



## ARE YOU SUPERSTITIOUS? A SURVEY ON CHINESE ATTITUDES TOWARDS HOMOPHONIC WORD TABOO

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Taboo is the prohibition of an act or the use of a word under pain of punishment. Freud (2000) perceives taboo as superstition owned by the barbarians. This paper is a combination of socio-psychological and linguistic study since homophonic word taboo is a socio-linguistic phenomenon in Chinese culture. The objective of this piece of research is to investigate Chinese attitudes towards homophonic word taboo in Hong Kong. Questionnaires were distributed to 7 groups of students, old and young, male and female, with questions related to number 4, which is phonologically linked to the meaning of 'death' in Chinese culture. The Chinese people are afraid of this; therefore, they try to avoid any thing or object dealing with number 4. The findings revealed that old female students were more superstitious than young students; no significant difference was found between old male students and old female students; young male students and young female students were comparatively not superstitious. This study was conducted in Hong Kong with Hong Kong Chinese. Further study can be done in other Asian countries using Chinese as subjects. To conclude, superstition is a social phenomenon and further research is needed to investigate the realm of word taboo in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics.

**Keywords:** taboos, superstition, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics

### INTRODUCTION

Taboo is generally considered as a sociocultural phenomenon affiliated with superstition, custom, and hierarchical power. Every human society prohibits or restricts certain kinds of behavior, although those prohibited in one society are not necessarily the same as in another. Now, if a community or the society at large regards some articles or certain acts as taboo, usually the names of these acts and things must not be mentioned or talked about, at least in public. Consequently, words, objects and expressions related to social taboo become verbal and non-verbal taboo, or linguistic taboo.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) stated that culture is a complicated notion that there is no single definition or a simple description for it. It brings different images to different people. Broadly speaking, it includes mental habits, personal prejudices, moral values, social customs, artistic achievements, and aesthetic preferences of particular societies. In a narrow path, this paper looks at a relatively personal construct referring to the patterns of behaviour, values, and beliefs,

that is, the number 4 (/si/), which means 'death' in Chinese culture, that guide the daily life of an individual or a group of individuals within a cultural community.

Every culture has its own taboos. Communication works better when the participants share more assumptions and knowledge about each other (Scollon & Scollon, 2000). Yet, in many circumstances, participants recognize the existence of the rules associated with taboos only after they have violated them. Those who do not observe these social 'rules' may experience embarrassment, as Saville-Troike (1989) puts it, they may be accused of immorality and face social ostracism.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Fraser (1994) classifies taboos into 4 categories: behaviour, people, objects, and language. Freud (2000) perceives taboos as superstition practised by the barbarians. It is meaningless to ask them where taboos come from since they are unconscious. Ren (1990) proposes to find out its sources, solutions, as well as insensibility.

Examples of taboos include living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, having number 4 in ones home address, car plate number, and phone number. Violation of these taboos will lead to punishment and irresistible consequences (Freud 1985:80). A lot of Hongkongers (=people of Hong Kong; 99% of the population in Hong Kong is Chinese) observe taboos not out of respect but because they are afraid of death (Yeh 2000). Because of this cultural aspect, they try to avoid talking about death thinking that death may come upon them and to their relatives.

Li (1994:31-32,35) believes that religion comes after the invention of language but taboo comes before language and religion. When taboo occurs, humans still cannot use language as a thinking medium (Li 1994, Jin 1994). The origin of taboo lies in avoiding the natural danger but gradually and continuously converting to escaping certain things, which is a tribute to the supernatural. Li (1994) pointed out that some bookshop owners do not allow their employees to read the books while working since 'book' and 'lost' are phonologically identical. These owners would like to make a profit out of selling books and therefore disallowing employees to 'lose' their money.

Lou & Tan (1997:102-103) reported that taboos can bring forward business opportunities. For instance, a Chinese fortune-teller predicted that there will be a natural disaster in July 2009 in northeast China and in order to avoid this evil, simply put on a pair of blue socks. Hence, people looked for blue socks resulting in a boom of sales. A businessman in northern China grasped this chance claiming that red socks were even better. Another businessman said it would be more effective if one put on both blue and red socks. Subsequently people put on two different colours of socks. These seem ridiculous but as the Chinese are extremely superstitious, they will do anything they can to escape from evil or to avoid disasters impose on them.

Chen (1993:7-15) indicated 4 characteristics of taboos, they are a) ancient and barbaric; b) mystical; c) customary; and d) social trend. Taboos were originated and created by people in ancient slavery and feudal societies to avoid supernatural revenge or penalty such as poor harvest of crops. To them, taboos were mystical and non-understandable. Nowadays people would not violate taboos since they want to provide their families, friends, or themselves with safety (Yeh 2000). The taboo from number 4 (/si/=death) not only control Hongkongers' behaviour, but also Japanese because Japanese ancestors are Chinese.

In France, we cannot find a house or an apartment with number 13. In the UK, just a few hotels have rooms with number 13 (Radford 1996). Research can be conducted investigating the level of superstition among the French people on number 13 and subsequently compare with the

Chinese on the notion of number 4. The assumption is different culture has different perception on numbers.

People from different cultures make more mistakes in drawing inferences on the meaning of words than people in the same culture. In order to avoid making these mistakes, most people tend to adjust their language and behaviour in expressing their attitudes towards others. Characteristics of verbal and non-verbal taboos are seldom discussed which is indispensable for successful interaction (Shen, 1993). This is the subject we now turn.

### **What is a taboo?**

The term 'taboo' was used by Captain Cook in his journal of 1777 while he was in Tonga. It comes from the Tongan word 'tabu', an adjective which refers to things or persons 'under prohibition, forbidden or set apart'. Later, Cook changed it into a noun referring to the prohibition itself and a verb meaning 'to make someone or something taboo'. Today this word is being openly examined (Thody, 1997). To most people, it refers to 'forbidden' or 'to be avoided' behaviour, both verbal and non-verbal. A taboo, therefore, is an act of disapproved behaviour in the society.

People trust that inappropriate verbal and non-verbal manner will bring disastrous outcomes to them. These behaviours infringe a code based on supernatural beliefs and violate the moral standard of the society (Wardhaugh, 1992). In fact, taboos exist from ancient to modern societies and in different levels of civilization. People are psychologically and physically prepared to obey these 'rules'. For instance, westerners put on black clothes for funeral and white for wedding; whereas the Chinese wear red for wedding and white for funeral. Because of western influence, now the Chinese brides and bridegrooms wear white for their wedding (Shen, 1993). The power behind this interdiction is ascribed to supernatural power and the danger constituted in the manner itself. Offending a taboo will therefore carry bad luck and misfortune to us. Examples of taboos include food, speech, actions, numbers, colours, and gifts.

Many westerners loathe the notion of consuming horses, dogs, or insects; yet many Cantonese in China habitually eat dog's meat in the winter to keep their body warm. Some foods, because of religious reasons, are treated as 'dirty' or 'unnatural', for example, the Muslims do not take pork and Hindus do not eat beef. They believe that these food may cause illness or skin disease and their consumption may offend the supernaturals.

Although the Chinese have no taboos on food, they take action related to it. For instance, people will not eating up the whole fish in the reunion dinner on New Year's Eve because the fish in Chinese (/Yu/) shares the same sound with the word 'extra' or 'leftover'. There is a New Year phrase that says "Nian Nian You Yu" which means "there are some (fish) leftover from the previous year and in subsequent year". Therefore the Chinese will usually keep a little leftover from the reunion dinner as a symbolic gesture.

One example of taboo related to gift giving is the book. A book is a nice present in most cultures but the Chinese have a prohibition against giving a book to a gambler since the word 'book' in Mandarin has a similar sound as 'lost'. Hence, in order not to commit a taboo, it is advisable to know others' cultures before giving a gift. Nowadays most people perceive taboos as 'old superstitions', however, these interdictions sustain because people pass on their beliefs to their children and grandchildren. The fact is these people are scared of misfortune and ill omen. Believe it or not, they try to avoid any person, thing, or incident that may carry bad luck and sadness to their lives.

### **Verbal taboos**

Impermissible language exists in any culture, that is, words with strong emotional connotation that people cannot use in polite discourse. In western and Asian cultures the fear of death links with the words of death. Hence, people replace words such as 'die' or 'death' with 'passed away', 'went to heaven' or 'departed' (Hayakawa, 1982). The Chinese are, generally speaking, superstitious in that they try to avoid doing anything that can bring bad luck. Chinese phonologically linked taboos are ancient products which symbolize evil spirits, death, disasters, and other negative phenomenon (Shen, 1993).

### **Non-verbal taboos**

Some non-verbal taboos seem ridiculous, but heavy penalty will be imposed on those who fail to obey these rules, for instance, staring or smiling at your friend's wife is considered inappropriate and an indecent act. If you give a present to your Muslim friend, present with your right hand because left hand is, to him/her, is dirty. To offer an alcoholic drink to your Muslim friend is restricted in a Muslim country. If you are invited to a Chinese home, do not buy chrysanthemum as a gift because it is related with funeral. Further, never buy a clock for your Chinese friend on his/her birthday since the word has similar sound with the 'end' and therefore literally means the 'end of life'. All these must be abstained.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Instrument**

Chi-square Test and Fisher's Exact Test were used to differentiate difference within the 7 groups. If the  $p$  value is  $<0.05$ , further investigation will be conducted; no analysis if it is  $>0.05$  which means Hong Kong people have the same attitude towards word taboos disregard of their education, age, sex, and major areas of study.

### **Respondents**

The sample for this study consisted of 348 students which were divided into 7 groups: G1 (50 postgraduate female students), G2 (18 postgraduate male students), G3 (university Natural Science majors, 32 males, 3 females), G4 (46 university female Humanites majors), G5 (36 university male Humanites majors), G6 (80 high school female students), and G7 (87 high school male students). The total for G1 and G2 is 68 and the average age is 35. They are pursuing either a Masters or a PhD degree in Humanities. All of them are Chinese. G3, G4, G5 are students from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The age range is from 19 to 26, with an average age of 22. The last 2 groups, G6 and G7 are high school students with an average age of 15.

### **Data collection**

Data was collected by means of questionnaire (see Appendix). To centre on Chinese word taboos, 10 questions, with 6 questions related to number 4 and 4 questions related to the sound 'death', which is a terrible phenomenon (Freud 1985), were asked.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Results**

People in all groups have similar likes and dislikes on homophonic word taboos disregard of their education, age, sex, and majors. Table 1 shows no significant difference in purchasing a cheaper flat on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor [N=157 (45.1%)]; 102 (29.3%) people have no preference; 89 (25.6%) people dislike living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor because they claim that \$100,000 is not a lot of money. Their criteria for choosing a flat are comfort and fearless. They claim that they will discuss with their parents, spouse, and fortune tellers before buying a flat.

**Table 1.** buying a cheaper flat on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	20 /40.8	10 /20.4	19 /38.8	49
G2 (eldest male)	10 /52.6	4 /21.1	5 /26.3	19
G3 (natural science)	21 /70	5 /16.7	4 /13.3	30
G4 (female humanities)	15 /31.9	18 /38.3	14 /29.8	47
G5 (male humanities)	14 /45.2	9 /29	8 /25.8	31
G6 ( high school females)	40 /48.2	27 /32.5	16 /19.3	83
G7 ( high school males)	37 41.6	29 /32.6	23 /25.8	89
TOTAL	157 /45.1	102 /29.3	89 /25.6	348

(Chi-square value=17.226; p value=0.107).

Table 2 indicates all groups have similar trend, that is, 1.4 % like living in a home with number 4; 82.8 % do not care, and 15.8% dislike this number. Some home buyers request a price reduction if the number contains 4. We discover that 84.2% (1.4% + 82.8%) ignore this, however, they tend to take advantage of this word taboo to reach their marketing priority.

**Table 2.** Home address with number 4.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	36/72	14/28	50
G2 (eldest male)	0	13/81.3	3/18.7	16
G3 (natural science)	0	27/81.8	6/18.2	33
G4 (female humanities)	0	42/91.3	4/8.7	46
G5 (male humanities)	0	31/88.6	4/11.4	35
G6 (high school females)	2/2.5	67/83.8	11/13.7	80
G7 (high school males)	3/3.4	72/81.8	13/14.8	88
TOTAL	5/1.4	288/82.8	55/15.8	348

(Chi-square value=13.55; p value=0.23).

A clock is a useful object. When people move into a new house, they hope every room has a clock. Table 5 depicts that 8.9% of the respondents are delighted to receive clocks as gifts, 59.5% do not care, and 31.6% dislike this notion. The reasons for not accepting clocks are: a) the sound 'giving a clock' is phonologically linked to 'go to hell', and b) the price of a clock is cheaper than in the past.

From Table 3, we discover 1.4% like, 82.8% do not care, and 15.8% dislike staying on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor in the hospital. The assumption is when people face illness, they become more superstitious.

**Table 3.** living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the hospital.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	18/37.5	30/62.5	48
G2 (eldest male)	0	10/62.5	6/37.5	16
G3 (natural science)	0	18/60	12/40	30
G4 (female humanities)	0	31/68.9	14/31.1	45
G5 (male humanities)	0	23/67.6	11/32.4	34
G6 (high school females)	2/2.5	40/50.6	37/46.8	79
G7 (high school males)	2/2.1	58/60.4	36/37.5	96
TOTAL	4/1.2	198/56.9	146/41.9	348

(Chi-square value=17.59; p value=0.086)

Table 4 reveals that 7 people prefer their phones containing number 4, 86.8% do not care, and 11.2% dislike this number.

**Table 4.** Phone number containing number 4.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	41/82	9/18	50
G2 (eldest male)	0	17/85	3/15	20
G3 (natural science)	0	27/84.4	5/15.6	32
G4 (female humanities)	0	39/84.8	7/15.2	46
G5 (male humanities)	0	33/97.1	1/2.9	34
G6 (high school females)	2/2.5	72/90	6/7.5	80
G7 (high school males)	5/5.8	73/84.0	8/9.3	86
TOTAL	7/2	302/86.8	39/11.2	348

(Chi-square value=13.6; p value=0.125)

**Table 5.** Gift received for new homes.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	2/3.9	26/51	23/45.1	51
G2 (eldest male)	0	12/66.7	6/33.3	18
G3 (natural science)	0	24/72.7	9/27.3	33
G4 (female humanities)	6/12.8	26/55.3	15/31.9	47
G5 (male humanities)	3/8.3	19/52.8	14/38.9	36
G6 (high school females)	8/10.1	46/58.2	25/31.6	79
G7 (high school males)	12/14.3	54/64.3	18/21.4	84
TOTAL	31/8.9	207/59.5	110/31.6	348

(Chi-square value=16.9; p value=0.104)

In Table 6, only 3.4% of all respondents prefer to live on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor; 68.4% do not care. More G1 females (56%) than G3 (12.5%) hate living on this floor because the difference is 43.5%. The p value for G2 to G7 is 0.668 which means there is no significant difference in these groups.

**Table 6.** Living on a 4<sup>th</sup> floor apartment.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	2/4	20/40	28/56	50
G2 (eldest male)	0	13/72.2	5/27.8	18
G3 (natural science)	0	28/87.5	4/12.5	32
G4 (female humanities)	0	35/77.8	10/22.2	45
G5 (male humanities)	2/5.9	25/73.5	7/20.6	34
G6 (high school females)	2/2.5	55/67.9	24/29.6	81
G7 (high school males)	6/6.8	62/70.5	20/22.7	88
TOTAL	12/3.4	238/68.4	98/28.2	348

[Chi-square value (G1-G7=35.35; p value=0.000); G2-G7=5.92]; [Fisher's value (G1 & G2=0.0987, G1 & G3=0.0000109; G1 & G4=0.000209; G1 & G5=0.002; G1 & G6=0.00109; G1 & G7=0.0000719).

The Chi-square value in Table 7 shows that the eldest females (G1, 51%) are more superstitious than high school female students (G6, 11.4%). No significant difference was found from G2 to G7. G1 females (51%) dislike number 4 more than G2 to G7. Tables 6 & 7 reflect that G1 females are not superstitious than G2 males but females are more superstitious than youngsters (G3-G7).

**Table 7.** Car plate number containing number 4.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	25/49	26/51	51
G2 (eldest male)	0	14/77.8	2/22.2	18
G3 (natural science)	0	26/78.8	7/21.2	33
G4 (female humanities)	0	38/82.6	8/17.4	46
G5 (male humanities)	0	30/85.7	5/14.3	35
G6 (high school females)	4/5.1	66/83.5	9/11.4	79
G7 (high school males)	6/7	70/81.4	10/11.6	86
TOTAL	10/2.9	269/77.3	69/19.8	348

[Chi-square value (G1-G7=42.709; p value=0.000); G2-G7=7.925]; [Fisher's value (G1 & G2=0.0819 G1 & G3=0.02; G1 & G4=0.000493; G1 & G5=0.000511; G1 & G6=0.00000289; G1 & G7=0.0000199).

As far as receiving an umbrella as a gift is concerned, the Chi-square value (21.879%) for G1-G7 shows that G3 (18.2%) are less superstitious than G5 (40%) which has the lowest and the highest percentage respectively. No significant difference was found for G1, G2, G4-G7. The Fisher's value indicates that G3 are less superstitious than G6.

**Table 8.** Receiving an umbrella as a gift.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	33/64.7	18/35.3	51
G2 (eldest male)	0	13/72.2	5/27.8	18
G3 (natural science)	0	27/81.8	6/18.2	33
G4 (female humanities)	0	29/63	17/37	46
G5 (male humanities)	2/5.7	19/54.3	14/40	35
G6 (high school females)	10/12.7	44/55.7	25/31.6	79
G7 (high school males)	7/8.1	56/65.1	23/26.7	86
TOTAL	19/5.5	221/63.5	108/31	348

[Chi-square value (G1-G7=21.879; p value=0.028); G1,G2, G4-G7=14.789]; [Fisher's value (G3 & G1=0.068, G3 & G2=0.037; G3 & G4=0.108; G3 & G5=0.0289; G3 & G6=0.0137; G3 & G7=0.137).

In Table 9, the Chi-square depicts that old men (G2) significantly dislike the idea of offering an umbrella as a gift than high school female students (G6). This indicates that high school students are not superstitious, however, still there are high school female (31.6%) and male students (26.7%) who do not like this concept. According to the Fisher's value, G6 and G7 are completely different from G1 and G4, that is, high school students are significantly less superstitious than old males and females studying humanity subjects. G1 and G4 females will comparatively consider the misunderstanding made by the receivers of umbrellas which means these people have a lot of considerations when thinking of gifts.



**Table 9.** Offering an umbrella as a gift.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
G1 (eldest female)	0	12/23.5	39/76.5	51
G2 (eldest male)	0	5/27.8	13/72.2	18
G3 (natural science)	0	13/38.2	21/61.8	34
G4 (female humanities)	0	12/26.1	34/73.9	46
G5 (male humanities)	0	11/31.4	24/68.6	35
G6 (high school females)	3/3.8	36/45.6	40/50.6	79
G7 (high school males)	2/2.4	37/43.5	46/54.1	85
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>5/1.4</b>	<b>126/36.2</b>	<b>217/62.4</b>	<b>348</b>

[Chi-square value (G1-G7=21.879,  $p=0.033$ ); G1-G5=2.879]; [Fisher's value (G6 & G1=0.0027, G6 & G2=0.0778; G6 & G3=0.388; G6 & G4=0.0101; G6 & G5=0.102; G6 & G7=0.666; G7 & G1=0.0009, G7 & G2=0.107, G7 & G3=0.588, G7 & G4=0.0299, G7 & G5=0.199]

In Table 10, what most Hongkongers observe is to avoid giving an umbrella as a gift (64.4%). The second thing is to avoid staying on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor in the hospital. In some private hospitals in Hong Kong, no patients would like to stay on this floor unless they want to spend less money, since these hospitals charge less for wards on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. 45.9% of respondents like to purchase a cheaper 4<sup>th</sup> floor flat; 25.6% dislike it. 2.6% like living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor; 29.9% dislike it. About 30% of all respondents dislike living on this floor.

**Table 10.** Conclusion.

	<i>Like/%</i>	<i>don't care/%</i>	<i>Dislike/%</i>	<i>TOTAL</i>
Q1--living on the 4 <sup>th</sup> floor	9/2.6	235/67.5	104/29.9	348
Q2—purchase 4 <sup>th</sup> floor apartment	160/45.9	99/28.5	89/25.6	348
Q3—home address	4/1.1	289/83.1	55/15.8	348
Q4—staying on the 4 <sup>th</sup> floor hospital ward	4/1.2	203/58.3	141/40.5	348
Q5—phone number	7/2	301/86.5	40/11.5	348
Q6—car plate number	7/2	298/85.6	43/12.4	348
Q7—receiving gift	18/5.2	224/64.4	106/30.4	348
Q8—offering gift	5/1.4	119/34.2	224/64.4	348
Q9—clock	30/8.6	207/59.5	111/31.9	348
Average	27.1/7.8	219.4/63	101.4/29.1	348

## DISCUSSION

Within all scenarios, significant differences were found in 4 items, they are:

- a) Living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor: G1>G4-G7;
- b) Car plate number containing number 4: G1>G3-G7;
- c) Receiving an umbrella as a gift: G5, G6>G3;
- d) Offering an umbrella as a gift: G1, G4>G6, G7.

In fact, G1 is more superstitious than male and female youngsters. However, no significant difference was found between G1 & G2. G6 & G7 seem comparatively not superstitious. We can conclude that young male and female students majoring in natural science are comparatively not superstitious than old people.

Li (1994) pointed out that most Chinese mainlanders do not believe in taboos anymore. Yet, we discover that 11.5% to 64.4% (29.1% in average) of all respondents do not do anything against taboos (Table 10). Perhaps we could use Hongkongers and Chinese mainlanders as subjects and find out which group is more superstitious. The mentality of people (11.5% to 64.4%) has a 'better believe it' attitude which means they cannot escape from fear, stupidity, and superstition (Ibid, 1994).

To most people, word taboo is nothing serious. It may brighten up their lives and entertainment. The reason why people avoid living on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor is that they might get pressure from their parents or voluntarily bounded by this perception. If this is the case, then they are controlled by anonymous or irresistible fear. For social harmony, a lot of people (64.4%) insist not offering umbrellas as gifts. Li (1994) suggested that we should conquer laziness, break through tradition and taboos; educate our children about the insensibility of taboos and not to force other people to become superstitious.

Ren (1990) pointed out that if we educate people about the origins and insensibility of taboos, this non-scientific-based taboo will vanish. In Hong Kong, higher education does not produce highly superstitious people, conversely, high school students are not superstitious. The possible explanation is: old people have experienced, in the course of their lives, misfortune or unhappiness arising from taboo incidents, hence they become more superstitious than youngsters. Vyse (1997) claimed that superstition is the product of several psychological phenomenon including people's sensitivity to coincidence, the fear of failure, and the attitude towards uncertain future.

To conclude, this study signals a minority of superstitious people if, in the researcher's perspective, properly taught, can refrain from word taboo. 11.5% to 64.4% of Hongkongers believe the existence of taboos. They not only scare themselves but also affect other people. To convince them not to believe in word taboo is not an easy task.

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## APPENDIX

### Questionnaire Given to Students on Word Taboos.

Direction: The following questionnaire is about word taboos. Circle a, b, or c.

1. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike living on the 4th floor.
2. I am looking for a flat. The 4th floor flat costs 100K less, therefore, I definitely buy it. [(a) strongly agree; (b) agree; (c) strongly disagree]
3. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike my home address containing number 4.
4. I am sick and have to stay in a hospital. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike staying in a ward on the 4th floor.
5. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike my phone number containing number 4.

6. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike my car plate number containing number 4.
7. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike receiving an umbrella as a gift.
8. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike giving an umbrella to someone as a gift.
9. I have bought a new house. I (a) like, (b) don't care, (c) dislike receiving a clock as a gift.
10. If a person avoids living on the 4th floor, (a) what is your opinion on his/her mental behaviour? (b) Do you think they will die earlier?

a) \_\_\_\_\_

b) \_\_\_\_\_

\*\* Thank you for completing the questionnaire \*\*