

# THE MEANING OF COLOR I

Colors represent different things in different cultures. Consider the question: “how would you feel if somebody went to your wedding wearing a white tie?” Depending on the nationality of the person you asked, you would get a variety of answers. An American would respond “I would think that person is weird.”

A Japanese person may respond “I would feel happy.” One from Hong Kong would, however, say “I feel very angry.” We can deduce from the different responses that colors symbolize different ideas and feelings, and have different psychological implications.

In ancient times, Chinese people had already developed a complex culture surrounding colors, and their language included many descriptive color-based words. Different colors were endowed with different philosophical or customary symbolism. The Chinese thus developed a unique culture of color.

Colors are, in themselves, objective and with no inherent qualities to suggest one is better than the other. However, in a socio-political, cultural, or ritual context, colors unavoidably become grouped into different categories.

In ancient China, blue, red, black, white and yellow were classified as “direct” colors, and reddish blue, light blue, light red, purple, and reddish yellow were classified as “indirect” colors. This may be due to the fact ancient Chinese regarded some colors as basic or primitive, which they

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labeled “direct”.

Combinations of these colors in different proportions created new colors, which they labeled “indirect”. According to The Analects of Confucius, Confucius once said, “I hate the color purple for it contends red, I hated State Zheng’s music for it mingles with elegant music I hate those who overthrow their state by sweet words.” Here Confucius already had a bias towards colors.

The culture significance of color in China is closely tied to the Theory of Yin Yang and the Five Elements. This theory was first developed by Zi Si and his disciple Mencius, and was mostly completed by Zhou Yan from the State of Qi during the Warring States Period. Although Zhou Yan’s two works were both lost, his philosophies have been referred to in other historical works.

Zhou Yan regarded the five elements of water, fire, wood, gold and soil as “five virtues”. According to him, wood can overcome soil, gold overcome wood, fire overcome gold, and water overcome fire. It made sense, therefore, that the world followed the rules of the five elements to recur and subrogate, and dynasty replaced dynasty.

This belief was particularly favored by both upstart feudal rulers and established kings or emperors who sought to legitimize their claims to power. The former took it that they had the right to challenge the established power base, and the latter could claim they had followed philosophical conventions and held the mandate of heaven.

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