

The Language of Color in China

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By

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Color is a phenomenon of nature and exerts a strong influence on the ways in which human beings perceive the universe.¹ Color is also a language to communicate with others in daily life. Color is fundamental in a wide field of human exchanges, conveying messages such as traffic signals, distinguishing signs or symbols, enlivening television, films, fashion, buildings, computer-based graphics etc. in society. Color catches people's attention and transmits important information. Color language has been used throughout the history of humanity,² and connected with changes in society, economic development, society, economic development, and dynasties replacing the old with the new.

China is an ancient country with a long-standing culture and a documented history of social development spanning about five thousand years. Confucius (Kong Qiu, 孔丘, 551 BC – 479 BC)³, a great scholar who was influential in politics, education, and thought, and is known as the founder of Confucianism, said: "If someone does not see any object and its color and form of existence, the person must be a blind man".⁴ Confucius's view indicated that all people lived in societies that consisted of colors, objects, and different natural phenomena, such as snow, rain, sunshine, earthquakes, and volcanoes. Nothing visible can exist without a material form, and color is an important factor in human life.

¹ See for example Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House Inc., 1996: 55.

² See for example Finlay, Robert. "Weaving the Rainbow: Visions of Culture in World History." *Journal of World History* vol. 18 no. 4, 2007: 383-431.

³ For more information, see Confucius. *The Analects of Confucius*. Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010.

⁴ 论语□季氏篇 第十六 16.6 孔子曰：“未见颜色而言，谓之瞽。” *The Analects of Confucius, 16, "Ji Shi"*, The Yangzi River Literature Publishing House, 2015.

In ancient China, colors symbolized the five elements of the universe.⁵ Yellow was the symbol of earth, blue was the symbol of wood, black was the symbol of water, white was the symbol of metal, and red was the symbol of fire. Color language can also be associated with political, economic, cultural, religious, emotional and aesthetic meanings, since people view color in these contexts. The language of color therefore played an important role and was a motivating force of Chinese historical development.

Red is the color of blood. Red therefore gives a sense of warmth and expresses strong as well as dignified emotions. In early times, in a world full of threats such as lightning and forest fires, primitive man reacted with fear and dread when he saw a fire, so red became a signal of danger. Red (in the form of powdered iron ore) was the first pigment used by humankind, when China was inhabited by primitive societies. In ancient China (for example, in texts from the Warring States Period to the Han Dynasty) red represented honor, celebration and victory in images of nature, hunting or war. Red has thus become an important color in traditional Chinese culture, and it has been referred to as “Chinese Red” for about five thousand years. In the 21st century, Chinese people still like to use red for celebrations such as the Spring Festival and weddings.

Yellow is the color of sunlight. The Chinese word 黄 represents a yellow flame. Yellow is the symbol of bright prospects, wisdom, and civilization. Chinese Buddhism, Lamaism, and Taoism use yellow for their temples and their devotees wear yellow robes that communicate Chinese religious emotion. Yellow also symbolizes the center, so yellow held a special significance for the Dynastic Emperors for more than two thousand years of China’s history.

Green is the color of plants and trees and is the symbol of the natural environment and vitality. Green is full of youth and vigor, and also represents peace and security. Green is another important element of the traditional Chinese color system; for example, it may be seen in the tri-color glazed pottery of the Tang Dynasty. Green is also a representative color for traditional Chinese bronze vessels. In addition, Chinese people like to wear red and green clothes in the countryside, so red worn with

⁵ See for example Feng, Youlan. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 1. translated by Derk Bodde, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952: 163, 169.

green can be seen as a characteristic of Chinese folk color.

Blue is the color of the sky and the sea. It is associated with quiet emotion and expresses human expectations, as well as having a mystical appeal. Blue is also the defining characteristic Chinese blue and white porcelain, which is well-known throughout the world.

Purple symbolizes that which is noble and solemn. Mandarins and aristocrats often wore purple clothing in ancient China.

White is the symbol of a pure spirit and a clean body. White was traditionally used for underwear, which was referred to as “uncolored clothing” in ancient China. White is also an important color for mourning in traditional burial ceremonies.

Black symbolizes water and was traditionally associated with ash. It was the first special color for the Emperor in the Qin Dynasty (221 BC – 207 BC).

According to the research of Chinese archaeologists and color experts, prehistoric people understood the origins of color from their direct experience of fire, a tool that was being used by humans hundreds of thousands of years ago.⁶ Primitive shamanic totem worship was practiced by prehistoric clans, and the ancient prototype pictographic signs laid the foundations for colored visual images. Chinese written characters were developed from these early pictographic signs, becoming words with distinctive shapes. One such character is the Chinese word for fire, which is written as 火, and communicates the image of a burning flame. A pictogram can also convey information about different temperatures, represented using different colors including red, yellow, white, blue and black (ash or charcoal).⁷ Chinese archaeologists discovered and analyzed

⁶ The five colors of red, yellow, blue, white and black were once all associated with the description of fire and light. For example, black was associated with smoke, blue with the color of wood being taken by fire and yellow the color of the sun (see, for example, the “Shuowen Jiezi” manuscript).

⁷ For further information on the subject of the pictogram see, for example, Hoosain, Rumjahn. *Psycholinguistic Implications for Linguistic Relativity: A Case Study of Chinese*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Ass. Inc., Publishers, 1991:2.

black ash deposits in the habitat of the “Peking Man”⁸ in the Beijing area, from fires used 500,000 years ago. Chinese archaeologists are still discovering red powder deposits in the habitat of the “Upper Cave Man” in the Zhoukoudian area of Beijing, dated from between 100,000 to 18,000 years ago.⁹ The people of the Upper Cave culture used red powder (iron ore ground into powder) and black ash to decorate themselves, communicating information to each other via the primitive language of color. These primitive types of color communication can be thought of as the roots of ancient Chinese aesthetics. Via the symbolism of both totems and tattoos, a wide vocabulary became available for the prehistoric people of China to communicate information to one another.

In prehistoric times, human beings created a totem system of colored visual images, through which they tried to placate or solicit help from their various nature deities.¹⁰ In the early stages of development among primitive societies, totem and tattoo images were a form of color language, conveying meanings associated with the specific behavior of the tribal clan, and can be seen as the earliest symbols of mankind’s original belief systems. For example, in the ancient book of rites,¹¹ Li Yun (礼记.礼运) mentions “kylin [chimera], phoenix, tortoise, dragon” as tribal totems, worshipped by China’s ancient ancestors to request protection from the gods. Moruo Guo, an author, historian and scientist,¹² wrote that the phoenix was a totem of the Yin nation in the time of the Shang Dynasty and that the dragon was a totem of the Hua-xia nation in the Xia Dynasty. From this, it can be said that the totem was an early form of color language,

⁸ The Peking Man, known as *Sinanthropus pekinensis*, is thought to have originated in the Middle Pleistocene period, approximately 700,000 – 200,000 years ago. In the cave where the fossilized remains of the male was uncovered, archaeologists discovered much additional material that shed light upon his lifestyle. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/449>

⁹ The upper cave was a part of the same hill where the Peking Man’s remains were found, and since the characteristics (skull shape, artifacts nearby) of the people there were different from those of the earlier remains, a separate classification was given. See <https://www.britannica.com/place/Zhoukoudian>

¹⁰ See, for example, Jung, Carl G. with M-L von Franz, Joseph L Henderson, Jolande Jacobi, and Aniela Jaffe. *Man and His Symbols*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1964.

¹¹ *The Annotated Edition of The Book of Rites*. World Digital Library, last updated Jan 3, 2018. <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/11379/>

¹² Cited in Lu, Yongxiang. *A History of Chinese Science and Technology*, Vol. 1. Berlin Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2014: 97.

used to indicate tribal loyalties, and was an indicator of the aesthetic sensibilities of the early people of China.

CHAPTER TWO

CHINESE TRADITIONAL COLOR CULTURE IN PREHISTORIC AND ANCIENT TIMES

The history of humans in the territory of China began in the Prehistoric era with the primitive clan society of the Paleolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age cultures. The Ancient era (2100 BC – 221 BC) spanned the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties as well as the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods.¹³ The subsequent Imperial era (221 BC – 1911 AD) began with the Qin Dynasty, followed by the Han Dynasty, then the Wei, Jin, and Wu Hu States, followed by the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Sui and the Tang Dynasties, the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, the Song, Liao, Jin and Western Xia Dynasties, and the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties.

Throughout these eras, China's traditional color culture¹⁴ was emerging, developing, and expanding into new possibilities of expression as cultures connected, technology developed, and aesthetic sensitivities deepened.¹⁵

2.1 Cultural characteristics of “Wushan Man” in the Longgu-po region

According to research by Chinese archeologists, “Wushan Man” was the first known ancestor of human beings in ancient China. The Wushan

¹³ See for example Loewe, Michael and Edward L. Shaughnessy. *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

¹⁴ Feng, Xiuwen. *On Aesthetic and Cultural Issues in Pragmatic Translation: Based on the Translation of Brand Names and Brand Slogans*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017.

¹⁵ See for example Feng, Xiuwen. *On Aesthetic and Cultural Issues in Pragmatic Translation: Based on the Translation of Brand Names and Brand Slogans*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2017.

people lived in the Longgupo region about two million years ago.¹⁶ The Wushan were able to walk upright and they made simple, rough stone tools for hunting, but they did not know how to use fire.

2.2 Cultural characteristics of “Peking Man” in the Zhoukoudian region

Chinese archeologists discovered black ash deposits from the time of the Peking Man in the Zhoukoudian region,¹⁷ dating from about 500,000 years ago. The ashes indicate that the Peking Man’s people were skilled at using fire and used it in everyday life. The use of fire enhanced humans’ ability to survive in their natural environment. Gradually, they became aware of the use of natural color pigments, and this was the first step towards an original color culture during this very early period of enlightenment. As the German statesman and philosopher Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) indicated, human beings first gained the ability to ignite fire by striking stones together, a very important characteristic which distinguished men from animals. It may be said that humans’ development of the skills required to use and control fire marked one of the most important turning points in the history of human evolution. This development of the ability to control nature was achieved through accumulated experience; at the same time, human intelligence made a qualitative leap when primitive people gradually discovered how to farm the land and to co-exist with nature.

2.3 Culture characteristics of “Hetao Man” in the Shuidonggou region

Dating back some 100,000 to 50,000 years, the Hetao culture of the Late Paleolithic period represents an important developmental stage.¹⁸ According to archaeological finds in the Shuidonggou region of Gansu Province and in Inner Mongolia, the Hetao people of the Salawusu River

¹⁶ Ball, Philip. *The Water Kingdom*. London: Bodley Head, Random House, 2016: 51.

¹⁷ Johanson, Donald C. and Blake Edgar. *From Lucy to Language*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

¹⁸ Dani, Ahmed Hasan and V. M. Masson, eds. *History of Civilizations of Central Asia*, vol 1. Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1992: 103.

area had evolved to the stage where their skeletons were the same as those of modern human beings, basically completing the evolutionary process from ape to human form. The Hetao made stone tools which were more refined than those of the Zhoukoudian Peking Man. In Hetao culture settlements in Shuidonggou, remains of stone tools were found among the materials used to make them: quartzite, mica sandstone, and flint, the latter having been important for starting fires. The stone tools showed signs of repair, including some cases where repairs appear to have been made after the tribesmen had defended themselves from attack. These repaired stone implements demonstrate the advances made by the Hetao, and are evidence of both the primary and secondary processing of raw materials.

2.4 Color culture of “Upper Cave Man” in the Paleolithic period (18,000 BC – 10,000 BC)

About 100,000 to 18,000 years ago, the “Upper Cave culture” was significant in laying the foundations of traditional Chinese culture and history.¹⁹ In Upper Cave society, based on findings from a large number of cultural relics excavated from the ruins of dwellings, there were relatively fewer stone tools and more bone items. Many of the items crafted from bone, such as spearheads made from the antlers of the red deer, were made with meticulous care, shaped not only by scraping and grinding, but also through cutting or drilling holes. In the case of bone needles, typically the body was rendered thin and smooth with a sharp tip, and some kind of pointed tool was used to bore a hole for the thread to pass through. The discovery of bone needles proves that the Upper Cave people possessed the ability to sew leather clothing to protect their bodies from cold temperatures. Most strikingly of all, many decorative articles have been found amongst the remains in the Upper Cave cultural sites,²⁰ including one made from local rock, with a slightly greenish cast, drilled on both sides, and formed in the shape of a chicken heart for a woman to wear as jewelry. Others finds include small items of jewelry, such as drilled stone beads made from polished white limestone, as well as

¹⁹ Wu Rukang and John W. Olsen, eds. *Paleoanthropology and Paleolithic Archeology in The People's Republic of China*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press Inc., 2009.

²⁰ Yu, Weichao. *A Journey into China's Antiquity: Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty, Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, Northern and Southern Song Dynasties*, Vol. 3. Beijing: Morning Glory Publishers, 1997.

perforated fox, badger, deer, and dog teeth. Many of the ornaments were painted red, the pigment having been made from powdered hematite ore. In addition to these accessories, a few pieces of red material showing traces of hematite were found, as well as some long pieces of hematite ore from which powdered dye would have been ground, and also a makeup brush to apply powder directly onto the face. These examples demonstrate that, even as a primitive society, the Upper Cave culture had a strong interest in aesthetics.

In addition, the discovery of the remains of human bones next to scattered hematite powder suggests that this substance was used for funeral ceremonies. According to historians, the Upper Cave culture developed in the late Paleolithic period. Archeologists who excavated the ruins of this primitive tribal culture found both red and black pigments, indicating that the people not only had an aesthetic appreciation of color, but they also knew about processing natural materials into dyes or pigments which were used either in their own clothing or for votive purposes. Hematite ore powder and black ash obtained from combustion were the first colors used by primitive people. This suggests that the Chinese preference for red may have originated in the ancient Upper Cave culture, and it could be argued that traditional Chinese color and culture started from that point.

2.5 Color in the Yangshao culture (5000 BC – 3000 BC), in the Neolithic period

Chinese Neolithic culture is dated from about 10,000 years ago. The Yangshao culture, which emerged about 7000 years ago, was a primitive Neolithic culture typical of those in the prehistoric territory of China.²¹ The name Yangshao refers to the mid-to-downstream area of the Yellow River in the Neolithic period, and the Yangshao culture represents an important indicator of the beginnings of what is today seen as China's national culture.

In 1921, Chinese archeologists discovered pieces of colored pottery decorated with dark red patterns in Yangshao ruins in Henan Province in

²¹ Fairbank, John K. and Merle Goldman. *China: A New History, Second Edition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006: 32, 35.

Northwest China. They also discovered many types of painted pottery, the surfaces of which were decorated with patterns in red-brown, black, white, and dark red. As a consequence, in archeological terms Yangshao culture is also known as the “Painted Pottery culture”.

Painted pottery is an important characteristic of Yangshao culture. Many examples of painted ceramics have been found in various Yangshao ruins, the main materials being fine red or gray clay, as well as black clay and white clay. Of all the examples found, those with red or black patterns have attracted the most attention; these vessels have glazed surfaces bearing red or red-brown designs, and were decorated according to the various totem symbols of the clans. This combination of color and graphic symbolism stemmed from everyday life, and suggests that color was becoming an important element of social development. The language of color in Yangshao culture can therefore be seen as an important element of social development in the Neolithic Age.

The colors of Yangshao painted pottery indicate that early humans had made marked progress in their knowledge and use of natural color sources. Many styles coexisted in this period. Some examples of ceramics decorated with fish forms and vivid colors were unearthed from the ruins of a Neolithic site in Banpu, Shanxi Province. Several examples of ceramics decorated with vivid frog motifs were unearthed in the ruins of a Neolithic settlement in Miaodi-gou, Henan Province. In addition, the “Jomon-style” corded rope pattern²² is a style particularly associated with Yangshao painted pottery.

In addition to the beautiful painted ceramics found at these sites, Chinese archeologists have discovered other types of colorful artifacts around the country, including:

- A clay bottle styled in the shape of a head, the surface of which was decorated with a blue-black reticulated fish motif and etched with purple lines, unearthed in the ruins of a Neolithic settlement in Qinandadiwan, Gansu Province, Northwest China (5850 BC);
- A ceramic stick and small ceramic pieces colored red and yellow,

²² The “Jomon” pattern, generally associated with Japanese historical ceramics and designs, is a textured effect achieved by making an imprint of rope or corded string.

- unearthed in the ruins of tombs in Baoji Beishouling, Shanxi Province, North China (5150 BC – 5020 BC);
- A vermilion-colored lacquerware bowl, unearthed in the Yuyao Amudu ruins of Zhejiang Province, Southeast China (5000 BC);
 - Some painted pots in gray, black and blue which were found in the ruins of a settlement in the Jiangsai cultural area, located in the north of Lintong District, Shaanxi Province, Northwest China (4600 BC – 4400 BC);
 - Red ceramic bowls decorated using black and blue pigments with totem designs such as fish, human-faced fishes, fishes and birds together, and also sheep and plants, unearthed from the ruins of a settlement in the Banpu region of Shanxi Province, North China (4000 BC);
 - Ribbed fabric in a pale shade of vermilion, discovered in archaeological sites in Zhengzhou Qintai, Henan Province, East-Central China (3500 BC);
 - Painted pottery depicting an orange spinning wheel (an important motif in Yangshao culture) and both red and brown-red geometric figures, found in an archeological site in Junxian County, Henan Province (3000 BC).

From the Yangshao culture remains, it may be seen that the application of color was of considerable importance. Yangshao painted ceramics are a major theme within Neolithic ceramic culture. Their scope includes Laoguantai culture painted pottery found in the Wei Jing River Basin region; Dahecun-type painted pottery distributed across the Songshan Mountains in the Central Plains region; Dawenkou culture painted ceramics distributed over the lower Yellow River and Huaihe River Valleys; Majiayao culture painted pottery found in the upper Yellow River Valley region, and so on.

Yangshao painted pottery culture thus had a significant influence on primitive society and made a major contribution to the history of color culture in China. The painted ceramics and colorful textiles that have been unearthed from this period represent priceless treasures within Chinese traditional color culture, indicating how early aesthetic perceptions and concepts were forming and developing. The most common palette for painted pottery and textiles in primitive societies in China was red (hematite ore powder and vermilion), carbon black (from burnt cinders or black manganese ore), and yellow (from 雌ci ore). This marked the beginning of

the system of traditional color in Chinese society.

2.6 Color in the Microlithic culture (15,000 BC – 6000 BC)

The Microlithic culture was a Neolithic subculture which ranged from the northeast of China to the Nei-Mongol, Gansu, and Xinjiang regions, and was important in terms of the development of color culture.²³ Historians have offered many views on the subject of the Microlithic period, but have been unable to supply specific dates for this era.

The people of the Microlithic culture produced many small, refined microliths made from various types of stone, including flint and agate. These artifacts show similar characteristics across all of the excavated ruins of this culture, which is why the term “Microlithic” was adopted. In recent times, Chinese archeologists have discovered about three hundred Microlithic relics in the Jinta region of Gansu Province. The materials used included good quality, finely transparent agate of various colors such as yellow, red, and white, as well as silica, flint, quartz, and soft jade. These stone objects appear to have been weapons and tools for hunting: for example, arrowheads, javelin tips, spearheads, knives, and so on. The microliths all bear distinctive characteristics of the desert and grassland color culture of Northern China.

In addition to these small stone implements, items of pottery also show distinctive cultural characteristics. In the ruins of a Microlithic settlement in Angangxi (Helongjiang Province, Northeast China) brown ceramics painted with simple parallel lines, cross-hatched lines or triangles, and spaced solid or broken lines, have been discovered. In the Linxi region of Inner Mongolia, Microlithic relics unearthed by archeologists include five-color (gray, black, brown, yellow, and red) painted ceramics.

Microlithic cultural sites dating from an estimated 5000 to 6000 years ago and attributed by archaeologists to the Hongshan culture were discovered in the Chifeng Hongshan region of Inner Mongolia. The relics unearthed there include bowls, pots, and other forms of painted pottery with a delicate texture and a surface color of orange-red or black, decorated with black or dark red geometric graphics. In addition, a number

²³ See Zhang, Chi. “The Discovery of Early Pottery in China,” *Documenta Praehistorica*, Vol. 29, 2002: 29-35.

of red clay pots were found, decorated in various shades of red, with designs painted in simple grid-like patterns, their simplicity being enhanced by the single color. Many rustic black and red bowls and urns were also discovered, painted with simple small comb-like patterns—one of the characteristic motifs of Microlithic culture pottery. In addition, the archaeological sites yielded many exquisite, smooth-surfaced, brightly colored jade stones of blue, yellow, green and brown, carved into various creatures such as pigs, turtles, birds, fish, and cicada. These Microlithic relics all reflect Neolithic cultural characteristics of the northern region of China.

The typical tones used in Microlithic culture were yellow, red, dark red, orange, brown, gray, white, and black. Chinese archeologists are of the opinion that the painted pottery of the Microlithic culture reflects characteristics of the Yangshao culture from the Yellow River Basin,²⁴ suggesting that the two Neolithic-period cultures influenced each other and contributed to a new form of color culture.

²⁴ See for example Li, Li. *China's Cultural Relics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

CHAPTER THREE

THE COLOR CULTURE OF THE XIA, SHANG AND ZHOU DYNASTIES AND THE SANXING-DUI, SPRING AND AUTUMN AND WARRING STATES PERIODS

In the historical record *Liji*, Tan-Gong-Shang wrote that the people of the Xia Clan loved black, that the Shang people liked white, and that the Zhou people respected red.²⁵ The following sections explore some elements of color preference and the development of techniques for its manipulation in the late Neolithic to Bronze Age cultures of China.

3.1 The color culture in the Xia Dynasty (2100 BC – 1600 BC)

From a historical perspective, the Xia Dynasty period was the last period of primitive clan society in China,²⁶ and slave culture was in its initial stages of formation. The color culture of the Xia Dynasty was therefore a crystallization of the color aesthetics that had been developing throughout the prehistoric period. From an archaeological perspective, the Longshan culture is considered representative of Xia-period color culture.

The Longshan culture ruins are located in Longshanzhen, Chengziya, in the Zhangqiu region of Shandong Province. In 1928, Chinese archeologists discovered many ancient relics there, including stone, pottery, bone,

²⁵ Ge, Zhaoguang, translated by Michael S. Duke and Josephine Chiu-Duke. *An Intellectual History of China: Before the Seventh Century CE*. Lieden, Boston: Brill NV, 2014: 133.

²⁶ Zhang, Peng Chuan. “Regional Traits and Mobility of the Design Culture in Ancient China and the Starting Point for Design Education in Contemporary China.” *Iridescent* 1:1, 2011: 118-129.

clamshell, and horn tools. Ceramics were typically colored black, red, white, yellow, and gray. Of these, one particularly characteristic type was thin-walled but very strong polished black ceramic vessels. As a consequence archaeologists sometimes refer to the Longshan culture as the Black Pottery culture.

In 1931, Hou Gang culture remains were discovered in Anyang, Henan Province, and the site was subdivided into three cultural layers. The upper layer contained materials from the Xiaotun culture (Shang Dynasty), the middle layer was Longshan culture (Xia Dynasty), and the lower layer was Yangshao (Neolithic). This archaeological discovery proved that Longshan culture represented a new color culture, the Longshan finds being typical of late Neolithic relics.²⁷ Longshan culture was evident across a large region, ranging east to Shandong, west to Shaanxi, north to southern Liaoning, and south to the Zhejiang region. Longshan ceramic products are distinguished by their advanced technical features: the use of pottery wheels, enabling the creation of thin and uniform ceramic walls, and a high degree of control of kiln temperature and air intake to achieve optimal conditions for oxidation and reduction, resulting in a very uniform color without impurities. Base materials included fine black clay, gray clay, and terracotta red clay, sometimes mixed with coarse sand in the case of the gray, red, and white pottery.

In the Xia Dynasty, black was a popular and respected color. According to written historical records, the Lu Shi and the Xia clans particularly appreciated black. For example, Mozi (c. 470-390 BC; a prominent Warring States period philosopher)²⁸ imitated the style of the Xia Dynasty and wore black cloth. Hanfeizi, another famous Warring States period scholar, wrote of Shun (an ancient Chinese ancestor) and Yu (the first Emperor of the Xia Dynasty) that all of their household utensils were black in color. His historical record also mentions a sacrificial vessel used by Yu which was black on the outside and red on the inside.²⁹ These examples indicate the importance of the black pottery culture in the Xia

²⁷ Liu, Li. *The Chinese Neolithic – Trajectories to Early States*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

²⁸ Fraser, Chris. *The Philosophy of the Mozi: The First Consequentialists*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2016.

²⁹ *Hanfeizi Jijie* 韩非子集解 (Collected Notes on the Hanfeizi) (1998), compiled by Wang Xianshen 王先慎. Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju.

Dynasty. Subsequently, Longshan black pottery would exert a considerable influence on the color culture of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC – 207 BC).

3.2 The color culture in the Shang Dynasty (1600 BC – 1100 BC)

In the Shang Dynasty period, red-brown pigment was still made using powdered red iron ore, but many other useful colored ores had been discovered. Azurite, daqing and bianqing were used for blue, while vermilion was made using cinnabar (mercury sulfide), white from white lead, yellow from orpiment (arsenic sulfide), and black from manganese oxide, smoked pine, carbon black. During this period, dyes were also extracted from natural plant pigments and used in daily life. For example, the crimson red dye alizarin was extracted from madder plants and used for dyeing cloth in this period. Plants including indigo (for various shades of blue), hispidarthraxon and gardenia (for various shades of yellow), and tallow (used to make black dye) were cultivated in gardens and used for dyeing royal clothing. By this point in time, mineral pigments and vegetable dyes covered the five main colors that form the core of Chinese color theory: red, yellow, blue, black and white.

During the Shang Dynasty,³⁰ China's ancient slave-based society was further developed from its antecedents in the Xia Dynasty. The Shang Dynasty rulers imposed a system of slavery, introducing a series of measures to promote private ownership. According to the historical record of Yin Ben Ji, in the Zhong Ding period of the Shang Dynasty, the capital was moved to Northwest Zhengzhou. Subsequently, in the Pangeng period of the Shang Dynasty, it was moved again: this time to Anyang in Henan. Anyang remained the capital until the late period of the Emperor of Zhou's reign (also Shang Dynasty), with the result that there are Shang cultural sites located across large swaths of Shaanxi and Henan.

Early Shang Dynasty cultural relics have been found in archaeological sites in the Zhengzhou region, along with workshops for processing bronze, pottery, and bone. Finds from the early Shang period include

³⁰ See for example Underhill, Anne P., ed. *A Companion to Chinese Archeology*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

bronze ritual vessels and a variety of bronze tools (arrows, knives, drills, hooks, and other devices), glazed and unglazed pottery, and musical instruments. In addition bone, jade, shells, fabrics, ivory combs and other artifacts have been found there. Early Shang Dynasty sacrificial objects found in tombs include gold jewelry, bronze, jade, agate, shell and other artifacts.³¹ In addition, bones have been found inscribed with oracle characters, incised using bronze drills.

Archaeologists who have analyzed the bronze relics found in early Shang Dynasty sites are of the opinion that smelting technology had already developed to a very high level. Henan culture relics found in late Shang Dynasty ruins illustrate a great deal about the aesthetic heritage of that period. Since 1928, archaeologists have excavated the Shang period Anyang archaeological site seventeen times, and have also explored the areas surrounding it. Finds from Yin culture ruins also reflect the rich cultural heritage of the late Shang Dynasty. Discoveries include house foundations, cellars, tombs, and chariot pits, along with cultural relics such as various bronze items, ceramics, bone, stone, jade, and bones carved with oracle characters.

The bronze culture of the Shang Dynasty was a very important element in the development of traditional Chinese color language.³² In the Shang Dynasty, pottery-making technology had reached a mature stage, which in turn promoted the development of more heat-resistant ceramic crucibles suitable for smelting copper and tin to make bronze. Some of the larger pots used for smelting bronze have been found in Anyang,³³ and large red or grey ceramic crucibles have also been found in the Shang Dynasty layer of the Zhengzhou site.

Bronzeware was produced in a five-step process: first, smelting the pure metals (tin and copper) from their ores, then refinement of the

³¹ See for example Thorp, Robert L. and Virginia Bower. *Spirit and Ritual: The Morse Collection of Ancient Chinese Art, Catalog*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982: 40.

³² See for example Li, Xue quin. *The Wonder of Chinese Bronzes*. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980: 29.

³³ See for example de Laet, Sigfried J. and Ahmed Hasan Dani, eds. *History of Humanity: From the Third Millennium to the Seventh Century BC, Vol. 2*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing and Routledge, 1996: 728.

smelted materials, then combination of the molten metals in a crucible, followed by casting into a mold, and, lastly, decoration.

Shang bronzeware can be divided into seven categories: weapons, tableware, wine goblets, water containers, musical instruments, chariots, and other miscellaneous wares. Shang period bronze decorations often featured the faces of beasts; one famous example is the bronze animal mask, set in strong contrast with a cloud or sunbeam motif in the background. Other common designs include nipple shapes, sheep heads, and dragons. The solemn style of Shang bronzes' depiction of the supernatural evokes a visual sense of awe. Shang bronzes typically bear inscriptions, characterized by thick brush fonts and short texts, usually depicting the clan emblem or name.






From the above description of the characteristics of bronzeware from this period, it may be seen that Shang bronze technology had reached a very high standard in terms of design, casting, decoration, and other features. Among the known artifacts from this period, the Anyang bronze "Si Mu Wu Ding", which weighs around 1370 kg, stands out as a rare treasure among the Bronze Age relics of the world, firmly placing Shang bronzes among humanity's greatest cultural treasures.


The bronze culture of the Shang Dynasty is considered highly significant for the remarkable and beautiful metallurgical artifacts it produced, but at the same time, society's understanding of the nature of color and its manipulation was increasing as people developed more pigments and dyes from natural sources. Color was seen as an important basic element and was applied in every field of society in the Shang Dynasty, particularly in terms of dyes, textiles, fur garments and the use of colored stone such as jade.

In the Shang Dynasty, white was respected, and represents an important characteristic of the color culture of the period. This preference for white was linked to the totemic worship of the sun god. In ancient times, Chinese people associated white with a blaze of light, and because the sun was the source of life and it shines all over the world, it was seen as a symbol of brightness. The royal family and lesser nobility all wore white clothing in this period, since white was seen as a symbol of honor and a propitious omen. Despite the importance of white to the Shang Dynasty, various other colors were also used in society, and it was during

this period the court first created a post for an administrative officer responsible for textiles and colors, referred to as the Shangsi (上丝).

The ancient Chinese gradually developed their understanding of color and used it widely in their social life.³⁴ Shang Dynasty ideas on the subject of color theory can be seen as belonging to an early stage of philosophical enlightenment. For example, the Shang Dynasty Oracle defines the four cardinal points – south, north, west and east – plus the center, totaling “five directions”, a concept which was to remain important in Chinese philosophy through the ages to come. The people of the Shang Dynasty understood and applied these cardinal directions in their daily life, relating them, for example, to the different types of wind that came from different directions, the changing seasons, and the climate, knowing well that all of these interrelated factors had impacts on agricultural production and the socio-economic welfare of society. Also during this period, the ancient Chinese created five pictographic symbols to represent the colors. Four of them appear in the Shang Dynasty Oracle (red, yellow, black and white). The character for blue is recorded later, in a Zhou Dynasty inscription.

Red (*Chi*):  yellow (*huang*):  blue (*qing*): 
 white (*bai*):  and black (*hei*): 

Each of the pictograms is linked in some way with the character for flame (*huo*):  (later 火) to indicate the corresponding relationship between the color and fire:

- Red is derived from firelight. It is the symbolic color of hot burning fire, and is the emblem of the South of China.
- Yellow is a light color of fire. It looks like sunlight, and is also the color of earth, in addition to being a symbol of Central China.
- Blue is a light color of fire, and it is a symbol of the East of China.
- White is a light color of fire, it is like the sunlight shining over the earth, or like the flame of a candle, and it is a symbol of the West

³⁴ See Pankenier, David W. *Astrology and Cosmotology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven*. Cambridge University Press, 2013: 211.

- of China.
- Black is the smoking color of flame, and is a symbol of the North of China.

As this classification shows, the Shang people had already come to think of the land of China as being divided into “Five Directions” (sometimes referred to as “Five Parties”) represented by the four compass points and the center. They also had a profound understanding of the relationship between the different forms of flame and their associated colors, as articulated through the “Five Colors” theory. The integration of the concepts of the Five Colors and Five Directions/Parties indicates a new approach to color in this period: namely, its application in an abstract, symbolic way, using colors to mean something beyond the natural phenomena they resemble. This development can be seen as a precursor of the more in-depth philosophical approaches to color that were to come in the Warring States and Qi Dynasty periods.

3.3 The color culture during the Zhou Dynasty Period (1100 BC – 771 BC)

In terms of the historical stages of societal development, the Western Zhou Dynasty and the Shang Dynasty both belong to the category of slave societies. However, during the Western Zhou Dynasty, the slave society gradually began to crumble and a feudal system started to emerge. The color culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty therefore incorporates the characteristics of two historical stages: the later period of slave society, and early feudal society. The character of color culture in the early Western Zhou Dynasty was similar to that of the late Shang Dynasty. For instance the modeling and decoration of Western Zhou Dynasty bronzes followed the style of the Shang Dynasty. As a consequence, both the Shang Dynasty and the Zhou Dynasty are often referred to as Bronze Age cultures.

However, the bronze culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty progressively developed its own characteristics. This was particularly true after Emperor Zhou Wu Wang died and his successor, Emperor Zhougong, founded the “Zouli” constitution which was used in the administration of the country. The rulers of the Western Zhou Dynasty used the new laws to manage the people and the relationships between the various classes in society. In

addition, the ruler of the Zhou Dynasty established a grade system for bronzes, based upon use, type, and quantity, along with strict and unalterable stipulations regulating the type and quantity of bronze vessels that officials of various levels were entitled to use. As a consequence, the Zhouli political system both influenced and had a direct effect upon Zhou Dynasty bronze culture.

After the Western Zhou Dynasty destroyed the Shang Dynasty, a feudal system was gradually established, and society, along with the economy and culture, developed rapidly. During this period, bronze crafts and the art of color reached a new stage of cultural maturity; for example, the decorative patterns of the Shang bronzes were mysterious, on occasions horrific, whereas those of the Western Zhou featured smooth, simple graphic patterns. Examples include two-ring-shaped patterns, dragon motifs, ripple graphics, fish-scale patterns and other decorative designs which reflected the simple aesthetic sensibilities of these ancient people. These features are associated with the unique style of Zhou Dynasty bronzeware.

One of the Zhou Dynasty records³⁵ represents the Five Directions between the five color hieroglyphs for red, yellow, blue, white and black. In the Zhou Dynasty, a new fundamental materialistic concept called the “Five Elements” philosophy emerged, which proposed that the structure of the physical world consisted of the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal and water.³⁶ Combined with the Five Color and Five Party of Shang Dynasty philosophy, these three concepts were integrated to create the ancient Chinese tripartite system of the “Five Color theory.” This was the first such color theory system in the whole of the ancient world.

According to the Five Color theory of the Zhou Dynasty, red, yellow, and blue comprised a chromatic series, while white and black comprised an achromatic series. All were considered to be pure colors (primary colors) from the Zhou Dynasty onwards. Ancient Chinese people believed that the colors of all natural objects were derived from these five basic

³⁵ See Jun, Wenren. *Ancient Chinese Encyclopedia of Technology: Translation and Annotation of the Kaogong ji (The Artificers' Record)*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013.

³⁶ See, for example, Allan, Sarah. *Shape of the Turtle: The Myth, Art and Cosmos in Early China*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991: 176.