

Symbolism and Meaning of Colours in Early Chinese Sources

What did colour mean to Chinese people more than two thousand years ago? Written sources seem to tell a different story regarding this subject than the archaeological record shows. Indeed, it is not very probable that there will be much agreement between the answers which philology and archeology can give to this question. Nevertheless, it remains important to look at texts when trying to understand why certain colours were displayed more prominently in ancient Chinese art than others. There is the possibility that, as in other cultures, sculptures were not designed to represent real life but to comply with ideals about how humans should look. Today such ideals can only be revealed by reading texts, not by looking at physical objects. However, this essay refrains from explaining why certain colours were used more often than others. Limited as our knowledge still is, such an attempt would for the time being certainly be doomed to failure. Therefore, this paper will confine itself to giving an idea on basic Chinese concepts concerning colours to those who are not acquainted with ancient Chinese sources.

Colour Terms

For several reasons Chinese colour-terms are interesting with regard to the subject of this paper. The most important reason to study terminology is that the graphs used to describe colours in ancient China can tell us a lot about the early development of Chinese culture. However, as there have been numerous very different interpretations of the original meaning of ancient Chinese characters, mainly by Chinese and Japanese scholars, the reader of the following lines should be aware that he is treading on very thin ice. Many assumptions about the meaning of ancient graphs do not go beyond the level of speculations.¹

As early as at the time when oracle bones were inscribed at the end of the second millennium B.C. colours seem to have been important as part of the ritual system of the Shang. Apparently, even at this early date the use of colours sometimes related to a specific context. White, red and multi-coloured oxen were, for example, frequently sacrificed in the ancestral cult whereas black sheep were used in rain-making rituals. Yellow oxen seem to have been sacrificed mainly to the directions or to earthly gods.² Recent research suggests that the colour system of the Shang consisted of only four basic colour terms: those for red, white, yellow and dark.³ The element which is certainly mentioned most often is red for which there are at least three different terms, namely *chi* 赤 which is used mainly to designate the colour of horses, *xing* 𤝵, which probably means yellowish-red close to orange and describes the colour of oxen, and *xuan* 玄 or *you* 幽, both of which seem to be words for a darkish red colour. Although *xuan* in later times came to be used for "purple" this cannot have been the original meaning of this character since in oracle bone inscriptions it is the colour of a dark oxen.

The character for the word "chi" is composed of the elements of a human figure, which was later, when the writing

system developed, stylized as "da", big, and of fire. It is not clear, however, whether we have to conclude that the human figure gave a semantic meaning to the character as did the element of fire or whether it was only a phonetic element of the graph.⁴ In the case of *xing* it seems plausible to assume the latter, namely that one of the two elements which means "sheep" is a phonetic one whereas only the other element "oxen" gave a semantic meaning to the character. *Xing*, then, would simply be the normal colour of an oxen. Similarly to *chi* the character "you" seems to be composed of an element which represents fire (although the modern written form looks like the character for mountain) and a phonetic element which is the same that is also used for writing the other character meaning dark red, namely *xuan*. Other words for red, such as *zhu* 朱, a character which seems to be a graph of a tree from the trunk of which a red dye-pigment is obtained,⁵ or *dan* 丹, cinnabar, do not occur as colour terms in the oracle bone inscriptions. Hence, it seems that the use of these terms dates to a later time. *Dan* has been thought to be a drawing of a globule of mercury on a pan or of a lump of mineral in a crucible.⁶

Hei 黑, the modern word for black, does occur in oracle bone inscriptions in sentences such as: "We do not use black sheep, there will then be no rain" or "we should sacrifice black dogs, the king will then receive assistance". It seems also to have been used for the word "drought" which may have been phonetically close to "huang" 黃, yellow.⁷ This might be the reason for the fact that yellow and black are sometimes confused in the inscriptions. The character has been interpreted as a drawing of a human figure with face and body covered with spots of dark war-paint⁸ or with a tattooed face, a punishment of criminals.⁹ As has been pointed out, however, the bone graph does not have the ink spots which occur only in the later bronze-inscriptions and there the character is never used as a colour term.¹⁰ It is, therefore, more plausible, that the pictograph for black shows two soot-collecting vessels over a chimney.¹¹

According to two eminent Western scholars, *huang*, yellow probably shows a man with a large belt¹² or with gold nuggets.¹³ However, Gao Hanyu says that the old graph for yellow clearly contains the character "fire" which suggests that this, again, is a character which was used to describe one of the colours of fire.¹⁴ In oracle bones it describes most often the colour of oxen but sometimes also of bronze or gold.

There are several theories concerning the character for "bai" or "bo" meaning white, all of which have been rejected by modern scholars. There are not many convincing explanations at the moment for what this character may have represented.¹⁵ As an example how complicated the business of interpreting characters can become, note the interesting explanation by Ulrich Unger who thinks that *bai* originally represented an acorn and was only later used as the word for "white" because of its phonetic value. Later it was incorporated into the character for "oak" (*li* 櫟).¹⁶

Interestingly, there is no term for green or blue in the oracle bone inscriptions. Although the character *qing* 青 which has

been explained as showing a plant, possibly indigo, with its juice being collected in a pan¹⁷ does occur in these inscriptions, it is never used as a colour term - which makes this explanation implausible as far as early times are concerned. The character is, however, phonetically and graphically related to sheng, "to grow". Although there is ample archaeological evidence for the fact that the Shang knew the colour green, the lack of the colour-term "green" or "blue" on oracle bones seems to suggest that most probably there was no term for blue or green at that time and that this colour was subsumed under the category of "dark", "yellow" or "multicoloured". There is, however, also the possibility that there was a word for "blue" or "green" but that it was not mentioned because colours were usually referred to in these inscriptions in relation to sacrificial animals - and that there was simply no blue or green sacrificial animal. With regard to this problem it is, on the other hand, significant that, in a commentary to the *Book of Changes*, which might date back as late as the third century B.C., heaven is "xuan", dark, contrary to the earth's being yellow. It seems that the colours blue and green were latecomers, which emerged from the dark category from which, much later, the modern terms "lü" 綠, green, and "lan" 藍, blue also derived. The use of the terms "qing" or "cang" 蒼 for the colour of heaven in other texts also seems to be late against the passage in the *Book of Changes* which reflects the earlier situation.

A most interesting word is in our context the Chinese word for "thing", wu 物 which obviously originally consisted of two words, one clearly being an oxen and the other one meaning "multicoloured". This fact has been pointed out as early as the beginning of this century (by the noted scholar Wang Guowei)¹⁸. In China's first etymological dictionary, the *Shuowen* of Xu Shen 許慎, which was written at the turn of the first to the second century A.D. the character wu is defined as a general term for things. This usage seems, however, to start only during the late Zhou period, a fact which has led to many mistranslations of early Chinese texts by Western scholars. The part of the character which means multicoloured has been explained either as a plough breaking up earth, the meaning referring to the colour of the soil¹⁹ or as a knife with dots representing the object it cuts apart. In the latter case the opinion has been expressed that the primary meaning was "to separate" or "select".²⁰ This interpretation is important because in some early texts "wu" quite clearly means "to select by colours". Only late the character wu developed to generally refer to a type of classification, whence it derives its meaning of "things".

For example, in the *Rites of the Chou*, *Chou-li* 周禮, which was probably written during the third century B.C. but which records a great number of ancient practices, there is mention of an official who is in charge of classifying the land in order to choose the right grain to be grown on each spot. The word for "to classify" is "wu", and it is explained by the second century A.D. scholar Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 as "to judge on colour and shape".²¹ Elsewhere the same commentary says that to classify means to look at the colours.²² Where the text says that it is possible to know in advance about coming disasters and catastrophies but also lucky events by watching the "categories of the five clouds", the word for category - which is again "wu" - is explained as colour. Yellow clouds mean, according to an early first century A.D. commentary, locusts, white colours mourning for a dead, red ones war, black ones inundations and yellow ones a good harvest.²³ In any case it seems quite plausible that the very word for "things" is closely connected to the word for "colour".

Five Elements Speculations and the Military

With this last passage we are, of course, in the realm of Five Elements speculations which probably started during the fourth or third century B.C. We find these speculations in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳, a historical text narrating the events from the period of the 8th until the fifth century B.C. In this work it is said that a good ruler of men has to make a display of his "things" which consist of objects in five colours. Again, a commentary, this time from the early 3rd century A.D., explains that the chariots, uniforms and weapons are arranged in order to symbolize the ruler's power over heaven, earth and the four directions and that for this purpose they should be distinguished by the five colours, the best means to distinguish these things.²⁴

It becomes quite clear that in the *Zuozhuan* "wu", things, are a word for the emblems by which status and rank are shown²⁵, and it seems that in this context colour played a very important role as early as at the time described in this text. For us this is important because from this time on in ritual and speculative systems colours began to become associated with certain objects or with directions. Partly we find similarities in these later systems with the early ones to be found in the oracle bone inscriptions. A relationship between the colour black and the element water can be seen in oracle bone texts (as mentioned above) as well as in five-elements theories. The same is true for the earth which is associated with yellow and for fire which - quite naturally - belongs to red. It is well-known that coloured animals were associated with directions, the green dragon being the animal or the essence²⁶ of the east, the red bird the one of the south, the white tiger the one of the west and the black warrior - sometimes also a turtle - the one of the north.

In the *Records of Rites*, the *Li-chi*, we read the following famous text:

A fighting chariot has no cross-board to assist its occupants in bowing; in a war chariot the banner is fully displayed; in a chariot of peace it is kept folded round the pole. A recorder should carry with him in his carriage his implements for writing; his subordinates the (recorded) words (of former covenants and other documents). When there is water in front, the flag with the green bird on it should be displayed. When there is (a cloud of) dust in front, that with the screaming kites. For chariots and horsemen, that with wild geese in flight. For a body of troops that with a tiger's (skin). For a beast of prey that with a leopard's (skin). On the march the (banner with the) Red Bird should be in front; that with the Dark Warrior behind; that with the Azure Dragon on the left; and that with the White tiger on the right.²⁷

Zheng Xuan's commentary explains that the four animals mentioned last represent the different formations of the troops. It is not clear whether the uniforms of the soldiers had to be in the relevant colour or whether there were just animals represented on the flags. One thing becomes quite clear, however, namely that colours played an important role for the military. We do not know whether the technique of wearing uniforms with distinct colours, permitting the easy recognition in battle of the men of one's own side, which was definitely used at the time of the fifth century A.D. was known earlier, but recent archaeological discoveries suggest that this development might have started as early as the fifth century B.C.²⁸

Textual data seem to support this hypothesis. In the *Mozi* 墨子 text, parts of which may be dated as early as the beginning

of the fourth century B.C. the use of corresponding colours for dress, flags and banners, numbers, sizes, sacrifices and the like is recommended:²⁹

If the enemy comes from the east receive him at the eastern altar. The altar should be eight feet high, the hall eight feet deep (?), and there should be eight people who are eighty years old. The host should sacrifice with a green banner, there should be eight green spirits which are eight feet long, sixtyfour crossbows should be raised and halted. The uniform of the general should be green, the sacrificial animal a chicken. If the enemy comes from the south receive him at the southern altar. The altar should be seven feet high, the hall seven feet deep, and there should be seven people who are seventy years old. The host should sacrifice with a red banner, there should be seven red spirits which are eight feet long, forty-nine crossbows should be raised and halted. The uniform of the general should be red, the sacrificial animal a dog.³⁰

The text continues to make the same remarks for the west, associated with the colour of white and the number nine, and for the north with six and the blackboar.

Another text which describes events of the year of 91 B.C. writes that when the crown prince of Emperor Wu of the Han tried to overthrow the government, his army used the red insignia of the Han. Therefore the Han added yellow pennants in order to make it easy to recognize their own forces.³¹

That certain commands were expressed by the colour of flags has been demonstrated earlier in the passage from the *Book of Rites*. The Mohists developed this system further:

In general, the standard procedure for defending cities is: Make grey-green flags for wood [i.e. if you need wood or if there is wood or for those who are in charge of wood]; make red flags for fire, make yellow flags for firewood and fuel; make white flags for stones; make black flags for water; make bamboo flags for food; make grey goshawk flags for soldiers, who will fight to the death; make tiger flags for mighty warriors; make double rabbit flags for brave soldiers; make youth flags for fourteen year old boys; make dog flags for crossbows, make forest flags for halberds feather flags for swords and shields; make dragon flags for carts; make bird flags for cavalry. In general, when the name of the flag that you are looking for is not in the book, in all cases use its form and name to make [the design on] the flag.³²

The Mohists obviously had handbooks for the defenders which instructed them to decide on the colour and design of individual flags.

Cosmological Systems and the Statecult

It is well-known that in Five-Elements speculations there are the elements of earth which is yellow, fire which is red, metal which is white, wood which is green and water which is black. In the texts just quoted only four of these elements were mentioned, with the earth missing. Although yellow as the colour of the centre is alluded to in early texts³³ it seems that the systematization including five colours is late and that originally only the four directions belonged to the system.

The *Discussions from the White-Tiger Hall (Bohu tong)*, a text which probably was written around 80 A.D., contains another passage mentioning the four animals of the directions. Here the yellow centre constitutes the fifth element but no animal is mentioned. It looks very much like this fifth colour

had to be added because of the conventions of the day, but that this could not be done in a proper way because the original set did not include a fifth animal. That the fifth element is a late addition which is somewhat unnatural to the old system based on only four parts can also be seen by the fact that systematizing ritual texts of the time make the colours correspond to the four seasons: spring which is green like the east, summer which is red like the south, autumn which is white like the west and winter which belongs to black and the north. The centre is in an awkward way added to this system as the last month of summer and the colour yellow.³⁴ In the dictionary *Shuowen* 說文 the colours are usually defined as belonging to their directions.

There is more evidence which can serve as a basis for our assumption that originally the Chinese colour cosmos was constituted of only four primary colours: when the Qin started to challenge the supreme power of the Zhou dynasty, they step by step seem to have established a system of sacrifices to Supreme powers whom they called "Di" - a word which later became the designation of the Chinese emperors. As the territory of the Qin lay to the west of the Zhou it was only natural that the first of these sacrifices, established in the year of 756 B.C. was directed to the white power, the baidi 白帝, who controlled the west.³⁵ Eighty-four years later the Qin established a second sacrifice to a divine power, this time the green one.³⁶ According to our sources in the year of 422 B.C. the Qin added two more sacrifices to the yellow and to the red power on high.³⁷ No more sacrifices were added.

It is significant that, with the exceptions of the sacrifice established first, the sites where these sacrifices took place did in no way correspond to the cosmological prescriptions which we know from the *Record of Rites* and other semicanonical texts. The sacrifice to the white power lay northwest of the city of Yung, the one for the blue power to its south and the two for the red and the yellow powers to its west. This suggests that the speculations concerning a relationship between the directions and the colours were not universally acknowledged during the period of the rise of the state of Qin. On the contrary, it seems that the system was observed at the time of Emperor Wu of the Han (140-87 B.C.) when his sons at their enfeoffing ceremonies were presented with coloured earth from the central altar of the earth at the capital. Each son was given earth in a different colour, according to the direction from the capital in which his fiefdom lay.³⁸

The careful reader will have noticed that a black power was missing from the addressees of the imperial sacrifices of the Qin. The following complicated argumentation might give a reason for this strange fact: Besides a cycle of four and of five colours the *Records of Rites* also mention a dynastic cycle of three colours, namely black, white and red. The Xia dynasty is said to have ruled under the colour of black, the Shang under the colour of white and the Zhou under the colour of red.³⁹ Because one dynastic cycle was over when the Zhou declined, the Qin were said to have again ruled under the colour of black and the power of water. This conclusion was also drawn from five-elements-speculations.⁴⁰ In the beginning of the Han there was some uncertainty regarding the colour which should guide the new dynasty. First, the founder of the Han thought that he was the son of the red power who had killed the son of the white power - which was quite natural because he came from the red southern state of Chu whereas the Qin were white and western. Only a year later, however, the first emperor of the Han asked:

"Whom did the Qin in former times sacrifice to as divine powers on high?" The answer was: "To the four powers. There were sacrifices to the powers of white, green, yellow and red." Gaozu asked again: "I have heard that in heaven there are five powers. Why did they [sacrifice] to four powers only?" When nobody knew the answer, Gaozu himself said: "I know it already. They are waiting for myself to complete the number of five." Thereupon [the Han] established sacrifices to the black power....⁴¹

Ritual Use of Colours

So the Han, after some initial wavering, began to rule under the power of black in the same way as their predecessors whose reign over the united empire had lasted only fourteen years and who were, therefore, not taken for a real dynasty. Under the influence of cosmological speculations they later changed their colour twice, first to yellow and then to red, which had been the initial idea of the first emperor of the Han.⁴² This does not need to interest us here. What is important for the the history of the Qin is that this dynasty is said to have ruled under the element of water and to have honoured the colour of black - although elsewhere it is stated in the textual sources that the Qin officials wore white uniforms.⁴³ Needless to say that the system of adopting a colour governing the time of a dynasty has been observed ever since this time until the collapse of imperial China.

Of course, the rule to adopt a certain colour for the reign of a dynasty was only the tip of an iceberg of ritual obligations which had to be followed by officials, dignitaries and common citizens of imperial China. A fitting example for these rules is provided by the following passage which is taken from the chapter Yucao 玉藻 of the *Records of Rites*:

At the ceremony of capping, the first cap put on was one of black linen. The use of this extended from the feudal lords downwards. It might, after having been thus employed, be put away or disused.

The dark-coloured cap, with red strings and tassels descending to the breast, was used at the capping of the son of Heaven. The cap of black linen, with strings and tassels of various colours, was used at the capping of a feudal prince. A dark-coloured cap with scarlet strings and tassels was worn by a feudal lord, when fasting. A dark-coloured cap with grey strings and tassels was worn by officials when similarly engaged.

A cap of white silk with the border or roll of a dark colour was worn by a son or grandson (when in a certain stage of mourning). A similar cap with a plain white edging, was worn after the sacrifice at the end of the year's mourning...

A dark-coloured cap with the roll round it of white silk was worn by one excluded from the ranks of his compeers [because he had been refractory]....

An ordinary officer did not wear anything woven of silk that had been first dyed. One [dignitary] who had left the service of his ruler wore no two articles of different colours.

After these sentences which clearly show that the wearing of coloured robes was, at least theoretically, reserved for officials there follows what are usually considered the most important lines concerning the colours in early Chinese sources:

If the upper garment were of one of the correct colours, the lower garment was of the [correspondent] intermediate one.⁴⁴

What are "correct colours"? For Zheng Xuan the "correct colour" was only one, namely xuan which can be rendered either as "black", "dark" or "purple". The "intermediate colour" is for him "xun 纁" which today means crimson. Kong Yingda 孔應達, a seventh century commentator, explains that "xuan", "dark" is the colour of heaven and "xun" which he glosses as a mixture of red and yellow is the colour of the earth - Heaven had to be on top, the earth underneath, as far as the robes of dignitaries were concerned. However, Huangfu Mi 皇甫謐 (215-282 A.D.), another commentator, says that the "correct colours" are the five colours of the directions, namely blue, red, white, black and yellow. For the intermediary colours he mentions green, jade-green, bay-yellow, purple and somekind of pink - a mixture of red and white.⁴⁵

Similar rules applied to the colours of girdles and even of knee-covers. Of course, according to the *Record of Rites*, the wives of officers were not allowed to choose the colours of their robes freely. They wore robes in colours which were determined by the rank of their husbands. In many later dynastic histories we find treatises with detailed prescriptions for the colours of chariots, clothing and seals.

Red

A high predilection for the colour of red is to be found throughout these texts. For example, the highest seals of state always contained an element of red,⁴⁶ the wheels of the chariots of high officials were painted red, and so were their houses. We may see here an influence of red as the kingly colour of the Zhou as well as the imperial colour of the Han - or the other way around: the Zhou and the Han may have chosen this colour because of their high social status. Two examples from the Han period relating to religious and political contexts may suffice to demonstrate this here. The *Taiping jing*, a Daoist text dating probably at least partly from the first and second century A.D. says:

If today the correct miasma arrives one will not for long be able to nourish evildoers. This is as if a Yang miasma arrives which has the effect that the Yin-miasma vanishes. Now if on top of utmost Yang the red miasma comes this is the essence of the fire-king. The fire-king is the sun which is the brightest [object].⁴⁷

The second example belongs into the sphere of semimetaphysical apologetics of the Han dynasty shortly before its final collapse at the end of the second century A.D. It is a fine example of how five elements colour symbolism was understood at that time. The end of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, a chronicle of the kingdom of Lu traditionally ascribed to Confucius is explained by He Xiu in a subcommentary:

The master since long times knew... that a commoner named Liu Ji [the founder of the Han] would replace the Zhou dynasty. When he [Confucius] saw that a gatherer of firewood captured a unicorn he knew that it had come because of this [man]. Why that? The unicorn has the essence of wood [green]. A gatherer of firewood is a commoner. The meaning is that he wants to make fire [red]. This means that the red emperor was going to replace the Zhou and to take their position. Therefore the unicorn was captured by a gatherer of firewood...

...
After the unicorn had been captured Heaven sent down a bloodscripture and wrote at the capital gate of Lu the following words: "Quickly create laws because the sage

Confucius is going to die and the Haus Ji of Zhou will perish... When Zi Xia, [a student of Confucius] the next day went to see what happened the bloodscripture flew away becoming a red bird which transformed itself into a white scripture...⁴⁸

Red, associated with magic blood was to continue to be in favour for centuries, as it is still today. That the mining of mercury, which is needed for producing the red substances cinnabar or vermilion was a very profitable business from quite early times on, is suggested by a story to be found in the second century B.C. *Records of the Historian*, an account of a widow from Sichuan:

There was a widow of Ba by the name of Qing whose husband's ancestors had found mercury mines and monopolized the profits for several generations. The family wealth was beyond counting. This woman had the ability to look after her enterprises, using much of her wealth as protection so that no one molested her or them. The first Qin emperor considered her a virtuous widow, treated her as a protégée and caused to be built in her honour a monument called the Tower of the Women's Remembrance of Mistress Qing.⁴⁹

Because of evidence such as the one just quoted, it is quite clear that red was the dominant colour in China from very early times on.⁵⁰

Much earlier than this story was another event in which cinnabar played an important role: There is an entry in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (670 B.C.)⁵¹ which reports that the pillars in the temple where the ancestral tablet of duke Huan 桓 of Lu 魯 (710-693 B.C.) was enshrined were painted in vermilion. He Xiu explains that this was done because the son and successor of Huan was going to marry a woman from the neighbouring state of Qi and that he wanted to show off in front of Qi - he probably wanted to demonstrate how much luxury he could afford.⁵² It should be pointed out that together with azurite cinnabar later become a word for loyalty: both materials, do not decay. None of the other materials, which are systematized in much later sources such as Wang Tao's *Wai Tai biyao* (dating to the year of 752 A.D.), such as malachite for green, east and wood, arsenolite for white, west and metal, magnetite for black, north and water and realgar for yellow, the centre and earth seem to have played a similar role as cinnabar.⁵³ Apparently, yellow became an important colour for the statecult only at the time of the Sui dynasty at the end of the sixth century A.D. It should also be noted that the Chinese did, as far as our written sources are concerned, not perceive themselves as a yellow race until very late - probably as late as the seventeenth or eighteenth if not even the nineteenth century.

Notes

- 1 C. f. Paul Serruys, "Basic Problems Underlying the Process of Identification of the Chinese Graphs of the Shang Oracular Inscriptions", *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* (Zhongyang yuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo jikan) 53 (1982), pp. 455-494.
- 2 Wang Tao, "Colour Terms in Shang Oracle Bone Inscriptions", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 1996.1, pp. 63-101. Throughout its first part this paper owes very much to Wang Tao's findings.
- 3 Wang Tao, 1996, pp. 98. Compare W. Baxter, "A look at the history of Chinese color terminology", *Journal of the Chinese Language Teachers Association*, XVIII, 2, 1983, pp. 1-25. Compare, however Gao Hanyu 高汉玉 who believes that "blue"/"green" belonged to the Chinese

Critical Statements Against the Use of Colour

Finally, all ideological characterizations of colours notwithstanding, it should be pointed out that all the attempts at systematizing certain aspects of colours must be seen in the light of a very strong sense among erudites of ancient China, that the use of colours in itself was deemed a negative thing.

A remark of Confucius runs:

"Fine words and an insinuating colour are seldom associated with true virtue."⁵⁴, a remark which is repeated thrice in the *Confucian Analects*. And Laozi says:

The five colours make blind the eyes of men

The five sounds make dull the ears of men,

The five tastes make apathetic the mouth of men....

Therefore the sage ... does not act for the eye. (Laozi 12)

Warning statements against the evil influence of the five colours for good government and public order are too numerous in ancient texts to be counted. What is the reason for this strange rhetoric? First of all, of course, many literati feared that too much money would be spent on things which were only superficial and not substantial. Secondly, the word for colour itself and its Chinese character provide a clue: the word "se" does not only mean "colour" but also "appearance", "eros" or simply "sex". *Shuowen* says that it is the "mood which is expressed in the face"⁵⁵ because "se" is used to express feelings of anger, joy and the like. One scholar even thinks that the basic meaning of the pictograph has to be interpreted as "sexual intercourse"⁵⁶, and indeed, in later texts the character very often simply means men's desire for the opposite sex. - Confucius said: "I have never seen a person who loved virtue more than sex or the beauty of women" (LY 9.18 and 15.13). It is possible that the double meaning of the word "se" results from the fact that since the earliest times women used coloured cosmetics for beautifying themselves. The word for colour could as a *pars pro toto* have taken the meaning of "eros". If this is true, then there would be small wonder that Chinese philosophers, who often warned that a ruler who neglected the state business because of his appetite for material goods and sensual pleasures would eventually lead the world into ruin, despised the use of colours altogether. This scheme could also explain why there were so many complicated rules regulating the use of colours. - Only with systematized and ritualized rubs could the negative effects, which the costly luxury of colours produced, according to the erudites be mastered.

colour system as early as during the Shang. S his "*Zhongguo secai mingwu shu* 中国色彩名物疏" ("Commentary to names and objects of Chinese colours", in *Liuxing se* 流行色 (Fashionable Colours), 1978/4 pp. 10f and 1979/1, pp. 30-33, and 2, pp. 28-31.

4 Gao Hanyu, *Liuxing se* 1979/1, pp. 31, explains chi as the colour of a big fire.

5 Needham, Joseph, *Science and Civilization in China* (6 volumes, 41 sections, Cambridge University Press 1954-1999, ongoing), V.2, pp. 157, based on Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa* number 128.

6 *Ibid.* Compare Karlgren, *op.cit.*, pp. 157, number 150.

7 Wang Tao, *op.cit.*

8 Karlgren, Nr. 904.

9 Tang Lan, *Wenwu* 1976, no. 5 pp. 63.

10 Wang Tao, pp. 92.

- 11 Needham V.2, based on *Shuowen* 10A/55b.
- 12 Paul Serruys, "On the System of the Pu Shou 部首 in the Shuo-wen chieh-tzu 说文解字", *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 55 (1984), pp. 651-754, pp. 739.
- 13 Karlgren 707.
- 14 *Liuxing se* 1979/1, pp. 31.
- 15 For Gao Hanyu, op.cit., pp. 31, the character for bai again shows an aspect of fire.
- 16 Ulrich Unger, "Hundert, Tausend, Zehntausend und Weiteres", *Hao-ku* 好古, 29 (1985), pp. 264-267.
- 17 Karlgren 812 c', d'. Needham V.2, pp. 157 says that "there is not much doubt that the pictograph shows a plant of some kind, very possibly indigo, with its juice being collected in a pan". He does not, however, give a source for this assumption which would put a very early date for the Chinese knowledge of indigo. Gao Hanyu, op.cit. pp. 31, once again says that the original meaning of the character qing had something to do with fire.
- 18 Wang Guowei 王国维, "shi wu 释物", in *Guantang jilin* 观堂集林, in *Wang Guowei yishu* 王国维遗书, Shanghai 1983, vol. I, juan 卷 6, pp. 13a.
- 19 Xu Zhongshu, in *Jiagu wen jishi*, ed. Li Xiaoding, Taibei 1965, 0317-18, quoted in Wang Tao, pp. 81.
- 20 Qiu Xigui, *Guwenzi lunji*, pp. 70-74, quoted in Wang Tao, *ibid*.
- 21 Ed. Sun Yirang, Peking 1987, pp. 1181f.
- 22 *ibid.*, pp. 937.
- 23 *ibid.* pp. 2124.
- 24 *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 (SSJZS, Peking, Zhonghua shuju 1980) pp. 1742.
- 25 Compare for example Duke Xuan 宣, SSJZS 1879A.
- 26 *Baihu tong shuzheng* 白虎通疏证, (ed. Peking 1994) 4/175ff.
- 27 *Liji* 礼记, SSJZS 1250A, translated by J. Legge I, pp. 90f.
- 28 Robin D.S. Yates, in Needham 5.6, pp. 8-9.
- 29 *ibid.*, pp. 57ff.
- 30 Mozi chapter 68, *Mozi xiangu* 墨子闲诂, Peking 1986, pp. 528ff. Translation by Yates, op.cit.
- 31 *Hanshu* 汉书, Peking 1962/1983, 66/2881.
- 32 *ibid.*, translation by Yates, pp. 281ff. Mozi, chapter 69, *Mozi xiangu* 15/534f.
- 33 *Zuozhuan*, SSJZS 2063B and *Liji*, Jiaote sheng 1455A.
- 34 See the chapters Yueqing 月令 of the *Liji*, Shize 时则 of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, pp. 171f, and *Lushi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋, chapter 6.
- 35 *Hanshu* 25A/1194, *Shiji* 28/1358.
- 36 *Hanshu* 25A/1196, *Shiji* 28/1360.
- 37 *Hanshu* 25A/1199 and *Shiji* 28/1364.
- 38 See the relevant entries in *Shiji* 60.
- 39 *Liji*, Tangong 1276A.
- 40 *Shiji* 28/1366, *Hanshu* 25A/1200.
- 41 *Shiji* 28/1378 and *Hanshu* 25A/1210.
- 42 M. Loewe, "Water, earth and fire - the symbols of the Han Dynasty." *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens/Hamburg*, 125 (1979), 63-68.
- 43 *Shiji* 28/1377 and *Hanshu* 25A/1208.
- 44 *Liji*, Legge II, pp. 9ff.
- 45 *Shisanjing zhushu* 1477C. The explanation of Huangfu Mi is the one accepted by Gao Hanyu, op.cit. who adds that the five "correct" colours correspond with mineral substances whereas the intermediate colours are organic ones.
- 46 Compare for example *Hou Han shu zhi* 30/3763f.
- 47 *Taiping jing* 109/682.
- 48 *Shisanjing zhushu* 2353A and 2354A.
- 49 I follow the translation in Needham V.3 pp. 6 which is based on Nancy Swann, *Food and Money in Ancient China*, pp. 431. Cf *Shiji* 129/3260 and *Hanshu* 91/3686.
- 50 Lao Gan 劳干, "Zhongguo dansha zhi yingyong ji qi tuiyan 中国丹砂之应用及其推演", *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica* 1936 (7.4), pp. 519-531.
- 51 Zhuang 庄 23.8.
- 52 *Shisanjing zhushu* 2237B.
- 53 See for the systematization Needham 5.4, pp. 287.
- 54 *Lunyü*, ed. Harvard Yenching Index 1.3; 17.15 and 5.25.
- 55 *Shuowen* 9A/431B-432A.
- 56 Serruys, "On the Pu Shou...", number 340, pp. 717f.

凡·埃斯

从中国古代史料看颜色的象征和意义

摘要

对这篇论文的标题《从中国古代史料看颜色的象征和意义》需要作些说明。首先，这次研讨会会有两篇专门探讨文字史料，而不涉及原材料即艺术品的论文，本篇即其中之一。

此外，由于本文论述的是观念而非工艺，其范围便得以限制：当然，为了推断古代工艺的发展，使用较近的史料亦非不可，但就观念而言，这样作却不无危险。由于肇始于汉代末年——倘若不是更早的话——并至六朝(公元 200-600 年)两种新的宗教，即佛教和道教的出现，中国文化在这个阶段经历了大的改革。鉴于此，在探索中国古代思想史的研究中，语言学家通常将他们的注意力集中在所谓“佛教传入之前”时期的文献。这同样适于我们的研究课题，依靠公元 200 年之后的材料，对生活在秦代的文人和艺术家于颜色所持的看法下定论，未免过于冒失。因为我们知道，一些颜色

在隋、唐时期和在汉代或更早的时期乃具有不同的意义。

本文试对文字史料，即从甲骨文开始到公元一、二世纪的哲学著作，作一番审视，为的是了解在探索不同课题时，如中国古代颜色术语的起源、五行学说中的颜色角色、礼仪中使用的颜色或一些颜色的社会意义，这些史料究竟能提供什么帮助。另一个目的是揭示那些记载颜料的生产原料的出处。最后我想侧重谈谈中文颜色名词的内涵以及文人对使用颜色的看法的转变。在西方汉学界，既无人对大部分这些课题作充分论述，也匮乏对重要材料作有条理的描述。本文唯一的奢望是对材料进行初步的概括，以便大家讨论。

(英译中：陈钢林)