



On the Cultural Differences of Different Colors in China and Japan

Xueyi Chen

Kede College, Capital Normal University, Beijing, 102602, China
a17600388139@outlook.com

Abstract. The research will also seek to solve the question of how the cultural differences between China and Japan are seen in the difference in the festival colors which has been a point of contention in Chinese and Japanese cultural studies. The main goal of this research is to contribute to the findings of the previous research. When studying differences in culture between China and Japan it takes festival colors as a microworld to give it a closer analysis. Simultaneously, the analysis method used to study is the example analysis method and the contrast method. According to the research made by the author, the Chinese and Japanese cultures have started mixing with one another as globalization gains momentum. Nevertheless, the roadmap of the cultural logic of both countries will not be subjected to any substantial alteration in the influence of each other and will generate new cultural output. However, there is no way that the cultures of the two nations would not be related to one another. This thesis not only talks about the cultural differences between China and Japan in detail, but also is a supplementary addition to the future researchers research on the China and Japan culture besides a new outlook.

Keywords: China, Japanese, Culture, Integration and Development

1 Introduction

Color is not only a visual message, but it is the language and this language is silent, and carries a burden of the history of a nation, its beliefs, and the feelings of the whole population. It is one of the most direct and yet intense channels of expression of culture as a prism through which the values, cosmological perspectives and aesthetic values inherent to the society are reflected and seen through. Still, in the context of the cross cultural studies, the symbolic aspect of color provides a rich, albeit underutilized, ground upon which one can uncover the subtle and at times deep differences which occur to be characteristic of national identities. The current studies on Chinese and Japanese folklore offer a great deal of cultural commentary on a wide range of fields, such as ritual practices down to mythological stories, but an enduring and concentrated study based on the use of the color semantic in particular to the context of the festal and ceremonial life, is yet to be had. This gap is a challenge and an opportunity. The presented paper, in turn, tries to fill the gap between the knowledge of the discipline of

folklore and the fine-tuning of color theories and cultural semiotics. Through a comparative study of leading festival colors, it attempts to make clear these cultural differences and philosophical directions that they incarnate. Its goal is to transcend the surface listing of preferences in terms of colors to an interpretative account of how colour as a medium of cultural logics is embedded. Hopefully, such analysis will provide an efficient, subtle guide to understanding cross-cultural better, where its possible uses would be in behavioral domains such as intercultural communication or design anthropology, and in tangible areas such as heritage studies or comparative aesthetics.

The color palette that was traditionally popular in China and Japan is divergent, and it does not happen simply due to the aesthetic coincidence, the accident of historical development, but an essential part of the particular cultural-philosophical framework of these countries. The traditionally Confucian-established, socially-oriented and celebratory ethos of Chinese, that lays more emphasis on harmony, continuity of family and the worldly prosperity, is the stark contrast of the mystical, purity-obsession and nature-pondering aesthetics entrenched in the syncretistic Shinto and Buddhist traditions of the Japanese. Indeed, these contrasting world views, where social and collective vitality is put above the short-lived beauty, social warmth against the cold and unemotional temperament, are summarized in the visual and symbolic selections. Not to mention the very vivid, saturated Chinese red prevailing over the New Year celebrations, which is associated with a sense of community celebration and good fortune, the subdued, occasionally monochromatic schemes in Japanese Obon rites are attributed to the idea of purity, ancestors and the shortness of life. It is this philosophical cleavage which appears in the lower levels of sensory and symbolic reality that inherently defines not only the domestic cultural manifestation, but a dynamic of cultural exchange, adaptation and preservation in both countries during the global flows.

The modern stimulus of this enquiry came when the author heard the announcement of the planned 2025 China Festival in Tokyo which on a personal sense of interest spurred him to the fine parallels and differences which exist within the Chinese and Japanese cultures of festivities [1]. Being the conscious demonstration of the Chinese culture in Japanese land, this action leads to the important questions regarding how the key cultural symbols and characteristics are perceived, translated, and possibly re-signified beyond the national boundaries. It prompted the writer to look with a new colorful look at these old-worn issues of Sino-Japanese cultural juxtaposition. Although there is an abundance of academic literature that can compare different aspects of Chinese and Japanese culture, one can easily be disheartened by the lack of depth and insight that can seem like a shift in circles around the general themes of similar but different origins. By shifting the emphasis to the particular field of festival colors and the cultural semantics inherent in them, the provided discussion is meant to add new specificity and granularity to the discussion. It attempts to fill a real gap in the literature which exists presently by showing how macro cultural distinction is uniformly coded and acted out by micro-cultural aesthetic decisions- a move in which has real value both to theorizing in the cultural field and to the practical world which is rapidly becoming more and more globalized.

2 Research Method

In order to test the cultural semantics of color systematically, this study will use qualitative comparative methodology, which involves testing individual culturally salient cases. The author combined and contrasted the more generalities activities and festivals in China and Japan, finding the representatives of which are most prevalent in their respective cultures, as well as rich in chromatic symbolism. This approach gives the possibility of a narrowed depth of analysis, and the results of the research are pegged on familiar cultural practices.

There are two key cases on which the main comparative axis is built. To begin with, the chromatic symbolism of Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) and Japanese Obon Festival is discussed. Although these two festivals have several issues in common, namely the reunification of relatives and the worship of ancestors, on the surface, they use radically different color accentuations which indicate different priorities in culture. The presence of the color red used in Chinese New Year, its decorations, clothing, monetary envelopes creates a very stark standing compared to white lanterns, minimalistic decorations, and muted dress code that Obon is associated with. This contrast is the direct point of departure in getting to know the differences in cultural attitudes toward celebration, afterlife and communal expression [2].

Second, the article also explores the symbolism of the clothing during life-cycle ceremonies, namely comparing the conventional hues of the traditional wedding attire between the two cultures. The historical and ongoing popularity of red color in the traditional bridal attire of Chinese (qungua or red gowns) are compared with the traditional Japanese shiromuku (pure white wedding kimono). This comparison is not just a question of fashion but one that goes further to reveal the ingrained ideas of color with beliefs of fortune, purity, transition and the place of the individual within the social and cosmic system [3].

The two cases have been chosen because of the high prevalence of culture and high symbolic density and as such they are very appropriate in respect to integrated comparison [3]. There is an approach to the analysis which involves both example analysis (reading carefully the particular use of colors in each ritual situation) and the contrast method (highlighting the differences in symbolic meaning accorded to similar/similar or different colors in the two cultures). It comprises the historical development of the colors meaning, how they are implicated into the larger philosophical or religious systems of thought (Confucianism, Daoism, Shinto, Buddhism), and how they have evolved and changed in the present day. It is more than just enumerating differences but the aim is to develop a consistent meaning of how such chromatic differences express basic differences in cultural logicity, worldview, and aesthetic sensibility between China and Japan.

3 The Cultural Semantics of Red

3.1 Cultural Semantics of Red: A Comparative View

The color red is paradigmatically suitable to investigate the Sino-Japanese divergent culture. Its meaning in both cultures is not arbitrary, but is created as a result of historical processes, religious beliefs and social practices. To be able to understand the differences in the paths of the culture in China and Japan, a comparative perspective assisted by a view of its strong symbolism ought to trace the path of historical roots and concealed meanings to the current usage of red.

The color commonly known as the Chinese red has deep complex roots in Chinese civilization. It can be traced back to the ancient cultural practices based on the worship of nature. The primitive, early connection was closely associated with the veneration of life-giving, vital, and powerful elements of nature blood, fire, and the sun. The inseparable nature of blood and the enigmas of life and death in ancient times made people believe that blood was something key and possess some kind of magic power which could intimidate the evil and establish contact with the spirits of the ancestors or other places of worship. Rituals made this belief come true as animal blood was used to purify the spaces and reach divine favour. There was a corresponding holiness assigned to the element of fire that offered necessary warmth, protection against predator and a way of cleansing the human elements with a cleansing flame of the fire. Juxtaposition of the red of blood and colour red of fire slowly amassed a deep-seated religious and favourable sense of the colour [4]. This was institutionalized over millennia by philosophical and political processes. Red was linked to the good value of Yang (symbolizing heaven, sun, activity and masculinity), wealth and eventually the rule of the emperor and popular happiness. It became the dominant color of festivity, fortune and community life, and finally it appears everywhere during the spring festival, weddings and other festivals.

Starkly contrasting, the historical course of red (aka or hi-iro) in ancient Japan took a very different course. In some early stages, red was separately and most ambivalently situated and frequently tabooed. Being an image of blood and fire, it had strong implications of danger, defilement and divine power at the same moment, a typical display of the ambiguity of the sacred (kegare vs. hare). Its application was thus limited and very contextualized. Although it might seem in the ornament of some Shinto shrines (which symbolized life force), in the past, it was also worn as prison robes to mark the condemned people. Such prohibitory use reinforces an idea of cultural perception surrounding the dashboard use of red as an energy source that demanded delicate mediation and control [5].

Considerable change in this aspect has however occurred in the contemporary and modern Japan. As the historical motivations of caution and strong religion have not disappeared completely, the red color is actively and broadly used in good, festivities, and commercial purposes. It is observed in bright red of the gates to Fushimi Inari, in the festal decoration of the establishment of a business or a school opening, and in fashionable clothing. This new locus but can tend to come off as a sunny, clean aesthetic in lieu of one that would have as densely layered a figurative load as a Chinese red [5].

Such analogy in history and in the present day provides a key cultural difference: whereas in China, red has preserved and even created a dominant range of positive meanings of fortune, joy, and group identity, in Japan semiotics access this semiotics have followed a more complicated path, moving between ambivalence, constriction, to a more modern and celebratory yet somehow more reduced range of symbolism that not entirely sloughs off the layers of meaning historically accrued. This is a dynamic and bargaining of color semantics, grounded on radically different historical events, spiritual formations and social metamorphoses, eloquently illustrating that there exist no universal and determinate meanings of color; instead, they are cultural formations of the best kind.

3.2 The Substructure of the Cultural Logics: The Celebration of the Communion and the Fleeting Beauty

Such symbolic life of colors as red is not something isolated but an outcome of most potent underlying cultural orientations and aesthetic ideologies. These are the foundations on which the color symbolism is made and interpreted.

Color in the Chinese setting is closely connected to a social and cosmic system that values harmony, continuity and group prosperity. Based on the principles of Confucianism, which stressed social roles, reverence and piety to the family, and complemented by the Daoist and folk convictions in the positive influence (*jixiang*), color becomes a visual signifier, that links shared feeling and indicates dreams of earthly achievement, prosperity, and harmony within the family [6]. The aesthetic gesture in the feast venues is consequently mostly of exuberant generosity, richness of the senses and overt symbolism. The same direction can be reflected in the festive, communal, and lively palette, in which the dominance of bright reds, golds, and purples of the main celebrations, such as the Lunar New Year or a wedding, has a clear social application: to reinforce the message of the joy, social renewal, and warm feelings. The color plays its own role in the creation and enhancement of the *qi* (vital energy) of the event and generates the environment where the sense of increased and mutual auspiciousness is present. It gazes outward and includes the rest of the community in an aesthetic emotional display of mutual good luck.

The ideals that determine the Japanese aesthetics especially those that affect ritual and reflective spaces are somewhat different. Ideas like *mono no aware*, a sensitive, poignant consciousness of the impermanence (*mujō*) of everything, and *wabi-sabi*, which perceives the beauty of defect and only, finds perfect in the age of things, have a profound influence on the world of the senses. This aesthetic sensitivity is concerned with a silent, sensual response of the cycles of nature, the strong but short concentration of spring cherry blossoms (*sakura*) and the noble breakdown of autumn leaves [7]. Frugality (*shojō*), simplicity, and appreciation of empty space (*ma*) are greatly appreciated. Consequently, a strong predilection towards a more mystic, quiet and pure palette on many traditional and ritual occasions is eminent. The colors tend to be non aggressive, less vivid, more neutral (whites, off-whites, greys, indigos), revealing the attitude of Zen-like thinking, self-worship, and respectful lack of contact with frank, demonstrative manifestation. The Obon celebration is an exemplary one. The festival, with a pre-

eminence of white (in lanterns, some of the decorations, and simplified offerings), and indicating the purity, and the temporality of the return of the spirits, and a dreamy, composed sobriety, produces an effect of deep, silent reverence, visionary to this aesthetic sense [8]. The logic that is involved here, is not the external enhancement of communal happiness, but rather an internalized, harmonious with nature, reflection and a clean welcome to the temporal visitors of the ancestors. And accordingly, contrasting is the, outward, socially-active vivacity of the relations of Chinese colors with the case of the relative stillness, the nature-ready and the self-centered meditations of the traditional Japanese rituals [9].

3.3 Interaction and Persistence within a Globalized Environment

The globalization processes and increased cultural contact have certainly made cross-cultural interplay more pronounced and numerous in issues of color. The modern globe is full of superficial adaptation and borrowing. The application of bright red in big Japanese celebratory commercialization or fest photo backgrounds or backdrops is now a common occurrence. On the contrary, the vision of Chinese brides wearing white London style wedding dresses is a conventional image of the modern urban China [9]. These moves could be an indication of gradual homogenization or blending of color symbolism.

But, a more acute examination shows that these adaptations are usually rather inclined to act on the level of fashion in a sense of aestheticity, ornamental avarice, or pragmatic expediency, than to an essential shift of profound symbolic value. The over-consumption of the Chinese wedding gown by white brides is so heavily fueled by the imagery of international (mostly western) wedding fashion, media, and concept of modernity, as opposed to the intentional denial of the traditional auspicious Chinese color red [10]. Along with the white dress in most scenarios, traditional aspects of red are also used (e.g. red accessories, a switch to red qipao later in the party), which is a hybrid practice where the new system replaces the old meaning but does not completely discard the old. The white gown has a tendency to imply a meaning of being modernly romantic and one that portrays a bridal beauty as an imported value, overlaid, but not superseding, the value of the original cultural affinity about red signifying luck and joy.

Similarly, the applicability of red in the contemporary Japanese cultural festive is not as rigid as it is in China since it is sometimes employed and its symbolic revocation rarely follows the part of the dominating, building, and even all-positive significance of the color [11]. A red lantern on a summer festival might be taken to mean good times, but it is not as comprehensive and all-inclusive as the good times portrayed by red envelopes during Chinese New Year. The symbolism architecture has much to do with the concepts of the sacred in Shinto as well as the Buddhist concept of transience and it is still mostly preserved even when the surface level is commercial or trendy adoption of colorful colors.

This suggests an important process of intercultural living in the global era: at whatever rate it may be in the superficial aesthetic realm, the instinctive color preferences, the fundamental significances deciphered with it, does manifest an impressive resistance. They are conservative since they are unremovably attached to prolonged and

slow-paced cultural logics (worldviews, religious positions, memoirs of history, systems of aesthetics), that can not be changed in the short-term by foreign imports [12]. Instead of erasing, however, globalization generates a number of layers of practice in which new meanings are taken up even as old ones stand, adapt or co-exist and make up a palimpsest of local and global symbolism.

4 Conclusion

As the given analysis shows, the surface and profound cultural difference between China and Japan could be effectively depicted with the help of a specific analysis of the color symbolism, and the approach to the red color may be taken as the example of the detailed discussion of the topic. Going beyond the simple descriptive cataloguing, the analysis has laid stress on the use of visual symbolism as a diagnostic prism of showing underlying basic cultural logic. Being either collective celebratory, historically discontinuous, and worldly auspicious (in China) or an aestheticism of the impermanence of nature, purity, and interior reflection (in Japan), these logics are regularly and effectively expressed through chromatic selections.

Moreover, the exploration has illuminated the tenuousness and subtlety of cultural contact in the era of globalization. It has demonstrated how superficial adjustment and artistic borrowing help create a collective, cosmopolitan visual lexicon, and at the same time, it points to the fact of the underlying stability of fundamental symbolic structures dominated by necessity. The tenacity of such structures indicates that cultural exchange in the symbolic sphere tends to be an adding and re contextualizing process and rarely an identity-substitutional process. This is the dynamic of global flow and combination with local depth and stability, borrowed forms and permanent meanings that is critically important to understand. It gives a more ecstatic understanding of the ways cultural identity one identifies with is shared, performed and sustained at the same time in the ever-growing interrelated world. Using the particular, and tell-tale concept of festival color, this research, as a secondary contribution to the already existing scholarly word on the cultural relations between China and Japan, suggests a methodological point of view that has the potential to be effectively put to service in other related cultural studies.

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