

## A Comparative Study on the Cultural Connotations of “Red” in English and Chinese

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**Abstract:** Color terms are abundant in both English and Chinese, such as red, yellow, green and blue. As an important color term in both cultures, “red” is frequently used in our daily life. There are rich cultural meanings behind the word “red”. Different nations of different cultural backgrounds, or individuals from the same nation with the same backgrounds but belonging to different social groups, have different views of various colors in cross-cultural contact. Color perceptions differs, resulting in a sequence of associative meanings for color words. In order to learn English well and communicate successfully with foreigners in cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to make a comparative study on the cultural connotations of “red” in both languages. This thesis makes a comparative study on the semantic meaning, associative meaning and cultural connotations of red in both English and Chinese cultures. Through the comparative study, the thesis reveals the differences and similarities of the cultural connotations of “red” in both languages.

**Keywords:** red, cultural connotations, similarity, difference.

### INTRODUCTION

Culture is a complex structure that pervades different facets of social life, and it is the accumulation of human material and spiritual achievements. Language is a cultural carrier that can represent various cultural connotations. Despite having different cultural backgrounds, people have common feelings on recognition and aesthetic experience of colors. That is to say, there are also similarities about the associative meanings of color terms cross culture. However, variations in customs, religion, geography and other cultural factors inevitably give color words different connotations in both English and Chinese language.

According to Geoffrey Leech (1981:9), “There are seven types of meanings: conceptual meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning, and thematic meaning.” And he combines connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning into “associative meaning”. Color words, in addition to their literal sense, have many associative meanings. Due to the different cultural background, these words are endowed with different cultural connotations by the Chinese and English people.

This thesis will compare and contrast some “red” words in English and Chinese, trying to find the

similarities and differences of its cultural connotations. It will be divided into two parts, the semantic meaning and the cultural connotation.

### COMPARISON OF THE SEMANTIC MEANING OF “RED” IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

Whether in China or in the West, the “red” always means happy and is associated with celebrations and festive days. Chinese people enjoy using red staffs to create a cheerful atmosphere in special days, such as the wedding days, the Spring Festival and the banquets for newborn babies. For example, Chinese people will put the red Spring Festival couplets on the doors during the traditional festival, and hang up red lanterns. And children will be given money wrapped in red paper as a lunar new year gift. While in the West, red is also used in some happy days. “Red-letter” has the meaning of festive. On Christmas day, Santa Claus in red will hand out gifts to children. Besides, the concept of red is basically consistent, like blood-red (血红色), orange-red (橘红色), red wine (红葡萄酒).

“Red” also can be used to express anger and embarrassment both in English and Chinese: for instance, when someone is angry, we say “红脸” and in English people say “turn red” or “become red-faced”. But there are other words or phrases in English to

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describe angry too, like “to blush, to flush, to redden, to color up” and so on. That is to say, one meaning can be expressed in different ways.

There is the third relationship between English and Chinese language, the incomplete correspondence of semantics between English and Chinese. Here are some examples:

- “红糖” is translated into “brown sugar”;
- “红茶” —— “black tea”;
- “红榜” —— “honor roll”;
- “红豆” —— “love pea”;
- “红运” —— “good luck”;
- “红利” —— “dividend”;

And red is a symbol of revolution in Chinese, like “红军”, “红旗”, “红色革命根据地” and so on. While in English, red is kind of derogatory, indicating cruelty, fanaticism, disaster, blood and so on. Here are some examples:

- “red hands” (血腥的手, 杀人的手)
- “red-headed” (狂怒的)
- “red-light district” (红灯区、风化区)
- “red-neck” (乡巴佬, 美国南部农民)
- “red-ruin” (战祸)
- “red skin” (对北美印第安人的贬称)
- “red-typism” (官僚作风)

## CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF “RED” IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

### Cultural connotations of “red” in English

Cultural connotations of “red” in English have positive meaning and negative meaning. The positive use of “red” in English is very much limited. Instead, it is often used in a derogative sense, connected with “blood”, “danger” and “violence” in the minds of native speaker.<sup>1</sup>

As for positive cultural connotations of “red” in English, it’s always linked with happy festive things, which is the same with Chinese. “Red-letter” means some days meaningful and commemorative, like Christmas and other special days. Such days are printed in red on calendars, rather than in black for ordinary days. Christmas to the west is what the Spring Festival to the Chinese. On that day, Santa Claus will wear in red.

And red is more less a positive word than a negative word in English. Red always comes with “blood”, “violence” and “disaster”. There are many phrases of red with bad meanings, such as “red revenge” means “血腥报复”, “red battle” means “血战

”. Meanwhile, as society and the economy progress, economic practices pervade all aspects of life in general, giving color words the opportunity to be used regularly in our everyday lives as well as the economic field. Therefore, color terms are extraordinary active in economic terms, especially the red color. For example, “go into the red” or “in the red” means “赤字”, and “red balance” means “赤字差额”. “In red ink” doesn’t mean that “在红墨水里” but “亏空”.

### Cultural connotations of “红” in Chinese

As mentioned above, the Chinese people prefer red color, so that “红” is endowed with more abundant cultural connotations than any other colors. Generally, when it comes to “红” in China, people always believe that something good is coming soon, like “好运亨通” and “上红榜”, etc.. This is because that the color word “红” in Chinese is a symbol of happiness, luck and victory. It is obvious that in Chinese culture, “red” is more a bad word than a good word. Chinese like red color more than other colors. Thus red can be seen everywhere on a special day. Expect the meaning of good luck, red is also a symbol of “revolution” and “socialism”.

After the October Revolution (occurring in Russia on 25 October 1917) and the influence of the political terms, “red” has meanings of revolution, Communist Party of China, proletariat and socialist system. So “red” is a symbol of “revolution” and “socialism”. In both Chinese and English, people tend to connect “red” with such meanings, e.g. Red Guard, the Red Army, red base, red political power etc. It stands for progress and consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

## CONCLUSION

According to the preceding discussion, different nations with different cultural backgrounds can offer words different connotations, including color terms. Exploration of various connotations of color words in English and Chinese will thus assist people in understanding different cultural perspectives on color terms. By compared with the meaning and cultural connotations of “red” in English and Chinese, the author finds that color is so complicated. A single word can carry so many connotations which are various in different culture. English and Chinese color words have different cultural connotations due to the influence of natural conditions, historical contexts, and religious values in the eastern and western worlds.

Color words, which are an integral part of language, share specific meanings and customs. Each color has its own way of being expressed in different countries. Red, as a primary color, is widely used in

<sup>1</sup> 引用, A Contrastive Study on Cultural Connotations of “Red” in English and “红” in Chinese and Their Translation Strategies

<sup>2</sup> 引用, On Cultural Connotation and Translation of Color Terms: Comment on the “red” color

everyday life and has strong connotations in both English and Chinese. As a result, understanding the cultural connotation of red is important for us to comprehend and grasp the accurate meaning of color in English and Chinese.

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