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Exchange of Presents: The Name and Nature of Chinese Red from the Perspective of Anthropology of Art

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Abstract: Chinese red refers to a key visual symbol of the multiethnic Chinese nation. From naming to local color preference, the visual experience accumulation in Chinese red lies not just in the solitary and fossilized historical relics, but in a ceaseless and dynamic process of formation, recognition, conversion and transmission. Moreover, the symbolic constitution and ethnic identification of Chinese red exemplifies historical accomplishments in local exchanges of artifacts, technologies, systems, and outlooks with foreign partners. Therefore, as part of the country's cultural heritage, Chinese red also encompasses two aspects, cultural integration based on its identification and artistic productivity with a focus on differentiation.

Keywords: Chinese red; traditional color; cinnabar; cultural heritage; anthropology of art

Since the 1980s, in the historical context of cultural awareness and confidence, Chinese red has widely appeared in political and non-political visual arts. It has contributed to deliberately imaging the national color worldwide thanks to the 2004 China-France Cultural Year, the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, and the 2010 Shanghai World Expo. On 17 January 2011, as the Chinese national image publicity video filmed by the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China was shown on the large electronic screen at Times Square in New York City, Chinese red amazed viewers from around the world. As a Chinese cultural element, Chinese red has indisputably become an incarnation and representation of China's ancient civilization.

Colors used to be one of the means for our ancestors to know about the world.

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However, along with social evolution, the meanings of original experiential knowledge have gradually become complicated with many overlapping and even conflicting symbolic meanings. A symbol may have plain and easily understandable sensory meanings or an in-depth social structure with specific conceptual meanings. So, the traditional color preference, which has been stirred up by Chinese red, is not just an artistic phenomenon but rather, a cultural one. However, to date, relevant studies still focus on the history of fine arts, designing arts, symbols, and the symbolic communication domain. Though some Chinese and international treatises, such as *The Lost Color of China*,^① *The Inheritance under Disintegration*,^② *Colors and Sacrificial Offerings: Exploring the Implications in Ancient Chinese Culture*,^③ and *The Conceptual Colors: Studies of Chinese Traditional Colors*,^④ have started to take Chinese red as an integrative cultural phenomenon to reflect the traditional ideological system and social situation. Unfortunately, such studies are still deficient in two dimensions: (1) They mixed the narrow sense of Chinese red with the broad sense of the Chinese red tradition, discussing them without differentiation. (2) The generational process of the color culture was deemed antithetical to and isolated from the outside world, and researchers seemed to be indulged in the color preference system at the dimension of philosophical ethics with constraints of egocentric epistemology and rarely exploring the overall picture of the objects with a focus on artifact production, circulation and exchange as they should be.

While sorting out relevant Chinese and international data, I find that Chinese red, in terms

of its form, content and connotations, may evolve and change for such factors as time, space, and event. To a great extent, Chinese red can be part of Chinese social and historical connections, local or non-local, as well as a cultural blending model in the context of globalization. On one hand, from naming of the color and the local color preference, visual experience of the Chinese red can be attributed to the Western imaginative projection reflections on the Chinese culture as well as their channel and mode of replication and consumption of Chinese culture; on the other hand, it is essential for local elites to seek national symbolism. A modern nation can be defined either by reference to geographical space and political dominion, or constituted and enhanced through imagination, narration, and symbolization. Given their roles as links to historical and cultural memories as well as common historical experiences, colors' significance is self-evident.

It is especially necessary to emphasize that though Chinese red is repetitively highlighted for its popular conception as a national symbol, its traditional implications still remain overlain and simplified. In the context of Western centralism, the color recognition system, which is named in the cognition system of "science" and "art," forms a threat to the "tradition" and a challenge against the "boundary." Besides the community symbolic schema and themed social ideology, Chinese red contains much unrecognized traditional implications. It is related to and carries forth Chinese ideology, experience and practice in history. Therefore, the Chinese red tradition and its modern constitution are in pressing need of clarification.

① Zeng, 2003
② Zhuge, 2007
③ Wang, 2003
④ Chen, 2015

1. Chinese red tradition: cultural evidence and cultural behavior

Regarding the visual instinct, red is the focused color vision of all mankind. However, how can Chinese red arouse the appreciators' diversified aesthetic perception and cultural imagination? For access to and experience in the unique charm of Chinese red, it is necessary to review and explore how the Chinese red tradition generates and grows. As an outcome, thanks to the joint roles of the mindset, power structure, knowledge entity, and representation practice, it is not just a cultural evidence, but rather, a cultural behavior.

1.1 The universal red

Red is the color known and used for long time, with a number of fascinating or awesome metaphors. In the West, red symbolizes power, heat, force, war, passion, noise, vitality, disturbance, wealth, devotion, victory, ban, danger, and Pentecost; in the Near East, death, malice, and dessert; in India, creativity; in the Far East, good luck, extravagance, happiness, marriage, health, fame, death, emergency, danger, violence, and hospital.^① However, all the symbolic meanings above originate from two essential experiences of mankind: red as blood or fire. In the Western tradition of Christianity, red is a contradictory symbolic system, whereas red flame stands for life, the holy spirit of Pentecost, tongues of flame on the disciples for rebirth, the savior's power for purification and the canonization of Saints. Meanwhile, it also represents death, hell, Satan's destructive fire, and dirtiness like filthy flesh, crime, sin, and uncleanness as taboos in the Bible.^② Human beings already acquired the techniques of red pigment collection and processing and could apply the

pigment to sacrifice-offerings, medical treatments, dyeing and paintings long ago. Early in the 35,000 BC, our ancestors already used reddish brown soil to portray their totems in the artistic form of Paleolithic cliff paintings. After the Neolithic era, they started to use madder for dyeing, and later learned to extract red from minerals, for instance, haematochrome from mercury sulfide (cinnabar), ferric oxide (ocher), as well as from some molluscs (e.g. rock shell) or cochineal. As is exemplified and described by James George Frazer in his work *The Golden Bough* (1890), the Syrians took red for their clothing, architecture, and sacrifices as the sacrifice-offering setting for the Celestial symbol. In ancient Rome, red-haired small beasts were, as a custom of locality, offered to the grain god Osiris for His blessing of bumper harvests.^③ Then sorcery could be analogized with the principle of "birds of a feather flock together." Any red specific disease was treated with blood or red medicine, e.g. red rose petals could be applied as a therapy for roseola, and for bleeding with smallpox the folks would turn to a red plaster. They might also ward off evils with red wool thread and red cloth straps. Due to the blood-related mindset and its symbolic connotation, red became a leading color to represent all positive feelings of life.^④

Red is also the earliest named color of mankind. According to the 1880 statistics by German ophthalmologist Hugo Magnus in his treatise *The Color Sense Investigation of Primitive People*, from several basic color distinction testings for aboriginal tribes, red was found to be the earliest color they could express in their languages.^⑤ In Sanskrit, the oldest Indo-European language, *randhira* means red, with the initial letter "r" implying "blood." Similarly in as many as twelve European languages, the word

① Jean-Gabriel Causse, 2016, p.148

② Pastoureau & Simonnet, 2017, p.38.

③ Frazer, 1957, pp.583-584.

④ Eva Heller, 2016, p.50.

⑤ Yao, 1988

for “blood” is unexceptionally initiated with the letter “r,” for instance, rot in German, rood in Dutch, and the like in Greek and Latin. In Hebrew, the two words dm (red) and dom (blood) are cognate. The Eskimo word aupaluktak (red) can be literally translated to the English phrase of “like blood.”^① In the ancient West, the color system was centered on three extremes: white (colorless), black (dark), and red (bright). Therefore, in some local languages, color and red share the same word, for instance, Colorado in Spanish and coloratus in Latin.

Since modern times, dominated successively by scientism, humanism and instrumental rationality, Western color study has endowed red with a fresh cognitive system and values in use. Provided that the ancestors used red for worship and simulation of divine power, beyond the primitive categorization by the physical experience, with a number of symbolic taboos,^② the contemporary application of red would transcend such a paradigm focusing on functional visual information under free subject domination. Experimental results prove that red has the longest wave with remarkably strong penetration and high perception. So, in modern society red is adopted for varied alerts, for example, red traffic light, fire extinguisher, and red cross. Because of the emphasis on physical simulation, red as a “color phenomenon” can be classified, by its differential hue, purity and brightness, into scores of sub-categories. Therefore, from the stimulation roles of the physical senses (animals also have these) to inclusion or provision of particular conceptual implications, the concept of color is indeed a value judgment of the cognitive subject based on particular experience. Color art is, by nature, an abstract outcome which is picked out as part of the natural entirety with its values not lying in

its own inherent nature, but in the framework jointly functioning with particular internal and external factors.

1.2 The system of Chinese red tradition

As a cultural symbol, color is interrelated to and interactive with a certain ideological concept, social system, and material condition. The Chinese traditional red system, from its color imitation, color symbolization to polychromy, showcases its “material-based” inquiry, presentation and verification. On one hand, the system of Chinese red tradition entails how Chinese ancestors conceptualized their routine life and how to encode their historical experience of the cosmic images; on the other hand, the red system was also applied to create certain power contexts of ritual behaviors and royal power politics, thus shaping a behavioral system to change the world.

1.2.1 Color system, name and origin

In modern Chinese language “red” is the commonest vocabulary for colors, but it was seldom used in pre-Qin literature.

“Red” was not yet mentioned in the classic works including *The Anthology of Ancient Literature*, *The Classic of Poetry*, *The Classic of Mencius*, and *The Classic of Master Zhuang*, among others; and only twice, in *The Poetry of the Chu State*; and once, *Analects of Confucius*. The earliest record concerning red was identified on a bamboo slip unearthed from a Chu mausoleum of the Warring States period.^③ Initially in ancient China, there was a general designation for the color, Chi (赤), which was later specified with other Chinese scripts such as Zhu (朱) and Hong (红).

The Book of Changes • Shuo Qian says, Qian is great Chi. This color in Annotations (Shu) implies a vigorous, powerful, and sacred color.^④ According to *The Origin of Chinese Scripts*, Chi (red) is written

① Nagasaki Molitelu, 1974, p.37; Eva Heller, 2016, p.48.

② Turner, 1967, pp.59–92.

③ Gao, 1980, P.236.

④ Kong, 1997, p.95.

as literally referring to the “color of south,” which means “scorching” or “fire” by its etymology. In the Chinese phrases, Da Chi (Scarlet) of the time jointly symbolized the bright south element. Therefore, the south was then also referred to as “red direction;” the sky above the south, “red sky;” the god in the south, “red god,” or “red emperor” worshiping fire as the merit of morality for Chi county, the domain he ruled over. Also, in reference to the domain’s alias “Divine Territory,” then allegedly governed by Emperor Yan, the county was also named Divine Territory Chi County or Chi County Divine Territory. As Chinese historian Fan Wenlan pointed out in his book *General History of China*, the Chinese nation, Hua Xia in Chinese, the word Hua itself meant red, a popular color in the Zhou Dynasty, and all the populations which observed the Zhou rites and valued red were identified generally as the Chinese people, or locally as the Hua people.

Red was mostly used for Chinese script inscriptions on bronze ware. There were three Chinese scripts for red, Chi for general red, Zhu for vermilion, and Hong for pink. Pink was just humbly deemed as the transitional color between the general red and vermilion. According to the article *Village Fellows in Analects of Confucius*, “Men of honor do not use cloth in deep green and red or blackish red for edge braiding; for casual clothing at home, reddish violet is not used instead.” It was the Confucian etiquette that red could not be used even for clothing at home. Hence, the lexical meanings of red were associated with femininity, for instance, “red dress,” “red confidante,” and “red beauty.” As of the Sui and Tang dynasties, as a homonym with “vermilion,” “red” was initially added to several Chinese phrases for ordinary homes, including “vermilion brocade” in *Records of Suburban Sacrifice Offerings in the Great Tang*

Dynasty and “Four colors, green, purple, yellow and vermilion, can be mixed to produce green ribbon” in *Records of People’s Clothing Etiquette*, a volume of Old Tang Classics. Then vermilion became the commonest color, gradually replacing other similar colors, such as general red, crimson, and scarlet, and started to be widely applied. Red and general red were defined as synonyms, namely, deep red and bright red also was more frequently used than general red. Specifically, there are several other appellations for red, such as vermilion red, real red, minor red, bright red, flesh red, and lotus red. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, cases of the red application outnumbered general red and ultimately replaced it. In modern Chinese language red has become a representative and basic word for color description.^①

The striking feature of the Chinese traditional color system is that each color has its corresponding color source, in other words, a color is represented by a concrete object from a given category, for instance, (1) the fire-derived colors: red is the connotation of a big flame, while black, the color of fire soot; (2) silk dyeing: dark refers to reddish black; plain, undyed and original silk fabrics, while red, reddish white; (3) the color of grass and wood: blue, a plant that can be dyed green, whereas hairy madder, a grass that can be dyed red; (4) the color of gray jade, fine jade, and fresh white jade; (5) the color of a horse: black horse, reddish yellow horse, and black-maned white horse. All such examples can be of physical associations based on intuitive experience of objects for confirmation of color property. The object specific general red originates from fire whose flames when kindled are general red in the direct impressions of human vision. Vermilion refers to the color of such objects as cinnabar, with three alias, Dan Mo, Sha, and Zhu, as the earliest designations of the general red mineral. So, the ancient

① Zhen, 2015, pp. 53–55.

people referred vermilion to general red.^① In Japan and elsewhere, the color category of “Chinese red” and the definition of the color tint “vermilion” are both directly related to the color material “cinnabar”.

The initial connotations of the object-derivative of red are as follows: Pink silk fabrics. As is defined in *Analytical Dictionary of Characters*, the radical art of the Chinese script for red is related to silk yarn, in addition to the right part, the script is pronounced [hōŋ];” (2) a Chinese description for a plant literally known as “red verdant grass” (*Alternanthera dentata*).” According to Grass Definitions, part of the first Chinese dictionary Near to Correctness as “red is a color favored from the ancient times, in a broad sense.” To sum up, red originally referred to the color of silk fabrics, soaked and dyed using natural pigments from madder, sappan lignum, sanders and other grass and tree species.

1.2.2 Color preference, application, and materials

The Chinese people seem to have favored red since ancient times. However, in the historical review of the Chinese traditional colors, besides the divine connections of featuring the bluish black heaven and the yellow earth, regardless of red, green, black or white, its color preference is not yet secured and fails to avoid changes. As recorded in Master Tan Gong, an essay in *The Classic of Rites*, the Xia ancient Chinese people set great store by black. At funerals they encoffined before dusk; they selected black horses to draw chariots; they offered black sacrifices at shrines or temples. In the subsequent Shan Dynasty, they put the corpse into a coffin at noon, selected white horses for the purpose, and offered white sacrifices.^③ So general red had already been, though not deemed until the middle up to late pre-Qin period as the most

popular color, emerged in the Zhou Dynasty and strengthened in the sacrificial offering settings.

According to the aforesaid discussion, ancient China attributed the color origin to the object in the order of the five major elements. Five colors thus corresponded with seasons, orientations, legendary emperors and gods, and processions, among others. “In the first month of summer, the land was ruled over by the fire-observing emperor Yan, and the fire god Zhu Rong was worshiped among the people. The emperor lived in the left room facing south, rode a vermilion imperial carriage drawn by general red horses with a red-dragon-patterned flag, worn vermilion clothes with red jade ornaments” (Monthly Term, part of *The Classic of Rites*). “Vassals took orders of the Zhou king. They built large-scale temples for sacrifice-offerings in the capital center. The eastern wall was built with blue clay; the southern, red clay; the western, white clay; the northern, white clay; and the center, roofed with yellow clay.” (*Chronicles of the Zhou Dynasty*).^④ Also, according to the poem Mt Xinnan in the Near to Correctness, part of the anthology *Minor Elegance*, the *Classic of Poetry*, “On the shrine fine wine we present, and sacrifice a helvolus bull; for our forbears to taste, hold a knife with a bell; to flay the bull offered, and take out tallow and blood.” The rooms were painted red. As Wang Tao put it, probably as a symbol of power as well as a connection to the concept of the “heaven,” red was adopted. The Zhou bronze instructions unearthed and handed-down literature prove that, for the Zhou rituals of sacrifices to ancestors, red was related to gods and ancestors living in heaven and the people’s religious beliefs.^⑤ By the Eight Diagrams for divination, general red was then believed to be a propitious and

① Chen, 2015, p.55.

② Ruan, 1980, pp.1276 – 2628.

③ Ruan, 1980.

④ Huang, et al.,1995, p.570.

⑤ Wang, 2013, p.144.

prosperous omen, scarlet itself symbolized heaven, both being of positive vitality for heaven and earth, sufficient to ward off any evils. According to recent archaeological discoveries of color remnants, from the middle up to the late Neolithic age, it was quite common that the in-tomb human bones were painted vermilion, cinnabar scattered near the tomb, and the coffin and burial artifacts painted vermilion. Since vermilion is analogous to blood, vermilion painting might symbolize reshaping and eternity of life. Such religious practice then prevailed among the folks, further endowing red with the functional symbols for exorcising evil, physical protection, and enjoyment of happiness and comfort. Even nowadays, at many Chinese key life rituals, festivals, and celebrations, red remains widely applied to highlight grandness, such as large scarlet lanterns hung around the house and couplets written on scarlet paper and pasted on the gateposts or door panels during the Spring Festival, the scarlet sedan-chair for a bride at the wedding, the scarlet bridal veil at the nuptial chamber, the scarlet candles, the scarlet quilts, red-painting on newly erected house frameworks, and the red waistband for persons in the recurrent year of birth in the twelve-year cycle. As time goes on, the people just followed suit, and few would explore the origins of such traditions.

The Chinese ink, as a color language for Chinese traditional painting, emerged hundreds of years later. For this artistic form, the “outlook of five colors (blue, red, yellow, white, and black)” has been influencing Chinese artists for thousands of years, of which red and blue pigments are even applied to set each other off and form a delightful contrast. In most artistic theories on paintings in history, red application principles are tirelessly written in lengthy treatises. As a normal color rigidly and unmatchedly observed in calligraphy

and painting, red is deemed parallel to one of the outlooks of the five elements (fire), orientations (south), internal organs (heart), tastes (bitter), sense organs (tongue), emotions (happiness), and seasons (summer). During the Spring and Autumn period through the Qin and Han dynasties, red-ink writing was regarded as a divine identification for sacrifice-offerings to the heaven, publicity of benevolent government, and oaths of alliance, for the supernatural witness and blessings.^① After the Wei Dynasty, the color designing concept of “coloring by category” come into vogue, in place of the previously prevailing outlook of “five colors.” But regardless of the gorgeous and heavy fine brush flower-bird-figure painting, or vivid and graceful Chinese ink landscape artworks, red retains its unshakable and prominent role in the principle of “coloring by the category.” It is also the first to bear the brunt of essential color elements in such handicrafts as pottery-coloring, lacquering, architectural painting, and fabric dyeing. Accordingly, ancient China already had very detailed, classified red color materials. The mineral pigments include cinnabar, red alum, ochre, yellow lead; plant (grass) pigments, madder, arnotto, safflower; and metal pigments, gold foil and gold powder. In the Yuan Dynasty, according to the Composite Color Classifications, red could be subdivided into 14 major sub-colors: yellow lead, crimson, three-red, earth-red, silverish red (Mercury Sulfide red), branch red, purple flower, Pomegranate seed red, sandalwood, carminum, crimson, pink (peach-red), pinkish red (flesh red), and clove brown.^② As listed in the Biography of Jiezi Garden Modern Chinese Paintings of the Qing Dynasty, the colors were reduced to only five: cinnabar-red, mercuric sulfide red, coral dust red, ochre, and old red.^③ In reference to the ancient literature on paintings, cinnabar was

① Zhang, 2015.

② Tang, 1918, pp.2-5.

③ Sheng, Wang, Wang & Wang, 1986, p.20.

seen as the most popular among the red materials, also with an especially detailed introduction ranging from its origins, quality levels, categories, recorded process flow diagram, application to its effectiveness.^①

To sum up, the Chinese traditional red system is not an isolated existence just with object visual presentation and physical experience, but rather a cultural entity practice through “material selection by color category—etiquette observation by color preference—enlightenment of the way by color outlook.” Regardless of the national etiquette or folk customs, the system itself entails subtle life expressions and dramatic changes in outlooks. Without a proactive access to and self-consciousness of the overall Chinese traditional red system, it would be impossible to make Chinese red a key color for the Chinese nation to compete and communicate with the world cultures and maintain cultural diversity and local discourse. According to a Western color master Johannes Itten, an accuracy that lacks vision and a symbolism without a touching power may be just a poor formalism; a visual impression effect, which lacks symbolic truth and emotional power, can be no more than plain and mimic naturalism; and the symbolic contents short of structures and the emotional effect without actual strength can just be confined to superficial emotional expression.^② Only by understanding the nature of colors, can the people ultimately inherit and fully express the color’s free realm.

2. The history of Chinese red: from other construction to national symbol

In the context of modern China, Chinese red seems to have become the national cultural totem and

spiritual conversion in all aspects of social life. But we might fail to explore: Why does only Chinese red, one of the five major traditional colors, represent the Chinese people’s national character? And how has such a set of color culture cognition and universal psychological identification been selected for the red color endowment? As a specialized term, in fact, Chinese red can be the outcome of the blending and symbiosis of global commodity consumption demands and modern ethnic groups’ national identification enhancements. By comprehending such a context via Chinese red, one may be better informed about the history of Chinese red.

2.1 Other construction: the commercial symbol and artistic style

Edward W. Said points out in his *Orientalism* that development and retention of each culture needs the existence of its opponent, i.e. “other.” Whether in the West or the Orient, identity construction cannot be done without “other,” which is created in all times and each society.^③ As a proper term, “Chinese red” was not initiated by a local designation, but one labeled by the Western in the early 1900s. In English, there are two versions for the color: Chinese red and China red, both connoting China-origin vermilion materials or substitutes of the Chinese lacquer wares (or red porcelain).

2.1.1 Top-grade color materials

Cinnabar is a mineral known as a natural mercury sulfide in the West. After being ground, a bright red powder vermilion is produced, which was first used as an English word in 1289. The word is spelt similarly in several other European languages, such as vermeillon (old French), vermelho (Portuguese), and vermeil (Catalan), all of which are, etymologically derivatives of the Latin word *vermis* meaning a worm,

① Yu, 2013, pp.86–107.

② Johannes Itten, 1978, p.10.

③ Edward, 1999

as vermilion analogous to the red pigment was made from worms. Before the 17th century, both vermilion and cinnabar referred to the natural mineral. However, since the Netherlanders started to synthesize cinnabar with mercury and sulphur, cinnabar was referred to the natural mineral buried deep underground while vermilion, was a proper name for the color.^①

Chinese red, as a designation for the specific color of orange bright red in English, was first recorded in 1924.^② By the Western contemporary color space criteria, the pH value of Chinese red is set at 11; the saturation value, 82; and the tonal value, 67. In the dictionary of color, Chinese red or China red is defined clearly as “obsolete name for cinnabar.”^③ In more details, a Japanese dictionary for color studies also gives such a definition: Chinese red refers to bright yellowish red, a color the Chinese people paint on buildings and other objects. Originally referred to a red color of mineral cinnabar mined from Chenzhou (present-day Huaihua) of Hunan province, China, vermilion is quite popular in China. Vermilion represents China and hence the color is also added to the name of the country to form a phrase. It is also known as “authentic red” or “red sand.”^④ The review above states identically that Chinese red is a shorter form of Chinese red vermilion. To date, top-grade pigment made of natural mineral cinnabar is still designated in the international color material sector as Chinese vermilion, Chinese red or Chinese red vermilion to produce top-grade red pigments, with most of the raw material imported from China.

An evidence of vermilion has been found with a

Neolithic relic (7000 BC—8000 BC) unearthed from the site of Çatalhöyük village in Turkey. In ancient Rome, natural cinnabar was deemed as the rarest pigment source. Then a triumphant general painted red his own face and the god Jupiter’s face with the cinnabar powder. Gladiators and heroes then would past their bodies with the mineral as well. Noble women applied cinnabar lipsticks. At festivals, all the statues of the gods and the emperors were coated with cinnabar to appear brand-new.

The raw material for cinnabar was mainly mined and transported from Almadén, Spain.^⑤ In those years, because of high prices for cinnabar, it was not allowed to unbundle or smelt the ore at the mine pit. Instead, the ore had to be delivered to Rome for exclusive sales, at a legal price equivalent to 70 British pounds to avoid any sharp rise in the market value.^⑥ Most murals in the ancient city Pompeii were also painted with cinnabar. Then the price of cinnabar pigment was 15 times more expensive than ochre red pigment, and it might be a symbol of the Roman wealth and nobility, hence the alias of the pigment, “Pompeii red.”^⑦ An archaeological discovery from Pompeii at the beginning of the 19th century manifested application of cinnabar paint in the Pompeii bathing pool during the reign of Roman emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus, with a written signage of alert clearly stating “For emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus only.”^⑧ In the period of the Byzantine Empire, the imperial family and administrators demanded use of the mineral cinnabar and the color vermilion for writing official letters and imperial laws and decrees.

① Cennini, 1933.

② Maerz & Paul. , 1930, p.27.

③ Ian Paterson, 2003, p.90.

④ Onoe Koichi, Yoshiko Kanaya, Yoshitomo Tanaka & Motoko Yanagisawa, 2011, p.213.

⑤ <http://archaeology.about.com/od/cterm/q/Cinnabar.htm> Cinnabar—History of Mercury Mineral Use Archeology.about.com, archeology of ancient pigments (2013-08-02)

⑥ Thompson, 1956, p.103.

⑦ Varichon , 2005, p.112.

⑧ Finlay, 2008, p.177.

After the Renaissance, along with the expansion of the European color application, the high cost of natural cinnabar mineral pigment could be compared to that of gold. The best renowned landscape painting master Joseph Mallord William Turner in the Western history of art took much more interest in light and color than objects laying a foundation to shape the impressionist painting style. He was very picky for any color pigment and the natural vermilion became his favorite color. An Italian painter Tiziano Vecelli, with a great fresco artwork known as *The Assumption of the Virgin* during the period 1516-1518, presented a perfect charm of the natural vermilion.

Due to the rareness and costliness of natural cinnabar mineral pigment, early in the 4th century B.C., in their discussions on alchemy, Greek scientist Zosimus and philosopher Theophrastus attempted to adopt a synthetic process for pigment production. In his *Color Recipe*, Arab alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-815) elaborated the process of vermilion pigment production with the raw materials of mercury and sulphur.^① As of the 17th century, a Dutch scientist invented a “Dutch process” to synthesize black mercury sulfide, heat it into a vapor condensation, and produce a bright red mercury sulfide. However, the cost of synthetic vermilion pigment was not cheap, either. So in the history of Europe vermilion pigment contained a mix of low-cost counterfeit lead oxides in large quantity, such as brick-red, orpiment, ferric oxide, Persian red, Iodine red, and minium (lead red).^② In 1817, German chemist Friedrich Stormier invented the mixture process with Cadmium and Selenium for production of the Cadmium red pigment, which was gradually and commonly used in place of the traditional cinnabar mineral. But the aforesaid synthesized vermilion pigments are far less multi-

layered, steady, and durable than the natural mineral pigments. Generally, the color disparity of natural mineral pigments depends on the cinnabar granular sizes, sulphide contents, and grinding processes. Compared with the ore for the pigments from the European mines, Chinese cinnabar ore contains less impurities with larger crystal sizes and is well-known around the world. A perfect vermilion made of pure, ground cinnabar mineral, the Chinese vermilion red has been assessed as the top grade among the users of natural mineral pigments.

2.1.2 Oriental magic wares

Italian Renaissance painter Cennini pointed out that Chinese red had been named for exquisite Chinese traditional lacquer wares.^③ The basic hue of the Chinese lacquer was red and black painting, of which most wares were lacquered red on the internal surface and black on the exterior. The subsequent carved lacquering process was red dominant. In the West, a typical color sign may be used to name a foreign ware, habitually, like cloisonné enamel, Chinese white (Dehua porcelain). Moreover, natural raw materials are used for lacquering (e.g. natural lacquer and vermilion) and the process is internationally advanced. So, China comes out first in the sector and Chinese red is also highlighted as a symbolic, artistic representation through the oriental magic wares. This may be why vermilion lacquer wares, which are exhibited at contemporary European museums or sold in art markets, are still named “Chinese red lacquer ware” “China red lacquer ware” or “China red.”

Chinese lacquer wares may date back to the Neolithic age, 7000 years ago. In the Shang and Zhou dynasties most wares were used as burial accessories; after the Warring States period and the Qin Dynasty,

① Bomford & Roy, 2009, p.41.

② Broecke, 2015, pp.63–64.

③ Andrea, 1933; Maerz & Paul, 1930, p.206.

lacquered ornaments became the objects of pursuance for the noble class of society. Meanwhile, lacquer was also widely applied to musical instruments, tableware, weapons, mortuaries, furniture, and carriages. As of the Song, Yuan, Ming through Qing dynasties, Chinese lacquering craftsmanship grew to perfection. Also, in Chinese history, emperors chose lacquered wares as a kind of valuable presents to the states under their jurisdiction or foreign countries with a good relationship.

For instance, emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty ever sent, three times successively, 186 pieces of carved lacquer ware to the Mikado (emperor) of Japan; emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty also sent scores of pieces of such ware to the British queen via the ambassador.^① In addition to the official present-sending, the ruins of the cities and unearthed relics along the ancient Silk Road provide evidence that early in the Han Dynasty lacquer ware played a key role in China-foreign trade.

Before the 19th century, China's influence on Europe was enormous. As French enlightenment thinker Voltaire said: "In fact, 4,000 years ago, when we still did not learn how to read, the Chinese people had already mastered what we now brag about."^② Then Chinese wares, mainly of lacquer, silk and porcelain, were what the Europeans admired. According to Marco Polo's Travelogue, a bestseller of the genre based on the Italian traveler's nuncupation in a tone of marvel, in the 13th century the Mongolian Khan could already wander in his luxurious, splendid imperial garden with imposing gilded and lacquered pillars.^③ Also, In China in the 16th Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, Chinese raw lacquer production

was introduced in detail.^④ Taking the opportunities of the regional trade with the East India Company in the 17th century, Chinese lacquer ware was exported to Europe in huge quantities. "Whether it is a color silk, embroidery, porcelain, lacquered cupboard or lacquer folding screen, when they are introduced at the beginning, not for their artistic values but for their top quality..."^⑤ Thus, European collectors acclaimed that the quality of the Chinese raw materials for lacquering was much better than that of Europe, and that is why the Chinese lacquer wares have been the articles of luxury for collection among the nobles.

The European collectors' admiration for the oriental wares further fostered changes and diversion of the regional artistic aesthetics. "We Europeans should thank God for the wonderful workmanship excelling nature... it would be too superficial, provided that just the Chinese talents are praised; that we only use the wares purchased from China, and disdain to care about the Chinese character and their spirit; and that simply play and appreciate with the China-made vase, basin, lacquer ware, ivory item, bronze quadrangle vessel."^⑥ With the Chinese-styled influence, aimed at refinement, flamboyance, luxury, comfort and visual pleasure, Rococo decorative art came into being as the times required. "Rococo" is a compound word from the French Rocaille and Italian Baroco. The French word Rocaille also combines two words, rocaille (stone) and coquilles (cowries), which indicates that the decorative artistic style then depended on the two major raw materials.^⑦ Besides the Western traditional process for mason wares, cowries were also highly valued in the artistic representation, which may account for the Chinese cowry inlaid lacquer wares'

① Chen, 2002, p.9.

② Voltair, 1948.

③ Marco Polo, 2009, p.142.

④ Matteo Ricci & Nicolas Trigault, 2001, p.18.

⑤ Hudson, 2004, pp.229-230.

⑥ Qian, 2004, p.242.

⑦ Wagner, 2005, p. 139.

popularity across Europe at the time. In Rocco art, Chinoiserie played a key role and lacquer wares were an essential element. “Chinoiserie,” as defined clearly in the Encyclopedia Britannica, “17th- and 18th-century Western style of interior design, furniture, pottery, textiles, and garden design that represents fanciful European interpretations of Chinese styles... used mainly in conjunction with Baroque and Rococo styles, featured extensive gilding and lacquering.”

The European fashion to treasure Chinese lacquer wares as rare artworks took shape during Louis XIV up to XV of France (1638-1774), when Madame de Pompadour, a royal mistress to King Louis XV, as well as the most influential patron, fostered its popularity. Chinese flower and bird lacquer wares were her favorite, and the suburban Burlington palace outside Paris became almost a museum of lacquer wares. Influenced by the royal court, exquisite and gorgeous Chinese lacquer wares became an oriental wonder for which the noble and wealthy French people scrambled, to show off their extraordinary nobility and elegant aesthetic taste beyond conventions. Also, during that period, as a key representative of Chinoiserie, antique lacquer wares spread far and wide across Europe even to the extent of abuse of the fine wares. To satisfy the rising market demand in France, Germany, Austria and other European countries, some French craftsmen ever modeled, in large quantities, on the flower-and-bird patterned lacquer wares, furniture and articles of daily use. Unfortunately, whichever technology they applied or how high the artistic values were expected, their products turned out to be incomparable to the Chinese counterparts. In the 1830s, according to the English version of *The History of That Great and Renowned Monarchy of China*, a number of pages contributed to introductions of Chinese lacquer

wares ranging from Chinese lacquer Chinese varnish tree plantation, raw lacquer harvest, lacquering craftsmanship, and appreciation and assessment, with such a conclusion: “The Chinese lacquer wares are a marvelous art, but in Europe it would be impossible to be replicated.”^① Chinese red is termed after the Chinese lacquer wares, and Chinese red porcelain can also be an English derivation, where I will no longer go into details, repetitively.^②

Culture encompasses one or multiple concise representation(s). For the sake of categorization and distinction, people tend to narrow down what they want to learn about to certain stereotyped and concise examples.

“A type of culture can be a concise, vivid, impressive portrayal to be easily attained and recognized, in which some features may be highlighted and some change and development confined within a minimum scope.”^③ The Western naming of Chinese red in history, first of all, started with identification of the origins and differences of Chinese vermilion red materials and lacquer wares through commodity symbolization. As the original material products are converted to vivid social symbols and included in the framework of Western art, constructed by “them,” Chinese red again ceaselessly keeps generalizing fresher semantic meanings and condensing into new cultural memories and imaginations.

2.2 National symbol: political proposition and cultural resources

During modern times, the color culture has evolved into several fresher instrumental orientations: (1) in the global system of national states, colors became a key tool to symbolize their political tendencies; (2) along with establishment of the discourse hegemony for the color outlook by the

① Zhou, 2004, pp.302-313.

② Li, 2014

③ Richard, 1977, p.28.

Western scientism, the diversity of color interpretations was constrained; (3) the contemporary popular “visual carnival” fostered the color creative applications in an unending flow, and was closely related to the consumer society. Through overlapped or even polysemy symbolization, the connotations of Chinese red have thus been balanced into an increasingly universal national color symbol.

2.2.1 The color glossary of communism

In modern Chinese vocabulary, apart from its original meaning of the color category, red also connotes, in a derivative sense, “a symbol of revolution or high political awareness.” In Chinese Thesaurus, the political connotations of the Chinese word “red” are sorted as follows: (1) a symbol of revolution; (2) a symbol of communism; (3) a symbol of strong belief; (4) some connection to the Communist Party of China; (5) a “left-leaning” politics; and (6) happenings of the New Democratic period (1919-1949).^① Without a doubt, the red color is deeply branded with the “revolutionary” implications, with a special connotation of the times.

Red is one of the heritages of the French revolution and the Paris Commune, as a symbol of the fighters’ blood on the political arena. In 1792, the Jacobins interpreted the red flag as the banner of freedom and in a broad sense, was deemed as a symbol of “left-wing” ideology and military strength. After the 19th century, red became a formal symbol of movements and protests with communism, socialism, and anarchism. In 1850, the English version of the *Communist Manifesto* was published in the weekly *The Red Republican*. In 1864, the First International was founded, when red was established as a symbolic color. For instance, then around the world all Communist

Party members used red as the revolutionary symbol. In 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics mandated its national flag’s design to be in red and adopted the red banner with a pattern comprising a pentagram, a sickle, and a hammer.

Along with the vast dissemination of Communist thought and the influence of the October Revolution, red as the symbolic color for revolution has gradually been accepted. A great number of modern Chinese phrases are formed by prefixion with the script “vermilion” and “red,” many being associated with revolutionary causes.^② In 1928, as clearly pointed out in the *Why Can the Red Regime Exist?* “The birth, existence and sound growth of the red regime is doubtless.”^③ In the same year, following the Mt. Jingtang junction, of the two armed forces led by Mao Zedong and Zhu De, in line with the instructions from the Communist International and the Chinese Central Government to build a red army in the Soviet region, the Chinese revolutionary army of workers and peasants was formally reorganized into a red army. As a symbol of the Proletarian regime and the communist faith, red was also emblemized for the people’s revolution led by the Communist Party. After the founding of New China in 1949, red was designated as the color for the banners of the nation, the Party, the Communist Youth League, and the Young Pioneers, thanks to the color’s representation of the Chinese nation’s struggling as well as its expression of the historical willpower in national independence, liberation, and democracy. In 1957, as reported in the *Literature and Art*, an article titled *From a Comrade to a Red Specialist*, “We learn that here red is not a concept of aesthetics, but rather, that of politics. In contrast to white, a metaphor of the bourgeoisie, red represents

① The Compilation Committee, 1979, p.1686.

② Xu, 2011

③ Selected Works of Mao Zedong (Volume 1), the People’s Publishing House, 1991, p.49.

the proletariat.”^① During the Cultural Revolution, red became a key tool to state clearly an ideological standpoint. After that, a good many series of literary and artistic works (later known as the “Red Classics”), with the themes of the Chinese people’s involvement in civil revolutionary war and the national liberation war under the leadership of the Communist Party, were created to further condense and convey Chinese red revolutionary spirit to the masses of the people: realistic and down-to-earth services for the people, fine qualities of diligence in defiance of any difficulty, and noble sentiment of selfless devotion. The masterpieces of the literary genre then include *The Red Rock*, *The Red Lantern*, *Red Lady Army*, and *The Red Oriental*, all of which have influenced the growth of several generations of the Chinese nation.

2.2.2 The visual art language of the Chinese characteristics

Culture is not just for adaption to the outside world, or satisfaction of demands. Provided that culture is deemed as an asset, it would play a proactive role. Likewise, given the roles of Chinese red representing the revolution, as a loanword from the Communist International or a Sinicized historical evidence source, the recent Chinese red, with its Chinese characteristic visual language created locally, would take the color as an intercultural communicative medium of values and knowledge, on its own initiative, and thus turn out creative artworks in large quantities.

First, the Chinese traditional culture dissemination and communication activities, almost without exception, regard red as a publicity-purposed base color. The Spring Festival gala evenings since 1983 via China Central Television (CCTV) have been the country’s grandest comprehensive theatrical performance of the year with the greatest ratings. Over some three decades, regardless of how the forms

and contents of the repertoire are updated, the festive scarlet background remains its mainstream hue, to highlight the Chinese New Year and impress the Chinese audience around the world. The repetitive appearance of visual codes on the screen are red lanterns, red couplets, red Tang costumes, and red Chinese knots. In 2004, when France held a Chinese Culture Year event, all major logos, performances and exhibitions adopted Chinese red as their background in contrast to the French gray. In the same year France even presented a red setting for its national symbol, the Eiffel Tower. The coloring cultural event immediately drew the world’s attention with Chinese red as a color symbol leaving a deep impression on global viewers. For the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, red was lavishly used for the emblem, mascot, souvenirs, athletic/thinking image sportswear, and the Bird-Nest stadium. During the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, the seven red-composite colors, varying from shallow to deep, were once again presented to the world as the classic, elaborately designed Chinese national color image. The aforesaid cases suggest a concept of “etiquette truth,”^② that is, imparting of experience and determining truth through repetitive etiquette. A national power may, via such etiquette, convey Chinese red indicating existence of the nation-state’s spiritual strength. Consequently, in the masses’ emotional climax, an authoritative experience of community may be made available, based on which additional meanings can be created, familiarity with them achieved in the memory, and identification shaped.

Second, since the 1980s, local artists have been frequently narrating the oriental story with Chinese red as the base color bringing the color to their Western counterparts with a marked visual impact. The film artworks by Chinese director Zhang Yimou can be one of the representatives. The key factors to his success

① Li, 2011

② Giddens & Pierson, 2001, p.105.

lie in his proficient application of the visual cognition means and subtle command of the characters' psychological insight.^① Whether for his maiden works like *Red Sorghum*, or later ones such as *Raise the Large Lantern* or *The Heroes*, the exaggerated Chinese red always keeps the film pace and the protagonists' emotion. While reflecting on the nature of life in the protagonists' protest against the benighted thoughts of feudalism, their yearning and appreciation for ideal and free life were also highlighted. Thus, as a special visual form, while being deployed to convey to cultural aliens its symbolic implications, Chinese red may be further refined and even be deified despite the plain daily life and subsequent indifferent emotion. Also, Chinese designers tend to take Chinese red as a special symbolic language, identify their commercial applications to clothes, jewelry, porcelain, and industrial design, endowing local products with great intangible cultural values, for instance, the visual identification system of China Unicom with bright Chinese red to match the more modest Chinese ink - black; the flying Chinese red for Li Ning sportswear's trademark; and the Chinese red design for a series of Galanz microwaves. All of these play a key role in opening their international markets.

Finally, the Chinese artists' remarkable contribution to the nation-state symbolic coloring also fosters Chinese red as a prioritized element to express the oriental culture for designing circles in the West. There is a saying circulated in the international preference sector, "popular brands fall in love with Chinese red." Chinese red classic elements attract international designing masters and preference pioneers' fanatical pursuits, for example, iPhone 7 Chinese red edition, Coca-Cola Chinese red bottle,

Valentino & Gucci Chinese red series, Armani & Dior charm Chinese version. In 2007, Nike released its limited edition of NIKE Air Zoom LeBnui IV, which was then named "Chinese red" and became a "sacred collection" in the hearts of global collectors with repeated derivations. In the prime time of the color culture, the color-symbolized materials and events as well as the emotions it represents are also diversified. Also, the innovative changes in color technology and the circulation sector will bring forth greater original effects on the people's color designing and expression. In the popularized visual carnival, interpreted as a symbolic identification, Chinese red is of higher diversity and broader participation, closely tied to the consumer society via senses of visual attractions and emotional experience.

3. Conclusion

Through the discussion above, we attempted to explore the political, economic, and cultural roles of the colors through our view of the integrative studies of semantic experience, aesthetic effect, and historical implications. Chinese red as a cultural heritage has two orientations: (1) cultural integration based on identification; (2) artwork productivity with a focus on distinction. As a multi-ethnic country's visual symbol, Chinese red is by no means rigid historical heritage, but rather, a dynamic process of endless formation, recognition, conversion, and transmission. Besides, Chinese red is the outcome of exchanges between Chinese and foreign wares, technologies, systems, and outlooks in history as well as reciprocal "presents."

(Translator: Wen Yi; Editor: Yan Yuting)

^① Cell, 1998, p.68.



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