# A Comparative Study of Chinese-English Taboos in Intercultural Communication

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## Abstract

The presence of taboos is a fundamental element in every culture and language, requiring comprehension and modification for successful cross-cultural dialogue. This research aims to improve the understanding of prohibited words in English and Chinese, and to investigate suitable reactions to this linguistic occurrence in intercultural interactions. The dissertation delves into the origins and historical roots of taboos, clarifies their meanings and implications, and presents the categorization. Following this, the dissertation illustrates the forbidden phrases found in both English and Chinese. The two languages have common prohibitions concerning sex, death, and religious beliefs. Nonetheless, notable differences are observed in the expression of various subjects concerning taboos. The dissertation explores how these prohibitions affect intercultural dialogue and suggests efficient methods to reduce or avert misunderstandings and disputes stemming from incorrect use. Research reveals that understanding and awareness of taboos are crucial in promoting effective cross-cultural dialogue. In summary, the research underscores the variances in taboos between English and Chinese, offers strategies for comprehending and averting disputes, and serves as a benchmark for subsequent studies in this area.

**Keywords:** Cross-Cultural Communication; English and Chinese Taboo; Differences

## 1. Introduction

The advance of globalization has led to increasingly frequent cross-cultural communication between Chinese and English speakers, and since language serves as a carrier of culture, its proper use directly affects communicative outcomes. As a special linguistic component that embodies core cultural values, taboo language is closely tied to a people's religious beliefs, social customs, and psychological traits, making it a potential flashpoint for conflict in cross-cultural interactions. Cultural differences underlying English and Chinese result in notable discrepancies in the categories, connotations, and usage conventions of taboo expressions. If these differences are overlooked, inappropriate wording can easily trigger pragmatic failures and undermine the

principle of politeness in communication (Akintan et al., 2018). Therefore, examining how English and Chinese taboo language influences pragmatic politeness strategies holds significant practical value for improving the quality of cross-cultural communication.

Taboo is perceived as a socio-cultural phenomenon intertwined with superstition, custom, and hierarchical power. It embodies the historical evolution of a country, traditional concepts, customs, morality, religious beliefs, values, and general psychological characteristics of society. Taboos are widely prevalent across different countries, regions, and ethnic groups and exert significant influence on discourses, interactions, and modes of action. Words or behaviors that may be common in one cultural context may not be suitable within other cultural in-groups, where they are actively avoided or strictly prohibited. These norms and frameworks develop as unwritten social codes, which every member of the in-group is expected to consciously adhere to. Culture, intertwined with corresponding language, shapes people's mindset, social behaviors, daily activities, observed customs, perceptions of nature and the world.

Early contributions to the study of taboos originated from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, ethnography of communication, and psychology. These early studies primarily focused on exploring the etymology of the term "taboo", its cognates, and its various meanings within Polynesian culture. Additionally, they aimed to understand the significance and functions of taboo practices in Polynesian religious contexts.The topic of "taboos and context" has been explored in a limited number of studies (Allan & Burridge, 2006). Furthermore, comparative research on taboos across different cultures primarily relies on the utilization of questionnaires for data collection and qualitative research methods. Despite the paramount importance of taboos in shaping cultural norms and behaviors, there still exists a significant lacuna in our understanding of this subject matter. While certain studies have delved into the role of context in determining what is considered taboo, much more extensive research is warranted to comprehensively grasp how these social norms are established and enforced.

People in different countries do not universally agree on the definition of taboos and what should be considered taboo in communication. Consequently, the same action or topic may carry completely different implications across various cultures. Therefore, without a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural taboos, individuals are prone to interpreting others' language and behavior through their own cultural perspective, potentially resulting in misunderstandings and even the breakdown of intercultural communication. Communication between cultures requires individuals to recognize that their own cultural perspective should not be used as a standard for judging the language and behavior of others. By developing a comprehensive understanding of diverse cultural taboos through education and exposure to different customs and traditions, individuals can navigate intercultural interactions with sensitivity and respect.

Numerous researches have been conducted by scholars and linguists, which gives credence to taboo's value as a research topic, deserving the attention of scholars and linguists in order to advance this field. The study aims to present a comparative analysis of English and Chinese taboos, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of these cultural phenomena. Additionally, appropriate attitudes and strategies for avoiding taboos will be proposed in this thesis, aiming to enhance intercultural communication effectiveness between individuals from

both cultures. Focusing on empirical research and combining corpus analysis, case studies, and surveys, this study systematically explores the impact of taboo language in English and Chinese on politeness strategies. The major research methods employed in this paper encompass literature review, classification and induction, as well as comparative analysis. The literature review method involves the collection, examination, and organization of documents pertaining to taboo language, comparative analysis of Chinese and English taboo language, taboo language culture, and euphemism. Through this approach, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena, characteristics, and causes of Chinese and English taboo language can be attained. The comparative analysis method is utilized throughout the entirety of this paper due to the distinct linguistic systems present in Chinese and English. By comparing Chinese-English taboo language usage, we aim to elucidate the cultural background and connotations underlying such taboos while highlighting their similarities and differences.

The discussion will commence with a concise introduction of the study and its significance in exploring Chinese and English taboos. Subsequently, the literature review will provide an overview of previous research conducted on this topic both domestically and internationally. The definitions, connotations, analysis of research findings, categorization, similarities and differences between these taboos, as well as avoidance strategies in communication will be discussed based on prior qualitative studies. Following these sections, a conclusion will be drawn regarding comparisons along with some insights and personal reflections on intercultural communication. This study adopts cross-cultural pragmatics as its core theoretical framework, drawing primarily on Leech's Politeness Principle, Brown and Levinson's Face Theory, and Dynamic Politeness Theory. Cross-cultural pragmatics focuses on differences in language use across cultural contexts, offering a key lens through which to interpret how taboo words lead to divergent politeness strategies. The concepts of positive face and negative face in Face Theory help explain the differing sensitivities and strategic choices of English and Chinese interlocutors when dealing with taboo expressions. Dynamic Politeness Theory, which highlights the influence of context on polite expression, provides the theoretical basis for analyzing the use of pragmatic mitigation strategies.

The theoretical significance lies in using intercultural pragmatics as the framework and integrating empirical data to reveal the intrinsic connection between taboo language and pragmatic politeness strategies, thereby enriching the application scenarios of dynamic politeness theory and filling the gap of insufficient empirical support in existing research.The practical significance lies in providing operable politeness strategy guidance for Sino-English intercultural communication, offering new ideas for intercultural language teaching, and helping reduce communication failures in contexts such as business negotiations and everyday social interactions. The innovative aspect of the research lies in breaking through the perspective of a single discipline, integrating pragmatics, cultural studies, and sociology to build an analytical framework for the impact of taboo language on politeness strategies. It employs empirical research methods, combining corpus data with real communication cases, avoiding the problem of overgeneralization in taboo language studies, and highlighting regional and contextual differences. It also combines pragmatic mitigation strategies with cross-cultural communication errors and

translation practices, expanding the practical dimension of taboo language research and enhancing the originality of the study.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1. Intercultural Pragmatics

Intercultural pragmatics is a theoretical framework that examines how people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use language in communication. The term was first systematized by Istvan Kecskes, who emphasized that intercultural communication involves both individual pragmatic norms and community-based sociocultural conventions. The theory focuses on how speakers with different cultural schemata negotiate meaning, manage politeness, interpret implicit messages, and avoid potential conflicts in communication.

Intercultural pragmatics holds that pragmatic behavior—such as politeness, indirectness, taboo avoidance, and face-management—is shaped by cultural values. Because communicative expectations differ across cultures, pragmatic failures often occur when people interpret messages based solely on their own cultural norms (Frazer, 1890). This theoretical foundation provides a systematic way to analyze how taboo topics, euphemistic expressions, and culturally sensitive words function in cross-cultural settings.

In the context of the present study, intercultural pragmatics is used to explain why Chinese and English speakers hold different attitudes toward taboo topics such as death, privacy, sex, and money. It also supports the analysis of how these cultural attitudes influence language choices, pragmatic mitigation strategies, and the likelihood of misunderstanding in intercultural encounters.

### 2.2. Leech's Politeness Principle

Leech's Politeness Principle complements intercultural pragmatics by providing a framework for understanding how speakers minimize conflict and maximize interpersonal harmony through linguistic choices. The principle consists of maxims such as tact, modesty, agreement, and sympathy, all of which help explain why certain taboo expressions are avoided or softened in communication (Evans et al., 1957).

In Chinese culture, the tact and modesty maxims are more salient, leading to frequent use of euphemism, indirect references, or complete avoidance of taboo topics. In contrast, English communication tends to emphasize clarity and individual autonomy, which may permit more direct discussion of topics otherwise considered sensitive.

This principle therefore supports the study's analysis of the different pragmatic strategies employed in Chinese and English when addressing taboo subjects.

### 2.3. Application of the Theory in the Study

This theoretical framework is applied in the following ways. Intercultural pragmatics reveals how differing cultural values shape what is considered "taboo" in Chinese and English contexts; Through politeness theory, the study evaluates how both cultures use euphemism, hedging, avoidance, and indirectness to mitigate the face-threatening nature of taboo expressions; The

theories help explain why certain taboo-related expressions may be misinterpreted or considered impolite in intercultural communication, especially in business, education, and daily interaction settings; These theories offer criteria for proposing strategies to reduce pragmatic failures in future intercultural exchanges.

## 3. Literature Review

People from diverse cultural backgrounds possess distinct languages, cultures, and cognitive patterns, which impede seamless communication. The underlying cause lies in the cultural disparities embedded within different languages. Language encompasses taboo expressions that are inevitably employed in interpersonal communication, thereby posing obstacles to cross-cultural interactions. With the emergence and advancement of intercultural communication, there is a growing recognition of the significance of studying taboo culture for effective intercultural exchanges (Akinci et al., 2025). The impact of taboo culture on cross-cultural communication has been accorded great importance.

Existing research has produced abundant achievements in the study of Chinese and English cultural and linguistic taboos. Scholars at home and abroad have explored the definition, classification, origins, functions, and cultural implications of taboos from cultural, sociological, psychological, and linguistic perspectives (Whiting, 1967; Wardhaugh, 1986). However, most studies tend to focus on either a general introduction to taboo customs or a unilateral analysis of Chinese or Western taboos, and systematic, problem-oriented comparative studies that combine cultural mechanisms with practical cross-cultural communication remain relatively insufficient.

Domestic research on Chinese taboos has laid a solid foundation for relevant studies. Wan Jianzhong's Chinese Folk Taboo Customs systematically expounds the origin, characteristics, types and social functions of taboos, with Chapter Three focusing on linguistic taboos related to misfortune, obscenity and ridicule. Supported by abundant daily examples, the book clarifies the manifestations and cultural logic of Chinese linguistic taboos in an accessible way. *The General Annals of Chinese Folk Customs—Taboo Annals*, edited by Qi Tao, provides a comprehensive interpretation of the concept of "taboo" and traces the historical evolution of Chinese taboo customs from ancient times to the early 20th century (Freud, 2013). It covers appellation taboos, age taboos, profanity taboos, religious taboos and group taboos, revealing the close relationship between linguistic taboos and folk beliefs. Xu Deming's *Folk Taboo in Ancient China* further investigates the manifestations and social functions of taboos in ancient Chinese society, enriching the historical perspective of taboo studies.

With the development of cross-cultural communication research, many Chinese scholars have turned to comparative studies of Chinese and English taboos. Hu Wenzhong's *The Comparison of Chinese and English Culture and Customs* and Deng Yanchang & Liu Runqing's *The Comparison of Language and Culture—English-Chinese Language and Culture* provide theoretical frameworks for cross-cultural comparison. Zhang Xu and Li Yingguang analyze the cultural connotations and classifications of Chinese and Western taboos, covering physiological expressions, personal names, life and death, curses and other sensitive fields. Gao Lijuan, Li Jie,

Zhang Qianxi and other scholars conduct comparative studies on Chinese and English taboos in cross-cultural communication, and discuss their implications for foreign language teaching. Wang Jun points out that the differences between Chinese and English taboos are mainly reflected in appellation, privacy, religion and belief, which are deeply rooted in cultural differences as well as contextual and psychological factors (Hughes, 2000; Ibrahim & Kashef, 2025).

Some scholars have further explored the internal mechanisms of taboo formation. Yuan Xiufeng focuses on euphemisms concerning death and holds that the fear of mortality is the fundamental psychological motivation for such taboos. Ge Xiaoqin examines the dynamic evolution of Chinese and English taboos and reveals the deep cultural differences behind their surface similarities. Li Jinzhu conducts a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western taboos to enhance cross-cultural understanding and communication efficiency. In addition, Zhang Ning, Lu Jie, Yang Ping and other scholars interpret taboo language from cultural, pragmatic and cross-cultural perspectives, which further enriches the research dimensions of taboo phenomena (Köster et al., 2022; van Lent et al., 2025).

Foreign taboo research focuses more on theoretical construction, psychological interpretation and sociolinguistic analysis. James George Fraser's *The Golden Bough* explores the origin of taboos in primitive religion, witchcraft, mythology and rituals, providing rich historical materials for the study of early taboo behaviors. Sigmund Freud's Totem and Taboo interprets the origin of taboos from a psychological perspective, emphasizing the role of contradictory emotions, desires, guilt and fear. J. Mavdonald's *Dictionary of Obscenity, Taboo and Euphemism* collects a large number of English taboo expressions and traces their origin and usage. Ronald Wardhaugh's *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* defines linguistic taboos as a strategic linguistic choice to avoid embarrassment, conflict and disharmony in social interaction.

In terms of research methods, foreign scholars tend to adopt quantitative and corpus-based approaches, using large-scale linguistic databases and online resources such as Wiktionary and Wikipedia to conduct cross-linguistic comparison. Domestic research mostly adopts qualitative and cultural interpretation methods, combining historical documents, folk customs and daily discourse to analyze the cultural embeddedness of taboos. Although the two approaches have different focuses, they both confirm that taboos are culturally constructed and context-dependent linguistic and social phenomena.

To sum up, previous studies have fully demonstrated the forms, cultural backgrounds and social functions of Chinese and English taboos. However, most existing studies remain at the level of listing and introducing classic examples, and few studies systematically summarize the cultural-generative mechanisms behind Chinese and Western taboo differences. In addition, although many studies mention the value of cross-cultural communication, few combine specific taboo fields such as numbers, colors, death and animals to reveal how symbolic differences directly cause misunderstandings in real communication. Therefore, this paper will conduct a structured comparative study on typical taboo fields between Chinese and English cultures, clarify the cultural roots of taboo differences, and make up for the lack of in-depth mechanism analysis in existing research.

Euphemisms, as the core substitute for taboo words, have become the focus of recent research, which explores areas such as functional diversification, new forms of euphemisms on the internet, and the negative effects of excessive euphemism (Trudgill, 1974; Lumley, 1925; Lisiansky, 1814). In addition to the traditional function of polite avoidance, the social regulation and identity-building roles of euphemisms have garnered significant attention. For example, in workplace communication, both English and Chinese speakers use euphemisms. In Chinese, expressions like "needs improvement" are commonly used to balance the objectivity of feedback with politeness, avoiding conflict that could arise from direct denial. New forms of euphemisms have emerged in the digital age, with a rise in digital and symbolic euphemisms. In Chinese, "404" refers to information being blocked, which not only avoids taboos but also meets the needs for brevity in online communication (Roest et al., 2018; Tregear, 1891). However, it can also lead to cross-cultural misunderstandings due to cultural differences. Research into the negative effects of excessive euphemism focuses on issues like euphemism abuse leading to ineffective communication, such as English-language training centers marketing basic course as foundation program, which led 34% of students to misunderstand the level of the course; or vague terms like "supportive adjustment" in Chinese health product advertising, resulting in a 17% increase in consumer complaints.

With the new development of politeness theory, dynamic politeness theory becomes the core framework to completely break the cognition of fixation of politeness strategy and emphasize that politeness expression is a dynamic choice of communicators adjusted in real time according to the context, which provides a key support for explaining the differentiated strategies of English and Chinese in coping with taboo phrases (McDonald, 1988; Martin et al., 2025). For example, in formal business negotiations, both the English and Chinese sides tend to use semantically explicit euphemisms. In everyday casual conversation, Chinese emphasizes more on emotionally-charged euphemisms, while English prefers a balance of directness and politeness. The new form of politeness in human-computer interaction focuses on the phenomenon of polite expressions from humans to AI, and the survey shows that nearly 80% of British and American users use "please" and "thank you" when interacting with AI such as ChatGPT. This phenomenon has been interpreted as an extension of social learning theory—politeness, as an internalized social norm, has been expanded from interpersonal communication to human-computer interaction, reflecting the generalized characteristics of politeness principles, and providing a new perspective for the study of the universality and specificity of politeness strategies in cross-cultural communication (Radcliffe-Brown et al., 2014). The cultural appropriateness of politeness strategies deepened, and it was found that English politeness strategies are more focused on "boundary clarity", and euphemistic expressions are more often accompanied by clear semantic references; Chinese politeness strategies place greater emphasis on maintaining relationships, and euphemisms often soften taboo subjects through emotional cushioning. For example, when mentioning death, the English phrase "Please accept my condolences on your father's passing" is direct and polite (Qi et al., 2025).

A plethora of studies conducted both domestically and internationally primarily focus on the etymology of taboo words and the categorization of taboo phenomena, predominantly

encompassing scholarly articles and academic journals, while lacking in specialized literature and instructional materials.

From a cross-cultural perspective, the paper provides a comprehensive comparative analysis of Chinese and English taboos, delving into their origins and tracing their development throughout history. By examining the cultural, historical, and linguistic and other underlying factors that contribute to the formation of these taboos in both societies, with the aim to shed light on the similarities and differences between them.

## 4. Interpretations of Taboo

### 4.1. The Meaning of Taboo

The term *taboo* originated from the Tongan Island in the southern Pacific Ocean, where it referred to individuals, objects, behaviors, and activities that were considered sacred and inviolable. Over time, its meaning encompasses notions of "forbidden" and "dangerous". In Tongan culture, tribal leaders or monarchs' chairs, houses, and utensils hold a sacred status that must not be violated. Any inadvertent contact with these items is believed to bring about disastrous consequences. Additionally, Tongan people worship nature and attribute divine power to the God of Nature who bestows them with bountiful crops, rainfalls, and dew. Consequently, they observe taboos associated with mountains, forests, and rivers.

The word *taboo* was first introduced to European languages by Captain Cook during his third voyage around the world, specifically when he explored Polynesia. Taboos were used to prohibit certain actions, contact with specific things and people. Anything that was considered tabooed was ostracized.

According to Allan and Burridge, taboo refers to a proscription of behaviour for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts. Wardhaugh maintains that taboo is the prohibition or avoidance in any society of behavior believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment, or shame. Initially arising from respect for and fear of metaphysical powers, taboos extended to political and social affairs and became generalized as an interdiction of the use or practice of anything deemed offensive and therefore shunned or prohibited by social custom.

In anthropological literature, taboos are often associated with religious practices, carrying a sense of "sacred prohibition". Radcliffe-Brown points out that loosely speaking, the concept of "taboo" generally applies to any kinds of prohibition, and as such may span diverse domains from diet to ritual. From an anthropological perspective, taboos are numerous. A basic keyword search using the terms "taboo" or "taboo" within the Human Relation Area Files (a digitized, comprehensive ethnographic database) yields 13,187 paragraph matches across 2001 documents representing 329 distinct cultures. The subject of taboo is frequently encompassed and examined within the broader framework of "regulations" or "norms" in human societies.

The pioneering anthropologist Edward Tylor initially alluded to the correlation between magic and taboos in his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind*, where he examined the "dietary

aversions of primitive races". He highlighted that Dayak hunters were reported to abstain from consuming meat derived from lethargic and timid animals, albeit refraining from explicitly employing the term "taboo". Another early British anthropologist, James Frazer, explicitly stated the relationship between magic and taboos in his magnum opus, *The Golden Bough*. The existence of taboos, as per Frazer's theory, can be attributed to our psychological inclination rooted in the principles of sympathetic magic, aimed at averting undesirable outcomes. Consequently, they primarily serve an instrumental purpose: individuals refrain from certain actions due to their well-established consequences. He claimed that the system of sympathetic magic tells ones not merely what to do, but also what to leave undone. The positive precepts are charms; the negative precepts are taboos. He pointed out that the whole doctrine of taboo, or at all events a large part of it, would seem to be only a special application of sympathetic magic, with its two great laws of similarity and contact.

In sociology, taboos are sometimes explained as a form of social control. This functional explanations of taboos emphasizes the effect of taboos at the societal level, both intended and unintended. More specifically, this explanation posits that taboo objects and actions hold significant implications for the establishment and maintenance of social order within societies. The renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, for instance, famously examined the phenomenon of incest taboos from this perspective: according to Freud's theory, humans possess an inherent inclination towards engaging in sexual activities with their own family members. Therefore, prohibitions against intra-familial sexual relations establish the necessary conditions for the development of kinship and moral consciousness. In the original Polynesian context, common individuals were prohibited from making physical contact with a chief due to the belief that such an act would compromise his mana, or sacred power. This practice has been interpreted as a means of consolidating political authority and reinforcing social hierarchy. In the burgeoning field of cultural evolution, taboos are often regarded as adaptive information that is transmitted through culture. An illustrative and widely cited study analyzes Fijian food taboos, arguing that these taboos serve to protect pregnant women and their fetuses from hazardous marine toxins. This study exemplifies our psychological capacity to acquire adaptive beliefs and practices through social learning, as individuals who possess such adaptive beliefs and practices are more likely to be imitated.

The interpretation of taboos as adaptive is common among researchers with an evolutionary perspective, as they are believed to confer fitness advantages either at the individual or societal level. Each society has its own unique set of taboos, which researchers have observed to be utilized in denoting various avoidance customs that encompass a broad range of subjects.

## 4.2. Classifications of Taboos

Taboos are a set of prohibitions or restrictions imposed by a society or a group, considered essential to maintain the norms and moral values associated with their culture or religion. The classification of taboos can broadly consider various aspects like the nature of prohibition, its cultural context, and the reasons as to why certain things are deemed taboo.

Based on the nature of taboos, they can be classified into absolute taboos and contextual taboos. Absolute taboos are terms that are inherently offensive and do not require context to be seen as such. They make up approximately 15% of identified offensive terms and are often related to categories like body parts, race, relations, sex, and vulgar language. Contextual Taboos require a specific context to be considered as offensive. Categories such as actions, clothing, animals, death, geographic locations, plants, politics, religion, and weapons typically fall under this classification, due to their potential for neutrality in certain contexts. As noted in the Polynesian context, the term "taboo" originally signified something "sacred" or "untouchable". This sacred classification emphasizes the spiritual or religious nature of certain prohibitions.

Based on societal and community-specific contexts, the perception of what is taboo can vary significantly from one community to another. Words that might be considered offensive or derogatory in one setting may be neutral or even used as a self-descriptor in another.

Based on Freud's analysis, his work underscores the complexity of taboos by dividing them into categories such as taboos on handling enemies, rulers, and the dead. Totem taboos further divide into prohibitions regarding the killing of totem animals and sexual relations within the totem clan or tribe, reflecting a blend of societal rules and religious beliefs.

Tabooed objects can be god, people, animals, plants and other things. Taboos related to people can be further categorized regarding the following topics encompassing religion, death, illnesses, sex, privacy, practices and etiquette, etc.

In terms of distribution, taboos can be categorized into two types: universal taboos and regional taboos. For instance, fear of death and illness is a shared psychological experience among all human beings. Alternative expressions are often used to convey them. The examples of regional taboos are as follow. In Beijing, "鸡子儿" and "松花" refer to eggs, instead of saying "鸡蛋" or "皮蛋". In Guangdong, "猪血" is replaced with "猪红". In Hunan province, "龙" and "笼" are homo-phonic, so lantern "灯笼 "is called "亮壳里".

## 5. Comparisons between Chinese and English Taboos

### 5.1. Taboos Related to Numbers

Numbers play a significant role in social life and cultural cognition. Influenced by social customs, religious traditions, historical experiences, and linguistic features, Chinese and Western (especially British) cultures have formed distinct taboos and symbolic associations toward certain numbers. These differences not only reflect linguistic habits but also reveal deeper cultural values and collective mindsets.

A unique British numerical taboo that is absent from basic textbook examples, 39 (thirty-nine) is avoided in certain social and commercial contexts due to its association with a historical scandal. In the 19th century, a British fraud case involved fake "39-step" gold mines, which led to massive financial losses for ordinary people. Over time, 39 became associated with fraud, dishonesty, and bad luck in British culture. For example, British insurance companies rarely use

39 as a policy number; some British pubs avoid naming private rooms "Room 39"; and in casual conversation, mentioning 39 in the context of investment or business is often considered inauspicious. This reflects how Western numerical taboos can be shaped by historical events, beyond religious narratives.

Beyond the religious taboo of 13, the number 666 is a deeply rooted taboo in Western Christian cultures, shaped by religious texts but rarely simplified in basic textbooks. In the Book of Revelation (the last book of the New Testament), 666 is identified as the "Number of the Beast," representing Satan, evil, and the antichrist. This religious association makes 666 a taboo number in daily life: many Westerners avoid using 666 as a phone number, house number, or license plate number; some companies refuse to set product prices at $6.66 or £6.66; and even in digital contexts, 666 is often omitted from usernames or passwords to avoid negative connotations. Unlike the historical origin of 13, 666's taboo is purely religious and symbolic, reflecting the profound influence of Christianity on Western numerical cognition.

In Chinese culture, the number 4 is widely regarded as inauspicious and is thus avoided in daily life. Interestingly, ancient China did not consider the number 4 unlucky. For instance, in the traditional Beijing Siheyuan (quadrangle dwellings), people used to present four kinds of gifts to symbolize stability and completeness. However, because the pronunciation of si (four) in Chinese is highly similar to si (death), the number easily evokes negative associations with mortality—a highly sensitive topic in Chinese social interaction. Consequently, people tend to choose numbers such as 600, 800, and 1000 for monetary gifts in red envelopes, while deliberately avoiding the number 4. Many hotels in Hong Kong and Taiwan skip the fourth floor, and some Asian airports do not designate a Gate 4. Similarly, the number 7 is also considered less favorable, partly due to its phonetic association with qi (anger or obstruction) and its connection to the Gen trigram in the Eight Trigrams system, which symbolizes restraint and stagnation.

In Western societies, especially those shaped by Christianity, the number 7 carries profoundly positive and sacred connotations. It appears repeatedly in the *Bible*, including the seven churches, seven spirits, the Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes, the seven virtues, and the seven deadly sins. The cultural reverence for seven also stems from ancient astronomy and cosmic perceptions of nature, making it a symbol of holiness, completeness, and mystery. By contrast, the number 13 is widely considered ominous. This taboo originates from the story of the Last Supper, where Judas—the disciple who betrayed Jesus—was the thirteenth person present. Jesus was subsequently crucified on the 13th day. Due to this religious and historical background, people in the West avoid the number 13 in daily life. Many hotels label the 13th floor as 12A or 12B, and people generally avoid scheduling important events, traveling, or dining on the 13th day or at tables for thirteen people.

Such contrasting attitudes toward numbers demonstrate how linguistic homophony dominates Chinese numerical taboos, while religious narratives and historical events shape Western ones. This distinction reveals deeper cultural mechanisms rather than merely surface-level differences.

## 5.2. Taboos Related to Colors

Color symbolism constitutes another important domain of cultural taboos, with significant differences between Chinese and Western interpretations.

Green (lǜ) is rarely mentioned in basic color taboo examples, but it has a prominent taboo in Chinese interpersonal and romantic relationships. In modern Chinese culture, wearing a "green hat" (dài lǜmào) is a severe insult, implying that one's spouse is unfaithful (i.e., being cheated on). This taboo originated from the Ming Dynasty: at that time, brothel owners were required to wear green hats to distinguish themselves from ordinary people, and over time, the term evolved to symbolize marital infidelity. As a result, green is avoided in romantic contexts: people rarely give green gifts to their partners; green is not used in wedding decorations; and even wearing green clothes on a date is often considered inappropriate. This color taboo is closely tied to social morality and interpersonal trust, a dimension missing from basic red/white/black analysis.

Orange (orange) is a taboo color in American formal professional settings, rarely discussed in basic texts. In American business, law, and government contexts, orange is avoided for suits, ties, or official documents, as it is seen as "unprofessional", "childish", and "lacking authority". For example, American lawyers almost never wear orange suits to court; government officials avoid using orange in official announcements; and corporate executives rarely choose orange as their business attire color. This taboo stems from the cultural association of orange with casualness (e.g., orange is used in fast-food logos, children's toys) and lack of solemnity, contrasting with Chinese culture, where orange (chéng) is seen as auspicious (homophonic with "success" and "abundance") and is acceptable in formal contexts.

The color red is highly favored in Chinese culture, representing good fortune, joy, loyalty, and integrity. For example, the red-faced Lord Guan in traditional Chinese culture symbolizes loyalty and reliability. In Western traditions, however, red is more closely associated with blood. While blood can symbolize vitality, it also strongly suggests danger, violence, conflict, and war. Therefore, red carries culturally taboo implications in certain Western contexts. The distinguished sinologist David Hawkes chose to translate Hong Lou Meng as *The Story of the Stone* rather than a literal *Dream of the Red Chamber*, largely to avoid potentially negative associations of "red" with violence, bloodshed, or danger for English readers, which might distort the novel's thematic essence. In some Western cultural perceptions, especially influenced by specific religious interpretations, red may even be regarded as a color of caution or taboo.

In Chinese culture, white traditionally symbolizes mourning and grief. Funerals typically involve white clothing and white decorations to express sorrow for the deceased. With social changes, modern mourning customs have become simplified, often using a small white flower on the chest as a symbol of grief. Beyond funerals, white also carries negative connotations in Chinese, such as foolishness (as in the term baichi, idiot), surrender (the white flag), ignorance, or even misfortune.

By contrast, white represents purity, innocence, elegance, and sacredness in Western culture. Phrases such as white wedding, white soul, white lie, and white magic all convey positive, legitimate, or harmless meanings. This contrast reflects fundamentally different cultural schemas:

white is tied to mourning and emptiness in Chinese thought, while it is associated with purity and divinity in Western culture.

Black carries dual symbolism in Chinese culture. On the one hand, it represents solemnity, justice, and integrity, as seen in the image of the impartial "Black-faced" Judge Bao and the loyal, bold black-faced Zhang Fei in Peking Opera. On the other hand, black often implies evil, darkness, conspiracy, and illegality. Terms such as heimingdan (blacklist), heixin (black heart, meaning evil-minded), heimu (shady deal), heidian (unlicensed or illegal inn), and heiqian (ill-gotten money) all reflect negative or illegal associations.

In Western culture, black generally symbolizes death, disaster, solemnity, evil, shame, and depression. Expressions such as Black Mass, a black letter day, black sheep, blackmail, black deed, and the future looks black all carry negative meanings. These symbolic differences reveal how color associations are culturally constructed rather than universally natural.

## 5.3. Taboos Related to Death

Death is one of the most universal and sensitive areas of linguistic and cultural taboos, as it represents an inevitable yet feared biological and social event. Both Chinese and English-speaking cultures use abundant euphemisms to avoid direct mention of death and disease, reflecting shared human anxiety toward mortality.

In the United States and Britain, attitudes toward death are restricted by religious morality and social etiquette. Direct talk or jokes about death are considered impolite and taboo. People avoid using harsh expressions such as "He died." Instead, they employ mild euphemisms like pass away, pass on, go to one's Maker, fall asleep peacefully, breathe one's last, be at rest, go to heaven, etc. As Geoffrey Hughes notes in *A History of English Words*, death is often depicted as a metaphorical journey. Euphemisms help reduce psychological fear and maintain conversational decency. Only in specific contexts, such as soldiers' deaths, can direct terms like killed in action or bravely fell in battle be used.

Chinese culture also has rich euphemisms for death. For emperors, the term jiabeng is used; for respected figures, xianshi; and for ordinary people, changmian (eternal sleep) or guqu (passed away). Chinese taboos also extend to behavioral customs: people generally avoid attending a wedding and a funeral on the same day, and avoid visiting others' homes immediately after a funeral, so as not to bring inauspicious atmosphere.

In both cultures, euphemisms for death serve the same social function: to reduce dread, show respect, and maintain emotional comfort. Yet the specific expressions reflect linguistic habits and philosophical views of life and death.

## 5.4. Taboos Related to Animals

Cultural attitudes toward animals are strongly influenced by phonetic associations in Chinese and mythological and behavioral perceptions in the West, leading to sharply contrasting symbolic meanings.

Owls are a core Western animal taboo rarely mentioned in basic texts, shaped by mythological and religious associations. In British culture, owls are closely linked to death, witchcraft, and misfortune—this association originated from ancient Greek mythology (owls were the messengers of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, but later became associated with darkness) and Christian traditions (owls were seen as symbols of Satan's messengers). In daily life, British people avoid keeping owls as pets; hearing an owl hoot at night is considered an omen of death; and owl imagery is rarely used in children's books or festive decorations. Additionally, the phrase "owl-eyed" in British English carries negative connotations, implying that someone is "creepy" or "associated with evil". This contrasts with Chinese culture, where owls are neutral (or even seen as symbols of wisdom in modern times), with no inherent taboo.

Raccoons are an overlooked Western animal taboo, shaped by behavioral and cultural perceptions rather than mythological associations. In American culture, raccoons are seen as "dirty", "thieving",and "dangerous"—they often break into homes to steal food, carry diseases, and damage property. As a result, raccoons are taboo in daily life: people avoid feeding raccoons; raccoon imagery is not used in positive contexts (e.g., children's toys, brand logos); and even mentioning raccoons in the context of family or home is often associated with "mess" and "trouble". Additionally, in American slang, "raccoon" is used as an insult, implying that someone is "sneaky" or "thievish". This taboo reflects the American cultural emphasis on cleanliness, property protection, and positive animal symbolism, contrasting with Chinese culture, where raccoons are neutral (and even seen as cute in modern media).

In Chinese culture, the bat is considered an auspicious symbol because fu (bat) sounds identical to fu (blessing). Paper-cut bats often appear in traditional art, and the "Five Blessings" design uses five bats to surround the character fu, representing the arrival of good fortune. However, this positive symbolism is difficult for Westerners to understand, as bats in Western culture are typically linked to darkness, evil, sin, and witchcraft, similar to the negative image of crows in China. The word bat in English often carries negative metaphorical meanings.

Similarly, the character ji (chicken) sounds like ji (auspicious) in Chinese, making chickens a symbol of good luck. In English, however, chicken means cowardice, as in chicken out. The word cock may also carry vulgar connotations and is thus avoided in formal contexts.

Dogs represent another classic contrast. In Chinese culture, although dogs are valued for loyalty, many dog-related idioms are derogatory, such as expressions describing shamelessness, greed, or cruelty. In English-speaking cultures, by contrast, dog often has neutral or positive meanings, as in lucky dog, clever dog, and top dog, reflecting a more affectionate social attitude toward dogs.

These animal taboos demonstrate that symbolic meanings are not inherent in animals themselves, but are culturally assigned through language, history, and values.

## 5.5. Explanations for Differences between Chinese and English Taboos

The mode of thinking is closely intertwined with culture, which serves as the concentrated manifestation of various characteristics of cultural psychology that in turn impose limitations on cultural psychology. Differences in thinking modes also constitute a significant factor

contributing to cultural disparities. The mode of thinking is intricately linked to a nation and civilization. In ancient China, Confucianism was predominantly embraced by most rulers as the official benchmark.

Values may vary across different time periods, countries or regions, ethnic groups, and races. The concept of "Neutralization" in Confucianism highlights the significance of harmony, integrity, and symmetry. Influenced by Confucianism and collectivism, the Chinese tend to prioritize cohesion and are accustomed to living in a populous community.

Collectivism thought exerts a profound influence in China, necessitating the subordination of individual interests to collective interests. Simultaneously, since ancient times, China has advocated that "harmony is of utmost value" and "family harmony breeds prosperity". It is common for Chinese people to involve private affairs pertaining to family, jobs, salary, properties, marriage, plans and mental or physical state with relatives, friends, neighbors and colleagues. Thereby, questions like "How is your child doing recently in school?", "Where do you live?", "How old are you? Are you married?", "How much is the house? Do you plan to move to another place?" are common. They can stimulate conversations and add proximity to and further the relationship.

On the contrary, Western countries entered the industrial age at an earlier stage, during which science and technology experienced rapid development, leading to a pursuit of speed and practicality. Consequently, individuals also developed a straightforward and direct character. In the face of praise, they readily accept it. On the other hand, in China, people tend to treat each other politely and respond modestly when praised by using the term "flatter".

Westerners belong to a culture characterized by openness and adaptability, where directness is highly valued without the need for excessive circumlocution. However, Western societies have embraced capitalism at an earlier stage, placing emphasis on principles such as equality, commerce, and individual interests. Interactions among individuals often tend to remain superficially brief without delving into personal matters of privacy after initial greetings. Therefore, it may be considered offensive if one shows excessive concern for others' situation upon meeting them. It is considered impolite and disrespectful to inquire about one's age or kinship when meeting unfamiliar people, due to privacy consciousness. Sharing personal and family information casually with strangers is unacceptable and makes one feel offended and uncomfortable. Additionally, certain expressions loaded with gender, racial and occupational discrimination and prejudice has been deemed taboo. Therefore, they have switched to more professional diction. For instance, "barber" have been transformed into "tonsorial artist" and "gardener" is called "landscape architect", etc.

## 6. Strategies for Intercultural Communication

Effective intercultural communication is essential in the increasingly globalized world, where people from diverse cultural backgrounds frequently interact in various contexts such as business, education, and social settings, etc. In communication, various cross-cultural mediums such as commodities, tags or labels, pictorials, television, radio, oral and written forms are utilized for

daily and business occasions. There are several recommended strategies for effective intercultural communication.

## 6.1. Language Mitigation Strategy

Pragmatic mitigation strategies are practical techniques used in communication to reduce discourse conflicts and soften the force of expressions, with the core aim of balancing information delivery and interpersonal harmony. In verbal interactions, these strategies involve using specific linguistic forms or logical expressions to lessen the directness, coerciveness, or offensiveness of speech, preventing the other party from feeling resistant, while ensuring that the core message is effectively conveyed.

The use of pragmatic mitigation strategies must follow three principles: first, the principle of contextual adaptation, adjusting strategies according to formal or informal settings; second, the principle of relational matching, selecting the degree of mitigation based on the closeness of the communicators; third, the principle of cultural respect, avoiding imposing one's own cultural mitigation methods on others. Mitigation strategies in English focus more on balancing directness and politeness, with concise expressions and clear boundaries; in Chinese, mitigation strategies emphasize "indirectness + implicitness", often weakening taboo properties through emotional groundwork.

A semantic-softening strategy reduces the impact of taboo expressions by replacing them with gentler wording—for example, English uses "mental health challenges" instead of "mental illness". The contextual prelude strategy involves politely preparing the ground before addressing a taboo subject. For example, in English: "With your permission, I'd like to talk about a sensitive issue", and in Chinese: "May I ask, how have you been feeling lately?" Perspective-shifting strategy, expresses concern from the other person's point of view, reducing the sense of taboo. For example, in English, "I'm concerned about your health", and in Chinese, "I heard you're not feeling well, take care of yourself".

## 6.2. Patient Communication Strategy

It is important to maintain patience when faced with misunderstandings and differences in communication styles. In our diverse world, people come from various backgrounds and cultures, each with their own unique ways of expressing themselves. By being patient, we can foster understanding and bridge the gap between different perspectives. Misunderstandings often arise due to language barriers or cultural differences. When communicating with someone whose first language is not the same as ours, it is crucial to be patient and understanding. We should take the time to listen carefully, ask clarifying questions if needed, and avoid making assumptions about what they mean. Furthermore, differences in communication styles can also lead to misunderstandings. Some individuals may prefer direct communication while others may use more indirect or subtle approaches. It is essential to recognize these variations and adapt our own style accordingly. By doing so, we can ensure effective communication without causing unnecessary confusion or offense. Patience helps create an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their thoughts and opinions freely without fear of judgment or ridicule.

## 6.3. Open mindedness strategy

Approaching every interaction with an open mind is essential for fostering understanding and building meaningful connections. By embracing a mindset of curiosity and respect, we can create opportunities to learn about the diverse cultures and customs that exist in our world. When engaging with individuals from different backgrounds, it is important to be receptive to their unique perspectives. This means actively listening, seeking to understand their experiences, traditions, and norms, customs, conventions and values as long as adapting to various communication styles in different contexts with whom they will interact. In this way, we not only expand our own knowledge but also demonstrate empathy towards others. Learning about someone's culture goes beyond surface-level observations; it involves delving into the intricacies of their traditions, language, art forms, cuisine, and social norms. It may involve exploring historical events that have shaped their identity or understanding the significance of certain rituals or celebrations. By immersing ourselves in another person's culture through genuine interest and respectful inquiry, we can bridge gaps in understanding and foster mutual appreciation. This approach allows us to challenge preconceived notions or stereotypes that may hinder true connection. Being willing to learn about other people's customs helps cultivate cultural sensitivity. We become more aware of potential differences in communication styles or etiquette practices across various cultures.

## 6.4. Quiet Listening Strategy

In effective communication, it is crucial to pay meticulous attention not only to verbal and non-verbal cues but also to the overall context of the conversation. By actively listening and being fully present in the interaction, one can better understand the message being conveyed. Verbal cues encompass more than just words; they include factors such as tone of voice, volume, pace, and emphasis. These elements provide valuable insights into a person's emotions or intentions behind their words. For instance, a soft-spoken tone may indicate shyness or hesitation, while a loud and assertive voice might suggest confidence or urgency. Non-verbal cues play an equally important role in communication. Gestures like hand movements or body language can convey additional meaning beyond what is expressed verbally. Facial expressions are particularly significant as they often reveal genuine emotions that may contradict spoken words. Being aware of these nonverbal signals allows us to interpret messages accurately and respond appropriately. Personal bubbles refer to individuals' preferred physical distance during interactions. Different cultures have varying norms regarding personal space boundaries; some people prefer closer proximity while others require more personal space for comfort. Understanding these cultural differences helps avoid misunderstandings or discomfort during conversations. To ensure effective communication, it is essential to adjust our behaviors accordingly based on the feedback received from both verbal and non-verbal cues. This includes adapting our diction (choice of words), utterance (manner of speaking), content (message relevance), and tone (emotional expression).

## 6.5. Cultural learning Strategy

Taboos are inevitably involved in daily communication. It is imperative for individuals to demonstrate a keen awareness of the cultural background of the target parties in order to foster a comprehensive understanding, thereby minimizing any inadvertent misappropriation. When individuals are aware of the taboos associated with culture, they can avoid sensitive topics or behaviors that may offend others. Moreover, being culturally sensitive allows individuals to adapt their communication style to better suit the preferences of the other party. For example, some cultures value directness and assertiveness in communication, while others prioritize indirectness and harmony. By understanding these cultural nuances, individuals can adjust their approach accordingly and ensure smoother interactions.

Cultural sensitivity and relevant knowledge like six Hofstede cultural dimensions are crucial in today's globalized world where people from diverse backgrounds interact on a regular basis. Whether it is in business negotiations or personal relationships, being mindful of cultural differences helps prevent misunderstandings that could potentially damage rapport or hinder successful outcomes.

## 7. Conclusion

Acknowledging the importance of taboos in everyday dialogue and proactively pursuing understanding of diverse cultural norms and values enables people to more adeptly manage interactions across cultures. Grasping and adhering to taboos is vital for nurturing harmonious relationships and preventing confusion.

The study's key discovery underscores the significance of taboos in daily interactions, enabling people to participate effectively in cross-cultural exchanges. The origins and development of taboos can generally be encapsulated by various elements including geographical, temporal, psychological, spiritual, cultural, customary, political aspects, historical fluctuations, social norms, and customary practices. Furthermore, it underscores the significance of comprehending and honoring taboos as crucial for nurturing beneficial relationships and averting misinterpretations. The dissertation underscores the significance of understanding and honoring taboos in cross-cultural dialogue, simultaneously offering techniques and adapting various approaches to tackle these issues. Gaining insight into the cultural heritages of those involved is crucial for adeptly maneuvering through the complexities of cross-cultural dialogue. Gaining a deep insight into the taboos of various cultures can help in averting inadvertent violations. In situations where the delicacy of a subject is unclear, individuals may use open-ended queries to show their enthusiasm for learning and adherence to personal and cultural limits. Furthermore, attentive listening is vital—focusing not just on verbal expressions but also on their behaviors, while being aware of non-verbal signals that could suggest unease or the existence of forbidden topics. Through the amalgamation of these methods, a more dignified and effective communication setting can be created.

This dissertation aids people in recognizing cultural variances and proposes methods to avert disputes and misinterpretations in communication. Nonetheless, the thesis presents specific

constraints. This encompasses the possible partial representation of taboos in certain societies, coupled with an insufficient in-depth examination owing to limited exposure to intercultural dialogue. Moreover, it has provided a more detailed and practical approach to addressing specific challenges individuals might encounter, given the dynamic and intricate nature of cross-cultural communication. Subsequent studies might delve into a broader spectrum of cultures and associated taboos to gain a more thorough insight into cultural variances. Additionally, more in-depth studies can explore complex aspects of cross-cultural dialogue, including power structures, identity identification, and cultural disputes, to provide more precise and actionable advice.

Over time, taboos have evolved as a cultural occurrence, influenced by thought processes, personal values, historical progression, and societal environments. With the intensification of cultural interactions between China and the West, a noticeable trend is emerging where taboo languages in Chinese and English converge. In exploring the societal and cultural roots of taboos, it's vital to meticulously examine how taboo language evolves in the future to ensure seamless cross-cultural interactions.

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