

A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Symbolic Meanings of Color

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to extend the scope of English knowledge about color so as to arouse the interest of students in learning English through the use of color terms. Color not only fills our world with beauty but provides a source of inspirations, which would stimulate the fancy of students to increase the interest of their life. Color serves as a means of communication. The communicative qualities of a color can be defined in terms of natural and psychological associations. Occurrences of colors in nature are universal and timeless. However, color may generate another level of meaning in the mind. This color symbolism arises from cultural, mythical, historical, religious, political, and linguistic associations. The symbolic meanings of color words reveal wide-ranging connotations in cultures including positive and negative meanings. The paper will examine human cognition of colors, explore the origin of primary colors, and analyze the meaning of color in different cultures. The awareness of how and why colors communicate meaning will be explained. Finally, an approach to teaching students how to use color terms in different situations will be presented.

Keywords: Color, Element, Connotation, Symbolism, Mythology

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1. Introduction

Color is the fundamental building block of visual symbols. Color serves as means of communication. In ancient civilizations, color was an integral part of the substance and being of everything in life. It is also closely associated with mental and emotional states, and can affect them profoundly. Most fundamental color symbolism was drawn from nature. Thus, green symbolized potency in arid regions but a sacred color in Islam. Blue stood for the sky, and also for the spirit and truth. Interpretations of color may differ and the symbolism varies with the cultural environment. The color black and the color white clearly stand for duality and antithesis. However, in some traditions, black is the color of death and mourning; in others, white. Red, the color of blood, is usually linked with living, but it represents death in the Celtic world.

In spite of individual differences in the interpretation of colors, ancient civilizations worked out conventionally determined forms of color symbolism, usually as part of a search for basic principles with which to organize a world of multiplicities. Thus, the primary colors were frequently associated with divinities, the elements and the directions. For the ancient Mayas of Central America, the directions east, north, west, and south were associated with red, white, black, and yellow, while in ancient China east, south, west, north, and center, with blue, red, white, black, and yellow. Religion often overlaid this with other significance. To the Buddhist, yellow is the color of humility, hence its use in the monk's saffron robe. In Christianity, white represents the pure conscience, clear of stain because it is the purest of all hues.

Colloquial English expressions that describe states of feeling in color terms include "in the pink," "green with envy," "in a black mood," "feeling blue" and "seeing red". During the 20th century, red was particularly linked to the Communist party, while the green movement aims to put environmental issues on the political agenda. Similarly, color is used to denote race, so that "black" and "white" carry social and political meanings depending on their context.

The main purpose of this paper is an attempt to extend the scope of English knowledge so as to arouse the interest of students in learning English, and color terms can be used to achieve this goal. Although there are many ways to study color, the paper

will examine human cognition of colors, explore the origin of primary colors, and analyze the meaning of color in different cultures. The awareness of how and why colors communicate meaning will be explained. Finally, an approach to teaching students how to use color terms in different situations will be presented.

2. Review of the Relevant Literature

There is a great deal of information about colors in both Chinese and English, but comparative approaches to colors are uncommon. In the following relevant literature, some talk about colors for a country; some only confine in a place. Four works are especially relevant to this topic. The first study addressed color and ethnic minority group in China, which has its own splendid cultural tradition. The second study explains color from a socio-linguistic with psycholinguistic point of view, including experimental studies. The third study discusses color terms with connotations, which belong to socio-linguistics. The fourth study explores the history and the story of color.

The Color and the Naxi Folklore《色彩與納西族民俗》written by Geng-Sheng Bai 白庚勝 (2001) indicates that the Naxi people are one of the China's ethnic minorities.¹ According to Bai, the Naxi have lived in a place with evergreen grasses and trees, blossoming flowers and picturesque landscapes. In the long process of historical development, most ethnic minorities have formed their own special traditions, customs, and religious beliefs. The Naxi people worship lofty mountains, lakes, and rivers, which symbolizes the colors, white and black. Bai suggests that color is closely related with the lives of the Naxi people, and emphasizes how color plays an important role in Naxi folklore.

A Socio-Cognitive Study of University Students' Color Codability in Chinese《中國學生漢語色彩語碼認知模式研究》 is written by Yonglin Yang 楊永林 (2002). Referring to Yang, the paper uses an experimental methodology, and the socio-linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects are dealt with. The purpose of this paper is to observe the

¹ The Naxi are one of China's 56 recognized ethnicities. Most of the Naxi ethnic minority live in concentrated communities in the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County in Yunnan Province. For further details, see the website of The Naxi Ethnic Minority, retrieved May 15, 2012, from <http://www.china.org.cn/e-groups/shaoshu/shao-2-naxi.htm>.

ability of university students' color codability in Chinese and the influence of socio-cultural factors. Color words differ in the degree to which they provide description or can be used for the naming of particular things, events, experiences, and states. Yang puts emphasis on the study of cognitive socio-cultural aspects of color in Chinese.

The Connotations of Color Terms: Color Based X-phemisms written by Professor Keith Allan (2009), is to investigate the connotations of color terms with particular attention to figurative uses of black, white, grey, brown, yellow, red, green, blue, and a few miscellaneous colors. Based on Allan, the connotations are judged on the basis of whether the phrases in which the color terms occur are typically orthophemistic, euphemistic, or dysphemistic. Allan explains that all colors surveyed have some orthophemistic connotations; euphemistic connotations of colors are rare; but dysphemism is common.

Color: A Natural History of the Palette by Victoria Finlay (2004) is a book of stories, anecdotes, histories, and adventures inspired by the human quest for color. As a result of Finlay's work, it is clear that color is the essence of landscape and of whole perception of the physical world. She has traveled through Chile, Afghanistan, India, Dunhuang (in western China), England and other places to investigate the origin of colors. Finlay pointed out most of the stories took place before the end of the nineteenth century.

Though there are many literatures dealing with colors, the meaning of colors can be different from each different geopolitical place. They represent different meanings, which are closely associated with various people and religions. In all these references, though no one has used comparative approach, but these works have provided very useful knowledge about colors which enrich my inspiration.

3. Theoretical Considerations

In cultural theory, people pay attention to two aspects: cognition of color and the symbolic meaning of color, which are considered in detail here.

(1) Cognition of Color

When people open their eyes and look upward a blue sky and white clouds may appear; or look downward a green ground appears; mountains, rivers and forests appear in front of their eyes. In the primitive time of chaos, no colors existed. Only when the sun light appeared, the sky and the earth started to have colors. Maybe no human being appeared in the world, colors would not be recognized. In prehistoric times, human being started to have activities. People did not have any knowledge about color; they had no clear idea of how the sun produced light, or why it moved through the sky. When human being has accumulated many experiences, they would start to recognize various colors. The colors are closely related with sunlight, and sometimes they exhibit a variety of shades as the earth moves around the sun in a day. For instance, alternatively strong and weak sunlight may create many different colors. Under sunlight, human eyes can identify various colors; without sunlight, only darkness is perceived.

From the physical point of view, there are no “real” colors which exist in nature. Only the various wavelengths make up light, which are absorbed and reflected by all of the objects around us. The reflected light wave enters the eye, which, in turn, sends signals to the brain: then we see the miracle of color.² However, people’s minds create colors as an interpretation of vibrations that are happening around us. Everything in the universe, whether it is classified as “solid” or “liquid” or “gas”, is shimmering and vibrating and constantly changing. However, their brains don’t find a very useful way of comprehending the world. Therefore, people translate what they experience into concepts such as objects, smells, sounds, and colors, which are easier for them to understand. For example, red may be associated with fire, white with frost, and blue with sky.

(2) Symbolic Meaning of Color in Culture

The symbolism of color in different cultures tends to have the common identification of color names through cultural exchange. Jung (1964) defined symbols “terms, names, or even pictures that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possess

² Light enters the eye and hits the retina, where it is absorbed by rod and cone cells. These cells transmit the signals that light triggers via the optic nerve, directly to the visual centre at the back of the brain: color is truly “in the mind of the beholder”. See Alison Cole (1993), p. 6.

specific connotations in addition to their convention and obvious meanings. They imply something vague, hidden, and unknown to us” (4). Fontana (1994), building on the work of Jung, pointed out that certain kinds of symbolism constitute a universal language. The images and their meanings occur in similar forms and carry similar power across cultures and centuries. The symbolism that makes up this language in Jung’s theory is “the natural expression of inner psychological forces” (10). However, Jung’s ideas on symbolism go only part of the way in accounting for the rich and varied symbolic vocabularies of different cultures.

The uses and meanings of color have never been totally consistent across cultural boundaries. Colors can carry different symbolic meanings: yellow, in northern Europe connotes “deceit” and “cowardice,” while in China is the imperial color; in Buddhist tradition, yellow stands for “humility” and “renunciation”; but in the Mayan civilization of Central America, it was associated with the West.³ The underlying reason for these differences is that the symbols used to portray archetypal energies are subject to the creative limitations of the human mind.⁴ At the cultural level, this process of differentiation receives further stimuli from the natural environment. Usually, the cultural elite dominate the color names over time. In the Western cultures, the white has long been a symbol of purity and virginity.

4. The Symbolism of Color in Myths and Legends

The colors regarded as the natural phenomena today, can be readily explained by science, but in the ancient world, they were simply mysteries. As a result, people created myths to explain them, using human experience and imagination as tools. Because the ancients endowed natural phenomena with will and feeling, they spun a common thread connecting color and myth. Therefore, people from culturally diverse

³ David Fontana (1994), *The Secret Language of Symbols*, p. 18.

⁴ Carl Gustav Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, stressed the positive influences of deep-seated drives, linked personal psychology to archetypal cultural patterns, and influenced 20th century thought in many other fields. Many symbols, he found, are common to different cultures; knowledge of them is not learned but sensed intuitively, retrieved from the storehouse of primordial cultural memory that is the collective unconscious. See Chris Rohmann (1999), *A World of Ideas*, p. 213.

societies created possibly similar myths. Nature was revealed to them in symbols, and early people symbolized everything that appealed to the human mind. Accordingly, early people tried to associate the different colors with divinities, the elements, directions, and planets. Linking color and myth seems to be universal, but the meaning associated with the color changes from culture to culture.

(1) Divinity

In several cosmologies, colors display a cosmic symbolism and mediate as divinities. For example, they play an important part in the Navaho story of the creation of the Sun. The Navaho had already partially separated light into its several colors. Next to the floor was white, indicating, dawn, upon the white blue was spread for morning, and on the blue, yellow for sunset, and next was black, representing night.⁵ Chinese cosmology is based upon the principle of dualism. The Yin and Yang are the positive and negative principles of universal life, and are represented by the symbol; the dark and light colors distinguish the two principles. Yang signifies heaven, sun, light, vigor and male. It is symbolized by the Dragon and is associated with azure color. Similarly Yin stands for earth, moon, darkness, female. It is symbolized by the Tiger and is associated with orange color.⁶

(2) Element

The elements were believed by the ancients to be the essential energy forces that sustain the world. In the West they are four in number: fire, water, air, and earth, but in the fundamental concept of Taoism, there are five elements 五行 including water, fire, wood, metal, and earth in China.⁷ However, they have no equivalence to the four elements of the ancient Greeks, which were thought to be the basic constituents of all matter. Ancient Chinese thinkers used the elements as symbols to denote influences

⁵ Hartley Burr Alexander (1953), *The World's Rim: Great Mysteries of the North American Indians*, p. 13.

⁶ Charles Alfred Speed Williams (1999), *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, p. 458.

⁷ Upon these five elements or perpetually active principles of Nature the whole scheme of Chinese philosophy, as originated in the 洪範, or *Great Plan of the Shang Shu* 尚書, is based. For further details, see Williams (1999), p. 186.

which, though not fully understood, were known to be real, such as the alternation of the seasons, the motions of the planets, some of the functions of the body explained in terms of the laws of nature.⁸ From the operation of five elements, proceed other cosmological components, such as the five atmospheric conditions 五氣, five planets 五星, five metals 五金, five colors 五色, and five tastes 五味. Diagram (see appendix 1) shows some of the relationships of the five elements, which indicate fire is related to chi; earth to yellow; wood to azure; metal to white; and water to black.

(3) Direction

In Mesoamerican cosmology, colors were frequently associated with particular directions. The identification of colors with directions is most fully documented among the ancient Maya, who had specific glyphs for the colors red, white, black, yellow, and green. In the Yucatec Maya codices, these colors are associated with east, north, west, south and center, respectively.⁹ In Chinese thought, the world is divided into five parts: the centre (colored yellow), the south (red), the north (black), the west (white), and the east (blue).¹⁰ Each part has its own symbol. The “Azure Dragon” 青龍 presides over the eastern quarter, the “Vermillion Bird” 朱鳥 over the southern, the “White Tiger” 白虎 over the Western, and the “Black Warrior” 玄武 over the northern.¹¹

(4) Planet

In Babylon, the 7-story Etemenanki Ziggurat was painted in different colors which corresponded to the planets.¹² The Saturn was black, the second was orange, the color

⁸ Charles Windridge (1999), *Tong Sing*, p. 67.

⁹ Mary Miller and Karl Taube (1997), *An Illustrated Dictionary of the Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya*, p. 65.

¹⁰ William G. Crampton (1997), *Flag*, p. 58.

¹¹ From an analogy between a day and year, it can be understood how these animals further symbolized the four seasons. The morning sun is in the east, which hence corresponds to spring; at noon it is south, which suggests summer. By similar parallelism the west corresponds to autumn, and the north to winter. See Walter Perceval Yetts (1984), *Symbolism in Chinese Art*, pp. 13-14.

¹² Etemenanki was the name of a ziggurat dedicated to Marduk in the city of Babylon of the 6th century BCE Neo-Babylonian dynasty. Originally seven stories in height, little remains of it now except ruins. For further details, see the website of Etemenanki-Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia,

of Jupiter; the third, red, the color of Mar; followed by green, Venus; Blue, Mercury; yellow, Suns, White for moon. The Zuni Indians of Western America, for example, make a yearly offering to their priests of corn of seven colors, each color pertaining to a planetary god.¹³

Five planets were known to the ancient Chinese. Thus, a planet was associated with each of the five directions and with the attendant color. Mars is red and Venus white. White is the color of death, of the West, and of autumn. Venus is the star of the West, where of course the planet is seen at its most impressive as an evening star. Mars is associated with fire and the south. It is also known as “fire-star”. Jupiter is associated with the East and with the element wood. Mercury belongs to the North and water, and its symbolic color is black. Lastly, Saturn is in the middle, and its color is that the earth, yellow.¹⁴

5. Cultural Symbolism of Color

There are many colors, but this paper concentrates on five primary colors: red, yellow, blue, white, and black. When any two colors are mixed, they can produce other colors. In the following sections, we shall deal with each of the five primary colors, which also represent different meaning in different time, and different place, and different culture.

Right now the five basic colors have been identified by the world through many generations and the development of communication. However, why each of the basic five colors still has its positive and negative connotations, which are based on the following three reasons. First, a strong culture tends to dominate the popularity of a color, during the twenty century, West culture is stronger than other culture, and during a wedding ceremony the bride who wears a white gown has replaced a red dress in

retrieved May 15, 2012, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Etemenanki>.

¹³ The Zuni people, like other Pueblo Indians, are believed to be the descendents of the Ancient Puebloans who lived in the desert Southwest of New Mexico, Arizona, southern Colorado and Utah for a thousand year. See the website of The Zuni – still a Mysterious People, retrieved May 15, 2012, from <http://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-zuni.html>.

¹⁴ Wolfram Eberhard (1990), *Times' Dictionary of Chinese Symbols*, p. 238.

Taiwan. Second, an important event has happened in one big country, the revolutionary flag, which is red, so the red has been emphasized because it represents the color of blood and passion. So far the Communists still stress on red. Third, a country which possesses long history and tradition, can maintain the positive meaning of a color, for instance, black represents righteousness or dignity in China. Any color would have its negative connotations, which are not widely recognized.

(1) Red

The word “red” originally comes from the Old English “rēad”. It can be traced to the Proto-Indo European root reudh-. In Sanskrit, the word “rudhira” means red or blood. In the English Language, red is associated with the color of blood.¹⁵ Fire is also strongly connected with red as if the sun and the sky at sunset. The color of fire and of blood is regarded universally as the basic symbol of the life-principle.¹⁶ Given the implications of the color red, we can deal with its positive connotations or its negative connotations.

(a) Positive Connotations

Red is supposedly the first color perceived by Man.¹⁷ In pre-historic times, Neanderthals sprinkled the bodies of the dead with red pigment as a way of restoring to them the “warm” color of blood and life. In Anglo-Saxon times, red was believed to protect against evil and objects, trees and even animals were painted red, while warriors covered their axes and spears in red paint to endow them with magic powers—a custom also practiced by some Australian Aboriginals.¹⁸ In ancient China, “chi” 赤, “zhu” 朱, and “jiang” 絳, all mean “hong” 紅. “Chihong” 赤紅 is the color “crimson” in English. “Zhuhong” 朱紅 means vermilion or bright red. “Jiang” 絳 means a deep red. In some cultures, red represents influence and authority. Red was also the sacred, vitalizing color of the Chou Dynasty (c.1050-256 BC). Roman Catholic cardinals wear

¹⁵ Elizabeth Knowles ed. (2003), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, p. 441.

¹⁶ Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (1996), *A Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 792.

¹⁷ In the form of iron oxide (red ochre) it accompanied humanity from prehistoric times onward, and it was used in the cave art of the Ice Age. See Hans Biedermann (1994), *Dictionary of Symbolism*, p. 281.

¹⁸ Mark O'Connor and Raje Airey (2007), *Symbols, Signs and Visual Codes*, p. 38.

red hats and kings have often dressed in red.¹⁹ “Red Carpets” 紅地毯 are still unrolled for the arrival or departure of an important visitor.

Red is linked with love and fertility. In ancient Rome, brides were wrapped in a fiery red veil; a custom still observed in parts of Greece and Armenia, while in China, the wedding gown and veil are red. Red eggs are offered to the couple when a child is born.²⁰ In Chinese cultural traditions, red is associated with good fortune, happiness, and celebration. On the eve of the Lunar New Year, the elders will give the children “red envelopes” 紅包. “The Red Lanterns” 紅燈籠 are used to project auspicious symbols during celebrations. “Red-Letter Day” is a lucky day. In Western festivals, red and green colors are immediately associated with Christmas. Together, red and green inspire warm thoughts of the Christmas season.

The another meaning of “chi” 赤 is the quality of being loyal and sincere; for example, “single-hearted” 赤心. On the Chinese stage, actors paint their faces red to show they are honest and decent characters. The god of war, “Guan-Di” 關帝, who represents righteousness and justice. In Taiwan, businessmen admire him. This is why there are so many Guan-Di temples. Red is described as a young girl. In China, “hongyan” 紅顏 means peach blossom face of a beauty; “hongfen” 紅粉 means young beauties.

(b) Negative Connotations

As the color of blood, red is a symbol of warning, war, destruction, sex, sin, and murder. In Roman mythology, red is associated with the god of war, Mars. Red in ancient Egypt was the color of the desert and of the destructive god Seth who was said to have red hair and eyes; red also meant a call to arms for the ancient Romans.²¹ Red flags are employed by socialist revolutionaries. Red was associated with prostitutes which founded in “red light district” 紅燈區.²² A Biblical example is found in Isaiah: “Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be white as snow”.²³ This comes from a

¹⁹ Biedermann (1994), p. 282.

²⁰ O'Connor and Airey (2007), p. 38.

²¹ Anna Franklin (2002), *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Fairies*, p. 216.

²² It is an area of a town or city containing many brothels, strip clubs, and other sex businesses, from the use of a red light as the sign of a brothel.

²³ Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett eds. (1997), *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with*

Hebrew view inherited by Christianity which associates red with the blood of murder. The phrase “red-handed” is to be caught in the act, or to be caught with bloody hands.

(2) Yellow

According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word “yellow” comes from the Old English “geolu,” which is akin to Old High German “gelo”.²⁴ The hue of color resembles ripe lemons or sunflowers. In dealing with yellow, the associations can be divided into two connotations.

(a) Positive Connotations

Yellow is associated with the sun and its life-giving generative powers. The yellow sun was worshiped as god in many cultures. According to Greek mythology, the sun-god Helios wore a yellow robe in a golden chariot drawn by four fiery horses across the heavenly firmament. The radiant yellow light of the sun personified divine wisdom; while in Mexican cosmology, golden yellow was the color of the Earth’s new skin at the beginning of the rainy season, before it grew green once more.²⁵ The color is therefore associated with the mystery of renewal. In China, yellow was associated with the centre of the universe, and one creation myth describes how the first humans were made out of yellow clay.²⁶ It was the sacred color of the emperor. The term “huangpao jia shen” 黃袍加身 (be draped with the imperial yellow robe by one’s supporters) means to be made emperor. To Buddhists, yellow is the color of humility, hence its use in monks’ saffron robes.

(b) Negative Connotations

Yellow heralds old age and the approach of death. To the Tewa Pueblo Indians, it is the color of west, which is associated with one direction to the underworld. To the Chinese, too, black and yellow were the colors of the north or of the underground abysses in which were the “yellow springs” 黃泉 leading to the kingdom of the dead. In Chinese symbolism, yellow emerges from black as Earth emerged from the primeval

Apocrypha (Isaiah 1:18), p.766.

²⁴ See Yellow - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved Sept. 23, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yellow>.

²⁵ O’Connor and Airey (2007), p. 38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

waters.²⁷ In English, yellow may be a sign of disease as well as age, particularly jaundice, a disease affecting the yellow bile.²⁸ In the tradition of the Chinese stage, actors paint their faces yellow as a mark of cruelty, deceit, and cynicism. A yellow flag was used in the West to symbolize disease and quarantine. The term “yellow movie” 黃色電影 can refer to films of pornographic nature in Chinese culture, and is analogous to the English “blue movie”. The animals such as “ox” 黃牛²⁹ and “yellow weasel” 黃鼠狼³⁰ have negative meanings.

(3) Green/Qing/Blue

Based on the definition in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the word “green” is closely related to Middle English “grēne,” which is akin to Old English “grōwan” (to grow). It is used to describe plants and the ocean. Several minerals have a green color, including jade and emerald, which people used to describe the color. Animals such as frogs, lizards, insects, and birds appear green because of a mixture of layers of blue and green coloring in their skin. Many creatures have adapted to their green environments by taking on a green hue to camouflage themselves.³¹ Green has both positive and negative connotations.

(a) Positive Connotations

Universally, the color of plant life, green, can stand for awakenings, new beginnings, and growth. In China it relates to spring. In Celtic folklore, the green man is an important vegetation and fertility god. In ancient Egypt, the green of the god Osiris symbolized resurrection and immortality.³² Chinese people wish to live long and remain strong just as pine and fir trees. “Songbaichangqing” 松柏長青 is an illustration of this term. Its spiritual symbolism was most important in the Islamic world, where it was the sacred color of the Prophet and of divine providence. In China, green

²⁷ Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), p. 1138.

²⁸ Michael Ferber (1999), *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 244.

²⁹ “Ox” 黃牛 means one who is used to eat his words.

³⁰ As the saying goes, “The weasel goes to pay his respects to the hen.” The term indicates one who does not have the best of intentions.

³¹ Refer to Green - Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved Sept. 23, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/green>.

³² O’Connor and Airey (2007), p. 38.

is a color associated with the Ming Dynasty (officials wore green). Green is also the emblematic color of Ireland, the “Emerald Isle”. The color symbolizes the struggle for Irish independence from Great Britain.³³ Green has become a symbol of environmentalism. Someone who works well with plants is said to have a “green thumb”. Green is used to describe unripe or immature fruit; a “greenhorn” also refers to an inexperienced person.

(b) Negative Connotations

There is a darker side to the natural world as well. Green has represented danger and death. There are many instances of green being linked with superhuman powers. The ancient Egyptians feared cats with green eyes and imposed the death penalty upon all those guilty of killing these creatures. In medieval Europe, green was associated with the Devil and wearing it was considered unlucky for human beings.³⁴ Whatever the origin of the belief, the correspondence of green and envy has passed into folk custom. Jealousy is the “green eyed-monster”.³⁵ Physically ill person is said to look green around the gills. In China, the color green is often used as a symbol of sickness and nausea. The Chinese use it as a sign of “cuckoldry,” particularly when linked to hats.

Besides, there are other two colors similar with green: “qing/azure” 青 and blue. Qing/Azure is the orthodox color in ancient China rather than green. The traditional China, “the azure dragon” 青龍, presides over the eastern quarter, as one of the “Four Supernatural Creatures”.³⁶ It is hard for people to distinguish qing and green or blue. There are many terms about “qing,” such as “qingtian” 青天 (blue sky), “qingjin” 青筋 (blue veins), “qingmian-liaoya” 青面獠牙 (green-faced and long-toothed terrifying in appearance) and “qing chuyu lan” 青出於藍 (indigo blue is extracted from the indigo plant). Another special term “qingsi” 青絲 signifies black hair.

With regard to blue, accordingly, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* indicates, the modern English word “blue” comes from Middle English “bleu” or “blewe,” which was borrowed from Anglo-French “blef,” or “blew,” of Germanic origin; akin to Old High

³³ Jack Tresidder (1998), *Dictionary of Symbols*, p. 94.

³⁴ Franklin (2002), p. 111.

³⁵ Othello, III, iii, 165. See Margaret Miner and Hugh Rawson (1995), *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations from Shakespeare*, p. 132.

³⁶ Williams (1999), p. 367.

German “blau” (blue).³⁷ Historically, many cultures worldwide have not distinguished blue from green. Originally, there was no specific Chinese word for blue; instead, “qing” referred to all shades from dark gray through blue to green. The present-day word “lan” 藍 actually means “indigo,” the color of simple work-clothes. Chinese do not have separate terms for “blue” from “green,” and “qing” instead covers both terms. There are both positive and negative connotations for these words.

(a) Positive Connotations

Whether celestial or oceanic, blue evokes wide, open spaces and is linked with infinity and primordial emptiness. The blue of the sky has been associated with the male principle, distance, and the gods. In ancient Egypt, gods and kings were often depicted with blue beards and wigs, and the Hindu divinity Krishna is portrayed as blue. Still, deep water, on the other hand, also associate blue with the female principle. As a symbol of peace and purity, it is the color of the Virgin Mary. Jesus teaches in a blue garment. Blue, the symbol of the truth and the eternity of God, will always remain the symbol of human immortality. Blue amulets in some cultures are supposed to neutralize the evil eye. The Old English custom of brides wearing something blue is meant to ensure fidelity.³⁸ This phrase “blue-blooded” is used to mean “aristocratic or socially superior”. Human blood is red, but during the fifteenth century many Spanish aristocrats had fair complexions which made their veins appear bluer than those of darker-skinned Moorish people.³⁹ Nevertheless, blue is a very popular color politically and with authorities of all kinds, particularly those that represent stability and conservatism.

(b) Negative Connotations

Ancient China had an ambiguous attitude toward the color. Blue-faced creatures in traditional art were demons, ghosts. While “Kui-hsing” 魁星, the blue-faced god, was originally a scholar, who was frustrated in his ambitions and committed suicide.⁴⁰ Blue

³⁷ See Blue – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved Sept. 23, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/blue>.

³⁸ O’Connor and Airey (2007), p. 39.

³⁹ Robert Hendrickson ed. (2000), *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, p. 82.

⁴⁰ Biedermann (1994), p. 44.

was traditionally seen as the angry color, e.g. “blue in the face” 臉綠 and the color of “a bruise”; while people still use “black and blue” 瘀青, to describe the mark left after being injured. Blue represents the excesses of calm emotion. It is frequently considered synonymous with depression-as in “feeling blue,” or having the “blues” and it can also represent withdrawal, isolation, loneliness, and instability. In colloquial English, “out of the blue,” happens in a way that is sudden and unexpected. “Once in a blue moon” means very rarely. The informal sense of “blue” to mean obscene, indecent, and profane developed in the mid 19th century.⁴¹ For example, a blue joke and a blue movie are indecent.

(4) White

Based on the definition in *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the color “white” evolved from Old English “hwīt”; akin to Old High German “hwīz” (white) and probably to Slavic “světū” (light), Sanskrit “śveta” (white or bright). Over time, the word became “hwīt,” which looks and sounds much closer to the white we use today. It is a pigment of the color of milk or snow, due to the reflection of all visible rays of light.⁴² Like colors, white has positive and negative connotations.

(a) Positive Connotations

White can be defined as the absolute color of light. It symbolizes truth, purity, innocence, and the sacred or divine. In many cultures, white garments are priestly vestments, associated symbolically with purity and truth. Newly baptized Christians wore white robes, and the souls of the just are depicted in white clothing in paintings of the Last Judgment. The Pope’s white garments symbolize transfiguration and glory. White is worn by brides in Western countries. The Anglo-Saxons were also the first to start using the word “white” as a surname for a person who had light hair or a fair complexion.⁴³ In China, white is the color of “the autumn,” or the emblem of “old age”. White clothing is said to have been worn in the time of the Shang Dynasty as white was

⁴¹ Knowles ed. (2003), p. 67.

⁴² Refer to White – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved Sept. 23, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/white>.

⁴³ Biedermann (1994), p. 380.

the symbolic color of this dynasty.⁴⁴ The association of white with purity and peace is used by many religions. The “white dove” originates from the story of Noah as a symbol of the end of the great flood.⁴⁵ The “white elephant” is sacred in Buddhism because the Buddha is said to have entered his mother’s womb in this form. The animal therefore stands for the Buddha’s patience, wisdom, and long memory. In English, the term is described “of little use and that is costly to maintain”.⁴⁶ The story of “baimatuojing” 白馬馱經 (carrying Buddhist Scriptures and figure of Buddha on its back) was popular during Eastern Han.⁴⁷ The white horse stands for purity and loyalty.

(b) Negative Connotations

On the other hand, white is associated with paleness, bloodlessness, lack of vigor, and death. In ancient Egypt, white symbolized the lifeless desert that covered much of the country. In several cultures, the soul is thought to leave the body in the shape of a white butterfly or a white bird. Christian angels are depicted as being dressed in white, while ghosts are described as emitting a white light.⁴⁸ On the Chinese stage, actors with white faces represent men who are not exactly wicked, but who are cunning and treacherous. In English, the phrase “white-livered” came from the old notion that livers of cowards were bloodless.⁴⁹ To show “the white feather” is to display cowardice. The phrase “white lie” is to a harmless or trivial lie, especially one told to avoid hurting someone’s feelings.⁵⁰

(5) Black

Accordingly, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* indicates, “black” can be traced back to its Proto Indo-European origins through “bhleg-” which means “to burn, gleam, and

⁴⁴ Eberhard (1990), p. 313.

⁴⁵ Fontana (1994), p. 72.

⁴⁶ The allusion is to the story of a king of Siam who used to make a present of a white elephant to courtiers he wished to ruin the recipient. See Knowles (2003), p. 579.

⁴⁷ XinLi Jing (2011), *The History of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 108.

⁴⁸ Franklin (2002), p. 271.

⁴⁹ The term reflects the traditional belief that a light-color liver indicated a deficiency of bile.

⁵⁰ The term, dating back several centuries, has its roots in the traditional belief that white is the color of purity.

shine”. The Old English “blæc” was akin to Old High German “blah” (black).⁵¹

(a) Positive Connotations

The absence of light, rather than a color itself, black is a complex symbol. Almost all cultures recognize the duality and opposition between black and white.⁵² Yet, in Egypt the blackness of earth and of rainclouds stands for the mothering darkness of germination. The black was the color of “rebirth” and “resurrection”.⁵³ In Greek, it is the color of Cronos/Saturn, which symbolizes time. The Hindu Kali and Durga can appear as black goddesses, suggesting the light-dark duality necessary to the continuation of life.⁵⁴ In China, the ancient written form of the character 黑 depicts a chimney and raging flames beneath it. They combine to refer to the thick black smoke that emits from burning fire. “He that touched pitch shall be defiled,”⁵⁵ as the saying goes. The Chinese idiom “jinzhuzhechi, jinmozhehei” 近朱者赤，近墨者黑 reflects this thinking. The great emperor Shi Huang-Di 始皇帝 who overthrew the Zhou Dynasty (whose color was red), chose black as his symbolic color “just as water puts out fire”. In Chinese history, Chin adored black while Song Dynasty adored white. One people named “Nu Zhen” 女真 worshiped the color of black, which represented dignity and may have been influenced by the black water of the Black Dragon River.

(b) Negative Connotations

In the Western world, black carries a lot of negative connotations, many of them centered on fear and the unknown. Death and mourning are symbolized in the West by black. The Grim Reaper, as the personification of death, is hidden entirely by black robes.⁵⁶ To the Elizabethans, Black Death is one of the deadliest plagues. Black magic

⁵¹ See Black – Definition and More from the Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary, retrieved Sept. 23, 2011, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/black>.

⁵² T. A. Kenner (2006), *Symbols and Their Hidden Meaning*, p. 16.

⁵³ Fontana (1994), p. 67.

⁵⁴ Tresidder (1998), p. 26.

⁵⁵ This comes from the Apocrypha (Sirach Chapter 13) and is a warning against mixing with the rich. In general it is a warning against wickedness. Keep company with evil men and soon you will be “tared with the same brush”—no more virtuous than they. See Ronald Ridout and Clifford Witting (1995), p. 189.

⁵⁶ Kenner (2000), p. 17.

is used for evil purposes. Black animals are regarded as unlucky, such as black raven, black dogs, black cats and black sheep. Black denotes guilt and vice; hence to say that a man who has a black heart is a contemptuous expression for depravity. Whereas on the Chinese stage, “Bao-Gong” 包公 with blackened face represents a person who is honorable and righteous. In English, the color terms such as “Black Monday” (or Friday is not a lucky day) because on this day, many terrible events have taken place. “Black market” means illegal market or underground market, while “black hands” describes a person who is skilled in repairing machinery; “blackmail” means to make payment by force.

In short, the meaning of black and white is not absolute and general, and it depends on many conditions. In addition, it has changed from time to time, and from region to region. It is also hard to say white is good while black is bad, and vice versa.

6. An Approach to Teaching the Meaning of Color

The difference of the meaning of colors in different languages and in different cultures has been actually originated from translation. If the meaning of the color can directly correspond in translation equivalence, it is easy to teach. For example: 黑髮 (heifa) in Chinese and “black hair” in English, both indicate that “black” in the two languages is used to describe “hair,” there is no other meaning. 白髮 (baifa) in Chinese and “white hair” in English, both show that “white” in the two languages is used to describe “hair”; there is also no other meaning.

However, in the following cases it would be rather difficult to translate between two languages. For instance, when a certain color is used as an adjective in Chinese but not in a similar way in English; or a certain color is used as an adjective in English but not in a similar way in Chinese; or a certain color is used as an adjective in English, but has a different meaning in Chinese; or colors are used metaphorically.

In order to overcome the above difficulties, two methods of teaching color words are suggested here.

(1) One method is to make use of a projector to compare the meanings of colors; this

may help students to learn and to memorize more easily. For instance:

(a) In English, “black sheep” means someone who is a family member considered odd or unusual, especially because he doesn’t live up to the standard expected of him or because he doesn’t behave like other members of the family; while in Chinese, people use the expression “the horse which inflicts harm on other horses” (害群之馬), to refer to a member of a group who harms other members of the group.

(b) “Black tea” in English and “red tea” (紅茶) in Chinese indicate the same thing.

(c) “Brown bread” in English and “black bread” (黑麵包) in Chinese indicate the same thing.

(d) “Green-eyed” means someone who is green with envy in English, while 眼紅 means “red-eyed” in Chinese, which become infuriated.

(2) Classroom practice. Divide the students in the classroom into two groups. One group represents Chinese students, and the other group represents English-speaking students. The Chinese group asks the meaning of a color in Chinese, and the opponent group explains the meaning of the color in English, and vice versa.

For instance:

| | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| (a) Chinese group | English group |
| <u>Question</u> | <u>Answer</u> |
| (i) 勒索 | blackmail |
| (ii) 膽怯 | show the white feather |
| (iii) 手沾滿血的 | red-handed |
| (iv) 老當益壯 | a green old age |
| (v) 難得，極少 | once in a blue moon |
| (vi) 黑名單 | blacklist |
| (vii) 停電 | blackout |
| (viii) 黑白影片 | black and white |
| (b) English group | Chinese group |
| <u>Question</u> | <u>Answer</u> |
| (i) a white elephant | 大而無當 |
| (ii) beaten black and blue | 被打得鼻青臉腫 |
| (iii) a red-letter day | 吉日 |

| | |
|----------------------------|-------|
| (iv) green fingers (thumb) | 園藝專家 |
| (v) out of the blue | 出乎意料的 |
| (vi) white coal | 水力 |
| (vii) black gold | 原油 |
| (viii) white night | 不眠之夜 |

(c) Please tell the story of each of the following color names.

- (i) Yellow Ribbon
- (ii) the Black Country
- (iii) Greenpeace
- (iv) White Terror
- (v) Red Indian
- (vi) Blue Jeans

(d) Please translate the following English sentences into Chinese.

- (i) The piece of jade is a white crow.
- (ii) All crows are black under the sun.
- (iii) He joined the colors.
- (iv) He is a black-and-white man.
- (v) He has blue blood.

In fact, the above Chinese and English color terms are not exactly equivalent. However, they provoke a similar response in arousing students' interest in learning English.

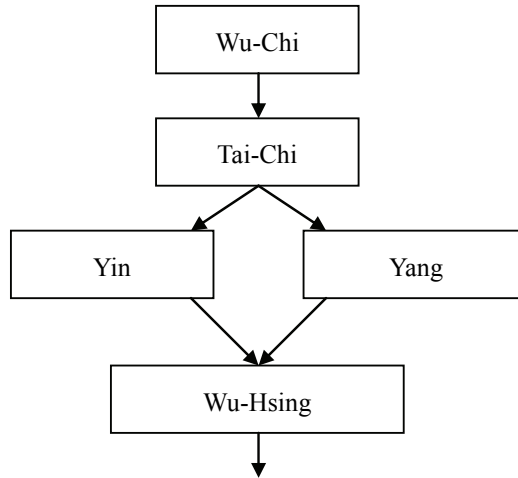
7. Concluding Remarks

Colors come from light, while the sun is the mother of light. No light, then no colors appear. Under the sun, colors not only beautify the great nature but also beautify human life, for instance, white cloud in the sky, green sea in the earth, white snow in the winter, and green field in the summer. All the colors have given aspiration to poets, and imagination to painters. So far, we have found that various colors appear in many poems, and many artists prefer to use various colors to describe the nature. When

science has developed, people like to use artificial dye to paint in order to keep colors in people's mind. The fundamental meanings of colors have been presented in all cultures, but the appearance of artificial dyes has emphasized people's cognition of various colors. Without intercultural communication, what may be a positive meaning of a color to one culture may mean something negative or entirely different to another. Above all, color terms require an understanding of cultural traditions, concepts of value and local customs.

With regard to first-year university students, most of them have little knowledge about various meaning of colors. Particularly, they know little about the application and usage of various color terms. This paper has not only presented different meanings for colors but also provided interesting stories for each color, which can inspire students. Furthermore, it is hoped that the subject will open a window for students to enjoy English language.

Appendix



| Color | Direction | Elements | Season | Animal Symbols | Planets |
|--------|-----------|----------|--------------|------------------------------|---------|
| Qing | East | Wood | Spring | Azure Dragon | Jupiter |
| Chi | South | Fire | Summer | Vermillion (Bird Phoenix) | Mars |
| White | West | Metal | Autumn | White Tiger | Venus |
| Black | North | Water | Winter | Black Warrior (Tortoise) | Mercury |
| Yellow | Center | Earth | Four Seasons | Gou Teng (Snake) | Saturn |

Source: Based on The Ancient Chinese Almanac, the above diagram of fundamental concept of Taoism is closely linked with the concept of Tai-Chi, which comes from Wu-Chi (the Void or Emptiness). The Yin-Yang principle includes five elements: namely, water, fire, wood, earth and metal, which are significant in traditional Chinese philosophy, science, astrology and medicine.

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跨文化分析顏色的象徵意涵

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摘 要

本文係嘗試開拓英語教學新領域，從而經由顏色詞的運用，擴大英文知識範圍，以期激發學生學習興趣。色彩以美麗粉飾世界並啟發學生的幻想力，增加生活情趣。長久以來，顏色用作溝通的工具。顏色的傳達可從自然和心理的關聯來說明。顏色是大自然的一種現象，具有普遍性與持久性；顏色在人類心理上卻產生某些聯想，其象徵意義與文化、神話、歷史、宗教、政治或語言相關聯。顏色的象徵意義表達出豐富的文化內涵，包括正面與負面的意義。本文剖析顏色的認知和來源，分析不同文化中色彩所代表的意義；也闡釋顏色用於溝通意義的方式和原因，且提出一種比較方法，教導學生在不同情境下如何運用中、英文顏色詞。

關鍵詞：顏色、要素、言外之意、象徵、神話

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