Narratives on Chinese colour culture in business contexts
The Yin Yang Wu Xing of Chinese values

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Abstract
Purpose – This research is interested in how dynamics in negotiating cultural meanings in the globalizing market place in China become visible in one particular aspect of culture: colour culture. The purpose of this paper is to explore the provenance of some of the many potential meanings invested in colours in contemporary China, and how and why these influence international business, communication, design and marketing management in particular.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative empirical study with ambition for an emic cultural approach to Chinese colour culture. Narrative analysis of accounts by Chinese colour professionals participating in a focus group interview, and by individually interviewed managers with extensive experience in Sino-Finnish business are reported in narrative format.

Findings – The findings support the proposed existence of a phenomenon which the author has named “Colour culture” – a cultural set of meanings that are invested in colours. Unexpectedly, the empirical study proposes a strong tendency towards these meanings being value based in China. Visual manifestations of cultural values appear to be dynamic and dependent on context.

Research limitations/implications – 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 future research on the phenomenon.

Practical implications – Since, for the Chinese, colours manifest cultural values and are highly emotional, not only linguistic, but also visual translation of communication is needed. For international communication, design and marketing managers, this further implies a need for contextual understanding of local colour culture.

Originality/value – Recognizing the existence of colour culture and its value-based proposition in China opens up new research avenues and practical considerations for cross-cultural studies.

Keywords Business communication, China, Colour, Value, Narratives, National cultures

Paper type Research paper

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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 for 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 visualizations, presenting Chinese colour culture as it reveals itself in business contexts in today’s China. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the dynamic characteristics of Chinese colour culture in a broad business context, in other words, how and why colours can have an effect on business. It should be emphasized that the aim is not to propose a generalizable resolution of Chinese colour meanings, but instead to explore the provenance of some of the many potential meanings of colours in China today.

The cultural construction of social life currently stresses the centrality of the visual, the seen and the observable (Emmison and Smith, 2007; Rose, 2003). There is a general perception that both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed (Rose, 2003) even amidst globalization. Reportedly, colours are invested with different meanings in China than in Western cultures (Madden et al., 2000; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2002; Ou 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, previous research offers no explanations for the dynamic nature of these meanings. Interestingly, the present empirical studies suggest that contemporary dynamics and changes in political, economic and socio-cultural values brought on by globalization are becoming visible as Chinese colour culture evolves.

This study used narrative analysis to scrutinize individual interviews with managers having extensive experience in Chinese-Finnish business and focus group interviews with Chinese colour professionals. Contrary to expectations, the findings disclose a strong tendency for the meanings invested in colours by the Chinese to be value based. This indicates the need for a thorough contextual investigation of Chinese colour culture when making management decisions regarding the colours to be used in communication, design and marketing.

Theoretical background: perspectives on globalization

This research is interested in how dynamics in negotiating cultural meanings in the globalizing market place become visible in one particular aspect of culture: colour culture. Culture is conceptualized as shared meaning (Hall, 2003). Moreover, meaning is generated through reference to physical objects or to physical experiences (Machin, 2009). Consequently, with respect to colour, the focus is on the importance of shared experience in the production of shared meanings for colours, a phenomenon which I call colour culture.

The relevance of national culture may be disputed (Groeschl and Doherty, 2000; Huntington, 1996). However, the role of nations and nation-states in global business remains significant (Garcı´a Canclini, 2001; Huntington, 1996; Ong, 1999). The various barriers to trade, which are typically defined by national boundaries, are one of the most important reasons for or aspects of this significance. Also, it has been suggested that “nation” remains a key unit of shared experience (Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

Hence, while the current study takes as its focus of interest a nation, the People’s Republic of China, this paper is grounded at the intersection of three

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simultaneously occurring but sometimes contradictory globalization paradigms in cross-cultural studies (Figure 1).

First, global homogenization or convergence theory suggests that cross-cultural differences erode in the midst of globalization (for analyses see, e.g. Howes, 1996). Most often this research corpus equalizes globalization with Westernization or Americanization, while also “Japanization”, “Russianization” and “Indianization” are of concern in some geographical areas (Appadurai, 1996, p. 32). Second, hybridization theory suggests that global and local cultures create new, amalgam cultures (Appadurai, 1996; García Canclini, 1995). Also referred to as creolization, this research corpus is interested in how global phenomena, products and brands are given culturally specific meanings. Third, an emerging research stream has taken a post postcolonial stance, also labelled the radical cultural turn (Ong, 1999; Shi, 2005; Westwood, 2004). I call this research stream empowerment, where non-Western countries, Asian “Tigers” in particular, are seen to actively and powerfully participate in global economy, culture and politics (Huntington, 1996, pp. 21-8; Ong, 1999, p. 35; Shi, 2005; Westwood, 2004).

Research design

The methodological stance of this research is a combined etic-emic (Polsa, 2002; Eckhardt, 2004; Zhu and Ulijn, 2005) cultural approach (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). This study uses three datasets from three phases of the study: the first, consisting of narratives from individual interviews with Finnish and Chinese managers having extensive experience in Finnish-Chinese business, the second, consisting of narratives of Chinese colour professionals generated in a focus group setting, and the third, consisting of narratives from individual interviews with Chinese colour professionals and further interviews with Finnish and Chinese managers. In the analysis, I used within-method triangulation of the data from these three phases (Figure 2).

Individual interviews are used as a way to find insight into the phenomenon of colour culture from the business perspective, in other words, how colour culture affects business. I used narrative inquiry as a projective technique, allowing the interviewees

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**Figure 1.**

Three coexisting paradigms of globalization

**Sources:** Extracted from Howes (1996); Appadurai (1996); García Canclini (1995); Huntington (1996); Ong (1999); Shi (2005)
to share knowledge without disclosing sensitive or confidential business information. On the other hand, group interviews are particularly useful in the Chinese cultural context since there “interpretations, evaluations, and attitudes are made collectively rather than individually” (Eckhardt, 2004, p. 406). Consequently, I used the focus group interview technique to find insight into why Chinese colour culture affects business in the ways identified in the individual interviews. As I am Finnish and not Chinese, this study cannot be considered emic as such. However, the analysis did not adopt any etic constructs. 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; Yu, 1998; Zheng, 2005).

Transcripts from the interviews were analysed using narrative analysis and content analysis. In this study, narrative inquiry refers to the technique of having interviewees tell stories about their particular experiences and creating joint narratives on the discussed topics within a group setting. My argument is that 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 forms of telling about experience, and not simply the content to which language refers. Narratives are useful for what they reveal about social life; culture “speaks itself” through an individual’s story (Riessman, 1993). Moreover, I used content analysis to allow for discovery of subtle patterns and for protection against an unconscious search for only those patterns which support “the researcher’s initial sense” (Lutz and Collins, 1993). I used a method of content analysis based on text search. I searched the transcripts for particular colour words and expressions to see how often a colour was mentioned and to group all narratives of a particular colour to enable comparison across multiple transcripts.

**Findings: colour narratives from China**

With her long recorded history, China’s past offers many potential interpretations for current uses and meanings of colours. First, the findings from the empirical study suggest
consistency in the way in which “traditional” Chinese colours are seen; second, a rather unanimous proposition on which factors affect contemporary change; and third, a less distinct view on what the future may hold. In the next sections, I elaborate on these three topics via narrative vignettes, which are analytic collages of excerpts from the narratives of several interviewees. The vignettes are given an analytic title and presented in italic typeface. If only a single person’s view is cited this is specified by adding quotation marks, and the gender (male/female) and nationality (CHN/FIN) of the person cited.

The dominance of the old Chinese concept of Wu Xing, the five elements (Paton, 2007; Zhang, 2005; Zheng, 2005), clearly emerges from the narrative data. The concept of Wu Xing came into use after the beginning of the Qin Dynasty (221 BC) and it represents five substances: wood, fire, earth, metal and water. Later the concept was developed into various correlations including directions, sounds, human senses, body parts, and colours (Yu, 1998; Zheng, 2005). The five colours of Wu Xing are green or “Azure”, red, yellow, white and black (Zheng, 2005). They carry specific but slightly altered meanings even today:

The five traditional Chinese colours

“When used on their own, the colours carry specific meanings: azure (蒼) for vital force, growth; red (赤) for sun, inspiration and happiness; yellow (黃) for sunshine and brilliance; white (白) for withered and the start of snowing, and black (黑) for dark and gloomy. Together, the five colours reflect a hope for ‘good luck and warding off evils’” (F/CHN).

Wu Xing also had the theory and application of “mutual generation” and “mutual conquest” as shown in Figure 3. The five phases are still used in Chinese medicine and Fengshui design (Paton, 2007).

An understanding of the profound meanings of traditional Chinese colours requires knowledge of their past uses and preferences during different dynasties. Perhaps,
most importantly, the five colours represented a manifestation of each dynasty in power; they were seen to follow each other in a cyclical motion according to the controlling cycle of *Wu Xing* (Zheng, 2005). 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 tradition of using colours as symbols of power is still of importance 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. When 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.

All five colours were only used in worship things. As the colours have always been controlled and mandated by the rulers, even today people have not developed their personal colours.

In effect, the present empirical study suggests an interesting connection between the theory of *Wu Xing* and contemporary colour culture residing in the issues of power and control. For thousands of years, Chinese society has been strictly controlled; even the use of colours was controlled during the imperial regime. Also, Mao Zedong recognised the power of dress in projecting ideology, and during the Cultural Revolution most people wore a blue, military style suit, while the military wore khaki suits (Powerhouse Museum, 1997). Even though Chinese society is opening up to international influences, these customs have persisting consequences. Even the present administration has followed the same principle, and chosen the colour red as their emblem. Contrary to the Western presupposition regarding Chinese red as the colour of communism, red for the Chinese predates communist ideology by thousands of years. Consequently, Chinese colour professionals did not refer to communism when discussing the colour red, but spoke instead of happiness:

The red of happiness

Red expresses happiness. In Chinese history, we seem to have never disliked red. The Chinese red is a yellowish red from cinnabar; this gives us the feeling of happiness. Consequently, red is used in celebrations; in the bridal wedding gown, in New Year’s celebrations.

Another prevailing function of the colour red is its use to ward off evil:

Warding off evil

Traditionally, 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, red items such as lingerie are sold. Every 12 years you have a “bad luck year”, and then you should wear red underwear.

The “bad luck year” every 12 years refers to the Chinese Zodiac, which is a 12-year cycle with one animal representing each year, 2011 being the year of the rabbit. Consequently, everyone that was born during a year of the rabbit has a “bad luck year” in 2011. Even young Chinese wear red shoes, belts or other garments for the duration of the year of their animal sign. One Finnish manager lively described how she came to understand this custom:

“I found out, wondering why on earth were there so many red belts in the shops in China, because it was not a fashionable colour. [This] led me to ask why, why, why, and the meaning
of the belt shows that you were born during the year we are celebrating, but it can be something else red as well, it can be something invisible like underwear" (F/FIN).

Even today, the colour yellow carries an exclusive undertone of belonging to the emperor, which dates back to the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD):

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

The colour white has very different undertones in the west than in China, where it is the traditional colour for funerals:

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” (F/CHN).

Participants in the present empirical study mentioned black as one of the traditional colours, but its meanings were not further discussed. Green and blue were mostly discussed in connection with royal buildings:

The green of vital force
Traditionally, the roofs of buildings were coloured green like in the Forbidden City. It is a kind of blue-green, like the sky or the sea, sometimes green, sometimes blue.

The concept of this blue-green colour is difficult to grasp for the non-Chinese, since it evades exact definition. This can clearly be seen in traditional handicrafts, where the black, yellow, red and white remain constant, but the shades of green and blue vary. A specific blue, however, is that of the Qing Dynasty:

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 the 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 the Qing Dynasty.

Yin and Yang of changing values in modern China


In line with Paton’s (2006) proposition, this paper uses the ancient Chinese cosmological system of yin and yang as a way of perceiving 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). This method of data analysis appeared to be extremely revelatory, not only in comparing east and west, but also many other potential opposites visible in today’s China.

The interviewees expressed traditional Chinese values in relation to Confucian doctrines (Au and Wong, 2000). Confucianism is deeply ingrained in the way of life and the social order even in modern China (Ng, 2000). Recently, however, the values and lifestyles of the Chinese people have been greatly influenced by globalization and the information age (Qi and Tang, 2004). With changing social expectations, rising living standards, and increasing Western influences (Hung and Li, 2006), the traditional
way of thinking has been complemented by applying a variety of interpretive strategies and self-referencing to merge traditional and global cultures (Hung et al., 2007) especially in urban China. Even though the Western-Chinese contrast is at least in part caused by the comparative nature of the research setting, the focus group participants returned to this divide time and again:

From self-protection to self-expression

“Unlike Western people, the Chinese separate internal and external expression. The appearance outside may be 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, 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 expressing themselves, finding their own colours” (M/CHN).

Balancing the Western and the Chinese

Development of Chinese colour culture means finding a balance between some Western ideas and traditional background. For example, in Chinese weddings now, besides the red “Qipao”, the brides also wear the Western white dress.

Historically, China exported its own values through trade and migration (Soontiens, 2007). 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 gradual acceptance of Western values or even to replacement of traditional values with them (Soontiens, 2007). The opening-up of society, globalization, and economic development all influence the change in Chinese values, and it was suggested that this Westernization would continue:

From a controlled to an 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 will not be able to see any difference between China, America and Europe” (M/CHN).

This politically correct expression of change seemed most apparent in the younger generation. In the focus group, vivid discussion and also the clearest unanimity emerged when discussing the generational difference and changing personal values:

From the “We” generation to the “Me” generation

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

Similarly, recent research findings suggest that there is an exceptionally clear generational divide between the “post-1980s generation” (Huang, 2007) and the “older generations” (Yang et al., 2005) in China. On the other hand, globalization was perceived to regenerate interest in the distinctiveness of Chinese culture:

Young people 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/CHN).

Globalization was seen to lead to increased awareness of global issues such as good health and ecology:
From human privilege to consideration of nature

“Change in ideology also imposes change in the use of colours. Now we pursue a secure, healthy and nature-friendly ideology. Poisonous colours that were used in China even in toys are being replaced with safer paints. This will influence our choice of colours as well” (M/CHN).

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

Business and leisure

On different occasions you should wear different colours. Black is kind of a safe colour on any occasion; if you wear black it makes you secure – no matter whether it is leisure, formal or business-like, you will be ok.

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

Geographical divergence is obvious in China and, in fact, non-specifiable in a country with an area of nearly 9.6 million square kilometres, a population of an estimated 1.3 billion people and 56 recognized ethnic groups. However, 92 per cent of the population is of Han ethnicity. Urbanization is swift, and officially up to 40 per cent of the population is considered urban. Commercially, interest focuses on these, gigantic, rapidly growing cities where international influences are strong (www.china.org.cn/). Urbanization and development of infrastructure influence the ongoing change in values and colour culture. Even local dialects were found to influence 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. Most of the people are still farmers, and many of them cherish traditional values. They use more colourful items than urban Chinese.

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

To conclude, a fusion of Eastern and Western belief systems and concepts seems to be emerging in China. On the other hand, globalization induces interest in the local and distinctive aspects of Chinese culture. Further, urbanization re-establishes the importance of the rural parts of the country and agriculture – Yin becomes yang, and yang becomes yin.

However, some values will not change, or will they? Feminine betrayal in a marriage appeared to be such a great disgrace that it was nearly unmentionable. According to an old saying, if the wife betrays her husband, the husband “Wears a green hat” (Mantua, 2007) and it was suggested that a green hat continues to carry this strong undertone:

The green hat of embarrassment

“[…] But be sure you do not give a green hat to Chinese men. This doesn’t change” (M/CHN),

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

Green hats may have wider than expected implications for sales, as any garment worn close to the face may have this connotation of betrayal:
“Well in China there is this old tradition, that if the wife betrays her husband then the husband wears a green hat. And because of that, green ties for example, there was no hope in getting them [sold], now they are starting to move but for a long, long time no, no way would one have a green tie, it would have been like admitting ‘my wife is betraying me’” (F/FIN).

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 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 the present empirical study were in line with the transformation of cultural values that is apparently taking place (Gong et al., 2004). Increased pluralism was seen to be induced by the opening-up and globalization of the market place and myriads of values were becoming more and more apparent to the younger generations.

Global brands have established themselves very visibly on the Chinese market, rendering it extremely competitive (Kauppalehti Optio, 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 fulfill a dream” (M/CHN).

When analysing the content of the accounts of 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

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, concentration on international trends may keep businesses from exploiting the entire available potential. The selection of colours was seen to emerge from a combination of tradition translated into the present. Will red and yellow turn into orange, will green become “olive green”, and may brown develop into a “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 the traditional Chinese kind of bright, but mixed with some international flare, making me think of California. This specifically will attract high-end people. Orange is also close to the Chinese red” (M/CHN).

This positive connotation with colour orange was limited to those Chinese who have wide international connections, and furthermore, orange seemed to be a Western interpretation of Chinese colours rather than a colour the Chinese would choose themselves.
Also, the Western trend of using “non-colour” like grey was questioned by one Chinese colour professional:

*Losing 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/CHN).

In very personalized items the colours of gender came forward. Tradition also seemed to play a part here:

*Colours of gender*

“Traditionally in southern China, green is a female colour and red is a male colour. When a couple got married they received two blankets as a wedding gift; green for the wife and red for the husband” (M/CHN).

“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. Hence, she had to refer to the international colour trends; she included sky blue, very feminine light pink, rose red, orange, and pansy in the collection. The designer herself liked olive green, so she tried to include this colour in her design. Coincidently, the marketing director happened to like olive green as well, so they agreed to include it in the collection. Olive green turned out to be the most successful colour, perhaps because it was the colour with the most leisurely feel” (F/CHN).

Interestingly, neither the international colour trends nor the five element colour theory nor the tradition of the green hat seem to have affected the choice and success of the “olive green” colour in this context. 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 traditionally feminine undertone of green.

The young generation wants to be different, to make a statement and to express themselves with colours:

*Colours of self-expression of the “Me” generation*

In five to ten years, the younger generation will become the mainstream of the 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. In their home, they may paint one wall green, one wall yellow, and one wall red.

*Bachelors in pink*

“Pink normally belongs to the girl, but nowadays more and more boys prefer this colour. We know in China now, more and more boys are entering beauty contests; they are kind of starting to do the girl’s job. They want to get praise and appreciation from the girls. And they also want to show themselves, most of the girls like the beautiful boy, like F4. So pink is the colour indicating that female power in China is rising” (F/CHN).

“Yes, so many boys wear pink, yes. Traditionally, people thought that pink is for girls. But in my mind pink is a younger colour, not a girl colour. So I like the boys wearing pink, I think […] I feel the boy wearing pink is more beautiful than the girl wearing pink (laughing). Because the girl wearing pink is pretty, cute, but the boys wearing pink is so […] so […] hmmm […] is to change the boy, the man’s image. The boy, the man is not made of iron, not hard, so hard, several […] so many parts are soft. I like, I think pink expresses well, for this. But I think the girl, women in modern city, modern life, they want to express their energy, they can work everything, they can express themselves with colour like blue, purple, red, some colour with energy, with the power, power. I think in this thought men, women, girl, boy, their use of colour can be mixed. So, pink boy is so […] express their realized thought. I think boys wearing pink can cry (laughing). The boys wearing black, wearing navy blue cannot (laughing)” (F/CHN).
The Finnish managers give different explanations for this kind of phenomena:

“What has lately been kind of surprising regarding ties is that for a long time the tie branch was very conservative, it was like yellow, blue and red that moved there [...] I mean really traditional, but now that we have had pink they want pink there. [...] So they kind of want to be in it, because, in the same way, they do travel around, they go to Europe and see [...] if they happen to travel to London all the time and in London pink is all you find [...] so maybe this could be, ‘when they in Europe are like this so maybe I could be, too’” (F/FIN).

In other words, the Finnish managers tended to put more emphasis on the explanatory power of international colour trends, while the Chinese colour professionals saw a deeper connection to the societal values.

Conclusions and discussion
Not surprisingly, change was regarded as the main theme in urban China in the present study. The opening up of the society and admiration for the Western way of life was found to be reflected in today’s Chinese values. Interestingly, however, changes in values induce changes in the use of colours. On the other hand, self-appreciation of the traditions of Chinese culture might be expected to re-emerge as the nation grows more confident.

In effect, the present study finds that three prevailing approaches to globalization theory are simultaneously relevant in the contemporary context of the Chinese market: In some aspects, conforming to the theory of homogenization, Chinese culture is becoming “Westernized” (Gong et al., 2004; McEwen et al., 2006). As far as colour meanings are concerned, this development has led to Chinese designers adopting Western colour theories such as those used in colour psychology. However, in many cases, “Western” is given new, culturally more appropriate meanings in Chinese contexts, which is in line with hybridization theory (Eckhardt and Houston, 2001 on McDonalds, and Venkatraman and Nelson, 2008 on Starbucks). For example, the extensive use of pink shirts by Chinese bachelors to impress girls is an indigenous phenomenon, even though on the surface it could be considered merely a part of the masculine pink trend (Koller, 2008). However, on a deeper level it is one of the ways in which the consequences of China’s one child policy and subsequent sex ratio allowing empowerment of girls (Ding and Hesketh, 2006; Fong, 2002; Tsui and Rich, 2002) is becoming visible in today’s China. Finally, contemporary empowerment of the Chinese is expected, as “Chineseness”, linked with cultural traditions such as Confucianism and Fengshui, on the one hand, and with transnational capital and entrepreneurs on the other, is regaining appreciation in China and the Pacific Rim, and albeit reluctantly, acquiring respect in the Western world (Ong, 1999). Fengshui, for example, is currently more appreciated in the west than by young Chinese, but perhaps precisely this positive reception overseas will lead to local renewed appreciation, as well, and consequently a renaissance of the five colours. On the other hand, Mao’s role during the Cultural Revolution has been re-romanticized, which is visible in some new features of commodity culture, such as Mao-style restaurants (Friedman, 2008). Capitalizing on revolution legacy, these popular restaurants feature revolutionist imagery and Mao-kitsch decorations using the colour palette of the era.

The most important discovery from the present study 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 a business context. To summarize, Figure 4 shows an overview of some of the main shifts
in values apparently taking place in today’s China. 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.

As can be seen from the figure above, 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 post-1980s generation, which never experienced the more controlled society, and have come to take for granted the undivided attention of their parents and grandparents, are focusing on themselves and have the means to express themselves. On the other hand, it was suggested that this generation would take a renewed interest in Chinese traditions to reclaim their identity in the globalizing world.

Negative values discussed in connection with colours in the Chinese context were few; colour as such seemed mostly connected with positive values. The fact that all of the interviewees were professionals working with colour may have influenced this outcome. Nevertheless, black was described as representing the dark side of human nature, and grey was seen as void of the joy of life. Figure 5 shows relates the change in colour culture to the *yin-yang* shifts in values discussed above.

![Figure 4. *Yin-yang* motion in values in contemporary China](image)

![Figure 5. *Yin-yang* motion of colours in contemporary China](image)
To sum up, the interviewees were of the opinion that traditional, clearly definable single colours had been replaced by a large range of shades that could not necessarily be described by a basic colour word. To further describe these colours, they made references to nature. Even more typically, however, the meanings of colours were expressed by discussing the feelings and emotions connected with them.

In effect, the findings of this study offer a starting point for further research on the connections between colours and values in China, and consequently, the potential contrasts between colour meanings and preferences in Chinese and other national cultures. This may lead to more sophisticated understanding of findings in studies carried out in specific contexts, such as the colour choices for particular products. Moreover, the findings further increase interest in a more detailed analysis of the types of values (Dolan et al., 2004) possibly manifested by colours in contexts other than those of 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 that other national cultures, for example Indian (Bhasin, 2007) or Finnish, suggest similar or different takes on the provenance of colour meanings.

This study did not aim at generalizable resolutions of Chinese colour meanings. In contrast, it explored potential colour meanings to help understand how and why colours affect international business in China. While this can be considered a limitation of the study, it is also a strong point, as this explorative approach generated novel and unexpected findings. Furthermore, as is typical of narrative inquiry, interpretation by the researcher in all phases of the study is inevitable, since narratives are representations of experiences. Because neutrality and objectivity are not possible (Riessman, 1993), the researcher is bound to become involved in the narrating process and the person of the researcher part of the interpretive process (Rowlinson and Procter, 1999).

To increase the validity and reliability of this study, I prepared 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 possible within the space restrictions of a research paper. Finally, the main limitation of this paper is that (in contrast to the data gathering) the reporting of findings is restricted to verbal format. Reporting colour research without visual aids 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, I have stored the original visual records of the materials used and created at the individual interviews and focus group sessions of this study.

**Management implications**

Understanding the continuous fluctuation of the importance of international and Chinese trends will have significant implications for communication, design and marketing. Although, change is swift in today’s urban China, international trends may miss some of the potential. As lucrative as it would be, 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 it would be inaccurate to argue that colour culture is a constant rather than a dynamic phenomenon. However, the findings of this study did accentuate the distinctiveness of Chinese colour culture when compared with Western colour culture.
Consequently, for communication, design and marketing management, the study implies a need for genuine understanding of the 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 contrasting local colour choice may lead to significantly higher sales. Contextual market research instead of general studies or at least complementing them is indispensable.

In intercultural business, 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 communication, 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 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.

References


Further reading


Wright, D.C. (2001), History of China, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport, CT.

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