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FIVE BASIC COLOUR TERMS AND COLOUR TABOOS IN ANCIENT CHINA (PART TWO)

Abstract. This paper aims to explore the use of five basic colour terms and colour taboos in ancient China. Looking at many literary texts, including *Classic of Poetry, Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions, Discussing Writings and Explaining Characters*, and several other collections, the paper offers a detailed analysis of the etymology and meanings of the following Chinese colour terms: *huang* 黄 'yellow', *chi* 赤 'red', *bai* 白 'white', *hei* 黑 'black' and *qing* 青 'cyan'.

Colours have always carried well-defined symbolic meanings in China, for instance, red is associated with wealth, dignity and happiness. Besides, the five basic colours are linked to elements and cardinal points: yellow – Earth and Centre, red – Fire and South, white – Metal and West, black – Water and North, cyan – Wood and East.

The investigated ancient Chinese texts provide evidence that colours implied high and low social ranks, good and bad personal qualities or fortune. The use of some colours in specific circumstances, as well as by people with a certain status, was prohibited. The cultural and social taboo phenomenon was connected with expressing self-identity and manifested itself in clothes and folk customs as well as in numerous other ways.

Keywords: Chinese basic colour terms; etymological analysis; oracle bone inscriptions; colour taboos; symbolic meanings

PIĘĆ PODSTAWOWYCH OKREŚLEŃ KOLORÓW I TABU Z NIMI ZWIĄZANE W STAROŻYTNYCH CHINACH (CZĘŚĆ DRUGA)

Abstrakt. Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie użycia pięciu podstawowych terminów kolorów i tabu kolorów w starożytnych Chinach. Patrząc na wiele tekstów literackich, w tym *Classic of Poetry*, *Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions*, *Discussing Writings and Explaining Characters* i kilka innych zbiorów, artykuł oferuje szczegółową analizę etymologii i znaczeń następujących chińskich terminów określających kolory: *huang* 黄 'żółty', *chi* 赤 'czerwony', *bai* 白 'biały', *hei* 黑 'czarny' i *qing* 青 'cyjan'. Kolory zawsze miały dobrze zdefiniowane symboliczne znaczenie w Chinach, na przykład czerwony jest kojarzony z bogactwem, godnością i szczęściem. Ponadto pięć podstawowych kolorów jest powiązanych z żywiołami i punktami kardynalnymi: żółty – ziemia i środek, czerwony – ogień

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i południe, biały – metal i zachód, czarny – woda i północ, cyjan – drewno i wschód. Zbadane starożytne chińskie teksty dostarczają dowodów na to, że kolory oznaczały wysoką i niską pozycję społeczną, dobre i złe cechy osobiste lub fortunę. Używanie niektórych kolorów w określonych okolicznościach, a także przez osoby o określonym statusie, było zabronione. Zjawisko tabu kulturowego i społecznego było związane z wyrażaniem własnej tożsamości i przejawiało się w strojach i zwyczajach ludowych, a także na wiele innych sposobów.

Słowa kluczowe: podstawowe chińskie terminy określające kolory; analiza etymologiczna; inskrypcje z kości wyroczni; tabu związane z kolorami; znaczenia symboliczne

1. ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COLOUR TERM *BAI* 白 'WHITE'

The character *bai* 白 'white' first appeared on the Oracle Bone Inscriptions, written in the following variations  ,  ,  (Sun 1965, 336–37). The character *bai* 白 has always been used as a colour word and its form has not changed much, making it relatively easy to recognise. There are different opinions on the implications of this colour word. According to the theory of the Five Elements, metal, representing the cardinal point west, is related to white in colour. Xu Shen explained this character as white is also the colour of the west. During funeral rituals, items that are used must have white paper attached to them, which then allows prayers for the peaceful return of the soul. Looking at character composition, *bai* 白 is formed of the character *ru* 入 'enter', which within it has the character *er* 二, meaning 'two' that represents the nether world (Xu 2019, 160). Therefore, the meaning of "white" extends to mean death and the nether world. Based on the lesser seal script of *bai* 白, written as  , Xu offered a philosophical interpretation of this colour. Importantly, his interpretation included not only the Five Element Theory, but also the Yin-Yang Theory. However, there is no real evidence to show that the original meaning of the Oracle Bone Inscriptions had this in mind. *Jiyun* is a classic dictionary from the Song Dynasty that shows the Chinese characters arranged according to the pronunciation in rhyme groups. It believes that the character for "white" is borrowed, using the colour of silk to express white (Ding et al. 1985, 732).

Modern scholars seem to have a much richer imagination. For example, Guo Moruo has conducted deep research on the Oracle Bone Inscriptions and the Chinese Bronze Inscriptions. He claims that the character *bai* 白 looks like a thumb. Consequently, as the thumb is the first finger, the meaning of this character can be extended to *bo* 伯 (Guo 2016, 181–82), meaning 'the first

among brothers, the eldest, or a person in power with a high status'. In addition, *bai* 白 used as a colour word, based on its pronunciation, is a phonetic loan character. Tang Han, a scholar of Chinese characters believes that this character can also resemble white nails (2018, 384). The reason for this is that white nails become very prominent and stick out on a background of muddy hands. Looking at the Chinese ancestors and the hard work they inevitably did on the fields, it is easy to imagine white nails surrounded by darker, dirty hands. Notably, another book should be mentioned here, *Basic Knowledge of Chinese Character Shapes: Etymology*. The book's author, Fu Donghua, proposes that the white character inscribed in the oracle bones are like rice grains (1954, 39). As rice grains are white, bright, and crystal clear, the ancients painted rice grains as white.

However, a more universally accepted explanation is that white is related to light. One example comes from Shang Chengzuo, an ancient Chinese philologist and archaeologist, who commented "the character *ri* 日 'sun' is added a line in the upper left corner, much resembling the sun rising from the ground with its light shining like a sharp point. The colour of day is already white, so we get the character *bai* 白 'white'" (1983, 69). The meaning of this can be found within the characters themselves. The Chinese philologist Zuo Min-an offers another argument. In the book *A Detailed Description of Chinese Characters* he states "the triangle in the middle portrays an imagine of a burning flame, and the circle with the sharp top and wide bottom represent a halo. Therefore, there original meaning of white, is bright" (see the first two variations of *bai* on the Oracle Bone Inscriptions) (2005, 424). Moreover, the character *bai* 白 originally referred to the whiteness of sunlight, and the ancient would refer to the sun as a *bairi* 白日 'white sun'. It was only after the Tang Dynasty that the colour of the sun became known as red (this red being either *chi* 赤 'red' or *hong* 红 'red'). Since the original meaning of this character referred to sunlight, most of the photo-semantic characters that have the semantic component *bai* 白 are derived to reflect the primary meaning of this colour word.

2. TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLOUR WHITE

Although the original meaning of *bai* 白 still must be verified, it is clear that when expressing colour, this character makes reference to a white, plain colour. In addition to the 'bright' meaning, this character takes on another

meaning of 'cleanliness'. From cleanliness, it is also extended to mean 'wise and just'. White appears naturally in many everyday objects, yet people often deem white objects as lacking in colour. When discussing colour, white and black are rarely mentioned. As white can be perceived as natural, uncoloured, and unpolluted, it falls in line with the Taoist philosophy of *fanpu-guizhen* 返璞归真 'returning to nature'.[1]

Despite its beautiful meanings, in the minds of Chinese ancestors, white can also pose an ominous sign as it is not only considered to be an evil colour, but it is also often associated with deaths and funerals. In the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, *Shijing* [Classics of poetry], the poem "Airs of the State of Kuai" presents a folk song in the state of Kuai, dating back to the pre-Qin period. One notable part of this poem is as follows:

> I am honoured to see you wearing a white *guan*, but your body is thin and haggard, all due to sorrow and fatigue. It is an honour to see you wearing white *yi*, yet I cannot help but feel sad. I am willing to die with you. It's my honour to see you wearing white *bi*. My heart is sad, I wish to be one with you. (Wang 2018, 1621–22)

It is the use of white in these lines that make this hue be considered the earliest recorded colour of mourning. In the original Chinese version, the poet describes *yi* 衣 'clothes', *guan* 冠 'hat', and *bi* 韠 'knee-covers', all as white. Furthermore, as the person wearing these garments is full of sorrow, the colour gained negative connotations. In addition, the state of Hui was destroyed in the early Spring and Autumn Period, so there became a custom in the Western Zhou Dynasty of mourning with white. Due to this, white became the colour associated with death and mourning.

Funerals were also called *baishi* 白事 'white matter', which first appeared in chapter six of *Honglou meng*.[2] As part of this "white matter", the ancients would bring white flags to funerals, scatter white paper money, set up white mourning halls, and dress is white clothing. Significantly, the traditional Chinese ritual system, which in the case of funerals places emphasis on memorial

[1] Chapter 19 of *Tao Te Ching* parallels the characters *su* 素 'raw silk or white' and *pu* 璞 'unworked wood or plain'. Holmes Welch describes *su* and *pu* as symbols used to expound the basic doctrine of "the return to original nature" (1957, 35). In *Shuowen jiezi* [*Discussing writing and explaining characters*], the character *su* 素 is defined as the undyed white silk fabric (Xu 2019, 278). Therefore, this character *su* was extended to white, for example, *sufu* 素服 refers to white clothing (Ding 2005, 1248).

[2] *Honglou meng* [*Dream of the Red Chamber*] is an 18th-century Chinese novel written by Cao Xueqin (1710–1765). It is regarded as one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

ceremonies, states that white mourning clothes should be worn during this time. Originating in the ancient period of Emperor Yao (2356–2255 B.C.) and Emperor Shun (2294–2184 B.C.), this tradition later matured during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–481 B.C.), as well as the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.). Subsequently, a strict patriarchal clan hierarchy was formed and this was an integral part of the ancient Chinese ritual system (Wang 2021). Furthermore, *The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonial* marked the first recorded system of mourning. As part of this book, the so-called "mourning attire" referred not only the clothes that people wore to mourn the dead, but also the accessories, like hats. However, there were additional, special rules that had to be adhered to by the relatives of the deceased and were decided by blood ties and marriage (Li 1999c, 540–43).

Moreover, it is generally believed that the use of white as part of mourning is due to the theory of the five elements. This theory deeply rooted in Chinese culture holds that cyan represents the east and spring, symbolising the growth of all things; red represents the south and summer, symbolising prosperity; white represents the west and autumn; and black represents the north, as well as winter. As the ancient people would harvest food in autumn to store in winter, it was believed that autumn caused the withering of all living things and symbolised the end of life, bringing with it lament and sorrow. Consequently, it was seen as only appropriate to incorporate this inauspicious colour – white, into ceremonies of commemorating the death of life – funerals. As part of this, this colour also was perceived as ominous and then became a taboo.

Without the use of dye, white is the primary colour of many fabrics, such as linen, silk, and cotton. Its plain, unmodified meaning can be taken in regard to funeral clothing, to distinguish it from the bright shades of dyed fabrics. The deep sadness that is caused by the death of a loved one allows no time for dying clothes into various gorgeous hues, rendering their pure form the most suitable. Additionally, Taiwanese scholar believes that the concept of "taking white as filial piety" is based on the "plain" meaning of this colour, as well as the thickness in the warp and weft weaving method (Feng 2012, 76). Much like the materials intertwining with each other, there is a customary rule made here to the relationship between the living and the dead. The closer this relationship is, how close one was with the deceased, means that a higher level of mourning clothing is required, whereas more distant relationship can allow

for less precision in the cloth. Although times have changed, it is still common to find white flowers and clothes at funerals.

Figure 1. A funeral in Yuanjiang, Yunnan (Feng 2012, 79)[3]

The custom of avoiding white clothing most likely derived from later generations showcased impressive dying technologies. Although the origins of Chinese dying were immemorial, the ancients themselves did not often dye clothes due to inexperience with these techniques. Consequently, the custom of avoiding white did not start in ancient times. As weaving and dying technologies were fairly primitive in this time, white, which was easily achieved by rinsing, became a popular colour for the lower class. Princes and the nobility, however, wore different colours, in accordance with their status. They would never wear white as this implied inferiority. As a result, some new words, with this particular meaning of white, were formed. For example, *baiding* 白丁 'white member' refers to common people or uneducated people and

[3] People dressed in white filial piety clothes and white hemp belts on their heads (hemp belts tied around the head or waist). Depicted here is an endless trail of mourners.

baiwu 白屋 'white house' was formed to describe the thatched houses of the poor. Subsequently, white became endowed with humble cultural connotations.

During the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 B.C.), once the etiquette system was completed, plain clothes that were white on both top and bottom became known as mourning clothes. In the first part of the *Book of Rites* it states "a person, whose parents are alive, will not wear *sufu*" (Li 1999a, 31). The meaning of *sufu* 素服 'plain or white clothing' in this passage are deemed as white clothes and white accessories, such as white cap, white headwear etc. As the use of plain, white clothing had this meaning, it was often a sign of death, or that somebody had died. However, white was still worn at this time by ordinary people, so saying that it was strictly prohibited would be an overstatement. Moreover, people would avoid to dress all in white so that not to tempt fate. It can be seen that a taboo mentality had been born.

Associating *sufu* 'plain clothing' with paying one's last respects made this colour become somewhat discriminated against. This, coupled with continuously more sophisticated dying techniques, meant that other colours became more favourable for daily life and, in turn, white became more and more disgusted and avoided. In the Tang and Song Dynasties it became more customary for ordinary people to dislike white and favour other colours. One of the chapters of the History of the Song Dynasty, entitled "Military dress record of Song", describes a situation, where Emperor Xiaozong issued an edict banning white clothing. More specifically, Minister of Rites Wang Yan wrote to the Emperor, asking for a ban on wearing white shirts. A plea to which the Emperor agreed. Consequently, white shirts became known as funeral attire, only permitted to be worn on this sorrowful occasion, and not for everyday life (Tuo 1977, 3578). Significantly, this official prohibition of white coming from such a high ranking individual is most likely what started the taboo on this colour, deeming it as ominous.

There is an extract in the *Qing bi lei chao* [Book of anecdote and trifles from the Qing period] that states "ministers are summoned, introduced, all wearing cyan gowns, blue robes; variegated robes are forbidden, sheepskin is not to be taken, its colour so close to mourning is loathed" (Xu 1916, 63). The meaning of this extract clearly shows the taboo associated with the white colour: when the emperor summoned his courtiers, they had to be wearing either cyan or blue garments. Partly-coloured clothing was not allowed and neither was sheepskin as its colour was too similar to that of the colour of death and mourning – white.

However, during the Wei and Jin Dynasties, worshiping "plain" was the spiritual pursuit of many scholars, so much so that this manifested itself in the appearance of these scholars, and their choice of white silk. During this time, the Imperial Court stipulated that common people and slaves could not wear colours other than green, blue, and white as these colours were considered those of a "cheap person" (Li and Xu 2018, 117). However, this provided an opportunity for rebellion and people would often make these kinds of statements in the colour and style of clothes they wore. Importantly, the implied hierarchy and status of colour is a product of Confucian etiquette (Bao 2022, 2). Every colour had its rightful place in people's lives, so there was no confusion as to what clothes should be worn where and when. Nevertheless, the glory days of Confucianism were gradually over with the fall of the Han Dynasty. During the Wei and Jin Dynasties, there was more of a push for Taoism and Confucianism to exist in harmony. Significantly, Taoism looked at the colour white from a different angle – white is not artificially dyed, therefore coincides with the Taoist pursuit of "returning to nature".

Additionally, there is also a folk custom, where white is not regarded as evil, but rather it is preferred. According to the *Qing bi lei chao*, there are notable customs of white clothing in Hanzhong, Lintong, Huazhou, Weinan, as well as in other places in the Shaanxi Province. Legend has it that this custom originated with people worn mourning for Zhuge Liang, a statesman and strategist of the Three Kingdoms (Xu 1916, 34). Moreover, Mongolian herdsmen also regard white as an auspicious colour and many of their customs still reflect this. White horses, as well as white yurts and white *hadas* (Mongolian ceremonial scarves), are favoured. Nowadays, Chinese people do not dislike white and it is a popular summer colour choice for many different items of clothing. Due to the remaining historical and cultural background, where white is equated to funeral, white thus is still not allowed to appear in traditional Chinese weddings. However, Western influences are equally as strong, as some Chinese brides also choose to wear white wedding dresses.

The vast majority of Chinese people in rural areas still regard a pure white colour as ominous. When women in the country tell stories to the children and intend to build a tense, spooky atmosphere, they often use symbols of white, such as an old man with a white beard, or a man wearing all white. Subsequently, a taboo mentality is reflected. In modern Chinese, the unlucky meaning of white is echoed in many different vocabularies. When *bai* 白 'white' forms part of a word, it automatically takes on a negative, treacherous, even cunning meaning. For example, *bailian* 白脸 'white face' is a symbol of evil

in facial makeup of Peking Opera. *Chang-bailian* 唱白脸 'to sing white face' is used to play the role of the harsh guy or the villain; *baiyanlang* 白眼狼 'white-eyed wolf' refers to an ingrate. Other negative meanings include that of backwardness and reactionaries, such *as baise-kongbu* 白色恐怖 'white terror' and *baise-zhengquan* 白色政权 'the white regime'. Finally, white can also express futility, e.g. *baifei-liqi* 白费力气 'a wasted effort' and *baida* 白搭 'in vain'.

3. ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COLOUR TERM *HEI* 黑 'BLACK'

In the Oracle Bone Inscriptions, there is the following character,  , the frontal image of a person with a large head. Yu Xingwu's interpretation of this character has been widely quoted by scholars such as Tang Lan (1981, 78), Wang Tao (2013, 98), etc. According to Yu's speculations, when this character was used as a colour word, it meant 'black' (Yu 1979, 227–30). Moreover, in the Bronze Inscriptions of the early Zhou Dynasty, the modern Chinese character for black, *hei* 黑, had several variations: , (Rong 1985, 692). Its basic glyph structure is very close to that in the Oracle Bone Inscriptions, but the head is emphasized with the extra small dots. Significantly, some scholars believe that these dots represent ink and that ink further implies the black colour. This character represents the initially positive image of a person whose face was latter tattooed with ink. This shows that the punishment of tattooing had already appeared in the ancients times. When a criminal's face was tattooed and became blackened with ink, it marked a lifelong shame that could never be erased. However, the character 'black' had no ink dots in the Oracle Bones and was not used as a colour word in the Bronze Inscriptions. Therefore, the tattoo explanation is described as a hypothesis.

Xu Shen's explanation of the shape and meaning of this character is as follows: "a colour smoked by fire; the bottom part of the character is *yan* 炎 'flames', and the top part, , is the ancient character for 'window', *chuang* 窻" (Xu 2019, 211). *Chuang* 窻 can be understood as a 'chimney' in this context, as the bottom part of the character interpreted by Xu is composed of flames. As can be imagined, a great fire blazes down, resulting in black smoke discharged from the chimney. However, many modern scholars would disagree with Xu Shen's statement as his explanation is in regards to lesser seal

script, 𐆛, which are composed of the "upper window" and the "lower fires", which does not match the shape of the OBI.

4. TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLOUR BLACK

There is no written record that can tell us how the first Chinese people recognised this character. Today, we use various items that have survived from the ancient times to provide clues as to the etymology of this colour word. As black is not hard to obtain – it can come from burning wood into charcoal, fires resulting in ash, natural mineral graphite, etc. – all the ancient Chinese people had access to it.

Black was very respected in the Xia Dynasty (2070–1600 B.C.), and even more so in the Qin Dynasty (221–207 B.C.), where black flags were held high, accompanied by golden spears and armoured horses. There is a poem in the first part of the *Classics of Poetry* entitled "Airs of the States", that reads the following lines: "How well do the black robes befit you! When worn out, we will make others for you" (Wang 2018, 901–3). As black is easy to dye, as well as durable and practical to wear, it was once a common colour choice for Chinese people to wear. Many people preferred to wear black in ancient times and, in some rural areas, this trend continues to today.

However, just like white, black can also easily remind people of unfortunate events, e.g. death and burials, influenced by the West, ordinary people are thus often hesitant to wear it, especially on festive days, such as marriage, childbirths, new year, and other festivals. On these special occasions, people avoid the colour black for fear of bad luck. As pure black can welcome disaster, such as death, it is said that while wearing black, one should always accessorise with other coloured belts, headscarves, shoes, or socks.

According to the theory of the five elements, black represents north, as well as corresponding to winter, meaning that it symbolises the withering of all living things. Moreover, winter is the last season of the year, the end of a cycle, but yet the beginning of a new cycle, a new year, so black can also portray the continuous transition between life and death. For this reason, black is widely used in ancient Chinese tombs. In the Mawangdui tomb in the capital of the Hunan Province, Changsha, there are four layers of coffins, each decreasing in size, for Xin Zhui, wife to the Marquis of Dai, who was Chancellor of the Changsha Kingdom during the Western Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–9 A.D.) of ancient China. The outermost layer is painted solely black to represent death

and the underworld. Additionally, the second layer is also predominately black, which symbolises that the soul of the body in the grave is entering the underworld (see figure 2). On the black background, gorgeous cloud textures are painted, as well as images of protective deities and auspicious animals among the clouds, which gather the vitality of the soul, in order for it to be reborn. However, black is no longer visible on the third layer of the coffin. Red here dominates as it is a symbol that the soul has entered the immortal world. Consequently, black can be seen as the vehicle, which takes us to eternal life.

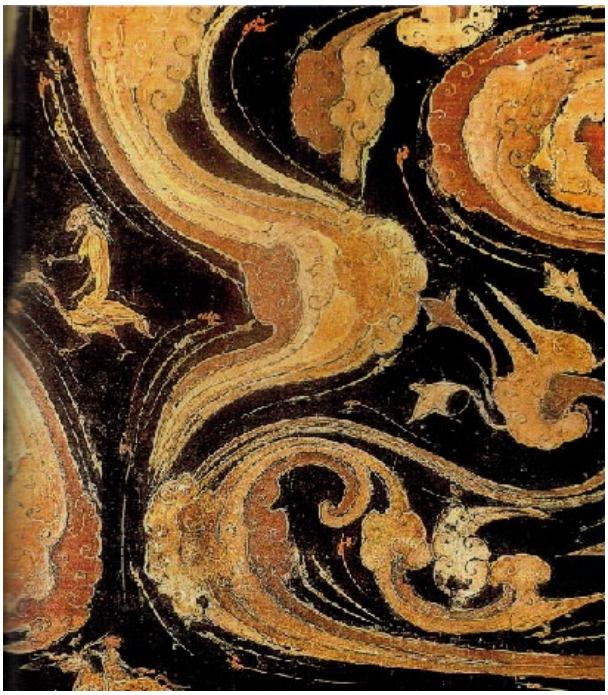

Figure 2. A section of the second layer of Xin Zhui's tomb in Changsha, Hunan (Huang 2012, 91)

In addition, when making shrouds, it is generally seen as taboo to use black materials. When it comes to covering the dead, blue is encouraged, and black is prohibited. Despite its negative undertones, this colour was not officially banned by any imperial court and still remained popular among the people. Furthermore, different regions also view this colour slightly differently.

As the aforementioned taboo is associated with black, its social and cultural semantics are mostly derogatory. In ancient times, there was a theory of "five

punishments", one of which was the above-mentioned ink penalty . Consequently, the term *mohei* 抹黑 'painting black' is used to smear people or matter, therefore making black become a derogatory term. In modern Chinese, the negative meaning of this colour is more prominent. An example comes from the name used to describe the margin of society, gangs that carry out illegal activities – *heishehui* 黑社会 'black society'. Other examples include *heidian* 黑店 'black shop', which refers to inns where money was taken in exchange for murder. Although this word was used in ancient times, it is still used currently to describe deceitful and extortionate shops or hotels. Furthermore, a lot of the derived vocabularies including the character *hei* 黑 'black' express wrongdoing. For example, *heiche* 黑车 'black vehicle', is used to portray those vehicles that do not have a license plate, or those that operate illegally; *heixin* 黑心 'black heart', refers to those ruthless and lacking in conscience; and *heishou* 黑手 'black hand', is used for people who are involved in illicit activities and/or manipulation.

5. ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COLOUR TERM *QING* 青 'CYAN'

As far as the traditional colour qing 青 'cyan' is concerned, Chinese scholars have different opinions about the etymology of this character and the colour it represents. Li Xiaoding (1965) claims that its form was first found in the Shang Inscriptions, written as  , but here, it was never used as a colour term (1739). Unfortunately, he did not come up with convincing enough evidence to support this theory. The book *Ziyuan* [Origin of Chinese characters] holds that the character *qing* 青 first appeared in the Bronze Inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty, written as with four variations: , , , (Li and Zhao 2013, 449). It consists of two parts – *sheng* 生 'to grow' and *jing* 井 'a well'. However, *jing* 'well' in this context most likely refers to a mine. Now, looking at the semantic component sheng 'to grow' of the character, it refers to the grass growing from the ground. Together, this is a comparative metaphor for the minerals being excavated from the mine, which are fresh-green as grass. Additionally, a small dot, or short horizontal line, may be added in the centre of the phonetic component *jing*, which is common variation of this character – or in the Bronze Inscriptions.

Xu Shen mentions in *Shuowen jiezi* [Discussing writings and explaining characters]: "*qing* 青 is the colour of the East; wood feeds fire, and it is formed

by *sheng* 生 ‘to grow’ and *dan* 丹 ‘cinnabar’” (2019, 106). More specifically, since both fire and cinnabar are red, this character, *qing* 青, was formed through the combined ideogram of both these characters, *sheng* and *dan*. Xu’s explanation connects the five elements with the five colours, which can be seen as somewhat too abstract. Furthermore, Xu believes that the lower component of the character *qing* 青 ‘cyan’ is *dan* 丹 ‘cinnabar’, for the following reason: when *qing* 青 was developed into a lesser seal character during the Qin Period, taking the already-mentioned 生 and 丹 as two parts of the form of this character, the result is not too far off the third variation shown above. Furthermore, as part of the Chinese Bronze Inscriptions, the two characters *jing* 井 and *dan* 丹 are similar in shape (appearing as and respectively). It can be said that “the character *dan* 丹 is a corruption of the character *jing* 井” (He 1998, 820–21). Moreover, *qing* is now used as a colour term in literature, but this use of its meaning may not have appeared until the Western Zhou Dynasty. According to the Research of the Institute of Archaeology, in the Bronze Inscriptions of the Spring and Autumn Period, *qing* started to denote colours, for example, *qinglü* 青吕(铝) ‘cyan aluminium’, and *qingjin* 青金 ‘green gold’ (223).

Qing 青, emerged from black category, was interchangeable with the colour term *cang* 苍 ‘dark grey’ or used with the term *you* 幽 ‘black’ during the early stage (Wang 2013, 113). When the classification of colours gradually became more specific, two new colour terms derived from *qing* 青 ‘cyan’ – *lü* 绿 ‘green’ and *lan* 蓝 ‘blue’. It should be mentioned that in pre-Qin literature, the semantics of *qing* 青 were very complicated. According to Qing Shuimao’s (1987, 161–62) interpretation, the literal meanings of this colour may include, but are not limited to, the following: firstly, a reference to the colour green, such as *qingcao* 青草 ‘green grass’; secondly, the colour blue, e.g. *qingtian* 青天 ‘blue sky’; and thirdly, sometimes a reference to the colour black or dark.

Notably, in the *Classic of Poetry*, there are two lines that make reference to *lüzhu-qingqing* 绿竹青青 ‘green bamboo’ and *qi-ye-qingqing* 其叶青青 ‘green leaves’. In both cases, the character *qing* 青 most likely refers to the colour we currently perceive as green as this due to the colour of “bamboo” and “leaves”. Furthermore, in *Explanation of Names* (a late Han dictionary), it stipulates “(the character) *qing* 青, formed by the semantic component *sheng* 生 ‘to grow’, shows the colour of plants when they are growing” (Liu 2016, 62). Therefore, green symbolises the colour of life. During springtime, Earth is rejuvenated, as plants gain a new life and there is a vibrant green present.

However, *qing* 青 can also refer to the colour blue, which is related to indigo colour dyeing. There is a text in Xunzi (an ancient Chinese collection of philosophical writings) that states, "(the colour) *qing*, though is taken from *lan*, is deeper than *lan*". However, *lan* 'blue' here does not refer to a specific colour, but rather to bluegrass, which can later be used to make indigo (a kind of vegetable dye). *Qing* extracted from bluegrass can then be transformed into indigo, a colour which is darker than bluegrass and is a blue that is closer to black.

Due to this, the connections between cyan, blue, and black are not difficult to understand. As similar colours are not easily distinguished, it is easy to confuse them. There are many examples that showcase the use of qing to express the colour black. One chapter of the *Book of Documents*, entitled "Tribute of Great Yu", records "*jue-tu-qingli* 厥土青黎 'its soil is black'", with the commentary "black soil is rich and fertile" (Li 1999b, 153). Furthermore, the poem "*Jiang Jin Jiu*" [Bring in the wine], written by Li Bai, a great poet of the Tang Dynasty, contains the following lines, "*Jun bu jian, gaotang mingjing bei baifa, zhao ru qingsi mu cheng xue* 君不见，高堂明镜悲白发，朝如青丝暮成雪", meaning "Have you not seen, in great halls' white mirrors, they grieve over white hair, at dawn like black threads, by evening becoming snow."[4] Significantly, in the original Chinese version, the black hair was described as *qingsi* 青丝 'cyan silk'. Until modern times, there were many words that contained the character *qing* to describe black – *qingshan* 青衫 'black gown' and *qingyi* 青衣 'black clothing', for example.

6. TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLOUR CYAN

During the Spring and Autumn Period, as well as the Warring States Period, the idea of the five basic colours linked to cardinal points had already formed in the ancient people's minds. *Qing* representing the East not only showed people's understanding of life continuation, but also their respect for nature. It should be remembered that the sun rises in the East. The bright sunlight gives life to all living things. Therefore, the sun is a big symbol of vitality and the source of beautiful things. Consequently, the colour corresponding to the East, *qing*, can be regarded as the ancients longing for beauty and kindness, as well as a token of their relentless pursuit for good character.

[4] This annotated translation is from https://eastasiastudent.net/china/classical/li-bai-jiang-jin-jiu (accessed September 3, 2020).

However, when the colour categorization was better defined, coupled with the continuous improvement of weaving and dying technologies, more colour terms such as *bi* 碧 'bluish green' and *lü* 绿 'green' were distinguished and began being culturally associated with humble beginnings. Rationalistic Confucian Master of the Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi, stated in the *Collection of Commented Classics of Poetry* that "green is the colour in the middle of dark blue and yellow" (Huang 2013, 128). More specifically, the mixed colour of the dark blue sky with that of the yellow earth. Importantly, this colour is not regarded as a pure one, but rather as a secondary and humble one.

Additionally, there is an ancient custom that dates back as far as the Spring and Autumn Period, where humiliation was marked with a green headwear. If a man sold his wife or daughter, he was required to wrap his head in a green width of cloth, so that he was easily, and immediately, distinguished from the noble and humble (Lang 2001, 359–40). Moreover, in the Han Dynasty, *lüze*[5] 绿帻 'green head-covering' was regarded as cheap clothing. As this time, only cooks, butchers, and servants wore *lüze* (Cheng 2003, 430). In the *History of the Former Han Dynasty*, Princess Guantao's[6] paramour, Dong Yan, notably wore *lüze* (Zhou 1985, 79). Therefore, it was commented in ancient times that *lüze* was the clothing of "pariah".

Additionally, wearing a bluish green headcloth was also a method of punishment for insulting prisoners during the Tang Dynasty. In the *Feng's Sketch Book* records, a case of the official, Li Feng, is described (Feng 1936, 120). When Li served as a magistrate in Yanling County, he would have a way of punishing the mistakes of those below him. If he was displeased by the actions of the officials under him, he would not use brute force, but rather a green headwear. Officials who had made a mistake would be publicly humiliated by this wardrobe choice and the length of time they had to wear this headcloth depended on the gravity of their error.

Furthermore, in the Song Dynasty, green headwears were worn by depraved youngers and butchers as butchers were considered as lowly in these times. Notably, in Shen Kuo's *Dream Pool Essays*, that is a fragment that stipulates, "In Suzhou, there is a frustrated man wearing a cyan headcloth made out of

[5] *Jin* 巾 'headcloth' is a form of cap of civilian usage, tied around the head or sometimes the topknot to protect hair. *Jin* with the use of frames can be called *ze* 帻, which is a cylindrical head covering cap with a higher back and low front (Zhou 1985, 79).

[6] Liu Piao, Princess Guantao, is the first daughter of Liu Heng (203–157 B.C.) who was the fifth emperor of the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–8 A.D.).

mixed fabrics under his black gauze cap (worn by feudal officials). The magistrate named Sun Bochun said: 'the headcloth is cyan, so what makes him different from a butcher?'" (Shen 2016, 677–78). Therefore, this shows that wearing cyan, green, or bluish green headcloths during the Tang and Song Dynasties was regarded as shameful and lowly.

During the period of Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, actors, instrumentalists, and even prostitutes had to wear green or cyan clothing as they were regarded as people who engaged in lowly activities. In his *Miscellaneous Notes of the Wanli Era*, Shen Defu holds, "according to the ancestral system, instrumentalists all wear cyan swastika head covering,… but ordinarily, green headwears are used to distinguish them from ordinary people" (Shen 1959, 367). In addition, He Mengchun's *Preface to Yu Dong* says, "entertainers in the *Jiaofangsi*[7] wear green headbands, and do not wear the clothes of other scholars". It can thus be seen that in the Ming Dynasty, entertainers, instrumentalists, and actors obligated to wear "mandatory" green headbands or caps. Finally, according to the *History of Chinese prostitutes*, "The descendants [people who came after the Yuan Dynasty] also called those who prostituted their wives and daughters as 'wearing a green headband' or 'wearing a green hat' – being made a cuckold" (Wang 1935, 248).

It can be seen that *qing* 青 'cyan', *lü* 绿 'green', and *bi* 碧 'bluish green' have become signs of lowliness and a lack of dignity. Moreover, intellectuals, monks, nuns, and the ordinary people all avoided having this colour in any of their clothes; the royal family even more so, where even a similar shade would be considered taboo. According to an anthology of historiographical essay from the whole Qing period, underlinen was originally white, but during the reign of Jiaqing Emperor, the sixth emperor of the Qing Dynasty, the colour of jade as well as oily green colour was preferred; in the early days of ascending the throne and adopting the era, everyone worn jade under linens, almost continuing the righteousness of green robes.[8] His father Qianlong Emperor, despite retirement, retaining ultimate power as the Emperor Emeritus, hated this colour as it was too similar to cyan and ordered for it not to be worn anymore (Xu 1916, 30). Those who wear this colour are labelled as cheap and

[7] *Jiaofangs*i 教坊司, an office of the imperial household, is responsible for the dramatic performances to entertain the emperor.

[8] The origin of the righteousness of the green robe can be traced back to the famous general, Guan Yu, during the Three Kingdoms Period at the end of the Han Dynasty. Due to his fearless, dared to break the law for his brother, he is respected as an epitome of loyalty and righteousness by posterity. As Guan is depicted wearing a green robe over his body armour in the novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, people often associate this garment with morality.

taboo by ordinary people. Furthermore, the prejudice against this colour being regarded as lowly, has existed since ancient times and has been passed down from generation to generation. Notably, it is used specifically to refer to the identity of certain people engaged in lowly occupations. A connection with the human body exists here as often people working these jobs are regarded as "unclean" or "filthy". Therefore, the taboo of lowly colour is the conversion of the prejudice against the humble people.

It should be noted that the use of a green headscarf as a symbol of a wife's adultery only started being used after the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. In accordance with the *Statutes of the Yuan Dynasty*, a collection of edicts on legislative matters from the Yuan Period, prostitutes, as well as parents and male relatives of entertainers, should wear cyan headscarves to reveal their low status (Cheng 2003, 430). Furthermore, due to the similar colours of cyan and green, this decree was stuck until the Ming Dynasty. Later, the integration and farfetched interpretation of the green headscarves and prostitutes' families caused husbands being made victims of adultery lose face and become inferior to others. This folk taboo had carried on until now. In modern Chinese, the *lümaozi* 绿帽子 'a green hat', is still used to express infidelity and the one wearing the green hat has not only been cheated on, but also has to face disgrace and embarrassment. Consequently, it is extremely rare to see people wearing green hats or businesses selling them in China.

CONCLUSION

Although there have been many changes from generation to generation, Chinese characters are the carriers of this culture and their shape cannot be separated from their meaning. The five traditional Chinese colours – *huang* 黄 'yellow', *hong* 红 'red', *bai* 白 'white', *hei* 黑 'black', and *qing* 青 'cyan' – carry meanings that are much deeper than just shade or hue, showcasing an extremely impressive history and culture. Seeing colours as taboo is a part of the Chinese culture. Although most of these cases do not have strict hierarchy boundaries, they influence psychological tendencies and impact the way people view morals – what is good or bad, auspicious or evil, fidelity, an ill omen, etc. Most of these psychological predispositions are greatly influenced by the definition of colour in the feudal ethics system. On one hand, we have colours viewed as noble by the feudal hierarchy and this reflects in auspicious folk

customs. However, some colours were viewed as too auspicious for the common people, even being banned for sole use by the nobility. On the other hand, we have colours that were viewed as lowly, disgraceful by the feudal hierarchy as these were often avoided by the people so not to tempt fate. Despite the hierarchy regarding colours disappeared along with the feudal system itself, yet, the taboos remain in modern society. Not only this, they have been adapted, developed, and enriched to thrive in the modern world we have today. Along with many other modern influences, Chinese colour taboos today are an example of a unique cultural phenomenon.

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