

## EXPLORING THE CULTURAL SEMANTIC EVOLUTION OF THE COLOUR WORD "PURPLE"

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### ABSTRACT

This paper takes colour word as the window to explore the semantic evolution process of "purple" in Chinese, analyzes the use of ancient literature works and modern Chinese, and combs the "purple" colour from its initial symbolic meaning to the multi-level meaning in different cultural contexts today. The study found that in ancient times, "purple" had a lofty symbol in religion, politics and social status, and was often related to imperial power and holiness, while in the modern context, purple was more integrated into daily life, showing the transformation of aesthetic and personalized. Through the comprehensive analysis of semantics and cultural linguistics, this paper reveals the dynamic changes of "purple" in different periods and contexts, and how this change reflects the changes of social culture.

**Keywords:** Purple; Colour words; Semantic evolution; Cultural connotation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As a kind of colour symbol, colour words play a vital role in the whole language system, and their profound cultural connotation has been widely inherited in various countries, and plays an indispensable role in international Chinese education. Due to the differences in geographical environment and historical development process of countries, the languages used in different regions are also different. In different cultures, colour is often given a specific meaning, which is not limited to the color itself, but derived from the long history and profound cultural background, covering the political, religious, folk, social and daily concepts and contents, reflecting the national culture and national psychology. Therefore, students learning a second language are inevitably disturbed by its cultural factors, which often have an impact on the language expression of learners directly or indirectly. In the process of learning colour words, foreign students will inevitably be influenced by the transfer of their mother tongue, resulting in the wrong understanding of colour words. Chinese colour words contain unique cultural connotation and meaning, which originates from the reflection of the Han nationality on the concept of colour. This paper will study and analyze the colour words, find out the cultural meaning contained in them, and draw corresponding conclusions according to the comparison.

### 2 RESERCH STATUS OF COLOUR WORDS

#### 2.1 Domestic research status

The comprehensive research on colour words in China roughly began in 1970s. In the 1940s, from the point of exegesis, Hu Pu-an deeply discussed the formation and evolution of five colour words (white, red, yellow, black and cyan) in ancient times. Liu Yunquan (1991), in his book colour, colour Words and Sociocultural Psychology, explored in depth the close connection between

colour and sociocultural psychology. Chang Jingyu (1995), *The Cultural Meaning of colour Words*, and Jiang Dongyuan (2002), *On colour and the Cultural Differences of colour Words*, compared the cultural differences of colour words and provided rich content for the study of colour words culture. In his book *On the Humanistic Characteristics of Chinese colour Words*, Yu Fengchun (1999) deeply discussed the humanistic characteristics of colour language from an aesthetic perspective. In the book *colour Words and Culture*, Tian Fuli (2000) deeply discussed the close connection between colour language and culture from the perspective of national psychology and aesthetic consciousness. He believes that colour words not only have rich cultural connotations, but also reflect the ways of thinking, living customs and religious beliefs of people in different times and other factors that have played a role in the development of human society. Luo Feng (2004) made an in-depth study of the cultural connotations of Chinese colour words in his book *Cultural Review of Chinese colour Words*, especially emphasizing the new cultural connotations of colour words as time goes on, which provided an important theoretical basis for cultural review of colour words.

## 2.2 Foreign research status

The study of colour words by foreign scholars began with W. Gladstone's in-depth exploration of colour in Homer's Epic. Since the 20th century, the study of colour words has turned to the direction of analyzing semantic structure, which was proposed by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, and their theory was called "basic colour word theory" (1969). In the 20th century, F.Boas, an American advocate of anthropological linguistics, emphasized the need to take greater account of the cultural content and uniqueness of language. His students B.L. Wolfe and E.Sapir further proposed the hypothesis of "linguistic relativity" (1930), emphasizing that different languages categorize different worlds of experience, and that languages that record the results of classification may impose limitations on the thinking and behavior of language users. This theory is also known as the "semantic field theory" in cognitive linguistics, which holds that language has a certain degree of fuzziness, variability and comprehensibility, thus providing us with a new analytical Angle to explain the human thinking process. Over time, much of the focus has been on the specific ways in which particular languages represent colour. Among them, H.C. Konklin and H.A.Gleason investigated many languages and came to the conclusion that the study of colour words in a particular language should not rely on the so-called a priori semantic theory, but should take into account the characteristics of the language and culture.

## 3.THE DERIVED MEANING OF THE COLOUR WORD “PURPLE”

### 3.1 Related to the meaning of colour

The meaning of "purple" refers only to the colour of purple, such as purple, purple gold, ultraviolet, comfrey, purple dot, purple sand, purple money, purple shell, purple Yan, purple xuan and so on. For example:

- (1) Red and purple are not considered obscene clothing. (《论语》)
- (2) Secretly light lilac, harmonious harmony and yellow. Tao Ling hedge colour, Luo containing house incense. (《菊》)

(3) Duke Huan of Qi was fond of purple, and the whole country was full of purple. (《韩非子》)

### 3.2 Related to gods and auspicious

"Purple" means auspicious meaning, its cultural origin and Taoism have a huge correlation, "purple" is associated with the gods, the ancients believed that the gods bless the mortals in the world, is a symbol of good luck, so "purple" means auspicious meaning came into being. Such as purple concubine, purple jade, purple dome, purple destiny, purple cloud, purple air, purple pavilion and so on. "Purple cloud" refers to purple clouds, which ancient people believed were a sign of good luck. For example:

(4) The Yao pond in the west comes down to the queen Mother, the purple air is full of Hangan in the east. (《秋兴》)

(5) Purple air comes east, Yao Pond looks west, and graceful blue birds descend before the court. (《长生殿》)

(6) Emperor purple cloud, holy and divine, the light to see the good fortune, Sue me without disaster. (《易林·履之渐》)

(7)

### 3.3 Related to prosperity and wealth

The Tang Dynasty adopted the system of three provinces and six departments, the imperial power is more concentrated, the province of China is the central department of the feudal regime, is the highest organ of the central government order, in order to uphold the monarch's will, so the Tang Dynasty imperial power is highly concentrated, accept the emperor's instructions in the province is also called "Ziwei" province, only the emperor's side of the senior officials can wear purple clothes, purple accessories, Because the articles represented by the relevant words composed of purple can only be used by ancient emperors or senior officials, and senior officials are rich people, thus "purple" has the meaning of wealth. The "purple ribbon" refers to the purple ribbon, which is usually only used by high-ranking officials. For example:

(8) Refreshing air floating red palace, autumn light pale purple palace. (《李夫人歌》)

(9) Yang morning draped in purple palace, day dawn descended to Huang Ting. (《题梅妃画真》)

(10) Noble gold seal purple ribbon, but no more than dozens of millet Dendrobium. (《后汉书·本纪》)

### 3.4 Related to Taoism

"Laozi returned from the ox, the purple qi filled the air, and became immortal", so the semantic meaning of "purple" has the symbol of immortals, Laozi itself is the founder of Taoism, purple and Taoism have a great connection, "Purple Mansion" means the place where immortals live, "Purple Mansion" here refers to the heaven, also refers to the abode of gods. For example:

(11) And this banished immortal. This limit full Angelica purple house. (《阅微草堂笔记》)

(12) A tall building in the palace is set in the purple sky, and the carpet is made of gold. (《春日行

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#### **4.CULTURAL CONNOTATION OF THE COLOUR WORD "PURPLE"**

##### **4.1 Cultural connotation of the colour word "purple" in ancient times**

##### **4.1.2 The connection between "purple" and the royal family and nobility**

Xie Jun (2005) pointed out in his book "Why the Royal Family Loves to Use the word 'purple'" that the word "purple" represents the purple microwall in the sky, which is located in the center of the three walls and is the residence of the Son of Heaven, so it is also used to represent the Son of Heaven. This is the initial connection between the royal family and the nobility and "purple". During the Spring and Autumn Period, purple was generally a favorite colour of clothes worn by ancient aristocrats. In addition to the colour of the table, the main role of purple is to combine with the feudal imperial power, the royal family and other beliefs, representing the supreme symbol of military power and honor of the ruling class at that time.

In the early days of ancient China, people worshipped heaven and astrology was very popular. Purple often appears in the sky when watching heaven, worshipping heaven and worshipping heaven, so it is easy to give purple a sacred noble temperament, which attracts indulgence and intoxication. Since then, the purple sky gradually had a connection with the royal family and nobility. In the north of the Big Dipper, with the North Pole as the center, there are fifteen stars on the purple micro wall, divided into two columns, seven stars in the west, eight stars in the east, showing a screen-like distribution, the ancient ruler of heaven that it is the place where the Lord lives, so this symbol of the emperor. Since then, "purple" has become a symbol of the emperor, carrying the culture related to the supreme ruler. The imperial palace where the emperor lives is also called purple Palace, also known as purple pavilion, purple wall, purple prohibition, purple hall, etc., such as in the "《文选·谢庄<宋孝武宣贵妃诔>》" recorded that "The colours of the sky and the light of the sea are all over the place, and the Forbidden City is a place of peace." Li Shan notes: "The palace of the king, like purple micro, it is called the palace for the forbidden". "Forbidden City", the place where the emperor lives, is the common name for the ancient emperor's residence, "purple" refers to the emperor, is the symbol of imperial power, "forbidden" indicates the forbidden place, is the symbol of rank and authority, ordinary people can not enter and leave at will.

##### **4.1.3 The relationship between "purple" colour and wearing accessories**

Chen Shenglan (2014) points out from the Chinese and Western dress culture in his book "《反恶紫夺朱》", that in the Middle Ages, purple silk was a luxury item representing the highest wealth and legitimacy, because of its very complicated dyeing process. The respect for this colour precisely reflects the purple culture in ancient China.

During the Spring and Autumn Period, Duke Huan of Qi liked to wear purple silk clothes most, and the market price of purple silk clothes at that time was at least five times that of ordinary purple silk today. After the emergence of the Han Dynasty in China, purple had become the representative colour of China's royal family, symbolizing its noble status. Throughout the Tang Dynasty, the

market price of purple clothes even greatly exceeded that of scarlet. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the court clothes of senior officials from the first to the third dynasties were all purple, which was also a symbol of privilege and status among the ruling class in medieval China. According to the "《新唐书·车服志》", it's said that in the Tang Dynasty, the prince and the three kinds of clothes were taken purple, the five and above were taken Zhu, the seven and above were taken green, and the nine and above were taken green. This text is about the royal dress system of the Tang Dynasty, and one important content is that the emperor must abide by the same grade classification standard when wearing clothes in different grades, that is, according to the status and the size of the distinction. It also mentioned that relatives of the fifth rank or above, as well as mothers and wives of the fifth rank or above, wore purple robes. It can be seen that wearing purple is the expression of high official wealth.

The Tang Dynasty established a complete system of official colours, which was confirmed and perfected at that time. In the early part of the Tang Dynasty, in order to strengthen the centralized rule and consolidate its political foundation, a strict hierarchical system was implemented for officials, stipulating that officials at all levels must wear yellow or blue clothes and not black clothes. Later, due to the fear of "deep blue and disorderly purple" (that is, the deep blue and red light obtained by dyeing blue indigo many times in ancient times, for fear of being confused with purple), the order was re-ordered, so it was recorded in the "Old Book of Tang · Aofu Annals" that "three or more articles of civil and military wear purple, four articles of deep crimson, five articles of light crimson, six articles of dark green, seven articles of light green, eight articles of deep blue, and nine articles of light blue." Towards the end of the Tang Dynasty, as the rulers advocated the idea of upholding frugality and purity, the colours of official clothing were changed from yellow to cyan, and then from blue to purple. At this point, purple in the long years beyond red, became a noble colour, its status beyond the ordinary red, become the noble choice of all colours.

#### **4.1.4 The connection between "purple" and Chinese culture**

In Xiao Hui (2010) 's book "《浅谈七彩心理联系》", she deeply understands the noble, mysterious and repressed human experience contained in purple, which cannot be simply summarized. In Chinese culture, purple is regarded as a symbol of good fortune and should not be trampled on. In the traditional Chinese cultural system, purple represents supreme wealth and legitimacy, and is reserved for the ruling class. It is well known that in traditional Chinese culture, purple represents the noble heart and spirit of saints, emperors. For example, the Forbidden City in Beijing is also known as the "Forbidden City". Going back to the Qi, Qin and Middle Han Dynasties, the Chinese character "zi" began to be used to officially call the sky, such as "purple dome" or "purple heaven". Another example, "Zi Ge" was used to refer to the place where the gods often lived in ancient China, and the white clouds floating in the sky were more often referred to as "purple clouds" by ordinary people. When Emperor Wudi came to the throne, another purple microstar began to appear in the clouds, prompting Emperor Wudi to order the construction of the Xianyang Palace, a royal building, which was also indicated in the Forbidden City. In the long history that followed, purple became one of the favorite colours worn by the ancient emperors and the nobility in their daily lives.

### **4.2 The modern cultural connotation of the colour word "purple"**

#### **4.2.1 Dilution of obsolete cultural connotation**

As a symbol of the rule of the royal family and nobility, "purple" had the supreme privilege only in the period of the feudal monarch dictatorship, and at that time "purple" only served the ruling class. When the feudal monarchical dictatorship was overthrown, the cultural orientation of "class", "privilege" and "supreme" no longer existed. Therefore, the cultural connotation of "purple" as feudal rule gradually faded under the background of "peace, equality and freedom". In addition, the cultural connotation of "purple", which refers to the gods and Taoism, has been greatly weakened in the new era. After the changes of The Times, people's knowledge and culture level has gradually improved, and their ideological consciousness stands more in the perspective of rational science. In daily life, the concept of "auspicious" has been very vague. Therefore, the connotation of auspicious culture represented by "purple" is gradually fading now. Purple itself is a pleasant colour, and people's concept of "purple" is more inclined to a pure aesthetic experience of colour.

#### **4.2.2 The endowing of emerging cultural connotations**

In today's society, "purple" is gradually endowed with novel cultural connotations. A number of popular terms have recently emerged, including "taro purple". In the online world, taro is everywhere. Compared to the traditional purple perception, taro has become a popular colour. From the word frequency statistics, "taro" is a very common colour word, which is consistent with the literature analysis. In the BCC corpus, although the keyword "taro" was searched in periodicals, ancient books, literature, science and technology and many other fields, no results were obtained, but the search on Taobao and Baidu showed a large number of results. Although "taro" is not included in the dictionary, the fact that it is a widely used colour word has also been fully proven. Another example is the word "red purple", which refers to someone who is highly regarded and has the potential to be very popular. In the past, it was used to refer to someone who is very popular with the emperor, but today it is often used to describe a celebrity who is very hot and purple.

"Purple" also has a cultural connotation called homosexuality, and the "purple fist" is a symbol of the movement to suppress homosexuality. In the 1950s in the United States, the government strongly opposed homosexuality, believing that gays were easy to be co-opting by other parties, and advocated repression. This suppression activity was called "Lavender panic". This campaign lasted for more than ten years, bringing gays and lesbians to be constantly excluded. And spread to the whole world. When the culture was introduced to China, "gay purple" emerged as a new online term, meaning gay men. Purple, the representative work of African American female writer Alice Walker, is a classic of western feminist literature, showing women's outstanding performance in self-identification, self-value realization and female consciousness construction. Therefore, the colour word "purple" has also been endowed with feminist colour, reflecting the noble elegance of women. However, in contrast, purple is more used in clothing, producing good visual induction, creating a visual impact, and bringing people quality aesthetic experience.

In addition, purple has attracted much attention in commercial advertisements in the modern fashion industry. Bright and gorgeous purple will attract people's attention, but due to its strong feminine tendency colour at the same time, it limits its application in all kinds of commodities or corporate image. Therefore, in addition to the design of products or corporate images related to female themes, other categories of design often do not tend to take purple as the main colour. For

example, in the decoration of some maternal and child health care hospitals, lavender is often used, giving people a warm and soothing feeling.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Through a systematic study of the semantic evolution of "purple" in Chinese, this paper reveals its multiple cultural connotations and the process of its evolution. From the ancient symbol of emperor, power and holiness to the more diversified application in the modern context, "purple" gradually got rid of the single symbol of power in the course of history, and moved towards a broader cultural and social expression. The semantic evolution of "purple" reflects the change of social structure, the transformation of cultural psychology and the diversified development of individual aesthetics. In modern society, "purple" not only retains some traditional symbolic meanings, but also takes on new meanings in popular culture and personalized expression. Through the in-depth exploration of semantic evolution, we can better understand how the colour words reflect the historical accumulation and the innovation of The Times in the change of cultural context and social background.

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