

Implicit Meaning of Chinese Vocabulary on Colors in Five Elements Elucidating Socio-Cultural Context

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Abstract

The Chinese words on colors do not only indicate types of colors, but also implicit the elucidating socio-cultural context. Colors in the Chinese language represent good and bad terms. For example, the makeup color of the Chinese opera show assigns the character wearing red makeup as a symbol of loyalty, justice, power, wealth, or high rank. Red contains most of the excellent and positive definition. On the other hand, the character wearing white means a person who is dangerous, cunning, and dishonest. These are some examples of how Chinese people use colors to represent meaning. Moreover, Chinese vocabularies are also communicated through alphabets and created to new words that hide beliefs and culture of the use of color as well.

This research aims to study the “Implicit Meaning of Chinese Vocabulary on Colors in Five Elements Elucidating Socio-cultural Context.” China is a fascinating country in culture and language. Besides, Chinese is a language used by many people as the top three in the world. This research studies 5 Chinese color words, which are red, black, white, green, and yellow. The methodology is to analyze words through the example vocabularies by describing and collecting from books, journals, and articles. For an instant, Red in Chinese culture is the color of fortune. Therefore, red words are used to create new words that relate to prosperity, such as 开门红(kāi mén hóng) means opening to welcome good things or 红红火火(hóng hóng huǒ huǒ) which is a wish for prosperity and, often used for business. As a result, it can be seen that the study of Chinese color terms is not only about colors, but these words also link to beliefs and cultures over time until many new words are created. It is the use of color words mixed into new vocabulary to reflect the ideas, beliefs, and cultures. We can study Chinese culture through color vocabulary very well.

Keywords: Chinese, Color, Implicit, Meaning, Culture

1. Introduction

Language is communication that reflects culture. By learning a language, it is as if we are learning the culture of origin, way of thinking and way of life of that native speaker. Nowadays, worldwide communication is relatively quick and easy. Communication between countries allows them to cooperate in many different areas, whether in technology, science, sports or trading. However, before we communicate with another group of people who speak a different language and have a different culture, we should know and understand the basic language and culture of that group. The author proposes that studying vocabulary and culture will be a benefit those people who are genuinely interested in true communication.

In learning a second language, it cannot be denied that learning that language vocabulary is an important. Vocabulary has many categories and the vocabulary of color is an important category. Therefore, the author has chosen the five Chinese vocabulary elements, which are red, black, white, green and yellow and for these colors to represent the scope of the study, because these five colors are the main colors of China up to the present day.

Given that a word can have an explicit meaning or many meanings; direct words and implicit words or implications are another type of vocabulary for example, in the Thai language, *Gar Fark*, or ‘parasite plant’ simply means one plant that survives by eating other plants e.g. a carnivorous plant (Bladderworts). This can imply to someone who lives off other people, but does not help or do anything useful or productive, but simply lives by taking advantage of other people. Therefore, the author has chosen to study the topic of Five Color Elements, expounding in Chinese which color has what implications in the Chinese social and cultural context. For the explicit purpose of sharing with interested people and those interested in the culture and language of China, to understand and comprehend the direct and implicit meaning of the five elemental colors.

2. Discussion

The five elemental colors mean or depict the color of the earth, water, wind, fire and gold respectively i.e. each element is depicted by its respective color; red represented fire, black represents water, white represents gold, green represents wood and yellow represents earth. The beliefs around the elements and their color representation stems from ancient China. Color in China has a hidden meaning and refers to the culture, history, ways of thinking and way of life of the Chinese people. It conveys elemental meaning through letters that form a word with various meanings that are with us today.

Elemental colors.

2.1 Red

In Chinese, 红(hóng), means more than just the color, ‘red’. Red color also implies “positivity”, for example red portrays the auspiciousness of the Chinese New Year Day (success; opportune; favorable: favored by fortune; prosperous; fortunate). So much so that Chinese people will attach the red paper to the wall, with written sacred poems in pairs which called in Chinese, 红对联(hóng duì lián), or another one called, 红福字(hóng fú zì), which

is also on red paper, but with the written word, 福(fú), which mean happiness and when the person attaches the paper to the wall, the word, 福, will be turned upside down to imply that the happiness has come down already and the word, 红, which also means red has been used.

Or, in the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, a red cloth is used placed on the body as it represents celebration and honor. This red cloth is called, 披红(pī hóng).

From the above, it can be shown that the red color is an important and traditional part of auspicious Chinese ceremonies as red represents the faith and the bond of the Chinese people that is portrayed by the use of the red color.

The Chinese word for good-fortune is, 红运 (hóng yùn). 红, literally 'Red'. 运, literally means 'Fortune', which together means "Red fortune". Red here, represent and portrays the color symbol of good fortune.

A good wish and greeting is, 红红火火 (hóng hóng huǒ huǒ), which means wishing someone 'progressive prosperity'. It normally is used in the context of a greeting, when opening a new business. The word, 红红, does not mean red here, but implies towards a progressive prosperity.

Red also means success and smoothness, such as,

开门红(kāi mén hóng), means, open to and welcoming all good things or translating literally, means opening the door to welcome the red color. Red here means a good beginning and all good things.

满堂红(mǎn táng hóng), is a metaphor and means to receive good outcomes in all areas or prosperity in everything. Here Red implies good results or good prosperity.

The beauty of a Chinese lady is implied in the color red, for example

红颜(hóng yán), means 'beautiful woman.'

红颜知己(hóng yán zhī yǐ), means 'beautiful girlfriend'.

红粉(hóng fěn), in the past, it meant 'beautiful women'. Today it means, 'cosmetics or pressed powder for women.'

红女(gōng nǚ), means, 'beautiful woman.'

红袖(hóng xiù), literally means the, 'long, red dress', but also implies, 'beautiful woman.'

Therefore, one can see from the vocabulary that instead of using the word beautiful, the use of, 'red' represents the beauty of women. For a clearer comparison, consider the word, 女红, which means beautiful woman. Translated literary into Thai, it means 'red woman', whereas the Thai language does not translate the word literally.

Red also implied to revolt in the era of Mao Zedong. Today, the red flag of China symbolises the communist revolution. Also, communist Chinese army uniform's collar has red flashes as is the scarf that is red. Here, the use of the red color symbolises development and change. There are many other words that use, 红, as a component to create meaning around

revolution, development and change, for example:

红色政权(hóng sè zhèng quān), means “Chinese communist party.”

红军(hóng jūn), means the “Red Army, People's Liberation Army or the Communist Party of China.”

红星(hóng xīng), means a “red pentagram”, depicting the symbol of the revolution of the working class and is the symbol on the Chinese flag.

红旗(hóng qí). This word has three meanings. The first meaning is a ‘red flag.’ The next meaning is as a symbol of the proletariat revolution. And the third meaning is, victory and progress.

We can clearly see that red here is used as a symbol of revolution, development and change.

Further, red has implicit meaning in the meaning of economy:

分红(fēn hóng), means “bonus.”

红包(hóng bāo), means a ‘monetary gift’, which is given in Chinese society during holiday or special occasions.

红利(hóng lì), means ‘bonuses and dividends.’

Also, in the preceding three examples, Red means ‘money, which obtained from sharing parts.’

Therefore, we can see that the red color mainly portrays to the Chinese people a positive meaning, such as prosperity, smoothness, the beauty of women, the revolution and progressive change and receiving shared payments.

2.2 Black

In China, the color, ‘black’ can imply either a positive, negative or neutral meaning. There are many black Chinese words which have a positive meaning, for example; Greatness, magnificence, energy and power. The implication of the color black has existed since the Xia Dynasty and Qin Dynasty. Xia and Qin dynasties gave great precedence to the black colour, because it was influenced by the belief in maintaining the Yin and Yang balance, which is symbolically represented by the colors, white and black. Therefore, the bureaucrats or those who had important positions in Xia and Qin dynasties wore black uniforms, which was considered a color of honor and dignity.

In China, black has the implicit meaning of, justice. For example, Chinese folk-literature that sounds familiar to the works of Thai authors, Pao Bun Jin or Justice Pao. The student can see that Pao Bun Jin has a black face, where black represents fearless, powerful and being fair. In Chinese opera, characters that wear black masks portray characters who are honest and unbiased.

In Chinese porcelain and Chinese Lacquerware, since ancient times black was often used as the one of the main, heavy colors to line the pattern.

Black that implies a neutral meaning of the darkness:

天黑了(tiān hēi le), means the ‘sky has gone dark.’

屋里很黑(wū lǐ hěn hēi), means the ‘room has gone dark.’

黑 , here means ‘dark.’, because the ‘dark sky is black’, so Chinese use the word 黑 . which means ‘black’ can refer to darkness’.

The black color which portrays a negative meaning can have many aspects around or involving ‘bad’ things: Bad luck or evil:

(1) Error

以白为黑(yǐ bái wéi hēi), means seeing white as black or to mistake bad for good. In this phrase the Chinese use of black is as a symbol of error and white is as a symbol of uprightness.

(2) Evil and cruelty

黑心肠(hēi xīn cháng), means ‘unsympathetic’. In this idiom, 黑心, means ‘ruthless, selfish’. Use of black refer to a ‘bad’ character or ‘not noble.’

黑名单(hēi míng dān), means a ‘blacklist’ or a list of ‘offenders’. People who come under this word can be recognized similarly in Thai, Chinese and English, where the same word is, 黑名单, and Blacklist.

(3) Doing wrong or dodging/avoiding that which cannot be disclosed

黑交易(hēi jiāo yì), means the ‘trade or the exchange’ of something that is illegal which, 黑 . in this case means the ‘nature of the secret that cannot be revealed.’

黑手(hēi shǒu), means ‘mysterious offender’ or a person who ‘secretly, breaks the law.’

黑帮(hēi bāng), means the ‘mafia group or dark influence group’, which cannot be identified or ‘groups that assist to do illegal acts secretly.’

(4) Breaking the law such as

走黑道(zǒu hēi dào), means ‘larceny.’

黑店(hēi diàn), means ‘shop selling illegal products.’

黑货(hēi huò), means ‘illegal goods.’

黑市(hēi shì), means ‘black market’ or the ‘market which trades in goods or commodities in violation of official regulations.’

黑钱(hēi qián), means ‘money proceeds from breaking the law.’

So, 黑, in all the above, mean, ‘illegal actions.’

2.3 White

White has been one of the primary Chinese colors for a long time. White in Chinese implies to both positivity and negativity. A positive meaning refers to purity, clean and simple, for example:

白领(bái lǐng), literally means, ‘white collar’, which refers to a brainy-person, such as a manager who uses her brain to do work.

白马王子(bái mǎ wáng zǐ), means the ‘prince on the white horse.’

清白(qīng bái), means ‘purity or sinless.’

The implicit negative meaning of white color in Chinese refers to grief, sadness and loss, such as:

白事(bái shì), literally means ‘white event’. In Thai it refers to ‘cremation or funeral.’

白色消费(bái sè xiāo fèi), means ‘money or budget spent on a corpse or funeral’, (白色 means white, 消费 means expense). Due to the death of 7 million people in China each year, the value of the funeral-wreaths costs almost Baht130,000,000 or USD4,333,333 per annum. Similarly, cremation services or funeral costs in Thailand where people will give a Buddhist merit donation, Chinese people give a minimum donation of 100 yuan. All the above expenses are called 白色消费(Note 1).

The word 白, has an implicit meaning of. ‘Cementation service or grief and sadness.’

2.4 Green

In China green’s implicit meaning can be both positive and negative, where green is the word 绿 (lǜ), and the dark green is 青 (qīng). 青, is the result of the mixture between green and blue colors and has a positive meaning as shown:

青青(qīng qīng), means the ‘season of youth’ or it comparing a, ‘beautiful and memorable moment.’

青年(qīng nián), means ‘youth.’

青, green, refers to the time or season during youth; like a tree which is blooming with beautiful flowers and leaves. It is a bright and memorable moment.

Interestingly, in ancient Chinese times, green had a negative meaning. Green then represented the inferior (low/ poor position), a negative-reputation and dishonesty. Today, even though the negative meaning of green is fading, it still lingers in some terms such as:

绿帽子(lǜ mào zi), literally means the ‘green hat’, but the real implicit meaning is ‘he has been cheated (used with men).’

青楼(qīng lóu), originally referred to a large house, but later referred to a brothel.

Green also refers to inexperienced people, with little knowledge and a lack of training, such as:

愣头青(lèng tóu qīng), means ‘people with no brain, do not think and just do things haphazardly.’

Currently, according to change in China and its place in the world, the meaning of green has also been changed. A new vocabulary is forming that is consistent with current world events and situations. So, there is an emergence and new vocabulary and meaning to the color and word green, such as:

1. Green can imply safety, traffic, hope and peace.

开绿灯(kāi lǜ dēng), means to ‘pass, approve.’ It matches with the word, ‘turn on the green light’, for example the ‘family turns on the green light for the brother who is courting his girlfriend.’

2. Green can mean ‘conservation.’ Because in China and worldwide the environment is becoming more polluted and people are realising the importance of conservation. Therefore, ‘green’ words relating to conservation has emerged and this emerging emphasis on green and conservatism has mostly come from the West, such as

绿色食品(lǜ sè shí pǐn), green food means ‘organic food.’

绿色和平组织(lǜ sè hé píng zǔ zhī), ‘Greenpeace, the international organization for public interest.’

绿色政治(lǜ sè zhèng zhì), ‘Green politics (Note 2).’

绿色消费(lǜ sè xiāo fèi), ‘Green consumption.’

2.5 Yellow

In China the color ‘yellow’, has been important from ancient times, with both positive and negative implications. In ancient Chinese culture, yellow often referred to the ‘King or religion.’ It was a symbol of gods, sacred items and auspiciousness.

From the Tang Dynasty to the Qin Dynasty, yellow was a symbol or an item’s color that was used with the king; called the color of exaltation. In the royal palace, yellow and red colors were often used to decorate the palace:

黄冠(huáng guān), means the ‘crown worn by the emperor.’

黄道吉日(huáng dào jí rì), means ‘good day, auspicious time.’

黄表纸(huáng biǎo zhǐ), similar to silver and gold paper but in yellow color. Burnt in worshiping gods or burnt for those who have died.

Also, the yellow dragon symbolizes auspicious occasions in China. The yellow color in folk-drama and in Chinese opera depicts, ‘bravery.’

However, from the time of the communist revolution, the presiding government has abolished the emperor system, with the symbolism of yellow becoming less popular. So much so, today the meaning of yellow has changed to infer a negative meaning:

黄色书刊(huáng sèshū kān), means ‘pornographic book or magazine.’

黄色电影(huáng sèdiànyǐng), means ‘pornographic movie.’

黄图(huáng tú), means ‘pornographic picture.’

黄段子(huáng duàn zǐ), means ‘jokes with pornographic meaning.’

However, the color yellow representing pornography or lewdness does not originally, come from Chinese culture, but it is influenced by the yellow-book from America.

In Chinese Yellow also implies to a ‘failure or return with empty hands; such as:

买卖黄了(mǎimàihuáng le), this ‘trade is finished and fails.’

去北京旅游的计划黄了(qùběijīng lǚ yóu de jìhuá huáng le) means the ‘plan to go to Beijing failed.’

Yellow, includes the implicit meaning of ‘illness or not healthy’, such as

面黄肌瘦(miàn huáng jī shòu), means ‘emaciated body.’

黄花(rán bǐ huáng huā shòu), literally means ‘Yellow chrysanthemum.’ But has the implicit meaning of the, ‘body is thin and does not look healthy.’

The Chinese language uses the physical appearance of the human body, when sick or not well as looking ‘yellow’ and pale and implies the body is not strong.

It also means ‘being childish or unreliable.’

黄毛丫头(huáng máo yā tóu) the original meaning is ‘childish woman’, in an insulting and degrading way.

Interestingly, today ‘yellow’ has another meaning as ‘one type of tea.’

黄口小儿(huáng kǒu xiǎo ér), means a ‘child’, but often used ironically meaning ‘not knowing like a child.’

黄童白叟(huáng tóng bái sǒu), means ‘child and adult’, 黄童, means ‘child’, 白叟, means ‘adult.’

3. Conclusion

Scientifically, color is the frequency of visible light. There are 1498 on the earth colors that humans can perceive. The meaning of color in each nation and culture has different meanings. The dress code in each country will have different fashionable colors. For example, at weddings, Chinese people wear red clothes while Thai people tend to wear white clothes. Performing arts in each country will also give different meanings to the use of color for make-up or dress. Chinese opera uses red to represent people who are excellent and aristocratic. At the same time, Thai classic masked dramas often use the color red with the main character of the story. Therefore, the color has hidden meanings for the cultural beliefs and traditions of that society.

Moreover, it is passed on to vocabulary. The Chinese language has introduced vocabulary about colors to create a new vocabulary. It is the case when combining color terms with other words. For example, the article can be summarized as follows:

In the Chinese language, **Red** refers to 1. goodness, prosperity, and beauty. It also represents 2. the meaning of the revolution in the Mao Zedong period, which is the development for the better and 3. the money received from dividends from the business. **Black** color means 1. greatness and power, 2. justice, 3. darkness. It also has the negative meanings that refer to 4. mistake and 5. illegal terms. The color of **White** reflects 1. purity, clean, and decency and 2. grief, sorrow, and loss. **Green** is related to 1. freshness and youthfulness, 2. obscurity, negative reputation and dishonesty, and 3. natural Conservation Meanings **Yellow** conveys 1. the color of the king, 2. failure, 3. agony, 4. pornography and obscenity, and 5. unreliable kid.

When the time changes, so the traditions, languages, and cultural beliefs gradually change over time as well. These things are reflected through the language and characters in each period. The formation of words and languages is not the same, which reflects the society at that time. There are still some parts that remain to this day, such as the word 绿 green in ancient China had a negative meaning. However, over time, the meaning of words has changed, leaving only the same meaning in some words such as word 绿帽子 which refers to cheating. Up to the present, according to the changing circumstances, green has become a representative of nature conservation and care.

“Implicit Meaning of Chinese Vocabulary on Colors in Five Elements Elucidating Socio-cultural Context” is useful for those who are studying Chinese to understand the implicit meaning of the color vocabularies. It will allow Chinese language learners to learn Chinese culture in another aspect from color vocabularies and also help to reduce the use of color errors.

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Notes

Note 1. 白色消费 [online] from baike : <https://baike.baidu.com/item/白色消费/> (retrieved on the 30th August 2017)

Note 2. Green politics means political parties that emphasize ecological policies, social justice, foundation of democracy and peace to be the core of their policies.

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