

USE OF COLOUR IN CHINA

Victoria Yau

IN OUR modern age, colour has become increasingly important to humanity. Colour, a major component in sensory perception, affects us visually and emotionally. Its effect varies according to age, gender, and health.¹ Since visual sense is directly connected to the brain, visual memory brings attachment to the colours in our environment.² Past experiences create strong preferences in individual colour choices. I truly believe that the colours of natural and man-made landscapes eventually influence our choice of colour. Colour plays an equal role in aesthetic value; it depends on how colour is placed or co-ordinated.

In China's past, the supreme power of the Imperial court, combined with tradition and the social system, overrode an individual's natural responses and spontaneous observations. Colour was used politically to distinguish rank, title, and status, and became an extension and reflection of power. The variations and choices of certain colours were thus often dictated by tradition. The relationship between this multifaceted component to the natural environment in China and to the Chinese social and cultural backgrounds is quite noticeable.

My personal interest in colours, as a long-time painter together with over twenty years of observing Chinese society, resulted in the following findings, which hopefully will open up new avenues of research in this field. In a sense, this article decodes the basic source of colour choices in China. Perhaps the initial reason for this article was to call attention to a long-neglected area in China, that of discovering and analysing their natural responses to colour, thereby unveiling the choice of colour. I hope the social and emotional needs in colour choices are on stage for closer view, and that this exploration in colour inspires further development of this topic. China's traditions still prevail today; old customs do persist. Another view of the past linkage will enrich our visual sense and help advance us into a new area of awareness. As in China, the technological advances to a new era are the sense of inner need of a modern Chinese up to true discovery.

THE INFLUENCE FROM THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE AND REGIONAL SURROUNDINGS ON USE OF COLOUR IN CHINA

In traditional Chinese paintings, mountains were often portrayed as barren and rocky. Westerners often consider the Chinese first in modern abstract,

when in reality they portrayed the natural landscape of northern China where the Yellow River Culture developed. The regional surroundings affected the artists' use of colour. For example, when Paul Gauguin went to Tahiti, the colours in his paintings reflected his new exotic surroundings.

REGIONAL SURROUNDINGS: The landscape colours of rocky mountains, muddy rivers, barren, infertile soil, and harsh climate have created the background colours for China. The Northern area of China is usually cast with a brownish tone, a result of the yellow dust blown from the Yellow Plateaux. This contrasts with the greenness of the western landscape, which appears in majority areas. Because of the depleted soil in most areas, the trees in China are twigs when compared with California's giant redwoods, even when they are the same age. The entire landscape has a monochromatic cast to it. Unlike the strong colourful contrasts of Western landscapes with ample rainfall, where you see long stretches of wild flowers blooming in fields, there are few flowers on the hills in China. The subdued Chinese landscape could be influenced by the lack of contrasting colour schemes, resulting in pale-coloured, traditional, delicate landscape paintings.

While the West encouraged land to lie fallow every few years, the rice paddies in China were used and re-used over thousands of years. Drought and water shortages plagued many areas. Rice fields, instead of luxurious green, appeared murky. The 'Yellow River Culture', already scientifically advanced by the fifth century, was still devoid of much colour variation. Floods from the Yellow River were muddy brown in colour. The Yellow Sea off China's east coast is brown. Natural disasters and wars forced the populace to struggle for survival. There was neither time nor energy to pursue the cultural part of living. Sense of colour became secondary to obtaining the necessities of life.

Beijing and Nanking, large cultural cities, are situated inland. Not being located near the coast or on lakes, the reflection of the sky is a dull grey rather than bright blue. These cities contrast sharply with major cultural centres in France, Spain, Italy and other European countries with long stretches of coastlines and vibrantly coloured skies.

USE OF COLOUR IN CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

LIVING QUARTERS: For thousands of years, the basic architectural character of buildings was similar throughout China. Buildings and living quarters were built predominantly of wood.³

The Chinese were the earliest people to use paint on buildings. Use of strong primary colours on building exteriors is a special feature of Chinese architecture. Often, the following colours were used for exterior decorations: White and blue for platforms and terraces; Red for columns and buildings; Blue or turquoise for the beams, brackets and soffits; Yellow or green for

glazed roofs. These crude, startling colours were painted by workers and craftsmen, not by sensitive colour designers or artists.⁴

Red brings fortune, and the Chinese used it for eaves and the outer wall of the courtyard. The front door of the courtyard was usually painted black, with red scrolls on both sides, sometimes with carved engravings.⁵

Compared with the West, Chinese architecture was considerably lower and smaller, with less space for displaying colour; thus fewer shades were utilized. In the past, the Chinese only allowed construction of buildings under one hundred feet. Good spirits soared through the air at the height of these roofs, they believed, and this would contain these spirits closer to them.

The interior walls of a Chinese house seldom had wide or expanded horizontal areas. Usually there were only one or two solid walls with the remainder broken into narrow segments of sliding wood panelling or lattice work. Some walls consisted of a sliding door and a translucent screen, while some had plain or carved wooden boarding and plaster filling the panels. Being narrow vertically and cluttered in design, these walls allowed little space to present colour.

The Europeans in the same period, conversely, used colour extensively for interior walls and had single rooms devoted to one particular colour. For example, they would have a blue room, a yellow room, or a red room. Ceilings in Chinese architecture were colourful when compared to the walls. They usually had intricate designs and delicate patterns interlaced with colour.⁶ This emphasis in ceilings could exemplify the social conditions, since the extremely rich could afford to spend time looking up at the ceiling while lying down resting.

The Northern Chinese usually used strong, heavy colours, such as a red exterior wall with a yellow roof, or a blue or grey roof, while Southerners usually preferred more subdued and quiet colours, often white washed walls and grey roofs.⁷

GARDEN (courtyard): The most distinctive style in the Chinese garden is the garden building, which is painted with strong colour. In Chinese gardens you always find a pavilion, simulated mountain and a pond. These pavilions usually have red lacquered or dull red columns, with the roofs an imperial yellow. The bracket forms, ornamental carvings and intricate details are extremely colourful.⁸ Since the main elements are purely artificial and painted, it is no wonder Westerners refer to it as 'the artificial landscape'.⁹

The gate to the courtyard was either painted a grey stone base with flat white or had dull red stucco applied to the walls. Windows in the garden walls had different forms of lattice work, many in coloured ceramic. The porch railing of the garden building was often red or dull red.¹⁰ These primary colours appear flat, rather crude, and disharmonious, as if they came straight from a paint can. The narrow colour range of the natural surroundings may

have influenced the desire for strong primary colours to brighten up the bare, lonely scenery.

A. Boyd once wrote in his book on Chinese architecture: 'Chinese people in England, in fact, often feel that English gardens are too green'.¹¹ While the English plant decorative hedges, even designing mazes with shrubbery, and the Japanese gardens have green moss on the rocks, greenery played little or no part in a Chinese garden; lawns were never used. In addition, the West has botanical gardens and innumerable nurseries, with wide varieties of colourful flowers, for the enjoyment of the people. Mainland China and Taiwan have only a few small nurseries and no public botanical gardens. Obviously, the environmental background influenced the colour sense of the Chinese people. Nature's most abundant colour is green, yet it is often only a small 'part' of the colour scheme in Chinese garden scenery and never the focal point.

We all draw on colours from nature with its many kinds of flowers and trees. Just as there were always favoured and privileged groups in Chinese society, there were favourite trees and flowers. Unfortunately, only a few favourites, with a limited variety of colours, were utilized in Chinese gardens and paintings. The best loved trees were the bamboo and plum. Aquatic flowers, such as the water lily, are especially cherished for they rise above the dirt of ponds. The hardy chrysanthemum is favoured for its long growing season. Regardless of the symbolism related to the flowers, the colours do not necessarily provide great variety. They are unsophisticated and limited to basic colours. The chrysanthemum does display a variety of colours, but yet is predominantly pale. Even the beloved peony has few colour variations when compared with roses, camellias or pansies.¹² The source of an individual's colour choice, therefore, was this limited colour palette of the environment.

THE EFFECT OF HEALTH ON PERCEPTION OF COLOUR

A general healthy state, including good eyesight, is essential for basic colour perception, while weak eyesight and colour blindness greatly diminish the ability to co-ordinate colours. Vitamin deficiency and malnutrition have always been widespread in China. According to some optometrists who practice in China the percentage of colour blindness that exists is alarmingly high. It is commonly known that a far greater percentage of colour blindness occurs in men; nearly all the painters in China were male. It appears, therefore, that the absence of colour variation in Chinese paintings has, in some measure, a physical cause and is gender related.

THE INFLUENCE ON USE OF COLOUR BY THE IMPERIAL COURT AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

THE SUPREME POWER OF THE COURT: In the five thousand years of Chinese cultural development, the empire was controlled politically by ethics and cultural tradition. The country has always been shaped by an intense sense of

tradition that dictated the use of colour. Colour, an index of rank, was politically prescribed. On each step of the social ladder, a different colour was ordained for court attire.

The wardrobe of the Ch'in Dynasty court was represented in the hierarchy of colour as follows:

Emperor: Yellow

Crown Prince: Orange

Prince: Brown

First-degree to Eighth-degree Nobles: Blue

First-degree to Ninth-degree Officials: Black

Yellow: implying the brightest sunlight and greatest power; the Emperor's colour

Orange: (or Apricot Yellow), symbolizing the sun glow; the second most powerful; the colour for the Crown Prince

Brown: (or Tawny Yellow) is a darker shade than apricot yellow and was for the princes¹³

The colours chosen for the wardrobe in the Ch'in Dynasty are fascinating to me. If the ruler desired to be the centre of attention, the brightly coloured court coats served the purpose well. Their deliberate selection of colours were extremely smart for marketing. The Chinese court enjoyed the attention these colours brought them and was evidence of their psychological understanding of the manipulation of colour. Using colour for political advantage centuries ago in China is the same as choosing certain colours today that enhance the image of political candidates. In China, the impact of the powerful court and social systems created a hierarchy of social ranking, which descended from the central government to the local government, scholars, landowners, merchants, farmers and finally peasants. The aristocratic class, or high ranking officials, wore strong colours to emphasize visibility. Colours were thus ranked accordingly.

For instance, Royalty was represented by red, purple and royal blue. These colours were forbidden to the merchant class. The colour of their costume accompanied the title. A judge might wear a bright black royal blue, which was strong and bold. Black attire was also for elders in the household. These colours had a psychological impact. Royal blue and black reflected the strong, distinctive and severe side of colours and symbolized power. The display of certain colours had a profound effect upon the average citizen. Subjects, seeing this distinctive colour ornamentation from afar, instinctively bowed before they could possibly recognize the face of local officials.

During the T'ang Dynasty, the Emperor visited 'River South'. The colourful southern landscape influenced his court ladies' attire for years afterwards.

During the Ch'in Dynasty, when Western influence became evident, the vibrant colours of Manchu costumes were used in the courts and for the upper class (court relatives), but not by the majority of the household.

People see beautiful and colourful robes in museums and books, ostensibly worn by the Chinese; however, we must realize this was only court attire and not representative of the clothing worn by the common people. To control the teeming population in a vast empire, the aristocrats used tradition. The Imperial court was able to wear bright, distinctive clothing, while the common people, unable to afford lavish colours, dressed in solemn, depressing hues. These humble, quiet colours diminished individual importance, minimized personal emotions and quelled any possibility of rebellion. In this way, the imperial officials controlled the hierarchy in the court and general populace. Thus, colour became an instrument of covert rule and an extension and reflection of power.

SOCIAL CUSTOM, TRADITION AND EXCEPTION: The Emperor wore blue when he worshipped Heaven and yellow when he worshipped Earth. Dynasties were differentiated by colours, such as brown for Sung, green for Ming and yellow for Ch'in.

In general, colours were for special occasions only. Preferring to blend in, what people wore daily looked similar to what everyone else wore. Only for special celebrations did the Chinese want to manifest individuality.

While the large background areas on garments were plain, small decorative items such as hairpieces, jewellery, shoes, snuff bottles and embroidery displayed much freedom in the expression of colour. Clothing remained on the quiet side, but men could wear brightly coloured trousers underneath a plain robe.

With furniture, the Chinese retained the natural colour of the wood. Again, bright colours were used only in small areas—cushions, pillows, inlaid jewels and ceramics. These comprised less than thirty per cent of the overall visual area. Colour still was limited and carefully distributed.¹⁴

Chinese opera singers, entertainers of the court and always favoured, were the exceptions in colour control, and lavishly wore colourful outfits for holidays, ceremonies and other special occasions. Chinese society disapproved of these colourful expressions by the common people, since it was considered brash and nonconformist. Only the performers had freedom of personal expression. This probably occurred because the verbal nature of the opera's theatrical act was valued more highly than the mute visual nature of the painters.

Red has always been a favourite colour nationally. With few symbolic restrictions, red (together with its shades of scarlet, crimson, magenta and pink), were fully explored. When opening a store, starting a business, completing a building, and perhaps at a wedding, red firecrackers were exploded

from the roof beams. To wedding receptions, guests usually brought two strips of red fabric (silk or cloth) bearing congratulatory poems.

Since there were severe restrictions on yellow, it was seldom used in clothing. Few shades in the secondary colours of purple, orange and green were fully explored.¹⁵ Kelly green for men did not exist. Also reflected in language was the lack of specific names for articulated hues. The title 'Mr Almost' regarding the Chinese people's ambiguously defined attitude towards every situation could certainly be applied here.

In the T'ang Dynasty, pink, turquoise green and orange secondary colours surfaced in functional art. The Sung Dynasty's functional art went back to subtle, subdued colours. These decorative items tended to use colour as accents, such as those on a bird's wing.¹⁶ Colours were used to complement each other rather than to contemplate; thus the design played a more important role than the colour.

In addition, the social tradition of: 'If it is not polite, do not look', influenced Chinese colour choices. Since so many behaviours are impolite, this social inhibition prevented training in observation skills, offering even less opportunity to utilize vision and develop colour perception and colour co-ordination.

The Chinese advanced in many technical fields centuries ago, yet their social and political systems suppressed personal emotional expressions in the visual area. In contrast, poets and prose writers were highly respected and were allowed a full range of artistic expression, further indicative of the Chinese preference for the verbal over the visual.

EFFECT OF SYMBOLISM ON USE OF COLOUR

For centuries, colour usage was generated and perpetuated by means of symbolism. To the Chinese, the five colours of the universe represent the five elements of life, and these colours were chosen because of their importance to the lives of the people. Colour was geared to a cognitive rather than an emotional response. While Westerners used colour to symbolize feelings, the Chinese used it to represent elements, locations and seasons. The five elements in life and their related colours became known as the 'Five Element Theory'.¹⁷

ELEMENT	LOCATION	COLOUR	SEASON
Gold	West side	White	Autumn
Wood	East side	Blue	Spring
Water	North side	Black	Winter
Fire	South side	Red	Summer
Earth	Centre (of Earth)	Yellow	All Seasons

Yellow, an important colour, represented the centre of Earth and supreme power and was used for the roof of the palace and the robe of the Emperor,

who personified the centre of Earth. The Crown Prince lived in the East Palace, with a blue tiled roof, symbolizing spring, a new beginning. The outer walls of the palace grounds were red, symbolic of the South, the sun and joy.

Red represented fire; yellow symbolized gold. This combination can be seen throughout China in all aspects of colour decoration. Since fire was regarded as a necessary element in the process of refining gold, together they were thought to convey luck. In Chinese tradition, sometimes a small fire inside a building was viewed as a sign of impending wealth. Even when one experienced this kind of disaster, it was seen as advantageous and the expectation of future riches was a comforting thought. Red also represented the positive essence (Yang) and Heaven, while yellow connoted the negative essence (Yin) and Earth. The idea was that combined, these two colours complemented each other and constituted a whole.

On her wedding day, the bride, honoured as an empress, was dressed in red, symbolizing fertility. Friends brought two strips of white fabric bearing poems of mourning to a funeral reception. The funeral party wore either white or ecru while the spectators dressed in black,¹⁸ in contrast to the all-black worn at Western funerals. In this way, the Chinese funeral party was easily distinguished from the spectators.

Colour symbolism could also be seen in theatrical costumes and makeup. Among the actors, the hero's face was painted red, the face of the boor or peasant was painted black, and the villain's face was painted white, probably to symbolize deceit, since the skin of most Chinese is light to medium brown.

COLOUR INTERPRETATION

Red	Royalty, holy divine qualities
Purple	Similar to red, but to a lesser degree
Black	A good but rather straightforward, rude character
Blue	Forcefulness, craftiness, a snob, such as generals
Yellow	All the qualities of blue to a lesser degree
Green	An unstable, unreliable character
Melon Orange or Pale Gray	Could represent old age or infirmity; physical or mental weakness ¹⁹

In opera, the aristocratic heroine's face was always painted white to represent exceptional beauty. In Chinese society, a fair complexion is relatively rare and often described as porcelain or white jade. A handsome man is described as a 'white faced scholar'. Skin colour is extremely important socially since the aristocrat had little exposure to the sun and retained a fairer complexion than the farmer, who worked outdoors and often was suntanned.

SELECTIVE FAVOURITISM: Specific colours appear on certain Chinese objects. These favourite objects bring fortune and symbolize good luck. How the Chinese viewed nature and related to nature's colour governed the colour

selection on these objects. The colours were favoured because of symbolism, when actually the colour co-ordination could be aesthetically poor. For instance, peach represented longevity and was often combined with wild plum, symbolizing endurance. Thus its wearers would be lucky enough to enjoy a long, healthy life.

COLOUR IN CHINESE PAINTING

To me, Chinese painting is the visible record of rhythmic gesture, the choreography of a dancer's body language. Frequently in Chinese paintings colour is merely used to fill in lines and carved surfaces. Seldom does it play a major role or assume a primary visual force. Bright colour is usually displayed and presented only in floral paintings and in the largest areas of wearable art. Throughout the centuries, intricate detail in lyrical lines found expression in all traditional Chinese paintings. The ends of Chinese brushes usually are pointed, rather than wide and even-ended; consequently, few broad sweeping colour strokes appear on Chinese paintings. The exception is on floral paintings,²⁰ where only tiny areas (perhaps of petals) would be painted with broad strokes.

While European paintings utilized various media, the Chinese used mainly water colour. These Chinese paintings are often described as a 'light coloured wash' by Westerners. (In a wash, colour is considerably diluted by water and lacks the full strength of colour.) The effect was a soft sultriness which gave the painting a quaint look. Instead of the harsh colours used to paint buildings, painters looked for subtlety and serenity, tending not to experiment with colour owing to inhibitions imposed by centuries of control.

Chinese society restricted women in developing reading skills and writing with brushes. Thus, they had no way to develop into painters. With few women artists over the centuries, feminine expression of colour was limited to items related to embroidery and wearable art. Women, being less affected by colour blindness, created needlework items that were charming and colourful, differing tremendously from the male's choices of subdued and monochromatic colours for their paintings.

Even in the Sung Dynasty, a wealth of material was used in paintings of harmonious, tasteful, yet monochromatic colour. There are extraordinary paintings from this period, but colour was not explored extensively until the Ch'in Dynasty when the quality of textile design and variety of colour flourished.

Paintings were easily transported in scrolls, yet seldom were on display throughout the centuries. There were few public exhibition facilities in China and the viewings were exclusive—limited to the circle of a few aristocrats and artists. Paintings were often kept in one's treasure chest to be shared only with one's friends. They belonged to the few collectors, usually the wealthiest and those of royalty. Personal seals were placed on top of the actual paintings

and this prevented their transportation and exhibition for the visual enrichment of the general public. Without the opportunity to view the paintings, the people were unfamiliar with artists' colours. The general public were not cultured in the same visual sense as the artists or painters; rather they were more familiar with the craftsmen's colour choices. The closed society did not allow them to explore themselves in colour usage.

Primarily, Chinese painting emphasizes rhythm, especially linear rhythm. In that sense, colour is less important. In Western painting, colour plays an equal role, sometimes even a major role. In a white on white painting, you don't see any line—whether horizontal, vertical, long or short. It is all overshadowed by the powerful surface colours. In modern painting, colour and form are joined. The concept of colour and design are united. This allows for free visual expression without the limitation of suggesting image or line and the restrictions of rhythmic painting.

In the West, colour exploded in modern art, while the Chinese continued to question whether it was possible to be lyrical without using the descriptive line. Can colour by itself be lyrical? To me, colour is as lyrical as articulating a word or a sentence. When combined, they become the essays, sonnets, heroic poems and epic novels. To me, colours are notes on a sheet of music; woven together they become the sonata or symphony. While each of these two versions of expression can be vocal (which was accepted and glorified in Chinese society), the silent visual expression of colour was long ignored.

THE SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE NEW SCOPE OF COLOUR USAGE

Several factors were influential in modernizing the Chinese perception of colour. Vibrant colours were introduced through exposure to the West. For example, a greater variety of colours was used in the T'ang Dynasty, when the Empire was extended to include Afghanistan and affected every aspect of art, sculpture, ceramics and jewellery.

Vibrant colours were also introduced through religion. Colour influence from Buddhism and Taoism evolved from the ceremonial style of the village shrine and temple and also from the vibrancy of Manchu costumes. A colour liberation can increasingly be seen in the Chinese textile industry and in wearable art.

New technology has stimulated the Chinese to explore their inner sense of colour, thereby expanding their choices. The majority of Chinese homes have colour televisions, where several families often gather socially to watch the shows. These programmes brought theatrical performers with their lavishly coloured costumes into the homes of the average citizen.

Improvement in the economic status of the people has modernized colour choices especially in European-style ready-to-wear garments. With the upward mobility of the middle class and the subsequent new wealth that

followed, many Chinese can affordably import colourful and exotic designer clothes from Italy and France for daily wear.

When it comes to furniture, however, many designs remain European, but the colour choices are typically Chinese. One example, in recent years, there are many European-style kitchen cabinets in luxurious apartments or villas. Instead of keeping the subtlety and unique colour combination of Scandinavian design, the white cabinets sometimes had fuchsia pink knobs.

CONCLUSION

Recently the world merged its political philosophies and social systems, diminishing the use of native languages. The world tends to embrace the international symbolism which I believe is the visual language. Colour will be an important bridge to the visual boundary. In a nation with a high illiteracy rate, China has placed much emphasis on verbal language. Visual awareness will be a strong asset, and colour will certainly be important in elevating the sophistication and living standard of the populace in modern Chinese society.

After studying the profound effect of tradition and customs on Chinese perception of colour, I still believe that one day China will be fully aware of the significance of colour and its positive impact on daily life. To a certain degree, all are affected by the past. European society has had centuries of expression in full colour and design. Westerners have long had opportunities to incorporate colour with design, resulting in diverse artistic expressions. The Chinese, even though now exploring new usages of colour, are impaired by the barriers of past inhibitions. Hopefully, they will realize that colour is a dynamic element in the creative process, and that the New Individualism, developing today in China, will seek new expressions through colour choices. As in music, may all users of colour be creators, rather than performers or practitioners merely tracing the notes of past artists.

Victoria Yau, 2609 Noyes, Evanston, Illinois 60201, USA.

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