

A Study on the Metaphor of “Red” in Chinese Culture

HUANG Qiang

School of Foreign Languages
Sichuan University of Science and Engineering
180, Xueyuan Street, Huixing Road, Zigong
Sichuan Province, 643000, P. R. China

Abstract

Many people may see Chinese people are so fond of hong se---red color under many circumstances, and the red flag, red clothes, red lantern, red couplet etc are quite common in China. Some people say the red color is the “national color” of China and China is called “red China”. Then, why the Chinese people love red color probably is a great puzzlement for many foreigners. In fact, the color term “red” has special and very interesting connotations in Chinese culture. The Chinese people share common understandings and feelings of the color term. The word “red” as a metaphor has obvious characters regarding its associations, symbols, implied meanings, and usage of “red” in Chinese language. It can represent the Chinese culture and customs, embody their value-concept and show the ways of thinking. This paper collects almost all the Chinese idioms related to “red”, expresses its literal meaning in English and interprets its implied meaning and connotation in different context of Chinese. In addition, it is of practical significance to know the cultural connotation of color term “Red” in Chinese culture and to promote the cultural communication between Chinese and English-speaking people.

Key Words : color term “red”; metaphor; meaning; symbol; culture

1. INTRODUCTION

“Culture consists of all the shared products of human society,” said Robertson in 1981. And language is a part of culture and plays a very important role in it. Language reflects culture and is reflected by culture. In different languages, words or terms may have more or less the same primary meaning, meanwhile they have secondary or additional meanings. The role of language within a culture and the influence of culture on the meanings of words and idioms are so pervasive that scarcely any text can be adequately understood without careful consideration of its cultural background. The word “red” as a metaphor in Chinese language carries a profound culture and needs careful study as a second language.

2. THE SYMBOL OF “RED” IN CHINESE CULTURE

A language, as the carrier of cultures, absorbs different cultures of different nations. Vocabulary is not only one of the three main factors of the language but also the constituent element of it. All the things are true to the color words, owing to the difference of culture, modes of expression, the understanding of the color. The same color may have different symbols and images in different languages. The color “red”, in Chinese *pin yin* “*hong*”, is an example of this, and it has unique symbols in terms of its figurative meanings, metaphorical usages, and idiomatic expressions in Chinese language.

2.1 A Symbol of Happy Events

The color “red” usually reminds us of the source of life on the earth---the red sun. This is true both in English as well as in Chinese. The sun brings the earth life, warmth, and vitality. Under this circumstance, Chinese people often regard “red” as a color of life, happiness, warmth, auspiciousness and so on.

“Red” is often connected with praises, celebrations, and respects in Chinese culture. For example, the honor roll or board is usually written on “red” paper and is called “*hong bang-red honor roll*”. (*hong bang* is Chinese *pin yin*, literal meaning in English “*honor roll written on red paper*”). All the similar expressions below will be explained in the same way: *pin yin-literal translation in English*). A “*hong pi-red wrap*”, a band of “red” silk over somebody’s shoulders, is always granted to a hero or an exemplary person as a token of honor. And a “*hong tie-red card*” for invitation of guests in China announces a happy event like betrothal and birthday. When welcoming distinguished guests or celebrating one’s feats, Chinese write their names on “*hong tiao fu-red scrolls*” to show the respect.

“Red” has a symbol of joyfulness. Most of the Chinese traditional customs in civilians would involve “red”. For instance, on the Spring Festival or some key days, civilians will hang “red” lights and wear “red” clothes. The seniority give some money (*ya sui qian-money for a new year*) to the junior who are not married or the seniority give the newly weds some money in a red envelope when they meet at the first time, which is called “*hong bao-red bag or envelope*”. The “*dui lian-antithetical couplet*” is usually written on “red” paper.

“Red” is involved in Chinese marriage culture as well. It is a symbol of luck and joy. For example, “*hong niang-red woman*” is a go-between or matchmaker of marriage. In Chinese marriage custom, the person who brings the lovers together is called “*hong niang-red woman*”. According to the legend, the Chinese God of marriage, a man of moon, has a book recording the marriage fates of those on earth and attaches betrothed couples with a “*hong xian-red cord*”, which will bind them for life. Dating back the history of *hong niang*, we can find in a famous opera *Western Chamber* written by Guan Hanqing in the Yuan Dynasty, “*hong niang*”, Cui Yingying's maid, was the go-between of Cui Yingying and Zhang Sheng. Later, “*hong niang*” becomes the synonym of matchmaker in China. Until now, the word “*hong niang*” still owns its traditional meaning. The Chinese character “*hong shuang xi-red double happiness*” is cut with red paper and stuck everywhere on the wedding ceremony and at the home of the newly-married. All the invited guests will give “*hong bao-red bag*” to the couple to show their celebrations and express their wishes. When their baby was born, guests going to celebrate will have “*hong tang-red sugar*” and “*hong dan-red egg*” and should give “*hong ba-red bag*” to the baby.

In both China and English-speaking countries, the “red” carpet is a kind of special treatment given to an important or honored guest. a strip of red carpet is laid for them to walk on. The “red carpet” is used to welcome distinguished guests, indicating a grand reception. This is also true in China and many other countries of the world.

A “red-letter day” means a day specially looked forwards to or remembered when something remarkable and pleasurable will happen or happened. Both Chinese and westerners share the same way of expressing a holiday or important day.

2.2 A Symbol of Revolution and Socialism

“Red” also stands for revolution and socialism in China, but is not originated from China. It is originated from the “red flag” and bonnet rouge used in the French Revolution from 1789 to 1794. In 1917, the famous October Revolution in Russia won, and Lenin organized the “Red Army.” Then, the Chinese Communist Part gives it a strong sense of revolution. Chinese national flag is “red”, which means being dyed “red” by the blood of the revolutionaries, and “*hong ling jin-red scarf*” for young pioneers is an angle of it. The expression “*hong xin-red heart*” means being loyal to the party or having socialist virtues. “*hong qi-red flag*” means setting a good example in the socialist construction. During the Long March, the young soldiers in the “Red Army” who were in their teens were called “*hong xiao gui-red kids*”. “*hong qu-red area*” means the base area established by the Communist Party of China in rural areas during the Second Revolutionary Civil War. In the arduous revolutionary war years, there were also “*red star*”, “*red power*”, “*red base*”, “*red guards*”, “*red-tasseled spear*” and other terms that are related to red revolution. “*hong tou wen jian-red document*” is the document issued by the Party or the leading department of the State with a title printed in “red”, hence the name.

In the Great Chinese Cultural Revolution, “*hong-red*” was used politically. Chairman Mao was titled “*hong tai yang-red sun*” and his works were called “*hong bao shu-red treasured books*”. The socialistic country governed by the proletariat was called “*hong se jiang shan-red rivers and mountains, red territory*”. The ruling power was called “*hong se zheng quan-red political power*”. Moreover, there were “*hong xiu zhang-red sleeves guard*”, “*hong se si ling bu-red headquarter*”, “*hong se ge qu-red revolution song*” and so on. Furthermore, at that time, people liked to paint the wall and door “red”, and wrote the political slogans on the wall. The whole country looked like a “red sea”. Under such a circumstance, due to some political reasons, its meaning is distorted and many westerners may have a bad understanding of “red China”. However, nowadays, this kind of meaning has been deleted.

2.3 The Association with a Certain Emotion

In Chinese language, the color “red” can be associated with a certain emotion. A “*hong lian-red-faced*” person whose face looks “red” often means he is embarrassed or angry. To see “red” is to become angry. In Chinese, “*hong*” is a word used when one feels embarrassed or gets angry.

The color “red” can easily catch our attention, so it is used as a signal of danger or emergency. “Red” can be associated with the exuberant scene of bustle and excitement. As we know, “red” is a symbol of vitality and excitement unique to the Chinese. If one’s face is seen red, then we say he is so excited that his face is “*tong hong-very very red*”.

“Red” can be a symbol of warning and restraining. “Red” can play a role of warning to remind people of guarding against, and even to some extent restraining. “*Hong deng-red light*” is a signal to stop at crossroads. “*Liang hong deng-red light blinking*” means something is in danger or will be in a state of failure or crisis. If a hospital, a police, or a military force is on “red” alert, it warns that there may be an emergency, so it should be ready to deal with it. A “Red flag or light” is used in China to show the area under construction; it is dangerous to near. This kind of “red” is a warning.

2.4 A Symbol of Youth, Health, and Beauty

The symbolizing significance of “red” concerning one’s appearance is embodied more obviously in Chinese. For example, a boy or a girl’s “red face” means that he or she is pretty. “*Mian se hong run-face red and ruddy*” refers to a very healthy and spiritual person. Many expressions are used to express women in Chinese language, such as “*hong yan-red face*”, “*hong zhuang-red clothes, women’s clothes*”, “*hong feng-red powder and rouge used by women*” and so on. A girl’s bedroom is called “*hong gui fang-red girl’s apartment*”. The muscle color of the beautiful women is described as “*hong bao shi-red gem*”. In addition, the word “*tao hong-peach red*” and “*xing hong-apricot red*” give us a vivid and beautiful picture of the spring. These meanings of “red” are perhaps quite strange for English-speaking people; after all, the westerner has never used “red” to representing the women.

2.5 A Symbol of Fortune, Fame, and Power

“Red” has an implied meaning of fortune and benefit. In the ancient time, the price of goods on the first business day after Spring Festival Day was called “*hong pan-red quotation*”. If one makes profit at the beginning of a day or month or year, he has “*kai men hong-made money when opening the door for business at the first time, a good start*”. Moreover, there are phrases such as “*hong li-red benefit (bonus)*”, “*fen hong-divide the red (dividend)*”, “*man tang hong-full hall red (successful in every business)*”, and so on. The rise of stock exchange index is shown in “red” and decline in “green” in China, while in western stock exchange market, it is opposite.

There are many expressions with “*hong*” indicating fame, such as “*zou hong-go red (become famous)*”, “*hon gren-red person (famous person)*”, and so on. “*Hong ren-red person*” often refers to a person who is in his superior's good graces. If someone is lucky enough to get great success in his career or other aspects of life, he is regarded as “*zou hong yun-red luck (getting lucky)*”.

“Red” has the symbol of power in ancient China. Formerly, the door of a high-ranking official was often lacquered “red”. “*Hong*” is a graceful color, standing for power and high position. It is well-known that the great poet of Tang Dynasty Du Fu has the famous line, that is, “Inside the (*zhu men-red gate*) vermilion gate, wine and meat are stinking; on the roadside lie the bones of people frozen to death.” “*Zhu men*” (the word “*zhu*” also means “red” in Chinese) means the “red-painted” gates, implying in the house, the high-ranking officials and nobles lived. In archaic Chinese buildings, columns, rafters, temples and nobles' houses are all painted in “red”. Thus, “*zhu men-red door*” becomes the symbol of wealth and high status. In addition, nobles, high officials and rich people are dressed in “red”. In the Tang Dynasty, the officials who were superior to the fifth rank were required to wear “red” court dress. Furthermore, their carts were called “*zhu xuan-red cart*” and “*zhu lun-red wheel*”. Therefore, the “red” dress becomes the synonym of success and power. The “red hat” is the official’s hat worn by a high-ranking government official in the Qing Dynasty.

“*Hong*” has some other meanings in Chinese language. “*Hong chen-red dust (the society, the world)*” is the usage of Buddhism and Taoism and it refers to the material or secular world. In Beijing opera, “*hong lian-red face*” facial makeup implies the virtues of loyalty, honesty, bravery and strong-mindedness, such as the character Guan Yu, and Zhao Kuangyin.

3. CONCLUSION

Scholars say, “Language is influenced by culture, and reflects culture. It does not only contain the history and cultural background of the country, but also indicates the life style and the mode of thinking of the country.”

Therefore, it must combine the knowledge of language and knowledge of culture together, which can make people communicate with each other fluently. And the color terms also play an important part in the cross-cultural communication.” From the above, we can see the cultural connotations carried by the color term “red” are quite profound and abstruse in Chinese language. To understand correctly the metaphor of “red” in Chinese culture can help foreigners communicate with Chinese people more easily.

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