it. In China, people would treat each other politely. In the face of praise, people would not respond positively or even degrade themselves. They would use the word "flatter" to express their modesty. The English nation stresses freedom and independence, and

attaches great importance to personal privacy. It may offend each other's privacy if they care about each other's situation when they meet. The English people dislike this kind of behavior. People's concern for the neighborhood is a kind of collective concern. Chinese and English people treat people differently in terms of identity and age. Chinese culture pays attention to "monarch, monarch, minister, father, son and son", and respects the old and respected. However, the English speaking people stress that everyone is equal, and people do not want to be old and refuse to ask about the age of each other.

#### **4.4. Religious Differences**

In many cases, language taboo is due to people's fear of something unknown or unclean or ominous. Because of the superstition in ancient times, people will associate this taboo with language, and religious belief can well explain this point. Religion is a special cultural phenomenon in the development of human society and an important part of people's traditional culture. It affects people's ideology, customs and habits. It is an important field in tracing the source of taboo differences. Since ancient times, China's three major religious beliefs are: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. Confucianists can be roughly summarized as: rites and music thoughts, loyalty and forgiveness thoughts, and the doctrine of the mean. The thought of rites and music, which is used by the ruling class, emphasizes the strict concept of hierarchical system, "men and women are different, the elders and children are orderly", attaches importance to the seniority and inferiority, calls the elders or superiors, and calls each other with honorific titles. In the kinship appellation, we must call the younger generation's name directly, and the younger generation needs to follow the corresponding appellation Address, not by first name. In addition to the ideology of rites and music, Confucianism also emphasizes "benevolence" and "benevolence" has two people. One cannot be benevolent and needs to be integrated into the collective [7]. Therefore, the traditional Chinese people pay attention to the collective concept. When people ask for personal information in a friendly way, most people do not avoid it. What they say is often regarded as a manifestation of mutual trust.

In English speaking countries, people are deeply influenced by Christianity and advocate individuals. The Renaissance in Europe is a typical representative of it. The bourgeoisie is dissatisfied with the spiritual control of the church over them and proposes to take people as the center and advocate individual liberation. In terms of appellation, people often establish an equal relationship by calling their first names. In family relations, the lower generation usually calls the elder by their first name, which indicates that they are close to each other. Because of the liberation of personality, people are very disgusted with each other's personal privacy. In Christianity, the name of God is also the most taboo in people's life. To mention it at will is to blaspheme the God. The taboo against the number "13" is also derived from Christian legends, and the love for the

number “7” is also due to the Bible. In terms of appellation, there are more names about clergy in English culture, such as nun and godfather, but few are related to family members.

## **5. AVOID TOUCHING TABOOS IN INTERCULTURAL ENGLISH COMMUNICATION**

In the process of cross-cultural English communication, more and more business transactions are involved, and the two sides of the communication are not language researchers. Once they touch each other’s taboos, it is likely to make the two sides communicate unhappily. In real life, many countries have collided in the process of communication due to different cultures. We can avoid touching taboos by the following points.

### ***5.1. Be Familiar with the Differences between English and Chinese Taboos***

With the rapid development of world globalization, China’s foreign exchanges are also increasing. In the process of communication, there are various ways of cross-cultural communication, such as commodities, pictorial, television, radio, oral communication, written communication, etc. for daily and business occasions, face-to-face oral communication accounts for the majority, in order to avoid the occurrence of wrong words in the process of communication and make daily communication smooth. With the smooth development of business activities, people need to be familiar with the taboo words of communication objects. Due to the differences in religious beliefs, customs, and regions, there are great cultural differences between China and Britain. Therefore, people need to understand the cultural differences between the two sides, which has a direct effect on avoiding the use of taboos. And with the change of the times, taboos also change with the change of people’s ideas. Taboos appear in every aspect of life, and people will subconsciously avoid them. However, taboos are inevitably involved in daily communication. Therefore, people need to pay attention to the other party’s culture to have a certain understanding, so as to avoid using them as much as possible. Taboo is a kind of cultural phenomenon. Its differences are actually the cultural differences between Chinese and English. No matter what kind of culture, there will be similarities and differences. In terms of disease and death, private parts and vulgar language, Chinese and English people have more common points. In these aspects, people can try to avoid them, but although the same types are in different countries, the object of people’s taboo is different in more contents, so people need to know the cultural background of English nation.

### ***5.2. Consider for the Object of Communication***

Communication is a two-way street[8]. Misuse of language may lead to the other party’s misunderstanding. Modern Chinese pays attention to English as a foreign language and puts it into nine-year compulsory education, which lays a good foundation for us to understand English culture. However, it is far from enough. People need to improve the knowledge we have acquired with the changes of times and ideas. Now many English speaking countries have begun to study various traditional Chinese cultures, making adequate preparations for bilateral exchanges. The different objects of communication affect which taboo words we should avoid or use appropriate euphemisms to replace hidden topics. For example, in ancient times, the death of an emperor was replaced by death, while the death of a duke was carried out by death; in terms of appellation, the Oriental people used to use humble words to express their modesty, while the English people used to express it directly. Different cultural background, different customs and habits all affect the language. In the process of communication, remember not to copy your own cultural customs to each other, or you will not only fail to achieve the desired effect, but also cause trouble. In a more formal situation, both sides generally do not use taboos, but in informal occasions, if the other party’s cultural level is not high, there will be more taboos. At this time, we need to consider the other party’s cultural background and national beliefs to avoid language taboos.

### ***5.3. Learn more Taboos in the Target Country***

The French, different from Britain, are sociable and good at socializing. In the process of conversation, they will talk a lot, but they need to pay attention to the taboo of too much talking about personal privacy in business occasions. They also taboo the number “13” in terms of numbers, because they also believe in Christianity. If the other party invites you to your home, you should choose some gifts with commemorative value or artistic flavor. It is not appropriate for a man to send perfume to ladies. It is also taboo to open gifts to the other person in person. In essence, the French are proud of their language. They think that French is very sacred and can not be destroyed. It is particularly important to keep the purity of the language [8]. They think that only after learning French formally can the other party use it. But in the process of conversation, two sentences of French with correct grammar and pronunciation will make the French people very happy.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In the rapid development of the present, both sides of communication need to understand each other’s culture to promote the smooth progress of interpersonal communication and business. Taboo language, as a cultural phenomenon, is reflected everywhere in our life, and the

most important factor affecting cross-cultural communication is cultural differences, so people should take corresponding measures to communicate effectively. This paper analyzes the differences in the use of Taboos between China and the west, and the reasons for the differences, so as to help people better understand the differences and the benefits of avoiding pragmatic failure of taboos in cross-cultural communication. Although the development of modern science and technology has narrowed people's time and space distance, it can't pull people's psychological distance. Different countries and nations have brought obstacles to communication because of their specific thinking modes and pragmatic rules. If they are not handled properly, they will bring unnecessary conflicts and even disasters to human beings. Therefore, the study of taboos can improve people's intercultural communication ability by treating foreign cultures with empathy. In the research process, we can refer to the relevant books written by the people of the English nation, so as to better understand their culture and taboos. The development of taboos comes from life. In the process of further study, we can also choose to communicate with people with English cultural background, so as to better explore all aspects of taboos that are not covered in the book. It can also overcome the communication difficulties caused by cultural differences, so as to correctly treat the culture of English speaking nations and make the world diversified and in-depth development.

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