

Exploring the Cultural Connotations of “Purple” and “Zi”

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Received 16 December 2018; accepted 21 March 2019

Published online 26 April 2019

Abstract

Colors constitute our life, thus making colors bearing varied and diverse cultural connotations as the carrier of culture. Color terms in both English and Chinese are endowed with specific meanings and implications. A multitude of basic color words in English and Chinese, such as “red, white, yellow” and “Hong, Bai, Huang” in Chinese accordingly, are explored in depth. By enquiring into British National Corpus and Chinese National Corpus, the paper is devoted to originally looking into the cultural connotations following the commonness and contrast between “purple” and “Zi” against different cultural backgrounds, and further brings insight into the reasons behind the phenomena. Therefore, a better cultural understanding of the color terms “purple” and “Zi” is available and further implications on cross-cultural communication can be reached.

Key words: Cultural Connotation; Commonness; Contrast; Purple; Zi

Wang, L. Y., & Guo, L. J. (2019). Exploring the Cultural Connotations of “Purple” and “Zi”. *Canadian Social Science*, 15(4), 57-61. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/11041>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11041>

INTRODUCTION

Researches have it that colors can trigger luxuriant associations in human’s brain and evoke various emotions. Both Chinese and English abound in color terms and

expressions, with basic color terms sharing similar concepts and meanings. However, due to differences in geography, history, social customs, religion and beliefs, the extended and associative meanings vary to a great extent. The depth and width of the previous studies on the contrastive analysis of basic color terms in English and Chinese, mainly involving “red” and “Hong”, “white” and “Bai”, “black” and “Hei”, “yellow” and “Huang”, is substantial. All of these basic color terms incarnate profound and rich cultural connotations, leading to a deeper understanding of color culture in the West and East (Peng, 2001). Here is an example sentence which can prove this: “Mr. White is a very white man. He was looking rather green the other day. He has been feeling blue later. When I saw him, he was in a brown study. I hope he will be the pink again.” For Chinese, the meanings of these color words are difficult to grasp for the lack of cultural knowledge in the field of color words and expressions. The same is true of expressions of color in Chinese. For example, the idiom “Ziqidonglai” in the form of Chinese phonetic alphabet, meaning “an omen of auspiciousness” is obscure for “laymen” in the West. Only by contacting and comprehending the traditional Chinese culture, can the real meaning of this idiom be clear. Thus, the present paper attempts to deal with the comparison and contrast of cultural connotations between “purple” and “Zi”, one of the pairs of basic color words in English and Chinese in order to further understand the connotations of “purple” in different cultures, which further helps to better present the commonalities and differences between Chinese and foreign cultures with regard to colors so as to make people more freely engage in cross-cultural communication activities in different cultural environments.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Color is defined as “the appearance that things have that results from the way in which they reflect light”

by Oxford English Dictionary. In the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, the term color refers to a natural phenomenon in which the visual perception occurs when the light waves is emitted, reflected or passed through by objects. It is not difficult to discover the cognition of color from the perspective of both Chinese and English is quite similar. The reflection of humans on colors is via language, and with the long-term interaction between humans and the objective world, colors are endowed with additional meanings, leaving color words' profound use not being limited to the original meaning. Color words can be divided into three groups: one is basic color word, the expression of color itself. In English, it embraces red, white, black, green, yellow, blue, purple, gray, and brown and so on. In Chinese, “Chi” (red), “Cheng” (orange), “Huang” (yellow), “Lv” (green), “Qing” (cyan), “Lan” (blue), “Zi”(purple) constitute the basic colors. From the observation, there is little difference between the definitions of basic color words. The next one is color words with colors of objects, such as ivory, snow-white, honey-colored, the color of cow's milk, honey-colored, golden and so on; the last one is color words in shades, such as dark blue, pale yellow, greenish, green-and-white and so on. “Purple” is defined as having the color of blue and red mixed together in Oxford English Dictionary, while it also means the color of blue and red mixed together in the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary, proving the equal cognition on the color “purple” across the West and East.

The relationship between culture and language can be concluded as this: language is one of the elements of culture and more importantly the carrier and means of culture, and it mirrors culture. First of all, language is a social phenomenon and a system of symbols for people to understand the objective world. It is also the most important communication tool for human beings. People use language to preserve and inherit the fruits of human civilization, but it is not just a carrier of culture. Language itself is also a cultural system. When learning a language, we do not simply learn the structures of language, namely pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, but together with the culture behind the language. Secondly, culture is a very broad concept. Many philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, historians and linguists in the world define culture from different angles. The relationship between language and culture is extremely close, and vocabulary is the basic element of language, serving as the prop in language system. Thus, vocabulary in a language is sensitive and close to culture. It can be seen that cultural differences are most prominent at the lexical level and involve the widest range of aspects. As we all know, color words in language are a special word class in the language vocabulary system, so these are naturally associated with culture. Culture influences the meaning of color words, and in return the meaning of color words reflects the richness and vastness of cultural connotations. In summary, as a mem-

ber of the vocabulary system, color words complements culture. In other words, the relationship between color words and culture is also very close.

2. COMMONNESS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS BETWEEN “PURPLE” AND “ZI”

In spite of totally different cultural backgrounds between the West and the East, they coincidentally share several commonalities in terms of cultural connotations between “purple” and “Zi”: nobility, royalty and power; luck and success; emotion.

2.1 Nobility, Royalty and Power

It is generally acknowledged that the color purple should be chosen as the color of the robe for emperors and nobilities in the Western and Eastern culture. Therefore, purple is a symbol of royalty and power for both. In Western culture, the purple dress is maybe prepared for emperors and cardinals. In the Byzantine Empire era, the emperors from the orthodox lineage will add “born to the purple” to the title in order that the purity of the bloodline and the orthodoxy of the imperial power can be expressed. In ancient Rome, purple is undoubtedly the noblest color in that only the emperors, queens, and legitimate successors are qualified to wear all purple cloaks. Ministers and senior officials are only allowed to have purple rims on the cloaks. Therefore, the purple can be regarded as nobilities, “to be born to the purple” indicating to be born in the royal family or a person of noble origins. In addition, “to raise somebody to the purple” means to make one the emperor or the cardinal; “to marry into the purple” is to marry into a wealthy family; “purple airway” refers to the airway for the special use of royal members; “Purple Heart” is a medal given to a member of the American armed forces who has been wounded in battles; the “Purple Wedding” as a nickname is used to feature the wedding between King Joffrey I Baratheon and Margaery Tyrell on the first day of the new century, 300 AC in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, a series of epic fantasy novels by the American novelist George R. R. Martin. Unlike the bloody “Red Wedding”, there isn't such a name called “Purple Wedding” in the novel. One of the reasons why the wedding is dubbed the “Purple Wedding” is that the color “purple” is often associated with royalty and power. All these expressions related to purple manifest royalty and power in the Western culture. In ancient China, to be more exact, the Tang Dynasty, the color of official robes is an important feature to distinguish the ranks of officials. The nobility of “Zi” can be reflected in the court robes of officials of the third rank and above while those of the sixth and seventh ranks wore respectively “deep green” and “light green” robes. If those whose original rank is below third were honored with the post of prime minister for their talents and virtues, the emperor would bestow

“the purple bag with patterns of gold fish” to show the infinitely royal graciousness. “Zijiasha” (purple kasaya) is a patchwork outer vestment for a Buddhist monk granted as a reward by an emperor. There are other expressions indicating imperial power and authority, such as Zijin

cheng (the Forbidden City), Zidian (imperial palaces), Zige (the place where the emperor lives), Zishoujindai (purple and golden printing charged by officials of high ranks) and so on. More examples related to “Zi” are shown in Table 1

Table 1
Expressions and Idioms Related to “Purple” and “Zi” Indicating “Nobility, Royalty and Power”

“Purple”	Be born to the purple; raise somebody to the purple; marry into the purple; purple airway; Purple Heart; the Purple Wedding
	Zigao (imperial edict); Ziyuan (the imperial palace); Zipao (the court dresses of senior officials); Ziying (the purple hatband of high officials); Ziwei (the palace where the emperors live); Zique (the imperial palace); Zifu (the court dresses of high officials); Zini (the inkpad used by emperors); Zihe (the purple sachet hung on the court dresses of high officials on the position of left shoulder); Zipao (the clothing of those who are rich and honorable); Zigai (the purple hood carried by a royal guard of honor). Zige (the magnificent palaces, often referred to the royal palaces); Zitan (the purple altar used by the emperor for the sacrifice ceremony.); Ziji (the confidential department in the imperial court); Zita (the palace of emperors);
“Zi”	Zipaoyudai (senior officials); Zishoujinzhang; Jinziyinqing; Peizihuaihuang; Qingzipiti; Yiziyao Huang; Yiziyaojin; Yiziyaojin; Beiziyaojin; Tuozichuiqing; Tuojinweizi; Zhongjinjianzi; Daijinpeizi; Yaojinyizi; Yaojintuozi; Erjintuozi; Huaijinchui; Huaijintuozi; Huaihuangpeizi; Yujinyezi; Yupeijinzi (the purple ribbon of the golden seal used by ancient prime ministers, referred to the honor of high ranks, implying the success of one’s career); Fuzierzhu (both the father and the son are senior officials); Huangqizigai(a sign of the emperor’s birth); Huangmazini; Huangmazishu (the emperor’s proclamation); Chuanguixizi; Chuanjuexizi (the inheritance of high ranks); Zouyingtuozi (If a leader sets an example, his subordinates will follow suit.); Duoqingshizi; Yuzhutuozi; Yuzhuyezi; Chuizhutuozi; Yuqingtuozi; Huaiyinyuzi; Jianzhuzhongzi; Tuoqingyuzi; Yuqingpeizi; Pizhupeizi; Fushiqingzi (symbolizing the high ranks).

2.2 Luck and Success

In English, the expression “purple patch” means a period of success and luck, and the similar expressions can be found in Chinese: “Dahongdazi” or “Hongdefazi”, which also indicate success in one’s career with great popularity. Traditionally, “Zitan” (red sandal), “Zizhu” (black bamboo) are planted in the yard to bring auspiciousness, prosperity and luck to the family. As is shown in “Ziqidonglai” and “Qingniuziqi”, “Ziqi” is an omen of auspiciousness, thus making “Zihu” (purple fox), “Ziyan” (purple smoke), “Ziyun” (purple and red clouds) and “Zidian” (purple lightning) carry the connotation of luck and propitiousness.

2.3 Emotion

Both “purple” and “Zi” can be used to describe people’s negative emotion, which denotes fury and anger. It can be said that a person in fury will turn purple with rage and have a purple face, corresponding to Chinese expression “Lian qidefazi”. From the description, the person is in bad mood with angry expression.

3. CONTRAST OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS BETWEEN “PURPLE” AND “ZI”

There is no doubt that there are also a multitude of differences in connotations between “Purple” and “Zi” on account of different cultural backgrounds, which reflect distinctive cultural elements respectively following the Western culture and Eastern culture.

3.1 Cultural Connotations Unique to “Purple”

Cultural connotations unique to purple encompass grandness and elaborateness in writing style, rarity of the

brainpower and professionals in business, religious piety and faith as well as spiritual vanity and extravagance.

3.1.1 Grandness in Writing Style

The expressions like “purple prose”, “purple passage”, and “purple language” are characterized by grandness and elaborateness in writing style, implying the flowery wordings, while also referring to the bitter or sharp wordings (Fan, 2005).

As a pretentious or overly embellished writing, “purple prose” is firstly used by the Roman poet Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. When adjectives, adverbs, and metaphors are overused, it can be called “purple prose”. “Purple passage” refers to a passage where a multitude of unusual words in length are used.

3.1.2 Rarity of the Brainpower in Business

“Purple squirrel” is a term which employers use to characterize a job candidate with the right education, rich experience, and valued qualifications that completely satisfy a job’s multifaceted requirements. The assumption is that the perfect candidate is as rare as a purple squirrel in the real life.

Theoretically speaking, various responsibilities of the job can be shouldered by the rare “purple squirrels” without training, and it is of great benefit for businesses to function with less cost and fewer workers, which may render the company operation efficient. Thus, it is commonly argued that seeking the “purple squirrels” is laborious and strenuous, thus making more inclusive recruitment requirements and effective training of current employees a wise choice

3.1.3 Religious Piety

In the West, purple is often associated with piety and religious faith. In Christianity, purple represents the power

from the Holy Spirit, supreme and authoritative. In the Catholic Church, purple is called the bishop color, and the bishop is wearing a purple robe. Purple represents the love, holiness, and honor of the Lord. However, because of the relation to religion, purple is seen as a taboo color, so people will not wear purple clothes in their daily life in the West.

However, students and faculty of theology wear purple academic dress for graduations and other university ceremonies, and “purple” is also often worn by senior pastors of Protestant churches and bishops of the Anglican Communion.

3.1.4 Vanity

Vanity and extravagance can also be embodied in the color of purple, especially in the aspect of the individual style. Purple haze can be justified to describe self-indulgent as a state of mind induced by psychedelic drugs, particularly LSD.

3.2 Cultural Connotations Unique to “Zi”

Apart from astrology and universe, Taoism and mystery, modesty and integrity, heterodoxy and unorthodoxy as well as bruise constitute the unique cultural connotations of “Zi”.

3.2.1 Astrology and Universe

In Chinese culture, “Zi” is a very valuable color, which has some relations with the constellation in the universe. It is said that there are three fixed stars called “Zi weiyuan” (Purple Forbidden Enclosure), “Taiweiyuan” (Supreme Palace Enclosure), “Tianshiyuan” (Heavenly Market Enclosure), which is located in the center of the universe, thus is considered as the palace of the heaven where the gods live in. So the palace in which the Supreme Deity of Taoism—the Jade Emperor and his family live is called “Zijingong”, which causes the naming of Imperial Palace in Beijing as “Zijincheng”. More examples will be listed in Table 2.

Table 2
Expressions and Idioms related to “Zi” indicating “Astrology and Universe”

“Zi”	Zigong (the palace where the Jade Emperor lives); Zihuang (the Supreme Deity of Taoism); Zishu (the edicts of the Jade Emperor); Zifu (the palaces inhabited by immortals in the heaven); Zitai (the palaces where immortals and emperors live); Zizhou (the universe); Ziji (the palace of immortals); Ziqiong (the heaven); Ziming (the heaven); Ziweidoushu (the astrology).
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3.2.2 Taoism and Mystery

“Zi” is closely associated with Taoism. The legend has it that one day, Ling Yinyi, who was the county magistrate of Hanguan, one of the earliest forts in Chinese history, saw the “Ziqi”(purple smoke) flowing from the east, and thought of this as a sign of auspiciousness, so he tracked and found Laozi (the founder of the Taoist school of thought) riding an ox to leave Hanguan and the magistrate asked him to write something, which is known

as “Tao Te Ching”, an ancient Chinese classic as a mirror of Taoist philosophy. Thus, it is no surprise to discover much “Zi” in Taoism. In order to enhance their status and gain the support of the rulers, Taoism establishes the links between “Zi” and imperial power, such as the Emperor of Heaven is known as “Zihuang”, and the place where Emperor of Heaven lives is called “Zitai”. There is a name called “Ziyangzhenren” referring to a Taoist in Song Dynasty, who had a cursory reading of Taoist magic arts and wrote books concerning Taoism and preach across the country after meeting an immortal called Liu Haichan. “Jiuzhuan zijindan” is a kind of elixir of life in legends, which can cure all the diseases and pain of humans. Therefore, whoever has it can live forever and become an immortal. It’s widely acknowledged that it is refined by the senior immortal called “Taishanglaojun”, who is considered as the founder of Taoism.

3.2.3 Modesty and Integrity

“Zi” stands for calmness, modesty and integrity. In traditional Chinese Peking Opera, the character of a person is usually expressed in types of facial make-up. In Peking Opera, the purple face expresses the character’s justness, such as the loyal vassal Xu Yanzhao who fights with the traitor to ensure the orthodoxy of the crown prince (the role in the Peking Opera “Da Baoguo Erjingong”), the resourceful and calm Huang Gai in the battle of Chibi (the role in the Peking Opera “The Battle of Chibi”).

3.2.4 Heterodoxy

“Zi” is a mixture of red and blue, so before the popularity of ancient Taoism, to a great degree purple was not a color denoting goodness, which even is quite derogatory (Liu, 2014). In the idioms “Hongziluanzhu”(the orthodox is replaced by the heterodox), “Zhuzinanbie” (making no distinction between the good and the evil), and “Eziduoazhu” (the good triumphs over the evil), “Zi” is regarded as something unorthodox, and “Zhu” (red) is viewed as orthodoxy and authority, embodying the unorthodox power symbolized by “Zi” based on “Zhu” as one of the main colors while “Zi” not.

3.2.5 Bruise

In the idioms “Qingyikuai, ziyikuai” and “Biqingyanzi”, “Zi” means the bruise on the face, however, the corresponding English expression is black and blue instead of expressions including “purple” (Zhang, 2006).

4. REASONS FOR SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS BETWEEN “PURPLE” AND “ZI”

What accounts for the similarities and differences of cultural connotations between “purple” and “Zi” mainly consists of four aspects: human perception, national psychology, natural background and religion.

4.1 Perception and Cognition

Perception refers to the recognition of things using your senses, especially the sense of sight. Cognition means the mental process involved in knowing, learning, and understanding things. As the process of recognizing and interpreting sensory data that enables us to make sense of our world, human perception and cognition give meaning to all those external forces. Because the ability of perception and cognition is partly learned and therefore influenced by all of the past experiences, the result of the process is not the same for all people despite the same physical mechanism of perception and cognition, rendering it even harder for people against different social cultures. Under different cultural backgrounds, different color words are used to describe things even with the same reference in both English and Chinese, such as “black tea” and “Hongcha”, the reason behind which is that people speaking the two languages are possibly different in their color orientation (Fan, 2005).

4.2 National Psychology

Color terms are expressive of different national features in English and Chinese in that differences in national psychology can be found in people in these two cultures, and they have different past experiences and cultural traditions (Mi, 2009). People have formed relatively stable customs and habits in long-term social life. Different ethnic groups have different customs and habits based on the national psychology. The influence of such customs and habits on language cannot be ignored. In ancient China, the colors were divided into two types, pure and binary. Pure colors include “Chi” (red), “Bai” (white), and “Hei” (black) and so on, while “Zi” (purple) belongs to the binary color. The binary color is often referred to an impure color, for example, “purple” is a color by mixing red and blue.

4.3 Natural Background

Natural environment refers to the system that provides material resources for human use. It is not only the material basis for human survival and development, but also the cradle for human civilization or culture, thus a close relationship between human beings and their natural and social environments can be well established and inevitably reflected in language and culture. The relatively stable natural environment in a country or region shapes the distinctive local culture to a great extent, undoubtedly language included. Different environments often account for different usage and understandings of the color terms, endowing them with cultural features of a nation.

4.4 Religion

Lamb (1982) believes it's clear that religion and culture are inextricably entwined. It is generally acknowledged that religion has been devoted to the expatiation and interpretation of those motions about life that otherwise could not be understood or resolved by logic and science and the study of religion not only looks into the spiritual and psychological needs of human, but also functions as a mirror reflecting the social aspects of a culture (Mi, 2009). For the people in Britain and America, Christianity is the dominant world view. In Christianity, “purple” represents the power from the Holy Spirit, supreme and authoritative. The Catholic Church calls purple as the color of bishop: the bishop wears purple; the cardinal wears vermilion. The main color of Advent is purple because Jesus wore a purple robe in the Crucifixion. However, in China, it is more associated with Taoism. In Taoism, “Zi” is used to symbolize auspiciousness and dignity.

CONCLUSION

Color terms in both English and Chinese are endowed with specific meanings and implications. It is recognized that color word meaning is directly related to man's social and cultural experiences which are unique to the members of a particular cultural group. So the understanding and interpretation of such culture-loaded words must go along with the understanding of the culture involved. By exploring the comparison and contrast between “purple” and “Zi” against different cultural backgrounds, and further bringing insight into the reasons behind the phenomena, a better cultural understanding of the color terms “purple” and “Zi” is available and implications on cross-cultural communication can be reached.

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