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The Yin Yang Wu Xing of Chinese values



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Abstract

This study aims at elaborating on the phenomenon of colour culture in China, exploring its significance on intercultural business communications in China. Narrative analysis of accounts by Chinese colour professionals participating in a group discussion are reported in narrative format.

The findings suggest an existence of a phenomenon which the author has named ‘Colour culture’ – a cultural set of meanings that are invested in colours within particular contexts. The present empirical study proposes a strong tendency towards these meanings being value based in China. Visual manifestations of cultural values appeared to be dynamic and dependent on context.

The current study does not offer generalizable prescriptions for contextual colour usages. The explorative, qualitative nature of this study serves as a basis for contextual and quantifiable research on the phenomenon.

As practical implications this paper suggests that since colours manifest cultural values and are highly emotional for the Chinese, not only linguistic, but also visual translation of communication is needed. For managers, this further implicates a need for contextual

understanding of local colour culture in order to make decisions regarding colours for branding, product design or any business communication in China.

Keywords: Business communication, China, colour, culture, narratives, values.

Introduction

The global significance of China as a market in both consumer and business-to-business contexts is growing rapidly. Many aspects of Chinese culture have oscillated at the focus of interest of both scholars and managers. However, the various visual manifestations of Chinese values are only vaguely comprehended. The current study bridges this gap by offering an entry point to Chinese values and their visualisations, presenting the Chinese colour culture as it reveals itself in business contexts in today's China.

The current argument in cultural construction of social life concur the centrality of the visual (Rose 2003) acknowledging the need to expand the visual studies beyond that of images, to the study of the seen and observable (Emmison and Smith 2007). The significant apprehension is that both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed (Rose 2003). Reportedly, colours are invested different meanings in China than in Western countries (Madden, Hewett, Roth 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen 2002; Ou Li-Chen et al. 2004). It has even been suggested that the connotative meanings of colours may be more important in communicating in eastern rather than western cultures (Bottomley and Doyle 2006). However, the previous research offers no explanations to the dynamic nature of these meanings. Bridging this gap, the current empirical study reveals how the contemporary changes in political, economic and socio-cultural values become visible as the Chinese colour culture evolves.

Group discussions of Chinese colour professionals are scrutinized using narrative analysis. Unexpectedly, the findings disclose a strong tendency of the meanings invested

in colours by the Chinese to be value-based. This indicates the need for thorough contextual investigation of Chinese colour culture when making management decisions regarding colours used in business communication for specific purposes.

Research design and data: cross-cultural approach

The theoretical framework of this exploratory study is grounded on a multidisciplinary, value-based notion of culture. This construct of culture focuses on the importance of *shared experience* in the production of *shared meanings* for colours, a phenomenon which the author has named *colour culture*.

The relevance of national culture may be argued (see e.g. Groeschl and Doherty, 2000; Huntington 1996). However, when discussing global business, the role of the nations remains significant. One of the most important reasons or aspects of this significance are various barriers of trade, which typically are defined by national boundaries. Also it has been suggested that nation remains a key unit of shared experience (Inglehart and Baker 2000). Therefore, the current study takes as its focus of interest a nation, the People's Republic of China.

This paper is part of a larger research project into the phenomenon of colour culture. The methodological stance aspires for an emic (Polsa 2002, Eckhardt 2004, Zhu & Uljin (2005) cultural approach (Moisander and Valtonen 2006) to the phenomenon utilizing narrative inquiry into Chinese colour culture. The research design in detail is presented next.

This paper reports on an empirical study conducted among Chinese colour professionals in Shanghai in October 2007. The nature of this research is resolutely comparative, as it focuses on the differences between 'Chinese' and 'Western' colour cultures. In this paper, 'Chinese' and 'Western'; 'East' and 'West' are not explicitly defined, but these concepts are used as the professionals who participated in the empirical study expressed

themselves. However, this paper focuses on reporting the findings on the Chinese colour culture only.

As I am not Chinese, this study cannot be considered emic as such. However, considerable measures to take on a Chinese rather than only a Western view on the phenomenon were taken. Firstly, the preparations for the empirical study were carefully considered from the Chinese perspective. The invitees to participate in the study were selected to create a group that's dynamic would work for the study: the invitees, chosen by Finnish company CPS Color according to commonly discussed principles, were prominent colour professionals from top level in their organisations and were respected by each other. Secondly, as the facilitator of the discussion I prepared myself circumspectly to the event, taking into account the credibility and power issues suggested by a Chinese research colleague, considering even the smallest details such as whether to wear spectacles rather than contact lenses. Thirdly, the actual event of the empirical study included both more formal, seminar type of phases as well as formal and less formal group discussions, including lunch and dinner. And finally, the analysis did not adopt any etic constructs but instead, two relevant Chinese tools that emerged in the empirical data were applied; the concept of *Yin and Yang*, and *Wu Xing*, the theory of five elements (Morton 2004, Zheng 2005). These concepts will be discussed in detail in the implications sections.

The purpose of the current study is to elaborate on the characteristics of Chinese colour culture in broad business context. A purposive sample of Chinese colour professionals participated in a full-day seminar, including panel discussion and workshop, to discuss and share their business experiences on Chinese colour culture. Purposive sampling refers to choosing the sample based on a specific purpose rather than randomly, in this case to find a revelatory sample of colour professionals (see Teddlie and Yu, 2007).

Consequently, the participant sample did not endeavour to be representative of any demographic profile, but instead, the aim was to include a broad array of professionals of different ages and from different parts of China; with first-hand business experience to explore some of the many potential meanings invested in colours in China. The thirteen

colour professionals were working in marketing (paint or colorant equipment businesses), design (graphic design, interior design, colour consulting), and research; represented different ages (23-62), both genders (seven male, six female) and several provinces in China. Participant details are presented in Appendix 1.

The panel discussion and workshop was conducted as a part of a full-day seminar where I introduced several aspects of colour usage in business context for discussion: How global colour trends emerge and are created; how commercial colour phenomena have been studied in academic research; how businesses have studied and made decisions regarding colour choices; and how national colour cultures have come into being. The topics were elaborated with examples (photos and case studies) from China; Europe, especially Finland; India; and Japan; and the seminar as a whole acted as a set of probes and elicitation material (Mattelmäki 2006, Moisander and Valtonen 2006) for the panel discussion and workshop. Most essentially, the participants had been asked to prepare their own business-related real-life experiences and examples beforehand, and to tell their stories in the panel discussion.

The participants narrated their personal colour experiences in two sessions during the course of the day. From these discussions there emerged a clear unanimous view, that the Chinese colour culture can be divided into two parts: the traditional and the modern. This first finding was elaborated at the end of the day, as each participant created a graphic representation using paper, coloured pencils, colour charts, scissors and glue, of his/her view on 'traditional' and 'modern' Chinese colours, and explained their views using either Chinese or English as their language of choice. All of the discussions were videoed and the graphic representations recorded as originals as well as photographs. Some participants provided also other visual data, such as power-point slides or references to certain web-sites, to complement their stories. The discussions were transcribed from video both in Chinese and in English and translated to the other language.

The transcriptions were analysed using narrative analysis and content analysis. In this study, narrative inquiry refers to having interviewees tell stories on their particular

experiences and creating joint narratives on the discussed topics within group setting. As defined, colour culture evolves with *shared experiences*. Consequently, narrative inquiry was a suitable method for this study since, as Riessman (1993) points out, it opens up the forms of *telling about experience*, not simply the content to which language refers. The current methodology is also in line with Elliott's (2006) proposition for the researcher to engage in multitude of different ways with the narrative properties of their data, instead of using a single narrative method. Narratives are useful for what they reveal about social life; culture 'speaks itself' through an individual's story (Riessman 1993). However, a naturalistic or topic centred approach (Elliott 2006, Riessman 1993) to the narrative was applied in this paper, putting main focus on the content of the narratives, rather than on what kind of representation of themselves the participants were putting forth.

Finally, to complement, quantify and evaluate the findings from narrative analysis, content analysis was used to allow for discovery of patterns that were too subtle to be visible on casual inspection and for protection against unconscious search for only those patterns which supported 'the researcher's initial sense' (Lutz and Collins 1993). In this study, content analysis was thus used to assess the relative importance of the issues (the more of the participants discussed a certain topic, the more important it was assessed), and relative unanimity of the participants on the topics, for example. The conclusions of the content analysis are reflected in the order and wordings of the vignettes in narrative format in the findings section.

Findings: Colour narratives from China

This section presents findings from the empirical study. The vignettes in narrative format are analytic collages of excerpts from several interviewees' narratives. The vignettes were given an analytic title, and are presented in italic typeface. If only a single person's view is cited, this is specified adding quotes, gender (M/F) and age of the cited person.

With her long, recorded history, China's colourful past offers many potential interpretations for current uses and meanings of colours. The present empirical study

revealed firstly, a clear consistency in the way in which ‘traditional’ Chinese colours are seen; secondly, a rather unanimous proposition on which factors affect contemporary change; and, thirdly, a less distinct view on what the future may hold. In the next sections these three topics will be discussed.

The Wu Xing (五行) or five elements of traditional Chinese colour culture

Prevailing significance of the old Chinese concept of *Wu Xing*, ‘five agents’ or ‘five elements’ (Paton 2007; Zhang 2005; Zheng 2005), clearly emerges from the narrative data. *Wu Xing* was an extension of an idea in traditional Chinese philosophy where the aim was to achieve a balance and harmony between Man and Nature (Zheng 2005); and everything was seen as correlated to everything else (Fairbank 1994). *Wu Xing* represented five substances or qualitative matters: metal, water, wood, fire and earth. Later the concept was developed to various correlations including directions, sounds, tastes and other human senses, internal organs, body parts, and colours (Zheng 2005; Fairbank 1994). The five colours of *Wu Xing* were Green or ‘Azure’^[1] (Wood), Red (Fire), Yellow^[2] (Earth), White (Metal) and Black (Water) (Zheng 2005).

The five traditional Chinese colours:

The foundation of traditional Chinese colours is based on the theory five elements. When used on their own, the colours carry specific meanings: cyan (青) for vital force, growth; red (赤) for sun, inspiration and happiness; yellow (黄) for sunshine and brilliance; white (白) for withered and the start of snowing, and black (黑) for dark and gloomy. However, the combination of the five colours together reflects a hope for ‘good luck and warding off evils’.

Wu Xing also had the theory and application of ‘mutual generation’ as presented in Figure 2 below. The five phases are still, at least implicitly, used in Chinese medicine and fengshui design (Paton 2007), including the use of the respective colours.

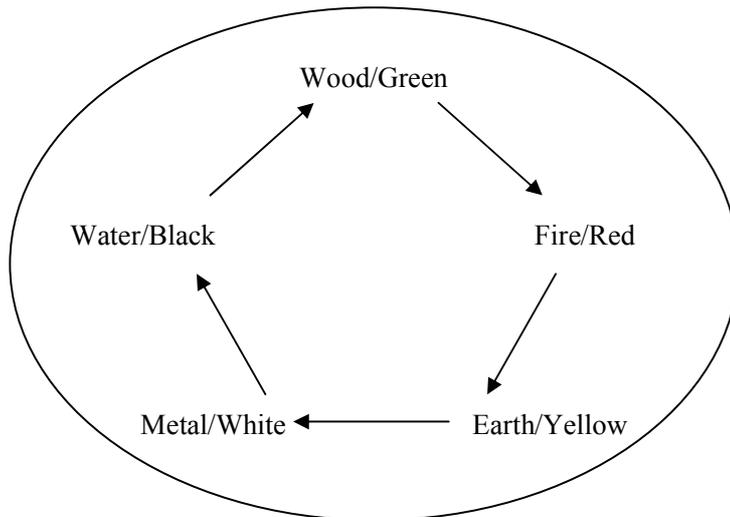


Figure 2. Mutual generation of *Wu Xing* (five elements). Water (black) generates wood (green), wood generates fire (red), fire generates earth (yellow), earth generates metal (white), and metal generates water (Zheng 2005). This is a metaphoric construct, an expression of correlations in nature.

Different dynasties, different colours

“China has a long history, in different periods we had different colour preferences. In Tang dynasty, we preferred the five colours, very contrastive colours. In Song dynasty we liked the blue-green, like the sky or the sea, sometimes green, sometimes blue. And for Ming dynasty, the traditional vase was coloured blue and white.”(M/33)

To understand the meanings invested in the traditional Chinese colours requires knowledge on their various past uses. Perhaps most importantly, these colours represented a manifestation of each dynasty in power. Thus, for example, fire (red) was the sign of Zhou, defeated by water (black), the sign of Qin, and water in turn defeated by earth (yellow), the symbol of Han (Morton 2004). This was called the controlling cycle (Zheng 2005); which according to the empirical findings still has impact in today’s China:

The politics of colour

In the time of the emperors, they controlled the colour, and the common people were not allowed to use the royal colour. As the emperor wore yellow, the second level was only allowed to use purple, white or blue; the people could only wear grey. During the Cultural Revolution people used grey and blue, occasionally red. All of the five colours could only be used in worship things; they were colourful, with bright colours. Many traditional paper cuts and handicrafts used the five colours; these items were used for worship and to ward off evil. As the colours have always been controlled and mandated by the rulers, even today people have not developed their personal colours.

As each dynasty used to choose its colour, the present administration has followed the same principle, and chosen the colour red as their emblem. Relating to business, state-owned enterprises today often have red logos, and, in the early years of market transition, private companies even used a 'Red Hat strategy', meaning they disguised their private ownership by registering as a public-owned organization to benefit from differences in property rights (Wenhong Chen 2007).

Contrasting with a Western presupposition regarding Chinese red, the Chinese colour professionals today did not refer to communism in the context of colour red, but they spoke of happiness:

The red of happiness

Red expresses happiness. In Chinese history, we seem to never have disliked red, we always welcome red. The Chinese red is a yellowish red^[3]; this gives us the feeling of happiness. Consequently red is used in celebrations; in the bridal wedding gown, in Chinese New Year's celebrations.

Traditionally, the red is also used to ward off evil. The walls of the Forbidden City and even modern buildings are coated red for this reason. During Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) lot of red items such as lingerie are sold. Every 12 years you have a 'bad luck year', and then you should wear red underwear.

10/29

Especially the colour yellow still today carries the exclusive undertone of belonging to the emperor:

Yellow of the emperor

The emperor wore bright yellow clothes, and no one else was allowed to use yellow. Yellow or gold was used also on the ceilings of the emperor's buildings. Yellow represents gold as a colour, thus it represents richness.

The colour white had very different undertones in China than in the West:

Withering of the white

Traditionally in China when a person passed away, his family would dress in white. It is not a sad meaning, but a new starting to a new life. Earlier it has been recommended for Westerners not to present gifts wrapped in white paper, with white ribbon. But it is not only the colour; it is also the form of the package, if it reminds one of an ash box. It is not as simple as only the colour.

Black was mentioned as one of the traditional colours by most of the participants, but they did not discuss its traditional meanings further. Green and blue were discussed in connection with empirical buildings:

The green of vital force

Traditionally, roofs of the buildings were coloured green like in the Forbidden City.

Blue and the temple of heaven

Traditionally the Chinese, we do not seem to like blue, but we can find combinations of blue and red in Chinese temples and tombs. Blue colour was popular in Qing Dynasty, because people said that the emperor is the son of

heaven. The temple of heaven is blue, and the roof of the tomb of Sun Yixian is blue, while the walls are red. This is typical of Qing Dynasty.

To sum up, the traditional Chinese colour culture manifested values based on political hierarchy and the general belief system. The society was strictly controlled, powerfully ruled and mandated up to small details. Rituals played an important part in sustaining and transferring the cultural values. Colours as manifestations of values were mostly located in built environment and the apparel worn by the emperor and his subordinates, as well as in items used for worship. The values manifested by the traditional culture appeared to emphasize *honour, hope, respect* and *self-protection*.

In the next section, empirical findings on current changes in Chinese values are discussed.

Yin and Yang of changing values in modern China

“The Changes discuss yin and yang.” Zhou Dunyi (in Zhuagzi, cited by Zhang, 2005).

In line with Paton’s (2006) suggestion, this paper uses the ancient Chinese cosmological system of *yin* and *yang* as a way of thinking of East and West in the context of culture. In this system, *yin* and *yang* are mutually connected so that they are never found without each other. There is *yin* within *yang* and *yang* within *yin*; hence, eastern perspectives are defined by western and vice versa (Paton 2006). In the narratives of the current study this way of analysing the data appeared to be extremely revelatory, not only comparing the East and the West, but also many other potential opposites visible in today’s China: the old and the young, the traditional and the modern, the controlled and the open. In this section, the contemporary change in values in China is presented via the *yin* and *yang* principle. The narratives focused on a few key divides, which are presented next.

The participants of the study emphasised comparison and contrasts between the 'West' and 'China'. The Chinese traditional values were expressed in relation to Confucian doctrines (see e.g. Au and Wong 2000). Even though the Western-Chinese contrast can be seen at least in part caused by the comparative nature of the research setting, the group interview participants returned to this divide time and again:

From self-protection to self-expression

Unlike the Western people, the Chinese separate between internal and external expression. The appearance outside may used as protection, not showing what there is on the inside. Western people express themselves, 'the look and the man's feeling is the same'. But traditionally, the Chinese followed the rule, focused on internal beauty according to Confucian teaching, and did not care about the outside appearance. Even now, the outside appearance is still more for other people, to make them appreciate you. Thus, to follow the trend is safe. But the young generation may start finding their own colours, expressing themselves.

Balancing the Western and the Chinese

Chinese colour culture development means finding a balance between some Western ideas and some traditional background. For example in Chinese weddings now, besides the red 'Qipao', our brides also wear the western white dress.

As noted by Soontiens (2007), historically China exported its own values by means of trade and migration. In recent decades, however, technological development and accessibility has contributed to an unprecedented exposure to Western values. In many parts of the world this has led either to gradually accepting Western values or even replacing traditional values with those from the West (Soontiens 2007). The opening-up of the society; globalization; and economic development all influence the change in Chinese values, and it was suggested that this Westernization will continue:

From controlled to open society

“China has been very controlled, even the colours have been controlled. Now China is opening up. In the next twenty years, China will become the most open country in the world; you cannot see difference between China, America and Europe.” (M/39)

This change seemed most apparent in the younger generation in China. In the present empirical study, vivid discussion and also clearest unanimity emerged when discussing the generational difference and the changing personal values:

From ‘We’ generation to ‘Me’ generation

In China, the generation born after 1980 has been named the after-80’s generation, or ‘Me’ generation. The older generation says ‘we’ and the after-80’s generation uses ‘I’.

On the other hand, globalisation was also seen as an influence to recreate interest for the distinctiveness of Chinese culture:

The youth and Confucius

“Our young generation wants to find our roots; we notice that foreigners know more about Chinese history and culture than we do. We do American and European things but also want to find our Chinese roots. It is popular to read Chinese history, read the writings of Confucius.” (F/23)

Globalisation was seen to lead to increased awareness towards global issues such as health-preservation and ecology:

From human privilege to considering the nature

“Change in ideology also imposes change in the use of colours. Now we pursue the security, healthy and nature-friendly ideology. Poisonous colours that were used in China even in toys are being replaced with safer colours, and new

standards will be formulated for exterior decoration and interior paints. This will influence our choice of colours, as well.” (M/62)

In urban life, business and leisure time were considered separate; and ‘leisurely’ clearly emerged as a fairly recent, significant and positive meaning attached to a colour:

Business and leisure

The young know that at different occasions they should wear different colours. Black is kind of safe colour, no matter on which occasion; if you wear black it makes you safe. When you wear black no matter if it is leisure, formal or businesslike, you will be ok.

The modern colours are more transparent, lighter, and more leisurely. Perhaps the colour with most leisurely feel is the most successful colour.

Geographical divergence is evident in China and, in fact, non-specifiable in a country with an area of nearly 9.6 million square kilometres, population of an estimated 1.3 billion people, 56 recognized ethnic groups, and swiftly developing, gigantic cities with international influence (<http://www.china.org.cn/>). Even local dialects were found to have influences on colour choices. The group discussion pointed out some details on the geographical divides:

Rural – urban; north - south

You cannot understand China by focusing on cities like Shanghai; that is not the real China. Still 80 per cent of the people are farmers, and many of them cherish traditional values. They use more colourful items than urban Chinese.

“This century silver has become a popular car colour in China. However, in one province in southern China, the silver-coloured cars did not sell. The explanation was that in local pronunciation, the character for ‘silver’ sounds like ‘money gone’. Therefore, the businessmen would not buy a silver car.” (F/30)

Thus, in line with Xu and Rickards (2007), a fusion of Eastern and Western belief systems and concepts seems to be emerging in China. However, the empirical data suggested that the young may find the globalizing society confusing for their identity, and thus they may become re-interested in the traditions. On the other hand, globalization induces interest in the local and the distinctive aspects of Chinese culture. Further, urbanization re-establishes the importance of the rural parts and agriculture. – *Yin* becomes *yang*, and *yang* becomes *yin*.

An overview of some of the main motions in values suggested to be taking place in today's China is presented in Figure 3 below. In accordance with the philosophy of *yin* and *yang*, it is important to notice that this should be seen as a circular movement: when *yin* rises, *yang* diminishes, and vice versa; the motion never ceases.

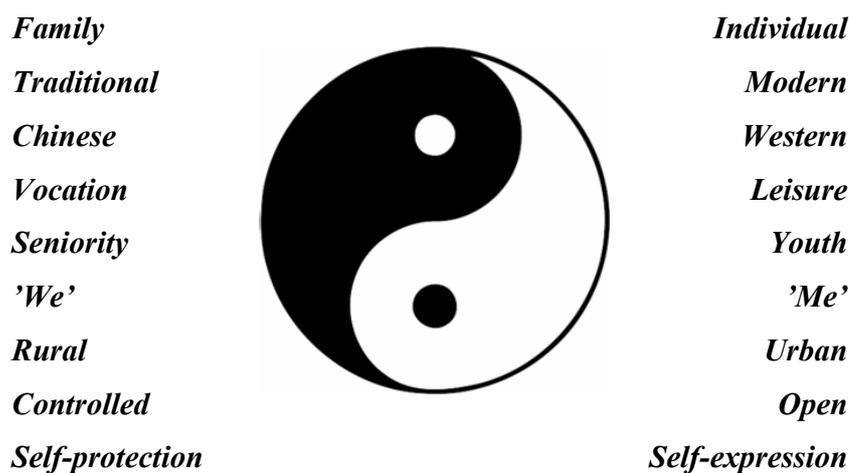


Figure 3: The *yin-yang* motion of values in today's China

To sum up, the recent transformation in values in China appeared to shift the focal point of appreciation to the individual over the family, to the modern over the traditional; and to the Western or global over the Chinese. Leisure and joy of life were increasing in significance, as business, work and career were considered more and more demanding. The after 80's generation, which never lived the times of more controlled society, but, instead, were the only children that had come to take for granted the undivided attention

of their parents and grand parents, were focusing on themselves and had the means to express themselves. On the other hand, this generation was suggested to become re-interested in the Chinese traditions to reclaim their identity in the globalizing world.

However, some values will not change, or will they? Feminine betrayal in a marriage appeared such a strong dishonour that it was nearly unmentionable. According to an old saying^[4], if the wife betrays her husband, the husband ‘Wears a green hat’ and the green hat was suggested to still today carry this strong undertone:

The green hat

“...But be sure you do not give a green hat to Chinese men. This doesn’t change.”

(M/37)

“Who knows, maybe after 20 years it will be a kind of fashion.” (M/39)

The next section discusses the empirical findings on what these changes in values may imply for modern colour culture in China.

Modern Chinese colour culture – myriad colours and colour combinations

“Yang changes and Yin unites, and this produces water, fire, wood, metal and earth. [...] The interactions [...] transform and generate the myriad things.”

Zhou Dunyi (in ‘Book of comprehending’, written during Song-dynasty (960-1279), cited by Zhang, 2005).

Even today, outsiders often fall for the fallacy of a monolithic China. However, the findings of present empirical study were in line with the suggested tendency of transformation of cultural values taking place in China (Gong, Li & Li, 2004). Increased pluralism was seen to be caused by the opening-up and globalization of the market place, and the myriad of values were becoming more and more apparent with the younger generations.

International brands have become very visibly present on the Chinese market, rendering it extremely competitive (Kauppalehti 2003). Consequently, international colour trends have played a significant role in recent urban China. The middle-class was seen to aspire for international values:

The Dream society

Chinese people use colour to reflect what they dream for, their dream society, their ideal self. Our ideal society now is American and European style. China opens up. In a way, to follow the international trend is to fulfil a dream.

When analysing the content of the accounts on the dream society, the ideal, words like ‘elegant’ and ‘leisurely’; ‘harmonious’ and ‘contrastive’ came up repeatedly. Joy was seen to emerge from the contrasts, and contrasts were seen to create harmony:

Harmony resides in contrast

Harmony can also be found in the conflict. The modern Chinese colours are contrastive; they give you the feeling of happiness and joy. When you combine different colours, it can be harmonious, as well.

Understanding the continuous fluctuation of the importance of international and Chinese trends has significant implications for marketing. As change takes place at an extreme velocity in today’s urban China, international trends might not grasp the whole potential. The selection of colours was seen to emerge from a combination of tradition translated into the present. Maybe the red and yellow are turning into orange, green will become ‘olive green’ or ‘bamboo green’; and brown might develop into ‘coffee colour’? Happiness, leisure and joy of life seemed to be highly valued, and on an axis of joy, orange or red seemed to contrast with grey:

Orange; the new red?

“Orange is bright, happy, and also an international mix. The meaning of orange is brighter, and it is not traditional Chinese kind of bright, but also, mixed with

some international flare, making me think of California. These specifically will attract a lot of high end people. Orange is also very close to the Chinese red.” (M/39)

Loosing the joy of life?

“The present society is high in tension. If all the colours are grey, we will not have the joy of life.” (F/30)

In very personalized items the colours of gender came forward. The tradition seemed to play a part in this, as well:

Colours of gender

Traditionally in China, green is the female colour and red is the male colour.

When a couple got married they received as a wedding gift two blankets; green for the wife and red for the husband.

“When designing the spring summer collection of ladies’ lingerie for 2007, the designer was puzzled, for the Chinese don’t have any traditional festivals during this season. Therefore, she had to refer to the international colour trends; she included sky blue, very feminine light pink, rose red, orange, and pansy to the collection. The designer herself liked olive green, so she tried to involve this colour into her design. Coincidentally, the marketing director happened to like the olive green as well, so they agreed to include it in the collection. The olive green turned out to be the most successful colour, perhaps because it was the colour with the most leisurely feel.” (F/30)

As suggested by the narrative, the “leisurely feel” of the olive green may well have contributed to its success, but it may also have had to do with the feminine undertone to green, as well.

The young generation gets out there on the cool-hunt; to be different; to make a statement; and to express themselves with the colours:

What is 'cool'?

"In marketing, we need to know the trend. Black used to be the cool colour to wear, now it is cool to dye your hair yellow [blonde]." (M/33)

"Young boys have started to compete in beauty contests and more and more boys prefer pink, which normally belongs to girls. The boys want to get the appreciation from the girls." (F/23)

Colours of self-expression of the 'Me' generation

In five to ten years, the younger generation will become the mainstream of Chinese consumer market. More attention should be put on their choices. They want to show their personality, to be different, more colourful. They seem to like shining, bright, strong contrastive colours. At their home, they may paint one wall green, one wall yellow, and one wall red.

The content analysis clearly established that the personal colour accounts of the participants revealed aspiration towards positive values, which were described by active values such as *excitement, happiness, joy of life, leisure, power, passion, self-expression, and strength*. On the other hand, a more passive set of positive values was accounted, such as *calm, generous, refreshing, safe, stable, and steady*. Further, *elegance* seemed to be sought after. And finally, various expressions of *harmony* emerged.

Negative values discussed in the connection with colours were few; colour as such seemed mostly to be connected with positive values. The fact that all of the participants were professionals working with colour may have influenced this outcome. However, black was described as representing also the dark side of human nature; and grey was seen as void of joy of life.

To sum up, the traditional, clearly definable single colours were seen to have been replaced by a large range of shades that often needed more than a basic colour word to name them. To further describe these colours, references were taken from nature. Even more typically, however, meanings of colours were expressed by discussing feelings and emotions connected with them.

Summary of findings

Not surprisingly, the main theme in China was seen to be change. The opening up of the society and admiration for the Western way of life was found to be reflected in today's Chinese values and, consequently, the usage of colours. However, a re-appreciation for the traditions of Chinese culture might be expected to re-emerge as the nation grows more confident.

In this study, the Chinese colour culture appeared as being divided into two generations: the traditional and the modern. The traditional colour culture consisted of five colours; blue-green, red, yellow, white, and black. These five colours were related to a theory of the *Wu Xing*, five elements, which are still used in traditional Chinese medicine and fengshui, for example. The modern colour palette, however, consists of a myriad of colours and colour combinations. They surface from tradition translated into the present combined with international colour trends, creating a unique yet dynamic and contextually changing set of meanings invested in colours today. Where the traditional colour scale was seen as a set of clearly definable, single colours, the modern colours were described as more of a combination of mixed colours, toned with white or black, creating lighter or heavier feelings. Expressions of emotions were used when describing what colours might illustrate or symbolize.

The most important discovery from the present study, however, was highly unanticipated: It proposed a powerful tendency of meanings invested in colours in China to be value based. This is a finding that has not been reported in previous colour studies in business context. Consequently, as values have been established to be of high significance in

intercultural communications (e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 2001), and cultural values in China have been suggested to be based on human feelings as opposed to an internal ethic in the West (Kenna and Lacy 1994) colours as the visual manifestations of values call for increased attention. The findings of this study offer one important key for aperture of these connections and differences.

The study revealed that the *yin* and *yang*; waxing and waning of traditional and modern values might become visible in colour usages. The traditional colours manifested values like *honour, hope, respect* and *self-protection*; while the modern colour palette revealed a more pluralist set of values: active values such as *excitement, happiness, joy of life, leisure, power, passion, self-expression, and strength*; more passive values such as *calmness, generosity, refreshing, safety, stability, and steadiness*; as well as *elegance and harmony*. These findings further increase interest in a more detailed analysis into the types of values (Dolan et al, 2004) colours may manifest in different contexts in China. Consequently, the present study opens up new views and research avenues on the phenomenon of Colour culture. Further, it will be interesting to see if future studies find other national cultures, for example the Indian (see e.g. Bhasin 2007) or the Finnish, to suggest similar or different takes on what colours might manifest. From personal experience I suspect the Western way of thinking about colours to be much more superficial than that of the Chinese, for example.

Management implications

Understanding the continuous fluctuation of the importance of international and Chinese trends will have significant implications for marketing. As change is swift in today's urban China, international trends might not grasp the whole potential. As lucrative as it would seem, the current study does not offer generalizable prescriptions for contextual colour usages, because such generalizations would only lead to falsified stereotyping of Chinese colour culture. On the contrary, the current study revealed that suggesting that colour culture were a constant rather than a dynamic phenomenon would be inaccurate.

However, the findings of this study did accentuate the distinctiveness of Chinese colour culture when compared with Western colour culture.

Consequently, for management, the study implicates a need for genuine understanding of dynamics of local colour culture in order to make decisions for branding, product design or any other commercial visual communications in China. International colour trends may work in China, but, a local colour choice may lead to significantly higher sales, as suggested by the example of success of olive green lingerie in 2007, presented in the section which discusses Modern Chinese colour culture. Contextual market research instead of or at least complementing general studies is indispensable.

In intercultural marketing, there emerges a need to work with Chinese designers, who have an innate understanding of the potential local colour meanings. Further, approaching the market with a humble and non-colonialist attitude becomes essential. In branding and other marketing communications, the meanings invested in colours are just as important – if not more so – than the meanings of language, since they are connected with emotions and values. It is vital for a brand's success to make sure that also the meanings conveyed by visuals are 'translated' into another culture. The usage of a particular colour or colour combination in an inappropriate context may prove harmful. The strongest example found on this point is the betrayed-husband symbolism of a green hat presented in the section discussing *yin* and *yang* of changing values in modern China, suggesting that it might be wise avoiding using a green hat in advertising visuals, for example.

Research summary and limitations

This paper reports on an exploratory qualitative study on a phenomenon called 'Colour culture' as it is visible in broad business context in today's China. This paper is part of a larger research project focusing on business colour culture in China. The current empirical study consisted of a full-day seminar, panel discussion and workshop among Chinese colour professionals from different parts of China, aged between 23-62, both male and female. The participant sample did not endeavour to be representative of any

demographic profile, but instead, the aim was to include a broad array of professionals to explore potential meanings invested in colours in China. Narrative analysis complemented with content analysis was used to scrutinize the discussion texts.

This study used an innovative research design to elaborate on the phenomenon of Colour culture. The colour professionals that participated in the seminar and workshop found that studying colour culture in this manner is extremely valuable and revelatory due to the possibility of peer discussions and outside views. This is in line with Moisander and Valtonen's (2006) note that today's trend in using visual methods and materials is to use them in combination with other methods, and novel ways of conducting interviews are based on having the interviewer and respondents collaborate in constructing the narrative. The group situation enabled participants to build on each other's accounts and, consequently, the collaboratively constructed narratives could not have been created with a different set of participants. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the participants were colour *professionals* working in *business*, so even though their backgrounds varied in other regards, they may have formed a relatively homogenous group with regards to their personal values.

Moreover, as is typical of narrative inquiry, interpretation by the researcher in all phases of the study is inevitable, since narratives are *representations* of experiences. As it is not possible for the researcher to be neutral and objective (Riessman 1993), the researcher is bound to be involved in the narrating process and the person of the researcher is part of the interpretive process (Rowlinson and Procter 1999). To increase the validity and reliability of this study, I prepared for the study carefully taking into consideration many distinctive features of Chinese culture in a group setting, and made the process of data gathering and analysis as explicit as is possible within the space restrictions of a research paper.

Finally, the main limitation of this paper is that the findings regarding colours are reported only in verbal format. Discussing colours without seeing them at the same time inevitably leads to multiple understandings. It has been suggested that even a colour as

globally wide-spread as ‘Coca cola red’ is not the ‘same’ red in everyone’s minds (Neyman 1996). For future reference and potential research collaboration, I have stored the records of the materials used and created at the group sessions of this study.

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Endnotes

^[1] The English translation of the colour of the ‘Wood-element’ represented by Chinese characteristic 青 varies in different sources. It has been translated at least as (in alphabetic order), ‘Azure’, ‘Blue’, ‘Blue green’, ‘Cyan’ and ‘Green’. This exemplifies the difficulty in translating a colour *as it is conceptualized* into a *text in another language*, especially within another writing system. (See Mantua 2007).

^[2] It is natural that the colour of earth is named ‘yellow’ in China. For example, the Yellow River gets its name from the rich, yellowish-brown soil called loess that it carries in suspension along its course (Wright 2001).

^[3] According to one participant, the first red colours in China were produced from mineral ‘Zhu Sha’, whose colour is also red with yellow. This exemplifies the influence nature has in the emergence of colour culture.

^[4] This may be due to Tang-dynasty legislation, which may actually have required the husband to wear a green hat, if he could not keep his wife acting decent. (Nojonen 2008, personal communication).

Appendix 1: Participants of the empirical study. Due to the confidential nature of the data, the names of the individuals and organizations participating in the group interview are not disclosed.

Field of Business	Title	Province of origin	Age	Gender (F=female, M=male)
Research institute	Chief engineer	Jiangsu	62	M
Paint company	Marketing manager	Tianjin	33	F
Paint company	Marketing manager	Guangdong	33	M
Paint company	Regional sales representative	Shanghai	38	F
Design company	Marketing director	Beijing	39	M
Design company	Technical Director	Guizhou	45	F
Training/Consultancy/ Design company	General manager	Beijing	50	M
Training/Consultancy/ Design company	Design manager	Beijing	30	F
Equipment company	General manager	Jianxi/Anhui	37	M
Equipment company	Regional sales and marketing manager	Liaoning	39	F
Design company	Design director	Shanghai	27	M
Design company	Chief Designer, painter	Jiangxi	33	M
University	Masters student	Shaanxi	23	F