

THE NUMBER GAME

By Joshua Zhong

At 8 minutes and 8 seconds past 8:00 pm on 8-8-2008, 2,008 *Fou* drummers dressed in traditional red and white thunderously announced the grand opening of the XXIX Olympic Games in Beijing's National Stadium, fondly known as the Bird's Nest, designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architects Herzog & de Meuron, who collaborated with ArupSport and China Architecture Design & Research Group. The current 91,000-seat facility will be reduced to 80,000 seats following the conclusion of the Paralympic Games in mid-September.

What is the big deal with the number 8? Call it superstition or tradition; numbers have played a major role in Chinese people's lives, especially in recent decades as China transforms itself from a closed and nearly bankrupt socialist society to an economic superpower. With the desire to be successful, economically, financially, emotionally, and physically, people and businesses alike have shifted their focus from politics to money. "*Xiang qian kan*" or "Set your sights on money and be prosperous" is the motto for many of the 1.3 billion Chinese today.

It is commonly recognized that Cantonese people in the southern part of China are excellent business people who are shrewd and successful. In fact, the first Special Economic Zone that the late Chinese president Deng Xiaoping launched to test his socialized capitalist idea was in Guangzhou's Shenzhen, a city that later became the leading force to introduce a market economy into all corners of China.

In Cantonese, the number 8 is pronounced *fa*, the same pronunciation as the words for prosperity and good fortune. No wonder 8 is the most auspicious lucky number in China. The seemingly-puzzling Beijing Olympics' opening time is in fact nothing confusing or coincidental at all. 8/8/08 is considered to be an auspiciously lucky date. In fact, Chinese authorities recorded the largest number of marriage license applications in its history on this special date, like 7/7/07 in the US!

The number 8 is everywhere. Lots of hotels in China have as many 8's as possible in their phone numbers, like the White Swan Hotel in Guangzhou - 81861188. Companies and individuals are willing to pay large sums of money to ensure 8's on their business phone numbers, vehicle license plates, cell phone numbers, and even house addresses. Wherever the 8th of the month falls on a Saturday or Sunday, you will see a spike of weddings all across China. In shopping malls everywhere, instead of \$19.99 as we see in the US, you will be overwhelmed by ¥1.88, ¥8.88, or ¥888.88 price tags.

Opposite to the lucky number 8, there is the unlucky number 4, a number that many Chinese, especially people in the southern part of China, will always try their best to avoid. In both Cantonese and Mandarin, the pronunciation of the number 4 is *si*, which sounds almost the same as the Chinese word for death, an obvious bad omen.

Even in America, realtors experience a very hard time selling houses with 4 in the addresses to their Chinese clients, as well as Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese buyers. In California, some counties have to pass special ordinances to allow the change of house addresses or accept applications for a special number. In Hong Kong, some high-rise residential buildings skip ALL floor numbers containing a 4, such as 4, 14, 24, 34, and sometimes even entire floors between 40-49. To please their customers, many Asian companies, and even some international companies doing business in

Asia, try their best to eliminate 4 from their products. All cell phone numbers in China start with 138, 139, or 136. Nokia cell phones, headquartered in South Korea, has no series beginning with a 4. Liken this to the so-called unlucky number 13 in the US.

However, not all Chinese identify with this practice or belief. In the northern part of China where I came from, 4 is considered a good number. “*Si shi tong tang*” means a four-generation family, which is a very good blessing; “*Si he yuan*,” a very famous Beijing architectural style, refers to a ranch-style house with four units surrounding a central courtyard; and “*Si xi wan zǐ*” or Four-Happiness Meatballs, is a very popular northern Chinese dish served at weddings and major holidays.

Besides 8 and 4, people attach different meanings to other single digit numbers and these numbers’ combinations, mostly based on the numbers’ pronunciations in local dialects and their association with certain non-number related meanings.

One, or *yi*, can be a good number, such as being number one or unified. *Yi*’s pronunciation implies the meaning of “certainty” or “for sure.” So 18 can be interpreted as “surely prosperous.” Naturally, 14 will then mean “certain death,” a number combination that people definitely try to avoid when conducting business or selecting a wedding date. Sometime *yi* can mean loneliness or having nothing. It all depends on the context.

Two, or *er*, is a positive number to many Chinese people. It means *shuang*, double, or *dui er*, pair. “*Hao shi cheng shuang*” or “good things come in pairs” expresses extreme luck. *Shuang xi* or “double happiness” is the symbol used for a wedding ceremony. It is an important custom in China to serve guests with an even number of dishes: 2, 4, 6, or 8. An odd number of dishes means unwelcome or disrespect. In addition, two’s pronunciation of *er* sounds very much like “son” and is also commonly used to refer to “children.” Thus, 28 can mean “children’s prosperity.”

Five, or *wu*, sounds like both *wo* (I) and *wu* (no). Thus it is left to individual interpretation. 58 can mean either “I prosper” or “no prosperity!”

The number 6, pronounced *liu* in Mandarin, sounds like the word for “flowing” or “smooth.” So naturally, number-loving people attach “everything goes smoothly” to this number. It is easy to tell that 6868, 8686, or 6688 (prosper smoothly) are extremely lucky numbers. In Cantonese, 6 is pronounced *lou*, the same as “highly-paid government position,” used in the old dynasties. Those who want a good salary, which I guess must include all of us, love number 6 in their lives. In fact, 6 is considered the second luckiest number by the Chinese, second only to 8.

The number 7, *qi*, on one side is considered spiritual or ghostly. The seventh month of the Chinese calendar is also called the “Ghost Month.” An ancient legend goes that during this month, the gates of hell are said to be open, so ghosts and spirits are permitted to visit the living realm. It is not commonly associated with luck. However, on the other hand, *qi* in Mandarin shares the exact same pronunciation as “wife.” So 5788 can mean “my wife and I prosper together,” and 5752 can mean “my wife and children.”

The number 9, pronounced *jiu* in Mandarin, has the same pronunciation as “forever” or “everlasting.” It is no wonder that 9 is widely used in traditional weddings, such as the number of wedding banquet tables. 98 can be read as “forever prosperous or successful.” 5859 means “Live

long and prosper.” ☺ In the Chinese ancient dynasties, only the emperors were privileged to wear robes, sit on furniture, use utensils, or build buildings with a nine-dragon design or decoration.

See, it is all about the pronunciation! Although funny, and sometimes even a bit laughable, the number games in China and other Asian countries are key parts of Chinese culture, just like the special meaning we give to certain numbers in the West. Understanding the meaning of these traditions adds a lot of fun and some sensitivity as we learn about and travel the world.