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

## INTRODUCTION

When laying gaze upon the world, every nation, without exception, has their own culture associated with colour. The Chinese nation has a deep understanding of colour and integrates it successfully within their culture. In China, it has grown into a core part of shared knowledge: the nationally recognised "Five Elements" – Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth representing west, east, north, south and centre are usually used to describe white, cyan, black, red and yellow respectively. These five directions, five natural elements along with their corresponding colours, constitute the fundamental factors of the universe in the Chinese tradition. The Chinese are adept in integrating their findings with the Yin-Yang theory, thereby creating a both complete and mature philosophical ideology – the system of five ritual colours.

Colour was used in China as part of "ritual" that help regulate social behaviour. In theory, here there is more of a focus on *Xuanxue*[1] 'Mystic Learning' than on the artistic effect of a given colour. There were many uses of the founded system, from daily guidance in the ways of tradition, through the reinforcement of social order and the setting of norms regarding manners, to the sophisticated ways of interacting with one another, all to such an extent that the system of five colours had over time created a rich history of colour

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[1] *Xuanxue*, sometimes called Neo-Taoism, is a philosophical thought that emerged in the Wei and Jin Dynasties. It is also the research and explanation of *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and the *Book of Changes*.

governance. The system of five colours, as well as the "rule of colour", which assigns specific colour to each of the five natural elements, can be found everywhere in China.

How is it possible for rules to stem from colours? The secret lies in the significance of the ranks and praise with which they were associated. Dating back as far as the reign of Zhou Dynasties, people have believed in the natural origin of five pure colours, and that only by the internal mixing of those one can obtain the so-called "secondary colours" (Guo 2012, 251). Differing from the Western terminology that stresses such concepts as "primary" or "secondary" colours due to their practical application, the difference between five primary and secondary colours in Chinese understanding is related to their implications of being high and low social ranks, good and bad personal qualities or fortune. Based on that principle, the rank of colours was built so that the pure colours were perceived as highly valuable, while the secondary colours were associated with inferiority (Guo 2012, 257).

Along with the fall of the feudal dynasty's[2] rule, the usage of five colour system to distinguish nobles from the poor – a determinant of good fortune – has gradually declined. However, its traces have not yet ceased to exist. The most distinctive one today, one may call it "taboo of colour" in parallel with the change of imperial court, is still present in Chinese mentality, which embodies aspects like people's clothes, the architecture, and folk customs.

Something taboo is deemed sacred, sometimes unclean, and even dangerous (Ren 2012, 57–58). Therefore, people may have certain apprehensions towards the taboo. It is an implicit prohibition of an action based on cultural sense that it is either excessively sacred and consecrated, or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake (Pauls 2020). As one of the long-standing and prevalent Chinese folk customs, the colour taboo is a kind of mysterious cultural and social phenomenon which depends on public self-identity, exists everywhere and influences people's lives. In fact, those inherited colour taboos have become the only both inseparable and unchanged part of the Chinese culture, which in itself is being naturally subject to adaptation over time, as society develops and encounters change-inducing stimuli.

[2] The Qin Dynasty is the first feudal empire and the Qing Dynasty is the last feudal regime in Chinese history.

## AN ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COLOUR TERM *HUANG* 黃 'YELLOW'

The character *huang* 黃 'yellow' is written with several variations in the Shang Oracle Bone Inscriptions (hereafter: OBI):  ,  ,  ,  (Sun 1965, 523), but the pictographic form of all these variations perhaps share a common basic structure, namely a human figure with an abnormal body in frontal view (Tang 1961). Some scholars argue this character probably represents a jade gemstone worn on the chest. Guo Moruo believes that the character originally indicates an archaic jade pendant attached to a silk belt (2016, 174–86).

It, appearing frequently in the Zhou Bronze Inscriptions, is also used as a colour term. The character *huang* 黃 in a common phrase *huang gou* 黃耇 'old people' is understood as the colour of old people's hair (Hao 1983, 23–25). Tang Lan, a paleographer, states:

> The character *huang* 黃, as seen in the Bronze Inscriptions, depicts a human with a swollen abdomen facing the sky. It is an ideogrammic compound that perhaps represents the skin colour of a patient suffering from bulging abdomen. At the time, a man's stomach infected with parasites could lead to an obstinate illness accompanied by such symptoms as ascites and jaundice which could make one's skin appear wax-like yellow. The skin of people suffering from jaundice became a symbol of the colour yellow in the Shang period. (Gu 2012, 57)

The statement *tian di er xuan huang* 天地而玄黃 'sky is dark and ground is yellow' in Kun trigram of the *Book of Changes* is the oldest known document describing the colour of the ground as yellow. Afterwards, the sixth chapter, entitled "Tribute of Yu" of the ancient Chinese literature *Book of Documents*, explicitly records the ground's yellow colour: "[Yong State] is completely covered with yellow soil" (Li 1999b, 156). The exact of location of the mentioned Yong State is a matter of debate, but this term generally refers to the Loess Plateau (*Huangtu Gaoyuan* 黃土高原, lit. 'Yellow Earth Plateau') today in the northern Shaanxi Province whose characteristics correspond with the description of *huangtu* 黃土 'yellow soil'. According to the ancient Chinese dictionary Shuowen Jiezi (Discussing writings and explaining characters), Xu Shen gave an explanation of the form and meaning of the character *huang* 黃: "yellow, the colour of earth; derived from semantic *tian* 田 'fields' and phonetic *yin* 炗", with 炗 being the ancient form of *guang* 光 'light'. The excerpt describes yellow as the colour of the fields illuminated by rays of light (2019, 291).

It is difficult to determine what shade of yellow the character *huang* 黃 referred to throughout history. In terms of various explanations left by the ancient people of China, it is, however, possible to establish that the primal shade of yellow was more similar to ochre colour rather than pure bright tint associated with yellow in contemporary times. The majority of the main areas where yellow loess soil can be spotted in China

is located in the valley of the Yellow River, mostly in Shaanxi, Shanxi and Henan provinces. These regions were the cradles of Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties as well as the birthplaces where the authors of handed-down documents lived. Following the accumulation of colour discrimination, Chinese ancestors decided to mark yellow as the standard colour of soil.

## TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLOUR YELLOW

Chinese people had already developed a sense of great pride in the early civilization since the Shang Dynasty. They perceived all their neighbours as uncivilized barbarians and considered their yellow loess soil to be located in the central position, as well as their political and cultural statuses to greatly exceed ones of the people surrounding them. They thus created the concept of the "centre" to complement north, east, south and west and conceived the concept of five cardinal points in the late Shang Dynasty (Jiang 2012, 24).

Only then, the concept of five cardinal points provided a reference coordinate for the perception of colours in China. The third chapter, entitled "Offices of Spring", in the *Rites of Zhou*, one of three ancient ritual texts listed among the classics of Confucianism, records the oldest known passage regarding the connection between colours and cardinal points:

> Making six jade utensils to ceremony the Heaven and Earth and four cardinal points, by black *bi* the rites of the Heavens, by yellow *cong* the rites of the Earth, by cyan *gui* the rites of the East, by red *zhang* the rites of the South, by white *hu* the rites of the West, by black *huang* the rites of the North. (Li 1999c, 477–79)

The six jade artefacts, *bi*, *cong*, *gui*, *zhang*, *hu*, *huang* were chosen as ritual vessels for the most important rites. The jade *cong* with yellow colour functioned as an object dedicated to the earth. It can be seen that the original Chinese perception of colour was not only connected to space, but also started to be linked with the system of rites as well as the social order. Marking directions and social ranks as superior or subordinate extended to an equivalent ranking of colours.

The concept of five cardinal points started spreading by the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Ancient people made specific connections between the ideas of five elements, five colours and five cardinal points, deeming the centre as corresponding to earth. The fourth section "Reply on the Five Elements" of the work *Chunqiu Fan Lu* (Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals), attributed to Dong Zhongshu, a major Confucian scholar from the Western Han Dynasty period, presents:

> Earth resides in the centre to embellish the Heavens. Earth is Heavens' trusted aide. Its virtues and vibrant beauty are not to be named. Metal, Wood, Water, Fire, even though all have their duties, could not stand on its own without Earth,… Earth is the foundation of the Five Elements. (2012, 406–9)

Dong considered the Earth to be the core of the Five Elements. Without Earth in the centre, the four remaining cardinal points, both in the sky and on the ground, would not have any significance.

Yellow, because of its connection to the soil, became the symbol of the centre – the colour of the imperial power. It possesses the most sublime position in Chinese traditional culture, being the colour used by emperors in five dynasties – Sui, Tang, Song, Ming and Qing. Yellow represents the greatest political power and status, legitimacy, dignity and solemnity.

Yellow robes were reserved for the emperor and common people were forbidden to wear yellow clothing, which most probably originated in the Sui Dynasty (Gao and Meng 2012, 257). According to the Ke Ye Cong Shu (Series of sketches and anecdotes), Emperor Gaozu of Tang, the founding emperor of the Tang Dynasty, imitated this Sui Dynasty clothing system, often wearing yellow robes and therefore, distinguishing himself from the common people, which marked the beginning of this prohibition of yellow wear for commoners (Wang 1987, 86). The emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty is the first emperor to be depicted wearing yellow robes in ancient paintings (see figure 1). From the Tang era onwards, yellow clothing served as the emperor's court apparel. According to the records of the chapter, entitled "Proceedings of Government in the Different Months" of the *Book of Rites*, yellow robes were initially worn only when offering sacrifices to ancestors, not being used on a daily basis. Making offerings to ancestors, the emperor had to "wear yellow clothing, ride a yellow horse, wear topaz-encrusted accessories, eat yellow millet, raise a yellow banner" (Li 1999a, 518). Yellow could be seen everywhere. This form of the royal offering ceremony lasted intact up until the Qing Dynasty period.

Figure 1. Portrait of Emperor Taizong of Tang (628–907) in Dragon Robe (Zhao 2012, 28)

Emperors of the Tang Dynasty, in order to emphasize the fact that they wore yellow every day, forbade common people from wearing or using this colour. Monarchs from the subsequent dynasties, after "seizing" the right to wear yellow, further strengthened its special position. In his work, an "unofficial" history of the Qing Dynasty, *Qing Bi Lei Chao* (Book of anecdote and trifles from the Qing period), Xu Ke states: "only the emperors can wear bright yellow; crown princes may wear reddish apricot while other princes may only wear golden yellow which is less bright; dukes cannot wear yellow except for being bestowed by emperors." During the Qing Dynasty reign, the crown prince, heir to the imperial power, had to follow regulations stating that he could only wear clothing of slightly reddish apricot yellow colour. Other princes must have stuck to brownish golden yellow.

Even though all these colours can be referred to as "yellow", their hue details varied, reminding of rank differences between relatives. It also reinforced the prohibition of the usage of yellow by the common folk who would be viewed as "attempting rebellion" and "dreaming about seizing the throne" had they worn clothes of such colour. Yellow, one of the five fundamental colours, disappeared from people's lives. During the military revolt

of 960 at Chenqiao that led Zhao Kuangyin[3] to found the Song Dynasty, the mutineers forcibly draped a yellow robe of the emperor over Zhao (see figure 2), sending the strong message that he was now Emperor. Idiomatic expression *huang-pao-jia-shen* 黄袍加身 'to take the yellow gown' signifies becoming the emperor.

Figure 2. 20th-century illustration of Zhao Kuangyin being proclaimed emperor by the army (Hutchinson 1915, 64)

The gates of the Imperial Palace, painted yellow during the Qin and Han Dynasties, are today known as *huangmen* 黄门 'yellow gate'. Furthermore, the Forbidden City and Imperial Ancestral Temple, as well as other royal building constructed during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, all had yellow roofs. The decrees issued by the Emperor were also written on yellow paper and gained the name, *huangbang* 黄榜 'yellow announcements'. Using yellow, common people would be perceived as plotting a rebellion against the state. Notably, if a peasant uprising wanted to seize power, part of this uprising was

[3] Zhao Kuangyin (927–976 A.D.), also known by his temple name Taizu, was the founding emperor of Imperial China's Song Dynasty.

putting up an apricot-yellow banner or wearing yellow scards on the revolutionaries' heads, which would then signal to the masses that revolt was on the way. For example, in *Water Margin*, one of the earliest Chinese novels written in vernacular Mandarin, the hall in the Liang mountains, where the volunteers of the army gathered, had a yellow banner hanging from the ceiling, hinting at their status of rebels.

Due to the noble nature of some colours and the fact that, in ancient China, colour could indicate the status of the one who wears it, certain colours were prohibited to be worn by the townspeople. Therefore, the taboo of noble colours on items of clothing is essentially a living metamorphosis of the taboo of authority figures. A ordinary person's hesitance to clothe themselves in noble colours comes from the fear that this action will make them come into contact with the "taboo body" of people hierarchically above them. In other words, the very colour of clothing can not only be regarded as taboo, but also the barrier, or insulator, between the human body and coming into contact with something taboo.

The history changes things and the 1911 Revolution marked a great changed for China's feudal society. The dynasty system completely collapsed and, with it, the status of yellow as a noble, lofty, and dignified colour. Taking into consideration thousands of years of admiration and respect towards the colour yellow, what is the most inconceivable is its sudden fall from grace within one hundred years, resulting in yellow becoming one of the symbols of pornography. The character *huang* 黄 'yellow' had no obscene implications in the ancient Chinese language and its negative connotations were imported from abroad.

At the end of the 19th century, *New York World* for the sake of selling newspaper, and latter *New York Journal* competed for readers intensely, posing vulgar comics content to which "The Yellow Kid" is one of them. These two newspapers that ran the Yellow Kid, quickly became known as yellow papers. The yellow kid journalism was also shortened to the term "yellow journalism", describing exaggerated, scandal-mongering, or sensationalism news events, even the stories with topics like crime, sex or violence (Biagi 2011, 57–59). In 1924, a special article in the Chinese newspaper *Guowen Zhoubao* introduced American press, clearly defining the extension of "yellow journalism" as "nothing more than assassinations, robberies, divorces, and illicit sexual relations" (Huang and Chen 2010, 87). The connotations of yellow initially imported is still relatively close to the original text, of which pornography is only one of the derived meanings of yellow journalism. Huang and Chen claim that the link between yellow and obscenity was established in the mid to late 1940s (89). Since then, the colour yellow is associated with erotic and vulgar things. That is to say, in modern Chinese, the cultural connotation of *huang* 黄 'yellow', has been influenced by Western languages and, in turn, has become a derogatory term. This change has been influencing Chinese people's perception of yellow up to present times.

Yellow in medieval Europe implied betrayal. The Spanish Inquisition of the 16th century, when penalizing heretics, first put yellow garments on the person about to be punished and only then proceeded with tortures. In contemporary France, the doors of the houses of people who committed felonies were smeared with yellow paint, marking their guilt. In English, the colour yellow indicates cowardice and despicableness, e.g. *yellow-bellied* 'not brave and easily frightened' and the phrase *yellow dog* 'a contemptible or cowardly person', while the French *sourire jaune* 'yellow smile' refer to restrained, self-conscious smiles.

Beginning of the 20th century, the time of great humiliation at the hands of the great powers, is also a point in time when a group of idealist, especially sensitive to the usage of words such as *huang* 黄 'yellow' or *huangse* 黄色 'yellow colour', gave rise to resistance against Western negative connotations of yellow. It was exceptionally visible in the case of those revolutionists who derived their roots from *Huangdi* 黄帝 'Yellow Emperor'[4] and often decided to use the character *huang* 黄 as their name, emphasizing one's affiliation with the Han people, strengthening national and racial self-esteem. This group includes such people as Huang Zhen who changed his name to Huang Xing (*xing* 兴 meaning 'prosperity'), as well as Chen Tianhua, an outstanding publicist of the social revolutionist faction of the late Qing Dynasty, whose pen name was Si Huang (*sihuang* 思黄 meaning 'longing for the colour yellow').

The exchange of Western and Chinese cultures brought about by the 1911 Revolution, introduced the connotation of yellow – 'vulgar' and 'low-level' in Western context to China. Additionally, in the writings of some journalists, this extended to mean 'pornography'. Yellow's implications of obscenity were established in the late forties. The expression "to sweep yellow away" (*saohuang* 扫黄, fig. 'to campaign against pornography') appeared for the first time in Li Zhaolian's *Discussing Yellow in Culture* in 1948. The aforementioned phrase was used twice in the text, calling for "cultural circles to expand on their goals of sweeping away yellow".

Importantly, after the founding of the New China in 1949, the pornographic meaning of the colour term *huang* 黄'yellow' became more prominent. In *Discussing Yellow Culture*, published by an essayist Nie Gannu in 1950, the yellow culture was described as follows: "Pornographic literature, crude movies, obscene photographs and drawings, news stories and remarks toying with women etc.… Its content is a glorification of animal

[4] Yellow Emperor is an ancient legendary figure, the head of the Five Emperors in the *Records of the Historian*. At present, the earliest handed down literature on the Yellow Emperor comes from the Bronze Inscriptions during the middle of the Warring States Period. After the Han Dynasty, most Chinese emperors set up temples and mausoleums for the Yellow Emperor to confirm the legitimacy of their rule. As can be seen, the Yellow Emperor is regarded as an important symbol of Chinese culture and the ancestor of the Huaxia people.

instincts, glorification of senses, glorification of physicality" (1981, 560-63). Government decree of 1956 on rectifying the situation of book renting stalls and book collections specifically used such expressions as *huangse shukan* 黄色书刊 'yellow publications' and *huangse huace* 黄色画册 'yellow picture albums' referring to pornographic works. As time passed, the popular usage ingrained the new implications in the language, sinking the "colour yellow", and making it taboo.

## ETYMOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COLOUR TERM *CHI* 赤 'RED', *ZHU* 朱 'VERMILLION' AND *DAN* 丹 'CINNABAR'

The character *chi* 赤 'red' is written in OBI as  (Sun 1965, 417). It consists of two pictorial elements: a frontal view of a human figure and a second element representing fire. As the writing system developed, the two elements were later stylized as *da* 大 'big' and *huo* 火 'fire', both standing as independent characters. Therefore, the colour red is associated – via fire – with heating. It is not difficult to imagine that the fire with which ancient people used to repel wild animals, keep themselves warm and prepare food became an object of worship and, subsequently, revered as a deity. The worship of fire in China was also developed and handed down in accordance with this cultural chain. According to Chinese legends, Zhurong and Ebo were the earliest recorded gods of fire, which was noted by Ban Gu (32–92 A.D.) in one of the chapters entitled "Treatise on the Five Elements" of *Book of Han* – the times of Emperor Ku had Zhurong and the times of Emperor Yao had Ebo. People recall their virtues with great admiration, offer sacrifices to them to honor the Divine Ancestors of Fire (1962, 1325).

Even to this day, numerous ethnic groups have retained traditions related to the worship of "Fire God". The "Kitchen God Festival", also known as "Little New Year", celebrated on the twenty-third day of the twelfth Chinese lunar month in northern China, and on the twenty-fourth in southern China, honours Zao Jun, the Kitchen God as well as the Fire God in Chinese folklore.

In addition to the character *chi* 赤 'red', in ancient Chinese vocabulary, many other words that expressed a red hue were present. For example, *zhu* 朱 'vermillion', and *dan* 丹 'cinnabar'. The character *zhu* 朱 derives from *mu* 木 'wood', the literal meaning of which is a proper name of trees with red wood heart (Xu 2019, 1118). Guo Moruo explains the character as follows: "*zhu* 朱 is the simplified form of *zhu* 株.… The derivation of *zhu* 朱 (written as  in OBI) is marked by a dot lying in the centre of *mu* 木 (written as  in OBI), therefore it is a brilliant example of an ideogram" (470). The ancient Chinese people also treated the shade of *zhu* as similar to *chi*, viewing it as a pure colour. According to the traditional Chinese perception of colours, *zhu* was a shade of red darker

than *chi*. In the *Book of Rites*, a statement with a comment records: "lighter colour is *chi*, darker is *zhu*" (Li 1999a, 493).

Found in the oracle bone inscriptions, *dan* 丹 'cinnabar' (written as 𠂤 in OBI), is an associative compound character. Looking at this character closely, the outer framer resembles a mine shaft, and the horizontal line in the middle symbolises the cinnabar which is found in the mine. Additionally, *Shuowen Jiezi* (Discussing writings and explaining characters), the original Han Dynasty Chinese Character Dictionary, records that "*dan* 丹 is a red stone in the Ba Ria and South Vietnam region" (Xu 2019, 106). Since cinnabar is a red ore, the meaning of this character also extends to mean 'red' or 'painted with red'. Overall, *dan* 丹 is the colour of cinnabar, meaning it is a bright red that is substantially lighter than other shades of red.

## TABOOS ASSOCIATED WITH THE COLOUR RED

According to "Annals of the Five Emperors" of *Shiji* (Records of the grand historian), the Yan Emperor Shennong, also called the Flame Emperor, preferred red, and then the dynasties of Zhou, Han, Sui, etc., all adopted the dynastic element of fire and ruled under the power of red (Guo 255). Red was also used in costumes, banners, architectures etc. to express respect during those dynasties. According to one of chapters, entitled "Proceedings of government in the different months" of the *Book of Rites*, in the first month of summer, the Son of Heaven "drove vermillion carriages, rode red horses, bore red banners, and wore vermillion clothes with red jades as accessories" (Li 1999a, 499–500, 508–9). Therefore, *chi* 'red' and *zhu* 'vermillion', regarded as one of the five traditional colours in ancient China, gained an orthodox status in politics and established a noble and insurmountable status in Chinese ancient concept of colours. It became the symbol of respect, power and dignity.

The use of red by rulers gave expression to their rights. Significantly, the emperors claimed that there was a "Book of Heaven" (*tianshu* 天书) in the world that this book was written with a *dan* pen, giving this book a second name – the "Book of Dan" (*danshu* 丹书) (Xin 2004). This book written in the *dan* colour was only meant to be read by the royal family, and was not meant to be touched by commoners. Moreover, the memorials to the throne with comments or remarks and other official documents written by emperors in red with brush were referred to as *zhupi* 朱批 'vermillion rescript' (see figure 3) and *zhuwen* 朱文 'vermillion document' respectively. Therefore, no one apart from the emperor was allowed to use red to write instructions.

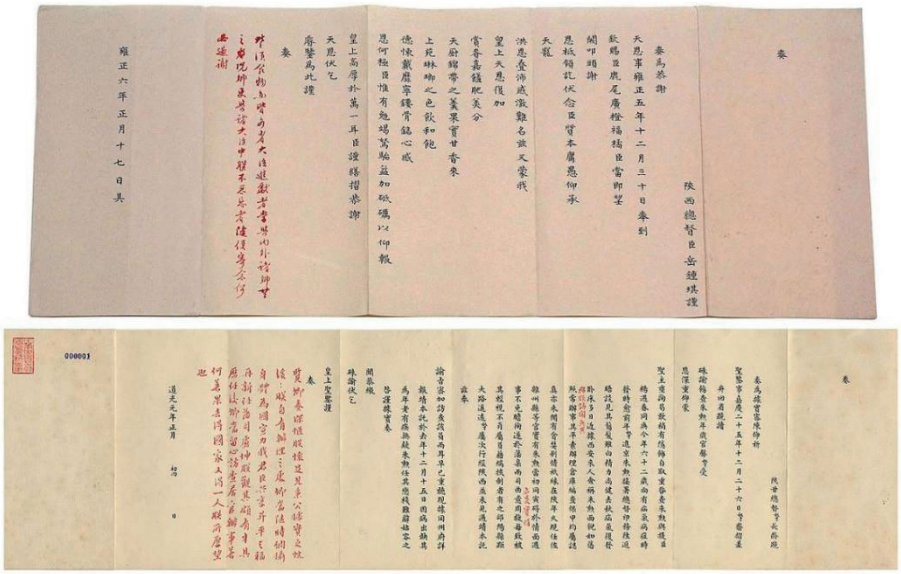

Figure 3. An official communication to the palace with a red inked response from the Manchu Emperor (National Palace Museum, https://theme.npm.edu.tw/exh109/QingDocuments02/ch/page-4.html)

Red is usually a lucky colour of jubilant nature. It is often used in celebrations of such festive opportunities as weddings, giving birth to children and the coming of the New Year. This colour is, however, also identical to the colour of blood and can serve as its symbol as well. It is the source of life and a point to which the soul is attached and where it dwells. During the period when people used to eat raw meat and drink blood, primitive tribes might know the source of connection between colour red and life – the inseparable relation with blood when they saw birth with and death from blood loss. Moreover, Chinese archaeologists stated that the caveman who scattered hematite powder next to the bodies of the deceased so that the dead could be reborn, there is a significant number of traces of the colour red left in numerous tombs (Ma 2000, 15–16). The best preserved of the Shang dynasty royal tombs unearthed at Yin (the capital of the Shang Dynasty) is the Tomb of Fu Hao, which was discovered in 1976 by Zheng Zhenxiang and has been dated to 1250 B.C. Many of the remaining funerary wares, made of wood, horn or bone, were clearly smeared with bright red paint (see figure 4). Gao and Meng point out the purpose of its usage in this case is not only to make the wares rotproof, but more importantly to serve as a symbol of monarchs' everlasting existence in the nether world (2012, 345). The Shang nobility who hoped that their life could continue after death caused people to mark dead bodies with red tattoos, especially in the chest area

where red decorative patterns were painted. It was a primitive ceremony of consecration consisting of summoning one's soul and prolonging its existence.

Figure 4. Tomb of Lady Fu Hao (photo by Chris Gyford, Wikipedia, https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tomb_Fu_Hao_YinXu.jpg)

Red originated from blood's vital force, making it indispensable to appear in the eternal dream of monarchs, aristocrats, as well as ordinary people. However, blood did not only give birth to life, it also foreshadowed death. Yin and Xu point out two functions of blood:

> They (ancient people) considered blood to be the essence of a human being, at the same time it was said to have a certain magical power. Therefore, blood worship was manifested in two aspects: on the one hand blood was thought to have the power to protect against evil and ward off the ominous, on the other hand it was considered to summon evil spirits and it had the function of urging people to cause evil. (1991, 475)

These two aspects of blood inevitably caused red to become a colour perceived as a taboo by the Chinese. As a result, red was fully respected and admired, whereas it also evoked fear and was avoided by people.

In specific circumstances, red expresses its ferocious nature. Being of the same as the blood's colouring, it can easily incite fear of bloodshed and suffering harm. It is therefore forbidden to wear red attire during funerary activities not to offend demons and spirits. Moreover, due to the colour red's association with *yang*, stemming from it being considered the colour of the sun, in the Shiming (Explanation of names), it states "*chi* 赤, as well as *he* 赫 'red' are the colour of the sun" (Liu 2016, 62). Its similarities to the colour of the sun, with black representing *yin*, wearing red clothes might cause imbalance in the *yin-yang* relation what would be unfavourable for the deceased. An emperor's demise in the ancient times resulted in all the people being banned from wearing red apparels. One of the old comedic stories, ridiculing the prohibition of red clothing after an emperor's death, mentions a person who used blue ink to dye his red nose. It is apparent that the funerary ban on red was treated seriously.

A saying from ancient times states that white is "auspicious for unfortunate events, unfortunate for auspicious events", whereas red was deemed as "lucky for auspicious events, unfortunate for unfortunate events" (Ren 2012, 609–10). It should be noted that these both colours correspond to each other well and express the following: white simultaneously opposes luck and misfortune, while red aligns with these ideas. This is also one of the anecdotes regarding colour taboos present among the people of China.

Up to now, in many primitive beliefs and witchcraft, red serves as a sign of punishment and taboo. According to one type of witchcraft, referred to as "homeopathic witchcraft" or "imitative witchcraft", all similar objects are of the same kind and they have identical functions (Frazer 1925, 12–15). For this reason, when practicing witchcraft, a subject similar to the other one or its substitute is used in order to achieve a given aim. Red is the colour of blood. Due to its resemblance, red serves as the best representation of blood. Therefore, the colour red is regarded as a symbol of witchcraft rituals. It is used to practice spirit-related witchcraft, which led to the extension of the meaning of red to taboo (Men and Tang 2010, 95).

Since ancient times, Chinese people followed the custom of *shaxue-weimeng* 歃血为盟 'smearing blood to make vows' which made use of the attribute of red taboo. People strongly believed that drinking a person's blood when making a pledge will assure that once breaking the vow this person will be strictly punished by mystical power. Afterwards, *shaxue-weimeng* well evolved into drinking animals' blood or smearing it around lips for expressing a solemn promise from two parties when they swore to form an alliance in front of the Heavens (Gao and Meng 2012, 345). Zhan Yinxin, a Chinese cultural history expert, in his book *Xinzhi De Wuqu: Wushu Yu Yushu Wenhua* (Misunderstanding of mind: Witchcraft and culture of Chinese witchcraft), interprets the behaviour related to witchcraft that parties connected together by means of drinking blood, which played a role in providing them with mystical way of interaction (2001, 375). This act

emphasized that if one party breaks one's promise, she/he will suffer inevitable punishment declared by the vows.

A common custom *kanxue-jiashu* 坎血家书, an ancient 'burying blood and script' ritual, associated with taking an oath, which dates from the Spring and Autumn Period, means using the blood of a slaughtered animal to smear on a signed oath, and later burying the document in a pit (Si 2012, 48). Subsequently, red became an abstract representation of blood and was sufficient to produce the same effect as blood by itself. Numerous oaths inscribed in jade unearthed in Houma, also known as Xintian in ancient time, the capital of the state of Jin from 585 BC to 376 BC, show both the importance and role of red in ancient treaties of alliance. On the whole, all of the texts related to oaths were written in vermillion. In comparison, texts related to divination rituals were written in black.

Figure 5. Oath inscribed on jade[5] (Zeng 2017)

Moreover, seals used by the Chinese are often red as well. "Sealing a document is synonymous to believing in its validity," as we read in an explanation regarding a seal found in the dictionary of the Han dynasty, *Shiming* (Explanation of names), it can be seen that a decision to use red was made just because of the fact, that initially seals were used to express one's faith in a given agreement (Liu 1959, 96). Furthermore, in Mandarin,

[5] It was unearthed in Houma, Shanxi Province, where enormous numbers of historical relics were excavated, provided the best evidence for faith in pledges written in red.

words such as: *chixin* 赤心 literally 'red heart' standing for 'sincere heart', *chicheng* 赤城 'absolutely sincere', *danxin* 丹心 'cinnabar heart' referring to a 'loyal heart' and other words describing people's loyalty and faithfulness, were traced into the red representing faith. More intriguing is the fact that most of them emerged during the turbulent times of war and social turmoil in the last years of the Eastern Han Dynasty. It is probable that in the state of chaos establishing mutual faith seemed particularly important.

In ancient China, women's menstruation was always considered by people as "dirty". One of the chapters in *Shiming* (Explanation of names) indicates *yi dan tumian* 以丹涂面 'painting the face red' to show married women applying a red dye on their faces during menstruation because they could not have sexual intercourse and were too shy to speak about this topic (Liu 1959, 76). Furthermore, in ancient times, the wives and concubines of the emperors and princes lived in groups. If any of these women started menstruation, red dots were painted on their faces, signalling to the emperors and princes that they needed to wait a few days before having sexual intercourse (Wang 1993, 150). This common practice became the origin of painting a red dot between eyebrows by women, in which red implied taboo. Later generations further developed and carried on the meaning of *yi dan tumian*. For instance, after getting vaccinated, the place on arm used for injection was covered with a small piece of red cloth to signify, that it is a forbidden zone; brides' red veils were not to be casually uncovered and so on.

Red was also a force capable of destroying everything in ancient China. Tibetans believed that red carried a symbolic meaning of "massacre". Soldiers going out to battle wore red war robes and applied red dye to their faces in order to increase their grandeur and show brutal intentions (Men and Tang 2010, 95). There was a phrase *chidi-qianli* 赤地千里 literally 'a thousand miles of red land' in ancient times, which described a scene of utter desolation after drought, wars, pests etc. Here, *chi* 'red' stands for bare, exhausted and none. Furthermore, extremely poor families were referred to as *chipin* 赤贫 'in abject poverty', or *chiqiong* 赤穷 'extremely poor'; the word *chishou* 赤手 'red hand' was synonymous to the adjective 'unarmed'; *chi-zu* 赤族 'red clan' was yet another way of saying 'to murder the whole family'. Therefore, red was used by rulers as a colour denoting punishment in ancient China.

Gao and Meng (2012) point out that experts carrying out textual research came to conclusion, that *chi* was a kind of punishment. In remote ages, during a famine, it was a custom of burning wizards (347). According to the record from OBI, when vast stretches of land were devastated and people suffered starvation during extreme droughts, wizards with superhuman abilities were held accountable for the unfortunate events. Eventually, wizards were burnt as an offering to Heaven during a special ceremony, with the purpose of praying for rainfall. *Chi* as a form of punishment was originally associated with the

practice of burning wizards in order to beg Heaven for rain, but later a red whip was used as a replacement.

In a folk legend, King of Hell used a cinnabar brush in his notebook of life and death. Names crossed out by him with the brush implied that those people were sentenced to death. Additionally, there is an ancient superstition that speculates that writing in red is an ill omen (*danshu-buxiang* 丹书不祥 'the cinnabar brush is ominous'). This superstition traces back to the death penalty in ancient China, where anyone sentenced to death would have marked with chicken blood on judgment. As this later evolved to writing with cinnabar and red ink, writing in this colour is seen as a bad sign. When the *Yamen* (a government office in feudal China) recorded the names of criminals, they did so with red letters. Moreover, during the execution, the supervisor and executioner would also draw an additional stroke onto the name with a red brush. Once this final stroke was finished, the person would be sentenced to death.

Figure 6. A death row prisoner signing his name with a red brush before being executed (Lu 2018)

As a result, *chi* was often closely related to punishment in later generations. Registers of criminals were prepared with the use of a red writing brush. Therefore, red pens were completely avoided when writing letters. Chinese people were even more wary when accepting objects with letters written in red which implied the end or severing off a relationship. Red was regarded by ancient rulers as a colour of punishment and served the function of maintaining the rule of dynasties. Until today, a prisoner sentenced to death has a red cross written on his or her name badge on the chest after the verdict. On the more negative side, obituaries are traditionally written in red ink, and to write

someone's name in red signals either cutting them out of one's life, or that they have died (Peterson 2000, 148).

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

Summary

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 PIERWSZA)

Streszczenie

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 ściśle określone, 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 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:** Chińskie podstawowe terminy określające kolory; analiza etymologiczna; inskrypcje z kości wyroczni; tabu związane z kolorami; znaczenia symboliczne