

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF BLACK IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE COLORS

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ABSTRACT

Color did not initially carry symbolic significance but gradually gained meaning through human activities and the evolution of consciousness. In the earliest stages, people divided the world's colors into two basic categories: black and white. As their understanding of color deepened, more hues were recognized. Few civilizations have been as deeply shaped by the symbolism of color in politics, economics, and cultural life as China. This article focuses on the significant and unique role of black in China's cultural systems. As one of the 'Five Colors' in the traditional Chinese color system, black embodies a variety of symbolic meanings. This paper seeks to explore how the Chinese have historically used and interpreted black, examining its symbolism and evolution within a historical context, with particular emphasis on its role in traditional Chinese colors.

Keywords: Black, Traditional Chinese Colors, Symbolism, Lacquerware

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between color and culture is deeply intertwined. Initially, colors existed purely in the natural world, but over time, they permeated history and society, evolving into symbols imbued with meaning. From a modern scientific perspective, the perception of color is influenced by the physiological characteristics of the visual system, which also affects the way colors are named (Li, Q 2022).

With a history spanning five millennia, Chinese civilization has profoundly shaped the perception of color among its people. Understanding color within Chinese culture requires a historical approach, integrating color research with ancient Chinese philosophical thought.

In the primitive era, early humans used color instinctively rather than artistically. Artifacts from this time show that color usage was simple yet intense, reflecting early human consciousness. These primitive color choices were linked to themes of survival, reproduction, and belief, carrying strong emotional and symbolic weight while remaining free from rational constraints. These early perceptions of color formed the most basic symbolic memory for individuals.

Archaeological evidence, such as the use of red ochre powder in burial rituals during the Paleolithic era, suggests that the use of color may have held religious or shamanistic significance. By the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, societal developments led to a more systematic understanding of color, influenced by the philosophies of Confucianism and Daoism. Over time, the Chinese associated the elements of life with the "Five Elements" and "Five Colors," forming a unique perspective on color.

The earliest recorded mention of the "Five Colors" appears in the historical text *Zhouli*, which states, "The matters related to painting involve the mixture of the five colors." Archaeological findings, such as the discovery of four-color painted silk curtains from the tomb of the Yin people in Luoyang, further support this notion. The concept of the Five Colors—blue, red, yellow, white, and black—took shape during the Western Zhou period, predating the Western idea of "seven colors" and "three primary colors" by over a thousand years.

Traditional Chinese colors are deeply rooted in "conceptual morphology," and any study of these colors must return to the classical Five Colors and

explore their symbolic meanings within Chinese culture.

Among the earliest colors perceived by humans were black and white, which stand at opposite ends of the spectrum. Black, in particular, has played a crucial role in Chinese history, dating back to the Neolithic period when early pottery was decorated with red and black patterns. Archaeological discoveries from the Yellow River basin reveal intricate black-striped pottery fragments from this era. In the Shang Dynasty, black was commonly used in engraving inscriptions on tortoise shells and bones, filled with black and red powdered substances (Chen, LuNan, 2014).

This article explores the significant and distinctive position of black within the Chinese cultural system, as it is one of the "Five Colors" in traditional Chinese color theory. It examines the symbolic significance of black, its evolution throughout history, and its use within the context of traditional Chinese colors.

From the Perspective of Written Language
 The *Shuowen Jiezi*, in its section on black, states: "Black is the color produced by the influence of fire. It derives from the character '炎' (flames) over a window," indicating traces left by fire. In oracle bone script, black is associated with sacrificial offerings, such as black oxen, sheep, horses, and pigs. Divinatory inscriptions also link black with weather predictions, such as "black sheep, there will be heavy rain" (Guo Jingyun, 2010).

In ancient Chinese color perception, black represented the primordial dark and lifeless world. In the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), black is considered the color of the heavens. The northern sky's persistent black hue led the Chinese to associate black with the north, and since the North Star was believed to mark the position of the Heavenly Emperor, black became the principal color in ancient China. During eras when monochromatic reverence was prominent, black held a dominant position longer than any other color in Chinese history.

From the Perspective of Daily Life

During the pre-Qin period, black did not carry the modern associations with death and mourning. Instead, it held auspicious significance, especially during important ceremonial events. For example, in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (*Season of Winter Record*), it is

noted: "In the month of Jidong, the Son of Heaven resides in the Xuantang (Dark Chamber), rides the Xuanhan (Dark Chariot), drives the Fijian (Iron Chariot), is transported in the Xuanlu (Dark Carriage), wears black garments, adorns himself with Xuan jade, and partakes in millet and helium." During this period, black was not worn during mourning, and its use in ceremonial attire signified prosperity and fortune.

The *Analects of Confucius* (*Village Discourses*) states, "A kid's pelt and a black headdress are not worn in condolences." This emphasizes that black, associated with official and ceremonial functions, was not regarded as appropriate for funerals. However, there were exceptions. In the state of Jin, black was used as mourning attire, as recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* (*The Thirty-Third Year of Duke Xi*), where Duke Wen's burial initiated the use of black ink in mourning practices.

Black also carried various other connotations in ancient China. First, it was often worn by commoners, signifying the color of the general populace. Second, during the Warring States period, black became the uniform for palace guards and soldiers. By the Tang Dynasty, soldiers were required to wear black, further embedding the association between black clothing and military personnel. Third, black was linked to punishment: one of the Five Punishments, known as "qing," involved marking a person's face with black ink as a form of servitude and criminal record.

Another layer of symbolism was derived from black's association with the night and darkness, which evoked fear and uncertainty. In the context of the Five Elements theory, black is connected to the element of Water and the season of winter. This association with the cold, dormant period of winter—when life seems to recede—linked black with the decline of vitality and evoked feelings of sorrow and sadness. As the color of the night, black was also seen as a representation of hidden dangers and inauspiciousness, reinforcing its dual nature as both a color of solemnity and fear.

In summary, black's symbolic meaning evolved over time, from its use in ceremonial and military contexts to its eventual association with mourning, fear, and punishment. Initially, people perceived the world in two broad categories—black and white—before a deeper understanding of colors emerged. Through the process of classification, color gained political,

economic, and cultural meanings in Chinese society. Black, in particular, played a significant role in defining class, military identity, and symbolic expressions of life and death.

Data Collection

The study of color in ancient China is deeply interwoven with its cultural and political systems, especially those shaped by Confucian and Daoist thought. This research draws on historical documents and previous studies on color usage in ancient China, with a particular focus on black. By identifying and analyzing representative artifacts, this study aims to understand the role of black in Chinese culture, using a combination of literary sources and archaeological evidence.

To ensure objectivity, the research is grounded in historical documents and cross-referenced with archaeological discoveries. Additionally, Python was used for color extraction and analysis from images of the identified artifacts. Two main criteria were followed for selecting samples: the significance of the excavation site and the variety of lacquerware patterns, which covered a wide range of functional categories.

Source of Samples

Han Dynasty tombs have yielded some of the most precious lacquerware artifacts, particularly from the Yangtze River basin in southern China. Key excavation sites include Mawangdui in Changsha and several locations in Hubei province. This study uses a dataset of 230 samples from the book *Patterns of Han Dynasty Lacquerware* by Li Zhengguang, of which 180 were selected for detailed color analysis. These samples represent a range of lacquerware types, demonstrating the craftsmanship and diversity of the Han Dynasty period.

Functional Categories of Samples

The study categorizes the lacquerware artifacts based on their function and form, including lacquer boxes, basins, plates, cosmetic boxes, teapots, cups, tripods, coffins, and more. This diverse selection highlights the extensive use of lacquerware across various aspects of life during the Han Dynasty, from household items to ceremonial and burial goods.

Research Methods

This study employs a mixed research methodology, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The literature review provides a comprehensive background on the symbolic meaning of black, while Python programming is used to analyze the color data from the selected artifacts. This combination of historical and computational methods ensures a rigorous analysis of black's role in traditional Chinese culture.

Literature Review

A literature review does not involve collecting data directly from research subjects but rather focuses on gathering and analyzing existing information, which can take the form of textual, numerical, pictorial, symbolic, or other data types (Feng Xiaotian, 2001). In this study, the literature review method was used to collect and analyze documentary materials on the color black in ancient China, aiming to reveal the social structures, historical events, culture, values, and transformations associated with this color.

The research relied on three types of sources: archaeological excavation reports, books, and research papers. Key themes related to the research were extracted to construct a conceptual framework addressing the research questions.

Color Extraction

This study applied color extraction techniques to analyze the samples. K-means clustering, a commonly used method for image analysis, was utilized to extract colors from digital images. The process starts by capturing photographs or scans of the items, creating two-dimensional images for further analysis. Each pixel in the image represents a data point with three attributes (R, G, B), which are then arranged in a two-dimensional array corresponding to the color of each pixel.

The K-means algorithm requires the manual selection of a K value, which defines the number of clusters. Initially, K data points are chosen from the pixels to serve as cluster centers. The Euclidean distance between these centers and other pixels is calculated, assigning pixels to the nearest cluster. The average color of each cluster is recalculated, updating the cluster centers. This process continues until the

cluster centers stabilize or a predefined number of iterations is reached.

While K-means is effective and fast for color extraction and image analysis, it has limitations. The results can vary based on the choice of initial centroids or the K value, and the algorithm assumes clusters are convex and circular, which may not fit all color distributions. Despite these drawbacks, K-means remains useful for identifying dominant colors within images and can be applied to tasks such as color segmentation and image compression.

Results of Color Extraction Analysis

Through a literature review, this study seeks to understand the perception and use of black during the Han Dynasty. Initial findings suggest that color use during this period was deliberate and based on conceptual frameworks, carrying significant social and cultural meanings.

Quantitative analysis of the lacquerware samples revealed that black and red were the dominant colors. This recurring combination of black and red, especially the motif of black on the outside and red on the inside, was a common pattern in lacquerware. This design may have roots in sacrificial practices, where blood collected in vessels would eventually turn black as it coagulated, symbolizing the external black and internal red combination seen in many artifacts.

Black Color and Symbolism of Rank

The preference for black in ancient Chinese aesthetics is deeply linked to both kinship systems and economic structures. The rigid hierarchical feudal system, privatization of land, and strict ancestral worship rituals helped solidify a comprehensive kinship system. Originally connected to natural worship, the use of black gradually became institutionalized and regulated at the national level. Over time, ideas related to color orientation and social hierarchy took root. Blood alliances and economic frameworks influenced kinship structures and cultural ideologies, and in turn, kinship systems contributed to the development of a color hierarchy. This laid the groundwork for the early formation of aesthetic values in Chinese culture.

Following the fall of the Qin Dynasty, Liu Bang established the second centralized feudal state in

Chinese history in 205 BC. During the early Western Han Dynasty, economic and social instability led to reforms aimed at strengthening the state. The Han Dynasty adopted policies like "fifteen taxes for one," loan-based agriculture, and large-scale irrigation projects to rejuvenate the economy. These efforts, particularly during the reigns of Emperor Wen and Emperor Jing (180–141 BC), resulted in a prosperous and stable society known as the "Wen-Jing Era."

The craftsmanship of Han Dynasty lacquerware, a major art form during this period, built on advancements made during the Warring States and Qin Dynasties. By then, bronze ware had declined, and porcelain had not yet emerged, making lacquerware the dominant artistic medium. The rising demand for lacquerware, particularly black and red, drove a significant increase in lacquer prices. For example, the price of lacquer rose from 35 qian per dou in the early Han period to 345 qian per dou by the time of Emperor Wen.

The consistent use of red and black in lacquerware had both functional and symbolic meanings. Vermilion (red) and black were associated with power, authority, and social status. These colors were not chosen arbitrarily but were part of a hierarchical system. During the reign of Emperor Wu, Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology, and with it came the emphasis on filial piety, which was reflected in elaborate funeral rites. Social rank was symbolized through coffin materials and colors. Nobles such as princes and princesses were interred in vermilion lacquered coffins, known as "first-grade lacquer," while high-ranking officials used black lacquered coffins, considered "second-grade lacquer."

Symbolism of Color and Authority

The "Kao Gong Ji" states, "Red and black follow each other," reflecting the ancient belief in the harmony between these two colors. Black was considered the fundamental color, representing nobility and sheen, while red symbolized richness and vitality. In Han Dynasty lacquerware, these colors were used for both practical and symbolic reasons, embodying cultural elements tied to religion, imperial authority, and cosmology, including the Five Elements and Yin-Yang philosophy.

In contrast to Western color theory, where brightness and contrast dominate, Chinese aesthetics emphasized equilibrium and balance through the interplay of red and black. These colors were not merely pigments; they represented connections to space, time, and celestial phenomena. Ancient Chinese philosophy assigned the five cardinal directions (east, south, west, north, and center) to five colors (blue, red, white, black, and yellow). Each color had profound associations with natural elements, seasons, and philosophical concepts.

Despite the philosophical alignment between black (associated with water) and red (associated with fire) as opposites, the Han Dynasty combined these two colors extensively in lacquerware. Historical records show conflicting accounts of color symbolism in the Han Dynasty. Although black was associated with the Water Element and Qin Dynasty, Emperor Gaozu of Han, who founded the Han Dynasty, is said to have preferred red due to its symbolic connection to the Red Emperor. Nonetheless, black remained an important color, particularly in the north, which Emperor Gaozu believed awaited his rule.

Conclusion

The study of colors, especially their symbolic meanings in historical contexts, is complex. Due to the antiquity of the subject, much of our knowledge about the history of Chinese colors comes from surviving texts and archaeological discoveries. Scholars from disciplines like history, sociology, anthropology, color theory, and psychology have laid a solid foundation for understanding color symbolism in ancient China.

This study combines literary analysis and quantitative color extraction to explore the cultural meanings of black and red in Han Dynasty lacquerware. While black and red were officially associated with hierarchical distinctions—red for the nobility and black for high-ranking officials—color extraction from archaeological samples suggests that these regulations were not strictly followed. Both black and red appeared in tombs of various social strata.

The widespread use of black and red was not limited to the elite. Craftsmen from the general populace also produced lacquerware in these colors, and commoners imitated the choices of the imperial court

to elevate their social status. Though black and red were prestigious colors, they were not exclusive to the nobility, reflecting a cultural recognition of their importance across social classes.

Despite the contributions of this research, challenges remain. The available literature and archaeological data provide limited insight into the full scope of black's use in ancient artifacts. Additionally, theoretical frameworks for studying Han Dynasty lacquerware are underdeveloped, and further research is needed to create a comprehensive understanding of this art form.

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