

A Cultural History of “Redness” in Chinese Civilization  
—The Origins: From the Neolithic up to Qin<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the cultural history of the color red in pre-imperial China, by investigating the interrelationship between materiality of color environment and symbolism of color language. Linguistically, it studies the two major words for “red”—the old Chinese label *chi* and the modern Chinese label *hong*—found in representative texts datable before 221 BCE. Archeologically, it addresses the range of use and ritual implications of different red hues in artifacts unearthed in Neolithic cultures in both northern and southern China as well as in the Bronze Age Shang and Zhou dynasties. Juxtaposing textual with material sources, I showed that pure red in saturation served as a symbol for high status and immortality, and together with its cosmic and gender associations, the character denoting saturated red in ancient Chinese *chi* became a cardinal color due to its ceremonial significance rather than its rarity.

**Key words:** redness, cardinal color, semantics, symbolism, cultural history

**Abbreviations**

<i>Shuowen</i>	<i>Shuowen jiezi</i>
OC	Old Chinese
<i>Shisanjing zhushu</i>	<i>Chongkan songben shisanjing zhushu fu jiaokanji</i>

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper has been presented at the Association for Asian Studies 2016 Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, USA. Primary literary sources of this survey come from CHinese ANcient Text database (<http://www.chant.org>), Digital Archives of Bronze Images and Inscriptions ([http://bronze.asdc.sinica.edu.tw/qry\\_bronze.php](http://bronze.asdc.sinica.edu.tw/qry_bronze.php)), Bamboo/Wooden Slips, Silks and Epigraphy database (<http://saturn.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/~wenwu/search.htm>), and Scripta Sinica database (<http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihp/hanji.htm>). For oracle inscriptions, I cite by bone or shell number; for bronze inscriptions, by vessel number; for manuscripts, by strip number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

## Introduction

Associated with cosmological schemes, social hierarchy and knowledge of the material world, color has been a highly meaningful category in traditional East Asian societies. Derived from properties of concrete substances, color naming involves the interrelationship between words and things, embodying philosophical significance of language. Cross-referencing with artefacts and determining the sources of colorants shed light on how environment changed over time, how trade relations evolved among distant communities, and how ancient Chinese people used natural resources and developed new techniques. However, these questions have been substantially understudied and have not drawn sufficient scholarly attention until the recent publication *Color in Ancient and Medieval East Asia*.<sup>2</sup> This article builds on previous scholarship, exploring the cultural significance of the color red in the formative period of Chinese civilization—from the Neolithic era to the unification of the Qin empire in 221 BCE—which witnessed the emergence of the Chinese script and Classical Chinese that became the medium of communication across the whole pre-modern East Asia. The thoughts and ideas from this age formed the intellectual foundation for the entire imperial period of Chinese history (221 BCE–1911 CE), being socio-culturally influential down to the present day.

Modern studies on color words can be traced back to more than one century ago,<sup>3</sup> but it was Berlin and Kay's hypothesis on the universal evolution of basic color terms<sup>4</sup> that triggered a wealth of research on color in linguistics, anthropology and cognitive sciences. They proposed a seven-stage trajectory of eleven basic color categories as “pan-human universals” based on biological foundations. Although the universalist approach has become dominant in color research since then, as more cross-linguistic data were analyzed, this theory was challenged, because the boundaries between color categories intersect and vary across cultures, making it hard to define “focal color salience”—the basis of color naming in Berlin and Kay's paradigm.<sup>5</sup> In addition, as color may change with the elapse of time and vary across different regions, the

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<sup>2</sup> Dusenbury ed. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Gladstone 1858.

<sup>4</sup> Berlin and Kay 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Lakoff 1987, pp. 24–30.

perception of color is impacted by its temporal-spatial dimensions. Also, human involvement in the environment such as the use of dyes and pigments or the production of colored artifacts have influenced the experience of color. Thus, archaeologists have called attention to “the ontological inextricability between color and things”, because only through concrete objects in the material world could the naming of and referencing to color become less vague and arbitrary.<sup>6</sup>

The existing research on color in the Chinese context has been largely dedicated to linguistics. In Chinese-language publications on color terminology, there are both synchronic<sup>7</sup> and diachronic<sup>8</sup> studies. In Western scholarship, William Baxter pioneered the studies on basic color terms in early Chinese texts, following Berlin and Kay’s framework.<sup>9</sup> Wang Tao investigated color vocabulary in oracle bone inscriptions.<sup>10</sup> Hans van Ess addressed symbolism and meaning of color concepts in ancient Chinese literature.<sup>11</sup> A more comprehensive diachronic research from both universalist and relativist perspectives was carried out by Victoria Bogushevskaya.<sup>12</sup> Wu Jianshe provided a corpus-based diachronic survey on the evolution of basic color terms in Chinese,<sup>13</sup> thanks to the availability of digitalized sources for humanities research. However, these studies focus exclusively on literary sources, without references to material evidence. Lai Guolong’s article in *Color in Ancient and Medieval East Asia* on symbolism of the contrast between red and black in early Chinese rituals has drawn our attention to visual information on an unprecedented level,<sup>14</sup> but he overlooks the nuances of different shades of color, treating various hues of red as the same category.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of studies on color, the goal of this research is to interpret the meaning of red in ancient Chinese civilization through embracing linguistic, artistic,

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<sup>6</sup> Jones and MacGregor ed. 2002, pp. 10–12.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Hu Pu’an 1940. Zhang Yongyan 1984. Xu Jialu 1995.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Yao Xiaoping 1988. Zhang Qingchang 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Baxter 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Wang Tao 1996 and 2007.

<sup>11</sup> van Ess 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Bogushevskaya 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Wu Jianshe 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Lai Guolong 2015.

intellectual, and material cultural perspectives. This article aims to provide a diachronic survey of different shades of the color red in the mental and material worlds of pre-imperial China, taking into account both literary sources and archaeological information. In my approach to color, *Begriffsgeschichte* (“conceptual history”) plays a major role, especially as defined in the *Wörter und Sachen* (“words and things”) movement, whose proponents advocated the methodology of studying semantic evolutions through the development of culture, incorporating *Sprachwissenschaft* (“linguistic science”) with *Sachwissenschaft* (“ethnographic work”) on “extra-linguistic realities.”<sup>15</sup>

The object of this research is confined to the pre-Qin period, but works cited go beyond this timeframe. Excavated materials and received texts will be laid equal emphasis on, as the former provide context and supplement transmitted records, while the latter represent the overarching cultural phenomena with their immanent worldview. After reviewing the definition of cardinal colors, in order to make the sources manageable in size, I will start with a linguistic survey, focusing on the semantic fields of two major words for red—the old Chinese label *chi* 赤 and the modern Chinese label *hong* 紅.<sup>16</sup> I will analyze their use and distribution in transmitted texts, and trace their origins in excavated epigraphs and manuscripts. In terms of material culture, I will address how the color environment was from the Neolithic period up to Qin, to which degree red artifacts were common, and which hues of red dominated in the lives of the elites. Also, I will investigate how the color red was conceptualized, whether it was related to religion or sacrifices, and if so, which hues had special ceremonial significance. Moreover, I will delve into the sphere of cosmology and gender studies, further unpacking the status of the red color in official ritual schemes. Contrasting textual with material evidence, I attempt to show how the semantics of “redness” in ancient Chinese symbolic system were formed under the given natural and artefactual environments.

### **The Five Cardinal Colors and the Five Intermediate Colors**

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<sup>15</sup> Trask 2000, p. 369. Asatrian 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Fu Huaiqing 1996, pp. 243–244.

The concept of five cardinal colors stems from the numerological scheme of *wuxing* 五行 (five phases), which is traceable to the *Hongfan* 洪範 (Great Plan) chapter of *Shangshu* 尚書 (Book of Documents).<sup>17</sup> During the late Warring States period, it was further developed into an all-inclusive cosmology by the Yin-yang 陰陽 school scholar Zou Yan 鄒衍 (ca. 305–240 BCE), connecting the five phases to five colors, directions, seasons, viscera, and so on and associating the cosmic cycle with the rise and fall of dynasties. An elaborate form of the scheme was recorded in the late Warring States encyclopedic *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (The Annals of Lü Buwei)—the earliest clearly dated literature (ca. 240 BCE) on correlative philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

The system of color stratification was clearly defined in the Zhou dynasty ritual canon *Liji* 禮記 (The Book of Rites) with a detailed commentary by the Sui and Tang-dynasty Confucian scholar Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (574–648 CE), in which *chi* was classified as *zhengse* 正色 (cardinal color), while *hong* as *jianse* 間色 (intermediate color).

Cardinal colors are *qing* blue, *chi* red, *huang* yellow, *bai* white and *hei* black; intermediate colors are *lü* green, *hong* pink, *bi* jade bluish green, *zi* purple, *liu huang* bay blackish yellow. *Qing* blue is the cardinal color of the east and *lü* green is its intermediate color. East stands for wood, and the green of wood overcomes earth. Earth yellow generates the intermediate color, hence the *lü* green color is composed of blue and yellow. *Zhu*<sup>19</sup> red is the cardinal color of the south, and *hong* pink is its intermediate color. South stands for fire, and the red of fire overcomes metal. Metal is *bai* white, hence the *hong* pink color is composed of red and white. *Bai* white is the cardinal color of the west, and *bi*, jade bluish green, is its intermediate color. West stands for metal, and the *bai* white of the metal overcomes wood.

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<sup>17</sup> Li Xueqin 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Graham 1986, p. 47.

<sup>19</sup> Here *zhu* 朱 is equivalent to *chi*. William Baxter points out that *zhu* and *chi* have equally occurred from Shang to Western Zhou, and *zhu* is the most frequently used synonym for *chi* from Eastern Zhou to Han, serving as color terms for red. Baxter 1983, pp. 5–6, 14–15.

Hence the *bi* jade green color is composed of blue and white. *Hei* black is the cardinal color of the north; *zi*, purple, is its intermediate color. North stands for water, and the color of water is *hei*, black. Water overcomes fire. Fire is *chi* red, hence the *zi* purple color is composed of red and black. *Huang* yellow is the cardinal color of the center, and *liu huang*, bay blackish yellow, is its intermediate color. The center stands for earth, and the earth overcomes water. And because water is *hei* black, the color of *liu huang* is composed of yellow and black.<sup>20</sup>

Cardinal colors were highly valued, while intermediate colors were regarded as inferior by Confucian classics. Based on the interconnection between the meanings and materiality of different shades of red, I will deal with the reasons why *chi* became a cardinal color, and whether its status was related only to its rarity or due to its religious implications.

### Semantics of “Redness” in Ancient China

#### *Chi and hong in excavated inscriptions and manuscripts*

*Chi* is a generic term for the red color in classical Chinese, as other terms for different shades of red are all glossed by *chi* in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters)—the first-ever comprehensive dictionary of Chinese characters, compiled by Xu Shen 許慎 (ca. 55–149 CE) of Eastern Han dynasty.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> 正謂青赤黃白黑五方正色也不正謂五方間色也綠紅碧紫駟黃是也青是東方正綠色東方間東為木木色青木刻土土黃並以所刻為間或綠也青黃也朱是南方正紅是南方間南為火火赤刻金金白故紅色赤白也白是西方正碧是西方間西為金金白刻木故碧色青白也黑是北方正紫是北方間北方水水色黑水刻火火赤故紫色赤黑也黃是中央正駟黃是中央間中央為土土刻水水黑故駟黃之色黃黑也。 *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 5, j. 29, p. 553. Translation adapted from Kuhn 2012, pp. 492–493.

<sup>21</sup> Although being an earlier lexicographical work than *Shuowen*, *Erya* 爾雅 is more like a

赤，南方色也。<sup>22</sup>

*Chi* <OC [t-qh](r)Ak<sup>23</sup>> red is the color of the south.

朱，赤心木。<sup>24</sup>

*Zhu* <OC \*to> vermillion refers to a tree which is *chi* red inside.

丹，巴越之赤石也。<sup>25</sup>

*Dan* <OC \*tʰan> cinnabar refers to *chi* red stones of Bajun and Nanyue.

紅，帛赤白色。<sup>26</sup>

*Hong* <OC \*gʃon> pink refers to silk of mixed color of *bai* white and *chi* red.

赭，赤土也。<sup>27</sup>

*Zhe* <OC \*tAʔ> ochre is earth of the *chi* red color.

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thesaurus, rather than an analytic dictionary. Coblin 1993, p. 94. Boltz 1993, p. 429.

<sup>22</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 11, p. 212.

<sup>23</sup> For phonological reconstruction, I follow Online supplement to Baxter and Sagart 2014. <http://ocbaxtersagart.lsa.umich.edu/BaxterSagartOCbyMandarinMC2014-09-20.pdf>, accessed 01 March 2016.

<sup>24</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 7, p. 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 6, p. 106.

<sup>26</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 14, p. 274.

<sup>27</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 11, p. 213.

銅，赤金也。<sup>28</sup>

*Tong* <OC \*[l]<sup>h</sup> oŋ> copper is metal of the *chi* red color.

*Chi* was found in Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Although the scripts in Period I, III and V<sup>29</sup> are slightly different, it is easily recognizable that they represent the same character. *Shuowen* deciphers the upper part as *da* 大 (big) and the lower part as *huo* 火 (fire), because *da* was written in the shape of a human.<sup>30</sup> The ideograph is a compound one and its meaning might originate from the optical hue of fiercely burning fire.

### Figure 1. *Chi* 赤 in Oracle Bone Inscriptions

From left to right: Period I, Period III, Period V

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Images taken from Gao Ming and Tu Baikui 2008, p. 1208.

In oracle bone inscriptions, *chi* sometimes but not exclusively appeared as a color term, for example:

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<sup>28</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 15, p. 293.

<sup>29</sup> Period I refers to the reign of King Wu Ding 武丁 and earlier (ca. 1300–1192 BCE), Period III refers to the reign of King Lin Xin 廩辛 and King Kang Ding 康丁 (ca. 1176–1147 BCE), Period V refers to the reign of King Di Yi 帝乙 and King Di Xin 帝辛 (ca. 1101–1046 BCE).

Dong Zuobin 1933, p. 324.

<sup>30</sup> *Shuowen*, j. 11, pp. 212–213.



癸丑卜• 貞左赤馬其• 不烈<sup>31</sup>

Cracking made on *guichou* day (50), ... divining: the red horse on the left side will be tame, not wild.

甲寅貞: ...射比赤...<sup>32</sup>

On *jiayin* day (51), divining: ... Chi is followed by archers...

In the first example, *chi* denotes the color of an animal,<sup>33</sup> but functions as a personal name in the second instance.

*Chi* emerged in bronze inscriptions throughout the Zhou period, and it sometimes functioned as a color term. Interestingly, although there are considerable amounts of bronze inscriptions dated back to the Shang period, all *chi* in bronzes emerged in Zhou inscriptions. Despite variations in both upper and lower parts, the forms of the character remained relatively consistent throughout a broad span of time and were firmly based on *da* and *huo*.

### Figure 2. *Chi* 赤 in Bronze Inscriptions

From left to right: Early Western Zhou, Middle Western Zhou, Late Western Zhou, Spring and Autumn

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Images taken from Gao Ming and Tu Baikui 2008, p. 1208.

矩或（又）取赤虎兩<sup>34</sup>

Ju fetched two red tiger pelts once again.

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<sup>31</sup> *Jiaguwen heji*, entry no. 29418.

<sup>32</sup> *Jiaguwen heji*, entry no. 33003.

<sup>33</sup> For different ancestors, Shang diviners used to choose certain kinds of animals of specific colors for sacrifice, such as red horses or black sheep. Wang Tao 1996, p. 68.

<sup>34</sup> *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng*, entry no. 09456.

易女赤市<sup>35</sup>

(The king) awarded you a pair of red kneepads.

易赤舄<sup>36</sup>

(The king) awarded (him) a pair of red shoes.

井弔易留赤金<sup>37</sup>

Jindiao awarded Hu copper.

*Chi* in the three examples modified hides, textiles, or clothing. Both *chi xi* 赤舄 (red shoes) and *chi fu* 赤市 (red kneepads) were worn by the kings of the Zhou dynasty during grand ceremonies.<sup>38</sup> Here it functions as a color term in the first three instances, but in the last example it refers to a metal.

In addition to bronzes, excavated scripts dated back to the Warring States period were also recorded on other materials, with texts predominantly written on wooden or bamboo slips and silks. Although their forms were much more diverse than those on bronzes, the two major components—*da* and *huo*—remained recognizable.

### Figure 3. *Chi* 赤 in Warring States Excavated Materials other than Bronzes

From left to right: Pottery, Bamboo Slip, Seal, Coin

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Images taken from Gao Ming and Tu Baikui 2008, p. 1208.

<sup>35</sup> *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng*, entry no. 02804.

<sup>36</sup> *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng*, entry no. 02817.

<sup>37</sup> *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng*, entry no. 02838.

<sup>38</sup> Jiao Tinghu. Quoted in Li Yingqiang 1993, p. 12.

含 (含) 息 (德) 之厚者, 比於赤子。• (虺) • (虺) 它 (蛇) 弗• (螫) , 攫鳥•  
 (猛) 獸弗扣, 骨溺 (弱) 董 (筋) (柔) 而捉固。<sup>39</sup>

He who has in himself abundantly the attributes (of the Dao) is like an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him, fierce beasts and birds of prey will not capture him, and although his bones are weak and its sinews soft, yet his grasp is firm.<sup>40</sup>

上新都人蔡• 訟新都南陵大宰• (樂) 憂、右司寇正陳得、正史赤, 以其為其兄蔡•  
 斷, 不法。<sup>41</sup>

Cai ... of upper Xin prefecture sued high official Luan You of Nanling in Xin prefecture, judicial official Chen De and his clerk Chi for illegal verdict in the case of his elder brother Cai ...

赤金桶<sup>42</sup>

Copper bucket

是狀神在其室, 屈 (掘) 遷泉, 有赤豕。<sup>43</sup>

If the spirit of this shape is in its place, dig down to the source, and there will be a red pig.

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<sup>39</sup> *Guodian Chumu zhujian*, entry no. Laozi 老子 A 甲 33.

<sup>40</sup> In the light of the differences between received and excavated texts, the translation here is adapted from Legge, trans. 1966, p. 99.

<sup>41</sup> *Baoshan Chu jian*, entry no. 102.

<sup>42</sup> *Wangshan Chu jian*, entry no. 2.38.

<sup>43</sup> *Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian*, entry no. Rishu 日書 A 甲 37.

In the above instances from excavated manuscripts, *chi* refers to a newborn in the first case, a personal name in the second, metal in the third and a color term for the last one.

Compared with *chi*, *hong* emerged much later and the earliest findings of the script with this character can only be dated back to the Warring States period.

#### Figure 4. *Hong* 紅 in Warring States Bamboo Slips

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Images taken from Gao Ming and Tu Baikui 2008, p. 1016.

新工初工事，一歲半紅（功），其後歲賦紅（功）與故等。<sup>44</sup>

When a new artisan begins his work as an artisan, in one year (he obtains) half the work; in the year thereafter the work imposed on him is equal to that of an old hand.<sup>45</sup>

• 縞裏，紅• 之純<sup>46</sup>

... white inside, pink ... silk threads

The above examples show how *hong* was also used as a color term, but not exclusively. It could also be an interchangeable word 通假字 with *gong* 功 <OC \*kʰoŋ>. Morphologically, *hong* is a phono-semantic compound, the left part of which refers to a kind of textile. It implies a combination of “red” and “white”. The English lexeme ‘pink’ is a broad concept—a label of “mixed color” in literature,<sup>47</sup> originating from the name for a species of pale reddish flower.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian*, entry no. Qinlü shiba zhong 秦律十八種 jungong 均工 111.

<sup>45</sup> Hulsewé 1985, p. 62.

<sup>46</sup> *Wangshan Chu jian*, entry no. 2.59.

<sup>47</sup> Wierzbicka 1996, p. 326.

<sup>48</sup> Vejdemo et al. 2014, p. 6.

Therefore, this article treats ‘pink’ as ‘off-red’—a wide range of unsaturated hues softened by the admixture of white, rather than get preoccupied with ‘pink’ as a simple word.

As for *chi* and *hong* in pre-Qin transmitted texts, corpus-based statistics are already available from pre-existing research: the total occurrences of *chi* are 78 cases and 34.62 percent of them were used as a color term; for *hong*, by contrast, there are only 3 occurrences and one of them (33.33 percent) was used to indicate color.<sup>49</sup> Thus, *chi* is a generic term for the red color in early Chinese literature. It not only emerged much earlier but also was used more frequently than *hong*.

### *Correlations of hong*

In terms of related meanings or objects associated with the use of *hong*, I did a complimentary classification of all entries containing *hong* in received texts during pre-Qin to Han period. I include Qin-Han literature into discussion, not only to compensate for the paucity of the examples of *hong* available in pre-imperial period, but also considering the fact that a substantial amount of early Chinese texts are not clearly dated or have controversies on dating still going on among scholars.

Statistically, the findings are: 34.26 percent of *hong* were used as a color term, and 93.88 percent of them meant “pink” instead of “red”. The only exceptions are *hong*’s collocations with *chi*, so the semantic scope of *hong* in ancient China is narrower than its spectrum in modern Chinese language. *Hong* often collocates with unorthodox colors, females, beautiful faces, flowers as well as mysteries—symbols of pleasure, temptations and supernatural forces incompatible with Confucian doctrine. When *hong* co-occurs (but not collocates) with *chi*, their meanings are strictly distinguished, forming a sharp contrast between the two colors of different qualities. Here I give one instance for each category:

Red

Collocation with *chi*

炭火盡赤紅<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Wu Jianshe 2011, pp. 106–107.

<sup>50</sup> *Han Feizi*, v. 1, j. 10, p. 595.

The burning coals are all red.

Comment: Here *chi hong* 赤紅 modifies the color of coals burning in the fireplace that is in shiny saturated red, so *chi hong* equals to *chi*.

Pink

1) Collocations with unorthodox colors

君子不以紺緞飾，紅紫不以為褻服。<sup>51</sup>

The superior man does not use a deep purple, or puce color, in the ornaments of his dress. Even in his undress, he does not wear anything of pink or purple.<sup>52</sup>

Comment: both *hong* 紅 and *zi* 紫 are unorthodox colors which consist of the mixture of two cardinal colors. The former refers to a mixture of red and white—pink, and the latter is a combination of blue and red—purple.

2) Depictions of females

二人並色如紅玉<sup>53</sup>

Both two beauties have pink jade-like complexion.

Comment: here *hong yu* 紅玉 is a metaphor for pink skin color of beautiful young ladies.

3) Portrayals of good-looking faces

面正紅白，市之男女未有敬之者，無德故也。<sup>54</sup>

His face is in pink against white to nicety, but no one respects him because his lack of virtue.

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<sup>51</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 8, j. 10, p. 88.

<sup>52</sup> Translation adapted from Legge 1861, p. 94.

<sup>53</sup> *Xijing zaji*, j. 1, p. 1074.

<sup>54</sup> *Kongcongzi*, j. 3, p. 1605.

Comment: Here *hong bai* 紅白 refers to the face of a good-looking person whose slightly reddish cheek and white skin make a perfect appearance.

#### 4) References to flowers

馳丘陵，下平原，揚翠葉，杙紫莖，發紅華，秀朱榮，煌煌扈扈，照曜鉅野。<sup>55</sup>

Up to the hill and down to the plain are green leaves dancing, purple stems waving, pink flowers blooming, red blossoms embellishing, and their charms shining in the vast open country.

Comment: Most common flowers in traditional China such as peonies, plums, peaches and lotuses have their colors ranging from light to deep pink, with very few of saturated red hue comparable to fire. In the prose, both *hong* 紅 and *zhu* 朱 are used to describe flowers. Since *zhu* is a synonym for *chi*—bright red, *hong*—pink portrays the color of flowers in general.

#### 5) Pictures of mysterious phenomena

晏然無雲。有紅氣。<sup>56</sup>

There were no clouds, but pink pneuma appeared.

Comment: The context suggests *hong* 紅 is the background color of a supernatural omen. As it appears indistinctly, *hong* means a faintly light reddish color instead of a conspicuous saturated red.

#### 6) Co-occurrences with *chi*

爪薄色紅者，膽薄；爪堅色青者，膽急；爪濡色赤者，膽緩<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Shiji*, v. 4, j. 117, p. 3028. *Hanshu*, v. 3, j. 57, p. 2559.

<sup>56</sup> *Qianhan ji*, j. 15, p. 153.

<sup>57</sup> *Huangdi neijing lingshu yijie*, j. 7, p. 358.

Those whose fingernails are thin and pink have thin gall bladder; those whose fingernails are hard and blue have tight gall bladder; those whose fingernails are soft and red have relaxed gall bladder.

Comment: *hong* 紅 and *chi* 赤 are used to describe different colors of fingernails, so the two words should express different hues—the former pink, and the latter red.

### *The Etymology of chi*

Although *chi* refers to big fire, the color of fire is not necessarily pure red, as it depends on combusted materials, temperature, and so forth. A pre-Qin technical manual, *Kaogong ji* 考工記 (Records of Diverse Crafts), notes divergent flame colors during different stages of metal casting: “凡鑄金之狀金與錫黑濁之氣竭黃白次之黃白之氣竭青白次之青白之氣竭青氣次之然後可鑄也<sup>58</sup> During the process of bronze casting, the flame of copper and tin is first black, then yellow-white, then blue-white, and finally blue when the bronze is ready to be casted.” Then, a gloss in *Shiming* 釋名 (Explanation of Names)—an Eastern Han dictionary reflecting traditional Chinese worldview—matching names with reality<sup>59</sup>—is worth attention.

赤，赫也，太陽之色也。<sup>60</sup>

*Chi* means *he* <OC \*q<sup>h</sup>s rak>, the color of the sun.

This entry means that the original meaning of *chi* may also have come from the solar cult, as fire is related to the sun in Chinese culture. An Eastern Han treatise on folklore, *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs and Habits), writes that “遂人以火紀，火、太

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<sup>58</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 3, j. 40, p. 620.

<sup>59</sup> R. Miller 1993, p. 424.

<sup>60</sup> *Shiming*, j. 2, p. 864.



陽也，陽尊，故託遂皇於天。<sup>61</sup> The Sui Emperor is remembered because of his discovery of fire. Fire refers to the sun, venerated as *yang*. Thus, the Sui Emperor is entrusted to the heaven.” In addition, the fire god *Yandi* 炎帝 (Emperor of Fire) is also the solar god, according to the Eastern Han explanatory text *Baihutong* 白虎通 (White Tiger Hall Discussions): “其帝炎帝者，太陽也。<sup>62</sup> The god *Yandi* is the sun”.

Nevertheless, only at sunrise and sunset is the orange or reddish color perceived, due to diffraction by the atmosphere; otherwise, the sun looks yellow or white.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, Zhang Yongyan points out that the semantic boundary between red and yellow was not very clear in Old Sinitic languages.<sup>64</sup> Thus, it is essential to examine the materiality of the red color, as the material aspects of color stabilize fluid perceptions and create symbolic meanings attached to its semantics.<sup>65</sup>

### “Redness” in Material Context and its Symbolic Associations

The earliest evidence of color use in China which can be dated back to the Paleolithic period was red ochre used in burials, such as in Upper Cave Men 山頂洞人 site at Zhoukoudian near Beijing.<sup>66</sup> However, the Zhoukoudian human fossils were identified as *Homo erectus*—an extinct hominid, not *Homo sapiens*—the only extant human species, so Paleolithic use of color might not be “Chinese.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, my discussion on “redness” in Chinese civilization starts from the

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<sup>61</sup> *Fengsu tongyi*, v.1, j. 1, p. 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Baihutong shuzheng*, v.1, j. 3, p. 177.

<sup>63</sup> For a scientific explanation on why different colors of the sun appear to our eyes, see “What Color is the Sun?” *Stanford Solar Center*. <http://solar-center.stanford.edu/SID/activities/GreenSun.html>, accessed 06 April 2017.

<sup>64</sup> Zhang Yongyan 1984, p. 125.

<sup>65</sup> Gage 1999, pp. 79–91.

<sup>66</sup> Tagawa Yoshiaki 1980.

<sup>67</sup> There are two major theories of human evolution, known as Recent African Origin of Modern Humans and Multiregional Origin of Modern Humans. The former is supported by DNA

Neolithic period. The practice of applying red pigments in high-status tombs was found in Neolithic cultures as well as Shang, Zhou and Han dynasties.<sup>68</sup> Anthropologists have pointed out that red might be universally related to blood, signifying life.<sup>69</sup>

Art historians have argued that stones (especially jades), shells and fine ceramics enjoyed high status in Neolithic China, and stones (jades), horns, ivories, lacquers, textiles and bronzes in the Bronze Age Shang and Zhou dynasties.<sup>70</sup> I will use archeological discoveries to explain why saturated red *chi* achieved orthodox status in ancient China.

### *Shells*

It should be noted that although shells belonged to high-status artifacts during the Neolithic era, they still could be considered as status objects in Early Bronze Age<sup>71</sup> Shang civilization, too. One reason for this was that the Shang dynasty was likely to be a transition period when certain Neolithic status artifacts, such as pottery, white in particular, were even more privileged than bronzes in ritual practice<sup>72</sup> and archaism was reflected in vessel shapes, both in part and in whole, prototyped with Neolithic objects.<sup>73</sup> Besides, as turtle shells and cattle scapulae bearing oracle inscriptions were used for divination purposes by the royal house of Shang elites and the

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evidence, while the adepts of the latter point to archaeological fossils which, however, are discontinuous. Therefore, *Homo sapiens* did not necessarily evolve from *Homo erectus*, and it is most likely that Zhoukoudian Upper Cave Men are not the ancestors of Chinese people. Li Jin and Bing Su 2000. Karafet et al. 2001.

<sup>68</sup> Those red pigments were likely to be cinnabar, but traces of the red color in many tombs have not been analyzed so far. Li Ling 1999, p. 310.

<sup>69</sup> Turner 1980.

<sup>70</sup> Kerr and Wood 2004, pp. 7–8.

<sup>71</sup> Early Bronze Age refers to the beginning of large-scale metallurgy (ca. 1500 BCE) to the founding of the Zhou dynasty (1045 BCE). Bagley 1999, p. 138.

<sup>72</sup> Li Chi 1977, p. 210.

<sup>73</sup> von Falkenhausen 2013.

Shang king served as the chief priest in the theocratic polity,<sup>74</sup> oracle bones—both its script and material—possessed crucial religious significance.

Shells and bones with inscriptions (and inscriptions themselves) were sometimes painted in red and black, and chemical analysis has indicated that the red color came from cinnabar.<sup>75</sup> Some scholars believe this aimed to contrast the inscriptions with the background, others think that black painting makes inscriptions to stand out, but the red color might have special meaning in Shang religious practice. Such an assumption is based on the observation that the inscriptions in red could make people dizzy rather than attract their attention; still, most inscriptions in red did contain important information.<sup>76</sup> Although other colors are also found on oracle bone inscriptions and white was favored by the Shang rulers,<sup>77</sup> the most common color in Shang excavations is red, which might have resulted from its symbolic association with life and the belief in cinnabar as elixir of life.<sup>78</sup>

**Figure 5. Ox Scapula with Divination Inscriptions Filled with Cinnabar**

from Anyang, Henan province

Shang dynasty, ca. 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE

Period I—Reign of King Wu Ding

Length 30.8 cm, Width 19 cm

National Museum of China

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Image taken from

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shang\\_dynasty\\_inscribed\\_scapula.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shang_dynasty_inscribed_scapula.jpg)

***Jades***

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<sup>74</sup> Keightley 1978, p. 136.

<sup>75</sup> Benedetti-Pichler 1937, p. 151. Britton 1937, p. 3.

<sup>76</sup> Wang Yuxin and Yang Shengnan 1999, pp. 200–201.

<sup>77</sup> Wang Tao 2013, pp. 81–84.

<sup>78</sup> Li Ling 1999, pp. 302–306. Wang Tao 2003, p. 448.

The use of jade in Chinese culture is believed to start from the Neolithic period, for example, Hongshan 紅山 culture in the north and Liangzhu 良渚 culture in the south, respectively.<sup>79</sup>

Erlitou is the earliest excavated bronze-using culture in central China, where jades signified their owner's status and possessed ritual meaning. Jades continued to be used in ritual contexts under the later Shang dynasty, and further under the Zhou period.<sup>80</sup> Jessica Rawson argues that as jades represented the status of living people—"whether a person may be approached or whether a reverential distance should be kept", they were likely to be regarded as functioning in the same way afterlife—providing protection for the deceased.<sup>81</sup>

Although the natural color of jade is mainly creamy, grey, yellow, bluish, greenish or transparent, considerable amounts of archaeological jades bore reddish traces due to the application of cinnabar. Jade and cinnabar share one common feature—namely, endurance. Jin-dynasty Daoist scholar and alchemist Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343 CE) advocates jade and cinnabar as medicines for immortality, “仙藥之上者丹砂，次則黃金，次則白銀，次則諸芝，次則五玉<sup>82</sup> The best medicine for elixir is cinnabar, the second gold, the third silver, the fourth *lingzhi* (*Ganoderma lucidum*), the fifth five jades”, because “夫金丹之為物，燒之愈久，變化愈妙。

<sup>83</sup> The longer cinnabar is burned, the better it appears” and “玉經曰：服金者壽如金，服玉者壽如玉也。<sup>84</sup> *Yujing* (Book of Jades) said, ‘those who take gold will live as long as gold; those who take jades will live as long as jades’ ”.

This common ground between jade and cinnabar makes their coexistence in mortuary context understandable. In addition, cinnabar was used as the most traditional preservative to prevent the

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<sup>79</sup> Rawson 1995, p. 28.

<sup>80</sup> Rawson 1995, pp. 38–39.

<sup>81</sup> Rawson 1995, p. 50.

<sup>82</sup> *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, j. 11, p. 177.

<sup>83</sup> *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, j. 4, p. 62.

<sup>84</sup> *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi*, j. 11, p. 185.

body from decaying in ancient China.<sup>85</sup> Although not as a preservative from a scientific viewpoint, jades were superstitiously believed to have the same antiseptic function as cinnabar. This tradition can be traced back to Liangzhu culture and developed consistently from then on.<sup>86</sup> The famous examples were jade burial suits of the King of Nan Yue and Prince Liu Sheng in the Western Han period.<sup>87</sup> So, the use of cinnabar and jade in funerary context might also be related to the belief that they play similar roles in preserving the dead, in addition to their association with immortality.

**Figure 6. Ornament Carved from a Section of a *Cong* 琮**

Western Zhou period, ca. 950 BCE

Pale grey green jade with areas of surface altered to white and traces of cinnabar in the incised lines

Height 3.5 cm, Width 6.8 cm

© Sir Joseph Hotung and the British Museum

Image taken from Rawson 1995, p. 238.

***Ceramics***

It has been noted that fine potteries were high-status objects in Neolithic China, but the significance of ritual ceramics had declined since the Bronze Age, especially from Western Zhou period.<sup>88</sup> The whole Neolithic age witnessed pervasive occurrence of red in both body color and painted color of ceramics. Relatively coarse, sandy, and reddish or greyish-brown earthenware was found in the central area (equivalent to modern day Henan, eastern Shaanxi, southern Shanxi and southern Hebei provinces) of early Neolithic (ca. 6000 BCE) China.<sup>89</sup> Into the middle

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<sup>85</sup> There were two ways to apply cinnabar. One was external use—spreading cinnabar powder over corpses, coloring clothes with cinnabar, painting coffins with cinnabar. Yet another was internal use—taking when alive and being filled when dead. Li Ling 1999, pp. 309–311.

<sup>86</sup> Li Ling 1999, pp. 311–317.

<sup>87</sup> Rawson 1995, p. 73.

<sup>88</sup> Rawson 1990, p. 108.

<sup>89</sup> Chang Kwang-Chih 1986, p. 94.

Neolithic period, distinctive red-bodied fine ceramics of Yangshao 仰韶 culture, decorated with red (iron red, from ferric oxide), white and black pigments for ceremonial use, were excavated at Banpo 半坡 site in Shaanxi province (ca. 5000–4000 BCE).<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, Yangshao potteries found in Henan province (ca. 6000–5000 BCE and ca. 4000–3000 BCE) were first red and then expanded to embrace other colors such as grey and brown.<sup>91</sup>

**Figure 7. Painted Pottery Vat with Images of a White Stork, a Fish, and a Stone Ax against the Reddish Background**

from Linru, Shanxian, Henan province

Yangshao culture, ca. 4000 BCE

47 cm high, 32.7 cm diameter at the mouth, 20.1 cm diameter at the bottom

National Museum of China

© photo by jiujin713, licensed under Pixabay

Image taken from <https://pixabay.com/photos/pottery-bird-fish-stone-axe-bowl-1796969/>

Archeologists suggest a link between north-eastern cultures and the central Yangshao culture in the Neolithic period, because fine black-painted red potteries were produced at several Hongshan sites in north-east China.<sup>92</sup> Chemical analyses indicate that loess was frequently used for ceramics in Neolithic-period China.<sup>93</sup> Noteworthy, red color of loess-based Neolithic wares could also result from firing effect under oxidized kiln atmosphere.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to loess, the more ancient red clays were also popular raw material for pottery making. These potteries were discovered under the loess in Yangshao ceramics in Gansu

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<sup>90</sup> Kerr and Wood 2004, p. 5, 609.

<sup>91</sup> Chang Kwang-Chih 1986, pp. 123–132.

<sup>92</sup> Nelson 1971, p. 21.

<sup>93</sup> For detailed compositions of northern Neolithic potteries of red color, see Yang Gen, Zhang Xiqiu and Shao Wengu 1985, p. 25. Freestone, Wood and Rawson 1989, p. 261.

<sup>94</sup> Kerr and Wood 2004, p. 100.

province. X-ray has detected lines of quartz in red Gansu potsherd powder. Chemical analysis shows the red potsherds are composed of a clay, “moderately rich in alumina and rather high in iron oxide, and the objects have been burnt oxidizing”. The yellow and buff color of Yangshao potteries resides in their high component of lime, otherwise all the clays are not very different.<sup>95</sup>

Geologically, due to tectonic events during Triassic Period, China has been divided into the clay-rich north and quartz-rich south blocks, the boundary of which is named Qinling Mountain–Huaihe River Line 秦嶺淮河分界. First ceramics found in southern China from Xianrendong 仙人洞 cave in modern-day north-eastern Jiangxi province (ca. 9000 BCE) were at least 1000 years earlier than those in northern China.<sup>96</sup> As of middle Neolithic period (ca. 5000–3000 BCE), red, brown and black wares were found in Majiabang 馬家浜, Songze 崧澤 and Hemudu 河姆渡 cultures in Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, and highly polished red, grey and black pots in Daxi 大溪 and Qujialing 屈家嶺 cultures along the middle Yangtze river.<sup>97</sup>

Into the Shang period, most ceramics excavated in Anyang were red or grey loess-based earthenware, and rare white pots were discovered in some important tombs.<sup>98</sup> The dominant colors of pottery in the Zhou dynasty was also red or grey. Both of them are composed of “the same ingredients with red Yangshao pots, but, on the whole, of an inferior quality”.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, although fine ceramics—especially white wares—were even more important than bronzes in funeral context during the Shang period,<sup>100</sup> the decline in quality marked the fall of ceramics as ritual objects in Bronze Age Shang and Zhou dynasties.

### *Textiles*

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<sup>95</sup> Sundius 1961, pp. 104–106.

<sup>96</sup> Chang Kwang-Chih 1986, pp. 65–68, 100.

<sup>97</sup> Chang Kwang-Chih 1986, pp. 192–233.

<sup>98</sup> Kerr and Wood 2004, p. 126.

<sup>99</sup> Sundius 1961, p. 107.

<sup>100</sup> Li Chi 1977, p. 210.

Archaeology has so far indicated that silk use in China started from the Neolithic period, and the earliest findings of silk were in Qianshanyang 錢山漾 site of Liangzhu culture (ca. 2850–2650 BCE).<sup>101</sup> As of the Shang period, both domesticated and wild silkworms were used to produce silk.<sup>102</sup> The word for silk—*si* 絲—is a pictograph, derived from *mi* 糸, both of which meant silk thread in Shang oracle bone inscriptions and are closely related to textiles in later periods. The script, to a certain extent, indicates the early importance of silk in Chinese history.<sup>103</sup> Shang textiles were likely to be red, brown, blue and so on which tended to dissolve and fade away over 3000 to 4000 years.<sup>104</sup> The earliest dress code can be dated back to late Shang, and clothing colors were used to indicate rank during the Warring States period.<sup>105</sup>

Textile colorants can be classified into dyes and pigments.<sup>106</sup> As for red pigments, cinnabar and red ochre (inorganic minerals) were used to color textiles in early days, especially before the use of plant dyes became widespread. These pigments were rubbed onto clothing. For instance, there is one piece of pre-Qin silk bearing reddish traces in the collections of the China National Silk Museum. Its red color was detected as coming from cinnabar—mercuric sulfide (HgS).<sup>107</sup>

### **Figure 8. Paired Dragon and Phoenix Embroidery on Patterned Tabby**

Warring States Period (475–221 BCE)

Length 13 cm, Width 13 cm

© China National Silk Museum

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<sup>101</sup> Kuhn 1988, pp. 272–273.

<sup>102</sup> Kuhn 1988, p. 280.

<sup>103</sup> Kuhn 1988, pp. 281–282.

<sup>104</sup> Kuhn 1988, p. 275.

<sup>105</sup> Kuhn 1982, pp. 386–387.

<sup>106</sup> A dye is an organic compound that is soluble in water so that it can penetrate into textile fibers. A pigment is generally a mineral (inorganic) that is insoluble in water and is generally mixed with a binder (oil, glue, gum, and the like) to make it stick to a surface. Laursen, personal communication, 24 April 2016.

<sup>107</sup> Liu Jian, 2009, via Laursen, personal communication, 22 March 2016.



Image taken from Xu Zheng and Jin Lin ed. 2017, p. 13.

Unfortunately, unearthed textile specimens are rarely available due to decomposition of organic fabrics.<sup>108</sup> There is no chemical analysis regarding textile dyes dating before 221 BCE from China—historical territory east to the Qinghai-Tibetan plateau—so far. However, specimens from contemporary Tarim Basin and later periods in China and Japan demonstrate that ancient East Asian people used indigenous plants—madder (*Rubia tinctorum* on wool and silk, *Rubia cordifolia* on silk)—to dye textiles red.<sup>109</sup>

As of the Zhou dynasty, dress conventions were systematically regulated: people were required to wear clothes of stipulated materials and colors according to their social status. The higher the rank of a person was, the more choices in colors were available.<sup>110</sup> The five cardinal colors<sup>111</sup> were major colors for ritual garments. They were reserved for the elite only, and commoners had rather limited options in clothing colors.<sup>112</sup>

### Figure 9. Visual Reconstruction of Red Ritual Garments in the Zhou Dynasty

Left: *chi yi chi shang* 赤衣赤裳 (red top and bottom) for men

Right: *chi fu* 赤服 (red garment) for women

© Nantian shuju

Images taken from Li Yingqiang 1993, pp. 41, 47.

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<sup>108</sup> Laursen 2015, p. 81.

<sup>109</sup> Laursen 2015, pp. 85–90.

<sup>110</sup> Li Yingqiang 1993, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> The common features of the five cardinal colors lie in their pure saturation—one important criterion for “cardinal” colors. Li Yingqiang 1993, p. 120.

<sup>112</sup> Li Yingqiang 1993, pp. 12–15. In terms of availability of red colorants, cinnabar was from poisonous mercury mines and thus out of reach for commoners, while madder was fairly easy to grow and more widely accessible. Laursen, personal communication, 29 July 2020. For example, madder red was found in textiles used by salt miners in Iran dated ca. 2000 years ago. Mouri, Aali, Zhang and Laursen 2014.

The illustrations above were formal dresses for ceremonial use, and they were both in saturated bright red. The tradition of limiting commoners' access to shiny red clothing endured throughout the whole traditional period, and was evidently observed in the eighteenth-century novel *Honglouloumeng* 紅樓夢 (Dream of the Red Chamber).<sup>113</sup>

It is noteworthy that display culture prevailed among the elite class, despite sumptuary laws. Take an example from *Lunyu* 論語 (The Analects), where Confucius criticized the popularity of purple over red in the Spring and Autumn period,<sup>114</sup> since purple was not a cardinal color. At that time, most dyes came from plants such as red from madder, blue from indigo, purple from gromwell and yellow from gardenia.<sup>115</sup> Purple was in fashion, because it cost much more than other dyes.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, whether a color achieved orthodox status or not was not necessarily bound to its limited availability.

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<sup>113</sup> Up to late imperial period, *hong* has completely substituted *chi* as a generic term for the red color. However, one dialogue in the 19<sup>th</sup> episode in *Honglouloumeng* reads, “想是說他那裡配穿紅? You think she's not good enough to wear *hong* red?” “那樣的不配穿紅的, 誰還敢穿? If she's not good enough to wear *hong* red I shouldn't think anyone is.” Another example is from the 35<sup>th</sup> episode: 寶釵道: 若用雜色斷然使不得, 大紅又犯了色, 黃的又不起眼, 黑的又過暗。 “Non-cardinal colors definitely would not do,” said Baochai. “But *da hong* bright red would clash, *huang* yellow would not stand out, and *hei* black would be too dark.” In both cases, *hong* refers to the orthodox saturated red, so it is obvious that there remained a hierarchy between pink and saturated red in the Qing dynasty. *Honglouloumeng jiaozhu*, v.1, j. 19, p. 303, j. 35, p. 542.

<sup>114</sup> 子曰: 惡紫之奪朱也 The Master said, “I hate the manner in which *zi* purple takes away the luster of *zhu* vermillion.” *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 8, j. 17, p. 157. Legge, trans. 1871, p. 190.

<sup>115</sup> Wu Shusheng and Tian Zibing 1986, pp. 45–46.

<sup>116</sup> Some scholars claim that gromwell was more expensive than other herbal dyes. Li Yingqiang 1993, p. 83. Others propose that purple dye may have come from shellfish and in addition to its status in Daoism, purple embodied kingship in early imperial China, like Tyrian purple. A.

### *Lacquerwares*

Lacquer use can be traced back to the Neolithic period. For example, a cinnabar lacquered wooden bowl was excavated at Hemudu culture site in modern-day Yuyao, Zhejiang province (ca. 6000–5000 BCE).<sup>117</sup> Lacquer paintings with the contrast between two colors—red and black—were common in Shang sites, and this practice continued in later Zhou and Han dynasties. For example, two identical lacquered wooden wine vessels were discovered at a Western Zhou site in Dahekou, Yicheng, Shanxi province. On these vessels, black lines demarcated silhouettes against a shiny red background.<sup>118</sup> Pairing of red and black lacquer painted coffins were found in Spring and Autumn period Sanmenxia site in Shaanxi province,<sup>119</sup> Warring States-period Marquis Yi of Zeng site<sup>120</sup> and Baoshan Tomb no. 2 in Hubei province,<sup>121</sup> and Han dynasty Mawangdui Tomb no. 1 in Hunan province.<sup>122</sup> Wu Hung understands the shining red as a symbol of immortality and black as an emblem of death in funerary art.<sup>123</sup> Lai Guolong explains the contrast between red and black reflects the binary Yin-yang cosmology, symbolizing heaven and earth, male and female.<sup>124</sup> Since lacquer also possesses protective antiseptic functions,<sup>125</sup> the combination of cinnabar red and lacquer black might be relevant to their decomposition-preventing qualities.

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Miller 2020, pp. 217–242. Although purple dye-producing shellfish can be found in Bohai even now, murex purple has not yet been found on textiles in China. Laursen, personal communication, 29 July 2020.

<sup>117</sup> Hemudu yizhi kaogudui 1980, p. 5, plate 3.3.

<sup>118</sup> Joint Archaeological Team of Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology 2012, p. 7.

<sup>119</sup> Henan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo ed. 1999, pp. 16–19.

<sup>120</sup> Hubei sheng bowuguan ed. 1989, pp. 12–55.

<sup>121</sup> Hubei sheng jingsha tielu kaogudui ed. 1991, pp. 57–64.

<sup>122</sup> Hunan sheng bowuguan and Zhongguo kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo ed. 1973, pp. 13–27.

<sup>123</sup> Wu Hung 1997, p. 24.

<sup>124</sup> Lai Guolong 2015, p. 38.

<sup>125</sup> *Bencao gangmu*, v. 3, j. 35, p. 1992.

### Figure 10. Lacquered Wood *lei* 纍-Wine Vessels

Western Zhou cemetery at Dahekou in Yicheng County, Shanxi

© *Chinese Archaeology*

Image taken from Joint Archaeological Team of Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology  
2012, p. 7

The above archaeological discoveries have demonstrated the pervasive occurrence of reddish hues on artefacts in Neolithic cultures in both northern and southern China and the Bronze-Age Shang and Zhou dynastic periods, showing that ancient Chinese people had access to sufficient supply of red colorants. Chemical analysis shows that the red color mainly came from organic dyes (madder in textiles) and mineral pigments (ferric oxide in ceramics and cinnabar paints on jades, shells and lacquers). Among different hues and colorants, cinnabar stands out as the most widely used for pure red and remains shiny despite being buried for thousands of years. The antiseptic and durable quality, together with the lasting brightness, entrusted cinnabar with the divine notion, especially the vision of immortality. In addition to *dan*, *chi*'s synonym *zhu* also refers to cinnabar. As the artefacts bearing cinnabar traces were status objects in the periods studied, the repeated occurrences of saturated red color implied the orthodox status of *chi*.

#### Cosmic and Gender Significance of “Redness”

The orthodoxy of *chi* was further enhanced due to its connection with the south. This connection is not only defined in *Shuowen* and other Han-dynasty philosophical texts, but also recorded in earlier ritual cannons such as *Zhou li* 周禮 (The Rites of Zhou): “東方謂之青，南方謂之赤，西方謂之白，北方謂之黑，天謂之玄，地謂之黃。<sup>126</sup> The color of the east is *qing* green, of the south *chi* red, of the west *bai* white, of the north *hei* black, of heaven *xuan* reddish black, and of the earth *huang* yellow” and *Yi li* 儀禮 (The Etiquette and Ceremonial): “設六色，東方青，南方赤，西方白，北方黑，上玄，下黃。<sup>127</sup> Six colors are set: *qing* green for the

<sup>126</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 3, j. 40, p. 622.

<sup>127</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 4, j. 27, p. 329.

east, *chi* red for the south, *bai* white for the west, *hei* black for the north, *xuan* reddish black for heaven, and *huang* yellow for the earth”.

Although *Zhou li* and *Yi li* were probably compiled during the Han dynasty, they still reflect Zhou ritual practices.<sup>128</sup> The connection between five directions and five colors was later on absorbed into the five-fold *wuxing* numerology, which remained central in imperial Chinese cosmologies. The association between *chi* and the south reinforced the ritual significance of the red color, because the south was the direction which the Son of Heaven was to face during ceremonial activities since middle Western Zhou times.

王才 (在) 周, 各大室, 即立 (位) , 南<sup>129</sup>

The king was in the Zhou capital, came to the center hall of the temple and took a seat, facing south.

The status of *chi* as a sacred color in state-centered beliefs and practices was reflected in the colors of costumes and decorations. The *Yueling* 月令 (Monthly Orders) chapter of *Liji* records the orthodox color typology of jades and garments. Jade ornaments and clothing of specific colors are connected to each of the five ritual seasons. *Chi yu* 赤玉 (red jades) and *zhu yi* 朱衣 (red garments) were for the three months of *xia* 夏 (summer).

天子居明堂左个, 乘朱路, 駕赤騮, 載赤旗, 衣朱衣, 服赤玉。<sup>130</sup>

The son of Heaven occupies the apartment on the left of the Ming Tang (Grand Fane); rides in the *zhu* red carriage, drawn by the *chi* red horses with black tails, and bearing the *chi* red flag. He is dressed in *zhu* red robes, and wears in *chi* red jade ornaments.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>128</sup> Boltz 1993, pp. 25–29, 237.

<sup>129</sup> *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng*, entry no. 04256.

<sup>130</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 5, j. 15, p. 306.

<sup>131</sup> Translation adapted from Legge, trans. 1885, p. 269.

天子居明堂太廟，乘朱路，駕赤騮，載赤旗，衣朱衣，服赤玉。<sup>132</sup>

The son of Heaven occupies the Ming Tang Grand Fane; rides in the *zhu* red carriage, drawn by the *chi* red horses with black tails, and bearing the *chi* red flag. He is dressed in *zhu* red robes, and wears *chi* red jade ornaments.<sup>133</sup>

天子居明堂右个，乘朱路，駕赤騮，載赤旗，衣朱衣，服赤玉。<sup>134</sup>

The son of Heaven occupies the apartment on the right of the Ming Thang (Fane); rides in the *zhu* red carriage, drawn by the *chi* red horses with black tails, and bearing the *chi* red flag. He is dressed in *zhu* red robes, and wears *chi* red jade ornaments.<sup>135</sup>

The association of red jades and red garments with *xia* in official religious practices continued in later periods, as is narrated in the *Shierji* 十二記 (Almanacs) chapter of *Lüshi chunqiu*<sup>136</sup> and the *Shizexun* 時則訓 (Basic Principles for Seasons) chapter of the early Han eclectic book *Huainanzi* 淮南子.<sup>137</sup> As the warmest season of the year, summer matches the light and warmth perceived from the fire, the sun and the south, in favor of the cosmological semantics of *chi*.

Furthermore, in oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, *xia* refers to a person under the sun. The intensity of the heat from the sun resembles the vigorous heat from the blaze of fire, signifying their magnificence. Also, the character *xia* itself means big or great, according to the earliest surviving Chinese thesaurus *Erya*. It was adopted as the title of the first Chinese

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<sup>132</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 5, j. 16, p. 315.

<sup>133</sup> Translation adapted from Legge, trans. 1885, p. 273.

<sup>134</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 5, j. 16, p. 319.

<sup>135</sup> Translation adapted from Legge, trans. 1885, p. 277.

<sup>136</sup> *Lüshi chunqiu*, v.1, j. 4, 5, 6, pp. 185, 241, 311.

<sup>137</sup> *Huainanzi*, v. 1, j. 5, pp. 167, 169.

legendary dynasty, referring afterwards to the Chinese state or nation.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, *chi* is also used to describe the Chinese state, namely *chixian shen Zhou* 赤縣神州 (The Red County, The Divine Land).<sup>139</sup> The connection between *chi* and *xia* enhanced the association of *chi* with the supreme power institutes as well as state beliefs and rituals. As an official symbol, the correlations of *chi* with the solar cult, the cardinal direction south, and the season *xia* contributed to its selection into the *wuxing* cosmology.

Besides, like jades, *chi* was related to male qualities rather than female, which is manifest in the earliest surviving anthology of Chinese poems *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Songs) datable to late Western or early Eastern Zhou period.<sup>140</sup>

乃生男子、載寢之床、載衣之裳、載弄之璋。

其泣嗶嗶、朱芾斯皇、室家君王。

乃生女子、載寢之地、載衣之裼、載弄之瓦。

無非無儀、唯酒食是議、無父母詒罹。<sup>141</sup>

Sons shall be born to him:

They will be put to sleep on couches;

They will be clothed in robes;

They will have jade sceptres to play with;

Their cry will be loud.

They will be [hereafter] resplendent with *zhu* red kneepads,

The [future] king, the princes of the land.

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<sup>138</sup> 釋詁云夏大也故大國曰夏華夏謂中國也 *Shigu* (Explaining the Old Words) of *Erya* says *xia* means big, so big state is called *xia*, and *huaxia* refers to China. *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 1, j. 11, p. 162.

<sup>139</sup> *Shiji*, v. 3, j. 74, p. 2344.

<sup>140</sup> Loewe 1993, p. 415.

<sup>141</sup> *Shisanjing zhushu*, v. 2, j. 11, pp. 387–388.

Daughters shall be born to him:  
 They will be put to sleep on the ground;  
 They will be clothed with wrappers;  
 They will have tiles to play with.  
 It will be theirs neither to do wrong nor to do good.  
 Only about the spirits and the food will they have to think,  
 And to cause no sorrow to their parents.<sup>142</sup>

This finding corresponds to the association of the unorthodox pink *hong* with females; thus, there is certain gender significance attached to different shades of red. Shiny bright red *chi* (interchangeable with *zhu*) as a cardinal color refers to the dominant males, while light red *hong* as an intermediate compound color marks the socially inferior females.

However, it is noteworthy that *chi* may have related to fertility cults and female images in earlier times. It is visible from pre-Qin non-canonical literature. For instance, Song Yü 宋玉's *Shennü fu* 神女賦 (Prose on Goddess) writes, “眉聯娟以蛾揚兮，朱唇的其若丹。<sup>143</sup> Her eyebrows rise as silk moths fly, her *zhu* lips are as red as *dan* cinnabar”. Although here *zhu* and *dan* are used instead of *chi*, both of them are found in pre-Qin excavated texts denoting shiny red. In addition to the male solar deity *Yandi*, the earliest comprehensive collection of classical Chinese mythology *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (the Classic of Mountains and Seas) records the sun mother *Xihe* 羲和: “東南海之外，甘水之間，有羲和之國。有女子名曰羲和，方浴日於甘淵。羲和者，帝俊之妻，生十日。<sup>144</sup> Outside of the east and south seas, between the sweet waters, is the state of *Xihe*. There is a woman named *Xihe* bathing the sun in the sweet spring. *Xihe* is the wife of *Dijun* and gave birth to ten suns”. *Xihe* is also mentioned in *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu)—the other important surviving collection of ancient myth-based poems.

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<sup>142</sup> Translation adapted from Legge, trans. 1871, pp. 306–307.

<sup>143</sup> *Quan shanggu sandai qinhan sanguo liuchao wen*, v. 1, j. 10, p. 74.

<sup>144</sup> *Shanhaijing jiaozhu*, j. 15, p. 381.



Nevertheless, although the historical portrayal of solar goddess is a pan-East Asian phenomenon, only the worship of *Amaterasu* 天照<sup>145</sup> in Japan has continued until the present day. Due to the Confucian view of women as inferior, subordinate and peripheral guiding gender relations since the fourth century BCE, the female deity *Xihe* is not included in *Shiji* 史記 (The Records of the Grand Historian)—the first official history of China.<sup>146</sup>

## Conclusion

The linguistic part of the present study covers two major words for the color red in early Chinese glosses found in pre-Qin excavated inscriptions and manuscripts. It distinguishes the semantic fields of *chi* and *hong* in pre-imperial China. The former means saturated red, being one of the five cardinal colors and a generic term for red in Old Chinese. The latter refers to a combination of red and white—pink, serving as an intermediate color and belonging to lower levels of color hierarchy. Material cultural findings have indicated ubiquitous occurrences of red colorants—ferric oxide, madder and cinnabar—on artifacts throughout the pre-imperial period, and bright hues of red dominated in those belonging to the elite. Pure red functioned as a symbol of superior status and immortality. Furthermore, the connection between *chi* and the solar cult, the imperial direction south, and the season summer strengthened its sacredness, explaining why it was absorbed into the five-fold *wuxing* cosmology. Besides, although *chi* was related to feminine features until a certain time, the change of its association to masculine qualities had also emphasized its significance as a gender marker in a patriarchal society. The connection between the color red and socially dominant males foregrounded the orthodox status of *chi*. Thus, in relation to the availability of saturated red and its divine, cosmic and gender implications, I argue that *chi* became a cardinal color, because of its ritual significance rather than its rarity.

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<sup>145</sup> Literarily meaning “heaven illuminating”, *Amaterasu* is a major deity of the Shinto religion and seen as the legendary founder of the Japanese imperial lineage. For a discussion on the cultural influence from continental tradition on the construction of this mythic figure, see Como 2009.

<sup>146</sup> Birrell 2001, pp. 196–197.

The main contribution of this research is that it brings to light the value of multidisciplinary sources and lenses in the study of cultural history on color. Drawing from philological, archeological and historical perspectives, this article probes into the meaning of the color red in early Chinese civilization and discloses that the saturated hue *chi* served as an official symbol originating from the solar cult. It was connected with natural philosophy as well as state beliefs and practices which were reflected in the color scheme of ritual suits and ornaments. It functioned as an emblem of divineness, especially embodying the concept of immortality. It also acted as a token of fertility cults and female images before its switch to link with the masculine. Only through a cross-disciplinary approach could all these strata of the red color be fully disassembled, which previous single subject-based scholarship failed to encompass.

This article is a preliminary investigation into the semantics and materiality of “redness” in pre-Qin China. It is noteworthy that early China was not the only civilization which privileged red as a sacred color. Except Sinitic cultures such as archaic Korea and Vietnam, the sacralization of “redness”, to a certain degree, appears to be a worldwide phenomenon, although it could take different forms in different places. Take the Duchy of Kievan Rus’—a medieval empire that is regarded as the forerunner of today’s Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (Belorussia)—as an example, red was the color of the rulers, festivals, Slavic solar god and ritual attires, which the etymology of *krasnyĭ* красный (red), originally *krasivyĭ* красивый (beautiful), came from.<sup>147</sup> These cultural similarities testify to the possible existence of certain universal tendencies in the realm of culturally constructed color hierarchies. Therefore, conceptual significance of “redness” in Chinese civilization can be further explored not only through dynastic history chronologically, but also through cross-cultural comparisons geographically.

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<sup>147</sup> Alexandrov, Kushner and Rabinovich 1970, p. 92.

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## Chinese Abstract

### 中華文明中的“紅”色文化史

#### ——其起源：從新石器時代至秦代

本論文研究先秦時代表示紅色詞彙的語義，並探索其在物質文化環境中形成的象徵性，旨在從文化史角度解讀紅色在古代中國的地位與意義。在語言學上，本文重點考察先秦出土文獻中的“赤”與“紅”二詞：前者為古代漢語中紅色的通稱，在上古漢語中表示正紅色；後者為現代漢語中紅色的通稱，但在上古時期則表示淺紅色。在考古材料中，本文探討中國北方和南方新石器文化以及商周時期出土文物中的紅色調的使用範圍以及禮儀內涵。對比文本與物質資料，本研究表明正紅色是地位和不朽的象徵，並且具有性別和五行宇宙觀上的意義。因此，赤在禮儀上的重要性和在劃分社會等級中作用使之成為五正色之一。

關鍵詞：紅色調、正色、語義、象徵、文化史

## Notes on Contributor

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