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Chinese heritage can mean being crazy about 8s

Chinese-Americans in Seattle say the number 8 means prosperity. But will it really bring good luck?

By **Erik Lacitis**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Logically, rationally, Kasper Lee says she knows there shouldn't be anything special about the number 8.

But she got married on Friday, and her wedding was a plethora of 8s.

Lee, of Sammamish, has a master's degree in business administration, works for a Web startup firm and is about to finish her doctorate. She's taken courses that delve into statistical randomness.

But our cultural past reaches deep into our psyche.

In fact, recent research shows it's hard-wired into our brains.

Now 31, Lee was born in Hong Kong, coming to this country with her family in 1992. She's hard-wired about the number 8.

That's the case with other local, younger Chinese-Americans, many working in high-tech fields, who in their work apply orderly criteria to decision-making.

Yes, Lee's statistics background tells her, "It's definitely more superstition than fact." But her emotions tell her otherwise.

For the Chinese in Hong Kong, who speak Cantonese, the word "eight" sounds similar to "prosperity."

Americans not of Chinese heritage learned how lucky the number is considered in China after all the stories about the Beijing Olympics formally opening at 8:08 p.m. on 8-8-08. Chinese state media reported that 16,400 couples registered for marriage certificates in Beijing on Friday, nearly four times as many as on the same date last year, The Associated Press reported.

"I've always believed in it," says Lee. "Growing up, it has always been part of the culture."

That's why, when a year ago, Jason Wu, 33, a Redmond police officer who was born in Beijing, proposed to her, Lee knew when the wedding would take place.



[enlarge](#) ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES
After taking wedding photos, Kasper Lee, her train held by maid of honor Sahar Lim, crosses Western Avenue on Friday to take a limo to her wedding. The date she and her groom chose for the wedding was far from random: 8-08-08.

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It was Friday, 8-8-08, in the ballroom of the China Harbor Restaurant by Lake Union.

The ceremony was at 6:08 p.m., the reception at 8:08 p.m., with 180 guests, seated at 18 tables, with eight total bridesmaids and groomsmen, an eight-layer cake and a Chinese dance performance with eight lions.

Lee's car license plate has two 8s, and 2s and 6s that add up to 8.


She asked her cellphone company for as many 8s in her number as possible.

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The other day, at the Mill Creek home of her mom, Amanda Lee, the newlyweds were visiting. It was easy to see how Kasper got hard-wired about the number 8.

Well, not just 8s, but 4s, and 47, and some other combinations of numbers.

"Chinese ... we don't like the number 4. It is death," says the mom.

She would never buy property with the number 47 in the address, she says. That 7 in 47, says the mom, means "For sure, you're going to die."

The daughter says that in Hong Kong when she was growing up, some buildings would "skip" a 14th floor, and go from 13 to 15.

On the other hand, a 13th floor didn't hold any particular significance for Lee, as it does in America, where many hotels do skip that floor.

We like to have some kind of scientific explanation for the unexplainable.

For some 35 years, professor Phillips Stevens Jr., an anthropologist at the University at Buffalo in New York, has been studying beliefs around the world and what he calls "magical thinking."

"The first thing you have to recognize," he says about Chinese and numbers, "is that this is very deep in their culture. All magical beliefs give a person a sense of control in an unpredictable, impersonal and complex world."

Then there is a neurological explanation, says Stevens, always hard to explain in generalized language.

"The principle of similarity lies at the root of many superstitions and magical thinking, and the discovery of 'mirror neurons' helps to explain that," he says.

So-called mirror neurons, he says, are brain cells that fire up when sensing similarities between two things, whether it's similarities in how they sound, smell, look or behave.

"In the case of the number 8 in China, the word sounds like 'prosperity,' and that's where the brain makes the connection — the similarity of sounds," says Stevens.

He says it doesn't matter what continent or what country or what religion, this is how our brains act.

"This principle is absolutely universal, with no exceptions," says Stevens. The brain makes the connection, even if the logic is elusive.

Local Chinese Americans interviewed couldn't come up with a specific instance in which the number 8 played a role in someone's prosperity, or the number 4 in someone's demise.

As an example, you would think 8 would be a very popular number in the state's Lotto. But it's only the 15th-most-frequently drawn number (top honors go to 28).

Dan Mo, of Seattle, is a senior program manager at a wireless company, and he holds a master's in computer science. He is president of the Northwest Chinese Professionals Association.

He says, "From a scientific view, I don't believe in the 4 or 8 thing."

Still, says Mo, "In real life, if you ask me for my preference, I pick 8."

His cellphone has three 8s, and a 6 and 2 that add up to 8.

As for Friday's newlyweds, Kasper Lee says that besides her belief in the number 8, she and Jason plan to have two children, timed so one is born in the Year of the Dragon (next one is in 2012) and one for the Year of the Tiger (next one is in 2010).

Jason gives a faint smile and mumbles something that sounds like, "Maybe."

There is no neurological research needed for that hard-wired response from a guy.

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