

A Study on the Expression of Three Colors - Black, Red, and Yellow and Related Aesthetic Ideas of the Yi People

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Abstract

China is steeped in a long history and splendid culture, where minority cultures add brilliance to traditional Chinese culture like bright pearls. For example, the culture of the Yi people showcases the richness of Chinese minority cultures, and at the same time, it is of special significance to traditional culture. From the perspective of the three-color culture (referring to black, red, and yellow) peculiar to the Yi people, this paper will analyze the features of the three-color culture and the colors, and study the unique aesthetic ideas of the three-color culture in the long history to demonstrate the Yi people's color-favored customs and connotations of traditional culture.

This paper consists of two important parts. First, it describes the traditional color culture of the Yi people and the features of these colors. The Yi people have a long history of the reverence for colors and a deep cultural heritage, which is a product of cultural accumulation. The Yi people have their unique understanding of colors, which comes from their life and nature. The reverence for and the worship of black, red, and yellow also has a long history and reasons. The features of these three colors unique to the Yi people reflect the culture of the Yi people and their emotions, embodying the unique color culture of the Yi people. Second, it studies the aesthetic ideas of the color culture of the Yi people, which is the focus of this paper. It analyzes and studies the aesthetic principles, styles, and ideas of the color culture of the Yi people deeply through centering on their costumes, lacquerware, and unique dance poems. With unique styles, the costumes of the Yi people are varied in colors, mainly using black, red, and yellow. Such use of colors creates a stark contrast, highlighting the characteristics of the Yi ethnic group's costumes and its ethnic features. The lacquerware of the Yi people is an expression of their unique aesthetic understanding of the use of three colors and the

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area of colors used. The color rhythms demonstrated with the help of a symmetric and harmonious application of colors is an important feature of the Yi ethnic group's lacquerware. The dance poem is a unique way to display the three-color culture of the Yi ethnic group. The black, red, and yellow are interpreted through three chapters by using the simplest colors to match the dance, creating a stark contrast that not only demonstrates the unique color culture of the Yi people, but also highlights the characteristics of the Yi people and their aesthetic ideas. Therefore, the research on the Yi ethnic group's color culture starts from three colors including black, red, and yellow, and explores the history of the culture as well as the characteristics of the Yi people, aiming to help people deepen their understanding of the color culture and the color-favored psychology of the Yi nationality, and the unique aesthetic ideas of this group. And this can further help us identify the special value of the Yi ethnic group's color culture and promote the spreading of the color culture of ethnic minorities.

In the context of the times, the colors used by ethnic minorities all demonstrate their own ethnic characteristics, and it relates to people's life and emotions, and nature. Therefore, it can be said that the choice of colors not only reflects one's aesthetic appreciation but also embodies the desire for life and a recognized culture.

Keywords: the Yi people, three-color culture, aesthetic ideas, color application

1. Introduction

China is a multi-national country with 56 ethnic groups (55 of them being ethnic minorities) spreading across this great land. The Yi people, the sixth largest ethnic minority in China, have developed the south-western region of China and contributed to its cultural and historical development.[1] The culture of the Yi nationality is one of the Chinese minority cultures that is rich in cultural connotations and of special significance, and it is also an integral part of Chinese minority culture. In the long history, the Yi ethnic group's culture is gorgeous and in particular, the application of colors by this group is a perfect combination of its people's emotions, lives, and nature.

From the perspective of the Yi ethnic group's color culture, their reverence for colors, aesthetic ideas, and ethnic feelings, this paper analyzes the features of colors used by the Yi people, their unique color culture, ideas, and aesthetic values, demonstrates abundant minority culture, and highlights the Yi people's favor and feelings of colors. Colors used by the Yi people have symbolic meanings to some extent, which can find expression in their unique cultural values, aesthetic values, and artistic values. Such application of colors plays a vital role in the practice of ethnic minority colors. Therefore, the

connotation and the color concept of ethnic minority cultures can be understood through this study, which can contribute to clarifying the development, artistic principles, and laws of ethnic minority colors, and there will be deeper studies on this field.

2. TRADITIONAL COLOR CULTURE OF THE YI ETHNIC GROUP AND ITS COLOR FEATURES

2.1 Origin of the Yi People's Favor of Colors

The colors used by the Yi people are not only visual art but also play an important role in local people's lives. Colors have a close relationship with people's feelings, preferences, cultures, and history. The Yi people have a long history of the reverence for colors and a deep cultural heritage, which is a product of cultural accumulation. Their worship of colors comes from local people's lives and their understanding of nature. In the early years, the Yi people began to worship the heaven and the earth, people, and everything in the world. And they believe that the essence of everything is two qi, either clear or murky. When these two are combined with each other, the clear one will become cyan and the other red. This is the Yi people's earliest understanding of colors, which shows these two colors have special meanings to everything and the Yi people's appreciation for colors.[2]

2.2 Traditional Color Culture of the Yi Ethnic Group

The Yi ethnic group has a long history of favoring black, red, and yellow, which is a significant part of its own culture. Therefore, it is clear that the Yi people tend to regard the above three colors as the "three primary colors" in the traditional color aesthetic view, which are major colors used by the Yi people.[3] The Yi people have their own reasons for their reverence for black, red, and yellow. First, as the symbol of the land, black is the most revered color in the Yi ethnic group, which comes from people's lives and nature. The local people grow up with a reliance on the land, and they are buried in it after death. This is a worship of nature, and thus they translate such reverence for black into everyday worship, which is also a respect for the black. [3] Besides, the Yi people have long lived in lush forests and secluded mountains, and this living environment has led to a visual stimulation of dark colors for local people, which has long made the Yi people accustomed to black. This has reflected their dependence on the colors of nature. [3] Second, the Yi people believe that the red is the protective color of their people. In the Yi people's concept of color, the red symbolizes blood, and they think that the blood-like red has the great power to repel enemies, and that the red can be used to

appease the gods and wandering spirits in rituals.[4] Meanwhile, the Yi people's reverence for red comes from the worship of fire. The Yi people use fire to repel wild animals and enemies and to cook food. They also believe that the cremation after death will bring them peace and blessings to the future generations.[5] Finally, yellow represents hope and goodness. In the traditional culture of the Yi ethnic group, there is talk about Bimo witchcraft where yellow is considered to give directions to lost souls, and thus ensure peace in the world. Therefore, in the Yi people's opinion, yellow is an auspicious color.[6] When looking up into the sky, you will see the sun, which gives life to everything in the world. Therefore, the Yi people believe that the sun is the source of life, and they worship it and appreciate it for giving life to the Yi people. The sun is yellow, so the Yi people have translated the worship of the sun into that of the yellow.[7] In addition, in the traditional customs of the Yi ethnic group, women will wear yellow waistbands to adorn themselves and make their dress more attractive, so yellow is also seen as a symbol of beauty.[4]

2.3 Features of Black, Red, and Yellow of the Yi People

2.3.1 The Symbolism of Black, Red, and Yellow

The Yi people's reverence for colors reflects their culture and their emotions, demonstrating their unique color culture. And their love of black, red, and yellow over the long history has led to the formation of a three-color custom. These three colors are the color language peculiar to the Yi ethnic group with typical symbolic meanings (see figure 1). The Yi people grow up, live, and eventually pass away in this black land, reflecting their worship of the black of nature. Because of their favor of black, they believe that black symbolizes strength, dignity, and solemnity.[4] From the perspective of the Yi people, red is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, which can ward off evil spirits and remove ill fortune. The red represents the Yi people's reverence for fire. They not only use fire to repel wild animals and enemies, but also to cook food. Therefore, red brings them hope.[3] The yellow sun reflects their ancestors' worship of sunlight, so they believe yellow means brightness, and is a symbol of harvest and richness.[8]

Figure 1. Three colors of the Yi people
https://www.sohu.com/a/132687402_669488



2.3.2 Iconic Characteristics of Black, Red, and Yellow

As the unique color language of the Yi ethnic group, the black, red, and yellow have been revered since ancient times, and have been given special symbolic meanings, which are different from other ethnic groups. For example, the Hani people believe that black means there is potential danger, so their preference for black can help them avoid being haunted by ghosts.[9] Tibetan people believe that yellow symbolizes the land where they live.[10] And the Dong people use warm colors such as pink and orange to highlight the festive and happy atmosphere. Therefore, the three-color culture of the Yi people is somewhat iconic.[11]

2.3.3 Decorative Effect of Black, Red, and Yellow

Black, red, and yellow are the expressions of the life and emotions of the Yi people, as well as the combination of their spiritual and material lives. The application of these three colors seems to be an invisible river throughout all ethnic solar terms enjoyed by the Yi people. And these colors will be reflected in costumes, lacquerware, and crafts. Solemn and calm, black is the color representing the Holy Spirit. It can be found that black is a versatile ground color in the Yi people's application of colors, which can make the overall look more elegant and calmer.[3] Red is well expressed during rituals and weddings.[4] Patterns like fire will be painted on lacquerware, highlighting the Yi people's worship of fire. With a reasonable combination and application of colors, the lacquerware also becomes more elegant.[12] Yellow is the most vivid color, and women will wear yellow waistbands to adorn themselves to make themselves more outstanding in the crowd.[13] Therefore, the Yi people use black, red, and yellow to decorate their own lives, which allows the harmony and contrast of colors to produce the best visual effect.

3. RESEARCH ON THE AESTHETIC IDEAS EXPRESSED THROUGH THE YI PEOPLE'S COLOR CULTURE

According to the aesthetic views held by the Yi people, only when black, red, and yellow are combined perfectly and harmoniously, can the beauty be created. The Yi people's unique aesthetic ideas are based on the harmonious combination of these three colors. The three seemingly simple colors actually represent the Yi people's worship of nature, the desire for a better life, the inheritance of the ethnic group's culture over the centuries, and the expression of their feelings and characters. This has become the vehicle for promoting the dissemination of the three-color culture of the Yi people. The inheritance of the application of colors can be found in the Yi people's costumes. With the change of the times, the combination of colors and multiculturalism better reflects the diversity of the Yi people's costumes. The Yi ethnic group's lacquerware has a long history, and its balanced combination of black, red, and yellow fully reflects the aspirations of the Yi people for a better life. The dance poem of the Yi people is a unique expression of their reverence for colors. With a perfect combination of colors and dances, three colors are presented more apparently, allowing the audience to have a deeper understanding of the aesthetic ideas of the Yi people's color culture and their feelings.

3.1 Costumes – Simplicity and Liveliness of Beauty in Form

The colors of the Yi people's costumes are an important part of their color culture. The colors used in their costumes display the Yi people's distinctive ethnic characteristics. The costumes are rich and bold in colors, with black, red, and yellow as the major ones, which constitutes a strong contrast, yet looks implicit and harmonious with a reasonable match. It is a culture that is worn by people (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. the Yi people's costumes <http://ynlnb.com/?p=4905>



3.1.1 Aesthetic Principles

The unique and colorful costumes of the Yi people are a reflection of their reverence for colors. As the preferences of the Yi people, black, red, and yellow are the major colors used. The Yi people regard black as an honored color, and they used to wear costumes in black to show their dignity. There are strict rules of colors, styles, and materials of the costumes. In a hierarchical society, the colors of costumes could be used by the Yi people to distinguish between their status in the early time.[14] Currently, the application of colors in the Yi people's costumes follows the principle of matching solid colors with other colors and making them compatible. Therefore, the patterns on the costumes look vivid and plain, the tones are simple and bright, with a rich flavor of life and distinctive ethnic features (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. the Yi people's costumes
<https://cj.sina.com.cn/articles/view/3723380045/pddee454d02700u4bq>



3.1.2 Aesthetic Styles

A stunning and harmonious combination of colors is the main style displayed by the Yi people's costumes. As the most basic color, black is the one used with the largest area on costumes and is the main ground color. Red is a dominant color that can be seen in costumes, which is also the brightest color. Just to complete the overall color scheme, yellow makes the costumes become brilliant and harmonious and demonstrates the sort of beauty unique to the Yi people. Colors used on the costumes create a stark contrast, but the black, as the ground color, matches with other colors harmoniously. Therefore, in the united and harmonious color rhythm, the features of the Yi people's costumes and their reverence for colors are highlighted. This is the Yi people's unique aesthetic characteristics.

3.1.3 Aesthetic Ideas

The aesthetic ideas reflected by color application of the Yi people's costumes display the cultural heritage of the group and demonstrate the group's ethnic ideas and unique aesthetic values. First, the combination with multiculturalism results in the diversity of colors of the Yi people's costumes. For example, in the early Ming dynasty,

when the Yi people were allowed to marry the Han people, the situation where the Yi people couldn't marry people from other ethnic groups was broken. This has led to a diversity in the application of colors of the Yi people, as they were influenced by the Han people.[15] Colorful embroidery was added to the costumes from the single use of floral cotton, and the colors were used and matched in a natural way. Nowadays, with the increase of quality and the influence of modern culture, the Yi people's costumes are more decent, and more popular colors are also used. The use of colors has become more varied depending on people's reverence.[16] Besides, the Yi people live in harmony with nature. They are simple and honest, which also makes them warm, cheerful, and hospitable. These characteristics are also reflected in their costumes. The choice of colors is based on the Yi people's worship of maturity and their ethnic characteristics. For example, they will choose bright colors such as red, purple, and yellow to decorate, and use black as the major ground color. Such a stark color contrast creates a combination of calmness and vibrancy, showing that the Yi people are both simple and hospitable.[17]

3.2 Lacquerware—Solemnity and Elegance of the Beauty of Harmony

The Yi people's lacquerware, which can date back to a thousand years ago, is a traditional Chinese minority craft and is placed in the list of the state-level intangible cultural heritage. It stands out in Chinese lacquerware culture.[18] With their wisdom and ingenuity, the Yi people have created unique, colorful, and practical lacquer crafts with black, red, and yellow as dominant colors in the long-term life practices (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. the Yi people's lacquerware, http://cul.china.com.cn/2021-10/22/content_41711412.htm



3.2.1 Aesthetic Principles

When the Yi people make their lacquerware, combining black, red, and yellow harmoniously is an invariable rule. These three colors are used as major ones, of which black is the darkest, and thus looks calm. The

red is pure and bright with high color lightness, and the yellow is slightly greyish rather than dazzling. Three colors are either dark or light, creating a striking visual effect and a stark contrast. Among the three colors, the black is the most important ground color with the largest area, which is different from the small area used with yellow and red. Therefore, it won't look too gaudy. Though with a high lightness, yellow and red make the lacquer become more compatible and composed against the black, showing some aesthetic ideas to some extent (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. the making of lacquerware,
<http://www.scpublish.cn/news/wx/detail?newsid=650471>



3.2.2 Aesthetic Styles

The color style of the Yi people's lacquerware is mainly characterized by the symmetry and balance of the colors used (see Figure 6). It is easy to find that there are many symmetrical things in nature, such as flowers and leaves. The symmetry and balance of colors will bring a beauty of dignity, elegance, and peace.[19] At the same time, in terms of the application of colors in lacquerware, harmonious rhythms are created through the combination of different colors. The density and the use area of colors are key to forming color rhythms of the lacquerware, which makes colors of the Yi people's lacquerware display their distinctive artistic style.

Figure 6. symmetric and balanced colors of lacquerware,
<http://www.scpublish.cn/news/wx/detail?newsid=650471>



3.2.3 Aesthetic Ideas

The Yi people worship and yearn for nature, adore their ancestors, and pursue peace and longevity for their families.[19] Therefore, the symmetric and balanced colors of lacquerware, and grasping the color rhythm can convey a feeling of stability and peace. If such a harmonious beauty is destroyed, it will look disorganized, unstructured, and disorderly. The Yi people's lacquerware is not only a combination of their cultural ideas and artistic expressions, but also the crystallization of people's emotions and their worship of nature. Their ideas on colors come from nature and their lives. They apply their such ideas to the making of lacquerware, making the lacquerware the vehicle of the Yi people's spirits. It carries the Yi people's desire for a better life and the pursuit of stability, which echoes the matching and use of lacquer colors, and reflects the Yi people's distinctive aesthetic ideas on colors.

3.3 Dance Poem—Beauty of Rhythm

In order to promote the development of minority cultures and protect the excellent arts of minorities, the Folk Arts Theater in Chuxiong Prefecture in Yunnan Province produced the Yi ethnic group's dance poem performance named the Three Colors of the Yi People in 2011. This performance is divided into three chapters, including the Dark Black, the Golden Yellow, and the Burning Red, aiming to demonstrate the Yi people's color culture with the help of the combination of colors and dances. It is a unique expression of the Yi people's colors, and the audience can feel the beauty of rhythm by appreciating the dance performance.[20]

3.3.1 Aesthetic Principles

Following the rule of displaying one color in one part, the dance poem performance uses black, red, and yellow as the theme color for each chapter. In the Dark Black, black is the dominant color displayed. First, the black will become more visible against the white light. Second, the black and white sheepskin vests worn by dancers also create a stark contrast. Finally, the white terraces are in contrast to the black “sky”. The white light makes the sky and the environment under the black sheepskin vests even more mysterious and empty (see Figure 7), highlighting the theme of this chapter and the use of black.

Figure 7. the first chapter, the Dark Black,
<http://www.ctps.cn/PhotoNet/product.asp?proid=1758577>



The application of yellow highlights the theme very well in the second part – the Golden Yellow, where the yellow light, yellow decorations, and yellow costumes worn by dancers show a sense of nobility and the joy of harvest. In this chapter, the yellow light is used extensively to create an atmosphere where people are delighted with the harvest. Besides, the colors of costumes and the dances are presented to show the Yi people’s joyous and happy life (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. the second chapter, the Golden Yellow,
<http://www.yizuren.com/art/yyhd/22611.html>



Red light and the costumes worn by dancers have shown the strength, life, and ardency in the third part – the Burning Red, where women use their delicate bodies to evoke people’s aspirations and appreciation for living, thus stopping the war. The use of charisma unique to women to demonstrate the strength of red has elevated women’s image to a new level. The light and costumes with red as the main tone keep the audience in high spirits, better highlighting the theme of this chapter (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. the third chapter, the Burning Red,
<http://www.yizuren.com/art/yyhd/22611.html>



3.3.2 Aesthetic Styles

The styles of the dance poem can find expression in simple and bright colors that perfectly match the dance, giving the audience the most straightforward feeling. The colors used in the choreography, light, costumes, and pops can reflect the identity, personalities, and environmental setting of the characters in the play, bringing a direct visual effect to the audience, satisfying people's aesthetic desire, and releasing their emotions. The most important and simplest three colors, including black, red, and yellow are used as the dominant colors to highlight the distinctive styles the Yi people's three-color culture. These three simple colors are matched to form a strong contrast, stressing the simplicity and passion of the Yi people, and allowing people to have an understanding of the Yi people's color culture (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. the combination of colors and dances, <http://www.yixueyanjiu.com/details.jsp?class=12&id=23281>



3.3.3 Aesthetic Ideas

The close combination of colors and dances can drive the plot. The colors render the costumes and the light life and implied meanings. The adding of colors to dances can enrich the performance, make the performance relaxing with a clear rhythm, create the setting for the dance, identify the theme of the dance poem, and show the emotional world of the Yi people. For example, in the first part, the dancers' costumes are black and white, with the former representing evil and the latter purity. The combination of these two colors reveals the people's inner struggle of sending off their families to the Underworld.[19] The application of three colors to the costumes demonstrates the Yi people's hospitality and their gorgeous color culture. The perfect combination of colors and dances reflects the aesthetic ideas of the Yi people's culture and their inner feelings.

Rather than coming out from nowhere, these feelings originate from the Yi people's experience of life and their worship of nature, which actually requires the accumulation of experience. The Three Colors of the Yi People uses simple colors to their fullest potential, and combines colors of light, music, dance, and costumes perfectly, looking like a rhythmic painting sparkling. It not only shows the aesthetic ideas unique to the Yi people, but also leaves a beautiful and deep impression on the audience.

4. CONCLUSION

The Yi people's color culture has a long history and a rich cultural heritage, and the connotations of the colors include the thoughts, emotions, and wisdom of the Yi people. The traditional three-color culture and the transformation of the Yi ethnic group reflect the wisdom and aesthetic ideas developed by their countless ancestors. The various combinations of these three colors reflect that there is not only inheritance throughout the history, but also different innovations in the modern time. With its independent and united style, rich ideological implications, and strong ethnic characteristics, the color culture has displayed distinctive, deep, and charming ethnic traditions and the visual culture, becoming an indispensable part of the Yi people's culture. Centering on the color culture of the Yi people and their aesthetic ideas, this paper analyzes the colors of the Yi people from its color culture and features of colors, and interprets the Yi people's aesthetic ideas from their costumes, lacquerware, and dance poem. It is found that different from other ethnic groups, the Yi people have their distinctive reverence for colors and aesthetic ideas. The author hopes that more people can appreciate that the Yi people have a rich and varied colorful culture and aesthetic ideas, which is conducive to learning from the ethnic minority's culture, carrying forward the essence of the Yi people's color culture and applying it to every aspect. In addition, it can also promote the rapid development of the Yi people's color culture, bringing it to a larger stage.

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