

# On the Translation of Color Words in Hong Lou Meng

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## Abstract

**Color words always play an essential role in literary works. In Hong Lou Meng, they are of a high frequency, and a great number of color words in it are closely associated with Chinese culture. However, researches that analyze the translation of color words from the cultural perspective have not received much attention. By illustrating the associative meaning of basic color words in Chinese and English, the research finds that different cultural backgrounds have an influence on translation. Thus, translators cannot take the words too literally and should consider the cultural connotation of the words and the context in the process of translating the color words. The findings of the study can help translators when they translate the original text that involves Chinese culture or contains special meanings.**

## Keywords

**Hong Lou Meng; Basic color words; Translation; Cultures.**

## 1. Introduction

Color words play a vital role in many literary works. Color words are indispensable in narrating characters, objects and scenery and are one of the main sense organ words applied to literary writing. On the one hand, color words give people visual excitement and beauty, and emotional punches. On the other hand, people usually associate color words with some cultural images. The Chinese and English color words can be generally classified into two categories: the basic color words and the entity color words. The basic color words refer to those which can denote the colors of natural things, such as white, green, black and green. The entity color words are the names of some things in nature. These entity color terms have dual meanings: the objects and the colors they represent, for instance, violet, sable and umber. Thus, basic color words have more cultural meanings than entity color words. Hong Lou Meng is one of the four famous classical works in Chinese literature, and its lingual art achievement is the representative of the lingual-art peak of Chinese classical literature. Moreover, according to the statistics, the number of color words is 155 in the first 80 chapters and these color words appear nearly 1000 times (Fan, 220). Besides, color words in Hong Lou Meng cover different aspects: from the character appearance to expression, from the environment to household articles. So Hong Lou Meng provides much research space for color words.

It's known that there are the two famous versions of Hong Lou Meng respectively translated by Yang Xianyi and David Hawks. Because of different cultural background and life-style, the non-equivalence of English and Chinese color words will appear in the process of translation. So the two versions of Hong Lou Meng may be different to some extent in dealing with color words. The present paper attempts to illustrate the associative meaning of basic color words and to compare and analyze the translation of basic color words from the cultural perspective.

## 2. Associative Meaning of Basic Color Words in Chinese and English

### 2.1. Definition of Basic Color Words

German linguist L. Geiger is the first one to put forward the hypothesis of ordinary acquisition order. The hypothesis holds that the colors perceived by people should match the natural spectral sort. The final conclusion is that the number of color words is 6—black, red, the mixture of yellow and green, white, the mixture of green and blue, as well as blue. One Soviet Union scholar made an experiment. 150 adults with euclomatopsy sort 112 cards including different colors. These cards were divided into six piles that respectively match six colors—white, black, red, yellow, green, and blue (Wu 92). In 1988 Yao Xiaoping revealed the evolution of color words in Chinese history and thought the basic color words are white, black, red, yellow, green, blue, purple, grey, brown and orange (19-28). In 1990 Liu Danqing pointed out that the number of the basic color words is eight—white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, purple and grey (77-80). In 2003 Li Hongyin thought the basic color words are white, black, red, green, yellow, blue, purple, brown and grey (92). On the basis of the six colors, the number of it can increase to 11—white, black, green, red, yellow, blue, gray, purple, pink, orange and brown. However, some color words contains few words in Hong Lou Meng, and the associative meaning of basic color words cannot be reflected by these words. Therefore, the research will focus on the following colors—white, black, red, yellow, green, gray and purple.

### 2.2. Associative Meaning of Basic Color Words in Chinese

In ancient China, the feudal society was rigidly stratified, which could be shown by the color of robes. Ordinary people were not allowed to wear colorful clothes; however, no matter how low the rank of an official is, his robe is colorful. So white usually refers to common people, people uneducated or people without social status. It also can be used to describe characters' expressions and signifies funerals.

Black, as the color of night, means something clandestine. It also refers to viciousness. In Zhou Dynasty, the emperors had the habit to wear black robes; even in other dynasties, officials with high ranks also wore in it. So black symbolizes solemnity, and the authority of emperors.

In Chinese culture, red signifies something jubilant. For example, in ancient times when couples married, the brides would wear red bridal arrays and bridegrooms would wear red flowers in their bosoms. Red is also applied to fire engines, warning boards and so on, causing the meaning of warnings and dangers. Besides, red is associated with emotion. Red is the symbolization of auspice and prosperity.

Yellow is special for the Chinese nation. Yellow, symbolizing imperial power is the color of emperors. In Qin Dynasty, yellow is designated as the robe color of emperors, so ordinary people and officials were banned to wear in it. Yellow refers to Yellow Emperor. Besides, yellow has the meaning of light and auspice in Chinese traditional culture. In addition, because burgeon as well as neonates' hair is yellow in nature and the color of things will turn into yellow when life decays.

Green, as the color of many plants in the world, is linked with nature and spring, extended into the meaning of vigor and energy. Green signifies clearance and permission for something and gives the meaning of salaciousness and humbleness. Purple is connected with eminence in the aspects of official position and power. In Tang Dynasty, it is an important feature to distinguish the official ranks by robe colors. The officials ranking over the third place usually wore purple robes. In Chinese culture, it is closely bound up with Chinese Taoism. Taoism makes purple connected with different aspects like imperial authority, palaces and auspice to improve its status and gain rulers' support. Purple also symbolizes calmness, equability and uprightness.

Gray, as a blend hue, means gloom and also refers to something that is legal on the surface and unable to be exposed to the publics. In Chinese culture, gray relates the mood of depression and hypobulia.

### 2.3. Associative Meaning of Basic Color Words in

White has the connotation of purity. In western weddings, brides wear white veil and bouquet and the dominant color of weddings is white, which symbolizes purity of brides and marriage. White also signifies luck as in “white day” (an auspicious day) and “white-haired boy” (a favorite). In the expressions “white elephant” it means something useless. White can be used to describe someone who looks pale because of illness, strong emotion etc.

Black means “illegal” and “evil”. Besides, the hell in Christianity is a dark place without any light and is said to be home for all wicked people who cannot go to heaven. Thus, black has the connotation of death and darkness. As death is an unfortunate thing and always makes people sad, black is also associated with sadness and misfortune. In addition, black is the symbolization of being formal and occupational and solemn. In some formal occasions such as workplaces and funerals, people usually wear black suits to show the seriousness of the situation.

Red represents life, birth, love, inspired passion and celebration. Red hat” and “Red Cross” refer to cardinal and an international organization respectively, both of which are the symbols of caritas and dedication. The red carpet will be rolled out in some important occasions to show the respect to guests and the importance of occasions. Moreover, red is as the same as the color of blood, signifying violence, anger, danger and bloodiness. For example, “red alert” means a warning there is very great danger. “Red activities” means violent activities. “See red” signifies becoming angry. Besides, it can be used to refer to “deficit” in the expressions such as “in the red” and “red ink”. In addition, the meanings of red are usually pejorative. For instance, “catch someone red-handed” means catching someone at the moment when he is doing wrong things. Yellow means warnings and dangers, especially in traffics and matches. For instance, “a yellow alert” refers to a preparatory warning. And yellow is connected with wealth and money as gold has the same color, as apparently shown in the expressions “yellow boy” (gold coin). Yellow symbolizes power and honor as it is a holy color in Christianity, for example, the Holy Grail used by Jesus in his final dinner was yellow. It also gives the meaning of cowardice and envy. The more common usage of “yellow” in English is to refer to an editorial style. For example, “yellow journalism” means the type of journalism that relies on sensationalism and lurid exaggeration to attract readers. Moreover, it also denotes that people miss loved ones far away and look forward to their return.

Green is linked with nature and spring, extended into the meaning of vigor and life as in “green old age”, “in the green” and “green belt”. It is also connected with environment. In addition, the traffic light turn into green which means people can move on; therefore, green signifies permission for something as in “give somebody the green light” and “green card”. Green is also a symbol of peace, which comes from the story Noah's Ark in the New Testament. In addition, green means freshness, naivety and a lack of experience, as apparently shown in the expressions “as green as grass” and “not as green as one's cabbage-looking”. Moreover, it also has the meaning of “envious” and “jealous”.

Purple has the connotation of emperors and aristocracy. For instance, “be born in the purple” was a category of members of royal families born during the reign of their parents. And “purple airway” means that airstrips are owned only by royal families. In English culture, purple is linked with western religions. In Christianity, purple represents the power that comes from the Holy Spirit, showing the authority and supremacy of purple. And in important and formal religious occasions, people will spread the purple table cloth and light purple candles as purple signifies love, holiness and dignity of the Lord. That is the reason why ordinary people usually

don't wear in purple. Moreover, purple has the connotation of sadness on account of Jesus with purple gowns on Good Friday.

Gray is a blend hue. It can be used to describe weather, people who are boring and unattractive, or a situation that is dull, unpleasant or difficult. It also signifies something that is legal on the surface and unable to be exposed to the public in such expressions "gray income" and "gray market". In addition, gray has some special meanings in the formation of phrases. For example, "grey matter" means someone's intelligence or brain. "Gray mare" means that wives' ability is greater than that of husbands.

### 3. Translation of Basic Color Words in the Two Versions of Hong Lou Meng

Although the associative meaning includes connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning and collocative meaning, the connotative meaning and affective meaning can reflect Chinese culture better. Idioms, poetry and sentences will be applied to show the importance of understanding the cultural meaning of basic color words and making the target language readers better appreciate the original context.

#### 3.1. Color Words and Expressions with Connotative Meaning

Example 1: 正不知是何意，忽见警幻说道：“尘世中多少富贵之家，那些绿窗风月，绣阁烟霞，皆被那些淫污纨绔与流荡女子玷辱了。”

Yang: in your dusty world, countless green-windowed chambers and embroidered boudoirs of rich and noble families are desecrated by amorous men and loose women.

Hawkes: 'In the rich and noble households of your mortal world, too many of those bowers and boudoirs where innocent tenderness and sweet girlish fantasy should reign are injuriously defiled by coarse young voluptuaries and loose, wanton girls.

"绿窗风月" means the bedrooms of ladies are beautiful and delicate. Yang Hsien-yi renders it into "green-windowed chamber", which is faithful to the original text but not accurate. The translation of Hawkes not only points out the accurate meaning but also gives great details about what the bower should be.

Example 2: 此茶名曰“千红一窟”。

Yang: "Its name is Thousand Red Flowers in One Cavern."

Hawkes: The name is "Maiden's Tears"

"千红一窟" is the name of a kind of tea. Yang Hsien-yi translates "红" into "red flowers" literally, which is faithful to the original context. However, "千红一窟" is a homophone for "千红一哭", which lays the groundwork for the tragedy. So it is necessary to translate the connotation of "红". While Hawkes renders it into Maids' Tears, which accurately translate the implication of this idiom.

Example 3: 昨日黄土陇头送白骨，今宵红灯帐底卧鸳鸯。

Yang: Yesterday, yellow clay received white bones;

Today, red lanterns light the love-birds' nest;

Hawkes: Who yesterday her lord's bones laid in clay.

On silken bridal-bed shall lie today.

It can be found that the translation of "黄" and "白" have been omitted in Hawkes' translation in comparison with Yang Hsien-yi's translation because the colors we perceive from bones and clay are the same.

Hawkes translates "红灯帐" as "bridal bed", because Chinese-style weddings are mainly decorated in red, for example, red candles and red beddings. Besides, it's all known that the main color of wedding in the western countries is white to show the couple's pure love. Thus,

considering the difference between these two cultures, he omits the translation of “红” so that it avoids confusion of the target language readers and they can appreciate the poem better. However, the room that has red lanterns is not necessarily wedding room. Compared with the translation of Hawkes, Yang Hsien-yi’s translation is faithful to the original context and includes “love-birds’ nest”, which can make English readers fully understand the implication of the verse.

### 3.2. Color Words and Expressions with Affective Meaning

Example 4: 一席话，说的贾琏脸都黄了。

Yang: Jia Lian turned pale at this. Y021e197

Hawkes: Jia Lian turned pale with fright.

Both Yang Hsien-yi and Hawkes use “pale” rather than “yellow” in their translation as “yellow” in Chinese culture means decline or illness when used to describe someone’s appearance. And “pale” means having a skin color that is very white or whiter than it usually is. Besides, in Chinese culture white can be associated with emotions. Thus, “turn pale” is accurate and faithful to the original context. In addition, taking context factors into consideration, Hawkes adds “with fright” in his translation to show the mood of Jia Lian better.

Example 5: 不想今儿才有些消息，又遭秋纹等一场恶意，心内早灰了一半。

Yang: Today her opportunity had come, but her hopes had been dashed by the spitefulness of Qiuwen and Bihen.

Hawkes: Today she had at last found an opening, only to have her hopes immediately dashed by Ripple's malice. She felt very discouraged.

Yang Hsien-yi’s omits the translation of “灰”. Hawkes translates “灰” into “discouraged”, which conveys the connotation of “灰”. However, grey in both Chinese and English has the meaning of feeling down. So it would be better to render it into “in a grey mood”, which not only preserves the original image of context but also delivers the cultural connotation of “灰”.

Example 6: 林黛玉自觉忘情，不觉红了脸，拿袖子遮了脸，翻身向里装睡着了。

Yang: Blushing to think she had given herself away, Daiyu hid her face with her sleeve and turned towards the wall, pretending to be asleep.

Hawkes: Dai-yu realized that she had been caught off her guard. She covered her burning face with her sleeve, and turning over towards the wall, pretended to be asleep.

Both Yang Hsien-yi and Hawkes adapt domestication in their translation, but they have difference in diction. Yang Hsien-yi uses “blush” whose meaning is to become red in the face, usually because you are embarrassed. And Hawkes adapt “burning” in his translation; the implication of “burning” is “feeling very hot”. By contrast, Yang Hsien-yi’s translation can more accurately reflect Dai yu’s embarrassing situation and complex emotions of delight and bashfulness than the translation of Hawkes.

## 4. Conclusion

Color words seem to correspond in conceptual meaning, but may considerably vary in connotative meaning, affective meaning and various socio-cultural associations they may arouse in different cultural settings. So the understanding and interpretation of basic color words must go along with the understanding of the culture involved. To better compare the translation of color words in the two versions of Hong Lou Meng, the author illustrates the English and Chinese cultures as reflected in basic color words from the aspects of historical background, religious beliefs, living conditions and so on. From those Chinese and English cultural differences, we can understand why and how basic color words are endowed with different connotations; therefore, we should take the connotations of basic color words into consideration when translating them.

The transmission of cultural elements in cross-cultural translation is necessary as culture influences language and language also can reflect culture. Thus, translators are expected to narrow the cultural gaps and keep the flavor of original context. The research gives lots of examples that contain basic color words with connotative meaning and affective meaning. This thesis compares basic color words in the two versions of Hong Lou Meng to analyze the wording from the perspectives of narrowing the cultural gaps and keeping the flavor of the original context.

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