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# A study in scarlet: cultural memory of the tropes related to the color red, female countenance, and onstage makeup in the Sinophone world

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**Abstract:** In a high-context culture like Chinese, the linguistic code encompasses only part of the message and is incomplete without context. One of the implicit codes embedded in high-context communication is color tropes. Highly recognizable in the Sinophone world, color tropes often manifest themselves in the forms of metaphor, metonymy, allusions, and similes and are often related to the conveyance of emotional content. This paper provides a selection and discussion of such color tropes, demonstrates that color in a language inspires associations and connotations that are often very subtle and determined by deep cultural memory, and, giving several Chinese examples, shows how the primary semasiology of a color term often influences its subsequent semantic extension.

**Keywords:** Chinese color names; cultural memory; culture-specific tropes; color metaphors

... a study in scarlet, eh? Why shouldn't we use a little art jargon ... through the colorless skein of life ...

– Doyle (2016 [1887]: 54)

## 1 Meaning versus reference

As Marshall Sahlins noted in his now classic 1976 article, “Colors and cultures,” empirical tests on color terminologies often confuse spectral *referents* with the essential *meanings* of color names. Sahlins's article stresses that color in culture is the process of relating, not of recognizing; moreover, the social use of color is not

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merely to signify objective differences of nature but *in the first place* to communicate significant distinctions of culture. For Sahlins, colors are semiotic codes that subserve cultural significance; color terms, then, do not have their meanings imposed by the constraints of human and physical nature; on the contrary, they do take on such constraints insofar as they are meaningful (Sahlins 1976: 3).

Umberto Eco has similarly stated:

When one utters a color term, one is not directly pointing to a state of the world (process of reference), but, on the contrary, one is connecting or correlating that term with a cultural unit or concept. The utterance of the term is determined, obviously, by a given sensation, but the transformation of the sensory stimuli into a percept is in some way determined by the semiotic relationship between the linguistic expression and the meaning or *content* correlated to it. (Eco 1985: 160)

At present, psychological, and psycholinguistic tests on colors are still contaminated by the confusion between *meaning* and *reference*. Thus, Xu (2007: 108), Sun and Chen (2018) translate the term 桃色 *táosè* ('peach' + 'color') as 'peach color' and 櫻 *yīng* ('oriental cherry', '*sakura*') as 'cherry color'. In the European tradition, 'peach color' refers to the color of the peach *fruit* (pale yellowish orange) as does the term 'cherry color' (medium to dark red), whereas in the Sinophone tradition, these terms refer to the color of the peach tree *blossom* and the cherry *blossom*, respectively. The direct English translation should therefore be 'peach-blossom color' and 'cherry-blossom color', both denoting PINK. This situation is confirmed by the Chinese participants in Xu's comprehension test, as a part of his psycholinguistic study, who "regarded 桃 *táo* as red with medium brightness; some of them tended to take the 5R7 Munsell chip, a light red chip, as the most typical example of this color, whereas others chose chips on the red-purple side of the red extent as its representatives" (Xu 2007: 108–109). The conclusion that "the frequency distributions of the terms 櫻 *yīng* and 桃 *táo* were almost identical and occupied the same regions as 'pink' in English" (Sun and Chen 2018) was predetermined and expected. It is first and foremost due to the primary semasiology of these terms and their original references and not to the selection of the respective color chips.

Even quotidian color expressions can often be very different in different cultures. For example, black tea is called 'red tea' (紅茶 *hóngchá*) in Chinese, as the reference is to the reddish-brown color of the brewed tea itself, whereas Europeans refer to the color of the dry tea leaves. Similarly, the English phrase 'brown sugar' refers to what the Chinese call 'red sugar' (紅糖 *hóngtáng* or 赤糖 *chítáng*) and even 'black' (黑 *hēi*) or 'yellow' (黃 *huáng*) in some dialects. In other cases, one language may denote a referent by means of color while other do not. For example, the sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatas*) is called 'red potato' (紅薯 *hóngshǔ*). In addition, the Chinese equivalent of the English 'brown (wrapping) paper' does not contain any

color term; instead, it correlates with the paper's quality characteristics: 牛皮紙 *niúpízhǐ* (literally, 'cowhide paper', figuratively, 'flexible and tough paper'). Even within a language, the meaning of a color term may contradict referential reality. Thus, for translators dealing with restaurant menus and for Chinese learners, it might be useful to know that when a menu reads 紅燒 *hóngshāo* (literally, 'braised in red'), the color refers to soy sauce that is actually dark brown.

These things happen because a color term – just like any other term – is always an abstraction, and abstractions and generalizations *themselves* are the product of social and cultural development. In addition, it is crucial to consider the context of the referents, as they often influence color terms' *combinability*.<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall (1997: 29) rightly observes that "meaning is produced by the practice, the 'work', of representation and it is constructed through signifying – that is, meaning-producing – practices." The meaning, however, often changes during a word's evolution. Moreover, figurative meanings are acquired at a higher level of the semantic shifts. Therefore, color tropes<sup>2</sup> are essentially the subsequent and secondary forms of semantic shifts.

## 2 Munro's categorisation of color tropes

Color semantics is a microcosm; it varies from one language to another and reflects the worldview, and historical and cultural traditions of each linguistic society. We may however ask ourselves how, using color terminology as the basis, different cultures may divide the abstract and metaphorical worlds. Munro (1983) suggests investigating the correspondences between English and Chinese color expressions in a practical framework and classifies them as follows:

1. expressions that are culturally identical or culturally similar (most borrowed expressions fit into this category);
2. expressions that are different, but culturally "graspable" (some borrowed expressions fit into this category);
3. expressions that are different and culturally remote (Munro 1983: 32).

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<sup>1</sup> Introduced by Rakhilina and Paramei (2011), the term *combinability* refers to the (in)ability of a color term to combine with terms for natural phenomena and artefacts.

<sup>2</sup> Here, a trope is understood as a word or phrase that is used in a nonliteral sense to create a particular image or effect; it refers to different types of figures of speech, including similes, metaphors, and metonymy.

Since borrowed expressions, in varying degrees, fit into the first two categories, for the sake of brevity, they will not be addressed in detail here. The examples that follow are given merely for illustration.

Category 1 includes examples like 臉紅 *liǎnhóng* ‘to blush (with shame, anger, etc.)’, 粉領 *fěnlǐng* ‘pink-collar’ (a metonymical substitution for women working in the service industry), 紅心 *hóngxīn* ‘red heart’ (‘hearts’ in card games), 亮紅牌 *liàng hóngpái* ‘to show a red card’ (in sports, figuratively, ‘to give a final warning’; Tián et al. 2013: 223), 紅區 *hóngqū* ‘red zone’ (COVID-19).

Category 2 examples can be somewhat more complex in the sense that they are unlikely to be understood the first time they are encountered. However, once explained, they become recognizable. This is because “they exhibit a partial cultural sharing of color term references in the concrete and abstract worlds across language boundaries” (Munro 1983: 34). For example, the idiomatic expression 戴有色眼鏡 *dài yǒusè yǎnjìng* ‘to wear colored glasses’ means ‘to have a prejudice against something’ (Liú and Wáng 2009: 73). Languages can also use completely different color categories to convey the same figurative meaning. For example, in English the expression ‘green-eyed monster’ or simply ‘green-eyed’ means ‘jealous, envious’; in contrast, in Chinese the color red is endowed with the figurative meaning of ‘envy’: 紅眼 *hóngyǎn*, ‘red-eyed’, or 紅眼病 *hóngyǎnbìng*, ‘red-eyed illness’. Red in Chinese is highly polysemous. It often has the connotation ‘advanced’, ‘progressive’, ‘lucky’, as in 開門紅 *kāiménhóng* (literally, ‘open a door’ [for business] + ‘to redden’) ‘to get off to a good start’ (for example, for the opening of a store or enterprise), 走紅運 *zǒu hóngyùn* (literally, ‘to pass through the red fate’) ‘have a spate of good luck’; or 紅人 *hóng rén* (literally, ‘red person’) ‘to be doted upon, to be (someone’s) preferred, a celebrity’. The last example finds its English near counterpart in the color gold (compare ‘golden boy’, a man who is unusually successful at an early age). Knowing 紅人 *hóng rén*, the set expression 紅得發紫 *hóng de fāzǐ*, literally, ‘red with a touch of purple’, the notion of ‘extremely popular’ (sometimes ironically) is a logical step. Other examples include the notion of ‘red’ carrying the meaning ‘festive’ and ‘profitable’: 紅事 *hóngshì* (‘red affair’) ‘a wedding’, 牽紅線 *qiān hóngxiàn* (‘to bind a red string’) ‘to set someone up for a date; to play matchmaker’ (Tián et al. 2013: 224), 分紅 *fēnhóng* (‘divide red’) ‘share out bonus’, usually distributed in red envelopes known as 紅包 *hóngbāo*.

Problems in Categories 1 and 2 are minimal due to the phenomenon of the partial sharing of the connotations of color expressions between Chinese and English. Category 3 examples are, on the contrary, a completely different matter and present specific problems for learners of either language. This category will be addressed in detail in the following sections of the paper.

### 3 Color in Chinese

Readers should be immediately warned that:

1. colors described below do not always coincide with the coloristic meanings accepted in European art;
2. the meanings of many color names have shifted over time;
3. shades within the same category may have several different and sometimes mutually exclusive meanings;
4. Chinese is a highly contextualized culture, where the linguistic code encompasses only part of the message and is incomplete without context (Hall 1976: 91). For non-Chinese, time must be devoted to decoding the message.

In this regard, the primary semasiology of the words for ‘color’ and their subsequent semantic extensions deserves our attention.

The word for ‘color’ in Modern Standard Mandarin<sup>3</sup> (MSM) is 顏色 *yánsè*, composed of two monosyllabic morphemes. The first morpheme originally referred to the glabella, the area between the eyebrows just above the nose. The term was later extended to mean ‘face’, ‘countenance’ (see the expressions 朱顏 *zhūyán* and 紅顏 *hóngyán* discussed in Sections 4 and 5). As regards the second morpheme, 色 *sè* (a semi-suffix in MSM), it originally referred to ‘facial expression’, ‘outward appearance’. It was a free monomorphemic word in Old Chinese meaning ‘color’. It described naturally or artificially colored objects in the graphological dictionary *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字, compiled ca. 100 CE by Xǔ Shèn 許慎. According to Clunas (1997: 135), in Buddhism 色 *sè* referred to the entire (illusory) world of sensory phenomena. However, subsequent semantic shifts appear to have taken the following trajectory: “female beauty” > “feminine charm” > “sexual desire,” and thus “links notions of avidity for color with avidity for sexual intercourse, both of which will tend to exhaust the vital essence of the male and bring premature ageing and death. Color, in this sense, could be fatal to a man” (Clunas 1997: 135). These semantic shifts can be traced in the expressions that contain the combinations of the morphemes 桃 *táo* and 色 *sè* (described in Section 6).

It is interesting to note that the following set expression, which contains a contemporary word for ‘color’, conveys the meaning that implicitly denotes facial

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<sup>3</sup> In the present paper, the term “Modern Standard Mandarin” refers to contemporary Chinese, from the twentieth century onwards. The term “Old Chinese” is used in a broad sense to refer to varieties of Chinese used before the unification of China under the Qin 秦 dynasty in 221 BCE. “Middle Chinese” refers to the language of the so-called “rhyme books,” especially the *Qīèyùn* 切韻 of 601 CE and the *Guǎngyùn* 廣韻 of 1008 CE, and “Old Mandarin” dates from the twelfth to twentieth centuries. The scheme sketched here should be considered no more than a working outline.

expression: 給顏色看 *gěi yánsè kàn* (literally, ‘to give color to see’) to see someone’s facial expression as a reaction on our strong action in order to bring the person under control (Liú and Wáng 2009: 91; Shī et al. 1985: 159), figuratively, ‘to teach somebody a lesson’.

## 4 Color tropes and terms involving cinnabar

In China colors were traditionally considered the property of the object itself, color symbolism was therefore directly related to the material from which the color was derived. Cinnabar, the naturally occurring mineral form of mercuric sulphide, which was unknown in ancient Egyptian painting and the early Mesopotamian cultures, was one of the most precious materials and significant colorants in ancient China. Finely ground and mixed with glue, cinnabar makes a brilliant and glowing red pigment and, unsurprisingly, was designated as ‘vermilion sand’ (丹砂 *dānshā* or 朱/硃砂 *zhūshā*). Traces of cinnabar, applied with a writing brush, often occur in the incised lines of writings on Shāng 商 oracle bones<sup>4</sup> (Britton 1937: 1; Yüan 1974: 7).

Another “magical” property of cinnabar, which is the color of blood and thus of life itself, is that it can be transformed into mercury, or quicksilver, a “living” metal (a metal which seems to grow and move). Mercury was employed in early burial practices in China. Therefore, cinnabar had profound religious significance in ancient China; it was believed to be a substance by which the forces of life and the cosmos could be controlled (McNair 1997: 70). Present-day Chinese still consider red to be auspicious.

By the fourth century BCE, belief in the revitalizing functions of cinnabar and mercury in burial practices had given rise to the idea of an elixir of immortality. Just as the living metal quicksilver symbolized the quickening of the soul, so did gold, the imperishable metal, come to symbolize immortality. In this belief system, the body had to be transformed into a gold-like state to attain immortality. Early means of effecting this transformation involved consuming a herb of immortality or eating from vessels of gold (McNair 1997: 71). Perhaps because golden dishes were out of the reach of most people, there also arose the belief that gold and silver could be fabricated from other substances, especially cinnabar. Cinnabar was so central to Daoist (Taoist) alchemy that the word for elixir (丹 *dān*) is the same word as that for cinnabar.

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<sup>4</sup> Oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文 *jiǎgǔwén*) were carved on the scapulae of oxen or sheep and on turtle shells from about 1250 BCE (in the late Shāng 商 dynasty, which was overthrown by the Zhōu 周 in 1045 BCE). They comprise the earliest Chinese collection of graphs indisputably regarded as a fully developed writing system.

Alchemy and painting were both referred to by the metonymical substitutions. While alchemy was called 黃白之術 *huáng bái zhī shù* ‘the art of yellow and white’, in reference to the desire to produce gold and silver, painting was called 丹青 *dānqīng* ‘the art of red and grue’<sup>5</sup>, or literally, ‘the art of cinnabar and azurmalachite’. From the Daoist point of view, both painting and alchemy were transformative and magical arts that could be used to control the forces of life (McNair 1997: 71–72). Moreover, cinnabar and azurmalachite embodied the alchemical complementarity of 陰 *yīn* and 陽 *yáng* (feminine and masculine, receptive and creative, etc.).

The texts of the Eastern Zhōu 周–Hàn 漢 period (ca. 770 BCE–220 CE) often mention a set of ‘five colors’ (五色 *wǔsè*). The correspondences between five agents (五行 *wǔxíng*) such as cardinal directions, colors, minerals, and other aspects of the pentamorous cosmology of the early imperial dynasties are well known. To mention some:

1. Wood/east/青 *qīng* ‘grue’/azurmalachite;
2. Fire/south/赤 *chì* ‘red’/cinnabar;
3. Earth/middle/黃 *huáng* ‘yellow’/realgar;
4. Metal/west/白 *bái* ‘white’/arsenolite;
5. Water/north/黑 *hēi* ‘black’/magnetite.<sup>6</sup>

As cinnabar was related to fire, red, and the cardinal direction “south,” it was also the quintessence of the *yáng* male natural principle; therefore, it related to the emperor. The throne on which the emperor sat always faced south, and imperial edicts written in red ink were referred to as ‘cinnabar notes’ (丹書 *dānshū*).<sup>7</sup>

In five-agent theory, first advocated by *Yīn-Yáng* 陰陽 scholars and later by Confucianists (儒 *Rú*), the colors of the five agents are referred to as ‘primary’ (正 *zhèng*). In contrast, the colors generated in the process of the mutual conquest of the respective agents are called ‘intermediary’ (間 *jiàn*).

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5 The term *grue* is a modern construct combining the English *green* and *blue* and denotes a composite category of GREEN-and-BLUE. Its equivalent in Middle Chinese and Old Mandarin was the canonical term 青 *qīng*, which denoted cool primaries and also extended into achromatic areas. One hypothesis suggests that this character primarily referred to the aggregate of two minerals, azurite and malachite (Bogushevskaya 2015: 28). O’Donoghue (2012: 135) states that azurite is a secondary mineral found in copper deposits and is frequently mixed with malachite in the massive form of both minerals. His term for this symbiosis is *azurmalachite*. Hereafter, this term will be used in the paper. It is interesting to know that, if hydrated or exposed to a moist atmosphere, azurite gradually converts to malachite. Regarding the color, coarsely ground azurite produces a dark blue color; however, the finely ground pigment is pale and weak and has a greenish undertone (Ward 2008: 503). The light-blue tone of azurite is truly remarkable; indeed, this shade is not found anywhere today (Blänsdorf and Horn 2009: 18).

6 For more on mineral substances and their correspondences, see Pregadio 1986.

7 Prior to the Hàn 漢 dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the term referred to enslavement documents (Eberhard 1994: 66).

Importantly, the word for ‘red’ (赤 *chì*) in five-agent theory is different from the word for ‘cinnabar’ (丹 *dān*). Alchemy was condemned by Confucian scholars at court as early as the first century BCE. From a Confucian point of view, alchemy was at best mere fakery and illusion; at worst, it was a waste of money, talent, and lives. The Confucianists had no interest in the physical manipulation of pigments; instead, their approach to color made symbolic and moralising use of hue. Thus, in Old Chinese texts, RED was represented by the canonical ‘primary’ 赤 *chì*. It denoted a wide range of hues, from dark red to dark orange and reddish-brown, and could be applied to various objects that were colored either naturally or artificially (Bogushevskaya 2005: 197).

朱 *zhū* ‘cinnabar red’ was also common enough to be a possible rival of 赤 *chì*. A well-known simile<sup>8</sup> reads:

- (4.1) 近朱者赤, 近墨者黑。  
*Jìn zhū zhě chì, jìn mò zhě hēi*  
 (literally) Close cinnabar NMLZ red, close ink NMLZ black  
 “One [who is] near cinnabar [becomes] red; one [who is] near ink [turns] black.”  
 (i.e., Different environments provide different influence.)

朱 *zhū* was often applied to objects that were painted and did not have that pigment naturally. For example, 朱顏 *zhūyán* ‘cinnabar cheeks’ describes a woman’s face. A ‘cinnabar note’ (see above) was written with a ‘cinnabar brush’ (朱筆 *zhūbǐ*), a writing brush dipped in red ink.

Sometimes 朱 *zhū* may convey the meaning ‘wealthy’, as in 朱軒 *zhūxuān* (literally, ‘*zhū*-red carriage’) ‘carriage used by high officials’. It also has this meaning in a scene painted by Táng 唐 dynasty (618–907) poet Dù Fǔ 杜甫 (712–770) in an often-quoted line:

- (4.2) 朱門酒肉臭, 路有凍死骨。  
*Zhū mén jiǔ ròu chòu, lù yǒu dòng sǐ gǔ*  
 (literally) [Cinnabar-] red gate wine meat smell, road LOC freeze-die bone  
 “Behind the vermilion gates [of the rich], meat and wine go to waste; but along the road  
 are bones [of the poor] who have frozen to death.”

<sup>8</sup> Citations for Chinese texts are made using the electronic copies stored in the Chinese Text Project database (<https://ctext.org>), Chinese Classic poetry verse is cited according to the Chinese Ancient Poetry and Prose Network database (<https://www.gushiwen.cn>). Other tropes addressed in the article are drawn from the *Hànyǔ dà cídiǎn* 漢語大詞典 [Comprehensive Chinese word dictionary] (<http://www.guoxuedashi.net/hydcdd/>). Unless otherwise specified, the translations are my own.



To describe the color of the clouds at sunrise and sunset, Táng poets used expressions like 朱霞 *zhūxiá* ‘vermilion glow’ or 丹霞 *dānxiá* ‘cinnabar-red clouds’. The latter expression is maintained in MSM: “China Danxia” is the name given to landscapes with the unusual rocks that have developed on continental red terrigenous sedimentary beds. The most spectacular example looks like a colorful sandwich cake; located near the city of Zhāngyè 張掖 in Gānsù 甘肅 Province, it became a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2019. Thus, a color metaphor involving cinnabar has also become a toponym.

Other cinnabar-related tropes can be mentioned here. Daoist meditation practices concentrated on the figure of the 赤子 *chìzǐ*, literally, [cinnabar] red child’, in internal alchemy. The red child is the innermost deity, the main precursor of the “embryo”; this is the child as the “true self” possessed by every human being (Pregadio 2021: 111). One of the alchemical stages of this practice is focused on the middle Cinnabar Field (丹田 *dāntián*), or Crimson Palace (絳宮 *jiàngōng*). This is the Field of the seat of Breath and is found at the center of the chest (Pregadio 2021: 118).<sup>9</sup> It seems plausible that the meaning ‘naked, bared’ – which red can symbolize in MSM – stems from these Daoist practices. The term 赤子 *chìzǐ* ‘cinnabar child’ now means ‘a newborn baby’.<sup>10</sup> Other examples that share this sememe set include 赤心 *chìxīn* (‘red heart’)<sup>11</sup> ‘sincerity’, and 丹心 *dānxīn* (‘cinnabar-red heart’) ‘loyal heart’.

## 5 Color tropes involving 紅 *hóng*

The basic color term for RED in MSM is neither of the abovementioned terms (赤 *chì* or 朱 *zhū*); rather, it is 紅 *hóng*. Etymologically, the character 紅 *hóng* is related to safflower 葎 *hóng* (*Carthamus tinctorius*), now written 紅花 *hónghuā* (literally, ‘red flower’; Bogushevskaya 2016: 240–241). This plant was imported to the Central Plains of ancient China along the silk route from the areas of northern Egypt and the Near East around the third century CE. At that time, dye technology was not of a high quality, and dyed fabrics tended to be orange (Han and Quye 2018: 12). Primarily a textile term denoting fabric dyed pink with safflower, in Confucian five-agent theory, 紅 *hóng* unsurprisingly is referred to as an “intermediary,” “non-pure” non-*yáng*

<sup>9</sup> According to Eberhard (1994: 66), Cinnabar Field is comparable to our solar plexus.

<sup>10</sup> The Chinese equivalent of the English expression *to be in the red*, meaning ‘to be in debt’, is 赤字 *chìzì*, literally, ‘赤 *chì*-red graphs’. This is consistent with the bookkeeping practice of writing outgoing funds in red ink, which was originally embodied in the English variant; moreover, it also implies ‘bared’, ‘empty’.

<sup>11</sup> 紅心 *hóngxīn* ‘red heart’ additionally implies ‘proletarian, revolutionary’ (compare another meaning of this term described in Section 2).

pink (a mixture of the ‘primaries’ 赤 *chì* ‘red’ and 白 *bái* ‘white’); consequently, it became associated with pale-red female complexions and, by extension, with female beauty.

Interestingly, some tropes involving 紅 *hóng* may represent a person’s status or achievements. Color expressions of this group were originally descriptive, but subsequently they acquired referential meaning. Thus, 紅頂子 *hóngdǐngzi* ‘a Ruby Finial’ was a metonymical substitution for high-ranking officials of the Qīng 清 dynasty (1644–1911), since they were all required to wear a hat finial with a ruby. The finial stone provided a highly visual indication of a person’s rank and social status (Bellemare 2021: 38–39). Nowadays, this is a set expression that describes a public servant who received his position by framing cases against competitors (Shī et al. 1985: 182). The expression 紅椅子 *hóngyǐzi*, literally, ‘red chair’, derives from the 科舉 *kējǔ* civil service examination system in imperial China. Since a red tick (compare ‘cinnabar brush’ in Section 4) indicated the end of the list of the candidates who were admitted for the Palace Examination. The one whose name was found at the bottom of the list was referred to as ‘taking an exam on a red chair’, or ‘sitting on a red chair’ (Shī et al. 1985: 183), meaning ‘to be the last of a few successful candidates’.

Red Dust 紅塵 *hóngchén* referred to a ‘place of mundane bustle and excitement’, as used by Táng dynasty poet Mèng Hàorán 孟浩然 (689–740) in a poem:

(5.1) 酒酣白日暮,走馬入紅塵。

*Jiǔhān báirì mù, zǒumǎ rù hóngchén*

(literally) Wine intoxicated daytime to.bury, to.ride horse to.enter red dust  
“Well-wined, as daytime dusks, I race my horse into the Red Dust”

(translated by Dolby 2016: 148).

The term ‘Red Dust’ was later extended to mean ‘the vain mortal world, mortal society, ordinary lay society’ (Dolby 2016: 148).

From the Táng dynasty onwards, its meaning shifted, 紅 *hóng* gradually ousted 赤 *chì* and other rivals in the RED family and became the basic term for this color category in MSM (Bogushevskaja 2008: 78–81). This substitution was also probably due to dye technology advancement, as from around the Táng dynasty forwards, the color which could be obtained with safflower dyeing was called 大紅 *dàhóng* (literally, ‘pure red’) or 真紅 *zhēnhóng* (literally, ‘true red’) ‘crimson’ (Han 2016: 47).

Nevertheless, in MSM, 赤 *chì* continues to be used as an epithet of things in which the red color forms a natural or obvious mark of kind or class. Thus, the choice of 赤 *chì* or 紅 *hóng* in various expressions depends on the nature of the referent. Interestingly, in some cases, 紅 *hóng* and 赤 *chì* occur juxtaposed, as in the idiom 面紅耳赤 *miàn hóng ěr chì*, literally, ‘face 紅 *hóng*-red, ears 赤 *chì*-red’, meaning ‘blush up to the ears’.

However, 紅 *hóng* still “remembers” its association with female beauty. Thus, we find expressions like 紅淚 *hónglèi* ‘rosy teardrops’, referring to women’s tears of sadness; and 紅樓 *hónglóu*, literally, ‘red chamber’, that is, ‘women’s living quarters’, the sheltered chambers where the daughters of prominent families resided and where a stranger was not allowed to enter. The latter example should not be confused with the binomial 朱門 *zhūmén* ‘[cinnabar-]red gates’ (mentioned in Section 5), which refers to wealthy homes. The expression 紅顏 *hóngyán* ‘rosy cheeks’, referring to beauty, as lauded by Táng dynasty poet Lǐ Bái 李白 (701–762), has given rise to the adage that says 紅顏命薄 *Hóng yán mìng bó*, literally, ‘Rosy cheeks – life (is) weak’. This can be interpreted in two ways: the first meaning is ‘A beautiful girl (often) has an unhappy fate’; the second meaning implies the association of female beauty with sexual desire (see the negative connotations for the word 色 *sè* discussed in Section 3). As such, it describes “the early demise of a husband who is sexually plagued to death by an overdemanding wife” (Eberhard 1994: 249).

The basis for interpreting a color name may not always be the hue alone but may also include its combinations with other hues. To develop this theme further, let us address the following examples. Since red and green (the correlatives of cinnabar and azurmalachite) are the two complementary colors of life (see Section 4), their combinations are significant for the Chinese. Juxtaposition of the terms for these color categories enhances their rhetorical effect and expresses a conventional concept of beauty in people’s appearance and in nature. Thus, the set phrases 柳綠花紅 *liǔ lǜ huā hóng* ‘willows are green and flowers are red’ and 紛紅駭綠 *fēn hóng hài lǜ* ‘confused red and disturbed green’ are often deployed to describe the luxuriant vegetation swaying, for example, in the wind and as part of the splendour of spring. The expression 紅綠 *hóng lǜ* ‘red and green’, which describes young people decked out in gorgeous clothes, is a truncated version of the set phrases 綠女紅男 *lǜ nǚ hóng nán* ‘green girls and red boys’ and 紅紅綠綠 *hóng hóng lǜ lǜ* (literally, ‘red~red, green~green’) ‘colorful’.

## 6 Color tropes and terms involving peach-blossom and apricot-blossom

From around the eleventh century, PINK becomes denoted by the terms 粉紅 *fěnhóng* ‘powder-red’ or sometimes 桃紅 *táohóng* ‘peach-blossom red’. 桃紅 *táohóng* is a term used in a 1716 memorial to the Kāngxī 康熙 emperor by the governor-general of the southern Guǎngdōng 廣東 and Guǎngxī 廣西 provinces. It is used to describe foreign enamelling materials brought to the port of Canton (Bellemare 2021: 60).

Peach-blossom (桃 *táo*) color is compared to the fine coloring of a young girl but may also refer to a woman who is ready to be seduced (Eberhard 1994: 228). In one novel we read that a girl is as red as a peach blossom and ripe for love (桃紅 *táo hóng*; Eberhard 1994: 249). 桃 *táo* conveys the meaning of ‘sinful’, as does the term *scarlet* in the English expression *scarlet woman*; as such, it can be assigned to Category 2 of the color expressions’ classification suggested by Munro.

In relation to semantic shifts, it is crucial to mention the negative connotations of the morpheme 色 *sè* ‘color’, meaning ‘sexual desire’ (discussed in Section 5). The two morphemes, 桃 *táo* and 色 *sè*, combined, occur in expressions describing illicit love and scandalous love affairs, such as 桃色新聞 *táosè xīnwén* (literally, ‘[peach-blossom] pink-colored news’) ‘sex scandal’ and 桃色敲詐 *táosè qiāozhà* (literally, [peach-blossom] pink extortion scheme’) ‘sextortion’.

In Old Mandarin, 碧桃花下 *bì táo huā xià* ‘under turquoise peach-blossom’ was a metaphor for lovers’ secret meeting place, while the expression 桃花眼 *táo huā yǎn*, literally, ‘peach-blossom eyes’, figuratively, ‘affectionate glance’, referred to the moist, appealing eyes of actors playing female parts (Eberhard 1994: 228). Finally, the one who 走桃花運 *zǒu táo huā yùn* ‘passes through a peach-blossom fortune’ is usually a womanizer. This expression, however, can also be a synonymous with 走紅運 *zǒu hóng yùn* (literally, ‘to pass through the red fate’) ‘have a spate of good luck’ (discussed in Section 2).

Apricot-blossom (杏 *xìng*) is likewise a symbol of beauty. The binomial 紅杏 *hóng xìng* ‘red apricot[blossom]’, however, conveys the meaning ‘unfaithful wife’ and derives from a metaphor used by Yè Shàowēng 葉紹翁, the Southern Sòng 宋 dynasty (1127–1279) poet:

(6.1) 春色滿園關不住，一枝紅杏出牆來。

*Chūn sè mǎn yuán guān-bù-zhù, yī zhī hóng xìng chū qiáng lái*

Spring color fill garden close-NEG-RES, one CLF red apricot go.beyond wall come

“[But] the color of spring cannot be closed within the garden,

A spring of red apricot peeps over the wall” (translated by Zheng 2011: 31).

The verse has also given rise to the saying 紅杏出牆 *hóng xìng chū qiáng*, literally, ‘the [blooming] red apricot branch leans over the garden wall’, figuratively of a woman’s extramarital affair. The erotic connotation of this adage is amplified by the expression 春色 *chūn sè*, literally, ‘the color of spring’ (spring is the season of erotic awakenings + 色 *sè* ‘color’ > ‘sexual desire’), omitted in the saying but present in the original text.

## 7 Color tropes derived from traditional theatre makeup

Some Chinese color tropes stem from the traditional theatre, where, in turn, the choice of color in face painting derives from the written literature about the historical characters who appear in traditional 京劇 *jīngjù* (capital drama, commonly known as Beijing opera) plays.

Red faces (紅臉 *hóngliǎn*) denote straightforward men who are loyal and courageous. In Chinese culture, such characters are considered men with ‘the nature of blood’ (血性 *xuèxìng*), hence the choice of red for their makeup. Red signifies that the character is an intrinsically good man who can be trusted to be steadfast in his bravery. Guān Yǔ 關羽, from the famous historical novel 三國演義 *Sānguó yǎnyì* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*), was referred to as having a 赭面 *zhěmiàn* ‘red ochre complexion’, and his stage makeup is a plain red face (Bonds 2008: 207–208). The set expression that derives from this makeup is 唱紅臉 *chàng hóngliǎn*, literally, ‘play the red-face role’, meaning ‘to play the good cop’ (sometimes sarcastically), ‘pretend to be generous and kind’. However, someone who 唱紅了 *chàng hóng le*, literally, ‘has become red for singing’ is a person who became famous for such performances (see Section 2). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the connotations within a color category may sometimes be mutually exclusive.

Understanding 赭面 *zhěmiàn* ‘red ochre complexion’, one can easily extend the positive connotation on the binomial Red Clothing 赭衣 *zhěyī* (literally, ‘the red-ochre-robed ones’). In contrast, this term holds a negative connotation. In Old and Middle Chinese, the binomial 赭衣 *zhěyī* was a metonymic substitution for criminals who were sentenced to forced labour and to those sentenced to death. The garb of convicts garb was reddish-brown (dyed with red ochre), collarless, and with raw selvage. The color might stand for the shedding of blood, while the wearing of a collarless jacket might express the fact of beheading (Liú 1990: 209; MacCormack 2002: 317–320). Capital drama has taken on that tradition and expanded it to encompass most prisoners<sup>12</sup> (Bonds 2008: 167); albeit, the term has been changed into 紅衣 *hóngyī* ‘the *hóng*-red-robed ones’.

Bāo Zhěng 包拯, the famous judge from the Northern Sòng 宋 dynasty (960–1127), was called 鐵面 *tiěmiàn* ‘iron face’ because he was impervious to bribery and influence. His stage counterpart, Judge Bāo 包公, is now depicted with black and brown face paint (Bonds 2008: 207). Today, the expression *tiěmiàn* ‘iron face’ figuratively means ‘upright person’. However, one should be careful when using this

12 For lesser sentences, some prisoners can be dressed in black, white, or blue (Bonds 2008: 167).

expression, as it can also represent a truncated version of the idiom 鐵面皮 *tiěmiànpí* ‘iron face skin’, meaning ‘shameless’.

As for a white visage on the Chinese stage, it is reserved for the most treacherous characters of the deepest infamy. According to Bonds (2008: 208), there are two forms of white makeup, each carrying a different meaning. A white powder makeup prepared with a layer of white cake makeup creates a dry shell. This matte surface (粉白 *fěnbái* ‘powder white’) appears to conceal the blood color or humanity of the character. Such matte-white-faced characters are intolerant and unsympathetic, as Cáo Cāo 曹操, the ruthless warlord in the famous historical *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. A second category of white face is the shiny white (油白 *yóubái* ‘oily white’) created with oil-based makeup; this is used with arrogant and overbearing characters. Other name for such characters include 豆腐臉 *dòufuliǎn* ‘tofu-faces’, because of the whitish yellow color of tofu (bean curd) (Eberhard 1994: 313) and 粉頭 *fěntóu* ‘powder-heads’. The latter term has another negative connotation (discussed in Section 8). Derivative expressions for the white category include the idiom 唱白臉 *chàng báiliǎn* ‘play the white face’, meaning ‘play the role of the villain’ or ‘pretend to be harsh and severe’ and the metonymical substitution 粉墨 *fěnmò* ‘powder and ink’, referring to application of makeup on theatrical players, signifies ‘pretension’, ‘hypocrisy’.

## 8 Color tropes derived from standards of classical Chinese female beauty

From the earliest times Chinese women have used makeup to enhance their appearance. The Táng dynasty was a highpoint in feminine beauty. Because the Chinese always admired pale skin, white powder – originally made from rice-starch and subsequently from lead-white (粉 *fěn*) – was used to cover the entire face. A red powder (紅 *hóng*) was put on the cheeks, while the eyebrows were kohled with umber-black (黛 *dài*) pigment.

In the Qīng dynasty, women continued to favor a white face and drew eyebrows that were long and thin. The mouth and lips must resemble a cherry (櫻桃 *yīngtáo*), that is, round, small and not protruding, with just a bit of color applied in the middle of the mouth, or only on the lower lip (Bonds 2008: 204; Eberhard 1994: 36).

The above beauty standards are reflected in the following allusions:

1. 紅粉 *hóngfěn*, literally, ‘rouged and powdered’, figuratively, ‘the fair sex’. NB: In imperial China, prostitutes were often disparagingly referred to as 粉頭 *fěntóu* ‘powder-heads’, since they tended to thickly cover their faces with white powder (Eberhard 1994: 241). One should, therefore, be careful when using this

expression, as the subtle nuances are often crucial (compare this meaning with the one mentioned in Section 7).

2. 粉黛 *fěndài*, literally, ‘powdered and kohled’, is a truncated variant of the poetic expression 粉白黛綠 *fěnbái dàilǜ* ‘the powdered white and kohled green’, about women’s makeup and, by extension, about womenfolk (Dolby 2016: 113).
3. 青蛾 *qīng’é*, ‘grue moth’, as well-formed eyebrows are said to resemble a moth. Thus, this indicates blackened eyebrows and, figuratively, is used of a young dainty charmer (Dolby 2016: 34).

## 9 Concluding remarks

Color tropes comprise one of the implicit codes embedded in the Sinophone world’s high-context communication. They are highly recognizable and usually manifest themselves in the forms of metaphor, metonymy, allusions, and similes. Often related to the conveyance of emotional content, the tropes related to color in the Chinese-speaking world can be summarized as follows:

1. those that express the results of visual perception of the color characteristics of objects or phenomena and correlate with conventional concepts of beauty;
2. those that evolved from philosophical systems and literary texts;
3. those that embody the culture-bound artefacts;
4. those that pertain to the Sinophone society and its modes of organization; color terms of this group were originally descriptive, but subsequently acquired referential meanings.

The analyzed data also shows that the shades within one color category can have several different meanings that are sometimes mutually exclusive. Color in a language inspires associations and connotations that are often very subtle and determined by a profound cultural memory; the interpretive nuances thus depend heavily on the context. Moreover, as this paper has confirmed, the primary reference of a color term often influences its subsequent semantic shifts, expressed in associative and symbolic meanings.

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