



Cultural Implication and Semantic Opaqueness of Colour Expressions in Chinese Classics

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Abstract

The conception of colour is embedded in traditional Chinese culture, embodied by the correlation between the notion of five colours and the ideal of Five Elements, i.e. *wuxing*. Colour names in the Chinese language has undergone evolution from Classical Chinese to modern Mandarin, reflected by the fact that terminologies appertaining to colour have become more explicit, which is motivated by the Principle of Least Effort as well as a need for efficient memory, comprehension and communication. In classics written in Classical Chinese, expressions indicating colour tend to demonstrate semantic opaqueness, ascribed to historical references, metaphorical representations, literary allusions and etymological derivations.

Keywords

Chinese classics, colour names, *wuxing*, cultural implication, semantic opaqueness, grand narrative

Introduction

In modern Mandarin, names of colours are predominantly indicated in the form of ‘specific colour + 色 *se* (‘colour’), e.g. 红色 *hong se* ‘red colour’, 黄色 *huang se* ‘yellow colour’ and 蓝色 *lan se* ‘blue colour’, sometimes defined by 深 *shen* ‘dark’ or 浅 *qian* / 淡 *dan* ‘light’. Apart from the set of primary colours, secondary and tertiary colour representations in the gamut can also be named following this pattern, yet by virtue of the complex mixture, their names frequently entail real-world objects that are in such colours, exemplified by 米色 *mi se* ‘rice colour’, 栗色 *li se* ‘chestnut colour’, 琥珀色 *hupo se* ‘amber colour’, 金色 *jin se* ‘gold colour’, 银色 *yin se* ‘silver colour’, etc. Alternatively, if mixed colours fall into the category of primary colours, their names can be constituted of pre-modifying objects and following umbrella colours, generating terminologies such as 杏黄 *xing huang* ‘apricot yellow’, 珊瑚红 *shanhu hong* ‘coral red’ and 孔雀蓝 *kongque lan* ‘peacock blue’. Similarly, this strategy applies to secondary and neutral colours, as in 草绿 *cao lü* ‘grass green’, 葡萄紫 *putao zi* ‘grape purple’, 象牙白 *xiangya bai* ‘ivory white’, 橄榄黑 *ganlan hei* ‘olive black’ and 鸽子灰 *gezi hui* ‘pigeon grey’.

In Classical Chinese, however, colours are named in a more literary fashion. For instance, in an illustrious classic novel entitled 老残游记 *Laocan Youji* ‘The Travels of Laocan’, which was composed intermittently in 1903-1907 by Liu E (1857-1909), a member of the educated elite in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911/12) (Wong 1989, Kwong 2001, Lin 2001, Hsia 2004), colours are depicted in a metaphorical manner, as shown in Example (1). Except for 靛青 *dian qing*, which is more commonly substituted by 靛蓝 *dian lan* ‘tinctorial blue’ or 深蓝 *shen lan* ‘dark blue’, the expressions ‘fire red’, ‘snow white’ and ‘jade green’ in Example (1) have been preserved in modern Mandarin.

(1) 到了铁公祠前, 朝南一望, 只见对面千佛山上, 梵宇僧楼, 与那苍松翠柏, 高下相间, 红的火红, 白的雪白, 青的靛青, 绿的碧绿, 更有那一株半株的丹枫夹在里面, 仿佛宋人赵千里的一幅大画, 做了一架数十里长的屏风。

Dao le tie gong ci qian, chao nan yi wang, zhi jian dui mian qian fo shan shang, fan zi seng lou, yu na cang song cui bai, gao xia xiang jian, hong de huo hong, bai de xue bai, qing de dian qing, lü de bi lü, geng you na yi zhu ban zhu de dan feng jia zai li mian, fang fu song ren zhao qian li de yi fu da hua, zuo le yi jia shu shi li chang de ping feng.

‘He arrived the Tiegong Shrine and looked southwards: gazing from afar at the Thousand Buddha Mountain, he saw Buddhist temples nestled among tall and short pines and cypresses—the red was fire red, the white was snow white, the blue was tinctorial blue and the green was jade green. There were also one or two maple trees

in among, rendering the outlook a gigantic screen turned from a painting by the Song painter Zhao Qianli.’ (老残游记 *The Travels of Laocan*. Chapter 2. Trans. Mine)

Nonetheless, expressions for colours in more archaic classics may have been rendered unproductive or antiquated in modern Mandarin, exemplified by terminologies extracted from 论语 *Lunyu* ‘Analects’. In Example (2), the two colour names 绀 *gan* and 緹 *zou* are no longer used in modern Mandarin, disparate from 红 *hong* and 紫 *zi*.

(2) 君子不以绀緹饰, 红紫不以为褻服。

Jun zi bu yi gan zou shi, hong zi bu yi wei xie fu.

‘Such a noble-minded man never wore purple or maroon trim. And in his informal robes, he never wore red or chestnut brown.’ (论语·乡党 *Analects: His Native Village*. Trans. Hinton 2014: 79)

More significantly, compared with their contemporary counterparts, expressions regarding colour in pre-modern classics tend to demonstrate more profound cultural implication and a higher degree of semantic opaqueness.

Colour and *wuxing*

五行 *wuxing* ‘Five Elements; Five Agents’, viz. Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth, which dates back to as early as 1600 BC and first appears in the Eastern Zhou dynasty (770-256 BC), underpins Chinese cosmology along with the proposition regarding the two types of primal power *yin* and *yang* (Sivin 1995: 6, Harper 1999, Wang 2005), so *wuxing* is applied to an array of fields such as divination, astro-calendrical cult and self-legitimation of new regimes (Forke 1975: 233-237, Liu 1994, Wang 2019). For instance, in astrology, Venus is deemed as Gold, Jupiter Wood, Mercury Water, Mars Fire and Saturn Earth (Veith 2015: 21); in *fengshui* and architecture, the Five Elements are deployed to analyse surrounding landforms and building shapes with reference to their productive and counterproductive relationships (Lip 2008: 79, Du 2015, Wang 2016). Significantly, the Five Elements and the interwoven Eight Diagrams assume a foundational role in the ideals and practices of traditional Chinese medicine and Taoism, in that human bodies and actions are construed to be integrated into nature and hence embody and interact with nature (Yang and Yang 2013, Chen 2016). According to the medical classic 黄帝内经 *Huangdi Neijing* ‘The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Internal Medicine’, which is an ancient treatise on health and disease attributed to the iconic, semi-mythical emperor Huangdi circa 2600 BC and has been serving as the dominant theory of China’s indigenous medicine all the way to the contemporary era (Sigerist 2015, Curran 2018), human beings can be distinguished into five categories, corresponding to the Five Elements and according with 易经 *Yi Jing* (‘I Ching’) (Wang and Zhou 2014, Li and Lu 2017).

In the traditional Chinese philosophical scheme, colour is also inextricably intertwined with *wuxing*. Based on the construal of *wuxing*, colour serves as a fundamental means and preeminent factor identifying and differentiating all existing phenomena and inherent qualities of matter, in that colour embodies the harmonic

principle of Taoism and the interdependence among the ‘three potencies’ (三才 *San Cai*, viz. 天 *tian* ‘heaven’, 地 *di* ‘earth’ and 人 *ren* ‘mankind’) (Lee 2012, Redmond and Hon 2014: 159-161, Hon 2019). The correlation between colour and *wuxing* can be embodied by the conception of 五色 *wuse* ‘five colours’: the earliest extant record regarding *wuse* is in 周礼 *Zhouli* ‘Rites of the Zhou’ during the Western Zhou period (circa 1046-771 BC), which reflects ancient worship of pure colours that can only be derived directly from nature, discrepant from variegated colours (Zhang 2014, Shen 2017). *Huangdi Neijing* expounds that the five colours are on a par with Five Elements which correspond to the five major viscera, namely, 五色入五脏 *wuse ru wuzang* ‘five colours nurture five viscera’ (Trans. Mine), as illustrated in Example (3). Modern medical science still complies with this conjecture, and further enriches it by means of integrating the colour of food with the judgement of its flavour and warm/cold nature (Zhao 2009, Li 2015, Zhang 2017). In addition to Five Elements, viscera, orifices, orientations and flavours (as illuminated in Example (3)), the colours of green, red, yellow, white and black also accord with disparate illnesses, tissues, odours, climates, planets, musical notes, numerals, animals and grains (Veith 2015: 21, Liao and Yang 2017).

(3) 东方青色, 入通于肝, 开窍于目, 藏精于肝...其味酸, 其类草木...南方赤色, 入通于心, 开窍于耳, 藏精于心...其味苦, 其类火...中央黄色, 入通于脾, 开窍于口, 藏精于脾...其味甘, 其类土...西方白色, 入通于肺, 开窍于鼻, 藏精于肺...其味辛, 其类金...北方黑色, 入通于肾, 藏精于肾, 开窍于二阴...其味咸, 其类水...

Dong fang qing se, ru tong yu gan, kai qiao yu mu, cang jing yu gan...qi wei suan, qi lei cao mu...Nan fang chi se, ru tong yu xin, kai qiao yu er, cang jing yu xin...qi wei ku, qi lei huo...Zhong yang huang se, ru tong yu pi, kai qiao yu kou, cang jing yu pi...qi wei gan, qi lei tu...Xi fang bai se, ru tong yu fei, kai qiao yu bi, cang jing yu fei...qi wei xin, qi lei jin...Bei fang hei se, ru tong yu shen, cang jing yu shen kai qiao yu er yin...qi wei xian, qi lei shui...

‘Green is the colour of the East, it pervades the liver and lays open the eyes and retains the essential substances within the liver...its taste is sour; its kind (element) is grass and trees (wood)... Red is the colour of the South, it pervades the heart and lays open the ears and retains the essential substances within the heart...its taste is bitter; its kind (element) is fire...Yellow is the colour of the center; it pervades the spleen and lays open the mouth and retains the essential substances within the spleen...its taste is sweet; its kind (element) is the earth

...White is the color of the West, it pervades the lungs and lays open the nose and retains the essential substances within the lungs...its taste is pungent; its kind (element) is metal...Black is the colour of the North, it pervades the kidneys and lays open the two lower orifices [which belong to Yin] and retains the essential substances within the kidneys...its taste is salty; its kind (element) is water...' (黄帝内经·金匱真言 *Huangdi Neijing: Treatise on the Truth of the Golden Box*. Trans. Veith 2015: 112-113)

It is noteworthy that human beings are surmised to belong to five subcategories based on their correlation to Five Elements, i.e. people of Gold, Wood, Water, Fire and Earth. Therefore, dressing in the corresponding colour is presumed to be advantageous to health. To be more specific, people of Gold are supposed to wear white clothing, people of Wood green clothing, people of Water black clothing, people of Fire red clothing, and people of Earth yellow clothing. Apart from Five Elements, colours of clothes are supposed to reflect the change of seasons (Yang 2013, Cao 2017). Nevertheless, the entire formulated hypothesis is not compelling, as it is void of specifications of scientific experiments, independent and dependent variables or solid data. As a consequence, this claimed reciprocal cause and effect between the colour of clothing and physical wellbeing cannot be justified.

Semantic Opaqueness

As a scalar concept, semantic transparency denotes the degree to which the meaning of a multimorphemic combination is synchronically related to the meanings of its constituents as well as the typical method of combining the constituent meanings (Schäfer 2018: 1). Semantic transparency is essential in terms of accounting for how compounds are represented and processed in the mind, in that it is linked to the correlation between the meaning of a whole word and those of its constituents, which imposes boundary conditions on whether a multimorphemic word can be comprehended via constituent morphemes or it has representation in the mental lexicon (Libben 1998, Libben et al 2003). Regarding a two-character Chinese word, it is referred to as being semantically transparent if its meaning can be derived from constituent characters, such as 茶杯 *chabei* 'teacup' that is comprised of 茶 *cha* 'tea' and 杯 *bei* 'cup', yet a two-character word is regarded as being semantically opaque if its meaning cannot be derived from constituent characters, e.g. 光棍 *guanggun* 'bachelor' that consists of 光 *guang* 'light' and 棍 *gun* 'stick' (Han et al 2014).

In Chinese classics, vocabulary pertaining to colour tends to be marked by semantic opaqueness, e.g. 月白 *yue bai*, which literally means 'moon white' yet indeed denotes light blue, because in ancient times the moon was perceived to be in light blue colour, rather than pure white (Zhou and Wang 2013). The semantic opaqueness concerning colour names is mainly attributed to historical references, metaphorical representations, literary allusions and etymological derivations.

Historical References

In an epoch-making masterpiece 红楼梦 *Hong Lou Meng* ('Dream of the Red Chamber/Mansion' or 'The Story of the Stone') and the chef-d'oeuvre of Cao Xueqin (1724-1764), which is unanimously eulogised as the milestone and pinnacle of classical Chinese literature (Edwards 1990, 2001: 1-2, Zhou 2001, 2013: 2-3), there is a range of colour terminologies, including both common colours that are still used in modern Mandarin and rare ones featured by semantic opaqueness. For instance, in Chapter 89, a protagonist Lin Daiyu is depicted as wearing a skirt in 杨妃色 *yangfei se*, which literally means 'Royal Concubine Yang's colour'. As recorded in a Song (960-1279) work 杨太真外传 *Yan Taizhen Waizhuan*, Emperor Xuanzong of Tang used to compare the flush on the face of his imperial consort Yang Guifei to crabapple blossoms (Wang and Yue 2009), as shown in Example (4), so since then *yangfei se* has been employed to manifest the pinkish colour resembling that of crabapple blossoms. In Example (5), *yangfei se* is translated literally to preserve the historical reference concerning Yang as one of the Four Great Beauties, thereby implying the elegance of the character Lin Daiyu (Cui 2004, Zhou and Wang 2013).

(4) 上皇登沉香亭, 诏太真妃子。妃子时卯醉未醒, 命力士从侍儿扶掖而至。妃子醉颜残妆, 鬓乱钗横, 不能再拜。上皇笑曰: '岂是妃子醉, 真海棠睡未足耳。'

Shang huang deng chen xiang ting, zhao tai zhen fei zi. Fei zi shi mao zui wei xing, ming li shi cong shi er fu ye er zhi. Fei zi zui yan can zhuang, bin luan chai heng, bu neng zai bai. Shang huang xiao yue: 'Qi shi fei zi zui, zhen hai tang shui wei zu er.'

'The emperor entered the Chenxiang Pavilion and summoned the Royal Concubine Yang, but she was still drunk, so the emperor ordered the eunuch Lishi and servants to carry her there. With smudged makeup and messy hairstyle, Yang was too drunk to curtsy to the emperor. The emperor smiled and said: "How can it be drunkenness? It is indeed a drowsy crabapple blossom."'

(杨太真外传 *Yantaizhen Waizhuan*. Trans. Mine)

(5) 但见黛玉身上穿着月白绣花小毛皮袄, 加上银鼠坎肩, 头上挽着随常云髻, 簪上一枝赤金扁簪, 别无花朵。腰下系着杨妃色绣花绵裙。真比如: 亭亭玉树临风立, 冉冉香莲带露开。

Dan jian dai yu shen shang chuan zhe yue bai xiu hua xiao mao pi ao, jia shang yin shu kan jian, tou shang wan zhe sui chang yun ji, zan shang yi zhi chi jin bian zan, bie wu hua duo. Yao xia xi zhe yang fei se xiu hua mian qun. Zhen bi ru: ting ting yu shu lin feng li, ran ran xiang lian dai lu kai.

‘He noticed now that Daiyu was wearing a pale-blue embroidered fur-lined jacket under a short white squirrel tunic, and a pink embroidered silk padded skirt of the kind worn by Lady Yang. With no flowers in her cloudy tresses, which were loosely knotted and clasped with a flat gold pin, she was truly like:

A jade tree standing gracefully in the breeze.

Or sweet dewy lotus in bloom.’ (红楼梦 *A Dream of the Red Mansions*. Chapter 89. Trans. Yang and Yang 1999)

Metaphorical Representations

In *Hong Lou Meng*, another colour name worth discussing is 秋香色 *qiuxiang se* referring to a type of yellow (Cui 2004) or light olive green (Zhou and Wang 2013), as in Example (6). The literal means of *qiuxiang se* is ‘colour of autumn’s fragrance’, metaphorically comparing the fallen leaves in autumn to the fragrance of autumn. As documented in a collection of literary sketches 清稗类钞 *Qing Bai Lei Chao* compiled by an intellectual and editor Xu Ke (1868-1928), *xiang se*, aka *qiuxiang se*, used to be stringently restricted to the clothing of crown princes in early Qing as an imperial colour (Example (7)). Therefore, it can be stated that the portrayal of the protagonist Jia Baoyu in *qiuxiang se* in Example (6) is to imply his aristocratic status.

(6) 一面看宝玉头上戴着累丝嵌宝紫金冠，额上勒着二龙捧珠抹额，身上穿着秋香色立蟒白狐腋箭袖，系着五色蝴蝶鸾绦，项上挂着长命锁、记名符，另外有那一块落草时衔下来的宝玉。

Yi mian kan bao yu tou shang dai zhe lei si qian bao zi jin guan, e shang le zhe er long peng zhu mo e, shen

shang chuan zhe qiu xiang se li mang bai hu ye jian xiu, xi zhe wu se hu die luan tao, xiang shang gua zhe

chang ming suo, ji ming fu, ling wai you na yi kuai luo cao shi xian xia lai de bao yu.

‘He was wearing a golden filigree coronet studded with gems, a gold chaplet in the form of two dragons

fighting for a pearl, a yellowish green archer’s jacket embroidered with serpents and lined with white fox-fur,

and a sash embroidered with many-coloured butterflies. From his neck hung a longevity locket, a talisman

inscribed with his name, and the precious jade found in his mouth at the time of his birth.’ (红楼梦 *A Dream of the Red Mansions*. Chapter 8. Trans. Yang and Yang 1999)

(7) 皇太子朝衣服饰，皆用香色，例禁庶人服用。后储位久虚，遂忘其制。

嘉庆时，庶民习用香色，至于车帟

巾带，无不滥用，有司初无禁遏之者。

Huang tai zi chao yi fu shi, jie yong xiang se, li jin shu ren fu yong. Hou chu wei jiu xu, sui wang qi zhi. Jia qing shi, shu min xi yong xiang se, zhi yu che wei jin zhi, wu bu lan yong, you si chu wu jin e zhi zhe.

‘Formal clothing of crown princes was all in *xiang* colour which was proscribed for common people.

Afterwards, since the heirship to the throne was long absent, this regulation was forgotten. Under the reign of

Jiaqing, *xiang* colour was widely used by common people for carriages, curtains, towels and combs, so

government officials started conniving at such behaviour.’

(清裨类钞·服饰 *Qing Bai Lei Chao: Clothing*. Trans. Mine)

Literary Allusions

The verb 霁 *ji* initially means ‘(bad weather) to clear up’ (Example (8)), as indicated in 晏子春秋 *Yanzi Chunqiu* ‘The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan’ composed during the Warring States (475-221 BC) period and collated by a later intellectual Liu Xiang (77-6 BC) (Xie 2011, Milburn 2018: 8). In following historical stages, however, 霁 *ji* is employed with a literary allusion to depict the colour of sky upon clearing up, as in a Tang (618-907 AD) poem portraying snow-crowned mountains (Example (9)).

(8) 景公之时，雨雪三日而不霁。

Jing gong zhi shi, yu xue san ri er bu ji.

‘During the reign of Duke Jing, once it had been raining and snowing for three days without clearing up.’ (晏子春秋 *The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Yan*. Trans. Mine)

(9) 终南阴岭秀，积雪浮云端。林表明霁色，城中增暮寒。

Zhong nan yin ling xiu, ji xue fu yun duan. Lin biao ming ji se, cheng zhong zeng mu han.

‘How fair the gloomy mountainside!

Snow-crowned peaks float above the cloud.

The forest’s bright in sunset dyed,

With evening cold the town’s overflowed.’ (终南望余雪 *Snow Atop the Southern Mountains*. Trans. Xu 2012: 237)

Etymological Derivations

Colour names involving etymological derivations can be exemplified by 黛色 *dai se* appearing in a Tang poem 古柏行 *Gu Bai Xing* ‘The Old Cypress: A Ballad’ composed by a leading poet-historian Du Fu (712-770 AD), as shown in Example (10). As stated in an etymological and philological reference book entitled 释名 *Shi Ming* ‘Explanation of Names’ in East Han (25-220 AD) (Miller 1993), 黛 *dai* is a homophone of a verb 代 *dai* ‘to replace’ and hence denotes the act of applying black colour in place of natural

eyebrows (Example (11)). Moreover, in *Hong Lou Meng*, *dai* is interpreted by the protagonist Jia Baoyu as a kind of stone that can be used as eyebrow pens: although he declares that this account is from a book entitled *The Compendium of Men and Objects Old and New*, he is doubted by another character, his half-sister Tanchun (Example (12)), and this claimed book does not exist.

(10) 孔明庙前有老柏，柯如青铜根如石。霜皮溜雨四十围，黛色参天二千尺。

Kong ming miao qian you lao bai, ke ru qing tong gen ru shi. Shuang pi liu yu si shi wei, dai se can tian er qian chi.

‘In front of the Kongming Temple there is an aged cypress,
its trunk is like green bronze, its roots are like stone.

Its frosty bark has been drenched by rains, a forty arm-span girth,
eyebrow-black touching Heaven, two thousand feet up.’

(古柏行 *The Old Cypress: A Ballad*. Trans. Owen 2015: 229)

(11) 黛，代也。灭眉毛去之，以此画代其处也。

Dai, dai ye. Mie mei mao qu zhi, yi ci hua dai qi chu ye.

‘*Dai* is a homophone of “to replace”. Shaving eyebrows off and drawing on the face with *dai*.’ (释名 *Explanation of Names*. Trans. Mine)

(12) 宝玉笑道：‘我送妹妹一字：莫若“颦颦”二字极妙。’探春便道：‘何处出典？’宝玉道：‘《古今人物通考》上说：“西方有石名黛，可代画眉之墨。”况这妹妹眉尖若蹙，取这个字岂不美？’探春笑道：‘只怕又是杜撰。’

Bao yu xiao dao: ‘Wo song mei mei yi zi: mo ruo “pin pin” er zi ji miao.’
Tan chun bian dao: ‘He chu chu

dian?’ Bao yu dao: ‘Gu jin ren wu tong kao shang shuo: “Xi fang you shi ming dai, ke dai hua mei zhi mo.”

Kuang zhe mei mei mei jian ruo cu, qu zhe ge zi qi bu mei?’ Tan chun xiao dao: ‘Zhi pa you shi du zhuan.’

“I’ll give you one then,” he proposed with a chuckle. “What could be better than Pinpin?” “Where’s that

from?” put in Tanchun. “*The Compendium of Men and Objects Old and New* says that in the west is a stone

called *dai* which can be used instead of graphite for painting eyebrows. As Cousin Lin’s eyebrows look half

knit, what could be more apt than these two characters?” “You’re making that up, I’m afraid,” teased

Tanchun.’ (*红楼梦 A Dream of the Red Mansions*. Chapter 3. Trans. Yang and Yang 1999)

Discussion

The millennia-long diachronic development of the Chinese language from the Pre-Archaic (14thc-11thc BC) to contemporary era is featured by a process of simplification. Driven by the Principle of Least Effort (Zipf 1949: 7, Kanwal et al 2017) and a need for efficient communication (Piantadosi et al 2011, Ball 2014), word evolution in written Chinese exhibits a simplification trend throughout distinct historical periods, reflected by an increase of word length and comprehensive employment of multi-character words (Chen et al 2015). The process of simplification may overlap with explicitation (Mauranen 2008) and be triggered by explicitation, in that a more exact message is expected to be easier to comprehend (Xiao and Dai 2014). Furthermore, the simplification process is accompanied by concretisation, which, according to study of recognition memory, is motivated by the fact that concrete words are better remembered than their abstract counterparts, and the reason lies in that concrete expressions can be encoded with dual codes and processed in a more elaborate fashion than abstract ones (Hamilton and Rajaram 2001, Fließbach et al 2006). It is notable that in addition to lexical simplification, the Chinese language has also undergone diachronic simplification in terms of phonology (Wang 1985, Ho 2006) and syntactic constructions (Xing 1997, Zhou 2001, Xu 2006: 204-206).

I propound that vocabulary appertaining to colour has undergone simplification and concretisation as well, as part of the diachronic evolvement from Classical Chinese to modern Mandarin. For instance, *yangfei se* in (5) and *qiuxiang se* in (6) are no longer commonly used in modern Mandarin, and they are substituted by ‘pink’ and ‘yellow; light green’ respectively. Such a postulation regarding simplified colour terminology can be further supported by Zhang’s (2015) analysis of expressions denoting flavour: words referring to tastes were coined based on food items, and they gradually evolved into concrete, specific terminologies. For instance, prior to the occurrence of accurate words, ‘sour’ and ‘bitter’ were initially represented by ‘berry’ and ‘herb’ respectively, which demonstrates their lack of explicitness (Zhang 2002). This fact manifests the similitude between vocabulary pertaining to flavour and that concerning colour, and thus implies the simplification and concretisation of colour terminologies.

Conclusion

According to orthodox cosmology and Taoist philosophy, colour entails underlying cultural connotations, in that it is inextricably intertwined with *wuxing*. As a consequence, the concept of five colours is applied in the field of traditional Chinese medicine. Moreover, colour is surmised to be able to impinge upon people’s physical wellbeing by virtue of its interplay with five categories of human bodies, whereas such a conjecture cannot be justified.

In classics composed in Classical Chinese, vocabulary pertaining to colour is featured by semantic opaqueness, by virtue of the presence of historical references, metaphorical representations, literary allusions and etymological derivations. Nevertheless, colour terminologies have undergone evolution from Classical Chinese to modern Mandarin, embodied by the simplification process which is correlated with explicitation and concretisation. The evolvement of the Chinese language in terms of colour terminology is driven by the Principle of Least Effort, along with the motivation to memorise, comprehend and communicate more efficiently.

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