

# *Analysis of the Cultural Significance and Social Rationale of "Red" in Chinese Culture*

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**Abstract:** "Red" is arguably the most frequently used color term in Chinese. Since ancient times, the Chinese people have held a special emotional connection to the color "red", and this psychological characteristic is directly reflected in the usage of the linguistic symbol "red", forming its unique cultural significance. This paper provides a brief analysis and overview of the cultural meanings of "red" from both traditional and contemporary perspectives, including its associations with "celebration," "power and favor," "nobility," and "revolution, progress." It elucidates the rich humanistic nuances layered upon the natural attribute of "red" and explores its inherent characteristics of human creativity, symbolism, and communicability, deepening our understanding of the cultural significance of "red." Furthermore, the cultural meaning of "red" is intricately intertwined with social factors. This paper delves into the external social rationale behind the formation of the cultural meaning of "red," conducting in-depth analyses of natural superstitions, historical factors, literary arts, folk customs, language influences, and other aspects, revealing the rich and profound social causes behind the cultural essence of "red."

**Keywords:** Red, Cultural Significance, Social Rationale

## 1. Introduction

"Red (Hong in Pinyin)", as a natural color, is an objective existence. In primitive times, humans used substances like red iron ore powder as a dye for decoration. According to "Shuowen Jiezi," it states, "From silk, pronounced 'gong.' Silk is red and white." This indicates that "red" belongs to the color spectrum of silk textiles. These linguistic and etymological perspectives confirm that "red" represents a specific color. As the widespread use of "red" continued, the Han Chinese developed a preference for the color, and its meaning evolved beyond the color itself, acquiring various cultural connotations stamped with the cultural identity of the Han ethnic group. This paper delves into these cultural meanings, analyzing and summarizing the creative, symbolic, and communicative characteristics of "red" as a cultural symbol. Additionally, it explores the deep-seated social factors that contribute to the cultural significance of "red," including the continuity of natural worship and awe of life, evolving social-historical factors, vibrant literary arts, established folk customs, and the language interactions resulting from cultural collisions.

In general, past research on "red" has often focused on specific literary works, explored the meaning of "red" in Han-English translations, or delved into the origin and semantic types of "red."

This paper, however, specifically examines the cultural connotations of "red," aiming to further elucidate the relationship between cultural meaning and social rationale.

## 2. Cultural Meanings of "Red"

The term "cultural meaning" refers to the implicit meanings of a word within a specific cultural context, reflecting various cultural factors such as national customs, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, and ways of thinking [1]. "Red" initially served as a color term, but with the evolution of its meaning and the influence of China's unique ethnic culture, the linguistic symbol "Red" gradually acquired diverse cultural connotations, forming a unique array of meanings.

### 2.1. Traditional Cultural Meanings of "Red"

The first and most common traditional cultural meaning of "red" is its association with celebration and good fortune. "Red" carries a joyful connotation rooted in symbols like the peach charm. It is considered the color with the strongest positive meaning, symbolizing happiness and auspiciousness [2]. In ancient times, "red" was referred to as the "auspicious color," and people often adorned objects in red for decoration or prayers.

The second meaning derived from the celebration is the extension of "red" to signify obtaining power and favor. It is often used to represent individuals with talent and those who are highly regarded, known as "red guys (distinguished figure, Hong-ren in Pinyin)." Additionally, it is employed to express success in one's career, such as phrases like "to be in the limelight (Hongjiyishi in Pinyin)" and "to be highly successful (Dahongdazi in Pinyin)." Honors and awards are also commonly referred to as "Recognition List (Hong-bang in Pinyin)."

The third meaning is the symbol of nobility. In ancient times, with a strict hierarchical structure, colors were used as important symbols to distinguish social status, with "red" typically considered as the legitimate color. Residences, carriages, and clothing of the ruling class were adorned with "red." This materialization of "red" was a direct and commonly used means for the ruling class to express their esteemed status.

The fourth meaning is associated with women. Ancient women used rouge on their faces, enhancing their beauty with a rosy complexion, making them more captivating. Chinese women have had a historical preference for "red," making it a color associated with femininity. Therefore, terms like "beautiful woman", "bridal attire", and "rouge" are often used to refer to women.

The fifth meaning is related to love. The passionate feeling evoked by the color red makes it a fitting metaphor for fervent and loyal love. Ancient people often used "red" to describe ardent and devoted love, such as using "red beans" to express love or referring to matchmakers as "Hongmei" or "Hongniang".

### 2.2. New Meanings of "Red" in Contemporary Culture

With the development of time and society, the application of "red" has become increasingly widespread, and its cultural meanings have grown richer. In recent history, "red" has been employed in various contexts, reflecting not only the development of contemporary Chinese culture but also the reflection of societal values. Instances such as uprisings and struggles have endowed "red" with the meanings of "revolution" and "progress," seen in terms like "Red Army" and "Red Flag". The fusion of cultures has turned "red" into a symbol of "danger" and "warning," as seen in the term "red light". In the economic sphere, "red" can signify "bonus" and "interest," with terms like "bonus" and "dividend" commonly used to express additional investment returns. The understanding of physiological responses has imbued "red" with the emotional color of jealousy, as seen in phrases like

"red-eye disease". The rise of China has also made the world see "Chinese red" as a symbol representing a miraculous ascent.

### **3. Characteristics of Cultural Meaning**

Through the exploration of the basic cultural meanings of "red" and an examination of its internal characteristics as a cultural symbol, we can summarize three key features of its cultural significance. Investigating these characteristics helps deepen our understanding of "red" and enables us to further uncover the social rationale behind its cultural meaning.

#### **3.1. Human Creativity**

"Culture is the humanization of nature"[3]. Culture possesses human creativity, with the cultural meaning of words being attributed by people in the course of production and life. "Human perception and generalization abilities abstract concrete colors into color concepts and color words are formed as a result"[4]. The natural attributes of "red" are perceived and felt by people, creating an association with human subjectivity. This association prompts the emergence of cultural meanings, and these meanings change with the subjective psychology of social groups. The visual experience that "red" imparts to people, evoking thoughts of warmth and passion, initially determines its cultural meanings related to "fire" and "sun." As people's cognitive levels improve or their thoughts change, the cultural connotations of "red" are influenced, highlighting the human creativity behind cultural meanings.

#### **3.2. Symbolism**

Cultural meanings are often hidden beneath the basic meanings of words, representing analogies or associations that people acquire through cognitive processes. This abstraction allows people to express thoughts, emotions, aesthetic tastes, and abstract concepts, imparting a symbolic nature to cultural meanings. Zhang Wangxi suggests that the symbolic nature represented by color words is "using the objective image of color concepts to express certain abstract ideas, expressing abstract ideological content through concrete color images" [5]. The associative meanings of the color word "red" are continuously enriched by cognitive groups based on the foundation of color concepts. These associative meanings span various aspects of people's lives and, in different eras, backgrounds, and situations, convey specific cultural values, demonstrating clear symbolic significance.

#### **3.3. Transitivity**

Language reflects culture which influences language, and any language serves as a witness to the historical and cultural heritage of its people [6]. Once cultural meanings emerge, they imply the need for horizontal transmission and popularity among social groups. This lateral transitivity facilitates communication and exchange among people. Additionally, cultural meanings exhibit longitudinal transitivity, serving as a vital guarantee for the intergenerational transmission and continuity of civilization within a nation or ethnic group. The cultural significance of "red" distinctly possesses this pronounced transitivity. Although "red" constantly acquires new meanings, from a synchronic perspective, whether constrained by ruling classes or influenced by societal norms, people tend to share a consistent understanding of the cultural importance of "red" during the same historical periods. Moreover, from a diachronic perspective, many cultural meanings of "red" have been passed down from ancient times to the present, and modern people still maintain traditional views and applications of "red".

## 4. Cultural Significance and Social Rationale

"The so-called rationale for word meanings refers to the reasons for the formation of word meanings, which is explored from a diachronic perspective" [7]. To gain a deeper understanding of the cultural significance of "red," one must not only examine the internal nature of its semantic meaning but also analyze the rationale for its meaning. Through an exploration of the cultural meanings of the color word "red" across different historical periods and an analysis of its cultural significance, it becomes evident that the emergence of its cultural meanings is inseparable from the cognitive subject as well as specific historical, political, and cultural contexts. The following analysis delves into the social rationale behind the formation of the cultural meaning of "red," investigating its relationship with various societal factors.

### 4.1. Natural Superstition

#### 4.1.1. Worship Psychology

In Chinese culture, reverence for "red" can be traced back to ancient times, starting with natural worship. The initial inclination of the Chinese towards "red" originated from the worship of fire and the sun.

The discovery of fire through wood drilling brought about a revolutionary transformation in human production and lifestyle, marking a profound transformation from a primitive state to civilization. Ancestors regarded fire as sacred, elevating it to the status of a deity, giving rise to the Fire God Zhu Rong, and even the name of the Chinese ancestral figure Yan Emperor is derived from fire. They viewed fire as a symbol of purity, believing it possessed the power to ward off evil, demons, disasters, and impurities. During nighttime travel, people often lit torches, and on various festive occasions, they ignited bonfires, lanterns and torches and set off fireworks and firecrackers to dispel diseases, malevolent spirits, and negative energy [8]. After the concept of color emerged, there was a natural association between fire and the color 'red,' likely influenced by the color of firelight. The Han Chinese, among the world's earliest fire-using ethnic groups, developed a special preference for the color red in their lives nurtured by the practices of slash-and-burn agriculture [9]. Consequently, the worship of fire gradually manifested through the reverence for the color 'red,' transforming it into a symbol of joy and auspiciousness. People associate red with happiness during celebrations, emphasize 'starting with red (Prosperous Beginning, Kai-Menhong in Pinyin)' in business, and express wishes for a 'full house of red (Joy and Prosperity Filling the Halls, Man-tanghong in Pinyin)' and a vibrant life.

In addition, worship of the sun is often intertwined with fire worship. Ancestral veneration of the sun is reflected in the significance of the color 'red.' The dazzling warmth and brightness of the sun, represented by its fiery red hue, invoked a sense of mystery. Ancestors revered the sun, expressing prayers for a safe and beautiful life. Consequently, the sun was often used as a totem, and people adorned rooftops with sun-shaped symbols, frequently embellished in radiant red. These sun symbols, often in shades of crimson, represented harnessing the fiery light of the sun to dispel evil spirits. With the widespread adoption and development of sun worship, 'red' frequently emerged as a symbol of the sun in people's lives. The color 'red,' associated with the sun, attained a spiritual significance, embodying people's reverence for the sun and their yearning for warmth and brightness. For instance, the phrase 'the red sun rises' symbolizes hope.

#### 4.1.2. Awe of Life

The most immediate association with "red" is often blood. In traditional Chinese culture, red blood symbolizes the vitality of life. The visual impact of red blood creates fear, and the loss of blood

instills terror. Scholars like Yin Falu and Xu Shuan believe, 'Ancient ancestors considered blood to be the essence of life, attributing a kind of magic to it. Human reverence for blood led them to believe that it could ward off evil and, at the same time, invoke evil.' [10] Naturally, people develop a reverence for blood and life, believing that blood can repel evil and protect against harm. Ancestors often used the blood of animals in sacrificial rituals, and as time progressed, blood was replaced by other red items in modern practices. People tend to favor the use of red on important occasions, such as decorating with red during the Chinese New Year and wearing red items in one's zodiac birth year. These practices are rooted in the psychological reverence for blood, as individuals seek safety through blood-related rituals. Expressions like 'fresh red', 'crimson', and 'dark red' are commonly used to describe the color of blood, highlighting the inseparable connection between 'red' and 'blood' in its usage.

## 4.2. Historical Factors

### 4.2.1. Social Context

The cultural significance represented by the color 'red' could be a product of specific historical periods, gestating under different social contexts. Just as white was popular during the Yin and Shang dynasties, and the Zhou dynasty embraced the concept of fire virtue, the awareness of the importance of 'red' began to form. "In Chinese history, it is said that Yan Emperor Shennong was known as the Fire Virtue King, also known as the Fire Emperor. Tang Yao was also associated with fire virtue, and the Zhou dynasty upheld fire virtue. The Han, Song, and Ming dynasties all followed the tradition of fire virtue, with rulers associated with fire virtue showing a preference for the color red. Thus, red gained a politically orthodox status." [11] With the gradual deepening of concepts like 'imperial color' and 'non-imperial color,' 'red' became a symbol of nobility and orthodoxy. This phenomenon reached its zenith during the Ming Dynasty, influenced by Zhu Yuanzhang's favoritism towards the color red. The imperial court protocols dictated that only the emperor's approval could designate an item as red, known as 'approved red.' Only concubines and empresses in the imperial harem were allowed to wear red. The 'red robe and jade belt' were reserved for officials of rank four or higher. Affluent families showcased the 'red bricks and green tiles,' along with crimson-colored imperial porcelain, emphasizing the exclusivity and prestige of the color red. During the Qing Dynasty, officials of first and second ranks were required to wear hats adorned with red coral beads, while common officials wore copper hats. These 'red hats' symbolized individuals with outstanding contributions favored by the emperor. Influenced by this hierarchical cap ceremony, 'red' acquired the additional connotation of 'gaining power and favor.' It is evident that under different social contexts, 'red' has different presentations, not only bearing the imprint of the times but also carrying ethical nuances.

### 4.2.2. Political System

Politics and culture, both being components of the superstructure, are closely interrelated, mutually influencing each other. The cultural significance embedded in 'red' is also connected to the political system. Under specific political circumstances, the red flag became a symbol of the proletarian revolution. With the development of communism in China, terms such as 'red political power,' 'Red Army,' and 'Red Songs' emerged. Under the leadership of the Communist Party, the Chinese people adopted the 'Five-Star Red Flag' and developed their own 'red faith.' This Chinese red not only represents the color of revolution but also embodies the fervor of numerous revolutionary pioneers, becoming an enduring patriotic sentiment.

### 4.3. Literature and Art

Literature and art serve as reflections of the times, intimately tied to people's lives. 'Red,' as one of the most commonly used color words in daily life, frequently appears in works of literature and art. The rich and profound cultural heritage of the Chinese nation imparts unique cultural meanings to 'red,' available for later generations to savor and study. For example, the poem 'Red beans grow in the southern land, sprouting a few branches in spring. I hope you pick many, as this item is most reminiscent of love.' In this verse, Wang Wei uses 'red beans' as a metaphor for lovesickness, endowing 'red beans' with the connotation of 'yearning,' referred to as the 'seeds of yearning,' cherished by many literati and scholars as a means of expressing emotions. In traditional Chinese opera, a 'red face' often symbolizes characters characterized by loyalty, bravery, and straightforwardness. One of the most typical representatives is Guan Yu, whose face is described as 'red as a date.' Therefore, 'red' imparts an impression of loyalty and straightforwardness. These literary and artistic works enrich the cultural implications of 'red,' giving it special metaphors."

### 4.4. Folk Customs

Folk customs refer to the habits and traditions of the common people, representing cultural phenomena that are collectively established in society. Mr. Zhong Jingwen proposed that the scope of folk culture includes "various social habits, trends, and phenomena existing among the people, including material culture, social organization, ideology, and oral language" [12]. Among the numerous color words in the Chinese language, "red" carries the richest folk color. Whenever there is a joyous occasion among the Chinese, "red" is inevitably present. During the Chinese New Year, red envelopes are given, brides wear "red wedding gowns" and cover their heads with "red veils," and decorations like "Double happiness (a Chinese symbol often used during weddings to represent joy and good fortune, Hongshuangxi in Pinyin)" are used. For childbirth, people offer "red eggs." Businesspeople consider "red" auspicious and use the term "red dividends (Dividends, Hong-li in Pinyin)" to indicate profits. Individuals who are favored are called "red guys (distinguished figure, Hong-ren in Pinyin)," and young actors who are popular and promising are referred to as "rising stars in red (popular young actor, Danghongxiaosheng in Pinyin)." "Red" encompasses various aspects of people's lives, and under the influence of social folk customs, new cultural meanings are constantly infused into the concept of "red."

### 4.5. Language Contact

"Some of the extended meanings of 'red' did not originally exist in the Chinese language, but with the mutual exchange and integration of Chinese and foreign cultures, basic color words in Chinese have acquired some meanings from foreign cultures" [13]. In the process of showcasing "Chinese red" to the world, the Chinese nation has also absorbed the essence of many foreign cultures. For instance, in the West, "red" is often associated with negative connotations, representing danger, violence, or obscenity. For example, "red neck" is used to mock the rough and irritable farmers in the southern United States; "red card" signifies danger and warning; and "red-light district" metaphorically describes a place where prostitution is concentrated. On the positive side, Western countries like to roll out the "red carpet" to signify solemnity and welcome, and a "red rose" represents loyalty and love towards a partner. Through language contact, these cultural concepts have entered China, and the foreign cultural meaning of "red" has gradually been accepted and used by the Chinese.

## 5. Conclusion

For the Chinese nation, "red" is not merely a color word; its rich cultural meanings are closely related to people's social life, serving as a condensed representation of Chinese culture over thousands of years. This article not only explores the semantics of the linguistic symbol "red" internally but also analyzes its external rationale. The exploration of social rationale reveals the close relationship between the emergence of cultural meanings and various social factors. Due to various limitations, this study on the cultural meanings of the linguistic symbol "red" still has shortcomings, lacking comprehensiveness and refinement, and has not formed a systematic framework. This is an area where further exploration and effort are needed in the study of other types of linguistic symbols in the future. It is hoped that this research on the cultural meanings of the linguistic symbol "red" and its social rationale can contribute to the understanding, learning, and promotion of the rich and unique culture of the Chinese nation.

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