

# Cultural taboos and their impact on healthcare communication in Chinese communities: a semiotic approach

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Keywords	Abstract
Taboo; Signifier; Signified; Semiotics; Chinese People;	Folk cultural activities are symbolic acts. Every activity, every instrument, every ritual, has a series of language symbols. Physical symbols, and even totem symbols, are programmed according to specific themes. The current research aims at describing the phenomena of taboos in giving a gift to Chinese people. Using the Semiotic methodology, it examined the association between signs and their roles in how Chinese people create meanings daily that related to taboos. The result shows that Wall clocks, Chrysanthemum flowers, fans & Umbrellas, Pears, Green hats, Glasses refer to the taboo gifts. It seems extremely irrelevant between signifier and signified. Moreover, this phenomenon reflects the arbitrariness and linearity of the signs, and depends on the uniqueness of the Chinese language system and history, as well as the collective memory of Chinese people.

## 1. Introduction

Language, as a communication and interaction tool, is only owned by humans (Cruse,2011). Language studies can start from the language itself, namely internal, such as phonology and morphology; it can also start from the external, for example, sociolinguistics and cultural linguistics (Makkai, 2019). The way that certain communities use their language can reflect their culture, and this culture reflects the ideology of the community too.

The definition of culture is “the characteristic feature of everyday existence(such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time”. The ceremony will be a mirror of real life. In China mainland, the wedding ceremony is the most important and very sacred ceremony in all kinds of ceremonies. The things and colours used in the traditional wedding ceremony usually have their special meanings. For example, in the traditional wedding ceremony in China, the bride always wears a bright red dress which means a bright and booming future. Peanuts will also be used which means the new couple will get their children soon. “red colour” and “peanuts” as signs used by Chinese people in the traditional wedding ceremony reflect Chinese people’s longing for a better life and future. Semiotics is just a branch of linguistics to studying the relation of sound-image and its meaning behind it.

The birth of semiotics is inseparable from the two figures who are often regarded as the pioneers of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (de

Saussure, 2011). The two figures come from different continents, but both put forward a theory which in principle is no different. If the de Saussure model is structurally semiotic, the Peirce model is semiotic analytical (Keane,2003). De Saussure developed the basics of general linguistic theory. In the other side, Peirce concept is based on the functioning of the sign by putting linguistic signs in an important place, but not the main one (Merrell, 2005).

Ferdinand de Saussure was a Swiss linguist and semiotician. His ideas laid a foundation for many significant developments in both linguistics and semiology in the 20th century. He is widely considered one of the founders of 20th-century linguistics and one of two major founders (together with Charles Sanders Peirce) of semiotics/semiology (Culler, 1986). According to Ferdinand De Saussure, language is a system of symbols or systems of signs (Coelho, 2019). He states that language is the combination of a concept and a sound-image a sign. The linguistic sign is then a two-sided psychological entity that can be represented by the following figure.

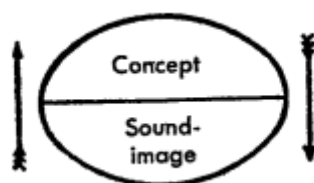


Figure 1.  
The two-sided psychological entity

On Figure 1 above, the two elements are intimately united, and each recalls the other.” A Chinese scholar Zhao (2019) defined the sign as “the perception that is considered to carry meaning”. He believes that semiotics is a science of meaning. Meaning is the potential that a sign can be explained by another sign. The explanation itself is the realization of meaning (Latupeirissa, 2016; Bracken, 2019). Signs are produced and interpreted by Chinese society based on Chinese traditional culture. Chinese people believe that number can bring them lucky or doom. They will choose a good lunar date (黄道吉日 huáng dào jí rì) for their wedding ceremony, for example, number six(六 liù) and number nine(九 jiǔ) are good numbers because number six can be related to a Chinese idiom “六六大顺 liù liù dà shùn” means all things will run smoothly, and number nine can be related to a Chinese idiom “天长地久 tiān cháng dì jiǔ”, which means love will be everlasting and forever.

Safar (2019) state that human beings are the only animals who use signs. We always come in contact with signs in everyday life both in the form of language and human attitudes. Every sign that we see and catch does not appear without cause but has the purpose behind it (Knight & Reed, 2019). Taboos are words and actions which forbidden to say and act on certain occasions. “Language taboo is a kind of consciousness generated by people’s worship of language spirits. It expresses several situations with different meanings at a specific time or place. Many taboo words are produced by the homophonic association of words.” Based on the thought, I am interested in describing and interpreting the common taboos when giving a casual gift or a small present to a Chinese friend. The result of this research is hoped to present a deeper understanding of non-

Chinese people in interacting with Chinese people. Therefore, it is stated that the current research is essential to be a cultural bridge for non-Chinese people and the Chinese people.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Signifier, Signified and Taboos

I propose to retain the word sign to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound-image respectively by signified and the signifier (cf. Lloyd, 2020; Yang, 2019); the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each other and from the whole of which they are parts (Lomas, 2019). This concept sees that meaning arises when there are associations signified and signifier. The sign is a unit of a signifier with an idea. In other words, signified are “meaningful sounds” or “meaningful streaks”. So, the signifier is material aspects of language, namely what is said or heard and what is written or read (Gahrn-Andersen, 2019). Signified are mental images, thoughts, or concepts (Meier-Oeser, 2019).

Roth (2019) argues that signifier without signified means nothing and is, therefore, not a sign. Conversely, a signified cannot be delivered or captured from the signifier. Therefore, we can say that there is no sign without meaning in the world. Language is an essential sign in semiotics studies (cf. Goldgaber, 2019). Signs are changing continuously from generation to generation, and it is always reproduced and reinterpreted by the users (people based on the contexts).

The term “taboo” comes from the Tongan tapu or Fijian tabu (“prohibited”, “disallowed”, “forbidden”), related among others to the Maori tapu, Hawaiian kapu, and Malagasy fady (Allan, 2019). Its English use dates to 1777 when the British explorer James Cook visited Tonga, and referred to the Tongans’ use of the term “taboo” for “any things that are forbidden to be eaten, or made use of”. Moreover, taboos are “things that cannot be touched, pronounced, etc. because they are related to supernatural forces which are dangerous.” In Chinese Dictionary, taboos (禁忌 jìnjì in Chinese) are words or actions that are forbidden (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 2012).

Allan (2019) states that Where something physical or metaphysical is said to be tabooed, what is in fact tabooed is its interaction with an individual, with a specified group of persons or even with the whole community. In principle, any kind of behaviour can be tabooed. For behaviour to be proscribed, it must be perceived as in some way harmful to an individual or their community, but the degree of harm can fall anywhere on a scale from a breach of etiquette to out-and-out fatality. From the above statements, we can be sure that taboos are things that cannot be done and words that cannot be said in a particular social community. It expresses a dangerous signal that is related to supernatural imagination. These imaginations are generally associated with negative life experiences of human beings.

### 2.2 Research Method

The current research applied semiotic methodology approach. It is a tool susceptible to many uses (Godino, 2019). Moreover, the approach is applicable to the study of personal experience (Alan, 2019), overt behaviour, social representations, or cultural artefacts such as the products of art or science (Alan, 2019; Mikhaeil & Baskerville, 2019). Related to the current study, I applied my personal experience as a Chinese woman, and review the social as well as cultural representations

(cf. Weeks & Schaffert, 2019) about the phenomena of taboos in giving gifts for Chinese people. My personal experience, as it appears in consciousness, is a sort of ‘pan-semiotic text’ (Magariños, 2008). All of my personal experiences and understanding of the related phenomena are then described in the following discussions.

The context of this discussion is giving a casual gift or present to a Chinese, and the theoretical basis of this discussion is semiotics. Like the two sides of a coin, a sign has its signifier and signified. When giving gifts to a Chinese in the Chinese community, a concrete thing immediately became a sign which has their special concept, so one has to consider relevant factors in this context, such as age, social status, gender, religion and the current state of your friend. You may touch taboos when giving gifts to a Chinese, so you have to be careful when giving gifts to a Chinese. It’s better to know the cultural and symbolic meaning behind the gift. Now let’s discuss what gifts can’t be given to the Chinese, and how about the concept behind them.

### **3. Results and Discussions**

#### **3.1 Meaning of Giving Gifts in Chinese Society**

China is a country that values etiquette, and traditionally it has paid great attention to ritual exchanges (Ruan, 2019). “Ren仁 (benevolence) , Yi义 (justice) , Li礼 (ritual) , Zhi智 (wisdom) , and Xin信(sincerity), among which “ritual” is the most classic and brilliant page of Chinese Confucianism. Its influence is far-reaching, and it is still highly respected. Gift-giving is a way of expressing your feelings and deepening friendship with others (Smith, 2019). In China, we regard the exchange of gifts as a ritual symbol. Before a Chinese gives some gift to others, there are some questions have to consider, such as when is appropriate to deliver the gift and what kind of gift is suitable, and how old is the receiver of the gift and how about the sender’s purpose. After learning semiotic theories and traditions of giving gifts in Chinese society, now we will discuss what the taboo is in giving gifts to Chinese people and why? What signifier and signified represented by these gifts.

#### **3.2 Taboos in Giving Gifts in Chinese Community**

In the Chinese language system, readings and writings of Chinese are not always consistent. A pronunciation can correspond to a lot of Chinese characters. Such as morpheme “huà” can be read as “[xuà]” and can correspond to “话” (speech), “画(painting)”, “化(melt)” and so on. We choose which meaning depends on the context. This is the unique feature and charm of Chinese. When speech Mandarin, you must be careful with the tone and the sound, because the sound and the tone can determine the meaning altogether. The same pronunciation, different Chinese characters, created a lot of Chinese proverbs and idioms.

#### **Watches and wall clocks/钟( zhōng)**

In general, clocks and watches are just tools for calculating time, a self-disciplined person usually likes to use them, but in China, in the system of giving gifts to others, there are some different meanings. The sound of the clock is “钟zhōng” in the Chinese language, and this sound is the same as one word that is “终zhōng” which means “end, ending or termination”. In Chinese culture, if you

send a clock to an old man, it means you are hoping that the old man will leave the world as soon as possible, and you don't wish him to live forever. Therefore, the wall clocks and watches are a taboo gift for Chinese people.

### **Chrysanthemum flowers/菊花(júhuā)**

Chrysanthemum flowers are prevalent around the world in many situations. You may find them in an official opening ceremony or a leisure situation. A beautiful bunch of chrysanthemums can be given to a keynote speaker of a talk show and can be given to a patient in the hospital. However, in China, you should never do that, because chrysanthemum flowers are often used in situations to commemorate the deceased, now chrysanthemum flowers have become a symbol of the funeral, so it's not suitable to give as a gift.

### **Fan扇(shàn) & Umbrella/伞 (sǎn)**

The fan is a tool used during the summer heat and is a good thing. In the other part of the world, if we got a beautiful fan as a gift, maybe we would be happy and pleased. An umbrella is a tool used during rainy days. However, in Chinese communities, you are not welcomed if you give an umbrella or a fan as a gift to a Chinese. Chinese sound of a fan is “扇shàn”, and Chinese sound of umbrella is “sǎn”, these two sounds are similar or same to one word “散 sǎn” which means “separate”. If you give to a friend especially who is dating with a girl or a boy, it will predict that both will break up or separate, so it is not suitable to giving a gift to a friend.

### **Pear/ 梨(lí)**

The morpheme of pears in Chinese is “梨lí”. The sound is a homonym of the word “离lí” which means “leave, separated from others”. When Chinese people eat pears, they don't use a knife to cut pears, because the sound of “分梨fēnlí” which means “cut pears” is same as another word “分离fēnlí” which means “separate”. Chinese people usually don't cut the pears when they eat it for fear of being left or separate with family. So “pears” should not be used as souvenirs or gifts to friends or family.

### **Green hats/绿帽子 (lǜ màozi)**

A hat is a device used on one's head, and a green hat is just defined as a hat that its colour is green. Nevertheless, in Chinese myths, the green colour implies “cuckold, disloyal, low or inferior class”. During the Qin and Han Dynasties, criminals are required to wear green clothes. In the eyes of the people Tang and Song Dynasties, it is the lowest person who wears green and green colours. Moreover, during Yuan dynasty, the king Zhu Yuanzhang ordered that the man who worked in the prostitution's family must wear a green towel, the waist is red, and the shoes are worn with pigskin shoes. They are not allowed to walk in the middle of the street. They are only allowed to walk on the left and right sides. As a result, when people saw wearing a “green hat”, They knew that someone in their family was a prostitute. Wearing a “green hat” also became a common name for a man's wife was a prostitute. Now if a person's wife is derailed, we will say that his wife brought him a green hat,

so if you give a green hat to a Chinese person, especially a man, he will be outraged, because this touched the taboo.

### Glasses/杯具(bēijù)

Glass is sometimes beautifully designed, but to make it pretty, may not be used as a souvenir in China. Because in Chinese, the sound “glass” is “杯bēi”, this sound is the same as another sound “悲bēi” which means “sadness”. The collection of glasses is called “杯具bēijù”, equal to one word “悲剧bēijù” which means “tragedy”. If you send a glass, it will be imagined to sadness and tragedy. Because the concept is not right, so it is not suitable for the use of gifts.

Based on the discussion above, it is stated that, in the system of gifts-giving in Chinese society, there are many taboos, these taboos are closely related to the Chinese language system and Chinese culture. The signifier and signified in some of these examples can be seen from the following Table (1).

No.	Signifier/sound-image	Signified/concept
1	钟zhōng/Clock& watch	The concept of the end of life
2	菊花júhuā/Chrysanthemum flowers	The concept of death
3	扇shàn&伞sǎn/Fan & umbrella	The concept of separation
4	梨lí /Pear	The concept of separation
5	绿帽子lǜmàozi/Green hat	The concept of disloyal
6	杯具bēijù/Glass	The concept of tragedy

Table 1  
Signifier and Signified

Saussure explained that contrary to all appearances, language never exists apart from the social fact, for it is a semiological phenomenon. Its social nature is one of its fundamental characteristics. Its complete definition confronts us with two inseparable entities.

When discussing specific signifier have certain signified, we have to consider the connection of language and the community of speakers. Only in a specific cultural environment, in a specific context, an absolute signifier may create a new different signified. The taboos in giving gifts to Chinese people only can be understood by Chinese communities and in the gift-giving context. These taboos in associated with the Chinese language system, because the same reading mix with the different writing, this coincidence produces many special language effects. From the analysis above, we found that all taboos point to situations in which humans do not want to appear or occur.

## 4. Conclusion

Discuss the current topic from the perspective of semiotics, we can find the extreme difference from the signifier and its signified. This difference depends on the unique Chinese language system, the history and collective memory of Chinese people. Many taboos are language taboos and closely related to the unique Chinese homonym form. Using ideographic forms of Chinese homophony can accurately reflect the cultural connotations of Han nationality to pursue goodness and avoid evil.

The appearance of the homonym taboo has its linguistics reasons and is also related to Chinese social and cultural psychology.

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