

The Main Colors of the Forbidden City

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The main colors of the Forbidden City are Red and Yellow, which can represent rich cultural deposits. According to the Chinese traditional culture, the Red of the Forbidden City has always been regarded as a positive color of celebration, conveying dignity and happiness. The Yellow color is usually considered as a promising color, and represents a bumper harvest. Based on the principle of the Five Elements, Fire is red, which means breeding and encouragement, and shows prosperity and a solid foundation for the country. Yellow represents Winged Dragon, belonging to the Center of the Earth, and symbolizes the divine right of emperors. Therefore, the color of the Forbidden City (see Figure 1) is of great significance to the development of history and the revival of culture. We still need to work determinedly for the protection of the cultural heritages, so that more people can have the opportunity to understand the brilliance of Chinese civilization.

Keywords: Forbidden City, colors, traditional culture, red, yellow, five elements, Chinese civilization



Figure 1. The watchtower of the Forbidden City.

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Introduction

With the development of our society, color is full of our lives. From the basic colors of black, white and gray to the three-primary colors of red, yellow and blue, the evolution of colors is obvious to all. But it is not surprising that, like other things, it has a deeper value and significance in addition to enriching our daily life.

There are many kinds of colors in people's lives, such as the appearance of buildings. Since ancient times, the color of traditional Chinese architectures has been endowed with a very special meaning. They have always been closely linked with the building itself, recording and carrying the memories and endless ethnic expectations between heaven and earth, human and God (Yang, 2022). Color is not only used as the decoration to make buildings beautified, but also an embodiment of the distinctive cultural hierarchy at that time. As the most intuitive visual embodiment of human perception, architectural colors always transmit the information of the current era to human beings (Lin, 2020). Let us take the Forbidden City as an example, a very famous historical site in China (see Figure 2), to see how many colors there are and what they represent. Then we can better understand the cultural form of ancient society and people's psychological recognition. It will develop the city and make more people have the opportunity to appreciate the brilliance of Chinese civilization.



Figure 2. The square in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

The Culture of the Color

Color, the most straightforward official explanation is a visual effect on light generated by people's eyes, brain and life experience. This sense of color is not only determined by the physical properties of light, but also affected by the surrounding colors. So, this physical property of different colors produced by substances is usually called color.

Classification in China

Color originates from nature. Since ancient times, people have obtained five colors of green, red, yellow, white and black by observing the scenery when the heaven and earth are moving and the sun and the moon are changing. And then, we got the color theory of "Five Color View" (Chen, 2021).

Green, also known as (dark) black, is the color of things when they were born, implying the birth of vegetation and the growth of everything.

Red, after the Warring States period, was regarded as one color with Chi by people. When Xu Zhi-heng talked about porcelain color, he said that “Green is the color of the past, and Red is the color of prosperity”. Therefore, it is obvious that the emperor’s residence is Red.

Yellow, the noble color, represents the power of the emperor. So that is the reason why only the Forbidden City was equipped with yellow roof.

White is the original color of the world. The ancient White symbolizes the starting point. In Buddhism, everything is empty, and the starting point is blank, so the end point is also blank.

Black, no other color when you look at it carefully, but actually is the most abundant color. In ancient China, Black was colorful, because it meant ink color. When ink met with water, it produced five colors. And we called it Ink Color Porcelain which is very unique (Liu, Zhang, & Guo, 2015).

Chinese people advocate Five Colors and are deeply influenced by the Five Elements thought (Yu, 2020). In addition, there are so many other beautiful colors in our culture. The reason why Chinese traditional colors are very vivid is because people associate them with daily life closely (Gao, 2022). Color is a way for the ancients to understand nature and the world. The color seen by ancient people is the color presented by nature. So, their definition of colors is just the most authentic expression of natural beauty, and it is also the beauty of artistic conception that we lack today (Nietzsche, 2013).

Embodiment in China

In China, from the Zhou Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, the number of various names of color has reached more than 700 according to the ancient classic books. These names mostly come from the ancients’ daily life, such as the solar terms they experienced, or the mountains they traveled. And then, they were combined with the cultural literacy of the ancients (Chen, 2019). Therefore, color is not only a concept of art, but also a concept of culture.

The ancients’ naming of colors is almost scattered in the expression of details, so this kind of name will be replaced by knowledge gradually. But fortunately, when people realized that it was such a pity, the cultural seed that had been sleeping for a long time was rejuvenated.

The traditional color of China is the crystallization of the wisdom of the ancients. It is more about expressing our own Cultural Complex. Each color has its origin and connotation. It is also endowed with a beautiful meaning. So, the name is poetic and picturesque (Gao, 2022). It is not hard for us to find that the way that Chinese people defined colors is always by the way of “seeing things and taking meaning”. Through the things we see in the world, such as flowers, moon, leaves, light and clouds, we can imagine and name them. Only when people really understand it, can they understand the great wisdom of the ancients.

Besides, color is also related to Time and Space. The connection between color and position was seen as early as in oracle bone inscriptions. The sense of space does not exist independently, it should be connected with the sense of time, such as the “four directions, the body of four seasons” in the *Book of Han Dynasty* (Guo, 2010). Color is connected with time (cold and warm in the four seasons), which means that color is added to people’s life and the representation of time.

The Colors in the Forbidden City

The Forbidden City here refers to the Palace Museum (see Figure 3) which is located in Beijing, the capital of China. It is the center of the central axis line, facing to the south. It was firstly built in the early Ming

Dynasty, more than 600 years ago. And the whole construction took fourteen years to be completed, from 1406 to 1420. It used to be the working office and residential area for the emperors and royal families in both Ming and Qing Dynasties. Totally there were 24 emperors who lived there and controlled China inside it. The reason why we called it Forbidden City is because in the old days it was only used by the emperors and royal families. So, it was forbidden for the common people. However, in 1925, the Forbidden City was officially opened to the public, and the name was changed to the Palace Museum. In 1987 the Palace Museum was listed as a world cultural heritage site by UNESCO.



Figure 3. The Meridian Gate of the Forbidden City.

It is said that there are mainly three colors inside the Forbidden City. They are yellow, black and green, which are combined with other colors. And another saying goes that the Forbidden City has 384 colors, and each of them reveals the essence of Chinese culture (Jiang, 2022). However, according to the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture and the analysis of the theory of *Yin Yang* and Five Elements, there should be two main colors in the Forbidden City actually. They are Red and Yellow (Gold).

Red

Standing in front of the Meridian Gate, you can tell the visual impact of colors. Red color surrounds you and yellow color is above you. If you wonder the meaning of these two colors in the Forbidden City, the most common explanation is that they are symbolizing the feudal autocratic monarchy system with strict hierarchy in the old society of China. As we all know, usually red color is the most powerful color, which represents liveliness, passion and vigorousness. And it also stands for more optimism and auspiciousness in the East. Besides, according to the inheritance of traditional Chinese culture, the “Red” of the Forbidden City is regarded as a positive color of festivity, and it conveys solemnity and happiness. So, this Red is collectively known as “the Forbidden City Red”. And there is such a short article that describes it vividly.

The Red in the Forbidden City is the wall, and the majesty is accompanied by repression. The Red in the Forbidden City is the window, which savors years between light and shadow. The Red in the Forbidden City is a mysterious yearning, and it places people's admiration for survival and hesitation for death. This is the Forbidden City Red.

In addition to the influence of traditional Chinese culture, the Red of the Forbidden City is also mixed with *Fengshui* Theory, such as Five Elements, *Yin* and *Yang*. For a long time, *Yin Yang* and Five Elements are the world view and cosmology in ancient China. And the color also follows this rule, especially for the ancient buildings, almost every place contains the immortal glory of the Five Elements theory. As it is well known to us, Metal, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth are collectively known as the Five Elements. Metal represents West, which is white, belonging to the White Tiger or *Bai Hu*. Wood represents East, which is green and belongs to Green Dragon or *Qing Long*. Water symbolizes North, which is black and belongs to Big Turtle or *Xuan Wu*. Fire stands for South. It is red, belonging to Rose Finch or *Zhu Que*. And Earth represents Center, which is yellow and means Winged Dragon or *Ying Long*. According to the Five Elements theory, Forbidden City belongs to the Central Earth. And the Earth depends on Fire, and the Fire is red, so the Forbidden City walls, gates and windows are mostly red color, conveying the meaning of breeding and promoting, which is showing the prosperity, and the foundation of the world (see Figure 4) (Lu & Tang, 2019). In addition, according to the records of Chinese Prehistory, the material of red pigment is cinnabar, such as the red seal clay and the red building lacquer, which are all made of cinnabar. The origin of cinnabar comes from China. And in the local religious and Taoist culture, Red is also regarded as the color of life and eternity. This is the reason why people usually describe the wall of the Forbidden City as vermilion.



Figure 4. The red wall in the Forbidden City.

The views mentioned above are not only reflected in the past, but also in our society today. People would like to use Red, because it can ward off the evil spirits and bring happiness. From this point, the Red of the Forbidden City has its extraordinary special meaning.

Yellow

Overlooking the Forbidden City from the sky, we can find that the bright golden glazed tiles on the top of each building, quite like a giant dragon crawling on the north-south central axis line of the city, extend from the Meridian Gate to the Gate of Devine Might. So, the question is what the differences between Gold and Yellow are? Firstly, Gold is a material color, slightly dark yellow. It has luster, and indicates noble, gloriousness and brilliance. Since ancient times, the value of gold has been endowed with symbolic meanings such as luxury, magnificence, flaunt, sanctity, reputation and loyalty. Therefore, gold represents the supreme power, which is also the reason why the royal colors in most countries in the world are gold. Yellow, a warm color, has the meaning of nature, sunshine and autumn. It is generally considered to be a happy and hopeful color that consists of positive energy and represents a harvest. Since the Song Dynasty, one of the feudal dynasties in Chinese history, bright yellow has become the exclusive color of the emperors, and common people are not allowed to use it. All these described above are the differences between Gold and Yellow in Chinese interpretation and explanation. It means that in terms of the perspective of color alone, the glazed tiles on the top of each hall in the Forbidden City should be golden color, because only Gold can express the original intention of the designer accurately. Especially for some foreign visitors from other countries, most of them do not understand the *Fengshui* Theory in Chinese culture. So, when they asked why the roofs of the Forbidden City are all golden colors, it is better to answer them directly with the international official definition of color, instead of explaining the Five Elements of *Yin* and *Yang*. Moreover, from a practical point of view, the golden glazed tile can reflect the meaning of supreme power, but the concept of yellow cannot. After all, there is no any record of the meaning of “warm”, “sunshine” and “harvest” in the official history of the Forbidden City.

Thus, the international definition of Yellow is clear, let us analyze it from the Chinese Five Elements of *Yin* and *Yang*. In the original myth and religious system of ancient China, the Emperor was the God who dominated everything in the universe, and he was also the supreme god of Confucianism, representing the sky or even equivalent to the sky, living in the middle of the universe (Liu, 2014). As mentioned in the previous article, Yellow represents the Winged Dragon, *Ying Long*. So, it belongs to the Earth that is the center. From this point of view, the glazed tiles on the roof should naturally be Yellow (see Figure 5). On the contrary, Gold is not included in the Five Elements Theory, so it cannot be used here. In addition, according to the classification of color system in ancient China, it can be divided into two types: “Normal Color” and “Intermediate Color”. Just like the five normal colors we mentioned above, “green, red, yellow, white and black”, corresponding to East, South, Middle, West, and North, or Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. In ancient times, the Normal Color was usually considered as the valued color (W. Chen, 2022). Yellow symbolized the monarchy, so bright yellow was only used by the emperor. We can find these ideas in each corner of the Forbidden City. They are all bright yellow.



Figure 5. The Hall of Supreme Harmony.

Discussion and Conclusions

When we talk about the colors of the Forbidden City, we usually think about another question: how many kinds of “Chinese Colors” in our daily life? The School of Five Colors View “green, red, yellow, white and black” can be traced back to the Spring and Autumn Period nearly three thousand years ago. The Five Colors are also known as the basic colors of China. Until the pre-Qin period, there was also a record in *The Art of War*: “color is no more than five, but the change of five colors is full of varieties”. Since then, “Five Colors” has been the most basic form of expression in traditional colors, and is also the carrier of social culture (X. Chen, 2022). In the book *The Color of China* published in 2019, the author [France] Bruno Barbey recorded his traveling experiences in China, and showed the development and change of contemporary China with more than 300 color photos. Thus, in his eyes, “Chinese Color” should be colorful. So, from different times and different perspectives, the answer to this question is not the same. It is really hard to define what the “Chinese Color” is and how many kinds there are, as is the Forbidden City.

In a word, one thing can be generally accepted by people or not depends on whether it can be passed down from generation to generation. The colors of the Forbidden City are good examples, such as the Forbidden City lipstick of different color numbers, the mug of yellow dragon and red phoenix, the eye shadow of snow white and so on. They are all popular cultural and creative products right now. This is the magic of Chinese culture.

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