

Module 13: "Color and Society"

Lecture 34: "Traditional Cultural Color Symbolism"

The Lecture Contains:

- ☰ Traditional Culture and Color Symbolism
- ☰ China
- ☰ Characteristics of the Five Elements
- ☰ Chinese Seasons and Color Symbols
- ☰ Japan
- ☰ Color Symbolism of Months

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Traditional Culture and Color Symbolism

Let us identify some of the traditional cultures and their preferences toward colors

China

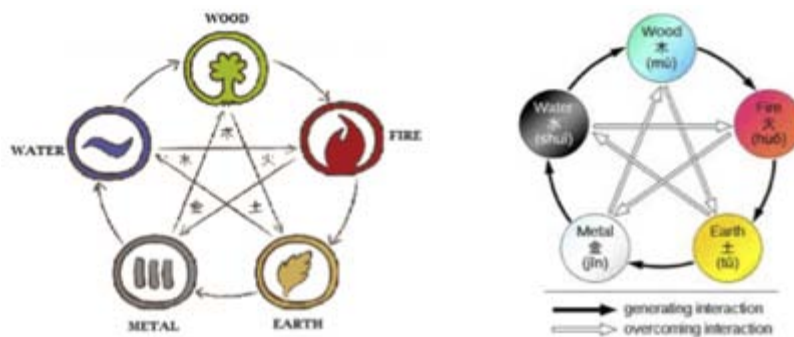


Plate4 Five Natural Elements

(Source: <http://www.google.co.in/search?q=ancient+chinese+five+elements&hl=en&noj=1&prmd=imvns&tbn=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=ngDWT7ruPMSxrAe08NX7Dw&ved=0CHEQsAQ&biw=1350&bih=559> ; June 11, 2012)

Ancient China symbolized 'five natural elements' of the earth with five colors. Symbolically the colors associated with nature.

For more than 2000 years, the Chinese people have used brilliant colors. Today in modern China, red is a very popular color. However, contrary to popular belief, ancient peoples did not pay special attention to the color red. Traditional Chinese physics taught that the Five Elements of nature that surround us are- water, fire, wood, metal and earth, in that order. They correspond to black, red, blue-green, white and yellow, respectively. Five elements refer to the five basic substances that constitute the material world, namely wood, fire, earth, metal, water and their movement and transformation in the universe. In humans, for example, the elements determine our whole physical, psychological and emotional balance.

The ancient Chinese believed that wood, fire, earth, metal and water were indispensable to the natural world. These elements have different characteristics but they are closely related rather than separate or isolated.

Ancient Chinese people believed that **the five elements** made everything in nature. They gradually established a relationship between colors and the principle of the five elements, which guided the natural movement of heaven and the heavenly Tao.

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Characteristics of the Five Elements



Water: Solitude, privacy, introspection, philosophy, mystery, truth, honesty, anxiety, nervousness, insecurity. **(Images: Black, Night, Winter)**



Wood: Leadership, assertiveness, creativity, planning, decision-making, competitiveness, conflict, anger, frustration. **(Images: Green, Morning, Spring)**



Fire: Self-expression, emotional extremes, empathy, extrovert, attention-seeking, sociable, talkative. **(Images: Red, Mid-day, Midsummer)**



Earth: Caring, supportive, nourishing, family-oriented, stability, grounding, "mother hen", worrier. **(Images: Yellow, Afternoon, Late summer)**



Metal: Precise, meticulous, logical, analytical, moderation, self-control, morality, tendency to pessimism **(Images: White, Evening, Autumn)**

Taoism comes from the word Tao ('dow'), which means 'the Way'.

Taoism talks about two kinds of energy- female ('yin') and male ('yang').



Yin (female) - symbolizes TIGER



Yang (male) - symbolizes DRAGON

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Chinese Seasons and Color Symbols

Chinese civilization has shown close relationship with nature and symbolic colors are chosen through observation of seasons and animal characteristic that have their rational reasoning.

Symbols and Metaphors in Taoism

Plate5 The Four Cardinal Directions

North- Tortoise (Black Warrior); Snake- symbolizes heaven and earth, also immortal creature;
Winter, Black, Water

East- Dragon lives in sky, rivers, oceans controls water and rain. Dragon is responsible for harvest;
Spring, Green, Wood_

South- Red Bird (Phoenixes) - birds of south symbolizes 'peace'; Summer, Red, Fire_

West- Tiger, Fall, White, Metal, Cranes- symbolizes 'long life';

(Read more: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/ssu-ling.shtml> ; June 11, 2012)

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Japan

Japan like any other traditional society has preference of colors associated with auspicious event or rituals. Interestingly most of the traditional colors are related to natural environment. Red and White are auspicious colors (good luck). You will find the two colors used for many special occasions, such as weddings, and births. Since tassels are used to decorate things of celebration, red and white are the colors you will find (unless it is black and white, or all black for a funeral). There is an observance in Japan that you may find amusing - you are in a train station and see a couple. Modern day it is common for men and women to wear black suit. However, the only way to tell is if the woman's obituary is colorful or solid black, and the man's tie is white or black. Colorful/white is for a wedding, black/black is for the funeral

Blue and White are also prominent colors in Japanese fabrics and dishware. Yukata is a blue and white cotton fabric used to make summer kimonos called "yukata". It is also used for the "temari-like" patterns found throughout their dishware. Japan has rich traditional of art and crafts design. Following are examples (plates 6) of such works



Plate6 Wood cut print



Fabric Design, Japan



Ceramics, Japan



Mask

Plates 6 Art & Crafts of Japan

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Color Symbolism of Months

The rich combination of red, white, blue, green etc are found in Japanese art and craft works. Traditional Japanese culture associate with the following symbolism of colors through months












	January	<i>Pine</i> : sprout green and deep purple
	February	<i>Red-blossom plum</i> : crimson and purple
	March	<i>Peach</i> : peach and khaki
	April	<i>Cherry</i> : white and burgundy
	May	<i>Orange Flower</i> : dead-leaf yellow and purple
	June	<i>Artemisia (shrub)</i> : sprout green and yellow
	July	<i>Lily</i> : red and dead-leaf yellow
	August	<i>Cicada wing</i> : cedar bark and sky blue
	September	<i>Aster</i> : lavender and burgundy
	October	<i>Bush Clover</i> : rose and slate blue
	November	<i>Maple</i> : vermillion and grey-green
	December	<i>Chrysanthemum</i> : lavender and deep blue

Plate 7 Color Symbolism of Months

(Ref. (Read more: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/ssu-ling.shtml> ; June 11, 2012)

The above information shows the Japanese tradition and their close association with nature. Each month is closely related to the changing season and the color. Naturally following through such tradition human beings are interactive and closer to the mother-nature.

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Like other cultures in Japan they associate the following colors (plate 8) are related to emotion and human nature









-  Yellow - In the Far East, a sacred color; but in the West it can mean treachery
-  Red - Passion; gets the blood flowing more intensely.
-  Orange - Represents knowledge and civilization
-  Violet - Stately and royal
-  Blue - Cool, passive, and also symbolizes fidelity (as in true blue)
-  Green - Restful and fresh
-  White - Purity and truth
-  Black - Gloom, sorrow and depression

Plate8 Color and Human Emotion (Japan)

(Source: <http://www.temarikai.com/meaningoftraditionalcolors.htm> ; June 11, 2012)

Naturally every culture has rich heritage of symbolism, taboos, metaphors that flows through generations. Creativity driven by the diverse cultural heritage has produced fine creative works in art, literature, performing arts, music, etc that reflect such heritage. The strength of healthy *interactive* society driven by numerous creative activities produced the range of aesthetic expressions.

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