

The Role of Colours in Shang and Zhou Divinations: A Perspective on Tian-Worship



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Abstract

In Chinese textual history, it is asserted that the people of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties revered the colours black, white, and red, respectively.¹ To investigate this claim of colour worship, this dissertation chooses the role of colours in pre-Qin divination practices as the focus. This study argues that colours within divinatory practices were understood to exert a tangible influence over reality in ancient Chinese belief systems, distinguishing them from colours used in other textual or artistic contexts. Evidence from oracle bone inscriptions and the *Zhouyi*² supports this view, revealing how colour functioned as both a symbolic and operative element.

One significant finding of this research is that, during the Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou (1046–256 BCE) dynasties,³ characters denoting colour terms were derived from celestial phenomena: white, yellow, and red symbolised aspects of the day, while black was associated with the night. This conclusion draws upon both the visual characteristics of the sky at various times and a detailed analysis.

This inquiry arises from the observable regularity in the associations between colours and specific ritual objects and affective disposition in early Chinese texts and material evidence. The recurrence of such connections, together with the fact that these patterns differ markedly between the Shang and Zhou dynasties, suggests an underlying logic linking colour, cosmology, and political symbolism. It is this pattern that prompted the following research questions:

1. What divine functions were ascribed to the various colour terms during the Shang and Zhou dynasties?

How were these colours perceived to mediate Heaven's (*Tian* 天) will and favour in earthly matters?

2. What are the principal differences in the symbolic meanings of these colours between the two dynasties,

¹ “夏后氏尚黑... 殷人尚白... 周人尚赤.” Robert Eno, trans., *Liji, Chapters 3-4: “Tan Gong”: Translation, Notes, and Commentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University ScholarWorks, 2016), 2, “Tan Gong I,” sec. 3.

² In this dissertation, a distinction is maintained between the terms *Zhouyi* 周易 and *Yijing* 易經 (commonly translated as the *Book of Changes* or *Classic of Changes*). *Zhouyi* is used in a narrower and more historically specific sense to refer primarily to the received divination text itself, namely the hexagram names, judgments, and line statements that emerged from the late Shang and Western Zhou divinatory tradition. By contrast, *Yijing* refers to the broader canonical and interpretive tradition that developed around the text, particularly following its incorporation into the Confucian classics and its association with the so-called “*Ten Wings*” (*Shiyi* 十翼). Since this study is principally concerned with early religious thought, divinatory practice, and the cosmological background of colour symbolism in early China, the term *Zhouyi* is generally preferred when discussing the early textual and historical strata, while *Yijing* or the *Book of Changes* is employed when referring to the later classical tradition or the text's broader intellectual reception.

³ The chronological framework adopted here follows the results of the Xia–Shang–Zhou Chronology Project (夏商周断代工程), an interdisciplinary initiative conducted between 1996 and 2000 under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. The project combined archaeological, astronomical, and radiocarbon data to establish a scientifically grounded timeline for early Chinese history. See Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所 (ed.), *Xia Shang Zhou Duan-dai Gongcheng: Zongshu Baogao* 夏商周断代工程综述报告 (The Xia–Shang–Zhou Chronology Project: Final Report) (Beijing: Shijie Tushu Chubanshe, 2000).

and what might explain this transition? We need to identify shifts in colour associations and link these changes to broader shifts in cosmology and governance, and to understand the role of colours as tools for political symbolism.

Previous scholarship on colour terminology in early China, such as Wang Tao's "Colour Terms in Shang Oracle-Bone Inscriptions" (1996), "Shang Ritual Animals: Colour and Meaning" (2007),⁴ and Wei Bi's "Five Basic Colour Terms and Colour Taboos in Ancient China" (2024),⁵ has laid important groundwork for identifying lexical and symbolic uses of colour in early ritual contexts. Among these, Wang Tao's study is the closest to my own research; however, his analysis remains confined to the Shang dynasty and does not trace the transformation of colour patterns into the Zhou period. This limitation is not merely chronological. By focusing on a single dynasty, his study is unable to fully reveal the structural connections between colour and divination, despite his extensive use of oracle-bone inscriptions. While Wang Tao acknowledges the religious nature of colour in a general sense—as religion permeated virtually all aspects of Shang society—he does not single out colour as a distinct religious category or examine how its functions differed from other ritual elements. A comparative reading that incorporates Zhou dynasty materials, particularly the divination texts the *Zhouyi* alongside other contemporaneous sources, brings these connections into sharper relief and highlights both the continuity and transformation of colour symbolism between the Shang and Zhou periods. This comparative dimension, which also exposes significant dynastic differences, constitutes a major aspect missing from his otherwise foundational work.

This dissertation builds upon and extends his approach by reconstructing colour as a patterned mediating structure between the divine and the human order, understood as a shared logic of perception, expression, and interpretation through which meaning is deciphered, decisions are made, objects are selected, and emotions are structured, and by tracing how this patterned logic transforms from the Shang to the Zhou dynasty. This study finds that during the Shang dynasty, the night was venerated as much as the day, a balance reflected in the Shang people's equal reverence for black, yellow, and white. Red at this stage was primarily associated with sacrificial offerings bearing red fur. In contrast, the Zhou dynasty's worship centred on the day, marked by the devaluation of black and the exaltation of white and red, while yellow assumed a secondary, modifying role linked to metal. Evidence from mythology and ancient astronomical records suggests

⁴ Tao Wang, "Shang Ritual Animals: Colour and Meaning (Part 1)," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 70, no. 2 (2007): 305–372.

⁵ Wei Bi, "Five Basic Colour Terms and Colour Taboos in Ancient China (Part One)," *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 72, no. 9 (2024): 101–120, Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL.

that this transformation in colour symbolism functioned as both a political strategy, meaning distinguishing the Zhou from the Shang hegemony, and a reflection of broader shifts in cosmology and agricultural practice. This research is grounded in the premise that colour in early China was understood as possessing a distinct divine efficacy and therefore occupied a privileged position within religious and divinatory practices. This premise is established through an examination of the etymology and semantics of key terms—*yan* (颜), *cai* (采), and *se* (色)—in conjunction with archaeological evidence, especially oracle bone inscriptions, contemporaneous textual sources, and early debates concerning the relationship between religion, divination, and colour.

Building on this foundation, the dissertation reconstructs a patterned logic through which colour mediated between the divine and the human order. As applications and extensions, related themes such as *kongsang* (空桑), *Zhaomu* (昭穆), *wen* (文) and *zhi* (质), the Name–Reality debate, ritual (li 礼), and broader pre-Qin symbolic thought are addressed as further manifestations of this underlying logic.

1. Introduction: Colour, Heaven Worship, and Divination

There already exists a long tradition of studying colours in early China as part of an anthology of cosmological principles, most notably within the system of *wuxing* (五行). Yet between the anthropological studies of primitive colour symbolism and the correlative cosmology of *wuxing*, there remains a considerable interpretive gap. Only a few scholars have approached colour not merely as vocabulary or symbolism, but as a perspective of ontology, a means of understanding how early Chinese thought organized the world.

Research on colour in the Shang (ca. 1600–1046 BCE) and Zhou periods has laid a preliminary foundation for understanding ritual colour symbolism, but most works treat colour as secondary to ritual or material typology. The oracle bone inscriptions, for instance, clearly attest to a highly developed chromatic order: white, black, *you* (幽), *wu* (勿), and *xing* (騂) animals were carefully distinguished and assigned to specific ritual contexts—ancestral offerings, rain-making, or royal inspection. Among them, white appears most frequently, especially in sacrifices to ancestors and in rain prayers, reflecting the deep ritual and cosmological preference for brightness and purity. Yet these empirical studies seldom interpret colour as a structuring category of early ontology.

Scholars such as Sarah Allan, Wu Hung, and Mark Edward Lewis have moved closer to such an ontological reading. Allan's *The Shape of the Turtle* identifies the deep structural categories that define Shang cosmology, a framework within which colour could be seen as a way of ordering the sacred world. Guo Yanlong builds upon Wu Hung's foundational work on the “transparency” and “materiality” of ritual objects to argue that the physical brilliance of high-tin bronze was a religious force revealing the invisible world.⁶ Lewis further confirms this trajectory: in *The Construction of Space in Early China*, he demonstrates that colour in early texts functioned as concrete substance rather than abstract description, bridging the Shang sacrificial practice (“black sheep for rain”) and the later Zhou and Han cosmographic systems.⁷

⁶ Yanlong Guo, “The Aesthetic of Brightness in Han Mirror Inscriptions,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 141, no. 1 (2021): 93–124.

⁷ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 273–

Within this lineage, Michael Puett's and Lothar von Falkenhausen's works have articulated how early Chinese religious and ritual systems embody shifting ontological premises. Puett's *To Become a God* contrasts the Shang view of the divine as agonistic with the Zhou's moralized cosmology, an evolution that parallels the transformation of colour from an animistic to a systematic principle.⁸ Falkenhausen's study of ritual materiality, including the "cultural history of redness," argues that the red pigment (cinnabar) used in burials served as a bridge between physical ritual practice and early cosmological thought.⁹ K.C. Chang's *Art, Myth, and Ritual*, in which he argues that in the Shang and early Zhou dynasties, political authority was rooted in the control of shamanic communication. Colour was not an abstract idea but a concrete requirement for sacrifice. For instance, specific-coloured animals were "consumed" by spirits; the colour was a physical substance necessary to trigger a divine response¹⁰ and David Pankenier traces *wuxing* to planetary observations. He demonstrates that the correlation of colours (e.g., Red = South = Fire = Mars) began to "conform Earth to Heaven." As the Chinese state became more centralized, these "concrete" planetary omens were abstracted into the moral and political system of *wuxing* used by Han emperors to justify their rule.¹¹

It is precisely between these two domains, the ritual ontology of the Shang and the systematic cosmology of the Zhou, that a scholarly lacuna remains. This dissertation seeks to fill that gap by treating colour as a central ontological category that bridges divination, sacrifice, and cosmology, demonstrating that chromatic differentiation was not merely aesthetic or linguistic, but constitutive of the very way the early Chinese conceived the sacred order of the world.

From the earliest phases of Chinese civilization, colour served as a primary medium for articulating the relationship between the human and the divine. Archaeological and textual evidence from the Shang and Zhou periods indicates that colour was integral to divination, sacrifice, and ritual governance, functioning as a code that linked cosmology, morality, and political authority.

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⁸ Puett, Michael. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.

⁹ Lothar von Falkenhausen, *Chinese Society in the Age of Confucius (1000–250 BC): The Archaeological Evidence* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology, University of California, 2006), 200–208.

¹⁰ K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 44–55.

¹¹ David W. Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 324–330.

Far from an aesthetic embellishment, colour operated as a system of correspondences through which early Chinese societies conceptualised causality and maintained cosmic order. Understanding this symbolic economy of colour provides a critical entry point into the study of early Chinese religion and thought. It is within this context that the present research addresses the role of colour in religious beliefs and practices and considers how its ritual use reflects evolving conceptions of the sacred and the real.

The central question of this research concerns the role of colour in religious beliefs and practices in early China. Specifically, I aim to investigate how the use of colours in ritual contexts reflects religious thought and the perception of causality. Yet, this is not the goal of the study. A more profound, guiding question underlies this inquiry: why study the religious beliefs of ancient peoples from c. 1600–256 BCE, and why approach this study through colour?

This overarching question can be divided into two parts. The first addresses the necessity of examining ancient religions. While historical research holds intrinsic value for archaeology, anthropology, and historiography, my approach seeks to go beyond conventional academic motivations. Research is not only about recording facts but about uncovering meaning and significance. It is often assumed, under a Western conceptual framework, that a society lacking an institutionalized church or a clearly defined theological system must therefore be secular. This assumption has led to the widespread misunderstanding that China, both ancient and modern, is fundamentally non-religious. Such a view, however, rests on an overly narrow definition of religion. Religious life can take multiple forms, many of which do not correspond to Western models of organized belief or doctrine. In China, reverence toward Heaven has long functioned as a central axis of meaning, authority, and moral order. This orientation has not disappeared; it persists even today in everyday expressions such as *cangtian shangdi* (苍天上帝, “Heavenly Lord”) or *wo de lao tianye* (我的老天爷, literally, “my old Heaven/Father Heaven”), which continue to invoke Heaven as a transcendent reference. Examining ancient Chinese religion on its own terms therefore illuminates a distinctive mode of world-conceptualization, one that differs fundamentally from Western religious paradigms.

Religion, as Rodney Needham suggests, “takes its strength and reality from the fact that it expresses the highest hopes conceived by a group of men to recreate their social bonds through their greatest effort.”¹² In my view, religion is a response to suffering, disaster, and the uncertainties of life, and thus a key to understanding human societies. Studying early Chinese religion allows us to trace the origins of unique modes of thought, particularly regarding the concept of Heaven, which plays a central role in Shang and Zhou cosmology. Heaven encompasses both perceptual and moral dimensions, influencing astronomy, astrology, ritual, and governance. As Feng Youlan delineates, Heaven can be understood across five layers, from the tangible sky to moral principle, bridging the gap between primitive intuition and rationalized thinking.¹³

At this point, colour emerges as an especially powerful lens. Unlike abstract discussions of Heaven, colours offer a concrete, perceptual entry point. They are before line, shape, and even spatial awareness, a primal mode of aesthetic apprehension, as emphasized in phenomenological thought. Rudolf Arnheim, a perceptual psychologist, emphasizes that colours often take precedence over shapes in visual perception, highlighting their primacy in human experience and symbolic thought.¹⁴ The human visual system has not changed substantially since antiquity: our eyes respond to the same spectrum, and the physiology of colour perception remains constant.¹⁵ This continuity creates a bridge across time. Just as Li Bai wrote, “People today can’t see the moon of old, but today’s moon once shone on the ancients”,¹⁶ so too do we see the same colours that the Shang and Zhou peoples once perceived, though their cultural meanings differ. Thus, colour perception links us phenomenologically with the ancients, while also

¹² Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience: Essays in the Comparative Anthropology of Knowledge* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), 176–187.

¹³ Feng Youlan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Derk Bodde (New York: Free Press, 1948), 192. Feng identifies these five layers: (1) Physical (the sky), (2) Anthropomorphic (a personal ruling deity), (3) Fate (the destiny of human life), (4) Moral (the source of ethical principle), and (5) Philosophical (the ultimate nature of the universe).

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 132; Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 330–335. Both emphasize colour as a primary, pre-objective experience.

¹⁵ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 45–48. Mirzoeff notes that while the cultural meanings of colours shift, the biological apparatus of human sight has remained physiologically stable over millennia.

¹⁶ Li Bai, “Drinking Alone Beneath the Moon,” in *The Selected Poems of Li Po*, trans. David Hinton (New York: New Directions, 1996), 42.

reminding us that perception is never neutral: it is always shaped by cultural and symbolic frameworks.

Early Chinese ritual texts and archaeological evidence reveal deliberate choices of colours, primarily red, yellow, black, and white, often linked to celestial phenomena. These choices were not arbitrary; they reflect a sophisticated symbolic system in which colour mediates between the perceptual world and metaphysical concepts.

Philosophers and ancient sages recognized this duality: colours are perceptible phenomena rooted in the natural world, yet they are also flexible symbols that carry emotional, ethical, and cosmological significance.¹⁷ From Confucius's delineation of pure and secondary colours to Laozi's dialectical pairing of black and white,¹⁸⁻¹⁹ colour has served as a medium for philosophical reflection, debate, and expression.

By examining the uses of colour in ritual, divination, and symbolism, we can trace the evolution of religious ideas from Shang to Zhou dynasty and explore the broader cultural transitions these changes reflect. This approach demonstrates how colours became central to Heaven worship and to the construction of early Chinese cosmology and philosophy.

Ultimately, this research seeks to establish colours as a legitimate and insightful pathway into the study of early Chinese religion, trying to contribute to the broader understanding of how humans interpret and engage with the world through sensory and symbolic experience.

1.1 Literature Review: Colour in Intellectual History

My initial engagement with colour studies began with foundational works in visual psychology and art theory. Josef Albers' *Interaction of Colour* and Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual*

¹⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 1:201–205.

¹⁸ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 101. Confucius states, “The gentleman does not use maroon or violet for the trim of his garments,” (10.6) prioritizing “pure” colours (zhengse) like blue and red over “interstitial” colours (jianse) to maintain ritual propriety.

¹⁹ Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin Books, 1963), 33. Laozi notes, “Know the white, but keep to the black” (Chapter 28). This pairing illustrates the Daoist principle of yin and yang, where opposites are mutually constitutive and necessary for cosmic balance.

Perception introduced the perceptual and optical foundations of colour, emphasizing relational contrast, visual equilibrium, and the psychological effects of hue.²⁰⁻²¹ These insights clarified how certain colour responses, such as warm–cool distinctions or emotional-affective reactions, are widely shared across human populations, providing an indispensable basis for understanding colour as both visual stimulus and cognitive experience. Complementing these studies, Berlin and Kay’s *Basic Colour Terms* demonstrated cross-linguistic regularities in colour terminology, highlighting universal tendencies as well as cultural variation in the evolution of colour vocabularies.²²

While colour has rarely been a central concern in Western philosophy, Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on Colour* remains an important exception, showing how colour terms function within “language games” and pointing out that chromatic expressions often convey relational or context-dependent meanings rather than denoting colour as an isolated property.²³

In the Chinese context, Lü Cheng’s *Outline of Chromatics* participated in this broader discussion, though it largely extends Western frameworks without fundamentally departing from them.²⁴

Semiotics offered an alternative analytical entry point. My earlier work on clothing nomenclature, drawing on Roland Barthes’ semiotic systems, examined how modern fashion attaches secondary symbolic meanings to colours through cultural coding. A similar symbolic orientation informs Michel Pastoureau’s work on colour in Western culture, which, despite its limitations and uneven treatment of non-Western materials, illustrates how colour can serve as a revealing lens through which broader social and religious structures may be observed.²⁵

²⁰ Josef Albers, *Interaction of Colour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963).

²¹ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art, and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

²² Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

²³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

²⁴ Lü Cheng 吕澂, *A Brief Introduction to Aesthetics: An Outline of Chromatics* 色彩学大纲 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985).

²⁵ Michel Pastoureau, *Les couleurs expliquées en images* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014).

These theoretical perspectives brought me to the conclusion that colour cannot be treated as an ahistorical or purely perceptual category; rather, it forms part of a long-term sedimentation of cultural psychology. This shift motivated my turn toward early China and the study of colour in archaeological, textual, and ritual contexts. Jiang Chengqing's *Chinese Colour Theory* was influential in shaping this transition. He argues that colour is fundamentally a regional cultural phenomenon, shaped by local worship practices, taboos, and ideological needs, and he presents a diachronic sketch of Chinese colour concepts from prehistory to modernity.

Building on this foundation, I turned to research devoted specifically to early Chinese colour terminology. Xiao Shimeng's doctoral dissertation on pre-Qin colour terms adopts a philological method combined with reconstructions of ancient dyeing and craft techniques, successfully identifying the physical hues to which early colour graphs referred.²⁶ Similarly, Zhao Xiaochi's linguistic study of Old and Middle Chinese colour vocabulary provides a systematic account of semantic development across historical stages.²⁷

To situate colour within the ritual world of early China, it was necessary to engage deeply with Shang archaeology and oracle-bone scholarship. Sarah Allan's *The Shape of the Turtle*, K.C. Chang's studies on Shang civilization, David Keightley's *Sources of Shang History*, and Tsung-tung Chang's research on Shang ritual practice collectively illuminate the cosmological, sacrificial, and divinatory frameworks within which colour operated. Kryukov's linguistic analysis of Yin inscriptions further clarifies the semantic behaviour of colour terms in the oracle-bone corpus. In Late Shang oracle bones, colour terms functioned primarily as categorical labels for sacrificial animals rather than purely descriptive adjectives. He identified that colours like *chi* (赤, "red") or *bi* (碧, "blue-green" / "dark") were used to classify victims within a rigid ritual hierarchy.²⁸

These works collectively prepared the ground for my own research. My master's thesis, '*Grace or Simplicity*'—*The Colour System in the Zhouyi*, demonstrated that colour terms in the

²⁶ Xiao Shimeng 肖世孟, *Pre-Qin Colour Research 先秦色彩研究* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2010).

²⁷ Zhao Xiaochi 赵晓驰, *Studies on Colour Words in Old and Middle Chinese 上古-中古汉语颜色词研究* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2016).

²⁸ Kryukov, V. M. (1980). "The Semantic Structure of Yin Inscriptions" (Semanticheskaya struktura inskriptsii). *The Early History of China*. Moscow: Nauka.

Zhouyi correlate closely with divinatory outcomes.²⁹ By analysing colour within its textual and ritual context, I showed that the compilers of the *Zhouyi* recognized the symbolic efficacy of colour and used it to express cosmological processes, emotional attitudes, and value structures. *Yizhuan*'s assertion that "the Sages set up images to exhaust [express] their thoughts completely"³⁰ is particularly relevant: colour imagery in functions as a verbal icon, while oracle bones employ both visual and material "object icons," most notably through the application of cinnabar or carbon on the plastron surfaces.

Finally, the diachronic relationship between early practice and later textual representation informs my methodological perspective. Although later narratives about Shang are not always factually reliable, cultural perceptions, especially concerning divination and colour, change more slowly than elite philosophical discourse. This is evident in the persistence of divination into the Song dynasty despite Confucius' disapproval.³¹ For this reason, later textual traditions, while imperfect, remain valuable for reconstructing the conceptual background of early colour symbolism.

It is important to outline the general approach that informs the analysis. The study treats colour not merely as an object, a set of isolated terms or physical hues, but as a perspective, a structural lens through which early Chinese ritual, cosmology, and thought may be understood. This approach allows colour to function as an organising principle, revealing patterns of meaning that cut across texts, materials, and historical periods.

²⁹ Chen, Xiaolingtong, "Grace or Simplicity" — *The Colour System in Yijing* 贲如皤如--《周易》古经中的色彩体系 (Master's thesis, Jilin University, 2021).

³⁰ Xici I, 12 (繫辭上). 圣人立象以尽意. See: Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 322.

³¹ Confucius' attitude is famously captured in *Analects* 6.22: "Respect ghost and spirits, but keep them at a distance" (敬鬼神而远之). While he reportedly studied the I Ching late in life to "avoid great faults" (*Analects* 7.17), he reframed it as a book of ethical wisdom rather than a manual for fortune-telling. The persistence into the Song dynasty is most notably embodied by the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130–1200), who, despite his rationalist metaphysics, wrote *Yixue qimeng* (易学启蒙), a literal handbook on how to perform yarrow-stalk divination.

Currently, research on colours remains largely confined to art, design, psychology, or linguistic studies of colour terms. Because colours are direct, spontaneous, and difficult to attribute to cognition.³²

This ritual logic is clearly reflected in Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Archaeological evidence further corroborates the long-term ritual importance of colour. The use of red pigments in Neolithic rock art, as well as painted funerary objects from sites such as Mawangdui, demonstrates the continuity of chromatic symbolism across millennia.

Comparative research suggests that while associations between colour and ritual are found across cultures, the Chinese system displays a particularly high degree of formalisation and conceptual integration. The *Wuse* (五色) framework codified cosmological, ethical, and aesthetic meanings into a coherent structure that appears unmatched in its scope and durability among contemporaneous civilisations.

Contemporary scholarship on Chinese colour systems adopts a range of complementary methodologies aimed at reconstructing both their historical development and conceptual complexity. Philological and historical analysis has been central to this effort. Guo Jingyun, for example, traces the evolution of colour terminology in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, demonstrating that terms such as *qing* (青), *xuan* (玄), and *you* (幽) functioned not merely as chromatic descriptors but as carriers of cosmological, moral, and spiritual significance.

Archaeological and art-historical approaches provide an essential material foundation for these textual analyses. Excavations of tombs, textiles, ceramics, and ritual bronzes, discussed by scholars such as Peng De in *Zhonghua Wuse*, anchor theoretical colour systems in concrete practices. In parallel, scientific analyses of pigments, including Han Purple and Han Blue, reveal a high degree of technological sophistication that aligns closely with ritual requirements and cosmological thought.

³² Arnheim, Rudolf. *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Another strand of research involves cultural and philosophical reinterpretation. Scholars have highlighted regional, temporal, and social variations within the *wuse* framework, uncovering what Wang Tao describes as “little traditions” embedded in local and popular practices. Comparative philosophical studies further contrast Chinese correlative modes of thought with Western analytical frameworks, clarifying the distinct epistemic functions colour performs across cultures.

Chinese colour philosophy constitutes a coherent and integrated system in which cosmology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics converge. It serves, first, as a cosmological model, structuring conceptions of space, temporality, and patterned transformation within the universe. Second, it functions as a technology of governance, through which political authority is legitimised and social hierarchies are symbolically stabilised. Third, colour acts as a moral regulator, marking distinctions between propriety and excess, norm and transgression. Finally, it provides an aesthetic principle that mediates between philosophical abstraction and material or artistic expression.

Recognising colour as such a polyvalent framework opens several promising directions for future research. One avenue lies in sensory history, situating colour within the broader ritual sensorium of early China and examining its interaction with sound, taste, smell, and bodily movement in sacrificial and ceremonial contexts. A second direction involves digital humanities approaches, particularly the systematic mapping of colour terms across large classical corpora in order to trace semantic shifts, frequency patterns, and contextual clustering over time. A *longue durée* perspective would further allow scholars to examine how classical colour concepts persist, transform, or are reactivated in modern aesthetics, political symbolism, and visual media. Finally, cross-media studies, such as spanning bronzes, ceramics, painting, textiles, and architecture, can illuminate how colour functioned as an integrative cultural principle across different material regimes.³³

³³ Thorp, Robert L. *China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

1.2 Methodology

The study proceeds from the assumption that we inhabit a world constituted by signifiers whose meanings arise through their relations with one another. At the same time, a methodological distinction must be drawn between colour as a perceptual phenomenon and “colour” as a conceptual and symbolic category. This distinction is crucial, as the latter does not merely denote sensory qualities but participates in systems of meaning production, functioning as a medium of what may be described as myth-creating and myth-representing symbolism.

To understand the symbolic functions of colour in oracle-bone inscriptions and the *Zhouyi*, one must therefore situate each term not only within the broader chromatic system of the Zhou period but also within this ontological framework. This necessarily creates a hermeneutic circle: to grasp pre-imperial colour terms, we must read the oracle bones and the *Zhouyi*; yet to interpret these texts, we must also understand the colour system that surrounds them. Rather than a methodological obstacle, this circularity reflects the structural nature of the material and the interdependence between perceptual phenomena and conceptual categories.

Finally, the dissertation adopts a comparative and antithetical approach. By contrasting the oracle-bone inscriptions with the *Zhouyi* with later Confucian interpretations, meaningful distinctions emerge—not only in colour usage but also in underlying attitudes. For example, the *Zhouyi* and Confucian texts share similar regulations regarding garment colours and similar concerns about ornamentation, yet the purposes motivating these positions may differ. Such comparisons help to illuminate both continuity and innovation in early Chinese thought.

In sum, the methodology combines philological rigor, structural analysis, and comparative reasoning. This dissertation further employs a multi-layered methodology that integrates ritual-cosmological interpretation, material culture studies, intellectual history, visual-image theory, and phenomenology. Visual studies contribute a framework for analysing colour as a form of ritual visibility and symbolic potency, while phenomenology foregrounds the embodied and experiential dimensions of colour perception within ancient ritual settings.

In addition to the specific methods employed, this dissertation adopts a structural-hermeneutic approach in which colour itself functions as an analytic framework for deciphering early

Chinese history, religion, and cosmology. Rather than treating “colour” as a purely linguistic or aesthetic category, the study approaches it as a junction of material substances, perceptual and visual experiences, ritual practices, and cosmological meanings. By tracing the chromatic system across a long *durée*: from Shang divination records to Western Zhou ritual texts and early philosophical reflections.

1.2.1 Sources and Corpora

The primary textual corpus consists of excavated and transmitted sources spanning roughly from the late second millennium BCE to the early imperial period. On the excavated side, the core body of evidence comprises Shang oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, with particular attention to graphs denoting colour terms and to coloured sacrificial animals. On the transmitted side, the dissertation draws on the *Yijing* (*the Zhouyi* and its *Ten Wings*), *Zhouli*, *Yili*, and *Liji*, as well as relevant passages from early philosophical and historiographical works such as *The Analects*, *Mozi*, *Laozi*, *The Grand Scribe's Records*. Later commentaries are used selectively as windows into how later commentator systematised and reinterpreted earlier chromatic regimes.

In addition, the dissertation incorporates modern archaeological reports, archaeometry studies of pigments and metals, and recent scholarship on early Chinese religion, kingship, and cosmology. These secondary materials are not treated as neutral data, but as interpretative acts embedded scholarly traditions. Visual theory and phenomenology help make these interpretive layers explicit by insisting on the interpretive nature of seeing, describing, and categorising colour.³⁴

1.2.2 Philological and Semantic Analysis

The dissertation employs a combination of Chinese philology and Western structural linguistics. Philology provides the textual, palaeographic, and historical grounding necessary for interpreting oracle bone inscriptions and pre-imperial classics, while structural linguistics contributes insights into semantic fields, lexical systems, and internal relations among signs. In this respect,

³⁴ Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986).

concepts drawn from semiotics and system theory are particularly useful, for oracle bone characters and the *Zhouyi* graphs operate within interrelated networks of signification rather than as isolated units.

While analytical tools from data theory and modern linguistic modelling are occasionally helpful, especially in identifying distributional patterns, it must be acknowledged that the corpus under study does not follow the regularities of modern scientific datasets. Early Chinese texts are embedded in mythic, ritual, and symbolic contexts, and therefore require a holistic perspective that attends to overarching cultural trends rather than strict statistical regularity.

A first methodological pillar is close philological analysis of key colour-related graphs and lexemes, including *yan*, *se*, *cai*, *wu*, and the specific chromatic terms (white, yellow, black, red, blue-green, as well as marginal categories such as *you* (幽), *xing* (騂), *wu* (勿). This analysis is grounded in the three disciplines that form the core of early Chinese philological and palaeographic research: traditional philology (*xiaoxue* 小学), oracle-bone studies (*jiaguxue* 甲骨学), and bronze inscription studies (*jinwenxue* 金文学). Together, these fields allow the study to reconstruct the earliest graphic forms, semantic contours, and contextual functions of colour terminology in Shang and Zhou texts.

Traditional philology focuses on the form, sound, and meaning of characters and their historical development. Through graphic analysis, phonetic series, and exegetical comparison, it becomes possible to recover the original motivations behind colour graphs, such as the semantic range of *qing* (青), the early relationship between *chi* (赤) and *zhu* (朱), or the visual logic underlying the graphs for white, black, and yellow. This work provides the foundation for determining what these colour terms could have meant in their earliest reconstructible layers.

Oracle Bone studies contribute the earliest systematic textual corpus in China and thus the earliest attested uses of colour terms in concrete ritual contexts. Through inscription reconstruction, palaeographic comparison, and chronological analysis, the oracle bones reveal how colour terminology functioned in sacrificial offerings, hunting records, divination charges, and royal decision-making. In this material, colour distinctions often appear as ritual requirements,

indices of omen, or criteria for ancestral response. These inscriptions therefore supply unparalleled evidence for chromatic practice in the lived ritual world of the late Shang.

Bronze Inscription studies extend this inquiry into Western Zhou contexts through longer, historically, and ritually dense texts engraved on ritual vessels. Methods such as inscriptional analysis, vessel typology, and historical contextualisation help to clarify how colour terms appear within investiture inscriptions, records of military activity, ritual protocols, and aristocratic exchanges. Because bronze inscriptions reflect a more formalised and institutional ritual order, they serve as a bridge between the fragmentary, practice-oriented evidence of the oracle bones and the later systematised ritual texts of the Zhou canon.

These three fields are not treated as separate domains but as mutually reinforcing interpretive tools. Their combined methodologies allow the dissertation to reconstruct early colour terminology with maximal precision, both lexically and contextually. The scholarly model exemplified by Yang Shuda's *Jiweiju Jinwenshuo*, which integrates graphic analysis, ancient grammar, and historical-institutional interpretation, serves as a methodological ideal: difficult graphs are resolved not in isolation but through combined attention to palaeography, syntax, and cultural context.³⁵

This philological and palaeographic work serves two principal purposes. First, it establishes the semantic “palette” within which Shang and Zhou actors could think and speak about colour, thereby avoiding the anachronistic projection of later systems such as the Five Phases and Five Colours onto earlier periods. Second, it underpins the ontological claim that in early Chinese thought “things” (*wu* 物) are often differentiated and encoded through colour, such that materiality and chromaticity are not separate domains but mutually constitutive. Visual-image theory reinforces this point by treating early graphs as visual structures that encode perceptual and classificatory distinctions, while phenomenology provides a vocabulary for understanding

³⁵ See Yang Shuda 杨树达, *Jiweiju jinwenshuo* 积微居金文说 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1952), 43–45. Yang proves his reinterpretation of the graph *si* 嗣 (to succeed) in the *Da Yu Ding* 大盂鼎 by moving beyond isolated graphic analysis. He identifies its verbal function through its syntactic position before the object “King,” and confirms this reading by citing identical linguistic patterns in the “*Shao Gao*” chapter of the Book of Documents. This demonstrates that the inscription refers to the ritual act of “modelling after” the ancestral mandate rather than serving as a mere title.

colour not as a static descriptor but as a lived and embodied quality embedded within ritual experience.

In addition to reconstructing the graphic and semantic histories of individual colour graphs, the philological analysis requires an explicit definitional framework for what constitutes a “colour term.” Because early Chinese chromatic vocabulary does not map neatly onto modern perceptual or linguistic categories, the dissertation draws selectively on the linguistic-anthropological model developed by Berlin and Kay to clarify the analytical distinction between hue terms, brightness terms, material-colour designations, and context-dependent chromatic descriptors.³⁶ Their typology, while formulated from modern spoken languages, offers a useful heuristic for distinguishing basic chromatic lexemes from secondary or derived ones and for identifying when a graph denotes a colour category versus a substance-based or function-based descriptor. This definitional clarity is necessary for analysing early Chinese texts, in which colour often appears simultaneously as a perceptual quality, a ritual marker, and a material state. The Berlin–Kay framework is therefore not applied uncritically but adapted as an analytical guide, helping to articulate the range of chromatic semantics without imposing anachronistic assumptions about universality or cognitive hierarchy.³⁷

1.2.3 Ritual-Cosmological and Structural Analysis

A second methodological pillar is ritual-cosmological interpretation. Colour usages in the sources are read within the broader structures that organise early Chinese religious life: directional schemes (east/green-blue, south/red, west/white, north/black, centre/yellow), seasonal cycles, the Five Phases, and the hierarchical relations between Heaven, Earth, and ancestral spirits. Texts such as *Zhouli*, *Yili*, and *Liji* provide a systematised account of these correlations, which is then placed in dialogue with the earlier and more fragmentary evidence of the oracle bones and bronzes. These later ritual texts are treated not as direct descriptions of Shang and

³⁶ Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

³⁷ See “Jian Jia” 蒹葭 (Mao 129, stanza 1, line 2): “白露為霜” (the white dew turns to frost). This usage exemplifies Berlin and Kay’s “Stage I” category, where *bai* 白 functions primarily as a brightness term rather than a hue. Since dew is physically transparent, the descriptor “white” denotes its high albedo and reflective radiance under dawn light. Applying this model clarifies that in early Chinese semantics, “white” often serves as a macro-category for luminous intensity and the perceptual clarity of moisture and light.

early Zhou practice but as analytic models and idealised structures that help to illuminate continuities, ruptures, and emergent patterns when read against earlier evidence.³⁸

This approach requires constant attention to the tension between long term historical development and structural analysis. The dissertation therefore examines not only where later ritual theories resonate with early practice, for instance, in basic colour direction associations, but also where they diverge, revealing alternative or earlier chromatic logics. In this way, colour becomes a means of tracing how cosmological ideas and ritual structures take shape over time rather than a static system projected backwards.

Within this structural reading, individual colour acts, such as offering a white horse, selecting a yellow offering, or donning a red garment, are interpreted as junctions within wider grids of opposition and correlation (light/dark, centre/periphery, above/below, life/death). Yet structural analysis alone is insufficient. Ritual actors were not passive executors of a fixed chromatic code; colour choices could be strategic, situational, and politically charged.³⁹ A classic instance of such strategic use is Duke Huan of Qi's preference for purple (*zi* 紫), as recorded in *Han Feizi* (韩非子). By adopting a "secondary" colour not recognized by the orthodox Zhou ritual code, the duke engaged in a situational performance of power that overrode established structural norms, effectively shifting the regional economy and social hierarchy through a deliberate, politically charged chromatic choice. The dissertation therefore asks: who used a particular colour, under what circumstances, and with what intended effect? Exceptional or irregular cases, deviations from expected chromatic norms, are treated not as noise but as historically meaningful interventions that reveal agency, negotiation, or crisis management within ritual settings.

Colour is also approached as a material and technological phenomenon. Its ritual significance rests not only in its symbolic associations but also in the physical properties of pigments, metals, dyes, and animal hides. Archaeometry and material culture studies therefore inform the

³⁸ For an application of this comparative approach, see the analysis of the *shaolao* 少牢 (lesser sacrifice). While the *Liji* (wangzhi 王制) presents a systematized model restricting the sacrifice to a sheep and a pig for specific social ranks, earlier Shang oracle bone inscriptions (*jiaguwen* 甲骨文) reveal a more heterogeneous ritual reality. Treating the *Liji* as an "idealized structure" allows the researcher to identify the rupture between the fluid religious practices of the Shang and the highly stratified, institutionalized ritualism of the late Zhou.

³⁹ See Michael Taussig, *What Colour Is the Sacred?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

analysis: the rarity of lapis-based blues, the different sensory tones of cinnabar versus madder red, or the colour variations produced by bronze alloys may condition how colours were perceived, valued, and deployed.⁴⁰ Archaeometry data shows that the superior light-reflectance and rarity of cinnabar conditioned its role as a “primary” ritual marker for the Son of Heaven, whereas the “sensory tone” of the vegetable dye madder (*qian* 茜), being more easily accessible and prone to fading, relegated it to lower-status applications. This demonstrates that chromatic value in early China was often a direct function of the material’s geological or botanical origins. Colour is thus examined as both a conceptual and a material event.

Phenomenology and visual studies further broaden this inquiry by emphasising the sensory and embodied dimensions of ritual experience. Colour is rarely perceived in isolation; it interacts with sound, movement, smell, temperature, and texture to generate the atmosphere of ritual.⁴¹ A chromatic act such as displaying red may co-occur with heat, brightness, musical intensity, or heightened emotion, producing a multisensory alignment that shapes collective cosmological perception. A quintessential example of this multi-sensory “atmosphere” is the concept of *you* (幽, “dark/hidden”), often paired with *xuan* (玄) to describe *yijing* (意境, “aesthetic-spiritual resonance”) of a temple. As seen in the couplet: “The serene/dark temple is nestled among the crags; a single path leads through to it.”⁴² In this context, *you* functions not as a static colour category but as a phenomenological assemblage. It synthesizes the visual “darkness” of the mountain shadows, the auditory stillness of the secluded location, and the embodied experience of the narrow path. This illustrates that early Chinese chromatic descriptors often serve to generate a ritual or aesthetic atmosphere that transcends the boundary between sight, sound, and space. This cross-sensory dimension underscores the central point of the dissertation: in early Chinese ritual, everything is meaningful, and colour participates in this dense web of significance as one among several coordinated sensory-cosmological operators.

Comparison is used sparingly but strategically: by situating Chinese colour-direction systems alongside other ancient cosmological traditions (e.g., Mesopotamian or Mesoamerican), the

⁴⁰ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and *An Anthropology of Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁴² Leng Chaoyang 冷朝陽, “*Su Baiyan Si*” (宿柏岩寺, “Staying Overnight at Baiyan Temple”), in *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 (Complete Tang Poems) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960), 272:3085. “幽寺在岩中, 行唯一徑通。”

dissertation highlights both the potential universality of colour-ordering schemes and the distinctive features of the Chinese case, including its ethical-political inflections and its flexible concept of the centre. Finally, a reception-oriented perspective is adopted to consider how colour codes might have been perceived differently by ritual specialists, assisting nobles, and ordinary spectators. Colour may have been intentionally legible to some and opaque to others, contributing to the staging of authority and the differentiation of ritual knowledge.

Through this integrated ritual-cosmological framework, colour becomes not merely a decorative or symbolic element but a structuring device within early Chinese ritual life. Its significance arises because ritual itself is a domain in which every component, such as gesture, material, sound, orientation, texture, and colour, participates in the production of cosmological order. Colour is therefore analysed as one of the key operators through which ritual meaning is enacted, negotiated, and historically transformed.

1.2.4 Material Culture and Archaeological Integration

Another pillar is the integration of material culture. The dissertation systematically brings together textual and archaeological evidence: bronzes, pigments, inlays, lacquer, textile remains, and archaeometry analyses of metals and colourants. Rather than assuming textual descriptions transparently mirror practice, the study tests literary claims (e.g., that the Yin favoured white) against the material record, examining points of convergence, divergence, and difference in ritual level (normative ideal vs. practical enactment).

Methodologically, this entails reading objects as “texts”⁴³: paying attention to colour choices in vessel patination, inlay, and paint; to the chromatic marking of animals in burials; and to the spatial distribution of coloured materials in tombs and temples. Visual studies encourage attention to the visibility,⁴⁴ perceptual affordances,⁴⁵ and ritual staging of colour, while phenomenology provides a vocabulary for describing the sensory and experiential dimensions of how colour manifested in ritual environments. The “Texts and Objects” chapter formalises this as a

⁴³ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁴⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁵ Alfred Gell, *Art, and Agency* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

dual-track approach in which neither philology nor archaeology holds unilateral authority, and both mutually constrain and enrich one another.

1.2.5 Diachronic, Hermeneutic and Comparative Approach

Because the dissertation spans Shang oracle bones, Western Zhou ritual texts, *Ten Wings*, and early philosophical reflections in Confucian and Daoist traditions, a diachronic, hermeneutic approach is employed. Colour concepts and practices are not assumed to be static; the study traces semantic shifts (for example, the development of *you* from a sacrificial colour to a term for confinement and obscurity) and transformations in the religious function of colour (for example, the movement from colours as omens in the *Zhouyi* to more abstract moral and cosmological uses in the *Ten Wings*).

The later philosophical chapters do not simply repeat earlier material but examine how inherited chromatic cosmologies are reinterpreted: how sacrificial colours are transformed into ethical metaphors (*su* 素 and *ren* 仁),⁴⁶ or how *xuan* becomes a key term for depth, darkness, and the limits of representation. Phenomenology helps explain these shifts by examining how changing modes of perception and experience reshape conceptual structures, while visual theory illuminates how philosophical discourse re-visualises earlier ritual colour systems.

Finally, the study situates early Chinese chromatic thought within broader theoretical discussions of colour in the humanities. Western theories of colour, from physics to phenomenology, semiotics, and linguistic anthropology, are invoked not to impose foreign categories on Chinese material, but to clarify what is distinctive about a Chinese, ritual-centred approach: the way colour is tied to sacrifice, divination, and Heaven worship rather than primarily to individual perception or artistic representation. “The symbolic logic of colour is first of all a cultural logic.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The paired formulations “*su* first, then ornament” (绘事后素) and “*ren* first, then ritual” (人而不仁，如礼何) articulate a central Confucian principle: inner moral substance must precede and ground external form. The graph *su* (素), combining the silk radical (糸) with a phonetic element meaning “to hang down,” originally denotes raw, undyed white silk and, by extension, an unadorned ground. In Analects 3.8, Confucius draws an explicit analogy between painting and ethics: just as a painter requires a plain white background (*su*) before applying colours, ritual performance (*li*) acquires ethical significance only when grounded in *ren*. Absent this plain, sacrificial sincerity, the visible forms of ritual are reduced to empty display.

⁴⁷ Marshall Sahlins, “Colours and Cultures,” *Semiotica* 16 (1976): 1–22.

Comparative discussion is therefore carefully limited and consistently subordinated to indigenous evidence. Where modern theories or cross-cultural models are used, the dissertation makes explicit how they are adapted, what their limits are, and how the Chinese case may in turn modify them. Visual studies contribute Theoretical vocabulary for analysing colour as a visual-material code, while phenomenology offers a framework for understanding colour as a lived and embodied dimension of ritual and cosmological practice.

1.3 Colour, Culture, and Allegory: Toward an Ontology of Colour

The systematic study of colour as a scientific phenomenon began with Isaac Newton, whose prism experiments demonstrated that white light is composed of a spectrum of distinct colours.⁴⁸ This work established colour as a property of light itself rather than merely a subjective experience, laying the foundation for modern optical science.

Building on Newton, Thomas Young proposed the trichromatic theory, suggesting that the human retina contains three types of photoreceptors, each sensitive to red, green, or blue light.⁴⁹ Young's hypothesis marked the first attempt to connect physiological mechanisms with perceptual experiences of colour. Later, James Clerk Maxwell provided quantitative confirmation of this theory through colour-matching experiments and the development of the colour triangle, as well as the first colour photograph in 1861, transforming colour study into an empirical science.⁵⁰

Towards the late 19th century, Hermann von Helmholtz expanded Young's ideas into the Young–Helmholtz trichromatic model, systematically relating sensation to stimulus.⁵¹ In parallel, Ewald Hering proposed the opponent-process theory, suggesting that colour vision relies on opposing pairs of colours (red–green, blue–yellow, white–black) to explain phenomena such as afterimages and contrast effects.⁵² Modern physiology reconciles these theories:

⁴⁸ Newton, I. (1704). *Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflexions, Refractions, Inflections and Colours of Light*. London: Royal Society.

⁴⁹ Young, T. (1802). *On Theory of Light and Colours*. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, 92, 12–48.

⁵⁰ Maxwell, J. C. (1861). *On Theory of Three-Colour Vision*. Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, 21, 275–298.

⁵¹ Helmholtz, H. von. (1852). *Handbuch der Physiologischen Optik* (Handbook of Physiological Optics). Leipzig: Voss.

⁵² Hering, E. (1878). *Zur Lehre vom Lichtsinne* (Contributions to Theory of the Light Sense). Leipzig: Engelmann.

trichromatic responses occur at the cone receptor level, while opponent processing takes place in retinal and cortical pathways, together producing the full spectrum of perceived colours.

In the 20th century, advances in physics further refined our understanding of colour. Quantum mechanics explained discrete spectral lines and the energy levels associated with colour emission and absorption, while the CIE 1931 colour space standardized measurements of colour perception, enabling precise reproduction in industry and technology.⁵³ The late 20th and 21st centuries have seen the application of these principles in digital imaging, display technologies, LED and OLED lighting, and advanced studies of cortical colour processing, extending colour science into both practical and theoretical domains.

By tracing the development from Newton's optical experiments to contemporary physics and technology, the scientific study of colour demonstrates a continuous progression from observation to theory, measurement, and application, forming the foundation for modern understanding of both light and perception.

Colour is not merely a physical phenomenon reducible to wavelengths of light; it has long captivated philosophers due to its unique position at the intersection of the objective and subjective realms. Unlike shape or motion, which can be measured and described with relative clarity, colour is simultaneously a property of the external world and an experience within the mind. This duality raises fundamental questions: What is the nature of colour? Does it exist independently in the world, or only in perception? How does it mediate our understanding of reality?

From the earliest thinkers, colour was recognized as a special phenomenon. Plato and Aristotle considered colour in relation to light, matter, and perception, linking it to both natural philosophy and metaphysics. Medieval thinkers such as Alhazen and Grosseteste explored colour scientifically, yet always with philosophical implications, emphasizing the interaction of light, vision, and the observer.

⁵³ Commission Internationale de l'Éclairage (CIE). (1931). CIE 1931 Colour Space Standard. Vienna: CIE.

The topic gained renewed significance during the early modern period. Newton's prism experiments demonstrated that colour could be analysed scientifically, revealing the objective spectral components of light. Yet, Locke and Berkeley emphasized that colour also depends on the perceiving mind, highlighting the subjective aspect of experience. This tension between the measurable and the experiential made colour particularly rich for philosophical reflection.

German philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries deepened this exploration. Goethe, in his *Theory of Colours*, rejected purely physical explanations, emphasizing the emotional and perceptual qualities of colour.⁵⁴ Schopenhauer considered colour as a manifestation of the will, revealing a metaphysical dimension where perception bridges the inner and outer worlds.⁵⁵ Later, Wittgenstein in *Remarks on Colour* analysed the conceptual and linguistic dimensions, showing how even the use of colour terms involves rules, context, and shared human practices.⁵⁶

What makes colour philosophically special, then, is its ability to illuminate the relationship between mind, world, and language. It is neither entirely reducible to physical laws nor entirely subjective, which allows philosophers to use colour as a lens for exploring perception, reality, aesthetics, and meaning.

From a semiotic perspective, colour functions as a symbolic form, operating in the interpretive structures through which human beings construct reality.⁵⁷ It is precisely this symbolic dimension that makes colour an allegorical medium, capable of carrying meanings far beyond its sensory basis.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz described culture as a system of symbols through which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop knowledge about life.⁵⁸ Within such systems, colours can operate as signifiers of identity, difference, and value. Likewise, Victor Turner's studies of ritual symbolism show how colours function as markers of liminality and transformation—white for purity, red for danger or vitality, black for death or transition—patterns that

⁵⁴ Goethe, J. W. von. (1810). *Zur Farbenlehre* (Theory of Colours). Cotta.

⁵⁵ Schopenhauer, A. (1819). *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation). Cotta.

⁵⁶ Wittgenstein, L. (1951). *Remarks on Colour*. Basil Blackwell.

⁵⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume 1: Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955).

⁵⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

recur across cultural traditions.⁵⁹ In Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, the philosopher underscored that the meaning of colour terms depends on their use in "language games": what counts as "red" or "pure" or "dark" is not only a matter of perception, but of the social practices and contexts in which such words acquire sense.⁶⁰

This symbolic extension of colour is especially visible in modern cultural history. In mid-twentieth-century Britain, for instance, "colour" became a synonym for "race." The vocabulary of social commentary itself turned chromatic: Peter Griffiths's *A Question of Colour?* (1966),⁶¹ L. Constantine's *Colour Bar* (1954),⁶² Clifford S. Hill's *How Colour Prejudiced is Britain?* (1965),⁶³ and Anthony H. Richmond's *The Colour Problem* (1955)⁶⁴ all deployed the term "colour" not to describe physical hues but to encode social and political boundaries. Likewise, Sheila Patterson's *Colour and Culture in South Africa* (1969) traced the role of colour categories in structuring racial hierarchies under apartheid.⁶⁵ Here, colour functioned semiotically, not physiologically, serving as a cultural code for identity, exclusion, and power.

The same logic applies in other domains. In medicine, colour provides diagnostic cues: pallor, redness, or jaundice signify distinct conditions of the body. In computer science, as in Skarbek and Koschan's *Colour Image Segmentation*, colour is employed as a criterion of differentiation and recognition.⁶⁶ In each case, colour functions as a sign system, a way of distinguishing, categorizing, and interpreting phenomena.

Religious traditions have long emphasized the allegorical significance of colour. In Christian contexts, colour symbolism shaped liturgy, iconography, and theology. The later infusion of colour distinctions into doctrine and practice reflects the increasing weight of chromatic symbolism in religious imagination. Painting and visionary traditions further reinforced this, where colours conveyed spiritual states and eschatological truths.

Considering these examples, colour emerges as a signifier that consistently exceeds its physical

⁵⁹ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 59–90.

⁶⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 1–15.

⁶¹ Griffiths, Peter. 1966. *A Question of Colour?* London: Leslie Frewin.

⁶² Constantine, Lewis. 1954. *Colour Bar*. London: Stanley Paul & Co.

⁶³ Hill, Clifford S. 1965. *How Colour Prejudiced is Britain?* London: Gollancz.

⁶⁴ Richmond, Anthony H. 1955. *The Colour Problem: A Study of Racial Relations*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

⁶⁵ Patterson, Sheila. 1969. *Colour and Culture in South Africa: A Study of the Status of the Cape Coloured People within the Social Structure of the Union of South Africa*. New York: Kraus.

⁶⁶ Skarbek, Władysław, and Andreas Koschan. 1994. *Colour Image Segmentation: A Survey*. Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin.

referent. It is not only “seen” but “read.” As Cassirer emphasized, humans are symbol-making animals, and colour belongs to the repertoire of forms through which meaning is mediated.⁶⁷ To interpret colour, therefore, is to interpret allegory: each chromatic sign may point to social categories, ritual states, religious truths, or diagnostic knowledge. Within divination, colour likewise participates in such symbolic economies, serving not as a mere perceptual datum but as a semiotic cue in a larger interpretive system. When Duke Wen of Jin died, his successor, Duke Xiang, led an army to intercept the Qin forces. Breaking the traditional ritual code that required white for mourning, he dyed his mourning clothes black (ink) to suit the military necessity of the campaign. This shifted colour from a symbol of personal grief to a sign of state transformation and military resolve.⁶⁸ Thus, to treat colour only as a physical phenomenon is to overlook its semiotic and allegorical force.

The modern English term colour (German *Farbe*) reflects a long etymological trajectory that already encodes a particular ontological assumption. The German *Farbe* derives from Middle High German *varwe*, from Old High German *farawa*, meaning “dye” or “pigment,” ultimately tracing back to Proto-Indo-European roots associated with brightness or visual appearance. This lineage foregrounds colour as something materially applied.

A similar conceptual orientation is evident in the Latin colour (Old Latin *colos*), which is linked to the Proto-Indo-European root *kel-* (“to cover,” “to conceal”). This etymology suggests that colour was originally understood as a covering layer, something that overlays and potentially obscures an underlying substance. In ancient Greek, *chrōma* (χρῶμα), derived from *chrōs* (χρῶς, “skin” or “surface”), reinforces this view: colour belongs to the outermost boundary of an entity, analogous to skin, rather than to its internal constitution.

Taken together, these Indo-European linguistic traditions converge on a shared ontological premise: colour is external, superficial, and separable from the essence of the object. This distinction resonates with broader tendencies in Western philosophy to differentiate appearance from reality. Philosophical treatments of colour further elaborate this divide. In Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Zur Farbenlehre*, colour emerges through the interaction of light and

⁶⁷ Cassirer, Ernst. 1955. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Vol. 1: Language. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁶⁸ *The Zuo Tradition: Zuozhuan*, trans. Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), Xi 33.3.

darkness within perception; in Arthur Schopenhauer, it becomes a manifestation mediating between the will and representation; and in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Remarks on Colour*, it is analysed as a function of linguistic practice. Despite their differences, these approaches retain the implicit separation between the physical world and its perceptual or conceptual articulation.

By contrast, early Chinese conceptions of colour suggest a markedly different ontological framework. As collected material on oracle bone divination demonstrates, colour terms such as *bai*(白), *hei*(黑), *xing*(騂), and *wu*(勿) are not merely descriptive attributes but are integral to the identity and efficacy of ritual objects. A white ox or black sheep is not simply an object with a colour property; its colour is constitutive of its ritual function, determining its suitability for specific sacrificial contexts, ancestral offerings, or rainmaking rites.

This indicates that, in early Chinese thought, colour is not an external layer added to an object but part of its ontological constitution. Appearance does not conceal or stand apart from essence; rather, it expresses and participates in it. In other words, what something looks like is inseparable from what it is and what it can do within a ritual and cosmological system.

This divergence is not merely linguistic but epistemological and ontological. It reflects two fundamentally different ways of structuring the relationship between perception, language, and reality. In the Western tradition, colour tends toward abstraction and detachment from substance; in early China, it remains embedded in materiality, ritual practice, and cosmological order.

1.4 From *Di* to *Tian*: Bronze-Age Heaven Worship

Modern scholarship once framed the Shang–Zhou theological transition in stark terms: Shang worships *Di* (帝) and Zhou worships *Tian*(天). In this narrative, Creel argued that *Tian* and *tianming* (天命, “Mandate of Heaven”) were Zhou ideological inventions to legitimize conquest over a Shang system centred on the high ancestral god *Di*.⁶⁹ Gu Jiegang’s “Doubting Antiquity” school likewise treated *Tian* as a late, retroactive construction. “Our traditional knowledge of Chinese antiquity was built up in successive strata, but in an order exactly the

⁶⁹ Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China*, Volume One: The Western Chou Empire (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 93–100.

reverse of the actual occurrence.”⁷⁰ More recent scholars, however, show that the conceptual boundary between Di and Tian was never as rigid as previously thought.

Texts such as the *Shangshu*, *Shijing*, and *Shiji*, even though later compilations, preserve a memory of Shang religion that entwines the actions of Di and Heaven rather than sharply separating them. In the “*Pangeng*” chapters, the king admonishes his people: “The former kings had their regulations; [they] were reverently careful of Heaven’s Mandate.” Later he states: “I also rely on Heaven to prolong our mandate in this new city.”⁷¹ These passages, while filtered through Zhou redaction, suggest that the idea of a Heaven-bestowed mandate could be projected onto Shang kings without appearing conceptually incoherent. From a chronological perspective, scholarly consensus places the composition of the “*Pangeng*” chapters in the Spring and Autumn period, long after the historical Shang.⁷² This temporal distance is precisely what makes their conceptual strategy significant. The ability of Zhou-period compilers to apply the language of Heaven and Heaven’s Mandate to Shang rulers presupposes the existence of an earlier, structurally compatible religious framework. I argue that such a seminal structure did exist in Shang religion: a Heaven-oriented system of supreme authority centred on Di. Although designated differently and articulated through distinct ritual and divinatory practices, Shang Di-worship already functioned as a transcendent source of legitimacy, punishment, and favour. The Zhou formulation of Heaven and its Mandate thus does not represent a radical theological rupture, but rather a terminological and conceptual rearticulation of an older religious logic. In this sense, the retrospective attribution of Heaven’s Mandate to the Shang in Pan Geng is not merely a Zhou projection, but a historically intelligible translation of Shang religious authority into Zhou conceptual language.

The Tang Shi chapter of the *Shangshu* similarly integrates *Tian* and *Shangdi* (上帝): “The Xia have many crimes; Heaven’s Mandate has smitten them,” followed by the declaration, “I fear

⁷⁰ “古史是层累地造成的，发生的次序和排列的次序恰恰相反。” Gu Jiegang, “Zhi Fu Sinian, Qian Xuantong xiansheng lun gushi shu” (Letter to Fu Sinian and Qian Xuantong on Ancient History), in *Gushi bian* (Critiques of Ancient History), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1926), 60.

⁷¹ “先王有服，恪谨天命。” “天其永我命于兹新邑。” *Shangshu* 尚書, “Pan Geng I” 盤庚上. For translation and discussion, see Mark Edward Lewis, *Sanctioned Violence in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 35–36.

⁷² Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Shangshu in Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Michael Loewe (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, 1993), 376–389.

Shangdi; I do not dare not to rectify [things].”⁷³ Following the same interpretive logic outlined above, the significance of Tang Shi lies precisely in the explicit juxtaposition of *Tian/tianming* and *Shangdi*, which makes their conceptual relationship unusually prominent. While the late dating of Tang Shi is widely accepted, this does not exhaust the interpretive implications of the text. The deliberate co-presence of *Tian*, *tianming*, and *Shangdi* in the same rhetorical framework is particularly revealing. Rather than indicating a simple Zhou imposition of its own political theology onto the past, this juxtaposition suggests that Zhou compilers perceived a meaningful continuity between Shang Shangdi-worship and their own Heaven-centred legitimization discourse. In other words, the retrospective linkage presupposes comparability: *Shangdi* could be understood as functionally equivalent to, or at least structurally compatible with, *Tian* as a supreme moral and cosmological authority. Had Shang religion lacked such a seminal structure, which is capable of grounding punishment, legitimacy, and dynastic succession, the fusion of *tianming* and *Shangdi* in Tang Shi would have appeared conceptually strained or unintelligible. The text instead presents this linkage as self-evident, implying that even in Zhou-period historical imagination, Shang Di-worship was not fundamentally alien to Heaven-based rule, but rather an earlier articulation of a shared religious logic.

“*Xuanniao*” (玄鸟) ode mythologizes Shang origins through Heaven: “Heaven commanded the mysterious bird; it descended and gave birth to the Shang, who dwelt in the vast land of Yin.”⁷⁴ The following ode “*Changfa*” (长发) blends Heavenly and ancestral agency: “The woman of the *Yousong* clan was in her prime; Di established a son, and thus Shang was born.”⁷⁵ The Grand Scribe’s Records elaborates this into the well-known narrative in which Jian Di swallows the bird’s egg: “...she saw a mysterious bird drop its egg; Jian Di took and swallowed it, and thus became pregnant and bore Qi.”⁷⁶ Here, Heaven, *Di*, and the miraculous bird appear

⁷³ “有夏多罪，天命殛之。……予畏上帝，不敢不正。” *Shangshu*, “Tang Shi” 湯誓. Translation and commentary in William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 16–17.

⁷⁴ “天命玄鸟，降而生商。” *Shijing* 诗经, “Shang Song” 商颂, “Xuan Niao” 玄鸟 (Ode 303). For translation, see Stephen Owen, *The Poetry of the Early Period in The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁵ *Shijing*, “Shang Song,” “Chang Fa” 長發 (Ode 304). Translation in Arthur Waley, *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996).

⁷⁶ Oracle bone inscription recorded in *Jiaguwen Heji* 甲骨文合集, ed. Hu Houxuan 胡厚宣 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1965). For English analysis, see David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 108–110.

in a layered cosmological nexus that is neither purely ancestral nor purely celestial. As noted, “*Xuan Niao*” and “*Chang Fa*” are generally dated to the Spring and Autumn period and are widely understood to have been composed in the State of Song by Shang descendants under Zhou rule. Yet precisely because these texts constitute retrospective narrations produced by the Shang’s own descendants, they are not best read as arbitrary Zhou inventions. Rather, they represent an inherited mythological memory through which later authors articulated what they understood to be the religious logic of their lineage. The consistent entanglement of Heaven and *Di* in these origin myths suggests that, from the perspective of Shang descendants themselves, Shang kingship had always been grounded in a form of Heaven-oriented authority. While the extant formulations are later, the cosmological structure they presuppose plausibly reflects religious conceptions already operative during the Shang, or at least remembered as such.

The oracle bones, which are the direct records of Shang ritual practice, further reinforce this picture of a cosmic authority governing natural phenomenon. Many inscriptions ask whether *Di* will regulate the weather essential to agriculture: “Will *Di* command enough rain for the year? Will *Di* command not enough rain for the year?”⁷⁷ Another reads: “On the next *guimao* (癸卯, the 40th day of the sexagenary cycle day), will *Di* command the wind?”⁷⁸ Still others record ritual actions appealing to celestial manifestations: “Perform a *liao*(燎) sacrifice to *Di*’s clouds.”⁷⁹ These texts show that *Di* governs wind, rain, clouds, and seasonal conditions—features of the sky and atmosphere—situating the supreme deity firmly within a Heaven-oriented cosmology.

Taken together, these sources show that the Shang already operated with a vertical cosmic axis whose topmost power governed weather, fate, and ritual efficacy. What the Zhou later articulate as *Tian* is not a wholly invention but a moral-political reinterpretation of an already existing

⁷⁷ *Shiji* 史記, “Yin Benji” 殷本紀. Translation in Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian: Chapters from the Shih Chi of Ssu-ma Ch’ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 45–47.

⁷⁸ *Jiaguwen Heji*. See also David Keightley, “The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology,” in *The Cambridge History of Ancient China*, ed. Michael Loewe and Edward Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 247–251.

⁷⁹ *Jiaguwen Heji*. Discussion in Li Feng, *Early China: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 87–90.

cosmic authority. Heaven worship, in a structural sense, precedes the Zhou; what changes across the transition is language, emphasis, and ideological framing, not the underlying cosmology itself.

2. Religion and Colour: Framing Heaven Worship

This chapter examines the interconnections between divination, colour, and Heaven worship as mutually reinforcing components of early Chinese religious life. From an anthropological perspective, religion may be understood as a symbolic and ritual system through which human communities structure their engagement with the cosmos and render it intelligible; from a political perspective, it functions as a mechanism for legitimizing and organizing authority. In early China, these dimensions were not separable but deeply intertwined. While China has often been described as “not traditionally religious” in a Western sense, early Chinese society was in fact structured by a pervasive cosmological and ritual order in which Heaven worship functioned as the primary and most authoritative form of religious practice, a position it arguably continued to hold, in transformed ways, well into later periods. Divination operated as the principal medium through which human actors communicated with ancestral and celestial powers, mediating between the uncertainties of the spirit world and the practical needs of political governance. Within this system, colour served as a crucial classificatory and meaningful element, not merely reflecting cosmological ideas but actively participating in their articulation and regulation. Because divination, colour symbolism, and Heaven worship intersect so consistently in the extant textual and material record, it is both reasonable and necessary to analyse them together. Reading these domains in relation to one another reveals how chromatic codes, ritual communication, and cosmological authority coalesced to shape both the religious imagination and the structures of political power in early China.

2.1 Colour in A Global Religious Context

The relationship between colour and religious practice has long been recognized across cultures worldwide. William E. Gladstone observed that Homeric societies had limited colour vocabulary, a pattern that persists in modern Greece’s architecture, clothing, and national symbols,

which favour blue and white. Gladstone noted that Homer used the same word, *oinops* (wine-dark), to describe both the sea and an ox. He concluded that ancient Greeks perceived the world more in terms of shades of light than distinct colours.⁸⁰ In a modern context, this aesthetic persists. The Greek preference for Blue and White is not just nationalistic but environmental and spiritual: Blue (*Kyaneos*) historically associated with the depths of the sea and the protective evil eye. White (*Leukos*) symbolizing purity, light, and the radiance of the sun against marble. The interplay of these two suggests a continuity of the ancient focus on the contrast between light and shadow.

From the earliest shamanistic rituals to codified ceremonial systems, colours have served both practical and symbolic functions, mediating the interaction between humans and the sacred. Anthropologists such as J. G. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough*, emphasize that colour often operates as a central semiotic tool in rituals, signalling status, invoking divine favour, or ensuring ritual efficacy. Frazer describes how the Wagogo people of East Africa used colour to influence the weather through sympathetic magic. To induce rain, they would sacrifice a black fowl, a black sheep, and black cattle. The colour black was a semiotic tool meant to mimic the dark, heavy rain clouds they wished to “invoke” from the sky.⁸¹

Shamanistic cultures offer particularly illustrative examples. Jiang Chengqing observes that “the most intense consciousness in shamanistic culture is colour consciousness, and the most powerful means for shamans to solve mysteries and dispel doubts is colour.”⁸² Across diverse traditions, shamans and ritual specialists employed coloured pigments, fabrics, and ornaments as instruments of ritual efficacy, believing that colours could influence spiritual forces and natural outcomes. Red, for instance, often signifies vitality, blood, and protection, while white signals purity or ancestral connection, and black represents transformation or liminality. Comparative research shows similar patterns worldwide: among the Nedembu tribe in Zambia, elaborate colour schemes in initiation rites denote social and cosmological hierarchies; the Ndembu use a tripartite colour system: White, Red, and Black, to represent the total experience of human

⁸⁰ Gladstone, William E. *Studies on Homeric Colour Terms*. London: Macmillan, 1858.

⁸¹ Frazer, J. G. *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. London: Macmillan, 1922.

⁸² “巫史文化中，最强烈的意识是色彩意识，而巫史们解惑释疑的最有力的手段也是色彩。” Jiang Chengqing. *Theory of Colour in China*. Lanzhou: Gansu People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008, p. 2.

life and the cosmos. During initiation rites (such as the Mukanda for boys), these colours act as “dominant symbols” that denote specific hierarchies: White (mpemba) represents purity, health, strength, and the authority of the ancestors. It is the colour of transition into a “clean” social status. Red (mukundu) represents blood, power, and masculine vitality. It symbolizes the transition through life-giving (birth) and life-taking (hunting/war) acts. Black (mwilu) represents death, darkness, and the hidden state of the uninitiated.⁸³ In medieval and modern Europe, the cardinal’s red robe, symbolising readiness for martyrdom and marking one of the highest ranks of ecclesiastical authority, which exemplifies how colour regulates religious hierarchy and encodes sacred meaning within Christian tradition; in Mesoamerica, colours corresponded to cardinal directions, deities, and agricultural cycles. Among the Aztec and Maya, colour was a spatial and temporal map. The “Four Quarters” of the universe were assigned colours that linked geography to divine influence: red in the east (sunrise and rebirth), black in the west (sunset and the underworld), white in the north (cold and ancestors), and yellow in the south (warmth and ripening).⁸⁴

These global patterns highlight a key principle: colours function as tangible mediators between perception and meaning. As perceptual psychology suggests, colour often reaches the observer more immediately than form or shape. As Arnheim argues, “in colour-vision action issues from the object and affects the person; but for the perception of shape the organizing mind goes out to the object.”⁸⁵ This supports the hypothesis that in early Chinese ritual and divination, where colour appears in material artefacts, sacrificial animals, and sacrificial garments, chromatic choices would have had a powerful perceptual and affective impact, not just a symbolic or conceptual one.

Archaeological evidence reinforces these textual observations. Red pigments, long associated with vitality, protection, and ritual force, appear widely in prehistoric rock art across Eurasia. For instance, in the caves of the *Yabrai* (雅布赖, Yabulai) Mountains of Inner Mongolia,

⁸³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 59–92.

⁸⁴ Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 64–65.

⁸⁵ Rudolf Arnheim, *Art, and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, revised ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 336.

paintings were executed in red and black, in which red ochre features prominently, though these works belong to later steppe traditions rather than the Palaeolithic cave-art horizon.⁸⁶ and on Neolithic pottery from *Hemudu*(河姆渡) and *Qingliangang*(青莲岗).⁸⁷ The Upper Cave Man's use of red iron ore powder in funerary contexts exemplifies an early belief in the communicative power of colour. Over time, the ritual repertoire expanded to include black, white, yellow, and combinations thereof, reflecting both symbolic refinement and practical codification, as seen in Shang and Zhou sacrificial ceremonies and ceremonial clothing systems codified in texts such as *Liji*. The symbolic significance of colours is further evident in the origins of the Chinese character for colour, which derives from sacrificial contexts, emphasizing colour's intense stimulative effect within ceremonial practice.

2.2 Colours in Early Chinese Thought and Ritual

Within this global context, early China provides a rich case study in the intersection of colour, ritual, and religious thought. Oracle bone inscriptions indicate that the type, gender, number, combination, and colour of sacrificial animals were carefully prescribed, reflecting a belief that colour could influence ritual efficacy and mediate between the human and divine realms.⁸⁸

Scholarship by Zhang Guangzhi and Sarah Allan situates these practices within a broader framework of integrated symbolic thought, describing early China as a world in which myth, ritual, and visual culture were interwoven under what can be described as “shamanistic culture.” As Zhang said, “The world of the Three Dynasties was one in which myth, ritual, and art were inextricably interwoven... I have elsewhere called this entire cultural complex ‘shamanistic,’ for at its heart was the use of ritual and art to communicate between different levels of the universe.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Chen Zhaofu, ed. *Complete Works of Chinese Rock Art*, Vol. 1: Inner Mongolia and Ningxia (中国岩画全集 1: 内蒙古、宁夏卷). Shenyang: Liaoning Fine Arts Publishing House, 2001, p. 204.

⁸⁷ Peng De. *Chinese Five Colours*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Fine Arts Publishing House, 2008, p. 23.

⁸⁸ Sarah Allan, trans. Wang Tao. *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010, p. 6.

⁸⁹ Zhang Guangzhi. *Art, Myth, and Ritual*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2005. p.129.

The relationship between the Yin and Zhou dynasties has been widely discussed. Wang Guowei, for example, analysed the Yin *lu* (辂) and Zhou *mian* (冕). The Yin emphasized physical symbols of prestige like the *lu*, a grand ceremonial carriage. The Zhou shifted this focus to the *mian*, a complex sacrificial crown that symbolized a person's specific place within a new, highly structured ritual hierarchy. Hence the transition from the Shang to the Zhou dynasty represented a fundamental societal and moral transformation, rather than a mere change in ruling power.⁹⁰ Yet, relatively few studies have approached this topic through the lens of colour. Wang Tao, a student of Sarah Allan, authored *Colours and Sacrifices*, examining which words in oracle bone inscriptions function as colour terms. By analysing these texts in detail, he derived their symbolic meanings. He also posited that the Yin people worshipped white, while treating yellow primarily as a symbol of the soil,⁹¹ a point with which I respectfully disagree.

Colours occupy a unique position in human perception. As physical phenomena, they are more detached from utilitarian concerns than other senses. They are original aesthetic forms with intense visual appeal, grounded in natural physiological responses. Over time, these responses became entwined with emotion and empirical knowledge, forming the historical sediment of human cultural mentality. Early societies recognized the special status of colours, often attributing to them supernatural qualities, as reflected in concepts such as the Five Elements, the Theory of the Sequential Succession of the Five Virtues (*Wude zhongshi shuo* 五德终始说), and the Theory of the Three Unifications (*Santong lun* 三统论). Theory of the Five Elements established structural correspondences between collars, seasons, and natural forces. Building on this framework, the doctrine of the Revolving Five Virtues, traditionally associated with Zou Yan, historicized these correlations by mapping elemental-colour phases onto dynastic succession, thereby legitimizing political authority through mandated "colour shifts" (e.g., Qin black). The Three Unification Learning, which gained prominence in the Han dynasty, further ritualized this logic by instituting a cyclical rotation of primary colours: Black, White, and Red, designed to align human governance with the temporal movements of Heaven. Collectively,

⁹⁰ Wang Guowei. "On the Institutions of Yin and Zhou." In *Guantang Jilin*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959 (Orig. 1932).

⁹¹ Wang, Tao. *Colours and Sacrifices: A Probe into the Meaning of Colour in Ancient Chinese Culture*. PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2010.

these theories represent the maturation of colour as a cosmopolitical instrument, embedding chromatic symbolism into the durable cognitive and ritual structures of Chinese political culture. In modern scholarship, such doctrines are commonly discussed under the rubric of correlative cosmology.

These frameworks point to a historically distinctive Chinese tradition in which colour was elevated to a fully theorized ontological category, unlike Mediterranean traditions, where colour speculation largely remained within philosophical, artistic, or allegorical discourse. Crucially, this chromatic ontology was not episodic: its underlying assumptions persisted across dynastic change and continue to shape Chinese intellectual and ritual vocabularies, marking colour as a durable and culturally distinctive medium of world-ordering.

A significant theoretical question also arises in the study of colours: the distinction between *wen* (文, often translated as “literary” or “cultural”) and *xiang* (象, “image”). In early thought, *Wen* transcends practical utility, constructing and reflecting the spiritual world. Xunzi’s concept of *jiebi* (解蔽) encapsulates this idea: “Mozi is obscured by the utility and doesn’t know *Wen*.”⁹² The tension between image and abstraction has long been a central concern in Chinese aesthetics and philosophy. Well before the emergence of modern visual or image studies, early Chinese thinkers articulated a clear awareness of the limits of linguistic abstraction and the epistemic power of visual form. This concern is most explicitly formulated in *the Great Treatise* (*Xici* 系辞), where the distinction between *xiang* and *wen* becomes foundational. The Great Treatise famously asserts that the sages “established images to exhaust meaning, and attached words to exhaust speech,”⁹³ thereby positioning images as prior to and more capacious than language. *Xiang* denotes the primal, pre-linguistic forms through which cosmic order is apprehended, while *Wen* refers to their cultural articulation in writing, ritual, and aesthetic refinement. The mythic account of Fuxi(伏羲), who observed the images of Heaven and Earth before composing *wen* to order human society—encapsulates this hierarchy. Taken together, these

⁹² “墨子蔽于用而不知文。” Xunzi, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 226.

⁹³ *The Classic of Changes*, “Appended Phrases I” (*Xici zhuan* 系辞传): “圣人立象以尽意，设卦以尽情伪，系辞焉以尽其言。” (Shengren li xiang yi jin yi, she gua yi jin qing wei, xi ci yan yi jin qi yan.) For an authoritative English translation, see Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 67.

arguments reveal a durable intellectual tradition that privileged visual and imagistic cognition as a fundamental mode of knowing, securing the problem of image versus abstraction a central and enduring position within Chinese aesthetic thought.

Scholars such as Hayashi Minao, in *Pattern of God and Beast*, and Zhang Guangzhi, in *Animal Bronze Pattern of Shang and Zhou Dynasties*, have examined how Xiang manifests in material culture. “The images of gods and beasts on Shang and Zhou bronzes do not merely decorate the vessel; they constitute a symbolic system through which the powers of the ritual world were made present.”⁹⁴ Both Hayashi Minao and K.C. Chang addressed the sensory power of bronzes, though their focus was primarily on the form and mythological function of the patterns (*xiang*). However, they both acknowledged that the visual impact, including luminosity and the metallic sheen, was essential to making the ritual power present. In *The Patterns of Gods and Beasts in Shang and Zhou Bronzes*, Hayashi argues that the reflectivity and brilliance of the bronze were not just aesthetic but were intended to mimic the luminosity of spirits. He suggests that the “glare” or “lustre” of a freshly cast bronze (which would have looked like gold, not the green patina we see today) was a way to manifest the “brightness” (*ming* 明) of the gods. The colour itself, a radiant, golden-yellow, symbolized the transition from the human realm to the divine.⁹⁵ While Chang focuses on the Taotie motif, he notes that the vessel itself acted as a ritual instrument. The visual dominance of the bronze, its heavy, metallic presence and its specific colour, functioned as a “signifier of status and a bridge to the ancestors.” He implies that the visual “weight” and colour provided the “intense visual appeal” necessary for ritual efficacy.⁹⁶

Li Zehou highlights the primacy of colours: “Lines and colours are two main factors in plastic arts. Compared to lines, colours are more primitive aesthetic forms. Because the feeling of colours has the animal reaction as a direct foundation (e.g., the different physical feelings towards red or green). All visual images are produced by colours and brightness.”⁹⁷ This

⁹⁴ Hayashi, Minao. *Pattern of Gods and Beasts*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1968, 34.

⁹⁵ Hayashi Minao, *Sengoku jidai fudōki no kenkyū* (Research on Bronzes of the Warring States Period). Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1989, 112–115;

⁹⁶ K.C. Chang, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: A Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 61–63.

⁹⁷ Li, Zehou 李泽厚. *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1985.

observation raises the critical question: why have colours been largely overlooked in studies of ancient China, despite their prominence in ritual and symbolism?

2.3 A Premise: Belief in Colours in Chinese Divination

One of the central arguments of this research is that specific colours were associated with unique functions in divination. The belief that colours were more than mere light or visual embellishment, that they could serve as bearers of fortune, enabled our ancestors to employ them as tools in divinatory practices.

2.3.1 The Chinese Symbolic Order of Colours

In Chinese civilization, colour has never been merely an aesthetic phenomenon. From the three dynasties worldview to codified imperial regulations, from revolutionary reassignments to contemporary cultural revival, colour has remained a meaningful structure through which the Chinese world is ordered and understood. This chapter traces the Chinese colour system, arguing that despite ruptures in form and ideology, chromatic symbolism endures as one of the most resilient cultural logics in China.

The study of colour in classical Chinese thought reveals a distinctive intellectual trajectory, sharply contrasting with Western approaches. While Western traditions focused on quantifying colour as a physical or psychological property, Chinese thought developed an integrated, cosmological, and symbolic system. Embedded in the correlative systems of *yin-yang*, *wuxing*, and *qi* (气, “vital energy”), colours functioned as a medium for expressing cosmic order, social hierarchy, and moral propriety.

At the core of classical Chinese colour thought lies the *wuse* system, or Five Colours. These were not “primary” colours in a purely aesthetic sense, but chromatic correlates of the *wuxing*, forming a dynamic, interdependent network that structured both the cosmos and human society.

Qing (青): Often translated as green or blue, *qing* represented vitality, growth, and renewal. It corresponded to Wood, the East, and the spring season. Its semantic range varies from verdant

foliage to the blue sky or jade.

Chi (赤): Red, associated with Fire and the South, symbolized life force, joy, celebration, and auspiciousness. It was used in sacrificial garments, ceremonial paraphernalia, and objects denoting sacred power.

Huang (黄): Yellow, linked to earth and the centre, represented centrality, authority, and nourishment. Its imperial connotation, especially through association with the Yellow Emperor (*Huangdi* 黄帝), made it a key symbol of governance and cosmic alignment.

Bai (白): White, corresponding to Metal and the West, signified purity, mourning, and moral clarity. It was the colour of both bridal attire and funerary garments, embodying dualities of life and death.

Hei (黑): Black, associated with Water and the North, indicated depth, mystery, and the primordial void. Beyond simple visual perception, it represented the unknowable origin of all things.

The correlative cosmology embedded in these colours made them functional and symbolic simultaneously. Each colour was connected to directions, seasons, organs, virtues, celestial bodies, and ritual procedures. For example, a ruler donning yellow was not simply displaying a decorative preference; he was aligning with earth, asserting centrality, and performing a cosmological act that reinforced imperial authority.

A concept central to understanding this system is *xuan*. Often translated as “mystery” or “profundity,” *xuan* is not simply black but the dark, reddish-black of the northern pre-dawn sky. It signifies the undifferentiated, primordial state of the cosmos. This idea underpins Daoist thought, where the unitary and mysterious *xuan* precedes the manifold *wuse*, reflecting a metaphysical preference for the original, unmanifest Dao (Allan, 2010).

The system also reinforced social and moral hierarchies. The Five Colours were known as *zhengse* (正色, “standard colours”), associated with ritual propriety and elite authority, whereas

secondary or blended colours (*jianse* 间色) could signal moral excess or disorder. Confucius's admonition in *the Analects*: "I hate the way purple confuses vermilion"⁹⁸ serves as a metaphor for the dangers of disorder, linking chromatic propriety with ethical and political stability.

Ritual texts of the Zhou period already present a remarkably systematic linkage between colour, direction, and cultic medium. *Zhouli* locates this correlation first in jade. "*Da zongbo*" 大宗伯 prescribes six ritual jades "to serve Heaven, Earth, and the four quarters"⁹⁹: the azure *bi* (苍璧) for Heaven, the yellow *cong* (黄琮) for Earth, the green-blue *gui* (青圭) for the East, the red *zhang* (赤璋) for the South, the white *hu* (白琥) for the West, and the dark *xuanhuang* (玄璜) for the North. Through this set, a full chromatic compass is projected onto both vertical (Heaven/Earth) and horizontal (four directions) space. A parallel scheme appears in the "*Guiren*" section, where six classes of tortoise are distinguished by direction and colour: "Heaven-tortoise" of the *ling* type, "Earth-tortoise" of the *yi* type, and four directional tortoises for East, West, South, and North, which Zheng Xuan glosses as black-dark (*xuan*) for Heaven, yellow for Earth, green-blue for East, white for West, red for South, and black for North.¹⁰⁰ In other words, the very animal bodies that mediate divination (tortoise plastrons) are themselves organised by the same directional colour code.

The *Yili* introduces an even more explicit visualisation of this cosmogram. In "*Jinli*" (覲礼), the square "direction board" (*fangming* 方明) associated with Wood is four feet on each side and divided into six colour fields: East is green-blue, South red, West white, North black, with dark above and yellow below. On this same board, six jades are laid out: *gui* above and *bi* below, with *zhang* to the South, *hu* to the West, *huang* to the North, and *gui* to the East. Here colours, jades, vertical polarity, and the four cardinal points are mapped onto a single ritual surface, making the directional colour scheme both visible and manipulable in the performance

⁹⁸ "恶紫之夺朱也." Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 206.

⁹⁹ "以玉作六器……以苍璧礼天，以黄琮礼地，以青圭礼东方，以赤璋礼南方，以白琥礼西方，以玄璜礼北方." *Zhouli zhengyi* 周礼正义, "Chunguan: Dazongbo" 春官·大宗伯, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏, ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), juan 35, 1389–90.

¹⁰⁰ "龜人掌六龜之屬……鄭玄注：天龜玄，地龜黃，東龜青，西龜白，南龜赤，北龜黑" (The Master of the Tortoises is in charge of the six types of tortoises... Zheng Xuan's commentary: "The Heaven-tortoise is dark-black; the Earth-tortoise is yellow; the East-tortoise is green-blue; the West-tortoise is white; the South-tortoise is red; the North-tortoise is black"). *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 (Correct Meaning of the Rites of Zhou), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 24:842.

space.¹⁰¹ The *Zhouli*'s “*Muren*” (牧人) further extends this logic to sacrificial animals: “For *yang* sacrifices, one uses red-haired animals; for *yin* sacrifices, one uses dark-haired animals; for ‘overlooking sacrifices’ (望祀), each uses animals whose hair matches the colour of its direction.”¹⁰² Zheng Xuan and Jia Gongyan clarify that *yang* sacrifices are those to Heaven at the southern suburb and in the ancestral temple, while *yin* sacrifices are those to Earth at the northern suburb and to the *sheji*(社稷); the “overlooking sacrifices” to the Five Peaks, Four Marchmounts, and Four Streams follow the colour of the corresponding quarter. Taken together with the “*Xiaozongbo*” (小宗伯)’s “divination of the Five Emperors at the four suburbs,”¹⁰³ and Zheng Xuan’s identification of their associated colours (azure for Ling Weiyang /Taihao in the East, red for Yandi in the South, white for Shaohao in the West, black for Zhuanxu in the North, and yellow for the Yellow Emperor at the centre), these passages show that by the time of the *Zhouli*/*Yili* redaction a mature system was in place that ties five directions, five sovereigns, five phases, and five colours into a single ritual–cosmological grid.

On this basis, *Liji* may be read as the textual site where the Five Phases and the Five Colours are finally welded into a fully articulated “colour-direction” regime that governs the entire life of the Son of Heaven. The “*Yueling*” chapter articulates a comprehensive chromatic programme: each season, direction, and phase is assigned a complete colour ensemble—residence, chariot, horses, flags, garments, jade, sacrificial food, and even the shape and surface of ritual vessels. In spring (corresponding to Wood and the East), the Son of Heaven dwells in the *qingyang* (青阳) apartments, rides the *luan* carriage(鸛路), drives azure dragons, bears blue banners, wears blue robes, dons green-blue jade, eats wheat and lamb, and uses openwork vessels “sparse and penetrable,” matching the expansive *qi* of the season.¹⁰⁴ Summer, aligned with Fire

¹⁰¹ “方明者，木也；方四尺，設六色：東方青，南方赤，西方白，北方黑，上玄下黃。設六玉，上圭下璧，南方璋，西方琥，北方璜，東方圭” (The *fangming* is made of wood; it is four feet square and set with six colours: East is green-blue, South is red, West is white, North is black, above is dark-black, and below is yellow. Six jades are set: above is the *gui*, below the *bi*, South the *zhang*, West the *hu*, North the *huang*, and East the *gui*). *Yili Zhushu* 儀禮注疏 (The Book of Etiquette and Ceremonies with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 11:1092–93.

¹⁰² “凡陽祀，用騂牲毛之；陰祀，用黝牲毛之；望祀，各以其方之色牲毛之” (For all *yang* sacrifices, use red-haired animals; for *yin* sacrifices, use dark-haired animals; for ‘overlooking sacrifices,’ use animals whose hair colour matches their direction). *Zhouli zhengyi*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 13:462.

¹⁰³ “兆五帝於四郊，四望四類亦如之。鄭玄：‘五帝，蒼曰靈威仰……黃曰含樞紐，黃帝食焉。’ Xuan: “Of the Five Emperors, the Azure one is called Lingweiyang... the Yellow one is called Hanshuniu, whom the Yellow Emperor eats with”). *Zhouli zhengyi*, in *Shisanjing zhushu*, 19:684.

¹⁰⁴ Yang Tianyu 杨天宇, *Liji yizhu 礼记译注*, vol. 1 上册 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 173–182 (“*Yueling*” 月令, Mengchun zhi yue 孟春之月).

and the South, receives a parallel configuration centred on red: the *mingtang*(明堂) residence, red chariots, red horses (*chiliu* 赤騮), red flags, red garments, red jade, beans and chicken, and tall, coarse vessels.¹⁰⁵ At the pivot of late summer and the centre (Earth), yellow emerges as the sovereign chromatic principle: the emperor rides the “great carriage,” drives yellow horses (*huangliu* 黃騮), carries yellow flags, wears yellow robes and yellow jade, eats millet and cattle, and uses round and capacious vessels.¹⁰⁶ Autumn (Metal, West) and winter (Water, North) complete the cycle with white and black/dark, again with fully specified ensembles of vehicle, horse, banner, garment, jade, food, vessel form, and even associated natural phenomena, such as the appearance and disappearance of the rainbow between late spring and early winter, and the association of winter with the water god *xuanming* (玄冥).¹⁰⁷ Compared with the already sophisticated directional colour codes of the *Zhouli* and *Yili*, *Liji* does not invent a new system so much as consolidate and saturate it, extending colour–direction correspondences from jades, tortoises, and sacrificial animals to the entire embodied practice and seasonal choreography of imperial ritual.

Alongside this seasonal–cosmological matrix, the *Liji* systematically embeds colour into the hierarchy of status and the regulation of desire. On the one hand, it codifies the classic distinction between “proper colours” —the five pure directional hues of blue/green, red, yellow, white, and black, and “intermediate colours”, admitting the latter only in subordinate positions: “the upper garment in proper colour, the lower garment in mixed colour”.¹⁰⁸ Certain mixed colours, such as purple, are explicitly marked as problematic when used in high ritual contexts (“xuan crown with purple cords, beginning from Duke Huan of Lu”),¹⁰⁹ and are treated as a sign of deviation from ancient norms. On the other hand, the same text multiplies subtle chromatic distinctions in headgear, robes, and furs to differentiate ruler, consort, nobles, officials, and “idle” or morally suspect persons (e.g. fox-white fur reserved for the ruler; certain capped styles

¹⁰⁵ Yang, *Liji yizhu*, 186–93 (“Yueling,” Mengxia zhi yue 孟夏之月). “高而麤之器.”

¹⁰⁶ Yang, *Liji yizhu*, 195–96 (“Yueling,” Zhongxia zhi yue 仲夏之月).

¹⁰⁷ Yang, *Liji yizhu*, 197–208 (“Yueling,” Mengqiu zhi yue 孟秋之月 – Mengdong zhi yue 孟冬之月).

¹⁰⁸ “衣正色，裳间色。” *Liji yizhu*, 276, 370.

¹⁰⁹ “玄冠紫缕，自鲁桓公始也。” *Li Ji* [Book of Rites], “Yu Zao,” in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, trans. James Legge, vol. 27 of *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 450.

for the unemployed or the unworthy). Colour here is no longer a neutral descriptor but a juridical code, a visible law of rank, office, and moral standing.

Within this highly saturated chromatic regime, the category of *su*, plain, undyed, or unadorned, takes on a new and ambivalent role. In the *Yueling* and related ritual chapters, “plainness” does not simply mean primordial authenticity, as in later Confucian moral rhetoric or in certain *Yizhuan* readings where unadorned colour can symbolize original sincerity or the uncarved state. Rather, in *Liji* it is increasingly mobilized as a corrective and punitive device. Extraordinary events such as eclipses trigger a shift into plain attire: “when there is a solar eclipse the Son of Heaven wears plain garments (*sufu* 素服) and rectifies the duties of the six ministries,”¹¹⁰ because the eclipse manifests a failure of yang-affairs and thus demands self-abasement and the purging of excess. Similarly, plain, or unpattern garments appear in mourning stages and in the dress codes for those who have lost office or stand outside normal political order (“those without a lord do not wear garments of two colours”).¹¹¹ In *Liji*, then, to strip away colour and pattern is often to strip away privilege, to confess guilt, to withdraw from the exuberant play of ranked colours that otherwise fill the ritual calendar. This marks a subtle but important shift from earlier texts like *Zhouyi* and *Ten Wings*, where “plainness” (*su*, *pu*, or the absence of ornament) is more frequently aligned with ontological simplicity or moral authenticity. *Liji* preserves that valuation in places, but at the same time inaugurates a new discursive trend: a heightened awareness of chromatic excess as a symptom of inflated desire and social disorder, and a corresponding use of “de-colouring” as a ritual technology of restraint. In this sense, *Liji* both completes the Five-Phases colour system and internalizes it as a moral regime that can be intensified, suspended, or deliberately muted through shifts between richly structured colour and enforced plainness.

With the rise of centralized empire under the Qin and Han, the pre-Qin chromatic cosmology of the Five Colours, aligned with the Five Phases, Five Directions, and *yinyang*, was fully

¹¹⁰ *Li Ji* [Book of Rites], “Hun Yi,” in *Ritual Civilization and Mythological Coding: Cultural Interpretation of Li Ji*, trans. Qicui Tang (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020), 163.

¹¹¹ “无君者不貳采.” *Li Ji* [Book of Rites], “Yu Zao,” in *The Li Ki*, trans. James Legge, vol. 28 of *The Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 18.).

systematized.¹¹² During this period, colour became a cosmological ethics of empire, governing sovereignty, ritual hierarchy, bureaucratic distinction, and moral order. No other symbolic marker made rank so immediately legible. *The Treatises on Attire and Carriages* (*yufuzhi* 舆服志), chapters within the official Dynastic Histories, regulated the visual signs of rank so that one's status was immediately "legible" through the colour of robes and the ornaments of chariots. In Tang Dynasty, the 624 CE code recorded in *the Old Book of Tang* dictated that only officials of the third rank and above could wear purple (*zi* 紫), while the fourth and fifth ranks were assigned crimson/red (*fei* 绯). During the Ming Dynasty, the History of Ming details strict prohibitions on bright yellow (*zhehuang* 赭黄), reserving it exclusively for the emperor, while commoners were restricted to subdued colours to avoid encroaching on the ruler's cosmic authority. In the Qing Dynasty, regulations extended beyond robes to the precise colour of the ruby or coral gems atop officials' hats, further demonstrating the integration of colour into the language of status and ritual.¹¹³ Across these periods, colour consistently functioned not merely as decoration but as a culturally intelligible symbol, communicating hierarchy, cosmological order, and social propriety.¹¹⁴

Colour's religious significance deepened with the spread of Buddhism and the institutional rise of Daoism. Buddhist art associated gold with enlightenment and the dharmakaya, white with purity and compassion, and deep azure or lapis with deities such as the Medicine Buddha. Daoist ritual culture mapped the Five Colours onto the Five Phases, the Five Organs, and the Five Directional Deities. Vestments, talismans, altars, incense burners, and ritual spaces were all orchestrated through chromatic codes intended to achieve ritual efficacy, divine resonance, exorcism, and inner transformation. In this way, colour served as a sacred practice of *li* (礼).¹¹⁵ In traditional Chinese thought, *li* is the fundamental architecture of civilization. It is often

¹¹² De Peng 彭德, *Zhongguo gudai wuse yu wuxing sixiang yanjiu* 中国古代五色与五行思想研究 [The Five Colours and the Five Phases in Ancient Chinese Thought] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1995).

¹¹³ "Treatise on Attire and Carriages" (舆服志), in *Old Book of Tang* (旧唐书), vol. 45 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1975), 1937–1940. For a comprehensive study of these regulations across dynasties, see *State Rituals and Ceremonies, The History of Chinese Clothing and Ornaments* (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2005), 112–115.

¹¹⁴ Shen Congwen 沈从文, *Zhongguo gudai fushi yanjiu* 中国古代服饰研究 [Chinese Clothing and Accessories Through the Ages] (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1984).

¹¹⁵ Zhaodi Wang 王招弟, *Liangzhou shiqi wuse xiangzheng yiyi chutan* 两周时期五色象征意义初探 [A Preliminary Study of the Symbolic Significance of the Five Colors during the Western and Eastern Zhou Dynasties] (Master's thesis, East China Normal University, 2004).

translated as “ritual,” “rites,” or “propriety,” but its scope is much broader, encompassing everything from high state ceremonies and religious sacrifices to daily etiquette and personal conduct. The essence of *Li* is the transformation of the natural into the cultural. By following these prescribed patterns (including the specific colours one wears or the way one stands), a person harmonizes themselves with both the social hierarchy and the cosmic order. One of the most defining passages regarding the purpose of *Li* comes from *Liji*, specifically the “*Quli*” (曲礼) chapter: “As for *li*, it is that by which the degrees of kinship are settled, suspicions and doubts are resolved, similarities and differences are distinguished, and right and wrong are made clear.”¹¹⁶

The twentieth century brought a profound rupture. The fall of the empire dismantled classical ritual hierarchies, and Western science redefined colour as a product of light and wavelength, divesting it of its cosmological, ethical, and metaphysical aura. Revolutionary politics then appropriated colour in new ways, above all red, which shifted from an auspicious ritual tone to a political emblem of class struggle, national rebirth, and mass mobilisation. Armies, banners, public celebrations, and ideological performances were saturated with red, signalling the emergence of a modern symbolic system that displaced the classical Five Colours order. Colour thus underwent a process of secularization and “disenchantment,” its meanings recoded within scientific rationality, revolutionary aesthetics, and nationalist ideology. In the “New China” established in 1949, red was redefined to signify the blood of revolutionary martyrs and the fire of class struggle.

Yet cultural traditions rarely vanish; they are transformed and reactivated. In contemporary China, colour continues to mediate ritual, aesthetic, and collective identity in ways that reveal the persistence of earlier symbolic structures. In life-cycle rituals, for example, white dominates funerals as the chromatic sign of mourning, purity, and transition to the otherworld, while red governs weddings as the emblem of joy, fortune, and fertility.¹¹⁷ These poles remain among

¹¹⁶ *Liji* (Record of Rites), “*Qu Li I*” (曲礼上): “夫礼者，所以定亲疏，决嫌疑，别同异，明是非也。” For the standard English translation, see James Legge, trans., *The Li Ki* (*Liji*), in *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 27 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 63. This passage defines *Li* (礼) as the essential tool for social and moral classification.

¹¹⁷ Shimeng Xiao 肖世孟, *Zhongguo secai de xiangzheng shijie* 中国色彩的象征世界 [The Symbolic World of Chinese Colours] (Beijing: Sanlian Bookstore, 2008).

the strongest taboos in Chinese society, preserving the folk-religious substrate of life rituals. Seasonal festivals maintain similarly deep chromatic codes: Spring Festival's red couplets, lanterns, and firecrackers; the five-coloured threads of the Dragon Boat Festival; and the golden tones of Mid-Autumn rituals are not decorative choices but ritual technologies meant to expel demons, secure blessings, and affirm seasonal and communal unity.

In the performing arts, Peking Opera masks vividly preserve classical chromatic ethics. Each hue encodes moral character: red signals loyalty, black integrity, white treachery, yellow cunning or valour, blue and green rebellious outlaws, while metallic colours mark gods and spirits.¹¹⁸ This visual lexicon translates cosmological and ethical orders into a legible stage language.

Traditional Chinese Medicine also preserves the cosmological chromatics of the Five Phases and Five Organs. Physicians still “observe the colour” (*wangse* 望色): cyan skin indicates stagnation, red suggests heat, yellow signals spleen deficiency, white marks cold or blood loss, and black reveals kidney weakness.¹¹⁹ Here colour functions as diagnostic language linking cosmos, body, illness, and fate.

In contemporary aesthetics and the cultural revival known as *guochao* (国潮), traditional palettes have been reawakened in fashion, design, and digital culture. *Dunhuang* (敦煌) hues, Forbidden City palettes, and poetic names such as “Twilight Violet” (*mushanzi* 暮山紫) or “Water sky Azure” (*tianshuibi* 天水碧) evoke more than beauty. They reactivate cosmological poetics and historical memory within new commercial and nationalist frameworks.

Across more than two millennia, Chinese chromatic thought has moved from sacred ritual codification, through modern disenchantment, to selective revival and innovative reconfiguration. Even though its overt political functions have diminished, its core logic, linking cosmos, morality, fortune, vitality, and identity, remains sedimented in cultural consciousness.

¹¹⁸ Baoli Zhang 张宝利, *Zhongguo lishi zhong de secai yu shehui* 中国历史中的色彩与社会 [Colour and Society in Chinese History] (Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Publishing House, 2006).

¹¹⁹ Yun Zhan 湛蕴, *Zhongguo secai wenhua de zongjiao weidu* 中国色彩文化的宗教维度 [The Religious Dimensions of Chinese Colour Culture] (PhD diss., Nanjing University, 2012).

2.3.2 The Role of Colours in Divination

Scholars generally agree that the *Shan Hai Jing* is a compilation of texts written by various authors over several centuries, rather than a single work from one specific year; the earliest sections (the “Classic of Mountains”) likely date to the 4th century BCE, while the final chapters were compiled as late as the early Han dynasty, roughly 2nd century BCE to 1st century BCE.

Scholars since the early twentieth century have emphasized *Shanhai Jing*(山海经) as a text with deep shamanic and divinatory roots. Lu Xun described it explicitly as a remnant of ancient shamanic literature, calling it “a book of the ancient shamans”, stressing the text’s reliance on archaic ritual lore and supernatural geography.¹²⁰ This recognition aligns closely with the SHJ’s earliest bibliographic reception. In the Han dynasty, Ban Gu placed the work at the very head of the “*Xingfa*” (形法) category under the “*Shushu lue*”(数术略) section in the *Hanshu*, “*Yiwenzhi*” (汉书·艺文志), a section devoted to omenology, physiognomy, and ritual technologies, accompanied by the definition: “The ‘Form Method’ (*Xingfa*) primarily involves utilizing the lay of the land of the Nine Provinces to establish the forms of city walls and dwellings, and [examining] the measurements of the bone structures of people and the six domestic animals, as well as the shapes and appearances of vessels and objects, in order to ascertain their sound, value, fortune, and misfortune.”¹²¹ This classification situates the SHJ not as geography but as a manual of ritual, omen-reading, and divination. Early testimonia reinforce this ritual genealogy: Liu Xiu in his *Shang Shan Hai Jing biao* associates the work with Yu and Yi and insists that it preserves the records of “the deeds of the sages of antiquity”;¹²² Zhang Hua in *Bowuzhi* lists it alongside *Shennong jing* as one of the rare surviving books of high antiquity;¹²³ Wang Chong in the *Lunheng* (论衡) attributes the text to Yu and Yi’s cataloguing of anomalous

¹²⁰ Xun Lu 鲁迅, *Zhongguo xiaoshuo shilue* 中国小说史略 [A Brief History of Chinese Fiction] (Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House, 1955), 4.

¹²¹ “形法者，大举九州之势以立城郭室舍形，人及六畜骨法之度数、器物之形容以求其声贵贱吉凶。” Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 汉书 [History of the Han Dynasty] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中华书局, 1962), 30.1774.

¹²² Liu Xin 刘歆 (Liu Xiu 刘秀), “Shang Shan Hai Jing biao” 上山海经表 [Memorial on the Classic of Mountains and Seas] (6 CE), in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, trans. Anne Birrell (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xl–xli.

¹²³ Zhang Hua 张华, *Bowuzhi* 博物志 [Treatise on Manifold Matters] (3rd century CE); for a discussion, see Roger Greatrex, *The Bowu Zhi: An Annotated Translation* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1987).

beings encountered during the flood works; and Li Daoyuan in *Shuijing zhu* 水经注 remarks succinctly that “King Yu recorded the *Shanhai*.”¹²⁴ Together these sources firmly establish the SHJ as a repository of pre-Zhou shamanic knowledge and ritual geography.

Within this framework, the SHJ provides exceptionally important evidence for reconstructing early colour systems in sacrificial and divinatory practice. We have mentioned the “colour system” several times, yet have not clarified why this term is necessary. “Colour terms” might seem sufficient, but neither captures the structural nature of early colour thinking. As Wittgenstein noted in his *Remarks on Colour*, the meaning of a colour term cannot be fully defined. One can only point to red, blue, black, or white, but cannot further explain them.¹²⁵ Colour terms appear self-evident in reference but are extremely limited in sense; they are understood only through contrast and relational position within a larger scheme. Classical Chinese usage already demonstrates this: *xuan* must be defined as black with red, and *su*, *bai*, *po* (幡) each acquire meaning only through mutual differentiation. Without white, the simplicity of *su* cannot appear; without other hues, the ritual centrality of yellow cannot emerge.

In the earliest stratum, *Shan Jing* (山经) colour terminology is sharply limited and remains tied to concrete ritual operations. Notably, sacrificial prescriptions employ only two colours: black (*hei* 黑) and white (*bai* 白), a pattern that mirrors with remarkable precision the Shang oracle-bone corpus. In *Zhong Shan Jing*, a complete sacrificial sequence employs a black victim (*heixi* 黑牺) within the *tailao* (太牢, “sacrifice of an ox, sheep, and pig”) configuration, together with jade offerings, drumming, blood presentation, and a hierarchical upper–lower offering structure: “The sacrificial ritual for it [the mountain spirits] consists of: *tailao*, with an auspicious jade disk (*bi*) fastened to it... The sacrificial items include palm fibres and *tailao* set featuring a black victim [sacrificial animal] and brewed grain spirits. Shield dances are performed to the beating of drums. A single jade disk is fastened... One black dog is used for the upper [offering], and one hen for the lower [offering]; a ‘transfigured’ sheep is slaughtered, and its blood is presented.”¹²⁶ Similarly, *Nanshan Jing* (南山经) prescribes without exception “one white dog”

¹²⁴ “禹记山海.” Li Daoyuan 酈道元, *Shuijing zhu* 水经注 [Commentary on the Waterways Classic] (c. 500–527 CE), juan 1.

¹²⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 318.

¹²⁶ 其祠礼：太牢，婴用吉玉... 其祠用棕、黑牺太牢之具、孽醢；干舞，置鼓；婴用一璧... 用一黑犬于上，用一雌

for its dragon-bodied, human-faced mountain gods.¹²⁷ No other colours appear in sacrificial contexts, no red, yellow, blue, or multicoloured animals, despite the Warring States–Han date of the compilation. This exclusivity strongly suggests that the earliest SHJ layers preserve a bipolar sacrificial colour system inherited from Shang religious practice, in which white animals were used for ancestral and auspicious rites, black animals for rites linked to water, liminality, and certain types of cosmic communication, and both colours served prominently in rainmaking. In contrast, colours such as yellow, which is central to *wuxing* theory, surface only in later, mythicized sections (notably *Haijing* 海经 and *Huangjing* 荒经), indicating the gradual infiltration of correlative cosmology into an originally Bronze Age ritual substrate. The SHJ thus functions as a textual fossil, preserving *pre-wuxing* sacrificial colour logic within a corpus whose final form belongs to the Warring States cosmological environment.

Having discussed the *pre-wuxing* tradition of colour and religion in the *Shanhaijing*, we can now address why colour is a necessary category in the analysis of divination. In early Chinese religion, divination functioned as a pragmatic ritual means of engaging ancestral and Heavenly powers, and colour operated as a material and symbolic condition for achieving efficacy. This pragmatic orientation, particularly pronounced in the Chinese context, meant that colour was not an abstract cosmological attribute but a functional element embedded in divinatory practice itself, inseparable from the religious logic that governed ritual action and interpretation. The belief in the power of colours arises not from empirical reasoning but from the logical structure of divination itself.

Lu Xun observed that a defining feature of Chinese religious attitude is pragmatism: disputes over denominational differences were rare, and religious practice was often guided by immediate utility. He famously remarked, “When you see the temple, burn incense. When you see the Buddha, you kowtow.”¹²⁸ This pragmatic approach explains how figures like Sakyamuni

鸡于下，刳一化羊，献血” Yuan Ke 袁珂, *Shan Hai Jing jiaozhu* 山海经校注 [Annotated Classic of Mountains and Seas] (Beijing: Beijing United Publishing Co., 2013), 125.

¹²⁷ “一白狗祈.” *Shanhaijing* [Classic of Mountains and Seas], *Nanshanjing* [Classic of the Southern Mountains], sec. 3. For a standard English reference, see Anne Birrell, trans., *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 9–10.

¹²⁸ Xun Lu 鲁迅, “Sui gan lu sanshi jiu” 随感录三十九 [Random Thoughts 39], in *Re feng* 热风 [Hot Wind] (Beijing: Beixin shuju 北新书局, 1925); trans. Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang, *Selected Works of Lu Xun*, vol. 2 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1980), 32–34.

and the Jade Emperor could coexist in popular worship, and how mortal heroes such as Guan Yu could be enshrined without formal deification.

Beyond this ritual logic, divination was also constrained by an even more immediate form of pragmatism: the material labour of its execution. The production of arc-line cracks and their inscription on bone or shell required time, skill, and considerable physical effort. Within such a costly procedure, nothing was recorded gratuitously. What entered the divinatory record was therefore, by necessity, what was considered functionally significant, making every marked distinction, colour included, an intentional and meaningful component of the divinatory act.

During the Shang dynasty, divinations were recorded on ox scapulae or tortoise shells. According to *Shiji* and *Bufa Xiangkao* (卜法详考), these inscriptions required elaborate preparatory steps: selecting and cleaning the animals, burning, and careful carving of characters. The labour-intensive nature of these procedures underscores the importance of each element in the divination, including colour terms. Divination was a solemn and precise event: *wu*(巫), or diviner, was knowledgeable, balanced, and methodical, rather than a possessed or ecstatic figure. The phrase “breaking off the way to Heaven”¹²⁹ underscores the distinction between the elite, ritualized practice of Shang-Zhou diviners and general spiritual activity.

The content of divinations spanned sacrifices, agriculture, hunting, weather, warfare, and disease. The careful selection of words, including colour terms, was instrumental in ensuring the success and appropriateness of ritual offerings. Similarly, the *Meng* (蒙) hexagram cautions against repeated divination, as redundancy could be deemed blasphemous. “The first time I enlighten him. If he asks two or three times, it is importunity [disrespect]. If he is importunate, I give him no information.”¹³⁰ From these procedures, it is reasonable to conclude that colours in divination were purposeful indicators, serving as omens and mediating the Gods’ favour.

¹²⁹ Wei Zhao 韦昭, comm., *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States], annot. Wei Juxian 卫聚贤 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1988), 562–564.

¹³⁰ “初筮告，再三渎，渎则不告。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes* [Yi Jing 易经], trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 17–18.

From a structural perspective, colour acquires meaning only within a system of differentiation rather than in isolation. For this reason, the study of colour in divination cannot proceed by singling out individual colours as discrete symbols. Instead, it must reconstruct the relational framework within which colours operated, since only through their patterned contrasts and distributions does a divinatory colour system become intelligible. Accordingly, the following analysis approaches colour in divination as a structured system rather than as a collection of isolated chromatic signs.

Anthropological comparison likewise shows that colours gain symbolic force only through oppositional structures, red/white, black/white, marked/unmarked, yet their semantic values shift dramatically across cultures.¹³¹ A colour can signify death in one setting and vitality in another, depending on the system of contrasts surrounding it. Perception itself is relational: white paper appears grey against snow. As Wittgenstein says, “in colours: similarity and contrast (and that is logic).”¹³² This relationality means that studying isolated colour terms risks missing the underlying logic that organizes them. *Zhouyi*’s colour world must therefore be situated within this evolving system.

2.3.3 The Tradition of Sanctifying Colours

Although this study focuses on the relationship between colour and divination in oracle bone inscriptions and the *Zhouyi*, it is necessary first to understand the broader religious framework in which both sacrifice and divination operated. Following the insights of K. C. Chang and Sarah, early Chinese religion cannot be divided into isolated domains. Myth, ritual, art, cosmology, and divination were, as Allan writes, “parts of a single system,” each expressing the same underlying worldview.¹³³ This integrative perspective applies equally to sacrificial practice and divinatory systems; both were modes through which humans sought to secure blessing, avert danger, and maintain communication with the powers of *Tian* and ancestral spirits.

¹³¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Way of the Masks*, trans. Sylvia Modelski (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1982), 80.

¹³² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Linda L. McAlister and Margarete Schättle (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 309.

¹³³ Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 12.

(1) *Sacrifice and Divination as Twins of Early Religious Thought*

In the Shang–Zhou world, sacrifice and divination were not separate institutions but two expressions of the same religious concern: how humans might align themselves with the will of Heaven or the high god. Sacrificial offerings were meant to attract favour, while divination sought to discern divine intention and thereby act in accordance with it. One appealed through offering, the other consulted through interpretation. In both cases, the ultimate objective was blessing, stability, and cosmic harmony. This close connection is already presupposed in early historiography. The Grand Scribe’s Records states that from antiquity, every ruler who “received the Mandate and became king”¹³⁴ relied on divination to determine Heaven’s decree, and that this tendency was especially strong under the Zhou; under Qin as well one sees that each successive ruler “on entering office” depended upon diviners, and the office of Grand Diviner (*taibu* 太卜) took shape along with the state itself.¹³⁵ In other words, assuming royal power was not a purely political act but a liturgical one, framed by consultation of turtle-shells and milfoil before one dared “rectify the calendar” or fix the proper days for sacrifices.

This intertwining of sacrifice and divination is made more explicit in Sima Qian’s “*Rizhe liezhuan*”, where diviners are portrayed not as mere technicians but as ritual specialists who “model themselves on Heaven and Earth, take images from the four seasons, and follow what accords with humaneness and righteousness,”¹³⁶ only then dividing the stalks to fix the hexagrams and turning the cosmographic *shi* board to straighten the “chess pieces” before speaking about the profit and harm of Heaven and Earth or the success and failure of human affairs. This is essentially a divinatory version of what the Analects calls “transmitting and not innovating”¹³⁷: the legitimate diviner does not invent a new order but carefully reproduces the cosmic and ethical structures that also ground sacrificial ritual. Sima Qian goes on to describe how former kings, in ordering their states, would “first consult turtle-shells and milfoil, sun and

¹³⁴ Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Volume IX: The Memoirs of Han China, Part II, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 371.

¹³⁵ Shaoming Lian 连劭名, *Zhongguo gudai bufa xiangkao* 中国古代卜法详考 [Detailed Study of Ancient Chinese Divination Methods] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2004), 45.

¹³⁶ “是以夫日者，法天地，象四时，顺仁义。” Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Volume IX: The Memoirs of Han China, Part II, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 363.

¹³⁷ “述而不作。” Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 64.

moon,”¹³⁸ before daring to fix the seasons, and only afterwards enter the ancestral halls and distribute estates to their sons. Here divination is the precondition for establishing the sacrificial calendar and the patrilineal order that sacrifices sustain; it is the epistemic side of the same religious system whose practical side is sacrifice.

Jia Yi’s famous remark in the same chapter that “the sages of antiquity, if they did not dwell at court, were to be found among the diviners and physicians”¹³⁹ reveals how, in the imagination of early Han literati, those who mastered the arts of communicating with Heaven and relieving suffering could stand on a par with ministers in the court. This does not merely elevate the social status of diviners; it situates divination alongside governance and ritual as one of the key media through which sagely wisdom manifests. Sima Qian further argues that when the diviner speaks, “the spirits may thereby receive their offerings; loyal ministers may thereby serve their lords; filial sons may thereby nourish their parents; compassionate fathers may thereby care for their children.”¹⁴⁰ In other words, correct divinatory speech facilitates proper sacrifice to ghosts and spirits and at the same time reinforces core human relations; it is “virtuous” (*youde* 有德) precisely because it guides both sacrificial behaviour and social ethics in the right direction. The value of divination, he insists, far exceeds the few dozen or hundred coins paid as a fee.

Other early sources confirm how tightly divination is bound to decisive, often perilous, action. The episode in the *Mozi* (墨子) where Mozi travels north to Qi (齐) and meets a diviner who warns him that “today Heaven will slay a black dragon in the North, and since your colour is black you must not go north,” shows divination operating not as abstract cosmology but as immediate practical counsel.¹⁴¹ Mozi refuses to obey, crosses the *Zi* River, fails in his mission, and returns, forcing the diviner to reinterpret his own prognostication. The anecdote demonstrates both the cultural authority of divinatory speech and the fact that it is embedded in a shared framework of omens, colours, directions, and sacrificial dangers: the “black dragon in

¹³⁸ “自古圣王将建国受命，兴动事业，何尝不宝卜筮以助善！” Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 166.

¹³⁹ “吾闻古之圣人，不居朝廷，必在卜医之中。” Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 167.

¹⁴⁰ “鬼神或以享，忠臣以事其上，孝子以养其亲，慈父以畜其子。” Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 167.

¹⁴¹ “子墨子北之齐，遇日者。日者曰：‘帝以今日杀黑龙于北方，而先生之色黑，不可以北。’” Lisa Raphals, *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 74–75.

the North” is not a random image but part of the same directional-colour cosmology that underpins where and how sacrifices should be performed. In this sense, Mozi’s story and Sima Jizhu’s apologetic for divination belong to a single discourse on how human agents negotiate risks and obligations considering Heaven’s will.

The Grand Scribe’s Records’s later commentators also recognise the deep historical roots of these practices. Sima Zhen’s *Suoyin* to the “*Rizhe Liezhuan*” notes that the name “*Rizhe*” has an old pedigree, that omens of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness are already prominently recorded in texts such as the *Mozi* and various Qi and Chu (楚) books, and that later practitioners merely continued this tradition; in his summary of the “*Guice Liezhuan*” (龟策列传) he observes that the Three Kings and Five Emperors already employed different kinds of turtles and distinct forms of milfoil divination, some long, some short, some like tile, some like jade, even though many of the original records and formulas have since perished. What survives, however, is the memory that from the mythical past onward, rulers depended on these techniques to found, stabilise, and sometimes rescue their states. Sacrificial institutions, ancestral temples, and state altars to soil and grain presuppose this divinatory infrastructure: before one offer, one must ask.

From this perspective, *Liji*’s insistence that ritual “originates in Heaven”¹⁴² and extends through all activities of worship, communication with spirits, and social order can be read as a theoretical crystallisation of what texts like The Grand Scribe’s Records narrate historically. Confucius’ linkage of observing Heavenly patterns with formulating rites implies that divination (as a way of reading Heaven’s configurations), sacrifice (as a way of responding to them), and ritual (as a codified form of both) all share a single intellectual and cosmological foundation. In the early Chinese religious imagination, therefore, sacrifice and divination are not parallel, independent arts, but two tightly interlocking operations: divination decides *what* and *when* to sacrifice, while sacrifice enacts and confirms the decisions produced by divination.

¹⁴² “夫礼，必本于天。” *Li Chi: Book of Rites*, translated by James Legge (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1967), 1:367.

(2) Institutional Overlap and Logical Interdependence

This unity is also visible in the institutional structure. As both transmitted texts and oracle-bone inscriptions show, *zhu*, *zong*, *wu*, *xi*, *shi*, and *bushi* were not fully distinct professions. They were variations of the same religious specialists who mediated between humans and spirits. The tradition that “Wu Xian created yarrow-stalk divination”,¹⁴³ as well as the numerous records of *wu*(巫) conducting prognostications, reveals that the same figures who performed sacrifices also performed divination.

The Shang *shi* who carved and cracked bones for divination were embedded in a broader ritual order: they prepared offerings, recorded events, formulated royal inquiries, and mediated ancestral power. Their role was not administrative but cosmological. Thus, as scholars like Jiang Chengqing and Wang Tao have shown, sacrifice and divination were structurally inseparable in both personnel and cosmological logic.

Divination often determined whether, when, or how sacrifices should be performed. Allan’s schema for Shang divinations that questions about offerings, the future, and calamities, shows that decisions about sacrificial victims, quantities, combinations, and even *colours* were determined through divinatory inquiry.¹⁴⁴

Conversely, certain forms of sacrifice required prior divination. Classical sources preserve the principle “Sacrifices must be preceded by divination”¹⁴⁵ and the *Zhouli* recounts how auspicious days and suitable offerings were fixed through divinatory consultation. In some ritual cycles, the sacrificial animal’s bone was then used again for divination, forming the well-known sequence of “Sacrifice—Divination—Sacrifice”, a loop of communication between human and spirit.

¹⁴³ “巫咸作筮.” Lü Buwei 吕不韦, *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 [The Annals of Lü Buwei], trans. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17.5/423.

¹⁴⁴ Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 112–23.

¹⁴⁵ “祭必先卜.” Lü Buwei 吕不韦, *Lüshi chunqiu* 吕氏春秋 [The Annals of Lü Buwei], trans. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 17.5/423.

(3) Shared Cosmology: Why Colour Matters

Because sacrifice and divination were two complementary methods of negotiating with the divine, both relied on symbolic correspondences (*xiang* 象) rooted in early cosmology. Early people believed that entities shared hidden isomorphisms, links that allowed symbolic materials to affect invisible outcomes. Thus, the choice of sacrificial animal, its age, gender, and especially colour, became part of the symbolic apparatus by which humans attempted to shape the efficacy of ritual acts.

Colours therefore did not merely decorate sacrificial practice; they embodied cosmological affinities. A yellow ox offered to a particular ancestor, a red banner used in a seasonal rite, or a black robe worn in winter all operated within a shared logic of resonance (*ganying* 感应). As Needham and Wang Tao emphasize, colour was a medium that connected ritual action to cosmic structure.¹⁴⁶

This helps explain why, even though the *Yijing* is fundamentally a divination text, its symbolism draws heavily from sacrificial logic. Sacrificial colours and divinatory colours belong to a single system: both seek to express, influence, or harmonize with the patterns of Heaven.

In Shang rituals, the significance of colour extended to sacrificial animals. Expressions such as “𪚩黄牛”¹⁴⁷ (yellow cattle) indicate dedication to specific ancestors. In the *Yijing*, colour symbolism is embedded in predictive systems, linking visual qualities with consequences. Later, the *Liji* codified correspondences between colours, time, and space. For instance, the eastern hall *qingyang* (青阳) denotes the east sunny room, while the northern hall *xuantang* (玄堂) signifies the black room. The southern *mingtang* (明堂) and western *zongzhang* (总章) halls emphasize light rather than hue. Seasonal changes also dictated the colour of the king’s attire, horses, and vehicles: from green to red, white, and black.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2: History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 261–63.

¹⁴⁷ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Oracle Bone Inscriptions Corpus], vol. 10 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中华书局, 1978–82), inscription no. 30287.

¹⁴⁸ *Liji* 礼记, “Yueling” 月令 [Monthly Ordinances], in *Liji zhushu* 礼记注疏 [Book of Rites with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Zheng Xuan 郑玄 and Kong Yingda 孔颖达 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999), 158–210.

Confucian scholars, considered successors of the *wuzhu* (巫祝), continued this tradition. Confucius himself employed colours both in ceremonial attire and as abstract metaphors, reflecting ethical and aesthetic principles. Similarly, in later sorcery practices, names and colours were believed to affect reality and fortune. Evidence from cross-cultural sorceries and the divinations of Yi 彝 people using sheep bones reinforces the idea that colours functioned as powerful symbolic indicators, beyond mere decoration.

Although divinations convey divine will, they were not purely passive. Selecting animals, objects, or colours in rituals reflects a subjective initiative: humans sought to influence outcomes through symbolic materials. Early thought assumed that isomorphisms between distinct entities allowed seemingly unrelated elements to interact. Colours, especially when used in consecrated contexts, became vital mediators of ritual efficacy and social meaning.

2.4 Heaven Worship as the Structuring Principle

2.4.1 Religion as the Structuring Principle of Civilization

Religion was the structuring principle of society itself. Religion, which expressed most concretely in ritual, sacrifice, and divination, was inseparable from the very fabric of Zhou social order and philosophical thinking.

As one scholar has noted, religion must not be treated as an afterthought, “stuck in a corner or put as an afterthought in the last chapter of a general history. Rather, it is the heart of the story, reflecting and propelling change in the political, social, economic, medical, philosophical, and aesthetic realms.”¹⁴⁹ This observation, although made in a comparative spirit, applies with force to China. From the earliest strata of history, Chinese society reveals how cosmological imagination and anthropomorphic vision shaped collective life.

If we adopt the definition of religion as “the practice of structuring values,” then the Zhou case shows how religion infused the very logic of governance. Practices of worship and systems of divination were not merely symbolic or ornamental; they structured legitimacy, hierarchy, and

¹⁴⁹ Robert Ford Campany, “The Religious Dimensions of Ancient Chinese Thought,” in *Heritage of China: Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Civilization*, ed. Paul S. Ropp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 91–92.

the ordering of human relations. In this sense, religion was not a sphere cordoned off from politics, law, or economy. It was the very ground upon which these domains were articulated. From a broader Western perspective, this intertwining of religion with all aspects of life is hardly unique to China. Augustine, for example, regarded religion as the binding of the human soul to God, thereby establishing an order of values that extended into political life.¹⁵⁰ Aquinas later emphasized how natural law, derived from divine law, underpinned social and political order.¹⁵¹ Modern theorists such as Émile Durkheim insisted that religion is the expression of the collective, “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,”¹⁵² which in turn creates social solidarity. Max Weber similarly traced how religious worldviews structured economic and political rationalities, most famously in his account of the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism.¹⁵³

These perspectives remind us that divination cannot be reduced to “individual belief.” The Zhou dynasty, for example, shows how the act of divination was never confined to a personal quest for meaning. It was a social mechanism, anchoring ritual order, political authority, and metaphysical orientation. For this reason, divination becomes a critical object of study. It is precisely through divination that we see how religion saturated Zhou political life, and how cosmological imagination was translated into social structures.

2.4.2 Religion and Politics as an Integrated Order in Early China

Religion and divination in early China can broadly be categorized under the system of “Wu religion” (*wujiao* 巫教).¹⁵⁴ What is “Wu religion”? As noted earlier, it corresponds to shamanism, a belief system centred on supernatural deities and spirits, mediated by shamans who served as intermediaries between the human and divine realms. This term is widely used for describing early religious forms across the world, and the ancient Chinese “Wu religion” falls within this scope. Influential figures include Fu Sinian, who used the concept to classify what

¹⁵⁰ In *The City of God*, Augustine argues that true religion (*religio*) reorients the soul's love toward God, which in turn defines the “earthly city” by how it prioritizes its loves and maintains temporal peace. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 10.1, 19.14–17.

¹⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁵² Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press, 1995.

¹⁵³ Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge, 2001.

¹⁵⁴ Mengjia Chen 陳夢家, “Shang dai de shenhua yu wushu” 商代的神話與巫術 [Mythology and Witchcraft of the Shang Dynasty], *Yenching Journal of Chinese Studies* [Yanqing xuebao 燕京學報], no. 20 (1936): 485–576.

he regarded as a primitive religious stratum in early Chinese civilization, and Chen Mengjia treated Wu practices as a coherent religious institution, thereby consolidating the modern historiographical notion of a “Wu-religion.” Later, K. C. Chang further developed this framework, arguing that a shamanic foundation underlay early Chinese political authority and ritual power. However, a closer comparison suggests important differences: contemporary shamans, often referred to in folk parlance as *tiaodashen* (跳大神, “spirit mediums”), are frequently described as acquiring divine powers after recovering from illness. By contrast, the ancient *Wu*, as described in the *Guoyu*, were “intelligent and profoundly wise” among men. The oracle bone character for *wu* depicts two jade pieces crossed, symbolizing a ritual implement.¹⁵⁵ In bronze inscriptions, *wu* also appears as the title of an official (e.g., the *Shi Zhong*), the graph itself associated with ritual tools and order, confirming its essential meaning as both a divine mediator and custodian of ritual knowledge.

According to Ge Zhaoguang, the earliest intellectual figures in China were the *Wu*, whose original task was to grasp the order of Heaven and earth. Long before the rise of the “Hundred Schools of Thought,” these figures were the sole keepers of specialized knowledge. Their “grasp of the order of Heaven and earth” was not merely mystical; it was a form of early political and natural science. By observing the stars, seasonal cycles, and ritual hierarchies, the *Wu* provided the cosmological framework that Chinese rulers used to justify their authority and maintain social stability.¹⁵⁶ In the Shang dynasty, this thesis is amply confirmed by oracle bone inscriptions and archaeological evidence: the Shang king himself was the chief among shamans. Inscriptions often record the king personally conducting divinations and interpreting omens, known as *wang zhan yue* (王占曰, “the king divined, saying”), an expression of his supreme power and his central religious duty. For example, *Heji* 10405 (obverse) records King Wu Ding divining “no disaster within ten days” and concluding himself: “There is misfortune! Hardship will come.”¹⁵⁷ From an anthropological perspective, the grandeur of the Shang bronze

¹⁵⁵ Institute of Archaeology, *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, ed. *Jiaguwen Heji* (Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions), vol. 2 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1978–1982), No. 5658.

¹⁵⁶ Zhaoguang Ge 葛兆光, *Zhongguo sixiang shi* 中国思想史 [A History of Chinese Thought], vol. 1 (Shanghai: Fudan University Press 复旦大学出版社, 2001), 45–48.

¹⁵⁷ *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions], ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1982), no. 10405.

civilization was inseparable from its politico-religious system, which monopolized and ritualized violence. Excavations at the royal cemetery of Yinxu (e.g., tomb M1001), the ritual pits at Xibeigang, and the Xiaoshuangqiao site in Zhengzhou reveal extensive remains of human sacrifice and burial retainers, corroborating oracle bone inscriptions such as “using Qiang” or “campaigning against Qiang,” which record the practice of sacrificing war captives (often Qiang people) to ancestors and deities.¹⁵⁸ This was not mere “cruelty,” but a core mechanism of Theocratic state: the Shang king consolidated absolute authority by monopolizing extreme acts of sacrificial violence and death, thereby affirming his unique role as political leader, supreme priest, and ultimate wielder of sacred violence.

The Zhou overthrow of Shang replaced one dynasty with another, but it did not break from the fundamental paradigm of theocracy. On the contrary, the Zhou fully inherited the Shang model and developed it into a more systematic and refined form. The myth of “the severance of Heaven and Earth communication”¹⁵⁹ though reprojected to the reign of Zhuanxu 颛顼, encapsulates the Zhou interpretation of the Shang legacy: only the king and his official apparatus could monopolize communication with Heaven, excluding private families from acting as shamans or scribes. When the Zhou accused King Zhou of Shang of “abandoning his sacrifices,”¹⁶⁰ the critique was not against sacrifice itself, but against his failure to effectively monopolize and regulate religious rites, thus forfeiting the Mandate of Heaven.

Bronze inscriptions and classical texts of the Zhou clearly attest to this continuity. Whereas Shang kings sought divine sanction through oracle bones, Zhou kings proclaimed Heaven’s Mandate through inscriptions on ritual bronzes. The inscription of the *Da Yu ding* begins with “Greatly illustrious King Wen received the great Mandate of Heaven,”¹⁶¹ while the *Hezun* 何

¹⁵⁸ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所 [Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences], *Yinxu de faxian yu yanjiu* 殷墟的发现与研究 [Discovery and Research on Yinxu] (Beijing: Science Press 科学出版社, 1994), 103–115; Henan sheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 河南省文物考古研究所 [Henan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology], *Zhengzhou Xiaoshuangqiao* 郑州小双桥 (Beijing: Science Press 科学出版社, 2003), 24–30.

¹⁵⁹ Wei Zhao 韦昭, comm., *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States], annot. Wei Juxian 卫聚贤 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1988), 562–564.

¹⁶⁰ “今商王受，惟婦言是用，昏棄厥肆祀弗答，昏棄厥遺王父母弟不迪。” By failing to perform ancestral rites, the Shang king was portrayed as cutting himself off from the ancestors and, by extension, the Mandate of Heaven. See Shangshu zhengyi (Correct Meaning of the Book of Documents), in *Shisanjing zhushu* (Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 183.

¹⁶¹ “丕顯文王，受天有大令。” Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng (Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions), ed. Zhongguo

尊 records, “He established this central realm and governed the people.”¹⁶² These perform the same legitimizing function as Shang oracle inscriptions declaring, “The High God approves the king.”¹⁶³ Archaeological finds from Zhouyuan, including oracle inscriptions such as H1182 recording Zhou kings sacrificing to former Shang kings (e.g., King Wen, Di Yi) and conducting divinations, provide direct evidence of Zhou continuity with Shang politico-religious practice.

Yet, the Zhou also undertook a critical transformation: the ritualization and humanization of inherited Shang practices. Archaeology shows that while human sacrifice persisted in early Western Zhou, large-scale ritualized killings declined dramatically and nearly disappeared. The Zhou did not relinquish the monopoly of violence but reconfigured it into a hierarchical ritual system (e.g., the bureaucratic offices in the *Zhouli*)¹⁶⁴ and into moral discourse, encapsulated in the doctrine of “matching Heaven with virtue”. *The Book of Songs* expresses this transition: in *Daya*, *Wen Wang*, “Heaven’s Mandate is not constant”¹⁶⁵ conveys anxiety, while “By emulating King Wen as a model, the myriad states have confidence”¹⁶⁶ presents the moral solution. Legitimacy was no longer sustained primarily by lavish sacrifice but by moral emulation of virtuous ancestors.

Thus, sacrificial rites and divination remained matters of state in both Shang and Zhou, though their expression and underlying discourse shifted. The frequent queries about human sacrifice

shehui kexueyuan Kaogu yanjiusuo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–94), no. 2837.

¹⁶² The He zun (何尊) inscription provides the first archaeological evidence of the term “Middle Kingdom”, used here to describe King Wu’s intent to rule from the center of the world. “隹武王既克大邑商，則廷告于天，曰：‘余其宅茲中國，自之乂民。’” “He zun” 何尊 [He zun inscription], in *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions], ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan Kaogu yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1984–94), no. 6014.

¹⁶³ “帝受（授）我祐。” *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collected Oracle Bone Inscriptions], ed. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1978–82), no. 1402.

¹⁶⁴ *Zhouli zhushu* 周礼注疏 [Notes and Commentaries on the Rites of Zhou], in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 635–39.

¹⁶⁵ “天命靡常。” *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛诗正义 [Correct Meaning of the Mao Poetry], “Wen wang” 文王 [King Wen] (Mao no. 235), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 505.

¹⁶⁶ “儀刑文王，萬邦作孚。” *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛诗正义 [Correct Meaning of the Mao Poetry], “Wen wang” 文王 [King Wen] (Mao no. 235), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 6.

in Shang oracle bones¹⁶⁷ and the solemn hymns of the *Zhou Song*¹⁶⁸ share the same essential function: monopolizing dialogue with the divine to stabilize political order. The Zhou, however, successfully replaced the blood-soaked ritual pits of Yinxu with the dignified imagery of bronze inscriptions, the codification of ritual texts, and the rhetoric of virtue.

The later Confucian image of the Zhou as the exemplar of “civilization” was thus a purified and idealized reinterpretation of this system. They effaced its violent core, emphasizing instead its ritual and moral dimensions. Yet from Yinxu’s sacrificial pits to Zhouyuan’s oracle inscriptions, from Shang divinations of “using Qiang”¹⁶⁹ to Zhou proclamations of “matching Heaven with virtue,”¹⁷⁰ the evidence demonstrates a continuous reality: both Shang and Zhou built and practiced a theocratic order in which the monopoly of divine communication underpinned royal authority. The Zhou did not break this paradigm but refined it through the creation of ritual and music, making it more subtle, more enduring, and ultimately more stable. The so-called “severance of Heaven and Earth communication” was the Zhou’s perfect definition of this inherited and transformed tradition.

2.4.3 Continuity of Divination and Kingship

A defining continuity in early Chinese civilization is that divination remained at the very centre of statecraft. Far from being peripheral “superstition,” divination was the supreme political technology by which kings claimed to communicate with Heaven and the spirits, adjudicate uncertainties, and justify their authority to rule. Whether framed in ritual sacrifice or in

¹⁶⁷“貞：爇自上甲……羌……” (Divined: In the burning sacrifice from Shang Jia... (sacrificing) Qiang (captives)...) *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collected Oracle Bone Inscriptions], ed. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1978–82), no. 1027.

¹⁶⁸ “Clear Temple” (清廟): “於穆清廟，肅雝顯相。濟濟多士，秉文之德。” “I Will Assemble” (我將): “我將我享，維羊維牛，維天其右之。” *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 [Correct Meaning of the Mao Poetry], “Qing miao” 清廟 (Mao no. 266) and “Wo jiang” 我將, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 577, 584.

¹⁶⁹ “其用羌于且 (祖) 乙。” (Perhaps use Qiang (captives) for Ancestor Yi.) *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collected Oracle Bone Inscriptions], ed. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1978–82), no. 232.

¹⁷⁰ “肆惟王其疾敬德，王其德之用，祈天永命……用劓劓我先正，肆克絜（配）天，其澤（釋）布在下。” (...May the King match Heaven (with his virtue), and its benefits will be spread below.) *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 [Correct Meaning of the Book of Documents], “Shao gao” 召誥, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 205.

textualized philosophy, the ultimate function never shifted: divination served the ruler, and through the ruler, it structured the governance of the realm.

In the Shang dynasty, this integration is inscribed most vividly upon the bones themselves. Tens of thousands of oracle bones from Yinxu record decisions on every sphere of state activity—warfare, harvests, sacrifice, and diplomacy. As the archaeologist K. C. Chang observed, “The Shang king was not only the political leader, but also the head of all shamans.”¹⁷¹ The oracle texts make this unmistakably clear: divination was not an auxiliary practice, but the king’s highest political responsibility. Far from abstract records of ritual, these inscriptions stand as archival traces of the Shang principle that “the great affairs of state lie in sacrifice and war”.¹⁷²

The Zhou conquest of Shang did not abolish this system. Rather, the Zhou inherited and refined it. The philosopher Li Zehou has described this as the “rationalization of the shaman-historian tradition,” whereby the raw techniques of Shang ritual and divination were transformed into codified social institutions of *li* (ritual).¹⁷³ In this process, the Shang king’s direct inquiries to High God were reconfigured as part of a broader bureaucratic order of scribes, historiographers, and ritual officers. Divination did not vanish into irrationality; it was institutionalized, canonized, and ultimately textualized.

Zhouyi epitomizes this transformation. Rooted in the same divinatory tradition as the Shang oracle bones, it became the Zhou’s most innovative creation: a systematic body of knowledge at once theological, political, and philosophical. As Yu Dunkang has argued, “The auspicious and inauspicious judgments in *Zhouyi* are decided according to the norms of ritual: what accords with *li* is auspicious, what violates *li* is inauspicious.”¹⁷⁴ Yu Dunkang emphasizes that

¹⁷¹ K. C. Chang 张光直, *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian 三联书店, 2013), 45.

¹⁷² Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhu* 春秋左传注 [Annotated Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals], annot. Yang Bojun 杨伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2009), 861.

¹⁷³ Li Zehou 李泽厚, “Shuowu shi chuantong” 说巫史传统 [On the Shaman-Historian Tradition], in *Lishi bentilun: 1979 nian wupian wenxuan* 历史本体论：1979 年五篇文选 [Ontology of History: Five Essays of 1979] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian 三联书店, 2003).

¹⁷⁴ Yu Dunkang 余敦康, “Xia Shang Zhou de zongjiao” 夏商周的宗教 [Religion of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou], in *Zhongguo zhexue lunji* 中国哲学论集 [Collected Essays on Chinese Philosophy] (Shenyang: Liaoning Daxue chubanshe 辽宁大学出版社, 1998).

Zhouyi shifted from a purely mantic text to an ethical one, where “auspiciousness” became a reflection of one’s adherence to *li*. In other words, *Zhouyi* replaced immediate divine will with the principle of ritual order as the ultimate standard of legitimacy. Its judgments reflected not a mysterious will of Heaven alone, but the Zhou ideal of a moralized, hierarchical, and ritualized society.

The difference, therefore, is not one of essence but of form: From “The King Divines” to the Authority of the Classic: In Shang, decisions were issued directly in the kings. In Zhou, authority increasingly rested in the text of *Zhouyi*, a carefully compiled classic. Power shifted from the charisma of the king’s mediumship to the textual authority of a canon.

From Blood Sacrifice to Ritualized Morality: Shang divination often concerned the details of sacrificial offerings, including human victims, to appease spirits. In Zhou, *Zhouyi*’s judgments invoked symbolic language, colours like “yellow robes” or “red sashes”, that encoded ritual hierarchy and moral order. Blood was replaced by colour, sacrifice by symbolism, but the function was identical: to affirm the legitimacy of rule.

From Archival Record to Philosophical Canon: Oracle bones were buried for verification, serving inward, administrative purposes. *Zhouyi*, by contrast, was outward-facing: a teaching text, studied by aristocratic heirs as a guide to governance. Divination thus evolved from a decision-making technology into a philosophy of rule.

“Colour and omen” (*se she ji xiong* 色涉吉凶) remained the organizing principle of divination in both dynasties. Yet the “colours” of Shang were the visceral hues of blood and sacrificial vessels, directly binding the king to Heaven. In the Zhou, they became codified symbols of rank, ritual, and virtue. Divination was never detached from politics. What endured was its political function; what evolved was its form.

2.4.4 Three Dynasties: Shared Origins of Shang and Zhou

To understand the profound continuity between Shang and Zhou in their model of theocratic governance, one must situate them within the broader framework of the *Three Dynasties* (Xia,

Shang, and Zhou). In traditional Chinese historiography, the *Three Dynasties* were not three discrete civilizations separated by ruptures, but rather a continuous community of political civilization. They shared a common cosmology, a logic of rulership, and foundational civilizational structures. When the Zhou replaced the Shang, they did not present themselves as radical innovators but rather as inheritors of the *Mandate of Heaven* stretching back to Xia and Shang, thereby legitimizing their authority (as in the *Shangshu*, *Zhao Gao*: “We must not fail to take warning from Xia, nor from Yin [Shang]”).¹⁷⁵ Thus, the commonalities between Shang and Zhou outweigh their differences: their transformations lay in the ornamentation of ritual, while their core principle of governance remained unchanged.

The problem of Xia is crucial for grasping the essence of Shang and Zhou. Although the Xia dynasty lacks contemporaneous textual evidence such as the oracle bones of Yinxu, its central role in historical memory and political discourse is indisputable. Scholarly debate on Xia generally follows two distinct paths, each of which sheds light on the nature of Shang and Zhou:

Xia as a historical entity. Many scholars argue that Erlitou culture may represent Xia. Archaeological evidence from Erlitou reveals large palatial compounds, bronze foundries, and stratified burial systems. This indicates that by the Erlitou period, the Central Plains had already developed a polity with wide territorial authority, social stratification, and monopolies over high-value resources (such as bronze casting) and ritual activity. K. C. Chang argued that Xia, Shang, and Zhou should be viewed as parallel cultural manifestations of the same civilizational continuum, with dynastic transitions being primarily political rather than civilizational. The Three Dynasties, in his reading, shared a common foundation of Bronze Age “Wu religion,” hierarchical stratification, and the city-state system. In this sense, the Shang and Zhou were not creating new models but inheriting and elaborating a political-religious form that may have originated in Xia.

¹⁷⁵ In the “Shao gao” (召誥) chapter of the *Shangshu*, this passage serves as a primary justification for the Zhou conquest, warning that the Mandate of Heaven is lost when a dynasty fails to maintain its virtue. “我不可不監于有夏，亦不可不監于有殷.” *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 [Correct Meaning of the Book of Documents], in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Thirteen Classics with Notes and Commentaries], ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980), 209.

Xia as a Zhou political construction. On the other hand, the Zhou representation of Xia inevitably reflects their political agenda. The Zhou needed to articulate a philosophy of “Heaven’s mandate is not constant, only virtue sustains it” to justify their conquest of Shang. Thus, both Xia and Shang were depicted as dynasties that had lost the Mandate through moral failure, while Zhou positioned itself as the virtuous successor. In this narrative, Xia embodied the paradigmatic model of political order, where divine authority (*tianming*), moral virtue (*de*), and royal power were inseparably linked. Li Zehou has argued that the Zhou, through their system of ritual and music, rationalized the older shamanic tradition, infusing it with humanistic ethics grounded in a profound consciousness of historical fragility.¹⁷⁶ In this sense, the Zhou’s portrayal of Xia was less a faithful record of antiquity and more a historical mirror through which they fashioned their own cultural self-image.

Whether Xia is accepted as a historical entity or primarily a Zhou construction, it remains decisive for understanding Shang and Zhou. If Xia existed as a historical polity, then the Shang-Zhou model of theocratic rule had an even earlier source, and together the Three Dynasties formed a “triadic model” of early Chinese state formation: a continuous civilizational system in which political succession did not alter the fundamental logic of rule, namely, the monopolization of sacred resources (access to Heaven, bronze ritual vessels) and the performance of ritual.

If Xia was primarily a Zhou construction, it demonstrates that what the Zhou sought to inherit and glorify was precisely the mature theocratic order of the Shang, which they reframed through the discourse of virtue and ritual. By projecting this order back to Xia, they endowed it with antiquity and permanence.

In either case, the question of Xia leads directly back to the essence of Shang and Zhou. These two dynasties stand as mediating links in the *Three Dynasties* chain. The Zhou did not break with the Shang but refined the same blueprint.

¹⁷⁶ Li Zehou 李泽厚, *Mei de licheng 美的历程* [The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics] (Beijing: Sanlian shudian 三联书店, 1981).

3. Yan, Se, Cai and the Ontology of Colour

This chapter explores the cultural and philosophical significance of colour in pre-Qin China, focusing on the terms *yan* (颜), *se* (色), and *cai* (采). Through philological analysis, it investigates how these terms evolved and acquired meanings that extend beyond visual perception, linking colours with celestial phenomena, daily activities, and religious practices.

The colours of the pre-Qin period (pre-221 BCE) are an infrequent topic of academic discussion. Although there are many colour terms in the Chinese language, most existing studies are lexicological.

I propose that colours should be treated as independent conceptual constructs, akin to *Dao* (道, “the Way”), *Tian* (天, “Heaven”), or *xing* (性, “human nature”). Though originally derived from material phenomena, colours were meaningful in early Chinese philosophy. Philosophers such as Laozi and Zhuangzi often used colour to convey ideas; for instance, Laozi remarked that “iridescent colours cause blindness”¹⁷⁷ and “five colours confuse the eyes.”¹⁷⁸ Laozi favoured black and white to express his philosophical ideals. Confucian scholars, too, developed a theory distinguishing primary and secondary colours.

In ancient texts, there are fragmentary annotations on the meanings of these terms and their connections to cultural phenomena, but a systematic exploration of colour in China only began in modern times.

Hu Puan pioneered philological analysis of five key colour terms from antiquity in his article, “To Dig up the Distinguishing-Colour Instinct and Dyeing Technology of Ancient Times from Philology”.¹⁷⁹ Although his work initially gained limited traction in China, it eventually

¹⁷⁷ “五色令人目盲.” *Laozi Daodejing zhu* 老子道德经注 [Commentary on the Laozi Daodejing], ed. Wang Bi 王弼, in *Zhuge jicheng* 诸子集成 [The Various Masters Edition] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1954), 12 (chap. 12).

¹⁷⁸ “五色乱目, 使目不明.” *Zhuangzi jishi* 庄子集释 [Collected Explanations of the Zhuangzi], ed. Guo Qingfan 郭庆藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1961), 324.

¹⁷⁹ Hu Puan 胡朴安, “*Cong wenzixue shang kaojian gudai bianse benneng yu ranse jishu*” 从文字学上考见古代辨色本能与染色技术 [To Dig up the Distinguishing-Colour Instinct and Dyeing Technology of Ancient Times from Philology], *Xuelin* 学林 3 (1941).

inspired further research on colour terminology, which can be broadly divided into three categories: studies on meaning, semantics, and cultural concepts.

The first approach traces the physical origins of colour terms, examining the characteristics of the original objects to which these terms referred. This is foundational to colour studies, as the meanings of colour terms are rooted in concrete objects. Some scholars seek to reconstruct the original appearance of these colours through ancient records or artefacts. For example, one detailed doctoral thesis, *Study of Colours Pre-Qin* identifies the specific hues associated with pre-Qin colour terms by comparing artefacts with historical accounts. Vermilion (*zhu* 朱), a bright red produced from high-quality cinnabar, was reserved for the highest nobility. *Qing* (青), associated with the East and spring, denoted a broad spectrum ranging from deep indigo to mineral greens such as malachite. *Huang* (黄), linked to Earth and central authority, was understood in the pre-Qin period as a rich, earthy ochre rather than a later metallic gold.¹⁸⁰ The researcher even replicated ancient artisanal methods to reproduce colours accurately.

A second line of research examines the symbolic and associative meanings of colour terms, focusing on their intrinsic nuances. This includes examining ambiguities, defining basic colour terms, analysing semantic structures, and applying cognitive linguistics to understand the significance of colour terms.

The third approach, which is closest to my research, investigates the cultural significance of colour in ancient China. My perspective, however, differs in that I view colour as an independent field, intrinsically linked to other cultural concepts.

Three primary terms in modern Chinese denote “colour”: *yanse* (颜色), *secai* (色彩), and *caise* (彩色).

¹⁸⁰ Xiao Shimeng 肖世孟, *Xian Qin secai yanjiu* 先秦色彩研究 [Study of Colours in the Pre-Qin Period] (PhD diss., Wuhan Daxue 武汉大学, 2011), 45–60.

3.1 Yan (颜): Look and Luck

In its earliest usage, *yan* (颜) did not denote “colour” but rather “face.” For example, terms like *rongyan* (容颜), meaning “appearance,” highlight this usage. Similarly, *yanmian* (颜面) also means “face” but carries a connotation of prestige. Yan also appears alone in certain contexts, such as in the famous saying by Xiang Yu: “He is discredited (*wuyan* 无颜) before the elders on the east side of the Yangtze River.”¹⁸¹ Here, *wuyan* meaning “no face,” implies a loss of honour.

This is significant because, in contemporary Chinese, *yanse* (颜色) has become a high-frequency term referring broadly to colours. In ancient times, however, *yanse* specifically referred to facial colouration. Indeed, as people experience various emotions, colours of their faces change accordingly; thus, *yanse* was often used to refer to facial expressions. For instance, the Book of Rites states, “Whenever conducting a sacrifice, one should hold an expression as if in the presence of the person being honoured.”¹⁸² In the *Analects*, it is written, “Maintain your expression and thereby draw closer to sincerity.”¹⁸³ In these examples, *yanse* signifies “complexion.” Only in later periods did *yanse* take on a generalised meaning to refer to colours, as in the verse by Du Fu, “The colours (*yanse*) are indeed great; may they never fall into the dirt”¹⁸⁴, which uses *yanse* to signify visual beauty.

As we see, *yan* originally had no direct connection to “colour” in a broad sense; it is only in combination with *se* (色) that it came to signify colour in general. This raises the question: why did facial colours acquire such significance that they ultimately represented colours as a whole?

¹⁸¹ Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Volume II: The Basic Annals of Han China, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 48.

¹⁸² “礼记·玉藻：凡祭，容貌颜色，如见所祭者。” *Li Ji 礼记* [Book of Rites], “Yu Zao,” in *Liji xunzuan* (Collected Commentaries on the Book of Rites), ed. Zhu Bin (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1996), 462.

Li Ji 礼记, “Yu zao” 玉藻, in *Liji xunzuan 礼记训纂* [Collected Commentaries on the Book of Rites], ed. Zhu Bin 朱彬 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1996), 462.

¹⁸³ “正颜色，斯近信矣。” *Lunyu 论语*, “Tai Bo” 泰伯, in *Lunyu zhushu 论语注疏* [Annotated Analects], ed. He Yan 何晏 and Xing Bing 邢昺 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe 北京大学出版社, 1999), 108.

¹⁸⁴ “深知好颜色，莫作委泥沙。” Du Fu 杜甫, “Hua di” 花底 [Under the Flowers], in *Du Gongbu ji 杜工部集* [Collected Works of Du Fu], ed. Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鳌 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1979), 842.

In traditional Chinese medicine, there are four diagnostic methods: observation, listening, questioning, and pulse assessment. Among these, “observation” primarily assesses facial colour, which, as we know, not only reflects mood but also serves as an indicator of health. Consequently, facial colour became a crucial element in assessing physical conditions.

Ancient Chinese numerology also included a method of divination through facial colour, though it was rarely used. Folk expressions still in use today, such as *yintang fahei* (印堂发黑, “the ophryon darkens”) and *manmian hongguang* (满面红光, “ruddy cheeks”), suggest that a darkened ophryon was an ill omen, while ruddy cheeks indicated good fortune. From health indicators to signs of fate, ancient Chinese did not delineate what we now distinguish as science versus superstition.

This tradition persists in expressions like *caitou* (彩头) or *caitou* (采头). One explanation is that this term derives from the colours on dice used in gambling, where the winner is determined by the random outcome of a dice throw. However, I believe it reflects an underlying belief that the colours on the dice themselves are seen as omens of luck. *The Records of the Grand Historian* recounts how Song Zhong and Jia Yi turned to diviners in a ritual known as *guancai* (观采). Scholar Yang Shuda used the Changsha dialect expression *kan caitou* (看采头, “observing the signs”). It implies that the visual appearance (colour/lustre) of an object or situation reveals its hidden luck.) and *chou caitou* (抽采头, “refers to taking a share of good luck, often used in the context of winnings or auspicious beginnings”) to argue that *cai* (采) indicates an omen of fortune or misfortune. The modern usage of *caipiao* (彩票, “lottery”) or *haocai* (好彩, “good luck”) stems from this ancient connection where “bright colour” was synonymous with “bright fortune.”¹⁸⁵ I agree with Yang’s interpretation; *guancai* only appears in ancient records associated with the diviners’ terminology, suggesting that *cai* denotes luck, making *guancai* a term specifically created for this purpose.

¹⁸⁵ Yang Shuda 杨树达, *Jiweiju xiaoxue jinshi luncong* 积微居小学金石论丛 [Collected Essays on Philology and Epigraphy from the Jiwei Residence] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2014), 158.

In conclusion, colours in ancient Chinese culture were believed to carry predictive and portentous power, imbuing them with significance beyond aesthetic value. This conveys the strong superstitious undertones associated with colours in traditional thought.

3.2 *Se* (色) and *Shi* (弑): A Semantic Conflation

3.2.1 *Se's Original Meaning*

On the original meaning of the character *se*, scholarly opinions vary, and together they sketch out a rich semantic map. Xu Zhongshu viewed it as “patterns,” He argues that before the term stabilized to mean “colour” or “facial expression,” it described the etched or woven designs on ritual objects.¹⁸⁶ Zhou Zumo associated it with “ornamentation.” Zhou argues that *Se* originally referred to the applied decoration on a surface. This links the term to the “lustre” or “finish” of an object, suggesting that colour was inseparable from the physical material it adorned.¹⁸⁷ Gao Ming emphasized its visual essence as “colour.” Gao focuses on the perceptual quality. He views *se* as the primary way humans distinguish objects, through their hue. His work emphasizes how classical Chinese used *se* as a general category for all visual stimuli.¹⁸⁸ While Yang Bojun delved into its “cultural connotations.” He focuses on how *se* shifted from a physical description to a complex ethical and psychological signifier. He argues that in texts like the *Analects* and *Mencius*, the term is inextricably linked to human nature and social conduct.¹⁸⁹

All these interpretations are undoubtedly correct, yet what they depict are more like the luxuriant branches and leaves that have grown out of the semantic tree of *se*. The unique value of Li Xueqin’s philological investigation lies in his excavation of the deepest “root”: namely, that *Se* was not originally an aesthetic or sensory concept, but arose within the sacrificial rituals of the Shang dynasty, where it designated the sacred attribute of the coat markings or spots of

¹⁸⁶ Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒, *Shang-Zhou Hanzi yanjiu* 商周汉字研究 [Research on Shang and Zhou Chinese Characters] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1959), 72–75.

¹⁸⁷ Zhou Zumo, *Hanzi shilin* (A forest of explanations of Chinese characters) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1985), 112–115.

¹⁸⁸ Gao Ming 高明, *Gu hanyu ziyi tongshi* 古汉语字义通释 [Explanations of Word Meanings in Classical Chinese] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan 商务印书馆, 1989), 245.

¹⁸⁹ Yang Bojun 杨伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 论语译注 [The Analects: Translation and Annotation] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 22–24.

sacrificial animals.¹⁹⁰ His argument is “more primitive” and “more essential” because it ties *se* directly to the core activity of early Chinese civilization: the “sacrifice”.

In Shang society, sacrifice was the supreme affair of state, serving as the medium between humans and gods and consolidating royal power. The choice of offerings was therefore of the utmost importance. Oracle bone inscriptions contain numerous records concerning the *se* of sacrificial animals, such as “to offer a red bull to Ancestor Yi?”¹⁹¹, or “... a white pig?”¹⁹². These examples show that the *se* of the victim was a decisive criterion for divine acceptance. Here, *se* functioned as a visual code of communication with the divine, deriving its value from theology and politics rather than from aesthetics. What Li Xueqin uncovered is precisely this origin moment imbued with sacredness and authority.

From this root, the other scholarly interpretations can be situated in a clear diachronic framework: Xu Zhongshu’s “patterns” and Gao Ming’s “colours” reflect the conceptual generalization of *se* from the sacrificial altar to the natural world at large. Once the specific designation of animal coat colour became a fixed linguistic sign, it was naturally extended to describe the surface visual attributes of all things. Zhou Zumo’s “ornamentation” illustrates the application of this generalized concept within the human realm. Since all things have *se*, humans could also consciously employ *se* to shape appearances. Yang Bojun’s emphasis on “cultural and ethical meaning” represents the second great semantic leap, occurring in the Zhou period and beyond. When *se* came to describe human complexion or appearance (cf. *Analects* “Xue Er”: “value the worthy, not appearances”),¹⁹³ Confucian thinkers imbued it with a moral dimension: “virtue arises within and is manifested without,”¹⁹⁴ so the *se* of a junzi should embody inner moral integrity.

¹⁹⁰ Li Xueqin 李学勤, ed., *Ziyuan 字源* [Origin of Characters] (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan 商务印书馆, 1980), 512–14.

¹⁹¹ Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (ed.), *Jiaguwen Heji 甲骨文合集* (Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions), Vol. 9 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), items 29504.

¹⁹² Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (ed.), *Jiaguwen Heji 甲骨文合集* (Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions), Vol. 9 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), items 29527.

¹⁹³ “贤贤易色.” Yang Bojun 杨伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu 论语译注* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局, 1980), 7.

¹⁹⁴ “德发于内，而见于外。” Sun Xidan 孙希旦, *Liji jijie 礼记集解* (Collected Explanations of the Book of Rites) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1989), 985. Note: In the *Shisanjing zhushu 十三经注疏* edition, it is found in Volume 38.

Thus, the different scholarly interpretations are not contradictory, but rather reveal the accumulative layers of *se* across history. Li Xueqin unearthed its most ancient and sacred kernel; the others have vividly traced how that kernel grew, diffused, and permeated the very fabric of Chinese culture, branching into aesthetics, ethics, and philosophy. From the sacrificial *xing-sheng* (red oxen) of the Shang to the “moral appearance” of the *junzi* in Confucian thought, the semantic history of *se* is in essence the story of a diffusion, from the visual codes of theocratic ritual to the universal expressions of culture. Li Xueqin’s philological insight is crucial because it reminds us that all later philosophical speculation and aesthetic pursuits concerning *se* still echo the sacred smoke of Shang sacrifices.

The character *se* represents a crucial intersection of three terms related to colour semantics. It is the earliest written form to express the concept of colour in textual history. Why, then, did *Se* come to bear the primary responsibility for denoting colour? Examining its origin provides insight: *se* originally shared roots with *shi*, arising from sacrificial rituals. It was not conceived for visual pleasure or descriptive purposes but for religious symbolism.

In form, *Se* closely resembles *jue* (绝), and is also associated with *Shi* in both pronunciation and glyph, both implying “cutting.” As the following analysis shows, the original meaning of *se* was “beheading.”

3.2.2 *Se* and *Jue*

While the glyph is the most apparent similarity between *Se* and *Jue*, they are also phonetically close. In archaic Chinese, *Jue*’s consonant is *cong* (从) and its vowel is *yue* (月), while *Se*’s consonant is *sheng* (生) and its vowel *zhi* (职). *Zhi* and *Yue* belong to checked tones that could alternate, and *Cong* and *Sheng* are similarly placed phonetically. The association between the two is not speculative; In *Shuihudi* Qin bamboo slips, these lines appear in the private letters and inventory lists (specifically the letters of soldiers Heifu and Jing), providing rare insight into the use of “colour” (*se*) in early China regarding textiles. In the 269 bamboo slips, the line “The aforementioned [consignment] carries one hundred *se* of red silk and forty *se* of [another

grade].”¹⁹⁵ on the first wooden tablet reads “Red silk, one hundred *jue* (rolls/units) and forty *se*.”¹⁹⁶ The shared sentence structure and phrasing indicate that *Jue* and *Se* can be used interchangeably.

Although *Se* and *Jue* share a radical, their oracle bone inscriptions differ substantially. *Jue* appears in oracle bone script as ¹⁹⁷, resembling silk yarn severed by three lines. This form remains largely unchanged in bronze inscriptions-  and ,¹⁹⁸ and additional strokes appear in seal script similarly to *se*, forming ,¹⁹⁹ likely reinforcing the idea of severance. This variation suggests an image of a knife above a kneeling figure. Over time, *Jue*’s right component was simplified as *Se*, indicating “cutting.”

Alternative interpretations should also be considered. Duan Yucai proposed that the radicals of *se* are *ren* (人) and *jie* (𠂔). *Ren* symbolises people, and *Jie*, according to *Shuowen*, denotes matching shapes used by gatekeepers to verify identities. Duan interpreted *Se* as representing a “complexion corresponding to inner character,”²⁰⁰ supported by citations from *Liji* and *Mengzi*, which associated facial colour with moral character. *Liji* asserts, “The benevolent one certainly has a pleasant appearance”,²⁰¹ while *Mengzi* states, “Virtue within brings radiance to

¹⁹⁵ “元上载朱罽一百色四十色。”¹⁹⁵ Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹简整理小组 (ed.), *Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian 睡虎地秦墓竹简* (Bamboo Slips from the Qin Tomb at Shuihudi) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1990), 12.

¹⁹⁶ “朱罽百绝四十色。” Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹简整理小组 (ed.), *Shuihudi Qinmu zhujian 睡虎地秦墓竹简* (Bamboo Slips from the Qin Tomb at Shuihudi) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1990), 205.

¹⁹⁷ Liu Xinglong 刘兴隆, *Xinbian jiaguwen zidian 新编甲骨文字典* [Newly Edited Dictionary of Oracle Bone Inscriptions] (Beijing: Guoji Wenhua Chubangongsi, 1993), 642.

¹⁹⁸ Rong Geng 容庚, *Jinwenbian 金文编* [Compilation of Bronze Inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 891.

¹⁹⁹ Xu Shen 许慎, *Shuowen jiezi 说文解字* [Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1963), 273.

²⁰⁰ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu 说文解字注* [Notes on Explaining graphs and analyzing characters] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1981), 443.

²⁰¹ “有和气者必有愉色。” Sun Xidan 孙希旦, *Liji jijie 礼记集解* [Collected Explanations of the Book of Rites] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1989), 1215.

the face.”²⁰² Early texts such as “*Daya*” and “*Lusong*” use *se* to imply complexion: “Fine demeanour and pleasant look”²⁰³ and “A delightful countenance and a smile”²⁰⁴ respectively.

However, suggesting that *Se* means consistency between the inner and outer self is problematic. Duan cites relatively late materials, while *Se* appeared much earlier, even in oracle bone script. Moreover, *Mengzi* and *Liji* were expressing ideological viewpoints rather than engaging in etymological analysis. Their interpretations of *Se* thus seem to reflect philosophical constructs rather than linguistic origins. The use of *Se* to indicate complexion likely arises from the observable fact that facial colour changes with emotion.

Some philologists, like Tang Lan, opposed Duan’s interpretation. Tang Lan argued that *shao* (𠂔) as *se* and suggesting, based on *Shuowen*, that *Jue* consists of *si* (糸), *dao* (刀), and *jie* (𠂔), thereby implying that *dao* and *jie* form *se*, rather than *ren* (人) and *jie*. Philologist Xu Zhongshu supported that *se* depicted a kneeling figure by a knife, symbolising execution. Xu concluded that the primary meaning of *se* was “to cut,” with its colour meaning a later phonetic borrowing.

Given this, why was a character meaning “to cut off” repurposed to represent colour? *Se*’s link with another character sheds light on this transition.

3.2.3 *Se* and *Sha*(杀): The Impression of *Se*

With its original meaning “beheading,” *se* is synonymous with *sha*. They share similar strokes: *se* in Chu Bamboo and Silk script written as 𠂔 suggests decapitation²⁰⁵, while *Sha* appears in

²⁰² “仁义理智根於心，其生色也睟然見於面。” Mencius argues that virtue is not merely an abstract concept but a biological and physical reality. When a person cultivates their “vast, flowing *qi*” (*haoran zhi qi*), it literally transforms their physical presence. The term “睟然” (*sui ran*) specifically describes a clear, glossy, and healthy radiance that cannot be faked, as it “roots” in the heart and “overflows” into the limbs and face. See Yang Bojun 杨伯峻, *Mengzi yizhu 孟子译注* [Translation and Annotation of the Mencius] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1960), 323.

²⁰³ “令儀令色.” Cheng Junying 程俊英, *Shijing zhuxi 诗经注析* [Annotations and Analysis of the Classic of Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1991), 772.

²⁰⁴ “載色載笑.” Cheng Junying 程俊英, *Shijing zhuxi 诗经注析* [Annotations and Analysis of the Classic of Poetry] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1991), 772. 1009.

²⁰⁵ Wuhan daxue jianbo yanjiu zhongxin 武汉大学简帛研究中心 and Henansheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 河南省文物考古研究所, eds., *Chudi chutu Zhanguo jiance heji 楚地出土战国简册合集* [Collected edition of Warring States bamboo manuscripts from the Chu region] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 2013), 74

oracle bone inscriptions as 𠂔²⁰⁶. Bronze inscriptions from artefacts such as 𠂔 (Liyoubi Ding 鬲攸比鼎)²⁰⁷ or 𠂔 (Shushi Zhong 叔尸钟)²⁰⁸ show Sha with a dagger or axe entering the neck, symbolising killing. Archaeologist Wu Zhenwu interpreted Sha as comprising *ge* (戈) and 𠂔, 𠂔 resembling the loose hair. According to Wu, the early forms of sha depict a person with dishevelled or loose hair (represented by the upper strokes) being struck by a *ge* (戈, “dagger-axe”). The loose hair is a critical iconographic detail. It often signifies a prisoner or someone stripped of their social status (and headgear) before being decapitated.²⁰⁹ Since the character represents decapitation, it indicates killing.

This script is the original way of writing Sha. Liyoubi Ding and Shushi Zhong are earlier ritual instruments. Liyoubi Ding is from the late Western Zhou dynasty and Shushi Zhong belong to the middle-to-late spring and autumn.

Other bronze inscriptions from the Spring and Autumn period added a human shape under the hair, as seen in the “Ju Shu zhi Zhong Zi Ping Bell” from the state of Qi.²¹⁰ In this inscription, Sha is written as 𠂔. A dagger axe appears to be inserted into the neck. The meaning of killing is obvious.

The phonetic similarities between Se and Sha also deserve attention. *Shi* 弑, whose paronym and the initial script is Sha, and Sha itself both belong to Xin initial and Zhi rhyme(心纽职部), which means they share the same pronunciation. Furthermore, up to the present day in many dialects, Sha and Se have the same phonetic spelling and pitch, which is “Sa.” There are

²⁰⁶Liu Xinglong 刘兴隆, *Xinbian jiaguwen zidian* 新编甲骨文字典 [New dictionary of oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Guoji wenhua chubans gongsi 国际文化出版公司, 1993), 258.

²⁰⁷ Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo (ed.), *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), 215 (Item No. 2818).

²⁰⁸ Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo (ed.), *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), 303–304 (Item No. 272).

²⁰⁹ Wu Zhenwu 吴振武, “Shi ‘sha’ 释 ‘杀’” (An Explanation of the Character ‘Sha’), in *Guwenzi yanjiu* 古文字研究 (Research on Ancient Chinese Scripts), vol. 19 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1992), 174–182.

²¹⁰ Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo (ed.), *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007), Item No. 273 (莒叔之仲子平钟).

examples of this in dialects of Loufan (Shanxi),²¹¹ Suzhou (Jiangsu),²¹² Yunhe(Zhejiang)²¹³ and Jinxian(Zhejiang).²¹⁴ This shared pronunciation is particularly common in Wu 吴 dialects and certain *jin* (晋) dialects where the historical “entering tone” (*rushing* 入声) has collapsed or shifted in a way that brings these two characters together. This linguistic data supports the palaeographic theory that these two characters were once more closely related in form and perhaps in a broader conceptual category of appearance/physicality and severance.

Why then, if Se originally meant “beheading” or sacrificial decapitation, did it come to mean “colour”? Beheading, especially as human sacrifice, was a distinctive Shang dynasty ritual. *Rensheng* (人牲, “human sacrifice”) was of vital importance as a sacrificial offering: the most important and noticeable movement during the sacrificial procedure was the execution of a human. Another philologist Yao Xiaosui collected statistics on the methods of execution: he counted about different 15 ways (such as *fa* 伐 for decapitation or *mai* 埋 for burial).²¹⁵ Commonly used methods are *yao* (殽) and *fa*, which is to burn people and behead them. At the Tongtuo Bay archaeological sites of Jiangsu province, human remains of Shang people killed for sacrificial offerings were discovered. In the ruins of Yin, the bodies and heads of sacrificial human beings were separated. Huang Zhanyue provides a detailed archaeological analysis of the Yin Ruins. He notes that in many sacrificial pits, the skulls were found buried separately from the torsos. This physical evidence corroborates the palaeographic findings of Yao Xiaosui and Wu Zhenwu, proving that decapitation (often represented by the early forms of sha) was a common and systematic method of ritual killing during the Shang dynasty.²¹⁶ Yinshan Rock Paintings in Inner Mongolia depict the scene of men being sacrificed to the Gods. On the right side of the picture, the head and the body are separated. On the left side, two people are dancing.

²¹¹ Zhai Yingyi 翟英谊, “Shanxi Loufan fangyan tongyin zihui” 山西娄烦方言同音字汇 [Homophonous Character List of the Loufan Dialect in Shanxi], *Fangyan* 方言, no. 1 (1989): 13–18.

²¹² Min Jiaji 闵家骥, *Jianming Wu fangyan cidian* 简明吴方言词典 [Concise Wu Dialect Dictionary] (Shanghai: Shanghai Cishu Chubanshe, 1986), 272.

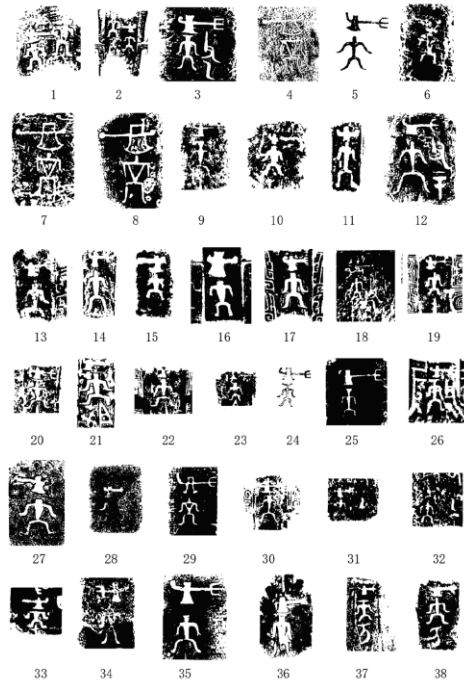
²¹³ Cao Zhiyun 曹志耘, *Nanbu Wu yu yuyin yanjiu* 南部吴语语音研究 (Research on the Phonetics of Southern Wu Dialects) (Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan, 2002), 249.

²¹⁴ Chen Zhongmin 陈忠敏, “Yinxian fangyan tongyin zihui” 鄞县方言同音字汇 (Homophonous Character List of the Jinxian Dialect), *Fangyan* 方言, no. 1 (1990): 40.

²¹⁵ Yao Xiaosui 姚孝遂, “Shangdai de fulu” 商代的俘虏 [Prisoners of the Shang Dynasty], in *Guwenzi yanjiu* 古文字研究 [Research on ancient scripts], vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1979), 337.

²¹⁶ Huang Zhanyue 黄展岳, “Yin-Shang muzang zhong renxun rensheng de zai kaocha” 殷商墓葬中人殉人牲的再考察 [A re-examination of human sacrifice and human burial in Yin-Shang tombs], *Kaogu* 考古, no. 10 (1983): 935–949.

The most striking aspect is that pictograms representing beheading resemble the character Shi. The pictograms are reproduced in the figure below:



It can be concluded that beheading played a significant role in sacrificial rituals. If, in its earliest form, the character Se denoted “beheading for sacrifice,” an important question arises: how did it come to signify colours exclusively? Modern evidence provides some insights. Traditional paint shops were historically known as *xueliao pu* (血料铺, “blood material shops”), not *seliao pu* (色料铺, “Colour Material Shops”).²¹⁷ The term *xueliao* refers to a traditional adhesive made from pig's blood and lime, commonly used in ancient Chinese lacquering and architectural painting. Notably, expressions such as *seliao* are absent from early textual sources. When we consider that Se originally referenced beheading, it becomes conceivable that ancient observers were profoundly impacted by the visual of beheading, specifically, the vivid flow of blood from the sacrificed victim. Consequently, the notion of “cutting” became intrinsically associated with colour due to this connection with blood.

This link between colour and blood is further substantiated in pre-Qin textual materials, where we observe blood tied to the concept of colour. For example, in the “*Nanshan Jing*” (南山经),

²¹⁷Peng De 彭德, *Zhonghua wuse* 中华五色 [The five colors of China] (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe 江苏美術出版社, 2008), 23.

a type of wood is described as having the ability to *xueyu* (血玉), where *xue* is used as a verb, meaning “to dye or stain with the colour of blood.” This instance illustrates the strong symbolic link between blood and the notion of colour, demonstrating how early meanings associated with *Se* evolved.

We can conclude that sensitivity to colour was intensified within the context of sacrificial ceremonies. Thus, the use of *Se* to denote colours reflects how the early perception of colour was closely tied to ritual sacrifice rather than everyday life. It is, therefore, unsurprising that some scholars argue that all terms for colours originally derive from sacrificial rites. Further evidence supporting this claim lies in pre-Qin sources, where descriptions of colour frequently pertain to the hair of sacrificial animals.²¹⁸

3.3 Cai (彩): A Celestial Phenomenon

In addition to *se*, other terms such as *secai* were used to represent colour. Having examined *se*, we must now turn our attention to *cai* (彩).

The character *cai* is composed of the elements *cai* (采) and *shan* (彡). In the *Shuowen Jiezi*, *cai* (彩) is introduced as a phonogram, with *cai*(采) as the phonetic component and *shan*(彡) as the semantic component. In this context, the colour-related meaning of *cai*(彩) is unrelated to the *cai*(采) element in the character.

However, *cai*(采) was frequently used to signify colour in ancient texts. Accordingly, we will examine these two components separately.

3.3.1 Shan(彡): Colour-Independent

If, according to Xu Shen, *shan* serves as the semantic component of the character,²¹⁹ we should consider whether it aptly conveys the meaning of colour. The form of *shan* has remained

²¹⁸Guo Jingyun 郭靜雲, “‘Youxuan’ zhi mi: Shang Zhou shiqi biaoda qingse de zihui ji qi yiyi” “幽玄”之謎：商周時期表達青色的詞彙及其意義 [The mystery of ‘Youxuan’: The vocabulary and meaning of green-blue in the Shang and Zhou dynasties], *Lishi yanjiu* 歷史研究, no. 02 (2010).

²¹⁹ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Explaining graphs and analyzing characters] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1963).

largely unchanged since oracle bone inscriptions, consistently resembling a brushstroke. The *Shuowen* defines *shan* as a “whisker and decorative pattern” (*Maoshi Huawen* 毛饰画文).²²⁰ Xu Hao interpreted these four characters as denoting hair, with an extended meaning of decoration—an intuitive association, as hair and moustaches are often adorned.²²¹ Additionally, *Guangyun* (广韵) notes that *shan* symbolises long hair.²²²

Characters featuring *shan* can be categorised into two main groups. The primary, or original, meaning of *shan* is “hair,” as illustrated by characters such as *xu* (须, “facial hair”) and *biao* (髯, “the way hair hangs down”). This foundational meaning of hair provides context for Shan 彡’s extended association with decoration.

As Xu Hao noted, *shan* also signifies “embellishment” in another major category of usage. The character *xing* (形) conveys the concept of visual form, while *Jiyun* (集韵) explains that *ying* (影) represents the shadow or reflection of objects. Similarly, when *shan* is combined with a radical related to sound, it amplifies the sense of that sound. For example, in *Shuowen*, *peng* (彭) is described as suggesting the sound of drama. In oracle bone inscriptions, the left radical *zhu* (𠂔) depicts a person playing a drum; thus, when combined with *shan*, the character implies “loud noises,” symbolising an “unseen sound.” This association is readily understood, as the same composition is used in pictographic representations.

Moreover, Shan’s function as an intensifier is more evident in the four characters *yu* (𠂔), *wen* (𠂔), *zhang* (彰), and *yu* (𠂔). *Shuowen* uses them to explain each other.²²³ Duan Yucai’s annotation can explain their meaning: *wenzhang* (𠂔彰) was simplified to *wenzhang* (文章). The meaning is clear because *wenzhang* (文章) in pre-Qin usually signifies intricate patterns and colours, or graded colourful flags.²²⁴ Du Yu interpreted *Zuozhuan*’s “displaying *wenzhang* to distinguish the noble from the lowly”, as referring to vehicle decorations and flags.²²⁵ Zhang

²²⁰ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Explaining graphs and analyzing characters] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1963), 190.

²²¹ Xu Hao 徐灝, *Shuowen jiezi zhu jian* 說文解字注箋 [Notes and annotations on the *Shuowen jiezi*] (Taipei: Guangwen shuju 廣文書局, 1972), 365.

²²² Chen Pengnian 陳彭年 et al., *Songben Guangyun* 宋本廣韻 [Song edition of the *Guangyun*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu jiaoyu chubanshe 江蘇教育出版社, 2008), 193.

²²³ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 [Explaining graphs and analyzing characters] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1963), 190.

²²⁴ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 [Notes on Explaining graphs and analyzing characters] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1981), 420.

²²⁵ “昭文章，明貴賤。” Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 [Annotation of the Zuo tradition of the Spring and Autumn Annals] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1990), 45.

Taiyan produced an exquisite summary to exhibit the reinforcing effect of Shan.²²⁶

The most relevant part of our topic is *biao* (彪), *cai* (彩), and *tong* (彤). *Biao* means “pattern of the tiger.” *Biao* is often combined with *bing* (炳) to express the meaning of “to glow.” Here, *shan*’s function is to magnify the original meaning of its matching radical. *Dan* (丹) means red. In the same way, when combined with Shan, the newly formed word *tong* means things are aglow in red.

The various combinations of character elements demonstrate that the meaning of words containing *shan* is not consistent. For characters in the *shan* category that denote colour, the colour meaning is derived from the other component. Following the logic that *shan* serves as an intensifier, it suggests that *cai* (采) is the primary source of the colour meaning. Accordingly, in the following section, we will investigate whether *cai* (采) itself has associations with colour.

3.3.2 *Cai*(采): Source of Colour Meaning

Characters using *cai* as a phonetic radical can be divided into three categories as follows:

- (1) 𠂔、采
- (2) 採、𦰩、𦰪、𦰫、𦰬
- (3) 菜、睬、彩

The first group is the original form of *cai* (采). According to *Yupian* (玉篇), *cai* (𠂔) is the ancient form of *cai* (采), whilst the second group lists variants of Cai.

Cai(採) is not included in *Shuowen*. Other Chinese dictionaries have two definitions: *Yupian*, *Guangyun*, and *Jiyun* agree that *cai*(採) means “picking.” In *the Records of the Grand Historian*, we find the phrase “In fall and winter lead the civilians to go into the mountain to gather and log.”²²⁷ Therefore, *cai* (採) is identical to *cai*(采). Another meaning of *cai* (採) is “paying attention to something,” for instance, in the phrase, “No longer paying any attention to the light clouds”²²⁸ In later times, the form *cai*(睬) was used in this context. *Cai*(𦰩), *Erya*(尔雅) said it

²²⁶ “夫命其质曰文，状其华美曰彰，指其起止曰章，道其素绚曰彰。” “To name its essence is called wen (文); to describe its flowery beauty is called wen (彰); to point to its beginning and end is called zhang (章); to express its plainness and radiance is called zhang (彰).” Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, *Wenshi* 文始 [The origin of writing], in *Zhang Taiyan quanji* 章太炎全集 [Complete works of Zhang Taiyan], vol. 7 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe 上海人民出版社, 1984), 289.

²²⁷ “秋冬则劝民山採.” Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Volume VII: The Memoirs of Pre-Han China, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 437.

²²⁸ “更不採轻霄.” Li Yanshou 李延壽, *Beishi* 北史 [History of the Northern Dynasties], vol. 14, “Houfei zhuan” 后妃傳 [Biographies of empresses and consorts] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1974), 522.

was a fief. In *Qianzun*(遣尊) and *Qianyou*(遣卣), Cai appears in the form *Caiyi* (采邑). Using Cai to point to the aristocratic realm is a very vivid metaphor: we imagine the nobility grabbing profit from the people like the ancients grabbing fruit from a tree. As for *cai*(睬), *Pianhai* (篇海) explains it means “noisy, kinetic, and large.” We see that these meanings may be more closely related to the radical *kou* (口), with Cai acting as the phonetic radical only. The next word *Cai*(睬) shares the same meaning as *cai* (采).

The last word in the second group is noteworthy. Among these words, *cai*(綵) is the only character implying coloured things, which is why we will come back to it later. In the second group, we can discover variants of *cai*(采) either connected to the abstract meaning “grabbing” or “seizing from people” or identical to Cai’s original meaning “picking.”

With regards to the third group, *cai*(菜) is the fruit of the action *cai*(采), although there are situations in which *cai* (采) only serves as a phonetic radical. The meaning of *cai*(睬) seemingly only relates to *mu* (目). *Cai*(睬) means “paying attention to something”, the most Chinese vivid idiom illustrating this being “Cast black pupil” (*qingyanyoujia* 青眼有加).

In the above-mentioned, only *cai*(綵) implies the meaning of colour. It refers to colourized silk and thus deserves to be studied carefully. There are many pieces of evidence: Jiyun suggests *cai*(綵) is equivalent to *hui*(绘). The Great Chinese Dictionary also uses Hui to explain Cai 綵, and that today it is used in the sense of *wuse chou* (五色绸, i.e., coloured silk).

Similarly, we find that *si*(糸) is not the source of the colour meaning either. Shuowen explains that it imitates the shape of a silken filament. If we look at its font in oracle bone inscriptions, it indeed looks like silk. *Si* assumed the role of silk, and we cannot find colour meaning in the characters that include *si* as a radical, like *xu*(绪), *mian*(緬), or *chun*(纯). Normally, characters containing *si* refer to silk fabrics. Thus, the meaning of colour is left to *cai*(采).

“Yiji” (益稷) said “dying clothes with five colours.”²²⁹ *Yiji* is unlikely to be referring to the work of the Shun(舜) period, but this is still long before the Qin dynasty. Other classics employ the same usage. *Zhouli* states “The silk strings all consist of three colours and three layers.”²³⁰

²²⁹ Kong Anguo 孔安國 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, comps., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 [The correct meaning of the Book of Documents], vol. 5, “Yiji” 益稷 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 154.

²³⁰ “縹皆三采三就.” Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, comps., *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏 [Notes and annotations on the Rites of Zhou], vol. 18, “Chunguan: Dianrui” 春官：典瑞 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 492.

Zheng Xuan interpreted *sancai*(三采) as three colours of red, white, and *cang* (苍, “Controversial, interpreted as black, blue, or green”). The passage translates to: “The silk strings are of three colors and six grades: vermilion, white, and azure.”²³¹ *Zhouli* also once said “wear five colours to sacrifice to the sun.”²³² Wei Zhao cited this phrase to explain *Guoyu*’s “The Son of Heaven wears *dacai* [the great colours] to sacrifice to the sun, and *shaocai* [the lesser colours] to sacrifice to the moon.”²³³ Although these interpretations may not be correct, the consideration that *cai*(采) represents colourized sacrificial garments provides a different perspective on *cai*’s colour meaning.

After proving that the meaning of colour derives from *cai*, we should examine why *cai* carries the meaning of colour. Two special and archaic terms may help solve this puzzle.

3.3.3 *Dacai* (大采) and *Xiaocai* (小采)

In oracle bone inscriptions, the character *cai* represents a hand-picking fruit from a tree. Chinese bronze inscriptions inherited the shape of this character. Luo Zhenyu noted for *cai* “depicts the form of picking fruit from a tree.”²³⁴ This usage is very common, both in ancient and modern times, as seen in the Classic of Poetry verse: (Spring days are long and gentle, people gather ferns in abundance).²³⁵

In the Shang dynasty, *cai* gained new meanings. In oracle bone inscriptions, *Cai* often shows up in two terms: *dacai* and *xiaocai*. For example, “...*Dacai* rain, King...”,²³⁶ “Divined, saying... *xiaocai* sun... female elder... second month”,²³⁷ “[Divined], Shi, [tested]: To[day]... [*Cai*] sun [rain].”²³⁸ Xu Zhongshu believes that *Dacai* represents the moment of sunrise and *xiaocai*

²³¹ Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, comps., *Yili zhushu* 儀禮注疏 [Notes and annotations on the Etiquette and Rites], vol. 22, “Pinli” 聘禮 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 615.

²³² Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, comps., *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏 [Rituals of Zhou with commentaries], vol. 18, 493.

²³³ “天子大采朝日，少采夕月。” Wei Zhao 韋昭, annot., *Guoyu* 國語 [Discourses of the states] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1978), 205.

²³⁴ “象取果于木之形。” Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉, *Zengding Yinxu shuqi kaoshi* 增訂殷虛書契考釋 [Revised interpretation of the inscriptions from the ruins of Yin], vol. 1 (Dongfang xuehui 東方學會, 1927), 61.

²³⁵ Cheng Junying 程俊英, *Shijing yizhu* 詩經譯注 [Translation and annotation of the Classic of Poetry] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2012), 154. “春日迟迟，采芣苢。”

²³⁶ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collected oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1978–1982), 1801, no. 12810.

²³⁷ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1978–1982), 2686, no. 20800.

²³⁸ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1978–1982), 2689, no. 20828.

corresponds with the moment of sunset.²³⁹ Lei Zihan also reaches a similar conclusion: due to word formation and application of *dashi*(大食) and *xiaoshi*(小食) in oracle bone inscriptions, *Dacai* and *xiaocai* should be used in similar situations, indicating early and late periods in one day.²⁴⁰

Dong Zuobin thought that the sequence of the period of the day was *ming* (明), *dacai*(大采), *dashi*(大食), *zhongri*(中日), *ze*(昃), *xiaoshi*(小食), and *xiaocai*(小采).²⁴¹ As we can see, periods are named after two types of things: celestial phenomena like the brightness and darkness of the day, or the location of the sun, and life activities like *dashi* and *xiaoshi*. So, it is plausible that *dacai* and *xiaocai* are also essential activities, as their original meaning is “picking.” In *Jiaguwen Jishi*, Li Xiaoding said: “I presume these names were differentiated by the intensity of light and the degree of cloud colour change.”²⁴²

Thus, he posited that *dacai* and *xiaocai* pertain to variations in light intensity, suggesting that the concept of *cai* as colour may have emerged from this association. When *cai* became habitually linked to specific times of day, it acquired a connection to the colour of the sky. Given that *dacai* follows *ming* and *xiaocai* follows *ze*, these terms likely correspond to the times of morning glow and evening glow, respectively. Collection activities take place during these two times of day, even in the fields today.

A modern philologist, Yu Xingwu, noticed that in oracle bone inscriptions, *cai* was regularly added before thunder, clouds, and fog.²⁴³ From this, he concluded that *dacai* and *xiaocai* indicated different kinds of cloud colours. His assumption is supported by a poem by Cao Pi “Radiance came down from the Heaven and then how bright the multiple colours are.”²⁴⁴ This verse concisely illustrates that light and colour are descended from Heaven and impress people with their exuberance.

²³⁹Xu Zhongshu, ed., *Jiaguwen zidian* 甲骨文字典 [Dictionary of oracle bone inscriptions] (Chengdu: Sichuan Cishu Publishing House, 2014), 651.

²⁴⁰Lei Zihan 雷紫翰, *Jiaguwen shijian ci yanjiu* 甲骨文時間詞研究 [Research on time words in oracle bone inscriptions] (Taipei: Wenjin chubanshe 文津出版社, 2010), 124.

²⁴¹Dong Zuobin 董作賓, *Yinli pu* 殷曆譜 [The calendar of the Yin dynasty], vol. 1, pt. 1 (Sichuan: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiusuo 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1945), 4–6.

²⁴²Li Xiaoding 李孝定, *Jiaguwen jishi* 甲骨文字集釋 [Collected interpretations of oracle bone inscriptions] (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology 中央研究院歷史語言研究所, 1970), 2012.

²⁴³Yu Xingwu 于省吾, *Shuangjianyi Yinqi pianzhi sanbian* 雙劍謄殷契駢枝三編 (Third series of supplementary notes on Yin inscriptions from the Shuangjian Studio) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1943), 15.

²⁴⁴“上天垂光采，五色一何鮮。” Xiao Tong 蕭統, comp., *Wen Xuan* 文選 (Selections of refined literature), vol. 22; Cao Pi, “Furong chi zuo shi” (Poem written at the Lotus Pond) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 1986), 1032.

Lei Zihan proposed that the use of *cai* to denote colours may originate from the visual similarity between the colours of clouds and those of gathered fruits. Although this view is more speculative than a formal hypothesis, it serves as a reminder that colours once symbolised a connection to time and human activities. In modern life, this link may seem less perceptible; however, it illustrates that ancient people experienced a profound emotional response to colours, perceiving them not as mere adornments but as potent, independent qualities. This perspective may shed light on philosophical debates about conceptual distinctions, such as the notion that “a white horse is not a horse” in the history of Chinese thought.

The prominence of colour in antiquity was due in part to its powerful visual impact, which remains striking today, and in part to its association with Heaven. The sky was regarded as a numinous and dominant force, and its observation became a foundational discipline in pre-Qin intellectual history. The Mandate of Heaven, one of ancient China’s most profound concepts, emerged from the impression and interpretation of the sky’s omnipresence. This reverence for the Heaven inspired both curiosity and veneration among early societies, ultimately personifying Heaven and giving rise to the concept of *Tianming*.

Colours were intuitively experienced and appreciated. Through observing facial colours and linking them to human health, different colours acquired associations with positive or negative qualities, becoming connected to auspiciousness. Similarly, given their sensory impact, colours became tightly intertwined with the concepts of beheading and sacrifice, to the extent that colours in the pre-Qin period must be discussed in the context of religious sacrifice. Moreover, the naming of times of day reveals that an underlying, intuitive feeling for colours informed these representations, lending colours an equal status and symbolic attributes.

Recognising the depth of our ancestors’ relationship with colours encourages us to examine the reasons behind these feelings and their associations in both literal and philosophical contexts.

3.4 Materiality is Chromaticity: *Wu* (物) is Colour

In English, the term “object” traces its etymology to the Medieval Latin “obiectum”, meaning “that which is thrown before” (the mind or the senses).²⁴⁵ Similar to the Chinese term 东西 (literally “east-west”), both words define tangible entities through vectors of space and orientation (front/back, east/west). This mode of conceptualization aligns with the logic of modern science, which measures existence through spatial-temporal dimensions.

By contrast, the Chinese character *wu*(物) demonstrates a markedly different, pre-modern cognitive pathway. Not only is it historically ancient, appearing on oracle bones, but it remains active in core vocabulary such as *wanwu* (万物, “all things”), *wupin* (物品, “objects”), and *wuzhi* (物质, “matter”). Unlike English “thing”, which derives from the Old Germanic *þing* meaning assembly or council, something closer to the Chinese *shi* (事, “affair,” “event”), therefore, leans toward abstract affairs, or “matter”, originally denoting “wood” and retaining a material connotation. *Wu*’s earliest meaning, surprisingly, is “a multicoloured cow.” How did a concept initially defined by colour evolve into a general term for all physical objects? And what does this reveal about early Chinese thought? The journey from a chromatic bovine to things is, rather, a window into the epistemic foundations of Chinese thought.

In oracle bone inscriptions, *wu* is written as 𠂔²⁴⁶. The character consists of two components: The upper component *wu*(勿), usually interpreted as a pictograph of a flag and serving here as a phonetic element. The lower component *niu* (牛, “cow”), signalling the semantic category. Characters such as *pin* (牝, “female”) and *mu* (牡, “male”) were created specifically to distinguish gender within the bovine species. Later, these two terms were extended metaphorically to all animals, demonstrating that bovine taxonomy served as the foundational model for organizing the natural world.

²⁴⁵ Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. “Object.” <https://www.etymonline.com>

²⁴⁶ Guo Moruo, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions], vol. 12 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1982), no. 37089.

If 勿 were treated purely as a phonetic, *wu*(物) would simply equate to “cow,” which fails to explain its later extension to *wanwu*(万物). The key lies in recognizing that 勿 also contributes crucial semantic content, specifically denoting “multicoloured” or “spotted.” Scholars often assert that the upper part of *wu* (勿) functions purely as a phonetic sign. Yet, if *wu*(物) derived its meaning solely from the bovine radical, there would be no reason for it to differ semantically from *niu* itself. The specificity of “varicoloured cattle” demands a conceptual supplement, not just a phonetic one. We must therefore reconsider the meaning of *wu*(勿), asking why it appears in this graph and what intrinsic conceptual relation it holds with *wu* (物).

From the Shang dynasty to the present, the form of *wu*(勿) has changed little. Ancient lexicons provide a consistent interpretation. The character *wu*(勿) has changed little from the Shang dynasty to modern Chinese (𠂔²⁴⁷, 𠂔²⁴⁸, 𠂔²⁴⁹). According to *Shuowen Jiezi*, it originally represented “a flag with three flowing ribbons.”²⁵⁰

But what does a flag have to do with multicolour? The answer is found in ancient ritual practices. *Zhouli* records: “A flag made of uniform silk is called *zhan*; a flag made of mixed-coloured silk is called *wu*(勿).”²⁵¹ *Zhouli* offers further illumination: “The Director of Banners oversees the names and physical properties of the nine types of flags, each belonging to a specific category to serve the affairs of the state. Those with the sun and moon are called *chang*; those with interlocking dragons are *qi*; those of solid-coloured silk are *zhan*; those of mixed-coloured silk are *wu*; those with bears and tigers are *qi*; those with birds of prey are *Yu*; those with tortoises and snakes are *Zhao*; those with full feathers are *sui*; and those with split feathers are *Jing*.”²⁵² Here, *tongbo*(通帛, “uniform silk”) refers to a flag made of single-colour fabric, called *zhan*, while *zabo*(杂帛, “mixed silk”) refers to flags woven from multiple colours, called

²⁴⁷ Guo Moruo, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions], vol. 12 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1982), no. 15922

²⁴⁸ Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ed., *Yinzhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 [Compendium of Yin and Zhou Bronze Inscriptions], rev. ed. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2007), no. 4293.

²⁴⁹ Xing Zi Ming Chu 性自命出, slip 2 (Guodian Tomb Bamboo Slips, Jingmen City Museum, Jingmen, China), in Jingmen Shi Bowuguan 荆门市博物馆, ed., *Guodian Chumu Zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹简 (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1998), 179.

²⁵⁰ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining graphs and analyzing characters) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1963), 190.

²⁵¹ *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rites of Zhou), “Chunguan: Sichang” 春官: 司常 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1984), 284.

²⁵² Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 and Jia Gongyan 賈公彥, comps., *Zhouli zhushu* 周禮注疏 (Rituals of Zhou with commentaries), in *Sibu beiyao* 四部備要 (Taipei: Taiwan Zhonghua shuju 臺灣中華書局, 1966), “Chunguan: Sichang” 春官: 司常.

wu(勿). This passage is the crux of our discussion. This is no accident of naming; it reveals a semantic continuity between wu(勿) and wu(物). The “flag” radical in wu(物) is not a random phonetic borrowing but a carrier of meaning.

Thus, the original meaning of wu(物) designates a cow with multicoloured or spotted fur. In the Shang dynasty, where sacrificial culture was highly developed, the colour of an animal’s coat was a central criterion for its suitability as an offering. While solid-coloured cows (xi 牺) were highly prized, multicoloured cows (wu 物) were valued for their distinctive and visually striking appearance, making them important sacrifices and property.

Because cows represented the most important and ubiquitous forms of wealth in early China, 物 expanded to denote all tangible entities recognizable by visible features such as shape or colour. Ultimately, wu(物) underwent a philosophical transformation, encompassing all objective existence—the concept of wanwu (万物, “all things”).

The evolution of wu(物) demonstrates that colour in ancient Chinese thought was not a secondary or decorative attribute but a foundational ontological category. Ancient Chinese did not first conceptualize “objects” and then attribute colour; rather, they identified, classified, and named entities through their most salient visual features: multicoloured patterns. This “colour-based ontology” reflects a distinctive, perceptually grounded philosophy of early Chinese civilization, in sharp contrast with the Western approach of defining objects through spatial orientation.

Beginning from Jane Bennett’s notion of *Thing-Power*, I trace the philosophical resonance of the idea that matter itself possesses vitality and agency. Bennett’s concept, developed in *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*, challenges the anthropocentric hierarchy that privileges human intention over material force. Drawing on Spinoza’s immanent causality, Deleuze’s assemblages, and Latour’s actor-network theory, she envisions a world in which things act and interact within dynamic networks of influence. This understanding provides a conceptual bridge to the ancient Chinese notion of wu(物) as it appears in the Shang dynasty

oracle bone inscriptions, where *Wu* does not simply denote an inert object but signifies a presence or manifestation charged with divinatory significance.

To summarize: in the Shang-dynasty mind, *wu* was colour, and colour was the first principle of objecthood. To call something *wu* was to recognize it as visibly distinct, as a phenomenon of appearance. The earliest Chinese notion of the “object” thus arose not from geometry but from chromatic perception, not from being placed “before the eyes,” but from being seen as different.

3.5 The Historical Foundations of Early Chinese Colour Thought

Since the previous chapter examined the semantic and graphic evolution of individual colour terms, the present discussion shifts to the broader systems of thought within which those terms acquired cosmological weight. It begins with the most comprehensive early framework *wuxing* and then traces the earlier ritual and proto-correlative layers upon which that system was built.

Wuxing system represents the earliest fully articulated metaphysics in which colour is integrated as a constitutive feature of the cosmos. Although the term “five agents” appears in “*Hongfan*” chapter of the *Shangshu*, scholars generally agree that the chapter assumed its present form in the fourth or third century BCE, making it contemporaneous with, or slightly earlier than, the Naturalist synthesis of the Warring States.²⁵³ By the time of the *Lüshi chunqiu* and certain chapters of the *Guanzi*, the five agents had become a dynamic cosmology linking colours, directions, seasons, sacrificial rules, omens, bodily systems, and political legitimacy.²⁵⁴ The five primary colours are the sensory manifestations of cosmological phases. In this philosophical configuration, colour carries causal properties within cycles of generation (*xiangsheng* 相生) and conquest (*xiangke* 相克), allowing visible qualities to reveal and participate in the underlying movements of the cosmos. *Wuxing* schema therefore furnishes a

²⁵³ *Shangshu*, “*Hongfan*.” Dating debates summarized in Constance A. Cook, *Ancient China and Its Eurasian Neighbors* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 87–90.

²⁵⁴ Kong Anguo 孔安國 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, comps., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (The correct meaning of the Book of Documents), vol. 18, “*Guming*” 顧命 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 552.

cosmological grammar in which nature, ritual, and governance are coordinated through patterned correspondences.

This metaphysical synthesis, however, presupposes a set of earlier conceptual layers that shaped the cultural understanding of colour long before its systematization. The earliest of these layers lies in the ritual ontology of the Shang, preserved in the oracle-bone inscriptions. These inscriptions display a stable and complex colour logic governing sacrificial animals: white oxen, black sheep, dark or mottled animals, and sorrel cattle appear in distinct ritual contexts.²⁵⁵ White animals dominate ancestral offerings, black animals appear in rainmaking, and the specialized categories correspond to defined ritual functions. These distinctions were not symbolic in the modern sense. Rather, colour was treated as an operative property that determined ritual efficacy. A white ox could not simply be replaced with a darker one; its colour was believed to possess intrinsic resonance with the ancestors or the atmospheric conditions addressed by the rite. In this early religious worldview, colour had ontological force. The Shang divinatory system relies on this logic, which interprets colour as a material criterion for effective communication with the spirits.

During the Western Zhou, colour acquires an expanded role as a principle of moral and ritual order. The *Shangshu*'s "*Guming*" describes ceremonial architecture arranged with coloured and patterned objects—mats, jade pieces, shells—assigned to the three ritual halls according to directional and hierarchical functions.²⁵⁶ These arrangements reflect a worldview in which correct ritual performance requires a correctly ordered visual field. *The Grand Scribe's Recording* further demonstrates that colour was used extensively to mark rank, express propriety, or criticize deviation. The red kneepads (*zhufu* 朱芾), golden shoes (*jinxi* 金舄), greenish pendant jade (*congxing* 葱珩), and the black official robe (*ziyi* 緇衣) denote status or ritual function; the contrast between "green robe with yellow lining" serves as a moral critique of inverted

²⁵⁵ David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 125–140.

²⁵⁶ Kong Anguo 孔安國 and Kong Yingda 孔穎達, comps., *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (The correct meaning of the Book of Documents), vol. 18, "Guming" 顧命 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 552.

order.²⁵⁷ In these literary sources, colour functions as a visual articulation of social hierarchy and ethical correctness.

In addition to these ritual and social dimensions, early China developed a proto-cosmological layer of colour correlations linking hues with directions, seasons, and environmental qualities. *Yizhoushu* (逸周书) describes the foundational five-coloured altar—blue-green in the east, red in the south, white in the west, black *li* (骊) in the north, and yellow at the centre.²⁵⁸ “*Zuo Luo Jie*” (作雒解) chapter details that the altar walls *wei* (墀) were built with earth from across the realm, symbolizing the unification of the “Nine Provinces” under a single mandate. This altar was not merely decorative; it was a political tool. When the King enfeoffed a vassal lord, he would grant a handful of earth from the section of the altar corresponding to the vassal’s new territory. This earth was then mixed into the vassal’s local altar, signifying that their authority was a literal “piece” of the central Zhou mandate.²⁵⁹ By utilizing five distinct shades of earth, Zhou rulers physically manifested *wuxing* theory, which integrated spatial directions with elemental forces. Archaeological evidence from Spring and Autumn burials reveals the use of mixed colour soils in ritual fills, suggesting that colour-coded earth embodied cosmological distinctions even outside textual tradition. These correlations likely originated from lived sensory impressions: the blue-green of eastern dawn, the red intensity of southern heat, the white clarity of western autumn, and the darkness of the northern sky. Before *wuxing* system synthesized these associations into an explicit cosmology, they existed as intuitive mappings that connected ritual practice to the rhythms of the natural world.

Classical texts further reflect this expanding conceptual horizon. The *Shangshu*’s “*Yugong*” describes soils as *qingli* (青骊), combining greenish and dark hues to classify regional environments.⁷ Its lists of jade objects, such as “great jade, yi-jade, Heavenly sphere, river diagram,” imply careful attention to colour in the ritual storage of precious materials. The *Guoyu* articulates the philosophical significance of colour in the statement “Five flavours manifest qi, five

²⁵⁷ The critique of “green robe with yellow lining” highlights a breach of *li* (ritual propriety). In the traditional hierarchy of colours, yellow—the colour of the earth—was a “primary” high-status colour, while green was a “secondary” or “interstitial” colour. Wearing green on the outside with a yellow lining symbolized a world where concubines usurped the status of wives or where chaos replaced order. See *The Classic of Poetry*, trans. James Legge (London: Trübner & Co., 1871).

²⁵⁸ Huang Huaixin 黄懷信, ed., *Yi Zhou shu hui jiao ji zhu* 逸周書彙校集注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2007), 565.

²⁵⁹ Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

colours refine the mind,” situating colour alongside sound and taste as fundamental constituents of sensory and moral order. Passages from *The Grand Scribe’s Recording* show that colour structured not only ritual identity but also emotional expression, as in the imagery of dyeing and weaving in “*Qiyue*”(七月), “We dye [the thread], some black and some yellow; our red-dye is very brilliant.”²⁶⁰ which reveals the technological sophistication and the symbolic signification of black, yellow, and vermilion fabrics, as these dyes required precise knowledge of mordants and mineral pigments.²⁶¹ These literary materials demonstrate that colour had become fully embedded in the symbolic and experiential fabric of Zhou life.

Taken together, these materials trace a coherent intellectual trajectory. The Shang conception of colour as ritual efficacy establishes the earliest ontological foundation. The Western Zhou expansion into moral and social order builds on this foundation by embedding colour within the visible hierarchy of ritual society. The proto-correlative associations of colour with directional and seasonal patterns introduce a spatial and temporal dimension. Finally, *wuxing* cosmology synthesizes these layers into an abstract metaphysical system that explains natural, political, and ritual phenomena through patterned correspondences.

4. Texts and Objects: The Material Basis of Colour Study

4.1 From Oracle Bones to the *Zhouyi*

The study of divination practices in the Shang and Zhou dynasties has long occupied a central position in early Chinese history, archaeology, and philology. The evolution of scholarly focus over time reflects a trajectory from text interpretation to ritual reconstruction, and, more recently, to analyses that integrate material culture, science, and the sociology of knowledge.

²⁶⁰ “载玄载黄，我朱孔阳。” James Legge, trans., *The She King or The Book of Poetry*, vol. 4 of *The Chinese Classics* (London: Trübner & Co., 1871), 233.

²⁶¹ Dieter Kuhn, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, pt. 9, *Textile Technology: Spinning and Weaving* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 144.

4.1.1 Oracle Bones: Cracks with Colours

Early studies of Shang divination were guided primarily by philological and chronological concerns. Scholars such as Wang Guowei, Dong Zuobin, Guo Moruo, and Chen Mengjia laid the foundations by deciphering inscriptions, analysing grammar, and reconstructing the content of the divinatory texts. Dong Zuobin's "Five-Phase Chronology" organized the dispersed corpus of oracle bones into a coherent historical framework, enabling the late Shang inscriptions to serve as reliable historical documents. Building on this textual basis, later scholarship turned toward the reconstruction of divinatory procedure—*bin* (賓, "preparation"), *ming* (命, "charge"), *zhan* (占, "cracking and inscription"), and *yan* (驗, "verification")—and to the institutional structure of the diviners' corps (*zhenren* 貞人), demonstrating that Shang divination formed a state-run religious system under the direct authority of the king. In this sense, Shang ritual culture was profoundly "divine-centric," with all major decisions oriented toward discerning ancestral will.

A major development in recent scholarship is the "material turn," which shifts attention from the inscription as text to the oracle bone as a crafted, chromatic, and sensorial ritual object. Oracle bones underwent a sequence of material transformations: scraping, thinning, drilling, polishing, and finally heating to produce pyromantic cracks.

The most significant aspect of this materiality is colour, particularly the practice known as *tuzhu* (涂朱), the deliberate rubbing of pigment into carved grooves. While earlier scholarship often treated these pigments as incidental or decorative, accumulating archaeological and scientific studies now reveal their central ritual and semiotic importance. Cinnabar's vivid red, a rare mineral associated with life, blood, protection, and apotropaic power, endowed the inscription with a visible vitality that "activated" the written charge and enhanced its efficacy in communication with the divine. Black carbon ink, in contrast, produced an austere, matter-of-fact register aligned with negative or routine outcomes.

Although the use of pigment appears throughout the late Shang period, its distribution is highly uneven: more than 80 percent of pigment-filled bones belong to the Wu Ding era (ca. 1250–

1192 BCE). Three factors account for this concentration. First, Wu Ding's reign marked the golden age of Shang divination, with the *bin* (賓) group of diviners producing the most extensive and elaborate corpus. Second, many of the inscriptions from this period were “display inscriptions,” designed to be archived and viewed; pigment enhanced their clarity and visual authority. Third, the bold, deeply carved calligraphic style characteristic of Period I better retained pigment than the smaller, shallower scripts of later reigns.

Within this chromatic system, a notable pattern emerges: cinnabar was typically used for the primary charge or for auspicious outcomes, while black ink marked counter charges or negative results. This dualism, as argued by Wang Tao, reflects the binary logic embedded in Shang divination itself. In rare but striking cases, such as Heji 9775 and 14129, both pigments appear on the same piece, differentiating between the question, verification, or opposing prognoses. Other specimens, including Yibian 6849 and 7285, contain exclusively cinnabar, whereas examples like Yibian 566 and 788 employ only black ink. This chromatic distinction was not arbitrary; it encoded ritual expectations, hierarchical status, and the perceived potency of charges.

The material and chromatic principles visible in oracle bones resonate with broader Shang ritual culture. The same cinnabar paste used to highlight inscriptions also appears on high-status ritual objects, including jade daggers and rings from Tomb 18 at Xiaotun, indicating that red pigment was part of a larger aesthetic-ritual grammar of vitality, protection, and sacral presence.

Understanding oracle bones through this material–chromatic lens restores their original ritual force. The bone was not a transparent medium but a sensorial and symbolic surface: milky-white bone, black pyromantic cracks, and cinnabar-filled inscriptions together created a visual field through which the Shang king apprehended the intentions of his ancestors. Raman spectroscopy, FTIR, XRF have further enabled scholars to identify pigment composition and application techniques.

4.1.2 The Golden Bronzeware

Colour in Shang material culture arises not from abstract symbolic schemes but from the direct manipulation of materials, the sensory affordances of different media, and the ritual demands of ancestral worship. Among the various material categories, bronze ritual vessels form the clearest case of intentional chromatic design. Their original appearance was defined by a cultivated golden brilliance. Surrounding this core, other ritual materials such as cinnabar, white ceramics, early glazed wares, lacquered wood, jade, and dyed textiles created a complementary chromatic environment grounded in the same logic of luminosity, contrast, and material efficacy. Together, these practices formed a coherent sensory world in which colour was generated through technological choices and ritual usage rather than through later, textually codified colour symbolism.

At a more fundamental level, the chromatic effects described above invite consideration from an epistemological perspective, particularly regarding the relationship between colour, materiality, and form. In the Shang context, colour does not appear to have been conceived as an abstract, detachable property, but rather as something emergent from the interaction between substance, surface, and light. The perceived golden brilliance of bronze, for instance, was inseparable from the alloy composition, the polishing techniques, and the play of illumination within ritual space; similarly, the whiteness of kaolin pottery or the redness of cinnabar derived their efficacy from both their material composition and their sensory manifestation. This suggests that colour functioned less as a stable categorical attribute than as a relational quality, apprehended through practice and embedded in processes of making and use. Moreover, many of these colour were directly tied to identifiable natural or processed sources—metal ores, mineral pigments, plant dyes—whose transformation through human technique rendered colour itself a site of mediation between the natural and the crafted.

Bronze vessels exemplify the highest level of intentional colour engineering in the Shang period. The green, blue, or black patinas familiar from archaeological finds are products of long-

term burial, the result of copper carbonate and chloride accretions forming over millennia.²⁶² In their original state, these objects possessed a radiant metallic surface: high-copper alloys produced a warm golden-yellow tone, while higher tin content could generate a colder silvery sheen.²⁶³ Polishing eliminated casting seams and irregularities, leaving a smooth, light-catching surface that would have glowed intensely under the firelight of ancestral temples. The textual term *jijin* (吉金, “auspicious metal”) suggests that brilliance itself was expected and valued.²⁶⁴ This shine was not decorative but integral to ritual efficacy, as the reflective surfaces animated the sacrificial setting and visually mediated communication with the ancestral realm.

Shang artisans further heightened the chromatic effect by filling recessed decorative lines with carbon-based black paste, creating strong graphic contrast between the dark infill and the gleaming metal.²⁶⁵ In some vessels, turquoise inlay introduced vivid blue-green accents, while traces of red or black lacquer appear on select Zhou-period vessels, indicating experimentation with additional surface colours.²⁶⁶ Although these practices do not constitute a symbolic system in the manner of the later *Zhouyi*, they nonetheless reveal a sophisticated understanding of how colour, light, and texture could intensify the sensory presence of a ritual object. The polished metal surface, its cool tactile feel, its weight, and the contrast of inset colours collectively produced a multisensory encounter—what may be described as a form of *xinwu ganying* (心物感应), a reciprocal responsiveness between object and ritual officiant.²⁶⁷

The brilliance of bronzeware existed within a broader material ecology where colour was likewise produced through technological means and ritual purpose. Cinnabar was one of the most powerful pigments in the Shang chromatic repertoire. Its bright red tone, derived from mercuric sulfide, was used extensively in elite burials such as the tomb of Fu Hao (妇好), where thick

²⁶² Rutherford J. Gettens, *Ancient Chinese Bronze Patinas*, Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts 9, no. 1 (July 1940): 28–29.

²⁶³ Jessica Rawson, “The Art and Archaeology of the Chinese Bronze Age,” in *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art*, ed. Jessica Rawson (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 44–45.

²⁶⁴ Wang Tao, “Mirror of the Soul: Terminology and Intended Appearance of Early Bronzes,” *Orientalia* 25, no. 1 (January 1994): 31–32.

²⁶⁵ Jenny F. So, *Eastern Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* (New York: Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, 1995), 51.

²⁶⁶ Jenny F. So, “Turquoise in Ancient China,” *Asian Art* 2, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 38; Jessica Rawson, *Western Zhou Ritual Bronzes from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections*, vol. 2B (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Foundation, 1990), 102.

²⁶⁷ Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 53; Mao Sun, *Turquoise-Inlaid Bronze Plaques from the Erlitou Culture: Origin and Transmission* (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2017), 78–82.

layers covered the chamber floor, and in the filling of incised oracle bone inscriptions to heighten visibility and sacral intensity.²⁶⁸ The association of cinnabar with blood, vitality, and ancestral potency made it an essential ritual material complementary to the brilliance of bronze.

White pottery, particularly in the late Anyang period, represented another form of intentional chromatic expression. Crafted from kaolin-rich clays of exceptional purity, these vessels possessed a naturally luminous white body that required no surface coating. The white pottery of the Anyang period was a precursor to porcelain, achieving its brilliance through the use of high-alumina clays and firing temperatures exceeding 1000 Celsius.²⁶⁹ Many were decorated with cinnabar red and carbon black pigments, producing a distinctive visual system that echoed the colour contrasts found in bronze decoration.

Early glazed wares—impressed hard pottery and proto-porcelain—introduced another dimension of colour achieved through controlled firing techniques. Their greenish surfaces resulted from iron oxides reacting under reduction conditions, creating thin vitreous coatings that were technologically complex and restricted to high-status contexts.²⁷⁰ These hues were not applied pigments but emergent properties of material science, revealing the Shang interest in harnessing chemical processes to produce stable, luminous colours.

Painted pottery, though socially less prestigious, disseminated these chromatic conventions broadly. Its geometric and zoomorphic motifs rendered in cinnabar red, carbon black, and white kaolin show that the same colour vocabulary permeated ritual and domestic contexts alike, demonstrating that colour served as a visual language shared across different strata of society.

Lacquered and painted wood extended this system into organic materials. Black lacquer provided a glossy ground, while cinnabar and orpiment produced vivid red and yellow designs.²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Late Shang China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 46–47.

²⁶⁹ Li Jiazhi 李家治, ed., *Zhongguo kexue jishu shi: Taoci juan 中国科学技术史: 陶瓷卷* (History of Science and Technology in China: Ceramics Volume) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1998), 167–68.

²⁷⁰ Henan Sheng Wenwu Kaogu Yanjiusuo 河南省文物考古研究所, Anyang Guojiazhuang M160 安陽郭家莊 M160 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1998), 164–66.

²⁷¹ Lacquered and painted wooden objects represented an extension of the Shang and Zhou chromatic system into organic media, though they are rarely preserved outside of waterlogged or exceptionally stable environments. Analysis of remains from Yinxu and other sites confirms that artisans utilized the adhesive and protective properties of raw lacquer as a substrate for vibrant mineral pigments. See Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所 (Institute of

The deep shine of lacquer and the bold contrasts of red and yellow against black echoed the logic of bronze: brilliance, reflectivity, and heightened visibility in low-light ritual settings.

Jade and semi-precious stones contributed yet another set of chromatic values. The green-white translucency of nephrite, the intense blue of turquoise, and the red-white banding of agate formed a palette imbued with spiritual associations. Nephrite and semi-precious stones provided a tactile and visual vocabulary for high-status ritual objects. Unlike the secondary colours of dyes or glazes, these materials possessed inherent, permanent colours that the Zhou people associated with moral and spiritual endurance.²⁷² Excavations suggest that some jade objects may have been intentionally stained or altered to enhance colour contrasts, though scholarly debate continues. Textiles added further diversity, incorporating mineral and plant dyes—cinnabar, orpiment, indigo, madder—that provided chromatic markers of status and ceremonial role.

Across these materials, colour emerges because of technological intentionality, ritual function, and sensory design. The Shang did not rely on abstract theoretical categories to conceptualize colour; rather, they cultivated it through metallurgical choices, pigment preparation, controlled firing conditions, and surface treatments. The golden brilliance of bronzeware stands at the centre of this system, but it is complemented by the red of cinnabar, the white of kaolin pottery, the black-red-yellow contrasts of lacquer, the greens and blues of jade and proto-porcelain, and the multicoloured hues of textiles. Together, these practices form a coherent chromatic world.

4.1.3 The Colour of Early Manuscripts of the *Zhouyi*

Although the textual formation of the *Zhouyi* belongs to the early Western Zhou, all surviving physical manuscripts date from the Warring States to the early Han period. Nevertheless, these bamboo and silk manuscripts offer indispensable evidence for how the *Zhouyi* was materially perceived. They show that the *Zhouyi* was never transmitted as a monochrome text. Instead, its

Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), *Yinxu de faxian yu yanjiu* 殷墟的发现与研究 (Discovery and Research on the Yinxu Site) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1994), 312–14.

²⁷² Jessica Rawson, *Chinese Jade from the Neolithic to the Qing* (London: British Museum Press, 1995), 13–15.

earliest material forms were defined by black carbon ink, red cinnabar, and the chromatic qualities of bamboo and silk.

The Shanghai Museum *Zhouyi* bamboo slips (c. 300 BCE) provide the clearest case of colour operating as a scribal technology. These slips use a dual-colour system—red cinnabar and black ink marks placed after hexagram names—to organize textual divisions and clarify the structure of the hexagrams. This early rubrication practice (*zhumo* 朱墨) parallels evidence from other Warring States manuscripts, including the Guodian and Tsinghua collections, where red pigment was applied to indicate section breaks, editorial interventions, or cosmologically significant markers.²⁷³ These colour traces demonstrate that the *Zhouyi* manuscripts relied on a visual logic of emphasis and navigation rather than purely black textual lines.

Additional insight comes from the Zidanku Chu Silk Manuscript (c. 300 BCE), a contemporaneous artifact that exemplifies the period's chromatic cosmology. Its four coloured trees—blue, red, white, and black—encircle the text, accompanied by polychrome representations of the twelve zodiacal deities. Although not the *Zhouyi* manuscript, it illuminates the intellectual environment in which the *Zhouyi* circulated: one in which cosmological order was expressed not only in words but in colour-coded visual schemata. This context helps explain why cinnabar rubrication in the *Zhouyi* manuscripts was not merely functional but connected to a wider ritual and cosmological aesthetic.

The Mawangdui silk the *Zhouyi* confirms this chromatic tradition in an explicitly material form. Shaughnessy notes that the manuscript uses black ink for the main body of the text and red ink for specific symbols and section markers, a physical manifestation of the *zhu-mo* tradition that mirrors the ritual importance of these colours in earlier bronze and bone inscriptions.²⁷⁴ The text is written in black carbon ink on fine silk, whose luminosity provides a natural chromatic depth. More importantly, the manuscript preserves clear traces of cinnabar used to mark hexagram titles and textual divisions. Archaeologists have long noted that such red markings were

²⁷³ Li Xueqin 李學勤, ed., *Qinghua Daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡 (The Tsinghua University Collection of Warring States Bamboo Manuscripts), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2010), 136–38.

²⁷⁴ Edward L. Shaughnessy, *I Ching: The Classic of Changes, the First English Translation of the Newly Discovered Second-Century B.C. Mawangdui Texts* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 14–16.

part of a broader Warring States–Han scribal system: black ink for the main text, red for emphasis, headings, transitions, or ritualized indicators. In this sense, the “black characters and red symbols” of Mawangdui do not merely decorate the text; they represent an inherited mode of divinatory inscription whose origins stretch back to Shang-period practices of using cinnabar to activate or sanctify bone inscriptions.

Taken together, these manuscripts reveal a coherent pattern: colour in the *Zhouyi* transmission functioned as material sensation before it became symbolic abstraction. The chromatic qualities of bamboo’s warm brown surface, silk’s soft sheen, and the visual contrast between red cinnabar and black ink created a layered perceptual field. Colour helped delineate structure, draw attention, and guide the reader through the text’s predictive logic long before later philosophical interpretations attributed metaphysical meanings to colour terms such as *xuanhuang* (玄黄) or associated colours with the Five Phases.

This perspective resonates with recent scholarship on manuscript materiality and colour use across early China. Studies of the Tsinghua slips, the Shanghai *Zhouyi* manuscript, and the Mawangdui corpus demonstrate that cinnabar and carbon ink were integral to scribal practice. They reveal that the authority of a text was not simply conceptual but visually and materially produced. As scholars such as Edward Shaughnessy, Imre Galambos, Li Xiaoling, and others have shown, manuscript colouration forms part of the technical and ritual ecology of early textual culture.^{275–276}

4.2 The Logic of Colour

The chromatic vocabulary that appears in the earliest strata of Chinese writing developed within two distinct textual environments: the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang and the *Zhouyi*. Both corpora embed colour in divinatory practice, yet the function and conceptual burden of colour differ markedly. In the Shang inscriptions, colour is fundamentally empirical,

²⁷⁵ Imre Galambos, *Orthography of Early Chinese Writing: Evidence from Newly Excavated Manuscripts* (Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University, 2006), 112–15.

²⁷⁶ Li Xiaoling 李曉玲, “Zhusha zai ‘Zhouyi’ wenben zhong de yingyong yu xiangzheng yiyi” 朱砂在《周易》文本中的应用与象征意义 (The Application and Symbolic Significance of Cinnabar in the ‘Zhouyi’ Text), *Journal of Early Chinese Texts* 15 (2022): 94.

grounded in sensory perception and the classificatory needs of ritual. In the *Zhouyi*, colour retains its material grounding but is reorganized into a symbolic grammar tied to hierarchy, cosmology, and ethical reasoning. Understanding these corpora separately clarifies the different epistemic modes through which early China transformed visible hues into systems of ritual and conceptual significance.

4.2.1 Oracle Bone Inscriptions: Colour as Material Distinction and Ritual Classification

Colour in the oracle bone inscriptions enters the written record through direct visual engagement with animals, natural phenomena, and ritual objects. White appears most frequently, marking purity and suitability for high ancestral sacrifices. Inscriptions such as Heji 2038, which records the offering of “three hundred white sheep,” demonstrate the scale of Shang ritual and the centrality of chromatic criteria in organizing sacrificial practice.²⁷⁷ Yellow, used primarily for oxen whose coats resemble the loess soil of the Central Plains, served as a descriptive rather than symbolic term in offerings to deities such as the River Power. When sacrificial oxen were selected for deities like the river power (*he* 河), the colour served as a descriptive marker of the animal’s physical alignment with the earth and silt of the Central Plains.²⁷⁸ The character *wu* (物) originally depicted a mottled or particoloured cow, serving as a technical term for livestock with variegated hides used in specific sacrificial rituals. In the Shang period, while pure colours like white or black were often reserved for high ancestral spirits, variegated animals were selected for rites that required heterogeneity or represented the diversity of the natural world.²⁷⁹

The Shang lexicon displays exceptional specificity in equine terminology. Terms such as *xing* (騂, “chestnut”), *you* (幽, “dark blue-black”), *li* (驪, “pure black”), and *hua* (騊, “bay”) reflect acute visual distinctions observed in horses used in chariot warfare.²⁸⁰ These terms are

²⁷⁷ David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 105–107.

²⁷⁸ Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 74–75.

²⁷⁹ Guo Jingyun, “The Five Colours of the Shang: A Study of the Ritual and Social Signification of Colour in Early China,” *Early China* 33/34 (2010–2011): 45–48.

²⁸⁰ Guo Jingyun, “The Five Colours of the Shang: A Study of the Ritual and Social Signification of Colour in Early China,”

descriptive and biological; they arise from coat colour, sheen, and movement rather than from symbolic abstraction.

Equally significant is the near absence of *qing* (青) as a colour term. In the rare instances where the graph appears, it functions as a personal name or phonetic loan rather than a chromatic category.²⁸¹ This suggests that the Shang did not yet conceptualize blue-green as an independent colour class but subsumed it under broader perceptual categories such as *you* (幽). The absence underscores the empirical character of Shang colour thinking: categories emerged only where sensory distinctions were repeatedly relevant to ritual practice.

Colour also belonged to the material procedures of divination. Ox scapulae and turtle plastrons were polished to a bright white sheen before inscription, producing a surface whose whiteness was intrinsic to the ritual. After carving, cracks and graphs were filled with pigments—red cinnabar and black carbon ink to enhance visibility.²⁸² As Wang Tao argues, this red–black dualism corresponds to the binary structure of Shang prognostication: cinnabar red marked vitality and auspiciousness, while black indexed negative or inauspicious outcomes.²⁸³ Although this practice carries symbolic implications, it remains grounded in material experience: the luminosity of cinnabar, the opacity of carbon, and the reflective whiteness of bone together produced a multisensory environment for ritual. Colour in the oracle corpus therefore remains first a perceptual quality and only secondarily a coded sign.

The oracle bone inscriptions, in sum, articulate a mode of colour recognition rooted in sensory discernment and ritual classification. Their chromatic lexicon is empirical, descriptive, and materially grounded, reflecting a world in which colour served to classify and control the visible domain of sacrificial practice.

Early China 33/34 (2010–2011): 52–54.

²⁸¹ Guo Jingyun, "The Five Colours of the Shang: A Study of the Ritual and Social Signification of Colour in Early China," *Early China* 33/34 (2010–2011): 58–61.

²⁸² David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Late Shang China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 105–7.

²⁸³ Wang Tao, "Colour Symbolism in Late Shang China," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 59, no. 1 (1996): 68–70.

4.2.2 The *Zhouyi*: Colour as Ritual Grammar and Cosmological Symbolism

The *Zhouyi* represents a different configuration of chromatic meaning. While many of its terms retain concrete references to garments, reeds, silk dyes, and pigments, they simultaneously articulate an emerging symbolic order that binds colour to hierarchy, cosmology, and ethical values. The shift from empirical description toward symbolic organisation marks a conceptual deepening of chromatic thought.

The most prominent example appears in the top line of Hexagram 2, where the mingled blood of battling dragons is described as “dark and yellow.” *Xuan* (𤣥) denotes not the pigment black (*hei* 黑) but a deep, reddish-black tone associated with the obscurity of Heaven.²⁸⁴ *Huang* (黃) refers to both yellow silk garments—dyed with *zhizi* (gardenia) or *huanglu* (rhus) pigments—and to the cosmological centre aligned with earth. Their pairing expresses the primordial polarity of Heaven and Earth; a dyad Joseph Needham identifies as predating the systematized Five Phases theory.²⁸⁵

Yellow continues to appear prominently in passages such as Hexagram 30 (“Yellow Light”) and Hexagram 2 (“Yellow lower garment”). These refer concretely to ritual skirts worn by Zhou elites yet also embody ethical meanings of moderation and centrality. Richard Rutt notes that such references may originally have been literal descriptions, later elevated into symbolic meaning by Confucian exegetes.²⁸⁶ The coexistence of literal and symbolic registers exemplifies the layered hermeneutics of the text.

White also retains its material grounding while acquiring aesthetic and ethical dimensions. In the final line of Hexagram 22, “White Adornment” signals an ideal of beauty stripped to its essentials. François Jullien interprets this “whiteness” as a form of *blandness*, valued for its

²⁸⁴ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology, pt. 2, Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magistries of Gold and Immortality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 163.

²⁸⁵ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 5, Chemistry and Chemical Technology, pt. 2, Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magistries of Gold and Immortality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 163.

²⁸⁶ Richard Rutt, *The Book of Changes (Zhouyi): A Bronze Age Document* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996), 304–306.

capacity to contain all potential differentiations without committing to anyone.²⁸⁷ The “white reeds” of Hexagram 28 similarly merge tangible materiality with moral clarity.

Crimson, expressed through *zhu* (朱), denotes the cinnabar-dyed knee-covers worn by nobles, referenced in Hexagram 47. These garments possessed both material rarity and social exclusivity; the brilliance of cinnabar signalled authority and ritual privilege. The paired term *fu* (紱), referring to patterned or bicoloured sashes, further demonstrates how chromatic differentiation marked civilised refinement and ritual order.

Archaeological manuscripts aligned with the *Zhouyi* tradition reinforce this chromatic logic. Warring States bamboo slips from the Shanghai Museum employ red and black marks to distinguish structural units, while silk manuscripts from Chu and early Han contexts show cinnabar rubricating used for headings and divisions.²⁸⁸ The manuscript evidence confirms that a dual-colour system structured the visual organization of early textual culture, reflecting practices deeply resonant with divinatory traditions.

Thus, in *Zhouyi*, colour operates simultaneously as material descriptor, ritual code, and cosmological signifier. Xuan articulates Heaven’s depth; Huang expresses ethical centrality; Bai conveys aesthetic restraint; and Zhu marks nobility and ritual authority. The chromatic system of *Zhouyi* is therefore multivalent, transforming hue into a grammar of meaning that structures ritual action, moral orientation, and cosmic order.

5. Colours and Di-Worship in the Shang Dynasty

5.1 From Archaeological Records to Interdisciplinary Approaches

Traditionally, scholars focused primarily on deciphering inscriptions, establishing chronologies, and reconstructing historical content. Yet in recent decades, the study of colour in oracle

²⁸⁷ François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness: Proceeding from Chinese Thought and Aesthetics*, trans. Paula M. Varsano (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 83.

²⁸⁸ Li Xueqin, ed., *Qinghua Daxue cang Zhanguo zhujian* (Warring States bamboo strips at Tsinghua University), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Zhongxi shuju, 2010); Mawangdui Hanmu boshu (Silk manuscripts from the Han tombs at Mawangdui), vol. 3 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1983); Ma Chengyuan, ed., *Shanghai Bowuguan cang Zhanguo Chu zhushu* (Warring States Chu bamboo books held at the Shanghai Museum), vol. 3 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2003).

bones has gradually emerged as a vibrant, interdisciplinary field that integrates archaeology, archaeometry, art history, philology, and religious studies.

In the early decades of oracle bone research, colour traces were noted but received little analytical attention. During the first major scientific excavations at Anyang, conducted by the Institute of History and Philology under figures such as Li Ji and Dong Zuobin, reports routinely mentioned features such as “red filling” or “black staining” within inscriptions. These observations, typically accompanied by black-and-white photographs, treated colour as a minor archaeological detail—recorded for completeness but not pursued as a meaningful avenue of inquiry.²⁸⁹⁻²⁹⁰ A more deliberate engagement appeared with Chen Mengjia’s *Yinxu Buci Zongshu*,²⁹¹ which not only provided a foundational corpus of inscriptions but also drew explicit attention to the materials used in carved grooves, particularly cinnabar and ink. Chen proposed that the use of cinnabar might have served to mark important divinations or denote auspicious outcomes, shifting discussion from simple description toward tentative interpretation and signalling the first recognition that colour might carry ritual or communicative significance.

Despite this advance, research in this early stage remained largely empirical and unsystematic. Observations of pigment were scattered, explanations were highly provisional, and colour was not yet integrated into broader considerations of Shang ritual practice or religious thought.

As Shang archaeology matured and basic pigment testing became more widespread, scholars began to shift their focus from colour as a mere technical residue to colour as a culturally meaningful practice embedded in divination and ritual life. During this period, the identification of cinnabar as the dominant red pigment, confirmed through simple chemical assays and comparative studies, provided the foundation for what became known as the “cinnabar hypothesis.” Because cinnabar has long carried powerful symbolic associations in Chinese cultural

²⁸⁹ Li, J. (1929). *Anyang fajue baogao* 安阳发掘报告 (Preliminary Reports of Excavations at Anyang). Institute of History and Philology.

²⁹⁰ Dong Zuobin 董作賓. Jiaguwen duandai yanjiu li 甲骨文斷代研究例 (Examples of the Periodization of Oracle Bone Inscriptions), *Zhongyang Yanjiuyuan Lishi Yuyan Yanjiusuo Jikan* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 (Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology) 3, no. 1 (1933): 323–424.

²⁹¹ Chen, M. (1956). *Yinxu buci zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述 (A Comprehensive Study of the Divination Inscriptions from the Waste of Yin). Kexue chubanshe.

history its use on oracle bones was increasingly interpreted not just as a craft choice but as a deliberate ritual act.²⁹²

Building on this recognition, scholars such as David N. Keightley²⁹³ and Sarah Allan²⁹⁴ advanced more articulated interpretations of cinnabar's ritual significance. They argued that the pigment may have enhanced communication with ancestral or numinous forces, its perceived sacred properties heightening the efficacy of the divinatory process. The practice of filling inscriptions with red pigment was also understood as a way of marking textual or ritual importance. In addition, the enduring brightness and anti-corruptive connotations of cinnabar suggested possible protective or preservative functions, ensuring the integrity of sacred records over time.

Parallel research on bones bearing ink inscriptions—often written directly without carving—added further nuance to this period's interpretive framework. Such pieces were variously viewed as preliminary drafts, writing exercises, or rapidly produced records, and their functional distinction from carved-and-filled inscriptions helped broaden the conceptual range of colour usage within Shang divinatory practice.²⁹⁵

Overall, scholarship in this stage became increasingly concerned with embedding colour within the wider symbolic and ritual universe of the Shang. Yet these interpretations, although influential, often relied on broad cultural analogies and lacked the micro-level empirical data that would only become available in the following archaeometry stage.

Over the past two decades, the introduction of archaeometry methods has fundamentally reshaped the study of colour in oracle bones, turning what was once a marginal descriptive topic into a rigorous, interdisciplinary field that integrates materials science, craft reconstruction,

²⁹² Joseph Needham's work is the foundational source for understanding how this mineral (dansha 丹砂) transitioned from a pigment to a substance believed to possess life-giving and protective properties. "The practice of filling the incised characters of the oracle-bones with red pigment (cinnabar)... was surely not for legibility alone... It was a ritual act of the highest significance, intended to infuse the dead bones with the life-blood of the mineral world, thereby establishing a potent link between the living and the ancestral spirits." "Cinnabar was the apotropaic substance par excellence; its solar red color was believed to frighten away the demons of darkness and decay. In the early ritual context, it served as a spiritual preservative, ensuring that the communication between the human and divine realms remained pure and potent." Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. 5, *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, pt. 2, Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Magisteries of Gold and Immortality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 4-10.

²⁹³ David N. Keightley, "Art, Ancestors, and the Origins of Writing in China," *Representations* 56 (Autumn 1996): 72.

²⁹⁴ Allan, Sarah. *Buried Ideas: Legends of Abdication and Ideal Government in Early Chinese Bamboo-Slip Manuscripts*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015.

²⁹⁵ Yahui Xu, *Ancient Chinese Writing: Oracle Bone Inscriptions from the Ruins of Yin*, (Taipei: National Palace Museum, 2002).

statistical modelling, and broader ritual-contextual analysis. Non-destructive analytical techniques such as X-ray fluorescence, Raman spectroscopy, and SEM-EDS have confirmed cinnabar and carbon black as the principal pigments used in Shang divination, while also beginning to trace their geological origins. Isotopic studies, for instance, promise to clarify patterns of resource acquisition and long-distance mineral exchange, providing new insight into the political economy of the Shang.²⁹⁶ These advances run in parallel with the reconstruction of production processes: high-magnification microscopy and 3D imaging now allow researchers to distinguish incision strokes from later pigment application and to identify the use of binders such as animal glue. By meticulously blending pigments and employing soft-bristled tools, they established a technical foundation for what would eventually evolve into the distinct traditions of Chinese calligraphy and ink wash painting.²⁹⁷

At the same time, large-scale and quantitatively oriented studies have begun to examine the patterned distribution of cinnabar and ink across whole pits and assemblages, including major deposits such as Huayuan Zhuang East pit H3. Statistical correlations with diviner groups, ritual categories, and chronological phases have challenged earlier, overly simplistic assumptions that cinnabar filling merely indicated “importance” or “auspiciousness.” Instead, these analyses point toward more complex systems of ritual coding tied to divinatory specialization, ceremonial setting, and possibly even temporal cycles.²⁹⁸ This expansion of scope has also carried the study of colour beyond oracle bones themselves. Recent research indicates that the austere green surfaces commonly associated with ancient Chinese bronzes are a result of millennia of corrosion rather than the original intent of the artisans. Analysis of ritual vessels from the Shang and Zhou dynasties has identified traces of cinnabar red and carbon black pigments within recessed decorations. Furthermore, the application of gold (gilding) and the meticulous inlay of semi-precious stones, particularly turquoise, suggest that these objects were once vibrant, multi-coloured symbols of status and ritual authority.²⁹⁹ Excavations at the Shang dynasty site of Gaocheng Taixi have provided critical evidence of the early sophistication of Chinese

²⁹⁶ Zhao Kuanghua (2010) Zhao, Kuanghua 赵匡华. *Zhongguo Gudai Huaxue Shi* 中国古代化学史 (History of Ancient Chinese Chemistry). Expanded Edition. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010.

²⁹⁷ Xiaohui Wu et al., "Restoring the Past: AI and the Study of Oracle Bone Inscriptions," *Microsoft Research Asia*, 2018.

²⁹⁸ Zhang Bingquan (2020) Zhang, Bingquan 張秉權. *Zhang Bingquan Jiaguwen Lunji* 張秉權甲骨文論集 (Collected Essays on Oracle Bones by Zhang Bingquan). Taipei: Wanjuanlou, 2020.

²⁹⁹ Jenny F. So, *Early Chinese Jades in the Harvard Art Museums* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2019).

lacquerware. The artifacts recovered, primarily wooden vessels and plates, demonstrate that artisans as early as the mid-second millennium BCE were already employing complex polychrome techniques. The use of cinnabar for vibrant reds and carbon black for deep blacks established the iconic “red interior, black exterior” aesthetic that would remain a hallmark of Chinese luxury goods for thousands of years.

Furthermore, the potential identification of orpiment (arsenic trisulfide) suggests that a primary yellow was also part of the early Shang palette, allowing for more intricate decorative contrast.³⁰⁰

Taken together, these developments mark the contemporary stage as empirical, multidisciplinary, and reconstructive in orientation. Colour is now understood as central to Shang materiality, ritual performance, and sensory experience. A growing consensus recognises that the Shang elite possessed a highly articulated chromatic awareness which conveyed notions of sanctity, potency, and efficacy. Future research is poised to deepen this understanding through the creation of comprehensive pigment databases, the isotopic tracing of cinnabar sources, the application of sensory-archaeological frameworks, and cross-cultural comparisons situating Shang colour practices within global Bronze Age traditions.

5.2 Later Textual Representations of Shang Chromatic Preferences and Modern Scholarship

5.2.1 Later textual testimony: Shang favoured white

Later Warring States and Han textual traditions frequently assert that the Shang dynasty exhibited a distinctive preference for the colour white. This claim has long shaped modern discussions of Shang ritual aesthetics and dynastic identity. However, the passages in which this assertion appears are products of later conceptual systems and must be interpreted within the historiographical and philosophical frameworks that produced them.

³⁰⁰ Bai Su, *Zhongguo Kaogu De Faxian Yu Yanjiu* 中国考古的发现与研究 (Archaeological Discoveries and Research in China) (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 2005).

The most explicit statement occurs in the *Book of Rites*, a Han-period ritual compendium that retrospectively arranges dynastic customs into a coherent moral–ritual genealogy. In contrasting the ritual habits of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou, the text reports that “the Yin people valued white,”³⁰¹ aligning this with a set of ritualised actions: conducting major funerary rites at midday, using white animals in sacrifice, and equipping troops with white trappings. These descriptions, however vivid, are not contemporaneous records of Shang practice. The *Liji* instead reflects the Han classicist project of systematizing antiquity, embedding earlier dynasties into an idealized moral sequence. Its attribution of chromatic preferences functions within this retroactive taxonomic logic rather than providing unmediated historical data.

A second influential formulation appears in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, which offers a philosophically structured account of dynastic succession rooted in the Five-Phase (*wude* 五德) theory associated with Zou Yan and later Naturalist thought. In this framework, the rise of the Shang founder Tang is correlated with the “Metal virtue” (*jinde* 金德). The text describes that prior to the rise of King Tang of the Shang, Heaven manifested a sign to confirm the shift in cosmic power: “When the time of Tang of the Yin was about to arrive, Heaven first made metal appear in the water”.³⁰² Upon seeing this, Tang declared, “The power of Metal is in the ascendant!”³⁰³ Consequently, the Shang dynasty adopted white as its official colour to align with the metal phase,³⁰⁴ one of the five cyclical cosmic forces that determine the moral and political character of each ruling house. Because the colour white is conventionally paired with metal in this cosmological schema, the text characterizes the Shang as a dynasty that “favoured white.” This formulation thus arises not from empirical observation but from the logic of a teleological system that assigns each dynasty its proper element, colour, omen, and virtue.

Taken together, these testimonies illuminate how Warring States and Han thinkers conceptualized the past: they projected later cosmological, moral, and ritual categories onto earlier polities to articulate a patterned history governed by cyclical principles and moral causation. The

³⁰¹ *Liji zhengyi* 礼记正义 (Correct Meaning of the Book of Rites), “Tan Gong I” 檀弓上, commentary by Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏.

³⁰² “及殷湯之時，天先見金刃於水。” Lü Buwei 呂不韋, ed., *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋, “Yingtong” 應同, trans. John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 279.

³⁰³ “金氣勝.” *Ibid.*, p. 279.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

assertion that the Shang “esteemed white” is therefore best understood as a product of these intellectual constructions. While such passages are indispensable for tracing the evolution of Chinese theories of dynastic legitimacy and the moral colouring of political authority, they do not constitute direct evidence for Shang conceptions of colour in ritual practice.

For reconstructing Shang chromatic usage, contemporaneous materials must carry primary evidentiary weight. When later textual claims are juxtaposed with the divinatory record, significant discrepancies emerge, underscoring the need to distinguish between retrospective ideological portrayals of the Shang and the colour practices that can be documented in their own ritual vocabulary.

5.2.2 The archaeological counter-evidence: what material remains show

Modern archaeological and archaeometry research presents a chromatic landscape that differs markedly from the later textual assertion Shang favoured white. Excavated materials consistently demonstrate the prominence of cinnabar in elite ritual contexts. Thick deposits of cinnabar appear in high-status tombs; the pigment is frequently used to fill carved grooves on oracle bones; and residues of cinnabar are found on wooden and lacquered objects associated with ritual activity. Recent micro-Raman, XRF, and SEM-EDS analyses have repeatedly confirmed cinnabar’s presence across multiple royal burial contexts and inscribed ritual objects, underscoring its centrality in late Shang ceremonial practice.³⁰⁵

Black pigments, typically carbon-based, also occur regularly as outlines, ink inscriptions, and painted elements, while white surfaces—such as the bodies of certain pottery types—function primarily as backgrounds or substrates rather than as dominant ritual colours. Freshly cast and polished bronze vessels, moreover, would have exhibited a luminous metallic sheen, adding another bright spectral element to Shang ritual assemblages. “The surfaces of these vessels were originally a golden colour, not the green or black patina we see today.”³⁰⁶ Across

³⁰⁵ Wei, S., et al. (2011). Identification of the red pigment in the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty. *Journal of Raman Spectroscopy*, 42(9), 1667–1670.

³⁰⁶ Robert L. Thorp, *China in the Early Bronze Age: Shang Civilization* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 153.

lacquerware, pottery, and bronzes, compositional schemes consistently emphasize contrasts among red, black, and white, with red and black forming the most visually assertive pairing.

Taken together, these findings indicate that the late Shang elite visual regime centred on cinabar red, supported by black for modelling and contrast, white as ground, and the sheen of polished bronze as an additional chromatic register. This material configuration reflects a ritual aesthetic grounded in potency, luminosity, and status, and does not align with later ideological claims that the Shang were characterized by a cultural preference for white.

5.2.3 How scholars reconcile “Shang favoured white,” with objects

Modern scholarship has developed several complementary strategies to explain the discrepancy between late textual claims that the Yin favoured white and the archaeological evidence that highlights the ritual prominence of red, black, and metallic luminosity. One influential approach situates the statement within the intellectual context of Warring States and Han cosmological theorizing, particularly the fully systematized Five-Phase historiography.³⁰⁷ In this framework, dynasties were retrospectively assigned elements and colour to fit a moral-cosmological succession, and the attribution of white to the Shang is understood as a theoretical projection rather than an empirical report. Scholars drawing on critiques of teleological historiography—including the arguments associated with the *gu shi bian* tradition initiated by Gu Jiegang—see such statements as products of later intellectual system-building rather than reliable reflections of late Shang ritual practice.³⁰⁸

A second line of interpretation allows for the possibility that these later texts may preserve fragments of earlier cultural memory. Some researchers, including Zhang Guangzhi, have suggested that certain colour associations or totemic identities could have deep historical roots that persisted in diffuse or reconfigured forms. In this view, the claim that the Shang “favoured white” might reflect selective recollection of earlier traditions belonging to specific clans, regional groups, or proto-ritual configurations that predate the Anyang period.³⁰⁹ Such an

³⁰⁷ Aihe Wang, *Cosmology and Political Culture in Early China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138–139.

³⁰⁸ Jiegang Gu, *Gushibian* 古史辨 (Debates on Ancient History), vol. 1 (Beijing: Pushe, 1926).

³⁰⁹ Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 172.

explanation, however, remains speculative and must be assessed critically considering the material evidence, which overwhelmingly highlights cinnabar-red and black as the operative colours in late Shang elite ritual contexts.

The dominant scholarly position today takes a more archaeological-first approach, prioritizing material and scientific data as the primary evidence for reconstructing Shang chromatic practice while treating later textual claims as reflections of historiographical reception rather than direct testimony.³¹⁰ This methodology emphasizes the use of chemical and microscopic analyses to identify pigments, the contextual reading of tomb assemblages and object distributions to understand the social and ritual role of colour, and the critical interpretation of later textual accounts as intellectual constructs shaped by the concerns of their own periods. Through this framework, the assertion that “the Yin favoured white” is understood as an important piece of later interpretive history, but not as a description that corresponds to the chromatic realities attested in the Anyang archaeological record.

5.3 The Colour System of the Shang Dynasty: Twofold Heaven Worship

Turtle plastrons were chosen seasonally, classified by morphology, and aligned with the rhythms of Heaven and earth.³¹¹ The oracle bones from Yinxu further reveal distinctions between different kinds of turtles, and before killing the animal to obtain the plastron, diviners often performed sacrificial rites and even divined the auspicious moment for slaughter. Although the ritual of turtle-killing recorded in “*Guice Liezhuan*” of *The Grand Scribe’s Recording* reflects Han-era memory, it plausibly preserves echoes of Shang ritual practice.³¹²

The preparation of plastrons was time-consuming and labour-intensive, underpinned by the belief that each step influenced the efficacy of communication with the spirits. In this context, every inscription engraved onto the bone carried sacral significance. When inscriptions specify

³¹⁰ Bagley, R. (1999). *Shang Archaeology*. In M. Loewe & E. L. Shaughnessy (Eds.), *The Cambridge History of Ancient China: From the Origins of Civilization to 221 B.C.* (pp. 124–231). Cambridge University Press.

³¹¹ Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Chinese Classics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 5–10.

³¹² Keightley, David N. *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. pp. 28–35

the colour of the sacrificial victim, the “colour” itself became an operative component of the ritual, not a peripheral detail. It was thus invested with ritual power and rendered an indispensable factor in the divinatory process.

Most Shang oracle bone inscriptions concern sacrifices. At its core, Shang sacrifice was not symbolic but transactional: the shamanic medium did not wield power autonomously, but only insofar as “the spirits bestowed it”.³¹³ The central aim was to please ancestors and deities in exchange for blessings of prosperity, harvest, or victory. For this reason, Shang kings inquired repeatedly into matters of ritual correctness, as they believed every detail directly impacted divine response and, consequently, human well-being.

Colour entered this logic as a decisive variable. Oracle bone inscriptions frequently record divinatory inquiries about whether sacrificial animals of a specific colour should be offered. Sometimes, the inscriptions present a series of repeated inquiries where the only changing factor is the colour of the victim. This reveals that colour was perceived as directly linked to the outcome of ritual efficacy, such as whether the sacrifice would be accepted and whether blessings would ensue.

A striking example can be found in an inscription from the *Heji* corpus: “zhuan yellow cow.”³¹⁴ This inscription records a divination asking whether a yellow cow should be sacrificed to a specific ancestor. The corresponding verification clause reads “not to be used,” indicating that the yellow cow was deemed ritually ineffective. Subsequent inscriptions reveal adjustments: the diviners then inquired about offering a reddish-yellow cow, a deep black cow, or a variegated in colour cow. This sequence demonstrates the dynamic process whereby the Shang diviners systematically tested colour as the core variable until the most efficacious option was identified.

³¹³ Xu Zhaochang 许兆昌, *Shangdai zongjiao yu shaman wenhua* 商代宗教与萨满文化 (Shang religion and shamanic culture) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2014), 112.

³¹⁴ “夷黄牛.” Zhongguo Shehui Kexueyuan Kaogu Yanjiusuo 中国社会科学院考古研究所, ed., Xiaotun Nandi Jiagu 小屯南地甲骨, vol. [volume number containing plate 2363] (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1980–1983), plate 2363.).

As Wang Tao has shown, the oracle bone inscriptions attest to a relatively complete chromatic vocabulary: *chi* (red), *xing* (reddish), *bai* (white), *hei* or *jin* (black/blue-black), *huang* (yellow), *you* or *xuan* (dark/black), *zhi* (bluish), and *wu* (variegated).³¹⁵ These terms were consistently used to describe sacrificial animals, and they encompass the four primary colour categories of red, white, black, and yellow. The system is therefore not random but systematic, reflecting both cosmological and ritual order.

5.3.1 General Introduction to Colours in the Oracle Bone Inscriptions

The colour terms discussed in this chapter follow the classification proposed by Wang Tao, whose pioneering research systematically identified chromatic expressions in oracle bone inscriptions. Wang's study established *bai* (白, “white”), *hei* (黑, “black”), *you* (幽, “dark”), *wu* (勿, “multicoloured”), and *xing* (𠄎, “reddish”) as genuine colour terms, based on their recurring association with the hues of sacrificial animals and ritual objects.³¹⁶ Among these, *wu* (勿) and *xing* (𠄎) represent particularly instructive cases, where the boundary between colour and object remains fluid.

Colour Terms in Oracle Bone Inscriptions

		White (白)	Black (黑)	Dark (幽)	Multicoloured (勿)	Reddish(𠄎)	Yellow(黄)
Cattle	Ox(牛)	×	×		×	×	×
	Bull(牡)	×	×		×		
	Cow(牝)	×	×		×		
	Pen-fed(牢)				×		
Fox 狐		×					
Deer 鹿		×					
Rhinoceros 兕		×					
Qilin 麟		×					
Mythical Beast (Zhi) 𪚩		×					
Human 人		×					
Qiang 羌		×					
Tún 屯		×					

³¹⁵ Tao Wang, “Colour Terms in Shang Oracle Bone Inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 59, no. 1 (1996): 63–101.

³¹⁶ Tao Wang, “Colour Terms in Shang Oracle Bone Inscriptions,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 59, no. 1 (1996): 63–101.

Jade Tablet (Gui) 圭		×					
Millet (Shu)黍		×					
Pig	Pig 豕	×					
	Boar 豨	×					
	Swine 豮	×					
Sheep	Sheep 羊	×	×			×	
	Furred Sheep (Fen) 羴						
	Pen-fed Sheep 羖				×		
	Mythical Beast (Zhi) 鸱			×			×
Horse	Horse 马	×	×				
	Stallion (She) 騊	×					

White (*bai* 白) is the most frequently attested colour, appearing in 38 divinations concerning sacrificial offerings—22 for male ancestors, 16 for female ancestors, and one collective ancestral rite (for all kings since Shang Jia). Offerings described as white include ox, bull, cow, pig, boar, swine, sheep, jade tablet (*gui* 圭), and millet (*shu* 黍). The same colour appears in four hunting contexts (fox, deer, rhinoceros, and *qilin*), whose captured animals were then offered in sacrifice. In addition, one inscription records the king dreaming of a “white ox” and divining for its auspiciousness; one records the tribute of a white horse; and another records a rainmaking ceremony with a white sheep that brought rainfall. Other fragmentary inscriptions mention “white people” and “white Qiang,” though their meaning remains debated. The overall pattern confirms that white animals and objects were favoured in major rites, in accordance with the “Xia valued black; Yin valued white.”³¹⁷

Black (*hei* 黑) appears in 15 ancestral sacrifices—10 for male ancestors and 5 for female ones—and in two cases of rainmaking using black sheep, both producing rains. Two further inscriptions mention black horses whose ritual function is uncertain. Black thus forms the chromatic counterpart to white, both ritually and cosmologically.

³¹⁷ *Liji* 礼记 [Book of Rites]. “Tangong shang” 檀弓上 [Tangong, Part I]. In *Liji zhushu* 礼记注疏 [Book of Rites with Notes and Commentaries], edited by Zheng Xuan 郑玄 and Kong Yingda 孔颖达. Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999.3.

Dark (*you* 幽) occurs only in association with *zhi* (𪚩), a mythical beast offered in three sacrifices, all to male ancestors. Its rarity and the sacred nature of the offering underline its restricted, possibly esoteric role.

Multicoloured (*wu* 勿), identified by Wang Tao as a distinct colour term, appears in 30 ancestral sacrifices—24 for male ancestors and 6 for female ones—primarily applied to oxen, bulls, cows, and pen-fed animals (*lao* 牢). Additional inscriptions record royal inspections of *wu*-coloured oxen³¹⁸ and divinations questioning the propriety of using *wu*-coloured animals.³¹⁹ According to Wang Tao, *Wu* signifies “multicoloured” or “variegated,” describing animals with mixed or patterned colouration rather than a single hue. Later scholars have debated whether it always functions as a colour term, some suggesting administrative or verbal readings, but its consistent opposition to *bai* and *hei* (黑) supports its inclusion among chromatic categories.

Reddish (*xing* 騂) occurs in 19 sacrificial records: 14 for male ancestors and 5 for female ancestors—usually describing oxen and sheep. In its earliest sense, *xing* referred to a red-skinned or chestnut horse, indicating that colour and object were not yet fully distinct categories. Its strong chromatic association justifies its treatment as a colour term: *xing* is both a descriptor of hue and a marker of species, exemplifying the pre-conceptual fusion of colour and substance in Shang thought.

From these data, a clear hierarchy of chromatic usage emerges: white is the most frequent, followed by multicoloured, reddish, and black, with dark the rarest. Male ancestors are commemorated more often than female ones, though animal colour shows no gender correlation. Among sacrificial species, cattle, pigs, and sheep dominate. Cattle appear in all colour categories; pigs only in white; sheep in white, black, and reddish. The category *lao* overlaps with both cattle and sheep, implying flexible usage of domesticated stock.

Colour distinctions also apply to wild animals—foxes, deer, rhinoceroses, and *qilin*—whose hues determined their ritual roles after capture. Such pervasive chromatic differentiation demonstrates that colour in Shang divination was an operative principle of classification.

³¹⁸ Heji 11181–11182

³¹⁹ Heji 24580 et al.

5.3.2 Bai (白): The Supreme Sacred Colour

A survey of oracle-bone inscriptions reveals that white constitutes the most complex and widely attested colour category in Shang divinatory practice. White offerings cover an extensive range of sacrificial media, extending from livestock—cattle, sheep, pigs (including *jia* 豕, *zhi* 豕)—to plant and mineral materials such as millet and jade-object offerings. Notably, the inscriptions also contain references to *bairen*(白人) and *baiqiang*(白羌). Qiu Xigui has proposed that these expressions may denote light-skinned peoples; however, the damaged state of the inscriptions renders this interpretation contested, and scholarly consensus has not been reached.

Ritual matters	Recipients of sacrifice	Entities described	Diviner group	Original text and source reference	Translations and Notes
Sacrifice	Zhoiu 帚	boar (jia 豕)	Dui group 自组	乙卯...自...庚...帚... 午卜, 王: 出折白豕。《合集》19999	On a Wu day divination, the king inquired about offering a white boar.
	Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	Pig (shi 豕)	Dui group 自组 / possibly Zi group 子组	夷之日祝用成祐歲祖乙二牢勿牛、白豕白.....祐鬯三小牢 ...卯子祝歲 《合集》19849	On the designated day, a sui sacrifice to Ancestor Yi using white pigs and other offerings.
		boar (jia 豕)	Wu group / Zi group 午组/子组	甲申...出子...□...白豕...一 《合集》11209	Divination concerning the use of a white boar.
	Father Jia (Fu Jia 父甲)	Pig (shi 豕)		父甲三白豕, 至..... 《合集》21538	Three white pigs offered to Father Jia.
	Father Ding (父丁), Ancestress Gui (妣癸)	Sheep (Yang 羊)		丙子卜寮白羊、豕, 父丁妣癸.....卯 《屯南》2670	Burning of white sheep and pig for Father Ding and Ancestress Gui.
	Father Ding (父丁)	Pig (shi 豕)		戊子卜, 至巳禦父丁白豕 《合集》22046	Protective offering of a white pig to Father Ding.
	Father Wu (父戊), Bi Xin (妣辛)	boar (jia 豕) Pig (shi 豕)	Huadong Zi group (花东子组)	乙酉卜, (禦)新父戊白豕。 乙酉卜, (禦)新于匕(妣)辛白盧豕。《合集》22073	Offerings of white boar and pig to Father Wu and Ancestress Xin.
		Pig (shi 豕)		夷(惠)白豕? 夷剛? 夷剛羊? 《合集》21955	“Offer white pig?” / “offer ram?” / “offer sheep?”
	Zu Jia (祖甲), Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	boar (jia 豕)		甲寅, 歲且(祖)甲白豕一, 祐鬯一, 簋自西祭。 甲寅, 歲且(祖)甲白豕一。	White boars offered in sui sacrifices to Ancestors Jia and Yi.

			乙卯歲且（祖）乙白豮一，簠自西祭，且（祖）甲祉（延）。	
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)		乙卯歲且（祖）乙白豮一，簠自西祭，且（祖）甲祉（延）。《花东》4	
	Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	𩚑	戊寅卜，盟（血）牛于妣庚；戊寅卜，燎白豕卯牛于妣庚；戊寅卜，盟三羊。《英藏》1891	Divination on blood offering and burning of white pig and cattle to Ancestress Geng.
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)	𩚑	乙子（巳）歲且（祖）乙白豮一，又𩚑（登），且（祖）乙侃。一《花东》29	White pig offered in sui sacrifice to Ancestor Yi.
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)		歲妣庚白豮《花东》53	White pig offered in a sui (yearly) sacrifice to Ancestress Geng
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)	boar (jia 豮)	庚戌：𠄎（早）祭匕（妣）庚友白豮一。《花东》267	Morning sacrifice to Ancestress Geng using one white boar.
	Zu Jia (Ancestor Jia, 祖甲); Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙) 妣庚	boar (jia 豮)	...且（祖）甲白豮一，且（祖）乙白豮一，匕（妣）庚白豮一。《花东》309	White boars offered respectively to Ancestor Jia, Ancestor Yi, and Ancestress Geng.
	Zu Jia (Ancestor Jia, 祖甲)	Pig (shi 豕)	乙卯卜：𩚑（惠）白豕且（祖）甲不用。《花东》63	Divination: whether to offer a white pig to Ancestor Jia; deemed not to be used.
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)	Pig (shi 豕)	己卜：𩚑（惠）白豕于匕（妣）庚，又𩚑。《花东》181	Divination: offering a white pig to Ancestress Geng, accompanied by chang (𩚑 ritual wine).
	Zu Jia (Ancestor Jia, 祖甲); Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙); Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)		甲寅，歲祖甲𩚑，歲祖乙，白豕，歲妣庚𩚑，祖甲𩚑劈卯。《花东》115	Complex sui ritual involving Ancestors Jia and Yi and Ancestress Geng; includes white pig and additional cutting/splitting (ji 𩚑 / pi 劈) procedures.
	Zi (子)	圭	乙亥，子𩚑白圭称。用。佳字若。《花东》193	Offering of a white jade tablet (gui 圭) by a royal son (zi 子); accepted.
	Fu Hao (妇好, Lady Hao)	纯	甲申卜：𩚑（惠）配乎（呼）曰帚（婦）好告白（伯）屯？用。《花东》220	offering made by Fu Hao (妇好); “white” may refer to a person (Bo?) or object.

	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚)	boar (jia 豕) Pig (shi 豕)		二牛。戠（待），弜又匕（妣）庚。三牛 夷（惠）小□、白豕？ 二牢、白豕。 五豕。 夷（惠）二黑牛？ 二黑牛。 白一豕又鬯。 夕：白豕、（羊土），□（酒）二牢。 夷（惠）二勿牢□白豕匕（妣）庚？ 三羊。 先椎白豕宜黑二牛。 夷（惠）一白豕，又鬯。 《花东》278	Series of divinations testing combinations of white pigs, white boars, black cattle, and sheep in offerings to Ancestress Geng.
	Zu Jia (Ancestor Jia, 祖甲)	boar (jia 豕)		甲子歲且（祖）甲白（豕土）一，（示又）鬯一。 夷（惠）黑豕且（祖）甲？不用。《花东》459	White pig offered to Ancestor Jia in sui ritual; black pig explicitly rejected.
		Pig (shi 豕)	宾祖卜辞	子（巳）^酉伐六牢，佳（唯）白豕。《合集》995	Military offering (fa 伐): among six sacrificial animals, only the pig is specified as white.
	Ancestor (祖)	Pig (shi 豕)		己未卜：出于且（祖）（庚）三牢出（又）白豕。《合集》2051	Offering (zhi) of white pig among three sacrificial animals to an ancestor (likely Ancestor Geng).
	Father Yi (父乙)	Pig (Zhi, 彘)		贞：侑于父乙白彘，新穀《英藏》79	Accompanying offering (you 侑) to Father Yi using a white pig; includes new grain.
		Pig (Zhi, 彘)		戊寅卜，鼎（貞）：□界彘。 宾，贞.....白彘.....子侑.....《合集》15943	Divination involving presentation of pigs; includes white pig in offering sequence.
		Pig (Zhi, 彘)		夷白彘.....毓有佑《合集》11225	Offering of white pig associated with blessing (you 佑).
		Pig (Shi, 豕)		夷白豕 辛卜，殼《丙编》197	Divination concerning offering of a white pig.

		Cattle (Niu, 牛)		五白牛，又穀。《合集》203	Offering of five white cattle together with grain.
	Wang Hai (王亥)	Cattle (Niu, 牛)		貞：侑于王亥，衷三白牛。《合集》14724	Accompanying offering to Wang Hai using three white cattle.
		Cattle/ox (Niu, 牛)		穀.....幻侑大甲白牛。用。《合集》1423	Offering of white cattle to Da Jia; used in ritual context.
				辛酉卜，賓，貞：燎于俊白牛。《京大》0001	Burnt offering (liao) of white cattle to Jun.
		Human (Ren, 人)		乙丑卜，.....貞：.....白人；燎白人。《合集》1039	Burnt offering of a “white human.” Note: Unique case; likely fragmentary or exceptional usage.
		Qiang 羌 (ethnic group, often sacrificial captives)		壬子卜，賓，貞：衷今夕用三白羌于丁。用。《合集》293(賓三) 丁亥卜，王：子白羌毓，不□（其？）白。《合集》3410（師賓間）	Offering of three “white Qiang” individuals; “white” may alternatively be read as “Bo” (伯). Note: Suggests possible phonetic substitution rather than colour.
		Pig (Zhi, 彘)	出組	貞：佳白彘。《合集》26030	Divination: “it is a white pig.”
	Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	Cattle (Niu, 牛)		白牛其用于毓祖乙，馘。《合集》23165	White cattle used in offering to Ancestor Yi.
		Ox (Mu, 牡)		丁卯.....貞：般.....侑羌.....白牡。《合集》22575	Accompanying offering including a white male animal (mu 牡).
		Ox (Mu, 牡)		甲子卜，旅，貞：翌乙丑砮，衷白牡？《合集》26027	Divination concerning use of a white male animal in ritual (possibly connected to travel/expedition context).
	Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	Ox (Mu, 牡)		王.....乙丑，其侑□歲于且（祖）乙白牡。王才（在）□卜。《合集》22904	Sui sacrifice to Ancestor Yi using a white male animal.
		Cattle (Niu, 牛)		登。華牛，大乙白牛衷元...《合集》27122	Offering of white cattle to Da Yi; associated with elevation/ascension ritual (deng 登).
		Pig (shi 豕)		燎。衷白豕？《合集》34462	Fragmentary burnt offering involving a white pig.
		Pig (shi 豕)		乙亥卜，燎白豕。《合集》34463	Burnt offering of a white pig.
		Cattle (Niu, 牛)		庚午卜，衷今夕.....衷白牛燎。《屯南》231	Burnt offering of white cattle.

					Note: Inscription layout irregular; likely fragmentary.
	Shang Jia (上甲)	boar (jia 豕)	历组	甲辰，贞：其大御自上甲.....盟用白豕九 丁未，贞：其大御王自上甲.....盟用白豕九；下示汎牛，在父丁宗卜。 癸丑，贞：其大御，夷甲子𠄎。《合集》32330	Grand yu (御) ritual from Shang Jia (上甲) using nine white boars; includes covenant (meng 盟).
	Former Kings since Shang Jia (上甲以来先王)	boar (jia 豕)		...𠄎大□(禦)自上甲，其告于大乙。才(在)父丁宗卜。 大御自上甲，其告于祖乙，在父丁宗卜。 其大御自上甲.....盟用白豕九；下示汎牛，在大乙宗卜。 自上甲，盟用白豕九...在大甲宗卜。 卯，贞：其大御王自上甲，盟用白豕九；下示汎牛，在祖乙宗卜。 丙辰，贞：其𠄎，大御王自上甲，其告于父丁。 《屯南》2707	Series of yu rituals directed to early Shang kings from Shang Jia onward, repeatedly using nine white boars.
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚); Ancestress Bing (妣丙)	boar (jia 豕)		辛巳，贞：其奉(禱)生于匕(妣)庚、匕(妣)丙，牡、豢、白豕； 《合集》34081	Prayer (dao 禱) to Ancestresses Geng and Bing using white boar and other animals.
	Ancestress Geng (Bi Geng, 妣庚); Ancestress Bing (妣丙)	boar (jia 豕) ram / male sheep (yang, 羴)		庚辰，贞：其奉生于妣庚妣丙，在祖乙宗卜； 辛巳卜，贞：其奉生于妣庚妣丙，牡，豢，白豕。 《合集》34082	Similar ritual context; white boar appears alongside other sacrificial animals.
	Ancestress Bing (妣丙)	ram / male sheep (yang, 羴); boar (jia 豕)		乙巳，贞：丙午，禱生于妣丙，牡，豢，白豕。《合集》34080	Prayer ritual to Ancestress Bing including white boar.
	Zu Yi (Ancestor Yi, 祖乙)	Millet (Shu, 黍)		于祖乙祔，敦来羌； 夷白黍登。《合集》32014	Offering of white millet (shu 黍) to Ancestor Yi.
进贡		Horse (ma, 马)	宾祖	贞：□呼取白马以；不其以。古来马；不其来马。	Divinations concerning arrival or non-arrival of white horses as tribute.
				鼎(貞)：□不我其來白馬。《合集》9176	
				甲辰卜，設鼎(貞)：奚來白馬。王□(占)曰：“吉。其來。” 甲辰卜，設鼎(貞)：奚不其來白馬。五(月)。《合集》9177	

Daily use animals		a female horse (she, 駘)		少駘白。不白。《合集》3411	White mare (she 駘); fragmentary inscription.
		a female horse (she, 駘)		駘子白。不。《合集》3412 (残辞, 模糊不识, 《合集》释为駘。与《合集》3411 同)	Foal of a mare described as white.
		Horse (ma, 马)		丙辰卜,贞: 厶.....马子白。《合集》5729	Divination mentioning a white horse.
				驪.....毓.....白。《合集》18271	Fragmentary reference to white animal.
		Horse (ma, 马)		丙午卜, 争, 贞: 七白马殪; 佳丁取。《合集》10067	Seven white horses involved in conflict or capture.
				丙午卜, 贞: 佳子弓害白马。《合集》10067	
		Cattle (Niu, 牛)	无名组	白牛, 夷二, 有正。 白牛, 夷三, 有正。大吉。 弔用。 其𠂔。 夷白牛九, 有正。大吉。《合集》29504	Repeated divinations involving white cattle; nine white cattle considered highly auspicious.
		Cattle (Niu, 牛)		白牛.....正。《合集》29506	Reference to correctness (zheng 正) associated with white cattle.
Dreams			宾祖	庚子卜, 宾, 贞: 王梦白牛, 佳𠂔 《合集》17393	King dreams of a white ox.
Hunting		Fox (Mang, 玃)	历组	寅卜: 王其射𠂔白玃, 湄日亡(災)。	Hunt resulting in capture of one white deer and two foxes.
		Deer (lu, 鹿)	黄组	壬申卜, 贞: 王田𠂔, 往来亡灾, 获白鹿一, 狐二 《合集》37449	Hunt resulting in capture of one white deer and two foxes.
		Deer (lu, 鹿)		壬申.....王.....田麦, 往.....亡灾。王.....曰: 吉。兹御.....白鹿。《合集》37448	White deer captured; interpreted as auspicious.
		Fox (Hu, 狐)		王卜, 贞:往来亡灾, 获.....麋二, 白狐一。《合集》37499	Capture of white fox among other animals.
		Rhinoceros (si, 兕)		辛巳, 王𠂔武丁,获白兕, 丁酉 《佚存》427	King Wu Ding captures a white rhinoceros.
		Rhinoceros (si, 兕)		于倪麓隻(獲)白兕, 𠂔于...才(在)二月, 佳(唯)王十祀, 彤日, 王來正孟方伯。《合集》37398	Capture of a white rhinoceros during royal expedition.
		a mythical and auspicious creature in Chinese tradition (lin, 麟)		用又白麋于大乙 《合集》36481	Offering of a white qilin (mythical animal) to Da Yi.

Based on sacrificial contexts, white offerings are predominantly directed to ancestral recipients.

Among the securely identifiable cases, thirty-eight divinations involve white animals or objects

being offered to male ancestors (22 cases) or female ancestors (16 cases), with one additional instance pertaining to a collective ancestral sacrifice (*xia* 祫). White offerings also appear in specialised ritual settings outside the ancestral cult: notably, white sheep are used in at least one rain-prayer ritual, which was followed by rainfall.

Outside formal sacrifice, the Shang elite frequently inquired about white animals, above all, white horses. The texts record divinations concerning whether a newly born foal will have white hair, whether a sick white horse will recover, and even the arrival of white horses as tribute. These routine enquiries contrast with the treatment of animals of other colours, where only the species category tends to be recorded, suggesting an elevated symbolic or ritual value for whiteness. A particularly striking case concerns the capture of a white *lin* (麟). Given the Lin's importance as a numinous beast the appearance of a white *lin* in the oracle-bone corpus is unlikely to be trivial. Another divination concerns the king's dream of a white ox; the king's anxiety about its portent demonstrates the charged semiotic status of white animals in the Shang symbolic universe.

Taken together, the oracle-bone evidence indicates that whiteness functions simultaneously as a material, ritual, and semiotic category. It is the colour most frequently employed in sacrificial contexts, appears in omen interpretation (including dreams), features prominently in tribute and hunting narratives, and is uniquely emphasised in the routine administrative and divinatory concerns of the Shang court. The prominence of white animals in rain rituals, ancestor sacrifices, and royal anxieties further supports the long-standing observation that the Shang maintained a cultural and ritual preference for the colour white.

White occupied the central place in Shang sacrificial practice. Its scope of application and range of functions were unrivalled by other colours. White-coloured victims were consistently preferred for ancestral offerings, appearing in inscriptions such as: “*zhuan* three white cows”

offered to Wang Hai;³²⁰ “Sacrifice to Ancestor Jia with a white boar”,³²¹ “a white pig for Father Yi”.³²²

The sanctity of white extended beyond animal victims to ritual jade: “offering a white jade tablet”,³²³ showing that whiteness symbolized purity in both living and crafted objects.

According to statistical studies, white was employed 38 times, including offerings to male ancestors (22 cases), female ancestors (16 cases), and even in grand ancestral collective sacrifices.³²⁴ White thus represented a universally valid and prestigious colour across major sacrificial contexts. White also marked extraordinary events in political and natural spheres: Such as Hunting omens: Capturing white animals, such as “a white deer”³²⁵ or “a white rhinoceros”,³²⁶ was recorded as Heavenly portents requiring ritual recognition and dream interpretation: The king’s dream of a white ox³²⁷ necessitated divination to determine its auspiciousness. Rain-making rites: White animals, such as “burning a white sheep and pig”,³²⁸ were sacrificed to induce rainfall, often with successful verification. Tributary gifts: Foreign states presented white horses as rare and valuable tributes,³²⁹ attesting to the political and economic value of whiteness.

5.3.3 Yellow Sacrificial Animals and the Case for the Sun Deity

Wang Tao follows Sarah Allan in interpreting yellow as a symbol of soil and land. This view is grounded in two observations: first, the loess of the Central Plains is naturally yellow; second, texts such as *Zuozhuan* use the term *huangquan* (黄泉, “yellow springs”), which appears to

³²⁰ “夷三白牛.” Guo Moruo, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978-82), no. 14724.

³²¹ Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ed., *Yinxu Huayuanzhuang dongdi jiagu* 殷墟花园庄东地甲骨 [Oracle bone inscriptions from the East Sector of Huayuanzhuang, Yinxu] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 2003), no. 4.

³²² Li Xueqin, Qi Wenxin, and Ai Lan, eds., *Yingguo suocang jiagu ji* 英国所藏甲骨集 [Oracle bone collections in Great Britain] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985), no. 79.

³²³ “子夷白圭称.” Institute of Archaeology, *Yinxu Huayuanzhuang dongdi jiagu*, no. 193.

³²⁴ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 32330.

³²⁵ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 37449.

³²⁶ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 37398.

³²⁷ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 17393.

³²⁸ Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, ed., *Xiaotun nandi jiagu* 小屯南地甲骨 [Oracle bone inscriptions from Xiaotun South] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980-83), no. 2670.

³²⁹ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 9177.

reflect the colour of the earth. In my view, however, linking yellow primarily to soil is a misunderstanding arising from a lack of historical contextualisation. Soil became a prominent political and symbolic concern only during the period when regional lords competed for hegemony. The well-known story of Duke Wen of Jin is often cited as evidence of the early valuation of land, yet the anecdote marks a shift in attitudes toward landownership: the duke initially reacted angrily when a farmer presented him with soil, and it was only through Huyan’s reinterpretation that the act was transformed into an auspicious omen.

The evidence from oracle-bone inscriptions suggests two defining features of the term “yellow.” First, yellow offerings are directed almost exclusively to bovines, with a single exception involving the *zhi*(麋). Second—and more importantly—yellow oblations exhibit a distinctive association with the east. This pattern is unique among all colour terms. Notably, Heji 14337 and Heji 14342 both mentions consecrating yellow items to the “Eastern Mother” (东母). Chen Mengjia has proposed that the “Eastern Mother” and her counterpart, the “Western Mother” (*ximu* 西母), correspond to the solar and lunar deities respectively. On this basis, my preliminary conclusion is that yellow is connected not primarily with soil, but with the sky at sunrise.

In Shang oracle inscriptions, most yellow sacrificial animals were cattle, with only a single instance of a *zhi*. These animals were frequently offered in rituals directed toward the east, as in: “Divination: The king at the east, entrap a pig, burn three, Mao yellow cattle.”³³⁰ or in rituals dedicated to the “Eastern Mother”, such as: “Divination: Burn ... Eastern Mother ... yellow.”³³¹ Yellow consistently appears in connection with the eastern direction or the deity of the east (see Table below).

Yellow Sacrificial Animals in Shang Oracle Inscriptions

Recipient of Offering	Object of Adornment	Diviner Group	Original Text (Chinese)	English Translation
	Niu (牛, “cattle”)	Binzu(宾祖,	乙丑卜, 宾, 贞:犬, 卯十黄牛。 《英藏》1289	Crack-making on the yichou day: Bin divined: ... ten yellow cattle of the Mao-day cycle with a dog.

³³⁰ Guo Moruo, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 [Collection of oracle bone inscriptions] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978-82), no. 14313.

³³¹ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 14342.

	Niu (牛, "cattle")	"bin group")	贞：帝于东，陷冢，燎三，卯黄牛 《合集》14313	Divination: The Di in the East—offering three burnt victims and Mao yellow cattle.
	Niu (牛, "cattle")		癸未卜，宾，贞：燎犬，卯三豕三羊。 甲申卜，宾，贞：燎于东三豕、三羊，□犬、卯黄牛。 《合集》14314	Crack-making on the guiwei day: Bin divined: burn a dog, three pigs, three sheep of the Mao-day cycle. Crack-making on the jia Shen day: burn three pigs and three sheep in the East, a dog, and Mao yellow cattle.
	Niu (牛, "cattle")		贞：燎东西南，卯黄牛。 燎于东西，侑伐，卯南黄牛。 《合集》14315	Divination: Burn in the East, West, and South; Mao yellow cattle. Burn in East and West in support of the campaign; Mao southern yellow cattle.
	zhi 麋		正面： 甲子卜，殼，贞：妥以巫。 贞：妥不其以巫； 丙寅卜，正，贞：今十一月帝不令其雨。 翌己巳燎一牛。 其延雨； 不其延雨。 反面： 燎东黄麋。 《合集》5658	Front: Crack-making on the jiazi day... on jisi, burn one cow... Reverse: Burn a yellow zhi in the East.
			己亥卜，贞：不.....示齐黄。 《合集》14356	Crack-making on the jia Hai day: divination: not ... shows proper/yellow correctness.
	Niu Niu (牛, "cattle")牛	无名组	夷黄牛，有正。 《合集》31178	The yellow cattle are correct/approved.
王 (the king)	Niu (牛, "cattle")		乙卯，其黄牛，正，王受有佑。 《合集》36350	On the yimao day: the yellow cattle are correct; the king receives blessing.
东 母 (Eastern Mother)			贞：燎.....东母.....黄。 《合集》14342	Divination: burn ... to the Eastern Mother ... yellow.

This pattern indicates a strong association between yellow sacrificial animals and both the Eastern Mother and the east. Understanding the nature of these entities is therefore crucial to interpreting the symbolic significance of yellow.

Ding Shan interprets the Eastern and Western Mothers as deities of the cardinal directions or of the earth, rather than Heavenly gods (Ding 1961). In contrast, Chen Mengjia proposes that the Eastern Mother and Western Mother represent the sun and moon, respectively. His argument rests on three lines of evidence: First, Ritual orientation: Texts like “*Jiyi*” (祭义) describe offerings to the sun and moon in the east and west,³³² and later sources (e.g., “*Fengshan shu*” 封禅书) prescribe cattle for solar offerings and sheep or pigs for lunar offerings. The oracle inscriptions show a clear preference for yellow cattle in offerings to the Eastern Mother.³³³

³³² *Liji* 礼记, "Jiyi" 祭义 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1980), 345–350.

³³³ Guo, *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 14337, no. 14342

Second, Mirrors and dynastic continuity: Mirrors from the subsequent Dai state, round like the sun or moon and inscribed with “Eastern Duke, Western Mother,” suggest a cultural memory of sun-moon parentage practices inherited from Shang. Third, mythological precedent: founding myths of nearby cultures (e.g., Korean Buyeo, Shang ancestors) indicate traditions of solar progenitors, with female figures such as Xihe and Changxi as sun and moon mothers.

Song Zhenhao emphasizes that oracle inscriptions reflect traditions of worshiping sunrise and sunset but interprets Eastern and Western Mothers as deities governing life and fate in the east and west.

While the exact identity of the Eastern Mother remains debated, there is consensus that she is a directional deity. Given that east and west were the earliest humanly distinguished directions—marked by sunrise and sunset—it is plausible that these are Heavenly rather than purely terrestrial deities. Yellow cattle and *zhi* offered to the Eastern Mother may symbolically reflect the yellow sky at sunrise. The name *Xihe* (羲和) itself reinforces the solar connection: *Xi* (曦) literally means sunlight at dawn, further linking sunrise with bright yellow light.

In early Chinese script, “yellow” (*huang*) may be etymologically related to “light” or “brightness” (*huang* 煌). Oracle bone forms of *huang* (黃) resemble a person wearing a pendant or a target center; while not initially a colour, the character’s association with brightness likely led to its early use for describing the sun’s first rays. The *Zhouyi·Li* (離) hexagram 6.2 states, “Yellow *li*, great auspiciousness.”³³⁴ Here, “*Li*” denotes fire or the sun, and Wang Bi comments, “Yellow *Li* represents the centre of culture.” This use of yellow as solar light reflects a continuity from Shang practice into Zhou philosophical codification. If the Eastern Mother were a terrestrial deity, why would the sacrifice avoid “black” or “earth-coloured” animals typically associated with the earth? The exclusive use of yellow reinforces the association with the rising sun and its unique light.

³³⁴ *Zhouyi zhushu* 周易注疏 [Book of Changes with Notes and Commentaries], in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 [Notes and Commentaries on the Thirteen Classics], edited by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 1980), 3:42a.

Chen Mengjia's sun deity interpretation appears more persuasive. Shang people offering yellow cattle to the Eastern Mother reflect a sympathetic magic logic: the yellow of the sacrificial animal echoes the yellow brilliance of the rising sun in the east, establishing a symbolic and ritual connection that both honours and communicates with the solar deity. The colour yellow thus mediates between earthly ritual and cosmic order, prefiguring the philosophical codification of colour symbolism in early Zhou texts.

5.3.4 *Hei* (黑): Specialized for Rainmaking

Black held a more limited but highly specific role in Shang ritual. While black victims were used for ancestral offerings (15 cases: 10 males, 5 female), their most distinctive function lay in rainmaking. Inscriptions record the sacrifice of “black sheep” followed by successful rain verification, paralleling the effect of white sheep.

This dual efficacy of white and black in rain rituals suggests a form of imitative magic, where black symbolized clouds and rain, while white signified lightning or celestial clarity. In *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China*, Roel Sterckx discusses how animal colours were not mere aesthetic choices but were deeply tied to the “taxonomic ritualism” of the time. While he notes that later ritual texts systematized these colour associations, he highlights that even in the earliest periods, animal victims were chosen to resonate with the natural phenomena they were meant to influence. Regarding the rain rituals and the use of black and white animals, Sterckx observes:

“The selection of a sacrificial victim of a particular colour or species was often intended to establish a sympathetic resonance with the spirit or natural force being addressed. In rain-seeking rituals, the use of black animals—symbolizing the dark, moisture-laden clouds—served as a form of mimetic persuasion, inviting the Heaven to respond in kind.”³³⁵ Together, they embodied a complementary polarity in natural symbolism.

³³⁵ Roel Sterckx, *The Animal and the Daemon in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 82.

The graphs *you*, *hei*, and *wu* all function as black colour terms in the oracle-bone inscriptions. Given the limited and still-developing vocabulary of the late Shang script, their diverse usages may originally have expressed different nuances. However, for the purpose of contrasting them with the white category, they may be treated together as the black chromatic group.

Among these terms, *hei* shows the most regular behaviour. It consistently modifies bovines—cattle, oxen, and cows—and such black animals are used in sacrificial rituals offered to ancestors. Two inscriptions record the use of black sheep in rain-prayer rituals, both resulting in rainfall. Two additional inscriptions concern black horses, although the specific matters being divined remain unclear.

The term *You* occurs only in reference to the extraordinary beast *zhi*, indicating that *you* function as a specialised descriptor rather than a general colour term. All known occurrences involve *youzhi* (幽麇) in sacrificial contexts.

The term *Wu* resembles *Hei* in its collocation with sacrificial animals and in the identity of sacrificial recipients, but it displays two noteworthy features. First, two inscriptions suggest that the king kept herds of *wu*-coloured cattle and personally inspected them. Second, at least nine divinations inquire whether *wu* cattle may be used for sacrifice. The remaining examples are fragmentary and require further textual clarification.

Taken as a whole, the black colour terms share several features with the white category. Both have fixed sacrificial recipients, and both appear in rain-making rituals—black and white sheep alike are used to pray for rain. The king's inspection of *wu* cattle also parallels his concern with white animals. While the *Liji* notes that “the Shang valued white,” the oracle-bone material shows that black was also important, though expressed through multiple terms rather than a single unified graph. This dispersed, more differentiated usage suggests that the Shang concern for black was in fact carefully articulated. In this light, the prominence of dark imagery in Shang mythology—such as the Black Bird and the ancestral names *Xuanwang* (玄王) and *Zhaoming* (昭明)—may reflect a dual structure in Shang colour symbolism.

Black colour words *You*(‘幽’), *Hei*(‘黑’) and *Wu*(‘勿’) in Oracle bone inscriptions

Related Business	Sacrifice recipient	Items described by colour Words	Original Texts and Sources	Explanation
Sacrifice		Zhi (麋 , a mythical beast)	辛卯卜, 子莫宜, 夷幽麋。用。 辛卯卜, 子莫宜, 夷。不用 《花东》34	Divination on Xinmao day: The Prince performs the Yi sacrifice, specifically using a dark zhi. Used. Huadong 34
		Zhi (麋 , a mythical beast)	辛卯卜, 子莫宜, 至二日。用 辛卯卜, 子莫宜, 至三日。不用。 辛卯卜, 夷宜……麋, 牝; 亦夷牡。用。 辛卯卜, 子莫宜, 夷幽麋。用。《花东》198	A divination on day Xinmao regarding the duration of the Yi meat-offering ritual. The prince tested if the ceremony should extend to the second day; the result was favourable and implemented. Huadong 198
	Ancestor Jia (Zujia, 祖甲)	Zhi (麋 , a mythical beast)	甲戌, 刳祖甲牢, 幽麋, 祖甲永子。用。 甲寅, 刳白豮; 甲寅, 刳祖甲白豮, 祐鬯一, 又簋。 《花东》149	On day Jiaxu: Sacrifice to Ancestor Jia a penned ox and a dark wild bovine; may Ancestor Jia eternally protect the prince. Used. Huadong 149
	Ancestor Jia (Zujia, 祖甲)	Zhi (麋 , a mythical beast)	甲子, 刳祖甲白豮, 祐鬯。 夷白豮……祖甲。 甲戌, 刳祖甲牢, 幽麋, 白豮, 祐一鬯。 甲戌, 刳祖甲牢, 幽麋, 白豮, 祐二鬯。 《花东》237	This entry records a high-level composite sacrifice to Ancestor Yi. It combines three distinct tiers of livestock: a fattened ox, a dark wild animal, and a white male pig, all paired with a standard offering of ritual wine. Huadong 237
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)		乙亥, 刳祖乙牢, 幽麋, 白豮, 祐鬯。 乙亥, 刳祖乙牢, 幽麋, 白豮, 祐二鬯。	On the Yihai day, [performed] a ritual killing of a penned ox for Ancestor Yi; a dark zhi (sacrificial beast / legendary creature); a white boar; and assisted/offered fragrant wine.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	丁丑, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 卯酌; 丁丑, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 卯酌二于祖丁。 《花东》49	On the Dingchou day, the ritual included sacrificing one black male animal to Ancestor Yi and splitting open one bo (small victim). The second instance added two bo split open specifically for Ancestor Ding.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	甲辰夕, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 夷子祝, 若, 祖乙永。用。翌丁砮。 《花东》6	On the evening of Jiachen, a black male was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi; the heir performed the rite, which was accepted, so Ancestor Yi was pleased. The ritual concluded the next day with a zhe sacrifice.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	乙亥夕, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 子祝。 《花东》67	On the evening of the Yihai day, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi, and the young master performed the invocation.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	乙亥, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 又羖一……子祝。 乙亥, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 又羖, 簋, 子祝。 《花东》252	On the Yihai day, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi, along with one additional black ram (or a ram and a gui vessel offering), and the young master performed the invocation.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	甲辰夕, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 子祝, 翌日砮。 《花东》350	On the evening of Jiachen, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi, the young master performed the invocation, and the next day the zhe (crushing) sacrifice was carried out.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	辛未, 刳祖乙黑牡, 祐鬯一, 子祝。 《花东》392	On the Xinwei day, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi, one vessel of aromatic wine (*chang*) was offered as aid, and the young master performed the invocation.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	乙丑, 刳祖乙黑牡一, 子祝, 骨御, 在。 《花东》319	On the Yichou day, [they] slaughtered one black male ox for Ancestor Yi. The heir performed the ritual prayer, and performed the Gu exorcism/sacrifice... at [place name].
	Ancestress Geng (bigeng, 妣庚)	Cow (pin, 牝)	辛酉晨, 刳妣庚黑牝一, 子祝。 辛酉卜, 子其□黑牝, 隹值往, 不雨; 用妣庚。	At sunset on Xinyou, one black female animal was sacrificed to Ancestress Geng, and the young master performed the invocation. A divination on that same day asked whether the young master should offer a black female and go straight ahead without rain; the answer

	妣庚)			was favourable, so the sacrifice was used for Ancestress Geng.
	Ancestress Geng (bigeng, 妣庚)	Cow (pin, 牝)	癸卯夕，刳妣庚黑牝一，在入，陟盟；陟盟。用。 《花东》178	On the evening of Guimao, one black female animal was sacrificed to Ancestress Geng at the entry (ritual entrance), followed by an ascending oath ceremony; the oath was performed and the sacrifice was used.
	Ancestress Geng (bigeng, 妣庚)	Cattle (niu, 牛)	己巳卜，翌日庚刳妣庚黑牛，又羊，暮送。用。 《花东》451	A divination on Jisi day determined that on the next day (Geng), they would sacrifice a black cow and also a sheep to Ancestress Geng at dusk, and this was carried out.
	Ancestress Geng (bigeng, 妣庚)	Ox (mu, 牡)	己酉夕，翌日砮妣庚黑牡一。 《花东》150	On the evening of Jiyou, they performed a zhe (crushing) sacrifice the next day for Ancestress Geng, offering one black male animal.
	Ancestress Geng (bigeng, 妣庚)	Ox (mu, 牡)	己酉夕，翌日砮妣庚黑牡一；更戊，酉 ^𠂔 牝一。 《花东》457	On the evening of Jiyou, the next day's zhe (crushing) sacrifice for Ancestress Geng included one black male; additionally, on the following Xu day, one black female was also offered.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	辛未，刳祖乙黑牡一，祐鬯一；子祝，曰：毓祖非；曰：云兕正祖隹？曰录□不□。 《花东》161	On Xinwei, one black male ox and one vessel of aromatic wine were sacrificed to Ancestor Yi, and the young master performed an invocation, uttering uncertain or oracular statements: questioning whether the "progenitor ancestor" was wrong, whether a cloud or rhinoceros was correcting the ancestor, and other broken phrases whose exact meaning is lost due to damage.
	Ancestor Yi (Zuyi, 祖乙)	Ox (mu, 牡)	丁丑，刳祖乙黑牡一，卯昃：子繇曰：未有艰其至，其戊。用。 《花东》220	On Dingchou, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Yi and a young animal (bo) was split open. The young master interpreted the omen, saying: "No misfortune has arrived; it will occur on the Wu day." The sacrifice was then carried out.
	Ancestor Jia (Zujia, 祖甲)	Ox (mu, 牡)	甲子卜，乙，子启丁璧暨玉； 夷黄璧暨璧。 辛未，刳祖甲黑牡一，日雨。 《花东》180	On Jiazi a divination was made for the next day (Yichou) about the young master presenting a Ding ring and jade, as well as a yellow ring and another ring. Later, on Xinwei, one black male ox was sacrificed to Ancestor Jia, and it rained that day.
Things are not clear		Horse (ma, 马)	弜勾黑馬。用。 《花东》179	"Do not pray for/request a black horse." (The divination was negative,) but it was still used (or the horse was used anyway).
		Horse (ma, 马)	癸酉卜，夷召.....刳马； 癸酉卜，弜刳新黑马，又□； 癸酉卜，刳新黑。 《花东》239	These inscriptions record a sequence of divinations performed on the Guiyou day to determine whether a newly acquired black horse should be sacrificed.
Praying for rain		Sheep (yang, 羊)	禱雨，夷黑羊，用。有大雨。 夷白羊，有大雨。 《合集》30022	Successful rain-making rituals where the sacrifice of black and white sheep resulted in the desired heavy rainfall.
		Sheep (yang, 羊)	弜用黑羊，亡雨； 夷白羊用于之，有大雨。 《合集》30552	Sacrificing a white sheep successfully induced heavy rain after the omission of a black sheep sacrifice resulted in no rainfall.
		Cattle (niu, 牛)	癸卯卜：王夷勿牛用.....《合集》19911	The King determines that a multicolored ox should not be used for the ritual sacrifice on the Guimao day.

5.3.5 *You, Wu, and Xing*

The term *you* (dark/blue-black) were used in highly specific contexts, almost exclusively linked to the mythical beast *zhi*. For example, “you-coloured *zhi*” (*Huadong* 34, 198) appears three times in sacrifices to male ancestors.

This narrow association indicates that *you* colour carried mythological resonance, inseparable from the ritual significance of the *zhi* itself, a divine beast often connected with justice and moral discernment in later lore.

The variegated category *wu* was the second most frequent sacrificial colour, occurring 30 times (24 male, 6 female). Its importance extended beyond ritual to royal administration.

Oracle inscriptions reveal that the Shang king personally inspected “wu cattle” (*Heji* 11181, 11182) and repeatedly divined about their suitability (*Heji* 24580, 23732). This indicates that variegated animals were not marginal, but a staple resource, essential both for religious offerings and the economic management of livestock.

The red colour term in the oracle-bone inscriptions is *xing*, a compound graph referring to red-haired animals. The term may designate sheep, cattle, or horses; in all cases, the defining feature is the reddish colour of the animal’s coat rather than its species.

Recipient of Sacrifice	Modified Object	Diviner Group	Original Text	Translation
—	Ox	Li Group (历组)	登 華牛大乙，白牛 夷元 (《合集》27122)	“Raising [ritual] oxen to Da Yi; white oxen are primary.” (<i>Heji</i> 27122)
			登 華牛大乙，白牛 夷元 (《合集》27122)	“Divined on dingchou day: the king will perform the [ritual] and offer five lao-sacrifices.” (<i>Heji</i> 29512)
Ancestor Yi (祖乙)	Ox	Unnamed Group	癸 新祖乙 (《合集》32564)	“[Sacrifice] to Ancestor Yi.” (<i>Heji</i> 32564)
Ancestress Gui (妣癸)	Ox	—	日，于妣癸，其 祗，王受祐； 夷 癸，王受祐。 (《合集》27575)	“On this day, sacrifice to Ancestress Gui; if cracked, the king will receive blessing; [if] zhuan, the king will receive blessing.” (<i>Heji</i> 27575)
		—	夷 癸.....吉。 (《合集》29514)	“[Zhuan...] auspicious.” (<i>Heji</i> 29514)
Ancestress Xin (妣辛)	—	—	庚申卜：妣辛 祗，王受祐，吉； 牢又一牛，吉； 夷 癸，吉。 (《屯南》694)	“Divined on gengshen day: sacrifice to Ancestress Xin; the king will receive blessing, auspicious; one lao and one ox, auspicious; zhuan, auspicious.” (<i>Tunnan</i> 694)

			𠬪 𠬪, 王受祐: 𠬪 勿牛, 王受祐。(《屯南》2304)	“Zhuan, the king will receive blessing; zhuan ‘wu-ox’, the king will receive blessing.” (Tunnan 2304)
			三牢, 王受祐: 𠬪 𠬪: 𠬪 勿牛。(《合集》29519)	“Three lao, the king will receive blessing; zhuan; zhuan ‘wu-ox’.” (Heji 29519)
Ancestress Xin (妣辛)	—		辛卯卜, 妣辛𠬪, 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 勿。(《合集》27441)	“Divined on xinmao day: Ancestress Xin sacrifice; zhuan; zhuan ‘wu’.” (Heji 27441)
Ancestress Xin (妣辛)	—		妣辛歲, 𠬪 𠬪, 吉; 𠬪 勿牛。(《屯南》2710)	“Sacrifice to Ancestress Xin; zhuan, auspicious; zhuan ‘wu-ox’.” (Tunnan 2710)
Shang Jia (上甲)	—		祝上甲…… 𠬪 …… 𠬪 勿牛。(《合集》27060)	“Invocation to Shang Jia… zhuan ‘wu-ox’.” (Heji 27060)
			父己岁, 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 勿牛。(《合集》27013)	“Father Ji sacrifice; zhuan; zhuan ‘wu-ox’.” (Heji 27013)
			𠬪 黑牛 …… 𠬪 (《合集》29508)	“Zhuan black ox …” (Heji 29508)
Ancestor Xin (祖辛)	—		庚子卜, 祖辛岁……吉。不用。 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 幽; 𠬪 勿牛。(《屯南》139)	“Divined on gengzi day: sacrifice to Ancestor Xin… auspicious. Not used. zhuan; zhuan ‘you’; zhuan ‘wu-ox’.” (Tunnan 139)
Ancestress Geng (妣庚)	—		丁丑卜: 妣庚史, 𠬪 黑牛, 其用佳。 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 幽牛; 𠬪 黄牛。(《屯南》2363)	“Divined on dingchou day: Ancestress Geng ritual; zhuan black ox, its use is good; zhuan; zhuan ‘you-ox’; zhuan yellow ox.” (Tunnan 2363)
Wu Ding / Ancestor Jia (武丁 / 祖甲)	—	Yellow Group (黄组)	丙戌卜, 贞: 武丁祊, 其牢。兹用。 癸巳年卜, 贞: 祖甲祊, 其牢。用。 𠬪 𠬪。用。(《合集》35828)	“Divined on bingxu day: Wu Ding peng-rite, its lao; this is used. Divined in guisi year: Ancestor Jia peng-rite, its lao, used; zhuan, used.” (Heji 35828)
Wu Yi (武乙)	—	—	甲申卜, 贞武乙祊其牢。兹用。 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 𠬪。 丙戌卜, 贞武乙祊其牢。𠬪 𠬪。兹用。 𠬪 𠬪。(《合集 35829》)	“Divined on jiashen day: Wu Yi peng-rite, its lao; this is used; zhuan; zhuan. Divined on bingxu day: Wu Yi peng-rite, its lao; zhuan, this is used; zhuan.” (Heji 35829)
Kang Ding (康丁)	—		丙午卜, 贞: 康祖丁祊, 其牢, 𠬪。(《合集》36003)	“Divined on bingwu day: Kang Ancestor Ding peng-rite, its lao, […].” (Heji 36003)
Kang Ding (康丁)	—		丙寅卜, 贞: 康祖丁祊, 其牢。𠬪。兹用 丙申卜, 贞: 康祖丁祊, 其牢。𠬪。 丙辰卜, 贞: 康祖丁祊。牢牢, 𠬪。(《合集》35965)	“Divined on bingyin day: Kang Ancestor Ding peng-rite, its lao; […], used. Divined on bingshen day… Divined on bingchen day: Kang Ancestor Ding peng-rite; lao-lao […].” (Heji 35965)
Wu Yi / Wu Ding / Ancestor Jia	—		甲子卜, 贞: 武乙祊, 其牢。兹用。 其牢又一牛; 𠬪 𠬪。兹用 𠬪 勿牛。 丙寅卜, 贞: 武丁祊, 其牢。 其牢又一牛; 𠬪 𠬪; 𠬪 勿牛。 癸亥卜, 真: 祖甲祊, 其牢。 其牢又一牛; 𠬪 𠬪。兹用。	“Divined on jiazi day: Wu Yi peng-rite, its lao; this is used; its lao plus one ox; zhuan, used; zhuan ‘wu-ox’. Divined on bingyin day: Wu Ding peng-rite… same pattern. Divined on guihai day: Ancestor Jia peng-rite… same pattern.” (Heji 35818)

			夷勿牛。（《合集》35818）	
Wu Yi (武乙) and others	—		甲戌卜，贞：武乙宗，其牢。 其牢，又一牛； 夷……兹…… 夷勿牛； 夷…… 夷勿牛。 丙子卜，贞：武丁祔，其牢。 其牢，又一牛； 其牢，又一牛。兹用。 夷 𠩺； 夷勿牛。 癸巳卯卜……宗。 其牢，又一牛。兹用。 夷 𠩺； 夷勿牛； 夷 𠩺； 夷勿牛，兹用。 甲辰卜……宗，祔……兹…… 其牢，又一牛； ……贞……祔，其…… 其牢，又一牛； …… 𠩺； 夷勿牛。兹用。 癸巳卜，贞：祖甲祔，其牢。 其牢，又一牛； 夷 𠩺； 夷勿牛； 夷 𠩺； 夷勿牛。兹用。 甲午卜，贞：武乙宗祔，其牢。 其牢，又一牛。兹用。 ……卜，贞：……祔……牢……用。 其牢，又一牛； …… 𠩺； 夷勿牛。（《合集》35931）	“Divined on jiaxu day: Wu Yi ancestral rite, its lao; its lao plus one ox; zhuan... used... zhuan ‘wu-ox’... (multiple repetitions across entries).” (Heji 35931)

At present, the sacrificial recipients and types of offerings associated with *xing* do not reveal any distinctive ritual pattern. What is noteworthy, however, is that *xing* appears predominantly in inscriptions from the Huang Group, a corpus generally assigned to the late Shang period. This concentration suggests that the use of red-haired animals as ritual offerings may represent a relatively late development. Classical sources describe the Zhou as valuing the colour red, and the appearance of *xing* in late Shang materials may therefore indicate a degree of continuity between late Shang ritual preferences and early Zhou colour ideology.

The reddish-yellow *xing* was a stable and mainstream sacrificial choice, appearing 19 times (14 male, 5 female). Its function was relatively consistent, primarily for ancestral sacrifices. Many inscriptions simply record queries about whether a *xing* animal should be offered (*Heji* 29514; *Tunnan* 2304). This reflects its role as a “default” sacrificial option, reliable and ritually efficacious.

The Shang colour system emerges as a pragmatic spectrum of sacred efficacy, rather than an abstract cosmology. Diviners constantly adjusted sacrificial colour choices, as seen in sequences where “a yellow cow was not accepted” and another colour was substituted until a favourable response was obtained.

White, with its purity and rarity, stood at the apex, functioning as an all-purpose auspicious colour—valid in ancestor worship, dream interpretation, rainmaking, and tribute diplomacy. Black and white together demonstrated imitative power in rain rituals. Variegated (*wu*) animals, despite their mixed appearance, were central in both economic and ritual practice. Other hues such as *you* and *xing* occupied more specialized but still vital places in the chromatic repertoire.

This mature, utilitarian system exemplifies the Shang worldview in which the great affairs of state lie in sacrifice and war. The later doctrine of the “Five Phases” represents a retrospective philosophical reconstruction, rather than a direct reflection of Shang ritual practice.^{336_337}

6. Colours and Tian-Worship in Zhou Dynasty

6.1 Sources from the Early to Middle Western Zhou

The study of colour symbolism and Tian-worship in the early to middle Western Zhou (ca. 11th–10th century BCE) is constrained by a documentary gap, as most contemporaneous writing survives only in bronze inscriptions, while bamboo and silk texts are largely lost. A multi-layered corpus is therefore required. Core evidence is provided by the *Zhouyi* (gua and yao statements) and early chapters of *the Book of Documents* (e.g., *Mushi* 牧誓, *Dakao* 大诰,

³³⁶ Cook, Constance A. *Ancestors, Kings, and the Dao*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³³⁷ Puett, Michael. *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*. Harvard University Asia Center, 2002.

Kanggao 康诰, *Jiugao* 酒诰, *Zicai* 梓材, *Zhaogao* 召诰, *Luogao* 洛诰), which preserve the ideological discourse of the Zhou founding elite, including concepts such as *de* (德), *tianming* (天命), and *min* (民). These are complemented by slightly later materials reflecting Western Zhou culture, notably the Classic of Poetry (“*Zhousong*” 周颂, “*Daya*” 大雅), which provides rich colour terminology, e.g., *zhufu* (朱芾), *congheng* (葱珩), *xuanguan* (玄袞),³³⁸ and Western Zhou bronze inscriptions recording elite objects such as *zhufu*, *youhuang* (幽黄), *jinche* (金车), and *luanqi* (鸾旗)³³⁹, demonstrating colour as a codified marker of rank and ritual hierarchy. Later retrospective texts, including the Rites of Zhou, Book of Etiquette and Ritual, and Book of Rites, systematize and interpret Zhou ritual practices but must be used critically. Taken together, these textual strata—core divinatory text, contemporaneous documents, literary corroboration, and later institutional codifications.

Although composed during the Warring States and Han periods, the *Zhouli*, *Yili*, and *Liji* preserve later systematized representations of Western Zhou ritual institutions and therefore serve as critical but retrospective sources for reconstructing early Zhou colour symbolism when read against oracle bone inscriptions and bronze texts. *Zhouli* presents an idealized bureaucratic-ritual order in which colour is fully formalized in clothing, sacrificial systems, and insignia (e.g., the “six crowns” and “five chariots”),³⁴⁰ reflecting a highly structured ritual theory rather than historical practice. The *Yili* provides detailed descriptions of aristocratic ceremonies such as marriage, mourning, archery, and diplomacy, consistently embedding colour usage within concrete ritual contexts. The *Liji*, especially the chapters “*Yuzao*”, “*Jiyi*”, and “*Jiaotesheng*”, offers an explicit symbolic interpretation of colour in ritual and preserves the influential dynastic schema. Taken together, these texts should be used not as direct evidence for Zhou practice but as later conceptual frameworks that, when cross-referenced with *Zhouyi*, early

³³⁸ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. IV: The She King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 191, 239, 547. The *Shijing* 詩經 includes terms such as vermilion knee-covers (朱芾, *zhufu*), onion-green jade pendants (葱珩, *congheng*), and dark ceremonial robes (玄袞, *xuanguan*).

³³⁹ Ma Chengyuan 馬承源, ed., *Shang Zhou qingtongqi mingwen xuan* 商周青銅器銘文選 [Selected Inscriptions of Shang and Zhou Bronzes] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988), 142. Bronze texts record ritual items such as dark yellow objects (幽黄, *youhuang*), golden chariots (金車, *jinche*), and phoenix banners (鸞旗, *luanqi*).

³⁴⁰ *Zhouli zhengyi* 周禮正義 [Correct Meaning of the Rites of Zhou], vol. 38, “Chunguan: Sifu” 春官·司服, ed. Sun Yirang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 1541–1550.

Shangshu, *Shijing*, and Western Zhou inscriptions, allow a stratified reconstruction of the historical development of colour symbolism from ritual practice to institutionalized doctrine.

6.2 From “Colours as Omens” to Ritual Order

I argue that the compilation of the *Zhouyi* must be situated within the same historical process that witnessed the consolidation of Zhou ritual civilization. In this intellectual and sociopolitical milieu, *li* was not merely a set of external ceremonies but the ultimate principle that permeated every layer of society and regulated both cosmic and human order. Within such a context, the *Zhouyi* was not an anonymous or accidental collection of divinatory records. Rather, it was intentionally constructed by a specific social group: the ritual specialists who both performed divination and were responsible for designing and maintaining the Zhou ritual system.

Approached through ritual theory, *Zhouyi*'s use of colour is not incidental but embedded in a broader Zhou conception of *li* as the structuring principle of cosmic and social order. As Confucius suggests (“delight in its words and observe its virtue,” *Analects* 7.17), the text encodes moral and ritual meaning beneath divinatory language. Modern scholarship has therefore emphasized *li*, rather than shamanism, as the key interpretive framework (Lan 2011; Shaughnessy 1997): unlike shamanic mediation between realms, Zhou ritual constructs a stable symbolic system of values expressed through objects, procedures, and colours.³⁴¹ The *Zhouyi* itself occupies a transitional position, retaining the Shang belief in direct colour-omen correlation (“colours determine auspice”) while simultaneously systematizing colour into a semiotic order tied to hierarchy, morality, and ritual propriety. This development is reinforced by the institutional context of its compilation: within the “official learning”, divination functioned both as diviners and as ritual administrators responsible for codifying sacrifices, ceremonies, and the regulated use of colour in ritual apparatus and dress. Consequently, when divinatory materials were compiled into *Zhouyi*, they were reshaped through a bureaucratic-ritual worldview in which colour

³⁴¹ Edward L. Shaughnessy, *I Ching: The Classic of Changes* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 164–168. Shaughnessy notes that the sashes (*fu* 紱/芾) were essential components of Zhou court attire, marking the transition from omen to administrative symbol; Lan Shan 蘭善, *Zhouyi li-xue yanjiu* 周易禮學研究 [Research on the Ritual Studies of the Zhouyi] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2011), 45–52. Lan emphasizes that the *Zhouyi* must be read as a product of the “official learning of the royal officers” (*wangguan zhi xue* 王官之學).

became part of a structured system of moral and social differentiation rather than a purely omen-based sign.

Although colour words appear only rarely in the ancient *Zhouyi*, their distribution is neither accidental nor decorative. Across the text, a total of seven true colour terms, yellow (黃), vermilion (*zhu* 朱), scarlet (*chi* 赤), dark/hidden (*you* 幽), white (*bai* 白), pale-white (*po* 皤), mottled-white (*jiao* 交), and two quasi-colours, gold (*jin* 金) and blood (*xue* 血), appear fourteen times in nine hexagrams and eleven-line statements. When these occurrences are examined as a whole, rather than in isolation, they reveal a remarkably stable correlation between colour and divinatory outcome. In other words, colour in the ancient *Zhouyi* forms a consistent omen-logic, in which each hue reliably corresponds to auspicious, non-harmful, or ominous judgments. This pattern demonstrates that colour in the ancient canon is not mere ornament but a meaningful component of divinatory reasoning, rooted in Zhou ritual symbolism.

This ritual semiotics is visible from the outset. In Kun 6.5, “yellow skirt, supremely auspicious”,³⁴² yellow clearly does not function as a visual flourish but serves as a marker of centrality and moderation, qualities already associated with proper rank and virtue in Zhou ritual culture. The same ritual encoding is evident in the references to the “scarlet sash (*zhufu* 朱紱)” and “red sash (*chifu* 赤紱)” in Kun 9.2 and 9.5, garments whose colours signified political office and hierarchical status. Their appearance in a divinatory context thus embeds sociopolitical symbolism within omen-language. The point is not that colour is symbolic *instead* of divinatory, but that symbolism becomes the medium through which divination is expressed.

Within this framework, yellow emerges as the most significant colour in *Zhouyi*. It appears five times, more frequently than any other hue, and in every instance, it is accompanied by a favorable judgment such as *yuanji* (元吉), *zhenji* (貞吉), *lizhen* (利貞), or *wujiu* (无咎). For example, in *Li* (Hexagram 30), line Six Two reads: “yellow brilliance, primordial auspiciousness”,³⁴³ while in *Xie* (Hexagram 40), line Nine Two states that “obtaining yellow arrows” signifies

³⁴² *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes], vol. 5, “Kun” 困, ed. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 238. The text for line 9.2 reads: “九二：困于酒食，朱紱方來”.

³⁴³ *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes], vol. 4, “Li” 離, ed. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 145.

rectitude and auspiciousness. Even when paired with the quasi-colour gold, the associated judgments cluster around “no blame” or “beneficial to maintain firmness in adversity”.

This consistency is striking. In early Chinese semiotics, yellow occupies the central and balancing position within the cosmological schema and thus signifies stability, legitimacy, and proper ritual order. Its uniformly positive valence in *Zhouyi* aligns closely with this cultural framework. The text’s preference for yellow, evident not only in its frequency but also in its overwhelmingly auspicious connotations, indicates that the colour system is deliberate and deeply rooted in Zhou ritual categories.

Red displays a different pattern, one shaped by its inherent ambivalence. The colours *vermilion* and scarlet appear only in the difficult hexagram *Kun*, where the ritual garments they describe indicate constrained, tense situations.³⁴⁴ The quasi-colour blood appears six times and provides the clearest insight into red’s divinatory logic. Blood is inherently double: it is the medium of sacrifice and vitality, but also the trace of violence and harm. Thus the line “dragon fights in the wild; its blood is dark-yellow”³⁴⁵ in *Kun* is ominous, just as “tears of blood” in *Tun* connotes distress.³⁴⁶ Yet in *Xiao Chu* 6.4 and *Huan*, when “the blood is gone,” the judgment is “*wujiu*(无咎),” indicating safe emergence from danger.³⁴⁷ The same logic appears in *Xu* (“出自穴”) and *Gui Mei* (“无攸利”).³⁴⁸ Red, therefore, is not chaotic or unpredictable; it consistently expresses a two-sided omen structure: dangerous when blood is present, safe when blood is resolved or removed. Its behaviour is patterned, not random.

White, by contrast, is the most predictable colour in *Zhouyi*. The terms white (白), pale-white (*po* 皤), and mottled-white (*jiao* 交) appear five times and are uniformly associated with outcomes such as *wujiu* or *ji*. In *Da Guo* (Hexagram 28), line Six One, “using white mug wort” is presented as a protective and purifying act that yields “no blame.” In *Bi* (Hexagram 22), the statement “white decoration” likewise assures the absence of harm. In *Bi* (Hexagram 22), line

³⁴⁴ Zhouyi, “Kun” 困, hexagram 47, lines 2 and 5.

³⁴⁵ Zhouyi, “Kun” 坤, hexagram 2, line 6.

³⁴⁶ Zhouyi, “Tun” 屯, hexagram 3, line 6.

³⁴⁷ Zhouyi, “Xiao Chu” 小畜, hexagram 9, line 4; “Huan” 涣, hexagram 59, line 6.

³⁴⁸ Zhouyi, “Xu” 需, hexagram 5, line 4; “Gui Mei” 归妹, hexagram 54, line 6.

Six Four, the mention of a “white horse” in a wedding procession signals ritual correctness.³⁴⁹ Even the quasi-white *jiao* (交) in Da You (Hexagram 14), line Six Five, results in an auspicious outcome. Across these contexts, white consistently conveys purity, caution, and reverential solemnity. Its omen-value is not one of triumphant good fortune but rather the steady security of “no blame.” This chromatic pattern corresponds closely to white’s established role in ritual practice, particularly in acts of purification and careful observance, throughout the Shang and early Zhou periods.

Black, however, is conspicuously absent as an omen-bearing colour. Only the term *you* appears, and it does so twice within the phrase “hidden person” (*youren* 幽人)³⁵⁰, where it describes a condition rather than a chromatic quality. In Lü (Hexagram 10), line Nine Two, and Gui Mei (Hexagram 54), line Nine Two, the term occurs in contexts that yield either “correctness and auspiciousness” or a modest benefit, as in “it is beneficial for the hidden person to maintain correctness”. Classical terms for black such as *hei* (黑) or *xuan* (玄), which carry significant cosmological weight in other early Chinese texts, do not appear in the core layers of *Zhouyi*. Their absence is therefore meaningful. Black does not function as a carrier of omen-values in this text, indicating that the chromatic system of *Zhouyi* is selective rather than comprehensive.

Viewed collectively, colour terms in *Zhouyi* display a clear divinatory pattern: yellow is consistently auspicious, white non-harmful, red patterned but ambivalent, and black absent as a symbolic omen, forming a coherent semiotic system rather than isolated poetic usage. Though fragmentary, these instances are internally consistent enough to reconstruct an underlying structure in which colour encodes ritual, social, and cosmological values while guiding divinatory judgment. This system reflects the role of the *bushi* (卜筮), whose dual function as diviners and ritual architects shaped the text, preserving residual colour-omen associations while systematically integrating them into a codified ritual order. *Zhouyi* thus represents the

³⁴⁹ *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [Correct Meaning of the *Book of Changes*], vol. 3, “Da Guo” 大過; vol. 3, “Bi” 賁, ed. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (Beijing: Peking University Press 北京大學出版社, 1999), 136, 110. Regarding Da Guo (Line 6.1): “藉用白茅，無咎” (Using white cogon grass as a mat; no blame). Regarding Bi (Line 6.4): “白馬翰如，匪寇婚媾” (The white horse comes as if on wings; not a robber, but a suitor).

³⁵⁰ *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, vol. 2, “Lu” 履, 80; vol. 5, “Gui Mei” 歸妹, 230. The text for Lu (Line 9.2) reads: “履道坦坦，幽人貞吉”

transformation of shamanic inheritance into structured ritual semiotics and supports the view that *yixue* (易学) and *lixue* (礼学) were fundamentally unified, emerging from the same intellectual milieu to articulate and stabilize Zhou social order.

6.3 The Sacred Connotations of “Yellow”

Among all colour terms in *Zhouyi*, “yellow” (*huang*) occupies a particularly prominent position. It is not only the first colour term to appear in the received text but also the most frequently occurring one, appearing five times in *Zhouyi* proper (excluding compounds such as *xuanhuang* (玄黄) in *Kun*, and zoological references to “yellow cattle” in *Dun* and *Ge*). The five occurrences are found in *Kun*, *Shi He*, *Li*, *Jie*, and *Ding*. Its exalted status can be demonstrated through three dimensions: its uniformly auspicious divinatory outcomes, its symbolic associations with sacred and political objects, and its consistent alignment with central hexagram positions. Taken together, these dimensions reveal how “yellow” in *Zhouyi* embodies the fusion of cosmology, political authority, and moral virtue in early Zhou ideology.

The most immediate indication of yellow’s sacred status lies in its consistently favourable divinatory outcomes. In *Kun* (Hexagram 2), line Six Five states: “Yellow lower garment, primordial fortune (*yuan ji*).”³⁵¹ In *Shi He* (Hexagram 21), line Six Five reads: “Biting dried meat and obtaining yellow metal; firm yet perilous, but without blame.”³⁵² In *Li* (Hexagram 30), line Six Two declares: “Yellow radiance, primordial fortune.”³⁵³ Similarly, in *Jie* (Hexagram 40), line Nine Two records: “Hunting three foxes and obtaining yellow arrows; correctness brings auspiciousness.”³⁵⁴ Finally, in *Ding* (Hexagram 50), line Six Five describes: “The tripod has yellow ears and a golden handle; it is favourable to maintain correctness.”³⁵⁵

³⁵¹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 12; *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [Correct Meaning of the *Book of Changes*], vol. 1, “Kun” 坤, ed. Kong Yingda (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999), 42. The original text reads: “六五：黃裳，元吉”.

³⁵² Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 89, 156; *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, vol. 3, “Shihe” 噬嗑, 112; vol. 4, “Jie” 解, 184. The texts read: “六五：噬乾肉，得黃金”.

³⁵³ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 119; *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, vol. 4, “Li” 離, 145. The original text reads: “六二：黃離，元吉”.

³⁵⁴ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 89, 156; *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, vol. 3, “Shihe” 噬嗑, 112; vol. 4, “Jie” 解, 184. The texts read: “九二：田獲三狐，得黃矢”.

³⁵⁵ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 195; *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義, vol. 5, “Ding” 鼎, 218. The original text reads: “六五：

Out of these five occurrences, two are marked as *yuanji* (元吉, “great fortune”), two as *zhenji* (贞吉, “auspicious in correctness”), and one as *wujiu* (无咎, “no blame despite danger”). This demonstrates that “yellow” was uniquely coded as a bearer of supreme auspiciousness.

Yellow’s exalted connotations are further confirmed by the specific entities it modifies. These may be grouped into a tripartite symbolic system: In *li*, the phrase “yellow radiance” (*huangli* 黄离) links yellow with solar brilliance, as *li* denotes fire, sun, and illumination. Yellow here signifies the harmonizing light of the sun, rooting its sacred meaning in cosmological order. This resonates with late Shang oracle-bone records, in which yellow animals were sacrificed to the “Eastern Mother” (sun deity), reflecting the continuity of solar-veneration traditions.³⁵⁶ ³⁵⁷ *Ding*’s “yellow ears and golden handle” describe the bronze tripod, a symbol of dynastic legitimacy. The golden-yellow hue evokes the sheen of newly cast bronze, long designated as yellow metal. *Jie*’s “yellow arrows” associate yellow with weaponry and ritual archery, signifying divinely sanctioned accuracy and martial authority. *Shihe*’s “obtaining yellow metal” again refers to bronze, here embodying just judgment and judicial authority within the divinatory process.

Through these associations, yellow becomes inseparable from kingship, law, and the ritual order of Zhou society.³⁵⁸ In *Kun*, “yellow lower garment” (*huang shang*) represents not only luxury in dyeing practices but also moral virtue. The hexagram position is the exalted “ruler’s place,” combining centrality and correctness. Yellow attire signifies virtue rooted in moderation and balance—the very embodiment of *zhongde* (中德), “central virtue.” Thus, yellow functions as a visual and ethical code, aligning ritual garments with ideals of humility, balance, and correctness.

The semantic interplay between the colour yellow and the “central position” (*zhongwei* 中位) is particularly striking within the structure of the text itself. Of the five occurrences of yellow

鼎黄耳金鉉，利貞”。

³⁵⁶ Keightley, David N. *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China*. University of California, 2000.

³⁵⁷ Li, Feng. *Early China: A Social and Cultural History*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

³⁵⁸ Bagley, Robert W. “Shang Ritual Bronzes in the Arthur M. Sackler Collections.” The Sackler Collections. Harvard University Press, 1999.

in *Zhouyi*, all are concentrated in the middle lines of the trigrams—specifically at the second and fifth places. Three instances occur at the ruler’s central place (six in the fifth place), while the others appear at the ministerial or central yang places (six in the second place and nine in the second place).

This distribution reflects early Zhou political-philosophical emphasis on “valuing centrality” (*shangzhong* 尚中). As articulated in *Shangshu* chapters such as “*Jiugao*”, the doctrine of walking the middle way (*zhongxing* 中行) shaped Zhou moral and political ideals.³⁵⁹ Yellow thus becomes the chromatic expression of this principle: the colour of moderation, balance, and appropriate positioning.³⁶⁰

In *Zhouyi*, “yellow” transcends mere chromatic reference to emerge as a sacred cultural construct with three interwoven dimensions: Cosmic sacredness: Rooted in solar radiance and ancient sacrificial traditions. Political authority: Materialized in bronzes, arrows, and gold, representing kingship and order. Moral centrality: Encoded in clothing and positional symbolism, aligning with *zhong* (centrality) and *de* (virtue).

Thus, “yellow” in *Zhouyi* is not only a divinatory sign of supreme auspiciousness but also a foundational symbol that integrates cosmology, ritual power, and ethical philosophy. Its role anticipates the later Confucian elevation of yellow as the imperial colour and establishes a long-lasting aesthetic and political tradition in Chinese culture.

6.4 The Decline of Darkness and the Prestige of Light

When the colour vocabulary of *Zhouyi* is examined as a whole, the most striking polarity is the asymmetry between black and white. While white retains a stable ritual and divinatory prestige—consistently associated with reverence, caution, and the avoidance of harm—black virtually disappears as a colour category. The term *you*, which in earlier ritual contexts described the colouration of sacrificial animals, loses its chromatic meaning entirely in *Zhouyi* and

³⁵⁹ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III: The Shoo King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 399.

³⁶⁰ Michael J. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002), 145.

survives only as a descriptor of physical darkness, confinement, and imprisonment. White, by contrast, becomes a sign of careful solemnity and ritual correctness. This transformation marks one of the most decisive shifts within *Zhouyi*'s chromatic worldview: the text turns away from darkness and aligns itself with light, purity, and manifest order.

In the oracle-bone inscriptions, you designated the dark colouration of sacrificial cattle; it was a functional colour term with ritual significance. In *Zhouyi* ancient canon, however, you no longer functions as a colour at all. The text contains no term that unambiguously denotes black, and You appears only twice, both in the sense of “gloomy,” “darkened,” or “enclosed.”

In *Lü* 9.2, “the path is smooth; for the imprisoned man, persistence is auspicious”³⁶¹, the *youren* (幽人) is universally understood by traditional commentators—Yu Fan among them—as one confined in a deep, dark prison, analogous to the inner lines of *Kan* (坎).³⁶² In *Gui Mei* 9.2, “half-blind yet able to see; it is favourable for the imprisoned man to be steadfast”,³⁶³ the same semantic structure reappears: you describes the condition of someone trapped in an unlit, subterranean space.

The imagery of *Kun* reinforces this meaning: “the buttocks are constrained by a log; he enters a dark valley”.³⁶⁴ Here *yougu* (幽谷) is a deep, shaded ravine, evoking the dimness of ancient underground detention chambers “deep rooms” whose defining experiential feature was not their colour but their absence of light. Darkness here is not cosmic or sacred but punitive and claustrophobic.

In *Zhouyi*, then, *you* is not a colour word. It does not participate in any omen-structure; it has lost all connection to mystery or depth. What remains is gloom, enclosure, and the negation of light. Strictly speaking, the ancient *Zhouyi* contains no operative term for black as a colour,

³⁶¹ *The I Ching, or the Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44 (履道坦坦，幽人貞吉).

³⁶² See Yu Fan's commentary in Li Dingzuo, *Zhouyi jijie* (履道坦坦，幽人貞吉). For the English translation, see *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44.

³⁶³ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 211 (眇能視，利幽人之貞).

³⁶⁴ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 182 (臀困于株木，入于幽谷).

and the semantic field of darkness is flattened into the imagery of imprisonment and obstruction. The once-numinous darkness is rendered banal.

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to clarify a terminological problem that often obscures discussions of white in *Zhouyi*. Although later traditions tend to conflate white with plainness or unadorned simplicity, the two terms are not equivalent in the ancient *Zhouyi*, as demonstrated in the following chapter of this dissertation. For this reason, the present analysis deliberately avoids using *su* in place of *bai*. In *Zhouyi*, *bai* is the primary chromatic term for whiteness, and its semantic field centres on purity, reverence, and ritual care, not on the absence of ornament.

A further refinement comes from *Dayou* (大有) 6.5, where the graph *jiao* (交) appears in the phrase “His truthfulness is mutually radiating and majestic; auspicious.”³⁶⁵ Although not obviously a colour term in the received text, the Han Mawangdui manuscript writes *jiao* (交) as *jiao*(绞), and the Er sanzi gloss explains explicitly: “*Jiao* (绞), white.” This reading is confirmed by Zhuangzi “Yufu,” which speaks of “*Xumei Jiao Bai*” (须眉交白, “his beard and brows intertwined in white”).³⁶⁶ Taken together, these sources show that *jiao* (交/绞) functions as a white-colour term, and this line must therefore be included in the white colour corpus of *Zhouyi*. Its divinatory result further strengthens the pattern identified earlier: whiteness in *Zhouyi* consistently correlates with auspiciousness or, at minimum, the absence of harm.

White undergoes the opposite trajectory. Rather than diminishing, it becomes one of the most ritually resonant and divinatory consistent colours in the text. The lexemes *bai*, *po*, and the quasi-white *jiao* appear in three major contexts—all of which reinforce white’s association with careful solemnity and the avoidance of blame.

The first instance is *Daguo* (大过) 6.1: “using white cogon grass, no blame.”³⁶⁷ The structure mirrors that of *Lü* first the diviner cites an image, then delivers a judgment. Most classical

³⁶⁵ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 60 (厥孚交如威如, 吉).

³⁶⁶ Zhuangzi, “Yu Fu,” in *The Texts of Taoism*, trans. James Legge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 192 (须眉交白).

³⁶⁷ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 112 (藉用白茅, 无咎).

commentators, including Wang Fuzhi, understood this line as referencing a suburban sacrifice. The use of white cogon grass in ritual contexts is well attested across early literature. *Tai* and *pi* both mention “uprooting cogon grass by its clump,”³⁶⁸ and commentators such as Lan Jia note that cogon grass is consistently tied to sacrificial practices. In the *Li Sao*, cogon grass is an oracular implement; Shijing “Ye You Si Jun” has the male lover wrap a deer-like animal in white cogon grass, because, as Mao’s commentary states, “white cogon grass is chosen for its purity and cleanliness.” Ritual texts likewise confirm its use: in the *Li*, white cogon grass forms the mat on which nobles are enfeoffed; Zhuangzi speaks of “a special chamber furnished with white cogon grass” and of ritual purification “ten days of fasting, three days of abstinence, seated upon white cogon grass.”³⁶⁹ The whiteness of the cogon grass signals purity, reverence, and the seriousness of sacrificial preparation. It is unsurprising that the divinatory result is “no blame.”

The second instance is *bi* 6.4, which reads: “decorated like pale-white, the white horse’s mane streaming; not bandits but a marriage alliance”.³⁷⁰ Although no explicit judgment follows, the line unambiguously rejects a negative omen. The visual misrecognition of a wedding procession as bandits is resolved through the presence of white, the colour of solemn ceremony. The phrase includes the rare colour term *po* (皤)—glossed in *Shuowen* as “the white of an old man’s hair,” later extended to describe other pale-white things. The text still refers to the animal as a “white horse,” emphasizing that “pale-white” dominates the decoration. The use of white horses for marriage rituals, noted in many cultures and attested in oracle-bone inscriptions and frontier traditions, again underscores the colour’s prestige and ceremonial gravity.

The third and most explicit instance is *bi*: “white decoration, no blame.”³⁷¹ As argued earlier in this dissertation, “white decoration” does not mean “plain and unadorned” but rather “decoration carried out with solemn, reverential whiteness.” Classic commentaries often

³⁶⁸ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 48, 52 (拔茅茹).

³⁶⁹ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), “Zai You” (築特室，席白茅) and “Da Sheng” (十日戒，十日齋，藉白茅).

³⁷⁰ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93 (賁如皤如，白馬翰如，匪寇婚媾).

³⁷¹ *The I Ching*, or, *Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 94 (白賁，无咎).

misunderstood this phrase, taking “white” to mean “returning to simplicity,” but *Zhouyi* uses *su* (素)—not *bai* (白)—to denote the unadorned. Here, white ornament is ritually appropriate and therefore leads to “no blame.”

Across all these uses, white consistently expresses a cultural emotion of reverence, seriousness, and purity. It is never used for trivial description. In each case, the presence of white reliably correlates with the avoidance of harm, and often with safe or auspicious outcomes.

Beyond explicit colour terms, *Zhouyi*’s treatment of brightness (*ming* 明) and darkness reveals a deeper cosmological evaluation. The paired hexagrams *jin* (晉) and *mingyi* (明夷) form the clearest contrast. Jin describes ascent, favour, and honour— “received three times in a single day”,³⁷² while Mingyi depicts brightness injured, a condition of hardship requiring endurance and strategic withdrawal. Darkness itself is not valorised; it is a situation to survive, not a path to wisdom. Light, by contrast, is associated with clarity, visibility, correct timing, and political legitimacy.

The *li*(離) hexagram extends this valuation. In *Ten Wings*, *li* is exalted as “double brightness transforming the world,” the virtue of the great person who “illuminates the four quarters.”³⁷³ The line statements map the course of the day: early light (“yellow brightness”) in 6.2 is supremely auspicious; the westering sun portends danger; the fiery sky at sunset depicts imminent decline; and the triumphant action of the upper line presupposes the return of dawn.³⁷⁴ A similar logic appears in *Yu* (豫), where hesitation in the morning leads to regret while hesitation at night incurs no blame. The text presupposes the ancient habit of rising at dawn and resting at dusk, aligning moral action with cycles of light.

From these examples, a consistent value orientation emerges: *Zhouyi* esteems light and depreciates darkness. Darkness symbolizes restraint, concealment, imprisonment, or danger; light

³⁷² Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagram 35. The original judgment states: “晉：康侯用錫馬蕃庶，晝日三接” (The powerful prince is honored with horses in large numbers. In a single day he is granted audience three times).

³⁷³ *The I Ching, or, Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 118–19 (重明...乃化成天下；大人以繼明照于四方).

³⁷⁴ *The I Ching, or, Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 119–21 (黃離；日昃之離).

symbolizes vitality, correctness, and right timing. This orientation explains white's stability and black's disappearance in the colour vocabulary of the text. White belongs to the domain of ritualized purity and light; *you* belongs to the domain of obstructed darkness.

Putting these strands together, the internal chromatic logic of *Zhouyi* becomes clear. White is the colour of ceremony, reverence, and non-harm. Its uses in Da Guo, Bi, and other contexts show a stable emotional value: white marks actions that are careful, pure, solemn, and therefore safe. Black, on the other hand, is not permitted to function as a sacred or omen-bearing colour. The only term that might serve as its representative, *you*, has been reduced to an image of imprisonment, darkness, and constraint. Any positive cosmological or sacral dimension associated with dark colouration is absent.

This shift is one of the most important internal changes in *Zhouyi*'s colour world. Although yellow rises to occupy the central and most auspicious position, the polarity of black and white reveals an equally significant reorientation: the text abandons the symbolic depth of darkness and consolidates the authority of light. The ancient *Zhouyi* affirms whiteness as careful reverence and rejects blackness as gloom. The text does not merely lack black; it systematically deprives darkness of positive meaning. In this way, the *Zhouyi*'s chromatic system reflects an intellectual and ritual world in which clarity, purity, and visible order have superseded the older resonances of the night.

6.5 Red and Sacrificial Blood

When we turn to “red” in *Zhouyi*, we immediately run into a conceptual difficulty. On the one hand, there are clear red colour lexemes such as *zhu* (朱) and *chi* (赤). On the other hand, several crucial words related to “redness” are not basic colour terms in the strict sense, but rather item names with a strong colour component, such as *xing* in the oracle bone inscriptions (a “red” cow or horse) and *xue* (血, “blood”). These “near-colour” terms must be included if we want to understand how red actually functioned in ritual and divination.

This distinction fits well with Berlin and Kay's classic criteria for basic colour terms: a basic colour term should (1) be monomorphemic, (2) have a colour meaning not predictable from its parts, (3) not be restricted to a narrow class of objects, and (4) be psychologically salient and stable.³⁷⁵ From this perspective, *zhu* and *chi* can qualify as red colour terms, whereas *xing* ("red cattle/horses") fails criterion (3) and *xue* ("blood") fails (2) and (3): they are lexicalized objects whose colour is salient but not generalized.

At the same time, work by Kay and McDaniel has stressed that colour categories themselves should be treated as fuzzy sets: a given hue belongs to one category only by degree; there are more central, prototypical hues and borderline hues that only weakly belong to any one category.³⁷⁶ In this light, "red" in early Chinese is not a crisp, fully abstracted colour category, but a cluster cantered on blood, fire, sun, and certain animals, with terms like *zhu*, *chi*, *xing*, *xue* filling different positions in that fuzzy space.

Chan Buddhist writers once warned that "once something falls from the lips, it is already a gate of death",³⁷⁷ naming freezes what was fluid. Colour terms, as inherently fuzzy and gradable words, occupy a liminal position "between life and death," mediating between sensory reality and linguistic fixation. Red in the *Zhouyi* is precisely such a liminal case: it is both a ritual technology and a semantic bridge between the visible world of blood and fire and the discursive world of omens, rank, and moral judgment.

In what follows, we will first consider *zhu* and *chi* as explicit red colour terms in the *Zhouyi*; second, *fu* (紱/韍/市/鞞) and the red ritual garment in *Kun*; and third, *xue* as a quasi-colour term, focusing on blood sacrifice and its imagery.

In the archaic hexagram text of *Zhouyi*, explicit red colour terms are surprisingly rare. The lexemes *zhu* and *chi* each occur only once, and both appear in Hexagram 47 *Kun*, modifying the same ritual object, *fu* (韍 / 紱 / 市): "Distressed by wine and food, the vermilion knee-apron

³⁷⁵ Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).2

³⁷⁶ Paul Kay and Chad K. McDaniel, "The Linguistic Significance of the Meanings of Basic Colour Terms," *Language* 54, no. 3 (1978): 610–46.

³⁷⁷ Wumen Huikai, *The Gateless Barrier*, trans. Robert Aitken (New York: North Point Press, 1991), 7.

arrives; it is beneficial to perform a sacrifice.” “Subjected to punishment, distressed by the scarlet knee-apron, then slowly joy comes; it is beneficial to perform a sacrifice.”³⁷⁸

The parallelism is striking: both lines are central yang lines (9 in 2nd and 5th place), both use a red colour word to qualify *fu*, and both end with the motif of beneficial sacrifice. This raises a series of questions: What exactly is *fu*? Why must it be red? And why does the text distinguish between *zhufu* and *chifu*?

6.5.1 *Fu* (绂/韦/市): a red, leather ritual apron

There are two main lines of interpretation regarding *fu* (绂/韍). One, going back to Li Jingchi, reads *fu* (绂) as *fu* (袂) and takes it to denote some sort of “barbarian garment,” a tribal costume marked by colour.³⁷⁹ Jin Jingfang follows this line. The other, more widely accepted, is represented by *Shuowen jiezi*, which glosses “韍，篆文市也，” explaining it as an ancient garment that covers the front of the body; the graph *fu* (市) imitates its shape.³⁸⁰ Zheng Xuan’s note to *Shijing* “Chi fu zai gu” (赤芾在股, “Red fu at the thigh”) likewise treats *fu* (芾/韍) as a leather apron attached at the waist and hanging down over the thighs.³⁸¹

Chen Hanping has argued, on the basis of Western Zhou bronze inscriptions such as the Nan-gong Liu ding and Xi ding, that forms like *fu* (绂/韍/韍) are all graphic variants of 市, and that 市 is consistently mentioned alongside other components of the crown and robe ensemble (冕服).³⁸² In these inscriptions, we find gift lists like “... yi nü chi shi, you huang, you le ...” (“... bestowing on her a red *shi*, dark-yellow [garments], and a *you le* ...”), or “chi shi, zhu huang, zhuan qi, you le” (“red *shi*, vermilion-yellow, coiled banners, and *you le*”).³⁸³ Yang Bojun, commenting on *Zuozhuan* “gun, mian, fu, ting,” also identifies *fu* (韍/韍) with *fu* (市/韍) and

³⁷⁸ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagram 47.

³⁷⁹ Li Jingchi 李镜池, *Zhouyi tanyuan 周易探源* (Probing the origins of the Zhouyi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978).

³⁸⁰ Xu Shen 许慎, *Shuowen jiezi 说文解字* (Explaining graphs and analyzing characters), s.v. “韍.”

³⁸¹ Zheng Xuan 郑玄, commentary to “Caishu” 采芣, in *Shijing 诗经* (Book of songs).

³⁸² Chen Hanping 陈汉平, *Jinwen fuzhi yanjiu 金文服制研究* (Research on the clothing system in bronze inscriptions) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986).

³⁸³ Li Xueqin 李学勤 et al., eds., *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng 殷周金文集成* (Collected Shang and Zhou bronze inscriptions) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–94), nos. 2805, 2819.

treats it as one of the standard components of formal crown attire.³⁸⁴ Zheng Xuan's note to *Liji* "Mingtang wei" is explicit "fu is the *bi*, a part of the crown garment."³⁸⁵

Putting these strands together, we can say that *fu* (绂 / 韍 / 韠 / 市) is not a whole set of clothes but a specific element of formal regalia: a leather front apron (*bixi* 蔽膝) hanging from the belt, distinguished by material (tanned hide) and by colour. The proliferation of graphic variants already points to its ritual importance: different graphs could be used to distinguish the apron belonging to crown attire from that belonging to other forms of dress. Zheng's explanation that different names distinguish the decoration of sacrificial robes (*mianfu* 冕服) from those of lower-ranked dress makes this explicit.³⁸⁶ A single object with multiple names and carefully differentiated materials and colours is almost by definition a key marker of rank.

The form of 绂 itself supports this: in small seal script, the character depicts a long vertical strip hanging from the waist, and many scholars see in it the stylized descendant of a prehistoric loin-cloth. The fact that this primordial garment survives in elevated ritual dress, and is especially associated with red, suggests a deep continuity of archaic ritual sensibility: an exposed, vulnerable front of the body is covered with a coloured strip that marks both modesty and status.

6.5.2 *Zhu* (朱) vs. *Chi* (赤): Red and Red

If 绂 is a key element of sacrificial regalia, why are there two different red terms attached to it in *Kun*? It is unlikely that *zhufu* and *chifu* are exactly the same object. *Zhouyi* is far from allergic to repetition; when it introduces small variations in otherwise parallel lines, those variations usually matter.

Drawing on Li Yan's survey of bronze inscriptions, we find that *chifu* is the most recorded combination, while *zhufu* appears only rarely. Moreover, the gifts accompanying *chifu* in inscriptions are relatively modest, whereas those listed alongside *zhufu* are richer and more

³⁸⁴ Yang Bojun 杨伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左传注 (Annotated Chunqiu Zuozhuan) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 405.

³⁸⁵ “韍, 冕服之韠也.” Zheng Xuan 郑玄, commentary to “Mingtang wei” 明堂位, in *Liji* 礼记 (Book of rites).

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

prestigious.³⁸⁷ In *The Grand Scribe's Recording*, “three hundred red fu” refers to a large group of nobles wearing red aprons, whereas “his vermilion fu is august” marks a singularly exalted status.³⁸⁸ Despite small discrepancies among texts, the overall pattern is clear: *zhu* is hierarchically higher than *chi*, a fact that aligns with later statements that *zhu* is the “proper” or most noble shade of red.³⁸⁹ Hu Xinsheng’s study of Zhou ritual attire further shows that red is reserved for relatively unobtrusive components (such as the fu/apron), while the main robe, crown, and skirt do not show a strong preference for red.³⁹⁰

Viewed this way, the contrast between *zhufu* in Kun, nine in the Second Place, and *chifu* in Nine in the Fifth Place transcends colour to reflect social hierarchy. Although both represent elite red ceremonial garb, *zhufu* denotes a superior, fully empowered rank, while *chifu* implies a lesser or compromised position. Consequently, the hexagram's terminology encodes subtle distinctions in political authority.

6.5.3 Kun as a story of Wen Wang

The density of ritual and architectural vocabulary in Hexagram 47 (*Kun*) has encouraged many readers to interpret it as narrating the story of King Wen’s imprisonment. Unlike most hexagrams, *Kun* explicitly mentions a “palace,” whereas other passages frequently refer only to holes, as in Hexagram 5 (*Xu*), which speaks of exiting and entering a hole. In the upper lines of *Kun*, we also find the phrase “oppressed by a metal carriage.” This represents a form of confinement far removed from the crude leather bindings of Hexagram 33 (*Dun*), Six in the Second Place, which describes being bound with the hide of a yellow ox. The final judgment, indicating that constancy brings good fortune for the great man, likewise suggests a person of elevated rank. Ancient sources like *qianzuo du* explicitly interpret *Kun* as pointing to “Wen Wang imprisoned at *Youli*”, and this fits well with the internal evidence: a noble or ruler, trapped, yet still surrounded by ritual paraphernalia. Within this framework, the paired lines

³⁸⁷ Li Yan 李岩, *Xi Zhou jinwen fushi yanjiu* 西周金文服饰研究 (Research on Western Zhou bronze inscription clothing) (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2012).

³⁸⁸ *Shijing* 诗经 (Book of songs), “Sigan” 斯干 (Mao 189) and “Hou ren” 候人 (Mao 151).

³⁸⁹ *Lunyu* 论语 (Analects), 17.18.

³⁹⁰ Hu Xinsheng 胡新生, *Zhoudai zongjiao fashu* 周代宗教法术 (Zhou dynasty religion and magic) (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1999).

Kun, nine in the Second Place and Kun, nine in the Fifth Place can be read as two phases in King Wen's career.

Kun, nine in the Second Place “The vermilion fu is about to arrive; it is favourable to perform sacrificial offerings”. At first, the Zhou clan is poor and weak, “distressed in food and drink”. Then “the vermilion fu is about to arrive”. Rather than an arbitrary southern motif (as in later interpretations that link red to the south through the Five Phases and direction–colour system), this can be understood as the granting of sacrificial authority: the right to wear the vermilion *fu* as part of formal regalia, and thus to perform certain sacrifices. Hence, “it is favourable to perform offerings”. From this perspective, the red fu is not a southern symbol, but an emblem of recognised sacrificial status. Kun, nine in the Fifth Place “distressed by the red fu ... it is favourable to perform sacrifices”. Later, when King Wen is imprisoned and loses effective control over Zhou, his situation is described as “distressed by the red fu”.³⁹¹ He still holds the title and regalia of a high noble, but his power is hollowed out. The choice of *chifu* instead of *zhufu* reflects this empty, merely nominal sacrificial authority—he is still “the one who sacrifices,” but cannot actually govern. This is structurally similar to the story in *Zuozhuan* (Xiang 26), where Wei Huizi is willing to surrender political power so long as “when there is sacrifice, it is still I who preside”: sacrificial prerogative as a hollow shell of rank.³⁹² Kun Nine in the fifth place, captures precisely such a state: ritual red survives, but behind it lies confinement and mutilation (*yiyue* 劓刖, “nose and feet cut”).

In this reading, *Kun* hexagram preserves a historical memory of red as a special sacrificial colour—visible in the fu/apron of formal dress—and simultaneously reflects a nuanced understanding of how colour, rank, and political power may come apart.

³⁹¹ Yijing, Hexagram 47 (Kun), line 5. For standard reference, see Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 432-33.

³⁹² *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Xiang 26. For standard reference, see Stephen Durrant, Wai-yee Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 1145.

6.5.4 *Xue*(血) as a quasi-colour term: red sacrifice and the earth

If *zhu* and *chi* are sparse but highly charged references to red, *xue* is the most important “near-colour” word for red in *Zhouyi*. Psychologically, red tends to carry a double valence—life, vitality, and health on the one hand; death, injury, and danger on the other. Cross-culturally, red’s double symbolism often stems from its dual anchoring in blood, fire, and sun.³⁹³ In many cultures, royal blood spilled on the earth makes the place sacred or taboo, as famously recorded in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*.³⁹⁴

In ancient China, the pattern is somewhat different. Veneration and taboo surrounding blood are less conspicuous; instead, blood is materially integrated into divination and sacrificial practice. One of the standard procedures in shell divination is “*xingu*” (衅龟, “consecrating the turtle with blood.”) *Liji* records that “the Grand Scribe is commanded to consecrate turtle and stalks with blood”,³⁹⁵ even the instrumental objects of divination (turtle plastrons and yarrow stalks) require a blood consecration. In oaths, sacrifices, and the consecration of ritual vessels, smearing with blood is ubiquitous; important ancestral bronzes are completed by being anointed with the blood of a young pig, and similar rites apply to buildings, gates, drums, and weapons. The graph *xue* (血) itself looks like a vessel containing a drop of blood, and its original meaning is precisely “sacrificial blood offered in a container.” In *Shanhaijing*, blood is often poured out as an offering to mountain spirits.

The question, then, is: how does *xue* function in the archaic *Zhouyi* hexagram text? I suggest that most instances of *xue* refer to blood offering, not merely to accidental injury.

The clearest example is found in the top line of *Guimei*: “The woman holds a basket, but there are no fruits in it. The man stabs a sheep, but no blood flows. Nothing is furthered.”³⁹⁶ *Guimei* concerns marriage and the proper arrangement of ties. Li Jingchi cites the *Yili* to explain this

³⁹³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 59–90.

³⁹⁴ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1890), 150–65.

³⁹⁵ *Liji* 礼记 (Book of rites), “Yueling” 月令, in *Liji zhengyi* 礼记正义 (Rectified meanings of the Book of Rites), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元, *Shi sanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 edition (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1362. “命大史衅龟、策”.

³⁹⁶ Li Jingchi 李镜池, *Zhouyi tanyuan* 周易探源 (Probing the origins of the Zhouyi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978), 231. The original text reads: “女承筐无实，士刲羊无血，无攸利”.

line as describing a newlywed couple performing a temple sacrifice: the woman carries a basket with nothing in it, and the man cuts a sheep but finds no blood. Ma Rong glosses *kui* (卦) as “to pierce;” the puzzle is: how can one pierce a sheep and find no blood? The most coherent answer is that this is a dead sheep, whose blood has already drained away. The absence of blood in this context means nothing to offer the ancestors, and so “there is no advantage.”

Other lines speak more directly of pouring out or burying blood. The fourth line of *Xiaoxu* notes “blood vanishes and fear gives way” and the top line of Huan, which similarly advises one to “dissolve his blood.”³⁹⁷ The parallel is obvious: in both, blood “goes,” fear is released, and there is “no blame.” Some later readers, following Ma Rong, emend *xue* to *xu* (恤, “worry, pity”), but this creates an unnecessary detour: the oracle-bone form of *xu* depicts a person standing reverently beside a vessel, and *Shuowen* glosses it as “concern,” not blood. There is no compelling need to reinterpret *xue* as “worry” here. Instead, we can read the lines quite literally: once the blood has been dealt with properly, one’s anxiety disperses.

Youfu (有孚) is the key to interpretation. Traditionally glossed as “having trust/faith,” it has recently been reanalysed by Xie Xiangrong as meaning “to be protected / to protect,” citing passages like “High Heaven protects the people below.”³⁹⁸ If we take *Youfu* in this sense, both lines may be describing a sacrificial act performed under divine protection: because there is such “custody/protection,” as the blood departs and sinks into the earth, fear is released and no harm follows.

This fits well with what we know of blood disposal in ritual. Yang Hua notes that blood collected in a basin and left standing would quickly become polluted or spoiled. The term *wuxin* (污衄) originally describes “dirty blood” (*xin* 衄 as foul blood). To offer such degraded blood to spirits and ancestors would be insulting. Hence, properly conducted sacrifices must ensure that blood is quickly buried or absorbed into the ground: the “going” of blood marks the

³⁹⁷ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagrams 9 and 59. The original text for *Xiaoxu* reads: “有孚，血去惕出，无咎。” Huan reads: “涣其血，去逖出，无咎。”

³⁹⁸ Xie Xiangrong 谢向荣, *Shangshu xungu yanjiu* 尚书训诂研究 (Exegesis and research on the Shangshu) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013).

completion of the rite. In this light, “blood goes, fear goes out, no blame” is almost a ritual formula: the sacrifice has been properly concluded and the danger has passed.

This is confirmed by *Zhouli* “Dazongbo,” which records that blood sacrifices are offered to Sheji (soil and grain), the Five Household Gods, and the Five Marchmounts. If we remember that *Huan* deals with flooding and the dispersal of danger, and “*Xiaoxu*” with agricultural concerns, then reading *xuequ* (血去) as blood sacrifice to the earth fits the semantic and ritual context well.

The same logic clarifies the Xu hexagram: “Waiting in blood. Get out of the pit.”³⁹⁹ If xu is understood only as “to wait,” then “to wait in blood” is puzzling. But if we read it against the background of domestic blood sacrifice, and understand *xue* here as sacrificial blood poured into a pit or depression, then the line describes someone who stands in or by the blood until it has soaked into the earth, and then “comes out of the pit/hole.” Li Jingchi argued that *xue* should be understood as “dwelling place / dug-out dwelling” rather than “trap,” which matches *Xici*’s remark that ancient people “dwelt in caves and lived in the wild”⁴⁰⁰. *Liji*, “*Wangzhi*” states that commoners sacrifice “in the sleeping chamber,” which in early stages could be a simple earth-pit dwelling. On this reading, Xu depicts an ordinary household conducting a blood sacrifice at home, standing in the sacrificial blood until it drains away; only then is it safe to emerge.

Only two lines in the archaic *Zhouyi* clearly use *xue* in a purely violent or descriptive sense, unrelated to sacrificial procedure: “his blood is dark and yellowed” and the variant readings of “weeping blood in streaming torrents”.⁴⁰¹ Here *xue* simply underscores extreme suffering. But the majority of *xue* occurrences can be understood as blood offered in sacrifice, whether in the temple or on the earth.

³⁹⁹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagram 5. The original text reads: “需于血，出自穴”.

⁴⁰⁰ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 331. The original text from the *Xici* (Great Treatise) states: “上古穴居而野处”.

⁴⁰¹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagrams 2 and 3. The original text for the top line of Kun states: “其血玄黄” (his blood is dark and yellowed), and the top line of Zhun states: “泣血涟如” (weeping blood in streaming torrents).

Taken together with the scarcity and ritual restriction of explicit red terms *zhu* and *chi*, this suggests that in the Shang–Zhou context red and red-related phenomena, especially blood, were largely reserved for sacrificial use. While in many cultures red quickly becomes a generalized emblem of joy, love, or danger, in *Zhouyi* red is still closely tied to ritual, sacrifice, and the handling of life-and-death forces.

6.6 Decoration, Colour, and Reverence in Hexagram *Bi* (贲)

Hexagram 22 *Bi* provides the most explicit reflection in *Zhouyi* on decoration understood broadly as ornamentation, embellishment, and the visible surface of things. Since colour is one of the fundamental forms of ornament, *bi* offers crucial evidence for understanding the aesthetic and ethical assumptions that structure the *Zhouyi*’s emerging colour system. Rather than elevating or rejecting a particular hue, the hexagram articulates a principle: decoration is legitimate when it accords with propriety and sincerity, and it becomes dangerous only when it exceeds its rightful measure. Within this framework, white acquires special significance: it represents the most reverent, solemn, and morally secure form of ornament in the text’s own symbolic order.

The term *bi* is defined in early lexicography as *shi* (飾, “to adorn.”)⁴⁰² Gao Heng further demonstrates that *bi* originally indicated multicoloured decoration, suggesting a concrete association between *bi* and visible differentiation.⁴⁰³ Yet *Zhouyi* employs *bi* not merely descriptively but normatively: it evaluates decoration within a moral framework of *wen* and *zhi*.

The progression of the line statements reveals this ethic with clarity. The first line describes decoration extended even to the toes.⁴⁰⁴ The accompanying behaviour, walking instead of riding to display such adornment, implies excess. Although no explicit judgment appears, the ominous tenor is unmistakable the second and third lines, by contrast: “Grace to the beard” and

⁴⁰² Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining graphs and analyzing characters), s.v. “贲.”

⁴⁰³ Gao Heng 高亨, *Zhouyi dazhuan tonglun* 周易大傳通論 (General discussion of the Great Commentary of the Zhouyi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956), 112–15.

⁴⁰⁴ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 90. “贲其趾.”

“Gracious and moist; perseverance brings good fortune”.⁴⁰⁵ *Zhouyi* thus rejects ornamentation that overturns proper relations while affirming the necessity of measured refinement.

As the hexagram proceeds upward, the focus broadens from individual adornment to ritual and social display. Line six-four introduces the sight of elaborately adorned travellers mistakenly taken as bandits, but correctly identified as a wedding procession.⁴⁰⁶ Lines six-five and upper nine extend Theme further, discussing decoration in the subdued, solemn environment of “Grace in hills and gardens” and concluding with the statement “White grace. No blame.”⁴⁰⁷ The cumulative message is consistent: ornamentation must be guided by propriety (*yi* 义), sincerity, and the ethical alignment of substance and expression. It is neither intrinsically positive nor intrinsically corrupting; rather, its value depends on measure.

The phrase “White grace. No blame”⁴⁰⁸ has often been misread by later commentators through the lens of moralistic simplicity, especially after the Han dynasty, with the assumption that “white decoration” signifies the absence of decoration. Yet this interpretation is untenable within the symbolic structure of the ancient text itself.

Modern readers frequently equate *bai* with *su*, but *Zhouyi* does not. The graph *su* appears only once in the ancient canon, in *Hexagram 10 Lü*: “Wearing simple shoes. Progress without blame.”⁴⁰⁹ Classical sources consistently understand *su* not as a colour but as the state of being unadorned, undecorated, or in one’s original material condition. *Zhouli*, when describing *sulü* (素屨), makes clear that *su* refers to the removal of ornament. In *Zhouli*, “plain shoes” were specifically designated for solemn ritual occasions, such as mourning or specific sacrifices, where the absence of dyed silk borders and embroidery signalled a return to the root (*ben* 本). This confirms that *Su* functions as a material category (raw, undyed silk or leather) rather than

⁴⁰⁵ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 92. The original text for Hexagram 22 reads: “二：贲其须” and “三：贲如，濡如；永贞吉”.

⁴⁰⁶ Zhouyi, “Ben” 贲, Hexagram 22, line 4, in *Shi sanjing zhushu*, 19. The original text states: “贲如皤如，白马翰如。匪寇，婚媾”.

⁴⁰⁷ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagram 22. The original text reads: “六五：贲于丘园” and “上九：白贲，无咎” (White grace. No blame).

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), Hexagram 10. The original text reads: “素履往，无咎”.

a simple colour term.⁴¹⁰ Early commentarial traditions, from Zheng Xuan to Jia Gongyan, confirm this understanding.

This distinction is essential. If the authors of *Zhouyi* intended to praise unadorned naturalness, they would have written *subi* (素贲), not *baibi* (白贲). The deliberate choice of *bai* (白) demonstrates that the line does not advocate the absence of decoration. Instead, it praises a specific form of decoration characterized by solemnity and moral clarity.

Zhouyi consistently associates white with reverence, formality, and ritual gravity. In Shang and early Zhou ritual practice white sacrificial animals, white objects, and even white horses appear in high-stakes ritual contexts: sacrifices to royal ancestors, offerings during transitions, and important divinatory events.

Taken as a whole, *bi* establishes an aesthetic-moral principle that stands at the foundation of *Zhouyi*'s colour world: 1. Decoration is not rejected; excess is. 2. Colour is meaningful, but not all colours are equal. 3. White stands at the apex of rightful ornamentation—reverent, clear, and morally secure. The central concern of the hexagram is not the beauty of decoration but its rightness. Ornamentation expresses and reveals moral intentionality. White decoration is without blame because it signifies solemn reverence rather than ostentation. This is not a Confucian or Daoist reworking but an articulation internal to *Zhouyi*'s own symbolic logic. *Bi* recognizes that human beings adorn themselves and their rituals. The question is not whether decoration exists, but what kind of decoration accords with righteousness. White becomes the exemplary answer: a decoration whose surface expresses, rather than obscures, the sincerity beneath.

⁴¹⁰ Zheng Xuan 郑玄, commentary to “Juren” 屨人, in *Zhouli* 周礼 (Rites of Zhou), Shi sanjing zhushu edition 十三经注疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 263.

7. Continuity and Transformation in Shang and Zhou Heaven Worship

7.1 The Primordial Source of Yellow: Heavenly Light, Not Earthly Soil

For centuries, scholarly interpretation of the colour yellow has been overshadowed by the later framework of Five Phases, in which yellow was simply equated with the Earth virtue (*tude* 土德) and taken as the emblem of the centre and the soil. Yet when traced back to its earliest attestations in oracle bone inscriptions and *Zhouyi*, it becomes clear that such an association is a relatively late theoretical construction rather than an ancient, immutable truth. The original meaning of yellow in the Shang–Zhou period was not rooted in the soil, but in the Heavens, specifically in the brilliance of sunrise and sunset.

7.1.1 Yellow is not Earth: A Retrospective Systematization

The conception of yellow as the colour of earth is already a product of Warring States and Han dynasty systematization. Texts such as the *Yi Zhoushu*, “*Zuoluo*”, which describes the “central region piled with yellow earth,” or Sima Qian’s *Shiji*, which claims that “the Earth virtue is auspicious, its colour is yellow, hence the Yellow Emperor,” reflect the retroactive imposition of Five Phases cosmology upon earlier tradition. Modern scholars like Allan and Gu Jiegang have shown that such interpretations are constructed for political cosmology—articulating “all under Heaven belongs to the king” through coloured soils—rather than revealing the original cosmological source of yellow.⁴¹¹ Even the anecdote of Duke Chong’er receiving a clod of earth (as a token of sovereignty) demonstrates that earth itself had not yet become universally sacred in the Spring and Autumn period. The sanctification of soil was still under construction.

(1) Reassessing the Origin of “Yellow = Earth”

The statement “yellow represents the central earth” has long been treated as a primordial truth of Chinese cosmology. Within the mature Five Phases system, yellow appears as the natural

⁴¹¹ Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 75–80.

emblem of the central earth, harmoniously complementing the directional schema of blue–east, red–south, white–west, and black–north. Yet this symmetrical arrangement, far from reflecting a preexistent worldview, is a philosophical construction formulated during the Warring States period.

This chapter argues that the fixed pairing of *huang* (yellow) and *tu* (earth) was not an indigenous belief of the Shang and Zhou periods, but rather the product of a cosmological abstraction projected from Heaven downward. The early concept of *tu* centered on sovereignty and the cult of the territorial deity *she* (社), while *huang* initially denoted the brilliance or luminosity associated with Heavenly phenomena. Only later, through the rationalization of the Five Phases system, was *huang* assigned to the “central earth” as its symbolic colour.

Drawing upon oracle bone inscriptions, bronze texts, and canonical sources, this chapter reconstructs the gradual process by which a Heavenly colour came to be attached to a terrestrial element.

(2) Shang and Zhou Foundations: Tu as Territory and Cult without Chromatic Meaning

In the Shang oracle corpus, *tu* appears primarily in ritual contexts, denoting both the sacred ground of sacrifice and the bounded domain of royal authority. In Heji 14395, for instance, the formula “to burn offerings upon the earth” reveals *tu* as the object of sacrifice—the divine substrate identified with the She, the earth deity. Similar expressions recur throughout Heji 14392–14400: “praying to the Earth,” “do not perform the burnt offering to the Earth,”⁴¹² demonstrating that *tu* served as a ritual entity, the locus where human and divine communication intersected.

At the same time, other inscriptions, such as Eastern Lands, Southern Lands, and Western Lands,⁴¹³ employ *tu* as a political designation, territory under royal control. The meaning here is spatial and administrative rather than physical. Tu marks dominion, not matter.

⁴¹² *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集, ed. Guo Moruo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978–1982), nos. 14392–14400. The original inscriptions include “禱于土” and “勿燎于土” (do not perform the burnt offering to the Earth).

⁴¹³ Guo Moruo, ed., *Jiaguwen heji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978–1982), nos. 17397, 20576.

In the earliest records, *tu* signified sacred land and political space. It bore no association with chromatic categories. The idea of “earth as yellow” was utterly foreign to the Shang worldview, where the focus lay on the divine governance of land, not on its sensory qualities.

Western Zhou bronze inscriptions preserve the same semantic field. The Da Yu ding declares, “receiving the people and receiving the bounded lands”,⁴¹⁴ which is a foundational expression of the Mandate of Heaven. And the Zongzhou Zhong records the phrase “to zealously strengthen the territory”.⁴¹⁵ Here, *tu* is not merely dirt but a “bounded” (*jiang* 疆/疆) political reality. Both expressions of territorial consolidation under Heaven’s Mandate. Likewise, the “Eight Decrees of Early Zhou”⁴¹⁶ in the *Shangshu* treat *tu* as the tangible symbol of political legitimacy, where the possession of the soil often symbolized by the building of a state altar (*she* 社)—is the ultimate confirmation of legitimate rule granted by the high powers.

In “Kanggao”, we read: “You, young lord, are enfeoffed in this eastern land”,⁴¹⁷ and in “Jiugao”, “They lead their carts and oxen far away to engage in trade, filially nourishing their parents”, describing life upon the appointed fief.⁴¹⁸ Here, *tu* signifies granted territory and ancestral stewardship, embedded in moral and political order.

From oracle bones to Zhou bronze inscriptions, *tu* consistently functions as a theological-political term. Its meaning revolves around possession, sacrifice, and divine sanction. No textual evidence indicates a colour association.

The earliest significant occurrence of *huang* appears in *Zuozhuan*, Duke Yin, Year One: “I shall not meet her until we reach the Yellow Springs.”⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁴ “受民受疆土.” Da Yu ding 大盂鼎, in *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成 (Collected Shang and Zhou bronze inscriptions), ed. Li Xueqin 李学勤 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–94), no. 2837.

⁴¹⁵ Zongzhou zhong 宗周鐘, in *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–1994), no. 260. “勤疆土.”

⁴¹⁶ *Shangshu* 尚书 (Book of documents), “Zhou guan” 周官.

⁴¹⁷ “汝小子封在兹东土.” *Shangshu* 尚书 (Book of documents), “Kang gao” 康诰, in *Shangshu jiaoshi yi zhu* 尚书校释译论 (Critical edition, translation, and commentary on the Shangshu), ed. Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚 and Liu Qiyu 刘起锜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 1085.

⁴¹⁸ *Shangshu*, “Jiu gao” 酒诰, in *Shangshu jiaoshi yi zhu*, ed. Gu Jiegang and Liu Qiyu (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), 1132. “肇牵车牛，远服贾用，孝养厥父母。”

⁴¹⁹ Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 15. The original text reads: “不及黄泉，无相见也”

Traditionally, *huangquan* has been read as the “underworld,” its colour derived from the turbidity of subterranean water mixed with mud. Yet this very description indicates that the colour yellow was not inherent to the soil itself, but perceived in the reflected hue of water absorbing light from above. The yellow of the *huangquan* is therefore derivative of light, not of earth—it is the hue of illumination filtered through darkness.

This duality became a powerful cosmological metaphor. The colour yellow, arising from the interplay between Heaven’s radiance and the earth’s opacity, stands symbolically between brightness and obscurity, central among colours as the balance between yin and yang. Its origin, however, lies in the celestial brightness descending upon the terrestrial realm, not in the soil’s own chromatic quality.

The Grand Scribe’s Recording attests to a developed colour vocabulary—red, black, white, and blue appear frequently in ceremonial and royal imagery. The *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry) preserves these ritual associations: for instance, the “*Bigong*” of “*Lusong*” (鲁颂·閟宫) speaks of the “dragon banners employed in sacrifice, “while the “*Daya*” poem “*Hanyi*” (大雅·韩奕) describes the ceremonial “dark robes and red slippers.”⁴²⁰ These colours belong to the realm of ritual spectacle—banners, robes, divine processions—each associated with light, display, and Heaven’s favour.

By contrast, *the Classic of Poetry’s* usage of *tu* remains bound to territory and cultivation: “clearing the lands and fields of the Earl of Shen” and “The plain of Zhou was rich and extensive; even the bitter herbs were sweet as syrup”.⁴²¹ The soil here is fertile, but its colour is never described. This silence reinforces the point: colour belonged to the Heavenly register of signs, not to the earth.

⁴²⁰ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics, Vol. IV: The She King* (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 547, 624. The original text reads: “龙旗承祀” and “玄袞赤舄”.

⁴²¹ *Shijing* [Classic of Poetry], “Songgao” (Mao 259) and “Mian” (Mao 237). For a standard English reference, see Arthur Waley, trans., *The Book of Songs* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 246, 282. “彻申伯土田” and “周原膴膴，堇荼如飴”.

Thus, even when “yellow” emerges as a visible category through images like *huangquan*, it remains a Heaven-descending illumination, not a property of matter. The colour appears when Heaven’s light touches the earth—but not as an intrinsic attribute of the soil.

(3) The Warring States Synthesis: From Celestial Symbol to Philosophical Earth

The Warring States period marks the systematization of colour within an increasingly explicit cosmological framework. The *Yugong* (禹贡, “Tributes of Yu”), later incorporated into the *Shangshu*, provides the earliest structured classification of soil by colour and texture: Xuzhou “厥土赤埴坟” (red, clayey soil), Liangzhou “厥土青黎” (greenish-black soil), and Yongzhou “厥土惟黄壤” (yellow loam). While often read as empirical geography—associating “yellow” with the loess of the Central Plain—the text’s organization indicates a symbolic scheme. The Nine Provinces are arranged around a cosmological center, and Yongzhou, assigned yellow soil, represents the political and cosmic centre rather than a purely geophysical region. “Yellow” here signifies centrality: the projection of a celestial axis onto terrestrial space, expressing the mandate to order and stabilize the realm.

This logic is formalized in late Warring States Five Phases cosmology, which correlates colours, elements, and directions into a systematic model of Heaven–Earth correspondence. Within this schema, *tu* occupies the centre and is assigned *huang*, defined as the median between light and darkness. This association is not derived from the observation of soil but follows a top-down cosmological logic grounded in the notion of “central light” (*zhongguang* 中光), the radiance mediating yin and yang. Yellow, as the colour of this central luminosity, is imposed upon earth to signify its mediating role. “Yellow earth” thus constitutes a metaphysical correspondence rather than a naturalistic description.

(4) Conclusion: The Heavenly Descent of “Yellow Earth”

The evolution of the “yellow = earth” pairing traces a movement not from *below upward* (from soil to symbol) but from *above downward* (from Heaven to earth).

Period	Meaning of <i>Tu</i> (Earth)	Meaning of <i>Huang</i> (Yellow)	Relation
Shang–Western Zhou	Territory, ritual ground, divine domain of <i>She</i>	Not yet associated; colour belongs to Heaven’s light	None
Spring and Autumn	Territorial and sacrificial concept	Appears in <i>huangquan</i> as descending illumination through water	Intermediary, light reflected through earth
Warring States	Earth reclassified as “central element”	Heavenly colour of central radiance projected onto soil	Symbolic imposition
Han and after	Earth as axis of cosmos, “yellow” as imperial hue	“Yellow” canonized as the colour of central Heaven and thus of Earth	Full cosmological descent

In this light, the *Yugong*’s “yellow soil” and the Five Phases’ “central yellow” are not empirical reflections of geography but symbolic appropriations of Heaven’s light. The colour *huang*, as the median between brightness and obscurity, became the emblem of the central axis — first celestial, then terrestrial, finally political and imperial.

The “yellow earth” is therefore not a natural colour but a philosophical invention, marking the moment when Heaven’s brilliance descended to define Earth’s order.

7.1.2 Yellow as Heavenly Radiance

The graph *huang* (黃) itself provides crucial evidence. While *Shuowen* glossed it as “the colour of earth,” the character is graphically composed of “*tian*” (田, “field”) and “*guang*” (光, “light”), with *guang* functioning both phonetically and semantically. This reveals its original association with brightness. Early exegetical texts reinforce this: the *Erya* glosses *huang* (晃) as “dazzling”; *Guangya* equates it with *hui* (暉, “radiance”); and the *Fengsu tongyi* states explicitly: “*Huang* means light.” Taken together, these sources form a philological chain of evidence pointing to an initial meaning of *huang* as luminous brilliance. From this perspective, yellow did not derive from soil but from the most striking Heavenly phenomenon visible to ancient observers: the radiant glow of sunrise and sunset, in which red and yellow intermingle. Yellow, then, was not simply a colour, but a manifestation of divine light.

The oracle bone inscriptions provide direct confirmation of this interpretation. Yellow cattle were not sacrificed to earth deities but were predominantly offered to the Eastern Mother or to eastern directional powers—almost certainly solar divinities.⁴²²⁻⁴²³ The ritual logic follows

⁴²² Chen Mengjia 陳夢家. *Yinxu buci zongshu* 殷墟卜辭綜述. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1956.

⁴²³ Keightley, David N. *Sources of Shang History: The Oracle-Bone Inscriptions of Bronze Age China*. Berkeley: University

sympathetic magic: by offering yellow-bodied animals, Shang ritualists mirrored and invoked the yellow brilliance of sunrise in the east, thereby communicating with the sun deity and securing divine favour. Similarly, in *Zhouyi*, the hexagram *Li* (離, “Fire / the Sun”) contains the phrase: “Yellow radiance: great auspiciousness”. Here yellow is not a terrestrial pigment but the harmonized brilliance of the sun’s light. The auspiciousness derives precisely from its Heavenly luminosity. The sanctity of yellow, in its earliest conception, lies not in earth but in Heavenly light. Its later association with the Earth virtue reflects philosophical systematization and political symbolism rather than primordial belief. In the oracle inscriptions and in *Zhouyi*, yellow is anchored in the observation and worship of solar radiance—a sacred hue descending from the Heavens, illuminating the world, and embodying vitality and cosmic order. Recognizing this earlier layer not only restores the original cosmological significance of yellow, but also reveals how Shang–Zhou colour thought emerged from natural phenomena and ritual needs, long before it was codified into abstract Five Phases theory.

7.2 The Banalization of *You* (幽): From Sacrificial Colour to the Semantics of Confinement

In the transitional era between the Shang dynasty and Western Zhou dynasty, the semantic evolution of key vocabulary provides a vital lens through which to trace deeper ideological and cosmological shifts. The character *you* exemplifies this phenomenon. In the oracle-bone inscriptions at Yinxu it originally functions as a sacred colour term, describing the hue of sacrificial victims; by the time of the archaic text of *Zhouyi*, it has lost that ritual function and instead refers to “prisoner” (*youren* 幽人) and “sunless valley” (*yougu* 幽谷). This process of semantic “banalization” mirrors the shift from Shang cosmology, rooted in nocturnal observation and star-rituals, to Zhou ideology, which increasingly privileges daylight, solar order, and clarity.

In the Shang ritual and cosmos, *you* carried a specifically elevated meaning. In the Yinxu oracle-bone divinations, *you* appears repeatedly as a designation for the coat-colour of sacrificial animals — notably oxen and antelopes — and typically in the context of important ritual

offerings: “Divining: Sacrifice a dark ox to Xiao Yi on the *mao* day; the King shall receive assistance. Auspicious”; and “Specifically a dark ox, and also a yellow ox”.⁴²⁴

These cases demonstrate that animals identified as “you-coloured ox/antelope” (*youniu* 幽牛 / *youzhi* 幽騂) were selected for ritual use, not casually described. At this stage, *you* co-exists semantically with other colour-terms such as *huang* and *xing* in precisely the domain of sacrificial value.

A key point is that in many oracle-bone inscriptions the characters *you* and *hei* appear together on the same piece, such as: “Divining on the *Dingchou* day: Sacrifice a black ox to ancestress Geng; it should be used. Specifically, a red ox. Specifically, a dark ox. Specifically, a yellow ox” (Tunnan 2363).⁴²⁵ This co-occurrence shows that Shang scribes made subtle chromatic distinctions: *You* is not simply ‘black’. Rather, it appears to indicate a specific shade, potentially one with a tenuous bluish cast or a deep lustrous sheen, whose ritual significance is not reducible to the generic ‘black’. This supports the observation that *you* carried a distinct Spectro-ritual meaning.

The *Shuowen jiezi* glosses *you* as “hidden, concealed”,⁴²⁶ yet palaeographically the oracle-bone form of *You* apparently shows a lower component resembling a flickering flame. Some scholars suggest the original sense may have been something like “a small fire” or “the faint glow in darkness”, picking up on the idea of dim light within night-space (which ties to the fungible material of night-stars or sacrificial smoke). This reading gives *you* an aura of numinous darkness, rather than mere darkness.

The statistical study of the so-called “You-phonological group” in old Chinese further supports that *you* belonged to a semantic field of darkness, hiddenness or secrecy rather than simply colour.

⁴²⁴ Yinxi huayuanzhuang dongdi jiagu 殷墟花園莊東地甲骨 (Huadong), no. 34; Xiaotun nandi jiagu 小屯南地甲骨 (Tunnan), nos. 4420, 763; and Jiaguwen heji 甲骨文合集 (Heji), no. 14951. The original inscriptions include: “辛卯卜: 子宜, 夷幽騂. 用”; “夷幽牛”; “卜: 小乙卯夷幽牛, 王受又. 吉”; and “夷幽牛, 又黃牛.”

⁴²⁵ *Xiaotun nandi jiagu* 小屯南地甲骨, vol. 1, pt. 2, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 2363. The original inscription reads: “丁丑卜: 匕庚史夷黑牛, 其用隹. 夷騂牛. 夷幽牛. 夷黃牛”

⁴²⁶ Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 187.

In short, at this stage it is a sacred colour-term deployed in ritual sacrifice, intimately tied to the late Shang cosmology of night, stars, and sacrificial communication.

By the time of the Zhou era (as represented in the textual layer of the *Zhou Yi*), the semantic field of *you* underwent a profound reorientation: its sacrificial, chromatic meaning faded, and it became associated with darkness, confinement, and entrapment.

A first observation is that the chromatic sense of *you* disappears in the archaic Zhou Yi: there is no attested instance of *you* functioning as a colour term. Instead, its core meanings narrow to (1) *you* as “the imprisoned person” and (2) *you* as “the dark valley/sunless ravine”.

In the *Zhou Yi*, *youren* clearly denotes a captive. For example, in Hexagram *Lü* (履), Nine in the Second Place: “Treading the path that is level and easy; for a prisoner, perseverance brings good fortune.”⁴²⁷ Yu Fan explains that the second line lies in the *Kan* (坎) “prison/trap,” hence the designation “you-man.” Gao Heng, citing the *Jiaoshi Yilin* (焦氏易林), “Entrapped and bound by officials; the you-man finds joy”⁴²⁸ confirms that *youren* refers to a person in bondage.

Similarly, *yougu* signifies a condition of darkness and confinement. In Hexagram *Kun* (困), Initial Six: “One’s buttocks are oppressed by a wooden stump; he enters a dark valley and for three years sees no one.”⁴²⁹ Here, the “dark valley” metaphorically expresses deep entrapment and bleakness, immediately associated with obscurity and inaccessibility.

Although the phonetic-graphic relation between *you* and *qiu* (囚) remains uncertain, their conceptual linkage is strong. Early forms of confinement (e.g., “placed in a deep room”)⁴³⁰ describe prisons as underground, light-deprived spaces. The defining features of such spaces with darkness, depth and invisibility, correspond to the semantic field of *you*. Thus, when Zhou texts

⁴²⁷ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 45. The original text reads: “九二：履道坦坦，幽人貞吉”.

⁴²⁸ Gao Heng 高亨, *Zhouyi gujing jinzhushu 周易古經今注* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 118. Gao Heng cites the *Jiaoshi Yilin* 焦氏易林: “執囚束縛，官司所告，幽人有喜”.

⁴²⁹ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 182. The original text for Hexagram 47 reads: “初六：臀困于株木，入于幽谷，三岁不覿”.

⁴³⁰ Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals"* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 1121. The text describes: “寘諸深室”.

employ you, the primary association is no longer a sacred coat-colour but the darkness of spatial and existential confinement. The semantic shift proceeds from place to person: from you-valley to you-man. Later idioms such as “to see the sky again” and “to see the light again” preserve this underlying schema of light as freedom and darkness as imprisonment.

This transition, from a sacred sacrificial colour to a mundane term of confinement, is not merely lexical but indexes a broader cosmological and ideological shift in early China, particularly in the valuation of light and darkness.

This shift can be framed as a movement from a Shang “night–stellar” orientation to a Zhou “day–solar” regime. In the Shang context, ritual life was closely tied to the night sky: divination and calendrical reckoning involved stellar observation (e.g., the “Great Fire Star” 大火星), and many sacrifices were conducted at night. The term you, connoting dim luminosity within darkness, aligns with this nocturnal sensibility; texts such as *Shangshu* refer to “dark-coloured victims” (*xuansheng* 玄牲),⁴³¹ indicating the ritual value of darkness.

By contrast, the Zhou ritual and calendrical framework privileges diurnal order. Practices such as “Observing the times of the sun”⁴³² become normative, and the model of “sunrise to work, sunset to rest” structures social and ritual life. In this context, brightness, visibility, and clarity acquire positive moral and cosmological valence, while darkness, and with it the semantic field of *you*, is relegated to a negative domain.

The internal logic of the Zhou Yi reflects this revaluation. Hexagram *Li* emphasizes brightness, praising the “yellow brilliance” of dawn while warning against the decline of “sunset brilliance.”⁴³³ Hexagram *Jin* celebrates the advance of light (“day-sun thrice meeting”), whereas *Mingyi* depicts the wounding of light, associated with adversity. Within this symbolic system,

⁴³¹ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III: The Shoo King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 177. The original text from the Tang Gao 湯誥 reads: “玄牲”.

⁴³² James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III: The Shoo King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 18. The text notes the practice of “觀日之辰”.

⁴³³ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 119. The text for Hexagram 30 refers to “黃離，元吉” (Yellow light; supreme good fortune) and warns of the “日昃之離”.

colours such as yellow and white mark auspiciousness and nobility, while the dark domain associated with you is displaced to the negative underside of the text's value structure.

Thus, the decline of *you* as a sacrificial colour and its transformation into a term of confinement reflects the shifting root-metaphors of the cosmos: from star-lit night to sun-lit day; from chthonic depth to open surface; from ritual darkness toward moral transparency.

The semantic history of *you* offers a rich micro-historical window into the broader transformation of ancient Chinese thought. In the oracle-bone corpus, *you* is a sacred sacrificial colour, a testament to the Shang world's orientation toward the night, the stars, and ritual mediation of the unseen. By contrast, in the *Zhou Yi*, *you* has been de-sacralised and moralised: it now manifests as the plight of the prisoner or the dark valley, signalling an ideological pivot toward daylight, clarity, and confinement.

8. Ten Wings: Moralising the Colours of Heaven

In the art of Peking opera facial makeup, different colours signify sharply distinct moral characters: red for loyalty and righteousness, black for integrity, white for deceit, and yellow or ochre for profound virtue. This mode of moral-colour symbolism already took shape clearly in *the Great Commentary of Zhouyi*.

8.1 The Mean of Colour: Yellow as the Paradigm of Centrality

The fifth line of *Kun* (坤) reads: “Yellow skirts, supreme fortune”.⁴³⁴ Although this line occupies the honoured fifth position—traditionally the sovereign's seat—and embodies the yielding virtue of *Kun*, the precise correlation between “yellow skirts” and its auspicious judgment is not immediately apparent. The “Xiang zhuan glosses: “‘Yellow skirts bring supreme fortune’—the pattern lies within”.⁴³⁵ The *Shuogua zhuan* further characterizes *Kun* as possessing

⁴³⁴ “黄裳，元吉。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes* [Yi Jing 易经], trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 12.

⁴³⁵ “黄裳元吉，文在中也。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes* [Yi Jing 易经], trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

wen, understood by Wang Su as “ornamentation,” such that the central line corresponds to inward pattern, or ornamentation residing in the proper place.⁴³⁶ Later commentators generally moralized *Wen* as “inner grace,” but this is likely a retrospective reading. In its earlier sense, *wen* refers to visible pattern or decorative colour; thus, in this passage, *Wen* most directly denotes the chromatic ornamentation of the yellow skirt.

Yellow, moreover, is the colour of the centre (*zhongse* 中色) in early Chinese cosmology. This notion is reflected in expressions such as *Huangdao* (黃道)—the sun’s ecliptic—as well as in traditional commentaries. Li Dingzuo, citing Gan Bao, explicitly states: “Yellow is the colour of the centre.”⁴³⁷ In *Tianwen xun* (天文訓) chapter of the *Huainanzi*, the “Yellow Path” represents the sun’s steady, predictable course. When the five planets deviate from their alignment with this path or cross into forbidden celestial regions, it is interpreted as a manifestation of qi imbalance caused by the ruler’s failure to maintain earthly order.⁴³⁸ Within the system of the five colours, yellow symbolizes balance, impartiality, and the harmonizing mean. Thus, “pattern within” can be read chromatically: the central position occupied by the yellow skirt visually and symbolically embodies the middle way, aligning moral centrality (*dao zhong*) with spatial centrality. This resonates with the *Ten Wings*’ doctrine of “rectifying positions.”

The *Wenyan* of *Kun* deepens this idea: “The gentleman, being yellow within, comprehends principle. Upright in his position and complete in his person—beauty resides within and flows through the four limbs, manifest in his deeds: this is the utmost beauty.”⁴³⁹ Here the gentleman’s moral cultivation is expressed through colour. His balanced, moderate disposition corresponds to yellow’s cosmological centrality. Yellow thus becomes an emblem of inward harmony radiating outward into action.

⁴³⁶ Shuogua zhuan 說卦傳; Wang Su 王肅, comm., in *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義 [Correct Meaning of the *Book of Changes*], ed. Kong Yingda 孔穎達 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980).

⁴³⁷ Li Dingzuo 李鼎祚, *Zhouyi jijie* 周易集解 (Collected Explanations of the *Zhouyi*), vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 42–44.

⁴³⁸ John S. Major, *Heaven, and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the Huainanzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 69–72.

⁴³⁹ *Zhouyi*, “Wenyan,” Kun: “君子黃中通理，正位居體，美在其中，而暢於四支，發於事業，美之至也！” See also Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

Elsewhere in the *Zhouyi*, yellow is again associated with centrality and auspiciousness. In *Li*, the second line states: “Yellow radiance, supreme fortune.”⁴⁴⁰ Because the second line occupies the central position of the lower trigram, the “Yellow Radiance” (*huangli* 黃離) represents a balanced, internal clarity that leads to “supreme fortune.” The *Xiang* explains: “Yellow radiance brings supreme fortune—attaining the mean.”⁴⁴¹ “Yellow radiance” refers to the sun at its zenith, occupying the centre of Heaven, just as the second line occupies the central position of the lower trigram. The *Xiang* contrasts the stability of centrality with the decline of the sinking sun—attaining the mean brings fortune; deviation leads to decay.

In the *Jie* (解) hexagram, the auspicious omen “obtaining yellow arrows”⁴⁴² is explained as the effect of “attaining the central way.”⁴⁴³ The *Ding* (鼎) hexagram likewise interprets “the cauldron’s yellow ears” as “cantered, thus able to contain substance.”⁴⁴⁴ In each case, yellow signals the virtue of containment, balance, and central alignment.

The Wenyan continues to expand colour symbolism into moral cosmology. Immediately following its praise of the gentleman as “yellow within,” it introduces the line: “Xuan and Huang are the mixture of Heaven and Earth—Heaven is dark (xuan), Earth is yellow (huang).”⁴⁴⁵ The Shuowen defines “mixed” (*za* 雜) as “the blending of the five colours.”

Interpreters long debated what “understanding principle” signifies. The *Zhouyi Zhengyi* glosses it as “understanding the principles of things,” while the *Zhouyi dazhuan jinzhu* interprets it as “comprehending reason in affairs.” Both readings are too narrow. Since the gentleman models himself after Heaven and Earth, the “principle” here must be the principle of Heaven and Earth itself. The *Hanshang yizhuan* affirms: “Principle is central correctness, the common source of all things.” Thus, the subsequent phrase “upright in position, complete in form” becomes

⁴⁴⁰ *Zhouyi*, “Li,” 6/2: “黃離，元吉。” See also Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 320.

⁴⁴¹ “得中道也。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 119.

⁴⁴² Jie line text: “執用黃牛，固志也。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 584.

⁴⁴³ Xiang zhuan on Jie 6/2: “九二貞吉，得中道也。” *The I Ching*, 585.

⁴⁴⁴ Xiang zhuan on Ding 6/2: “鼎黃耳，中以為實也。” Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 451.

⁴⁴⁵ Wenyan zhuan to Kun: “夫玄黃者，天地之雜也，天玄而地黃。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

intelligible: “form” (*ti* 體) refers to the human body, and “upright position”⁴⁴⁶ means that the central virtue symbolized by yellow is established in the body's core, radiating outward through the limbs. The physiology of colour becomes a moral metaphor.

Whether or not a codified system of upper–lower garments existed at this stage, the text's deeper message is clear: moral and aesthetic beauty must emulate the natural harmony of Heaven and Earth, and colour is the medium through which this harmony is expressed. In Confucian thought, aesthetic form and ethical substance are inseparable.

Finally, the union of centrality and uprightness is repeatedly emphasized. The Yuan scholar Wu Cheng observed: “To be strong yet balanced, firm yet not excessive—this is to be both central and upright.”⁴⁴⁷ In the *Zhouyi*, uprightness (*zheng* 正) is alignment with Heaven's way, enabling each being to fulfil its nature. The Guan Tuan chapter affirms: “By centrality and uprightness, one observes the world,”⁴⁴⁸ implying that governance aligned with natural order achieves kingly success.

8.2 White as the Essence of Simplicity

The first line of the *Lü* hexagram reads: “Simple steps—no fault.”⁴⁴⁹ Gao Heng explains this through the *Zhouli*'s catalogue of footwear— “red shoes, black shoes, red bindings, yellow bindings, green sandals, white shoes, hemp shoes”—to confirm the historical existence of “plain shoes”. The graph *Lü* originally meant “to tread,” later extended to mean “shoes,” a point unanimously accepted by commentators. Most interpreters conclude: plain shoes represent unadorned simplicity—moderation without ornament—and conduct rooted in such simplicity remains blameless.

⁴⁴⁶ Zhu Zhen 朱震, *Hanshang yizhuan* 漢上易傳 (Hanshang Commentary on the Changes), Siku quanshu edition, vol. 7, 12.

⁴⁴⁷ Wu Cheng, *Yi zuan* 易纂 (Collected Comments on the Changes), quoted in *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 412.

⁴⁴⁸ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 486.

⁴⁴⁹ “素履，往无咎。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Wilhelm, d Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44.

The *Book of Rites* records that in ancient times, before the kings had hemp and silk, “they wore feathers and furs.” Only later did people “observe the patterns of birds and the brilliance of flowers,” dyeing silk to imitate them and thus creating garments of five colours. Early clothing—made from hides or feathers—was largely without dye, emphasizing the primordial condition of *su*. Thus “plain colour” came to symbolize an unembellished, pristine state and a return to primal simplicity. This valuation of *the unadorned* is strikingly consistent with early Confucian aesthetic ideals. Although we usually attribute this sensibility to Confucianism, the *Zhouyi* itself shows that such a preference for simplicity and moderation predates Confucius—revealing continuity rather than borrowing.

The *Ten Wings* identify *Lü* not merely with walking, but with the moral act of “treading” upon propriety. The *Da Xiang* interprets: “Above is Heaven, below is the marsh; this is Lu. The gentleman thereby discerns high and low and stabilizes the people’s will.”⁴⁵⁰ The *Xugua* adds: “When things are gathered, propriety arises; thus follows *Lü*.”⁴⁵¹ Cui Jing therefore concludes: “*Lü* means *li*. When things are amassed without harmony, the gentleman first cultivates virtue, then guides through propriety.”⁴⁵² These interpretations show that within the Ten Wings system, *Lü* and *li* are essentially synonymous: propriety begins not with ornament but with disciplined plainness.

The *Xiao Xiang* deepens this message: “The going of the plain steps—this means to walk alone with sincerity.”⁴⁵³ The *Xiao Xiang* (Lesser Symbolism) commentary clarifies that the simple steps of the first line are not merely about external simplicity, but internal autonomy. Here, *yuan* (愿) conveys sincerity of intention. This line emphasizes that plainness is a moral attitude. Gao Heng interprets: “He who acts with simplicity and sincerity can pursue his will alone.”⁴⁵⁴ The Qing scholar Li Shizhen further expands: “Plain means unadorned. At the beginning of

⁴⁵⁰ chard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 44, 442. The original text reads: “上天下澤，履。君子以辨上下，定民志。”

⁴⁵¹ Wilhelm and Baynes, *The I Ching*, 443. The original text reads: “物畜然後有禮，故受之以履。”

⁴⁵² Li Dingzuo 李鼎祚, *Zhouyi jijie 周易集解*, vol. 3, ed. Wang Fengxian (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 142. The original text reads: “履，禮也。物畜而後不和，君子先修德，後以禮導之”

⁴⁵³ “素履之往，独行愿也” Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 205.

⁴⁵⁴ Gao Heng 高亨, *Zhouyi gujing jinzhu 周易古經今注* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984), 117;

walking the path, one holds no position; outwardly not seeking, inwardly not losing uprightness; to act from plainness is to act without dependence on ornament. The beginning of plainness is the root of propriety.”⁴⁵⁵ Thus, *su* becomes the origin of *li*: the ground from which all correct conduct arises.

“Xugua” (序卦) situates this dialectically: “*He* (合) means union; yet things cannot be joined casually, so *Bi* follows. *Bi* means ornamentation. When ornamentation reaches its height, decline follows; thus comes *Bo* (剥, Stripping).”⁴⁵⁶ The *Zagua* strikingly declares: “*Bi*—colourless.” Ornament and colourlessness appear contradictory, yet Cheng Yi resolves this: “Substance and ornament depend on one another; the highest ornament returns to simplicity.”⁴⁵⁷

This pattern is vividly expressed in *Bi*. The fourth line states: “Ornamented yet white; the white horse with wings—no bandits but a marriage.”⁴⁵⁸ The top line adds: “White ornament no fault.”⁴⁵⁹ The *Xiang* comments: “The fourth line is in its proper place—though doubtful, since the union is not robbery but marriage, there is no blame.”⁴⁶⁰ For the top line: “White ornament—no fault, for he attains his will.”⁴⁶¹ Yu Yue and Jiao Xun interpret “ornamented yet white” as “though adorned, still calm and pure.” White here is not merely descriptive; it denotes ethical clarity, sincerity, and plain dignity. In the *Zhouyi*, the whiteness of a horse or garment conveys moral luminosity—purity both of perception and intention.

This theme appears again in *Daguo* (大过) “Using white reeds as mats—no fault.”⁴⁶² The *Xiang* explains: “Using white reeds as mats—this is softness below.”⁴⁶³ White reeds evoke

⁴⁵⁵ Li Shizhen 李士珍, *Zhouyi zhangju 周易章句* (Taipei: Guangwen shuju, 1970), 82. The text reads: “素者，無飾也。方履之初，無位可居，外無所求，內不失正，由素而行，是不待文飾而行也。素履之初，為禮之本。”

⁴⁵⁶ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 503, 506; The original Xugua text reads: “盍者合也，物不可以苟合而已，故受之以賁。賁者飾也。致飾然後亨則盡矣，故受之以剝。”

⁴⁵⁷ Cheng Yi 程頤, *Henan Cheng shi Yichuan Yizhuang 河南程氏伊川易傳* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 162. The *Zagua* text reads: “賁，無色也。” Cheng Yi’s commentary reads: “質與飾相待而行，至飾則復於質。”

⁴⁵⁸ “賁如皤如，白馬翰如，匪寇婚媾。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93.

⁴⁵⁹ “白賁，无咎。” *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴⁶⁰ “六四當位，疑也；匪寇婚媾，終无尤也。” *Ibid.*, 504.

⁴⁶¹ “白賁无咎，上得志也。” *Ibid.*, 505.

⁴⁶² “藉用白茅，无咎。” *Ibid.*, 111.

⁴⁶³ 柔在下也 *Ibid.*, 526.

ritual purity: the simplest, cleanest sacrificial foundation. This echoes *su*—unadorned sincerity in offering.

Returning to the broader chromatic cosmology, the *Kun* hexagram provides foundational reflections. The fifth line declares: “Yellow skirts—supreme fortune.” The *Xiang* explains: “The pattern lies within.”⁴⁶⁴ The *Wenyan* expands: “The gentleman, being yellow within, comprehends principle; upright in position and complete in form; beauty resides within, spreads to the four limbs, and manifests in action—this is the utmost beauty.” Here yellow symbolizes the central colour—balance, moderation, harmonizing virtue. The *Wenyan* continues: “Xuan and Huang are the mixture of Heaven and Earth—Heaven dark, Earth yellow.”⁴⁶⁵ Thus yellow becomes the emblem of cosmic centrality, and the harmony of Heaven–Earth is expressed through colour.

In *Li*, the second line reads: “Yellow radiance—supreme fortune.”⁴⁶⁶ The *Xiang* commentary explains that “yellow radiance brings supreme good fortune” because it “attains the mean.”⁴⁶⁷ This imagery evokes the sun at its zenith, where the colour yellow signifies centrality and moral correctness. Within the hexagram *Jie*, the phrase “obtaining yellow arrows”⁴⁶⁸ indicates that one has attained the central way. Likewise, in the hexagram *Ding*, the “yellow ears”⁴⁶⁹ of the ritual cauldron are described as cantered and thus capable of containing substance. Across *Zhouyi*, yellow consistently functions as a signifier for containment, balance, and central alignment.

Thus, *Zhouyi* treats colour as a structured symbolic system. White signifies purity and sincerity; yellow embodies centrality; red conveys illumination and vitality; black expresses profundity

⁴⁶⁴ 文在中也。The *I Ching, or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

⁴⁶⁵ 夫玄黄者，天地之杂也，天玄而地黄。The *I Ching, or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

⁴⁶⁶ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 119. The original text reads: “六二：黄离，元吉”。

⁴⁶⁷ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395.

⁴⁶⁸ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 156. The original text reads: “九二：得黄矢”。

⁴⁶⁹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 195. The original text reads: “六五：鼎黄耳”。

and receptive potential. *Zhouyi* transforms chromatic qualities into a lexicon of moral, ritual, and cosmological meaning. Its valuation of plainness, moderation, centrality, and simplicity anticipates—and in many ways forms the foundation of—later Confucian aesthetics.

8.3 The Changing Fate of Red: From Sacred Blood to Ominous Stain

Among the most revealing transformations between *Zhouyi* and *Ten Wings* is the changing meaning of red and its intimate association with blood. In the archaic ritual world underlying the *Zhouyi*, blood carried a deeply sacred force. It sanctified altars, sealed offerings, empowered rites, and mediated between human beings and the ancestral spirits. Red, in this setting, was not a mere colour but the visible manifestation of vitality. In Shang and early Western Zhou sacrificial culture, blood was revered and feared—an instrument of shamanic communication and religious potency. Traces of this worldview remain in *Zhouyi* proper, where red ceremonial garments such as *zhufu* or *chifu* appear in contexts of sacrifice: “One is oppressed by food and drink. The man with the red brush-apron is coming. It is furtherant to offer sacrifice.”⁴⁷⁰ Or “One is oppressed by the red brush-apron. Then one slowly settles. It is furtherant to offer sacrifice.”⁴⁷¹ Here, red is solemn, powerful, and efficacious, its danger lying not in impurity but in its ritual force.

Yet the *Ten Wings* present a radically different sensibility. In the commentarial layer, blood has lost its sacred valence and becomes a symbol of harm, misfortune, and danger. The most striking example appears in the last line of the *Huan* hexagram: “He disperses his blood. Departure at a distance, going out. No blame.”⁴⁷² Regardless of whether one reads *ti* (逖/惕), the commentators are unambiguous in their interpretation: what matters is that the blood goes away. The *Xiang* elaborates: “He disperses his blood; this is to keep at a distance from injury.”⁴⁷³ to disperse or remove one’s blood is to distance oneself from danger. Even Cheng Yi’s conjecture

⁴⁷⁰ “困于酒食，朱紱方来，利用享祀。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 183.

⁴⁷¹ “困于赤紱，乃徐有说，利用享祀。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 626.

⁴⁷² “涣其血去逖（惕）出，无咎。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 231.

⁴⁷³ “涣其血，远害也。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm, and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 695.

that the line should read “The blood departs, and anxiety (fear) goes out.”⁴⁷⁴ though unsupported by any manuscript, shows how firmly the tradition understood blood as something one must escape. In the world of the *Yizhuan*, blood no longer means ritual power; it means harm.

This transformation becomes even more pronounced in the *Shuogua*, which describes the symbolism of *Kan*: “In man, it means an increase of anxiety, distress of mind, pain in the ears; it is the blood-trigram; it is red.”⁴⁷⁵ Here, red and blood appear alongside sorrow, physical illness, and pain. In this context, red is explicitly the colour of suffering. It no longer evokes sacrificial dignity, but physical and emotional distress. The semantic proximity between *xue* (血) and *chi* (赤) in this passage makes clear that, by the time the *Ten Wings* were compiled, red had become an omen of affliction rather than a ritual medium.

Such a reversal cannot be separated from historical change. The later Eastern Zhou, during which the *Ten Wings* likely took form, was a period vastly different from the world that produced the divinatory statements of *Zhouyi*. By the Spring and Autumn period and especially the Warring States, blood sacrifice had already diminished in both scale and religious centrality. Philosophical schools increasingly moralized ritual, shifting emphasis toward propriety, correctness, and the ethical formation of the gentleman rather than ecstatic or shamanic acts. As the authority of shamans waned and textualized ritual norms grew, the sacred charisma of blood correspondingly dissolved.

At the same time, the Eastern Zhou was an era saturated with violence. Frequent battles, political assassinations, organized warfare, and large infantry campaigns made blood a daily sight on the battlefield. In such a world, blood no longer belonged primarily to the altar but to war. Its associations naturally shifted from divine vitality to human injury, death, and trauma. What earlier signified the solemn force of sacrifice now conjured images of suffering and loss. Red, too, followed this emotional logic: instead of the colour of ritual power, it became the mark of danger, misfortune, and ominous outcomes. When the *Ten Wings* speak of dispersing blood to

⁴⁷⁴ “血去惕出,” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 700.

⁴⁷⁵ “其于人也为加忧，为心病，为耳痛，为血卦，为赤。” *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 271.

avoid harm or associate red with sorrow and pain, they are capturing a sensibility shaped by these later historical realities.

This explains why the chromatic semantics of the *Ten Wings* differ so sharply from those of *Zhouyi*. The earlier text still speaks from within a world in which blood is powerful, solemn, and religiously charged. *Ten Wings*, however, reflect a world in which blood sacrifice has lost its central place, shamanic traditions have faded, and warfare has redefined blood as a sign of danger rather than sanctity. The change in the meaning of red thus becomes internal textual evidence of the chronological distance between *Zhouyi* and its commentaries. It is not a mere exegetical shift but a cultural transformation that marks the transition from an ancient sacrificial cosmos to an ethical-philosophical worldview.

In this sense, the fate of red in the *Yizhuan* is emblematic of a larger shift in early Chinese thought. What once was sacred becomes ominous; what once mediated divine presence now signals harm and fear. Through the changing semantics of red and blood, we can trace the fading of ancient ritual practice and the emergence of a new, morally charged interpretation of signs—one shaped by the violence, intellectualization, and ritual reforms of the Eastern Zhou. Red's transformation from sacred blood to ominous stain reveals not only the evolution of textual layers but also the profound changes in the emotional and symbolic life of early Chinese culture.

8.4 A Mode of Thinking within Early Chinese Cosmology and Ethics

The colour passages in the *Ten Wings* are not just marginal glosses on a divination manual; they reveal a distinctive mode of thinking in which colour connects cosmology, ritual practice, emotion, and ethical evaluation. Many of these valuations later resonate strongly with attitudes associated with *ru* (儒, Confucian) thought, but they are equally rooted in broader early Chinese discourses on yin–yang, astronomy, ritual mourning, and moral physiognomy. Colours in the *Ten Wings* thus form part of a larger transformation: from concrete omens in the archaic *Zhouyi* hexagram text to an interpretive language that shapes how the world is ordered and judged.

A first step in this transformation is the cosmologization of colour. The *Wenyan* states: “Now, as for the dark and the yellow, they are the mixture of Heaven and Earth; Heaven is dark and Earth is yellow.”⁴⁷⁶ Here “dark” (玄) and “yellow” (黄) no longer denote specific pigments alone, but the two poles of Heaven and Earth. The term “za (杂),” glossed in *Shuowen jiezi* as “the five colours combined,” presupposes an underlying spectrum structured by the alternation of yin and yang. In Han Yong’s reading, the *Yi* itself grew out of reflection on *yinyang* understood concretely as sun and moon, the two great lights observed in early sky-watching.⁴⁷⁷ Technical astronomical terms such as *huangdao* (黄道, “ecliptic”) and *baidao* (白道, “lunar path”), as well as colour-bearing celestial figures like *xuanniao*, likewise arise from sustained observation of the changing sky.⁴⁷⁸ A related imagination appears in Gao You’s quotation from the lost *Guizang* in his commentary to the *Shanhaijing*: “When we look up to Heaven, it is now bright, now dark; then the sons of Xi He come forth from the Valley of the Sun.”⁴⁷⁹ The alternation of “one bright, one dark” is literally an alternation of colour-states in the Heavens, which provides a natural background for the Ten Wings’ repeated association of *xuan/hei* (玄/黑) with Earth, danger, and sorrow, and of yellow with the luminous centre.

This way of thinking presupposes a more general Chinese pattern of colour cognition, in which the path runs from object to perceived colour, and to new object. The *Liji* “*Jian zhuan*” chapter explains the coarse mourning cloth *ju* (苴) in precisely these terms: Why does one wear coarse hemp (*ju*) for the deepest mourning? *Ju* is an ugly appearance; it gives outward form to what is inside.”⁴⁸⁰ Sun Xidan notes that *ju* is hemp with the husk still on it, “its colour blackish-brown,”⁴⁸¹ and Yang Tianyu observes that those in profound grief have a darkened complexion

⁴⁷⁶ “夫玄黄者，天地之杂也，天玄而地黄。” Yang Jun 杨军, ed., *Zhouyi jingzhuan jiaoyi* 周易经传校异 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2018), 39.

⁴⁷⁷ Han Yong 韩勇, *Taiyi lun* 太易论 (Jinan: Shandong Youyi chubanshe, 1998), esp. his argument that the *Yi* originates in reflections on yin–yang as sun and moon.

⁴⁷⁸ While the specific essay by Han remains elusive in standard databases, texts discussing *Taiyi* (The Great One) often analyze how these color-coded, observable phenomena were integrated into ancient cosmological models. For a comprehensive look at how observational color terms mapped onto celestial mechanics in early Chinese cosmology, see John S. Major, *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought*: Chapters Three, Four, and Five of the *Huainanzi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 84–86.

⁴⁷⁹ Guo Pu 郭璞, commentary to *Shanhaijing* 山海经注解, quoting *Guizang* 归藏: “瞻彼上天，一明一晦，有夫羲和之子出于阳谷。”

⁴⁸⁰ *Liji* 礼记, “斩衰何以服苴? 苴, 恶貌也, 所以首其内而见诸外也,” “*Jian zhuan*” 间传, in Yang Tianyu 杨天宇, *Liji yizhu* 礼记译注, vol. 2 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2010), 769.

⁴⁸¹ Sun Xidan 孙希旦, *Liji jijie* 礼记集解, vol. 1, ed. Shen Xiaohuan 沈啸寰 and Wang Xingxian 王星贤 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 862.

which this material resembles.⁴⁸² The sequence follows a “Phenomenon-Colour-Phenomenon” logic. It moves from a concrete internal state (sorrow) to a visible physical sign (facial color) and finally to a codified ritual object (mourning dress). The Ten Wings apply this same logic on a larger scale, projecting emotional and ethical states onto colours and then using those colours to regulate external forms—garments, offerings, and omens. Within this framework, the Ten Wings develop a distinctive colour-ethics and colour-aesthetics that will later be easily read through Ru lenses, though it is grounded in a wider set of early practices.

Yellow is consistently elevated as the paradigm of *centrality* and *measure*. In the *Kun* hexagram, line 6/5 reads: “Yellow skirt: primordial good fortune”.⁴⁸³ In itself, this line simply depicts a garment; the *Xiang* commentary gives it a structural interpretation: “The yellow skirt, great good fortune—pattern in the centre”.⁴⁸⁴ Later exegetes such as Wang Su gloss *wen* here in line with *Kun* as “pattern,” located in the central fifth place.⁴⁸⁵ If we retain “wen” in its early sense of *ornament/pattern*, “文在中” points directly to the yellow of the garment as a visual sign of central position. Li Dingzuo, citing Gan Bao, explicitly calls yellow “the colour of the centre”.⁴⁸⁶ Because yellow occupies the middle place among the five colours, it becomes an emblem of *zhongdao* (中道) and of having the appropriate position (*wei*)—a logic entirely in harmony with the Ten Wings’ concern with “being in or out of place”.

The *Wenyan* makes this mapping explicit: “The gentleman’s yellow-cantered understanding penetrates principle; occupying the correct position in his person, beauty is within; it flows through the limbs and issues in his undertakings—this is beauty at its utmost.”⁴⁸⁷ Yellow here is not mere dye but the chromatic metaphor of an inner, cantered disposition. A similar pattern appears in *Li* 6/2 “Yellow radiance, great good fortune”, which the *Xiang* glosses as “it attains the middle way”.⁴⁸⁸ Since *Li* stands for light and radiance, “yellow Li” is best understood as noonday sunlight, when the sun hangs in the middle of the sky just as line 2 sits in the middle

⁴⁸² Yang, *Liji yizhu*, vol. 2, 769.

⁴⁸³ Yang, *Zhouyi jingzhuan jiaoyi*, 31. “黄裳，元吉”。

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 38. “黄裳元吉，文在中也。”

⁴⁸⁵ Li Dingzuo 李鼎祚, *Zhouyi jijie 周易集解*, quoting Gan Bao 干宝, *ibid*.

⁴⁸⁶ Yang, *Zhouyi jingzhuan jiaoyi*, 39.

⁴⁸⁷ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395. “君子黄中通理，正位居体，美在其中，而畅于四支，发于事业，美之至也！”

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 249, 253. “得中道也”

of the lower trigram. Further examples reinforce this: Jie 9/2 “In the field, three foxes are taken; he gets a yellow arrow; constancy is auspicious” is explained.⁴⁸⁹ *Ding* 6/5 “The cauldron has yellow ears, a metal handle; it is favourable to be constant” likewise receives a cantered reading in the *Xiang*: “The cauldron has yellow ears: it is filled from the centre”.⁴⁹⁰ In *Ge* (Hexagram 49, Revolution) and *Dun* (Hexagram 33, Retreat), the “yellow ox-hide” represents an unbreakable resolve or a secure bond. Yellow signifies the balanced path of the mean, while the leather hide symbolizes a material that is pliable yet exceptionally tough.⁴⁹¹ Across these occurrences, yellow condenses a broader evaluative pattern: central, stable, and measured—qualities that later Ru thinkers will also praise, but which here emerge from the internal architecture of the hexagrams and their trigrams.

White, by contrast, is associated with plainness, sincerity, and the priority of substance over ornament. In *Lü* “Plain sandals: going forth brings no blame” depicts undyed footwear.⁴⁹² The *Liyun* chapter of the *Liji* notes that before the advent of silk and dyeing, people wore feathers and hides; only later did they “observe the patterns of pheasant and peacock, and the splendid colours of flowers, then dye silk to imitate them, thus first making the five-colour garments for clothing.”⁴⁹³ *Su* thus originally means uncoloured, unadorned, close to natural materials. The *Xiang* gloss “Going forth in plain sandals: he walks alone according to his resolve” turns this visual plainness into sincerity of intention.⁴⁹⁴ The colour white appears in the I Ching as a symbol of essential purity and spiritual sincerity. In Hexagram 22 (*Bi*), white horses and “white adornment” suggest a beauty that transcends external decoration. In Hexagram 28 (*Daguo*), the use of “white thatch” for a ritual mat represents a foundation of extreme care and reverence.⁴⁹⁵ In these passages, whiteness marks clarity, harmlessness, and the removal of suspicion: the white horse signals peaceful intent rather than attack; the white mat ensures that the sacrificial

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 314, 316. “田获三狐，得黄矢，贞吉” and “九二贞吉，得中道也。”

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 383, 387. “鼎黄耳，中以为实也”。

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 270, 273, 379–80. “巩用黄牛之革” and “执之用黄牛之革。”

⁴⁹² Ibid., 120. 初九，“素履，往无咎”。

⁴⁹³ *Liji* 礼记, “Liyun” 礼运, in Yang, Liji yizhu; see also Fan Ye 范晔, *Hou Hanshu* 后汉书 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 3661, on “观翠翟之文，荣华之色，乃染帛以效之，始作五采，成以为服。”

⁴⁹⁴ Yang, *Zhouyi jingzhuan jiaoyi*, 125. “素履之往，独行愿也”。

⁴⁹⁵ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 93, 111. “贲如皤如，白马翰如，匪寇婚媾” (“Adorned, white and bright; a white horse with flowing mane; it is not bandits but marriage”) “白贲，无咎” (“White adornment, no blame”), as well as *Daguo* “初六“藉用白茅，无咎” (“Using white thatch as a mat: no blame”).

offering does not contaminate the altar. The Ten Wings thus articulate a colour-aesthetic that privileges light, sparse, and honest presentation over dense or alluring decoration.

Red is treated more ambiguously, but in many contexts, it is associated with blood, affliction, and dangerous excess. *Shuogua* characterizes the trigram *Kan* as (“It signifies added sorrow, heart-sickness, earache, the blood hexagram, and red”).⁴⁹⁶ Here the equation of “blood” (血) and “red” (*chi* 赤) is followed by a list of distressing states, so that red becomes a sign of emotional and physical burden. Several hexagrams present blood as either disturbingly abundant or conspicuously absent. In Zhun hexagram (Hexagram 3, “Initial Difficulty”), the transmitted version reads “Riding a mottled horse, tears flow down”,⁴⁹⁷ but alternative traditions recorded by Hui Dong and the Mawangdui silk manuscripts give “泣血涟如” or “汲血连如,” intensifying the image into streaming bloody tears; the *Xiang* concludes, “With tears streaming, how can this last long?”⁴⁹⁸ In the *Guimei* (Hexagram 54, “The Marrying Maiden”), the final line depicts “The woman carries a basket with no substance; the man cuts the sheep and finds no blood; there is nothing beneficial”,⁴⁹⁹ which presents the opposite: a bloodless sacrifice that has lost all efficacy. The Tuan explains this as a structural impropriety: “Nothing is beneficial because the soft rides over the hard”. Here “no blood” signals a ritual form emptied of inner power. In Hexagram 59 (Huan, Dispersion), the *Xiang* commentary interprets “dispersing his blood” as “distancing harm”, so that only when blood—and thus danger—is dispersed does harm recede.⁵⁰⁰ Taken together, these passages show how the Ten Wings integrate concrete blood imagery into a broader ethical and psychological map of danger, imbalance, and the need to restore order.

This pattern has echoes elsewhere in the Ten Wings. In Hexagram 47 (Kun, Oppression), the Ten Wings develop a paradoxical theme: internal joy and ultimate blessing can persist even

⁴⁹⁶ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 279. “为加忧，为心病，为耳痛，为血卦，为赤。”

⁴⁹⁷ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 19. “乘马班如，泣涕涟如”。

⁴⁹⁸ Edward L. Shaughnessy, *The First Way of the I Ching: The Yijing of the Zhou* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 142. “[泣涕涟如]，何可长也”。

⁴⁹⁹ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 213. “女承筐无实，士刲羊无血，无攸利。”

⁵⁰⁰ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 213, 230. “无攸利，柔乘刚也”。

when one is physically or socially hemmed in. While the core text describes being “entangled in food and drink”, the Xiang commentary identifies an “inner rejoicing”. This spiritual resilience is attributed to “inner straightness” (*zhongzhi* 中直), which allows for a gradual release from hardship and ensures that ritual sacrifices remain efficacious.⁵⁰¹ Here properly ordered sacrificial consumption transforms a potentially harmful indulgence into a medium of inner joy and received blessing. Although colour words are not explicit in these lines, they form an important counterpart to the bloody, ominous images elsewhere: properly prepared and offered food—which in practice would be full of concrete colours—neutralizes the dangers associated with uncontrolled red blood and unregulated appetite.

Seen against this wider background, the Ten Wings’ way of thinking in colour is not isolated. It belongs to a larger spectrum of ancient Chinese practices that associate colours with moral character, social roles, and cosmological positions. Much later, Peking opera facial make-up systematizes this intuitively: red faces symbolize loyalty, black faces uprightness, white faces treachery, yellow and ochre deep and resolute understanding.⁵⁰² This is a late, theatrical crystallization of an older habit of using colour as a shorthand for virtue and vice. The Ten Wings already provide a sophisticated early instance of this habit: yellow stands for central, stable correctness; white for plain, sincere substance; red/blood for affliction, imbalance, and risk; black/dark for grief and illness; and “dark–yellow” for the primordial polarity of Heaven and Earth.

In this sense, the Ten Wings offer not only a commentary on *Zhouyi* but also a nodal point in the history of Chinese colour thought. Their mode of colour-thinking draws together observational astronomy, yin–yang theory, ritual codification, and moral psychology. Later Ru texts, ritual writings, and even popular performance traditions will find their own ways of developing and systematizing these associations, but the Ten Wings already articulate a coherent chromatic language in which the world is read, judged, and ordered through colour.

⁵⁰¹ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 181, 184. “困于酒食”, “中有庆也”, and “[乃徐有说], 以中直也; [利用祭祀], 受福也”.

⁵⁰² He Weiwei 何伟伟, “Qiantan Jingju lianpu de secai yanjiu” 浅谈京剧脸谱的色彩研究, *Yishu keji* 艺术科技 28, no. 4 (2015): 138–39.

9. Confucius, Heaven, and the Reinterpretation of Colour

Like everything is regulated to a crumb in rituals, *Lunyu* also preserve this character including our discussion topic which is colours. In the following section, firstly I will enumerate examples using colours rigidly. During this process, we may find some cases that exceed our anticipation thus deserving further research and constituting the main part of this article. Lastly, there are fragmented aphorisms of Confucius and his disciples directed at the perceptions of colour showing the philosophical traits of *Lunyu*. And what are their perspectives? We will probe into these questions one by one. Moreover, Confucius himself is also related to colours in legends about his birth and posthumous title, again emphasizing the significance of colours in Confucianism discourses.

9.1 Confucianism: From Shamanic Origins

There is a traditional assertion that the Confucian school derives from Shamans. In a very early stage, the Western Han dynasty's *Qi Lue* (七略, "Seven Summaries") says "Confucian and its followers are probably out of the official position Situ. They help monarchs to tune up *yin* and *yang* and illuminate the *zaohua* (造化, "Fate")."⁵⁰³ Here *yinyang* and *zaohua* are words with shamanic meanings. The term *zaohua* refers to the "creative transformation" of the universe or the workings of Nature/Fate. By "illuminating" it, Confucians sought to make the patterns of the cosmos understandable to the monarch, ensuring the state remained in harmony with the Way (Dao). More importantly, the text gave us the information that Confucius comes from *Situ*, a position to administer education according to *Zhou Li*. Their primary mandate was to "lead their subordinates and manage the education of the state."⁵⁰⁴ This education was not merely academic; it was a system of social management intended to align the conduct of the people with the moral order of the cosmos. Because Confucianists are famous for their devotion to education that Liu Xin related these two together. But the deeper reason that Confucianists are dedicated to education might be that they are the descendants of immemorial Shamanists. The

⁵⁰³ “儒家者流，盖出于司徒之官，助人君顺阴阳明造化者也。” Liu Xin, *Qi Lue* 七略 (Seven Summaries), quoted in Ban Gu, *Hanshu* (Book of Han), trans. various.

⁵⁰⁴ 《周礼·地官·司徒》：“立地官司徒，使帅其属而掌邦教。” *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou), “Diguan Situ,” trans. various. See also: Ban Gu, *Hanshu* 汉书 (Book of Han), (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1962), 1728.

event Jue Ditian Tong (绝地天通, “Breaking off the way to Heaven and earth”),⁵⁰⁵ known in the Chinese history of thought, is a metaphor for the stratified process of the intelligentsia and the populace. Discourse power is in the hands of Shamanists after this like many primitive tribes.

Especially in the Republic of China period, the scholars reviewed the origin of Confucian again under the wave of “Doubting Antiquity.” Zhang Taiyan published *Yuanru* (原儒, “Trace the Source of Confucian”). Hu Shi wrote *Shuoru* (说儒, “Discuss Confucian”).⁵⁰⁶ Liu Shipei also wrote an article named *Shiru* (释儒, “Explain Confucian”). Among these three important essays, they collectively confirmed the saying that Confucian comes from Shaman. Their common evidence is also the primary duty of Confucians. In the meantime, starting with Zhang Taiyan researching the Confucian from the perspective of philology and associating it with *Xu* (需) hexagram, Hu Shi followed his thoughts immediately. But not until Xu Zhongshu gave concrete evidence from oracle bone inscriptions to attest to this statement in the essay *The Confucian Seen from Oracle Bone Inscriptions*.⁵⁰⁷

One of the prominent features of Shamanists is that they formed a set of patterns. This kind of feature is required by the ritualization of the Shaman. A fixed pattern guarantees not only successful continuity of the ceremony but also a kind of authority and stability. Although Confucianism is civilized and philosophized by Confucius, there are still tracks left by this feature. For example, *Zhuangzi* records that “Confucianists wearing round hat know the timeliness. Those wearing square shoes know the terrain. And the ones who wear colourful belts and jades can be decisive when there is an affair.”⁵⁰⁸ *Zhuangzi* was to object that dressing and knowledge are not certainly synchronous by citing this saying. However, it reflected the stylised attitude towards Confucianists. This feature peaks in *Yi Li* with trivial and detailed codes of

⁵⁰⁵ Wei Zhao 韦昭, comm., *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States], annot. Wei Juxian 卫聚贤 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1988), 562–564.

⁵⁰⁶ Zhang Taiyan, “Yuan Ru” (Tracing the Source of Ru), in *Guoguan Lunlun* (1910). ² Hu Shi, “Shuo Ru” (On the Ru), *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1934).

⁵⁰⁷ “论甲骨文中所见的儒.” Xu Zhongshu, “Lun jiaguwen zhong suo jian de ru” (The Confucian Seen from Oracle Bone Inscriptions), *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology* 4, no. 3 (1934).

⁵⁰⁸ 《庄子·田子方》：“儒者冠圜冠者知天时，履句屨者知地形，缓佩玦者事至而断。” *Zhuangzi*, *Tian Zifang*, trans. various. See also: *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

ceremonious conduct.

9.2 The Stylized Colours in the *Analects*

The section of “*Xiangdang*” (乡党) which means fellow villager or townsman literally and therefore usually used to present hometown. This chapter is mainly about the daily life of Confucians and recorded most of the regulations about colours. Some seem to be arbitrary like “The black outerwear goes with a fur coat of lamb; The white outerwear goes with a fur coat of deer; The yellow outerwear goes with a fur coat of fox.”⁵⁰⁹ The scholar of Confucian classics Huang Kan explained that here the lamb is specifically related to the black lamb. Similarly, he said the deer referred to the white deer and the fox referred to the variety of yellow hair. Then according to his explanation, Confucius was only arranging the colours on an aesthetical level. But he did not provide strong evidence for his viewpoint. I would rather believe that this is the representation of primitive religion’s remains of randomness and arbitrariness. There should be profound reasons and a long process of formation but we may never find out. The customs of colours in funeral and wedding ceremonies are likewise only with a much easier vein to trace. Also, in the section of “*Xiangdang*”, it says “He did not wear a lamb-fur coat or a black cap when making a visit of condolence.”⁵¹⁰ Till now it is still a custom to wear white at Chinese funerals. But white is a misunderstanding about Chinese funerals. The appropriate colour for the funeral ceremony should be *su*. They may mix up afterwards but they were different colours and had dissimilar symbolic meanings. *Su* means “undecorated.” The annotation of *aisu* (哀素, “grieve for *su*”) in the section “*Tangong*” of *Liji* says “All that is undecorated is *Su*.”⁵¹¹ *Su* is not a colour. And white is an auspicious colour. These two examples belong to the kind which seems to have unpredictable and irregular relations with meanings. But in effect, they are a legacy of primate religion’s stylization. The section of “*Yongye*” (雍也) says “The son of a brindled cow is red-haired and has neat horns. Even if we did not wish to use it, would the

⁵⁰⁹ “缙衣，羔裘；素衣，麕裘；黄衣，狐裘。” Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 104.

⁵¹⁰ “羔裘玄冠不以吊。” Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2003), 103.

⁵¹¹ “凡物无饰曰素。” *The Liji*, trans. James Legge, in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, vol. 27 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 154. The original text reads: “凡物无饰曰素。”

spirits of the mountains and rivers really reject it.”⁵¹² Here Confucius emphasized the hair colour of the oblation by using the word *xing* which means red-hairy animal. It reminds us that in oracle bone inscriptions the colour is a frequently asked item and in the *Zhouyi* red is always associated with auspice. Thus, we can roughly regard his saying as an inheritance of the colour worship of Zhou and the belief in colour since ancient Shamanism.

Another kind known as Theory of *zhengse* and *jianse* is ranking colours. The premise of this theory is that colours have symbolic meanings other than pure decoration. The section “*Yanghuo*” says “I detest the way that purple usurps the place of vermilion; I detest the way that the music of Zheng corrupts classical music; I detest the way that sharp mouths overturn states and families.”⁵¹³ Here the southern Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism Zhu Xi interpreted *zhu* as *zhengse* and purple as *jianse*.⁵¹⁴ Zheng Se perhaps can be translated into orthodox colours and Jian Se into secondary colours. My uncertain tone is due to the ambiguity of the source of these two terms. They appeared in the warring states period but no one gave clear definitions. Only from their usage, we can deduce that colours belonging to Jian Se are less important compared to Zheng Se. For instance, the “*Yuzao*” (玉藻) section of *the Book of Rites* writes that the coat should be Zheng Se while the dress should be Jian Se.⁵¹⁵ In the section of Xiang Dang, again the differentiation shows up by saying “A gentleman would not decorate with *gan* (紺, “Cyan with red”) and *zou* (緌, “A red colour”). *Hong* (A red colour) and purple cannot be used in clothes even just worn at home.”⁵¹⁶ The specific hues of the four colour terms are from Zhu Xi’s annotation. He also used Theory of orthodox colours and secondary colours to explain the reason for this regulation.⁵¹⁷ Above all, it reminds us that colours are used as a symbol and

⁵¹² “Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Raymond Dawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21. The original text reads: “犁牛之子騂且角，虽欲勿用，山川其舍诸？”

⁵¹³ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 206. The original text reads: “恶紫之夺朱也，恶郑声之乱雅乐也，恶利口之覆邦家者。”

⁵¹⁴ Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* (Collected commentaries on the four books), vol. 2 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2012), 86. The original text reads: “朱，正色。紫，间色。”

⁵¹⁵ *The Liji*, trans. James Legge, in *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, vol. 28 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 7. The original text reads: “衣正色，裳间色。”

⁵¹⁶ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 104. The original text reads: “君子不以紺緌饰，红紫不以褻服。” (Analects 10.6).

⁵¹⁷ Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu* (Collected commentaries on the four books), vol. 1 (Hangzhou: Zhejiang University Press, 2012), 278. The original text includes Zhu Xi’s commentary on the colors *gan*, *zou*, *hong*, and *zi*. “紺，深青扬赤色，斋服也。緌，绛色，三年之丧，以饰练服，饰，领缘也。” “红紫间色不正，且近于妇人女子之服也。褻服，私居服也，言此则不以朝祭之服可知。”

signs.

9.3 *Su* (素) and *Ren* (仁)

The “*Bayi*” section, rather than Xiang Dang, records a conversation regarding a verse from the Classic of Poetry between the disciple Zi Xia and Confucius. Zi Xia asked for an explanation of the line, “Plain silk provides the background for the colourful.” Confucius replied, “The application of colours comes after the plain white background.” Zi Xia then asked, “Does the practice of ritual also come after?”⁵¹⁸ With glad, Confucius praised “The one who enlightens me is Shang (The disciple aforementioned). I can begin to discuss *Classics of Poetry* with him now.” There are debates about the reply of Confucius because his words are as obscure as his other remarks. Some interpreters cite “In all work of painting and embroidery, the white work comes last” from *the Book of Diverse Crafts*.⁵¹⁹ However, this statement itself is also cryptic. Another way to think about it is from Shang’s rhetorical question and extension at the same time. He said *li* is also in the rear. Then it is quite clear that *ren* is in the front as we all know that the core idea of Confucius is Ren. The externalization of *ren* is *li*, which serves as a kind of decoration and if negatively a degradation. This explains why did Shang connect these two pair concepts.

Then we can understand that the aesthetic thoughts of Confucius are out of his ethics in effect. The emotion that he pursues is a pure natural and spontaneous reaction and the good that exists in the heart of a man. Because he thinks “Fine words and *se* (色, “an insinuating countenance”) seldomly make a benevolent man.”⁵²⁰ But he also realized the educational role of this civilization and thus attached importance to decoration. He also said, “The most difficult thing to serve your parents is *se* (The pleasant look).” This thought was then carried forward and developed by Mengzi who raised the doctrine of good human nature.

In the prose of Liu Xiang, the “*Fanzhi*” (反质, “Against Simplicity”) section of *Shuoyuan*(说

⁵¹⁸ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 20. The original text for this dialogue is found in Analects 3.8: “子夏问曰: ‘巧笑倩兮, 美目盼兮, 素以为绚兮’何谓也?” 子曰: ‘绘事后素.’ 曰: ‘礼后乎?’”

⁵¹⁹ Jun Wenren, *Ancient Chinese Encyclopedia of Technology: Translation and Annotation of Kaogong Ji* (The Artificers' Record) (London: Routledge, 2013), 74. The original text reads: “凡画绩之事后素功。”

⁵²⁰ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 2. The original text reads: “巧言令色, 鲜矣仁。” (Analects 1.3).

苑), there is a unique material which is only recorded here so we cannot make sure of its authenticity. But the thought contained here in my view is coherent with Confucius's original idea. Confucius said he is deliberating *zhisu* (质素, "Nature and Unvarnished").⁵²¹ He supplemented that when *zhi* (Simplicity or nature) is sufficient there is no need to decorate." This opinion sounds close to Laozi because he also tries to get rid of decorations like his saying "Five colours blind the eye."⁵²²

While after the collective opposition to over-ornamentation, they diverged into different aesthetic orientations which are entangled with their ethics, political philosophy and philosophical methods. Laozi, for example, who worships white but due to his dialectic way of thinking, chose the opposite of white, namely black, as an approach. Due to his complicated logic, he concluded that *xuan*, a colour compromising the two, is closet to Dao. While Confucius's thinking is much simpler, he dispels excessive decoration and turns back to nature and simplicity. His mediation between these two statuses is to emphasize the moderate decoration. This line of logic goes through all his thoughts. Like he said, "If you still got the strength after actions, you can learn *wen* (文, 'Decoration or Civilization')."⁵²³ Likewise, he said that "If a man is not benevolent, what has he to do with rituals? If a man is not benevolent, what has he to do with music?"⁵²⁴ and when Lin Fang asked about the essence of the ritual, he answered that "In rituals, it is better to be frugal than extravagant; in funerals, it is better to be consumed with grief than to be overly concerned with formalities."⁵²⁵ While emphasizing the primacy of benevolence, we can get a hint that although the decoration is secondary, it still has its place in Theory.

⁵²¹ Confucius, *The School Sayings of Confucius* (K'ung-tzū Chia-yü), trans. Robert Paul Kramer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1950), 224. The original text reads: "思夫质素."

⁵²² Laozi 老子, chap. 12, in *Laozi daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注, ed. Wang Bi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 28. The original text states: "五色令人目盲" (The five colors cause a man's eyes to go blind).

⁵²³ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 5. The original text reads: "行有余力，则以学文。" (Analects 1.6).

⁵²⁴ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 19. The original text reads: "人而不仁，如礼何？人而不仁，如乐何？" (Analects 3.3).

⁵²⁵ Confucius, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 19. The original text reads: "林放问礼之本，子曰：‘大哉问！礼，与其奢也，宁俭；丧，与其易也，宁戚。’" (Analects 3.4).

9.4 Confucius's Origin: Tangled with colours

Out of his doctrine, Confucius's life is also tangled with colours according to scholars of later generations. He was entitled *suwang* (素王, "The unvarnished king"). Descendants of Confucius have already started to juxtapose Confucius with emperors. *Book of rites* says, "Confucius follows the example of Yao and Shun and models himself on King Wen of Zhou and King Wu", implying that his career contains the same content as ancient kings. In *Mozi* "*Gongmengzi*" deliberately mixed the concept of Sage and King. He said the superior sage is the king. The second is the secretary and the counsellor. Then he directly said that if we let Confucius be the superior sage, he is qualified to be a king. In *Mengzi*, this thought is implied by placing Confucius in the lineage of the ancient sage kings: "From Yao and Shun to Tang... from Tang to King Wen... from King Wen to Confucius."⁵²⁶

It is comprehensible to raise the status of Confucius that due to the havoc they need a sage to guide the mob and one doctrine to believe. In such a disordered epoch where sons kill their fathers and servants betray their lords, Confucius' theory of faithfulness, benevolence, and righteousness seems to be outdated but in truth is unique and soothing.

But at the end of the day, he is not a real emperor, even not an aristocrat. It is assuming and improper to call him a king. So, the *Gongyang* school came up with a particular title to name Confucius and which happens to coincide with Confucius's colour worship. The term *suwang* emphasized the fact that Confucius had never been officially crowned while alive.

Then there arose the question that why can't the Heaven just authorize Confucius to be a real king. To justify itself, the school must raise a much more complicated theory saying that Confucius belongs to the water in Theory of five elements thus he does not accord with the sequence of dynastic changes. Again, to prove this theory, they spun tales about the origin of Confucius. One story tells that after his parents Shuliang He and Zheng prayed in a mountain called *Niqiu*, his mother was induced by a black dragon and then he was born.⁵²⁷ Another version is also this kind of induced myth except that the protagonist of the story changes from a black dragon to

⁵²⁶ Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 157. The original text reads: "由尧舜至汤.....由汤至文王.....由文王至孔子." (Mencius 7B38).

⁵²⁷ *Lunyu zhuan kao chen* (Divinatory commentaries on the Analects), quoted in *Taiping yulan* (Imperial readings of the Taiping era), vol. 359. The original text reads: "叔梁纥与徵在祷尼丘山，感黑龙之精，以生仲尼."

the black emperor.⁵²⁸ Thus, he gained the title *xuansheng* (玄圣, “The Black sage”). Being such a unique status, he, without doubt, has his mission which in the *Gongyang* School’s words is to establish a ruling system. Interestingly, again the scholars use colour to modify the system he built. In line with the sequence of dynasties’ elements, what Confucius built was named the red system.

This part does not seem to have a very close connection to Confucius’s philosophy. While there are two points worth noticing, the first is that the emphasis on colours by the later generation again shows the feature of ancient Chinese philosophy intertwining with aesthetic form. The second is that the move that they keep relating Confucius to colour explains the status of colours in Confucius’ theory.

10. Laozi’s *Xuan* (玄) as Dark Counterpoint to Heaven’s Light

Terminology in humanities and social sciences has place identities. Academy discourse is a semiotic system in Saussure’s sense. To adapt to this feature and analyse Chinese philosophy in its discourse background, I proposed “Colour Philosophy” as a new perspective. This article takes Laozi’s *xuan* as an example. Originally a colour term, *xuan* turned into a keyword of metaphysics in the Wei and Jin dynasties, a noticeable phenomenon drawing our attention to *xuan* in *Daodejing* and raising questions:

What is the meaning of *Xuan* used by Laozi? Why did the people of the Wei and Jin dynasties summarize Laozi’s philosophy with this colour term and why did Laozi himself adopt it to modify one of his core concepts *de* (德)? How did it influence later generations’ philosophy and how can we comprehend the confusing ambiguity of ancient Chinese philosophy?

Through my research, *Xuan* has several layers of different meanings in *Daode Jing*. When collocated with *miao* (妙), it signifies “subtle and elusive.” When modifying *jian* (鉴) and *pin* (牝), *xuan* implies “ultimate” and “mysterious.” The vital term *xuande* (玄德) should be

⁵²⁸ *Chunqiu yankong tu* (Evolution of Confucius in the Spring and Autumn Annals), quoted in *Taiping yulan*, vol. 359. The original text reads: “孔子母徵在游大泽之陂，睡梦黑帝使请己，己往，梦交。语曰：‘汝乳必于空桑之中。’觉则若感，生丘于空桑，故曰玄圣。”

inspected in the development and evolution of De. It is the reverberation and rectification of *mingde* (明德). Xuande first was raised as a political idea and then turned to dialectical thought. It is comprehensible that the Wei and Jin dynasties people favoured *Xuan* out of similar political diplomas. The reason that Laozi valued *Xuan* can be attributed to the widespread rules of early philosophy's ambiguity. But the more important factor is to respond to *mingde*. Deeply, this preference for colour terms derives from the worship of day and night and the agricultural background.

Laozi's pioneering work initiated the tradition of instinctive and aesthetic philosophy, more specifically, a philosophy that can be named after "Colour Philosophy." We can see the stream of philosophy from Laozi to Confucius's theory about pure colours and secondary colours. It again reminds us to view Chinese philosophy as a systematic symbol and "Colour Philosophy" can be an effective method to decipher it.

10.1 *Tanxuan* (谈玄) and *Xuantan* (玄谈)

Tanxuan is a noted term to refer to the metaphysical discussion. In *Shishuo Xinyu*, the chapter "Rongzhi" states: "Wang Yifu's appearance was tidy and beautiful, and he was marvellous at metaphysical discussion."⁵²⁹ *Xuantan* is the noun form of this activity. This term is traditionally for the philosophy of the Wei-Jin period. The philosophy of this period is also entitled *xuanxue* (玄学, "learning of the mysterious"). There are also some derivative words like *xuanyanshi* (玄言诗, "poetry on the mysterious") and *sanxuan* (三玄, "Three Mysterious Texts") that are also centred on *xuan*. Interestingly, philosophy is named after a colour, while philosophies of other dynasties do not have this way of naming.

Where does this name come from? To answer this question, we need to clarify the definition of *xuanxue*. *Xuanxue* is the mainstream philosophy of the *weijin* (魏晋) period, also including the adjacent period of the Three Kingdoms, Southern and Northern Dynasties. But it reaches its peak in the Wei-Jin period. So, it usually appears with the term *weijin*. The Jin Shu's biography of Lu Yun (Jin Shu: Lu Yun Zhuan) records that after Lu Yun spent a night in the tomb of Wang Bi, he became proficient in *xuanxue*: "Originally, Yun did not know *xuanxue*, but from then on

⁵²⁹ Liu I-ch'ing, Shih-shuo Hsin-yü, *A New Account of Tales of the World*, trans. Richard B. Mather, 2nd ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 2002), 314. The original text reads: "王夷甫容貌整丽，妙于谈玄。"

he became exceptionally advanced in *Tanlao* (谈老, “discourse on Laozi”).⁵³⁰ Therefore *tanlao* is equated with *xuanxue*. *Xuan* has a close relationship with Laozi.

However, a scholar argues that the term *xuanxue* only appeared in the Southern dynasty. All the examples mentioned are indeed from that period. A scholar argued that *xuanxue* is a refactoring term by modern philosophy.⁵³¹ While the Southern dynasty is closer to the Wei-Jin period than us. Their feeling for the ideological trend of that time focused on the word ‘Xuan,’ which is worth our attention.

10.1.1 Xuan’s Common Meaning: Black

In the eyes of the Southern dynasty people, *xuan* is the keyword of Laozi. But in what sense it was usually used at that time?

In the beginning, *Xuan* is a colour term. The exact hue of *xuan* is not very clear, but many explanations said it was related to black. Even *Shuowen Jiezi*, who says *xuan* means “far,” also notes that *Xuan* signifies black with red.⁵³² In some credible documents like “There are black and yellow. My red is so bright”⁵³³ and “the Heaven is black and the earth is yellow”⁵³⁴, *Xuan* existed as a colour. In these two cases, *xuan* made symmetry structures with *Huang*. Since that *Huang* is a kind of colour in evidence, *xuan* should also be colour. *Xuan* is used to depict different things such as *xuangui* (玄圭). “Yu granted Xuangui and announce his success.”⁵³⁵ There are also *xuanxian* (玄纆) and *xuangao* (玄缟) recorded in “Yugong” of *Shangshu*. Here *xuan* is a colour to depict *gui* (a jade ceremonial vessel), *xian* (纆, “silk”) and *gao* (缟, “raw silk”).

But what colour is it exactly? Countless instances are indicating that *xuan* belongs to black. Indeed, the *Zhuan* interpreted *xuan* in *Shi Jing* as “black while it is also red”.⁵³⁶ “*Zhongshanjing*”

⁵³⁰ Fang Xuanling, *Jin Shu* (Book of Jin) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1974), 54:1481. The original text reads: “云本无玄学，自此谈老殊进。”

⁵³¹ Bai Yuxiao, “‘Xuanxue’ mingyi zaikao: Jianji ‘Xuanxue’ zai zhexue yujing zhong de xingtai wenti” (A re-examination of the name ‘Xuanxue’: And its morphological issues in the context of philosophy), *Journal of Anhui University* (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition) 45, no. 2 (2021): 1–10

⁵³² Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi* (Origin of Chinese characters) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963), 88. The original text reads: “玄，幽远也……黑而有赤色者为玄。”

⁵³³ *The Classic of Poetry*, trans. James Legge (London: Oxford University Press, 1871), 233. The original text from the “Seventh Month” in the Odes of Bin reads: “载玄载黄，我朱孔阳。”

⁵³⁴ *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, trans. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 395. The original text from the Wenyan commentary on the Kun hexagram reads: “天玄而地黄。”

⁵³⁵ *The Shoo King* (The Book of Historical Documents), trans. James Legge (London: Oxford University Press, 1865), 150. The original text reads: “禹赐玄圭，告厥成功。”

⁵³⁶ Kong Yingda, *Mao Shi zhengyi* 毛诗正义 (Corrected meaning of the Mao Songs), in *Shisanjing zhushu* (Notes and commentaries on the thirteen classics) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980), 401. The original text reads: “黑而有赤也。”

says “Upside there are many jades in the colour of *cang* (苍, “black of blue, still controversial”) attaching to *xuan* stone.”⁵³⁷ Then the interpretation says “It says that *cang* jades attach to black stones”.⁵³⁸ *Xuan*, at this point, is identical to *hei* (黑, “black”). *Shuijing Zhu* (水经注) writes that “Passing by the mountains, I found many *xuan* stones”.⁵³⁹ Very shortly after it is the description of the stone’s black colour— “The stones are black and the patterns are like mica”.⁵⁴⁰ *Book of Rites* also equates *xuan* with black by saying “Wear black clothes, adorn with *xuan* jade, eat millet and pork.”⁵⁴¹

10.1.2 The Extended Meanings of Xuan

(1) The Meaning “Distant” and Existing Explanations

Already there is a saying that *xuan* is *yuan* (远, “far”) since *Shuowen*, “Xuan is deep and far”⁵⁴² and “Xuan is dark and unclear, silently like nothing exists”.⁵⁴³ Then perhaps influenced by this interpretation, Yang Xiong’s *Taixuan Jing* (太玄经), an imitation of *Daode Jing*, takes Xuan as the far and imperceptible Dao itself— “Xuan is that which darkly spreads through the myriad categories of things while its form remains unseen.”⁵⁴⁴ *Zhuangzi* (Chapter *Tiandi*) went further to use Xuan to refer to “remote antiquity.” *Xuangu* (玄古) is the word he created by juxtaposing *xuan* and *gu* (古, “age-old”) together.

Using Xuan to refer to is because that Xuan is close to Yuan phonetically. *Shuowen* said Xuan is *youyuan* (幽远, “deep and distant”).⁵⁴⁵ And there are also examples that Xuan indicates the

⁵³⁷ *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, trans. Anne Birrell (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 83. The original text reads: “上多苍玉，鏐于玄石。”

⁵³⁸ Guo Pu, *Shan Hai Jing zhu* 山海经注 (Commentary on the Classic of Mountains and Seas), in *Sibu beiyao* (Shanghai: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936), 5:18b. The original text reads: “言苍玉依黑石而生也。”

⁵³⁹ Li Daoyuan, *Shuijing zhu jiao* (The Commentary on the Water Classic, collated), ed. Chen Qiaoyi (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1984), 856. The original text reads: “历石鱼山下，多玄石。”

⁵⁴⁰ Li Daoyuan, *Shuijing zhu jiao* (The Commentary on the Water Classic, collated), ed. Chen Qiaoyi (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1984), 856. The original text reads: “石色黑而理若云母。”

⁵⁴¹ Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, *Liji Zhengyi* (The Corrected Meaning of the Book of Rites), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 (Notes and commentaries on the thirteen classics) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1980), 1364. The original text reads: “衣黑衣，服玄玉，食黍与粳。”

⁵⁴² Xu Shen, *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (Origin of Chinese characters) (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1963), 88. The original text reads: “玄，幽远也。”

⁵⁴³ He Yan, *Daodezhigui lun* (Treatise on the guide to the Dao and its virtue), quoted in *Taiping yulan* 太平御览, vol. 1. The original text reads: “玄者，冥也，默然无有也。”

⁵⁴⁴ Yang Xiong, *Taixuan jing* 太玄经 (Canon of supreme mystery), vol. 1, “Xuanli” (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1991), 12. The original text reads: “玄者，幽微万类而不见形者也。”

⁵⁴⁵ Xu Shen 许慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 说文解字 (An Explanation of Figures and Analysis of Compound Characters) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), 88.

meaning of Yuan. “The deep waters overflow and surge; the agitated waves toss with vigour”,⁵⁴⁶ here *xuanshui* (玄水) refers to deep water. Due to most of them appearing in later times, it is most likely to be an extension meaning.

While Li Xueqin’s opinion is more convictive, he said that *xuan* was *yao*’s (幺) variant. The extra dot and line are added to distinguish between the word and others during the evolution. He quoted fonts from oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions and the two words did look the same. 𠂔 was their collective font. Then from You’s meaning, he figured out how Xuan become to represent colour. Yao means small at first, which is the same as the meaning in the sentence “Subtle, minute, profound, and penetrating.”⁵⁴⁷

Now Xuan has four meanings. The first and the original meaning is small. Then, from the meaning of small, there generated the meaning of chroma. This logic is possible because it is usually hard to see when a thing is small. In oracle bone inscriptions, there is the term *youniu* (幽牛, “black cattle”). It sometimes was written as *you* (纒). The third meaning of far extended from the second meaning. It became a word describing subtle and elusive on the most abstract layer. We should analyse Xuan because it varies in different contexts.

(2) My Explanation of the Meaning “Distant”

It is confusing why there were two different explanations. From the source and collocation of Xuan, we may discover the reason. As indicated above, *xuan* is often used as an adjective. While in *Huainan Zi*, there is a word *xuxuan* (玄玄) which was interpreted as Heaven.⁵⁴⁸ In *Zhuangzi*, there is a term *xuantian* (玄天) signifying Heaven.⁵⁴⁹ While *Lüshi Chunqiu* says that *xuantian* was the Heaven of the north.⁵⁵⁰ This statement reflects Theory of five elements. North

⁵⁴⁶ “玄川溢涌，激波奋荡。” Chen Shou 陈寿, *Sanguozhi* 三国志 (Records of the Three Kingdoms), with commentary by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 11:356.

⁵⁴⁷ “微妙玄通。” Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 33.

⁵⁴⁸ At this time, the Profound Heavens reached an expansive state, revolving and illuminating (the world) “当此之时，玄玄至矴而运照。” Liu An 刘安, *Huainanzi jijie* 淮南子集解 (Collected Explanations of the Huainanzi), ed. Liu Wendian 刘文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 8:245.

⁵⁴⁹ “吾遊於玄天” (I roam in the Profound Heaven). Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Collected Explanations of the Zhuangzi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 11:388. In the “Zaiyou” chapter, Xuantian (Profound Heaven) denotes the primordial void or a state of supreme spiritual freedom. It represents a realm of non-being where the sage’s mind wanders once liberated from the constraints of physical form and worldly knowledge.

⁵⁵⁰ “北方曰玄天” (The North is called the Dark Heaven). Chen Qiyou 陈奇猷, *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 吕氏春秋校释 (Corrected Explanations of the Lüshi Chunqiu) (Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1984), 13:682. In the “You shi” 有始 (The Beginning) chapter, this text defines the Nine Heavens (jiutian 九天). Here, Xuantian (Dark Heaven) is a cosmological term specifically designating the northern direction, which is traditionally associated with the element water and the color black (*xuan*).

and black are a pair in this system. But this explanation of *xuantian* came later. *Xuan* and *Tian* had linked together long ago.

The most striking evidence is the allusion to “*xuan* bird gave birth to Shang.” *The Classic of Poetry* called Qi (契), the primogenitor of Shang, *xuanwang* (玄王, “the black king”). Zheng Xuan interpreted that “Succeed *Heidi*(黑帝) as prince, therefore we say Qi is *xuanwang*.”⁵⁵¹ Heidi is one of the Shandi (Heavenly emperor) in the five elements theory. Although his saying proved the relativity between black and Heaven, it is not convincing enough.

The story itself is convincing that Qi’s mother swallowed the egg of a swallow and got pregnant with Qi. *The Classic of Poetry* says “The Heaven commands *Xuan* bird to descend and give birth to Shang”.⁵⁵² It is worth our attention that in the earliest version, the specie of the bird was not specific. The emphasis lies on the colour. And Heaven chose the black messenger to impart monarch. Using black is simply because of the visual similarity between the sky and the colour. The ten wings said the Heaven is black and the ground is yellow. There is another term connecting Heaven and black. *Xuannü*(玄女, “Dark/Black Goddess”), as recorded in the *Shiji Zhengyi* (史记正义), was a heavenly messenger who assisted the Yellow Emperor in his war against *Chiyong* (蚩尤). A modern mythologist Yuan Ke thought that this legendary character derives from the mythology of the *Xuan* bird. Sun Shaoxian did not connect *Xuannü* with the *xuan* bird. But he thought that *Xuannü* is one of the ancient gods. As for why not use white to refer to Heaven, not simply because Heaven is much more mysterious and awe-inspiring at the night, a bold guess of mine is that this is related to the worship of the night due to agricultural reasons.

⁵⁵¹ “承黑帝而立子，故谓契为玄王” (Succeeding the Black Emperor and being established as his son, therefore Qi is called the Profound King). Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (comm.), *Mao Shi zhushu* 毛詩注疏 (Mao Shi with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 28.620. In this passage from the “Changfa” 長發 (Long-lasting) poem, Zheng Xuan interprets the title *Xuanwang* (Profound King) through the lens of Han-era “Five Phases” (wuxing) cosmology. He identifies the Shang ancestor, Qi, as the spiritual descendant of the Black Emperor (Heidi), the deity associated with the North and the color *xuan* (black/dark).

⁵⁵² “天命玄鳥，降而生商” (Heaven commanded the dark bird to descend and give birth to Shang). *Mao Shi zhushu* 毛詩注疏 (Mao Shi with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 28:603. This opening line of the poem “*Xuan niao*” 玄鳥 (The Dark Bird) in the “Hymns of Shang” (Shang song 商頌) section serves as the foundational myth for the Shang dynasty. Traditional commentaries, beginning with the Mao Commentary, identify the “dark bird” (*xuan niao*) as a swallow (*yan* 燕). The text alludes to the legend of Jiandi 簡狄, who became pregnant with the Shang ancestor Qi 契 after swallowing a swallow’s egg, thereby establishing the divine lineage of the Shang house through the color *xuan* (dark/black), which symbolized the celestial or the profound.

Xuan as a colour is typical in Laozi's time. As the people of the Southern dynasties sensed, Laozi did use *Xuan* a lot and put it in an important position. It may be due to the connection with Heaven. Then here come the questions. Is *xuan* in *Daode Jing* a colour? Does *xuan* have other meanings in *Daodejing*? Why does Laozi use colour to express his idea? And why choose *xuan*?

10.1.3 *Xuan's meanings in Daodejing*

(1) *Xuan and Miao (妙): The Original Meaning*

In the first chapter of *Daodejing*, colour appears and it occupies a quite important position. “*Xuan* and more *xuan*, the door of numerous *miao*,” in which we can see that colour is directly used to represent the door to the subtle and elusive truth due to its ambiguity.

According to Laozi, *xuan* is identical to *miao*. Because in the first chapter, Laozi said that *miao* and *qiao* are from the same root with different names while they can both be called *xuan*.

Then what is the definition of *miao*? Wang Bi interpreted it as imperceptibility. Wang said that everything began from very subtle things and was born after *wu* (无, “nothing”) which reminds us of Zhuangzi's words in one of the seven inner chapters “When it is about to finish it would be giant, while when it started it was simple”.⁵⁵³ It reminds us of Zhuangzi because the idea that complexity and multiplicity come from simplicity comes down in one continuous line. Indeed, there is still plenty of room for Laozi and Zhuangzi's school relationship and thought differences, we can roughly consider that the Inner Chapter of Zhuangzi is authentic and they both agree with beings come from not-being. Then at least this kind of explanation is consistent with Taoist thought.

Wang Bi explained in his book *Laozi Zhu* (老子注, “the interpretation of Laozi”): “*Miao*, is the acme imperceptibility. Everything rises from imperceptibility and is then accomplished. Everything begins from nothing and then is born.”⁵⁵⁴

Then another text of Laozi makes the meaning of *Miao* clearer. Chapter 15 states that “Those

⁵⁵³ “其將畢也必巨，其作始也簡” (At its completion it is bound to be enormous; at its inception it is simple). Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Collected Explanations of the Zhuangzi), Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961, 4:154.

⁵⁵⁴ Li Ruohui 李若暉, *Laozi jizhu huikao* 老子集注匯考 (Collected Commentaries and Comprehensive Examination of the Laozi), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2015), 585–86.

among the ancients who were skilled in the Dao were *wei* (微), *miao* (妙), *xuan* (玄), and *tong* (通), so profound that they could not be fully known.”⁵⁵⁵ Here *wei* and *miao* are juxtaposed. Therefore, we can speculate that they are similar in meaning. Now that they can interpret each other, *xuan* is the meaning of subtle and imperceptible. Then is it a colour? As we said before, this colour meaning of *xuan* may come from the meaning subtle. Here Xuan is used in its original meaning.

(2) *Xuanjian*(玄鑑): The Ultimate Mirror

Chapter 10 says “Having cleansed the Profound Mirror, can you be without flaw?”⁵⁵⁶ In later times, *xuanjian* is usually interpreted as a mirror as bright and clear as water. The Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Gao You explained *xuanjian* in *Huainanzi* that Xuan signifies water and Jian means mirror.⁵⁵⁷ Jian refers to mirror is agreed with by different scholars. “Dichu Xuanjian” (涤除玄鑑) has another version written as “Dichu Xuanlan” (涤除玄覽). Gao Heng demonstrated that *jian* was equal to *lan* in ancient times.⁵⁵⁸ However, Gao Heng did not consider *xuan* as water. Instead, he gave a completely different paraphrase: *xuan* means “metaphysical” and *xuanjian* is a mirror that reflects the mind. This thought is close to Wang Bi’s annotation which says that *xuan* is the utmost of things and “Dichu Xuanlan” means “Has cleansed away the most mysterious sights, he can become without a flaw.”⁵⁵⁹

Gao You’s explanation is more likely a product of the five elements theory, relating *xuan* to water due to the same logic as Theory that water is black. It is a reasonable association because *Shuowen* says *xuan* is a large basin containing water reflecting the image. But it is still a little bold to take *xuan* as water because there was not this usage in other parts of Laozi nor Laozi’s

⁵⁵⁵ “古之善為道者，微妙玄通，深不可識” (The ancients who were adept at the Way were subtle, miraculous, profound, and penetrating; they were too deep to be known). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 33.

⁵⁵⁶ “涤除玄鑒，能無疵乎” (Having cleansed the Profound Mirror, can you be without flaw?). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 22.

⁵⁵⁷ “玄，水也；鑑，鏡也” (Xuan signifies water; Jian means mirror). Liu An 劉安, *Huainanzi jijie* 淮南子集解 (Collected Explanations of the Huainanzi), ed. Liu Wendian 刘文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), 19:578. In his commentary on the “Xiuwu xun” 脩務訓 (Instruction on Cultivating Effort) chapter, Gao You identifies xuan with water, drawing on the cosmological association between the color black/dark and the element of water, thereby interpreting the “Profound Mirror” as a still, reflective water surface

⁵⁵⁸ “古鑑覽同字” (In antiquity, jian and lan were the same character). Gao Heng 高亨, *Laozi zhenggu* 老子正詁 (Corrective Explanations of the Laozi) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 26. In his commentary on Chapter 10, Gao Heng argues that the two characters were phonetically and semantically equivalent in ancient phonology, suggesting that Xuanlan (Profound Observation) and Xuanjian (Profound Mirror) ultimately point to the same concept of spiritual clarity.

⁵⁵⁹ Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annot. Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 24.

era. It is more reasonable to apply Wang Bi's explanation that *xuanjian* is a realm reflecting everything clearly without being disturbed by earthly clutters.⁵⁶⁰

(3) *Xuanpin* (玄牝)

Xuan also collocates with *pin* (牝) in *Laozi*. Chapter 6 says "The *gushen* (谷神, "Spirit of the Valley") who is immortal is called *xuanpin*. The door of *xuanpin* is the root of Heaven and earth."⁵⁶¹

Here we need to clarify the definition of *pin*. Then it is possible to understand *xuan* fully. *Shuowen* says that *Pin* is the general designation of female animals. *Pin*'s font is a combination of a woman and an animal in oracle bone inscriptions. The animal could be horses, sheep, pigs, and cattle. While according to *Shuowen*, the match between a woman and a cow is fixed because *Yi Jing* has a hexagram remark saying breeding a cow is an auspicious thing. "To raise *Pin* cattle is auspicious".⁵⁶² The most prominent difference between males and females is their sexual organs without a doubt. So, *Pin* is usually used to refer to the sexual organ. Sometimes *Pin* refers to the female in *Laozi*. Chapter 61 says "Big countries should be like the basin, tending to be the cross point and *Pin* of the world. *Pin* generally defeats *mu* (牡, male) by its motionlessness."⁵⁶³ In this kind of condition, there is *Mu* to form the pair. But when using *Xuan* to modify *pin*, *xuan* appears to refer to the female sex organ.

Laozi said *gushen* was immortal and it was called *xuanpin*. *Gu*, as Wang Bi said, is empty in the middle. In oracle bone inscriptions, *gu* is written as  symbolizing that the water flows from the valley. The female organ is also hollow and like water keeps coming out valley life also arises from the organ. So, it is very natural for *Laozi* to put these two together. Then *Xuan* here is possible to depict the colour of the sex organ. However, instead of using simple black,

⁵⁶⁰ "玄，物之極也，言能滌除邪飾，至於極覽，能不以物介其明。" (Xuan is the acme of things; it says that if one can cleanse away heterodox ornamentations and reach the point of ultimate observation, one can avoid letting things obstruct one's clarity). *Laozi* 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 22.

⁵⁶¹ "谷神不死，是謂玄牝。玄牝之門，是謂天地根" (The Spirit of the Valley does not die; this is called the Profound Female. The gateway of the Profound Female is called the root of Heaven and Earth). *Laozi* 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 ((Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 16.

⁵⁶² "畜牝牛吉" (To raise the female cow is auspicious). *Zhou Yi zhengyi* 周易正義 (Correct Meaning of the Zhou Yi), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 3:45.

⁵⁶³ "天下之交，天下之牝。牝常以靜勝牡，以靜為下" (The intersection of the world, the female of the world. The female always overcomes the male by stillness; by stillness, she takes the lower position). *Laozi* 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 156.

Laozi chose the more unusual colour word *xuan* to depict the organ. It is magnificent that life comes from hollowness and the immutability of this process. Wang Bi said, “Wish to speak that it does not exist while everything comes out from it. Wish to speak it exists while its shape is not visible”.⁵⁶⁴ This kind of feature does make people feel mysterious. Laozi even raises it to the position of the root of Heaven and earth. Thus, using *xuan* to depict the origin of life, which is identical to *dao* in Laozi’s discourse system, suggests the mysterious implication of itself.

10.1.4 *Xuande* (玄德)

A scholar of Peking University claims that *xuande* is “one of the most important concepts of Laozi’s philosophy and the key standard of philosophy breakthrough during the period of pre-Qin time.”⁵⁶⁵

(1) *De* (德)

Without doubts, *de* is one of the core concepts in Laozi. According to Historical Records: Biography of Laozi and Han Fei, when Laozi wrote *Daodejing*, he divided the book into two parts. The handed down masterpiece of Laozi, the silk copy of Mawangdui, and the Han bamboo book of Peking University all exemplified the statements in the Historical Records. By splitting the book with the name of *dao* and *de*, we recognized the importance of *de*, which is coequal to *dao*.

The term *Xuande* appeared twice in Laozi, in which *xuan* modifies *de*. *De* is a core concept of Laozi, as we can see Laozi is also known as *Daodejing*. *De* is subordinate to *dao* because, without a doubt, *dao* dominates everything including *de* in Laozi’s discourse as Laozi writes “*Dao* produces one; one produces two; two produces all”. In the relationship of *dao*, *de* and *ren* (仁, “benevolence”), we may get to know what is *de*. An important statement in Laozi displays several important concepts in order of importance and it also vaguely defines *de* by

⁵⁶⁴ “欲言存邪，則不見其形；欲言亡邪，萬物以之生” (Wish to say that it exists, yet one does not see its form; wish to say that it does not exist, yet the myriad things are born from it). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 16.

⁵⁶⁵ Zheng Kai 郑开, “*Xuande lun—guanyu Laozi zhengzhi zhexue he lunlixue de jiedu yu chanshi*” 玄德论——关于老子政治哲学和伦理学的解读与阐释 (On Profound Virtue: An Interpretation and Explanation of Laozi’s Political Philosophy and Ethics), *Shangqiu shifan xueyuan xuebao* 商丘师范学院学报 (Journal of Shangqiu Teachers College) 29, no. 1 (2013): 1.

comparison: thus, *dao* lost and *de* appears; *de* lost and then *ren* appears.”⁵⁶⁶ *De* is a character between *dao* and *ren*. We need to introduce these two briefly in the first place. *Dao* is primordial logos. It creates everything and stands as a precondition to everything. Meanwhile, Laozi’s ontology and cosmology often blended. So, *Dao* is also a way of being human. *Ren* is usually considered the core idea of Confucianism and translated as benevolence. Laozi said, “The Heaven and the earth are not benevolent, taking all the things on earth as a straw dog.”⁵⁶⁷ Therefore, *Ren* inherited the meaning from Confucianism and refers to intrinsic kindness. This can also be proved by the following sentence: “*Ren* lost and *yi* appears; *yi* lost and *li* (禮) appears.”⁵⁶⁸ In my perspective, *de* is a mediacy between *dao* and *ren*, exemplifying Laozi’s feature of mixing ontology and cosmology. It is more specific than *dao* but it cannot be simply attributed to a good character. It is beyond moral and immoral. But it should be the most natural way of being, namely *dao*’s presentation on humans. Thus, chapter 38 says: “The highest *de* is not *de* and then appears *de*”.⁵⁶⁹ The second *de* should be in the sense of morality. There are other adjectives used to describe *de* like *guang* (廣), *jian* (建), *zhi* (質) and *kong* (孔).⁵⁷⁰ From the context, we can tell that they are all close to the meaning “great” and “ultimate”. And using them to depict *de* means there is a possibility of explaining each other.

Xuan in this case is close to other words. And it is been given the meaning of ultimateness by placing beside *de*. This conclusion echoed Wang Bi’s view that *Xuan* refers to as “ultimate.” So, *xuande* means a kind of chaotic status that is beyond simple bad and good.

(2) Two Kinds of *Xuande*

There are two kinds of *xuande* in Laozi. One is cosmological and another is from the perspective of political philosophy, both proving our hypothesis about *xuande*. The former says “*Dao*

⁵⁶⁶ “故失道而後德，失德而後仁” (Therefore, when the Way is lost, Virtue appears; when Virtue is lost, then Benevolence appears). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 93.

⁵⁶⁷ “天地不仁，以万物为刍狗。” Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annot. Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 12.

⁵⁶⁸ “失仁而后义，失义而后礼。” Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annot. Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 93.

⁵⁶⁹ “上德不德，是以有德” (The highest Virtue does not strive for virtue, and therefore it possesses Virtue). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 93.

⁵⁷⁰ “上德若谷，廣德若不足，建德若偷，質德若渝” (The highest Virtue is like a valley; broad Virtue seems insufficient; established Virtue seems furtive; pure Virtue seems sullied). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 113.

gives birth to all...it produces all but does not claim anything as its own; it does all, yet does not boast of it.⁵⁷¹ This explains *xuande*. It will be easy to comprehend if we apply this idea to ethics. In a family, parents give life to their children while the best way to get along with them is not taking them as their prosperities. Leave the thing as the way it should be. Laozi also extends this thinking to the political aspect. Chapter 65 says that “Therefore using wisdom to govern the country is a disaster for the country. The contrary is the good fortune for the country. Knowing these two is to know a rule. Always knowing a rule is *xuande*. Xuande is deep and far, is going to the opposite of the things, and then the great harmony can be reached.”⁵⁷²

Qian Mu said in his book, *Zhuanglao Tongbian*, that Laozi pretends to be a Saint who seems indifferent to the earthborn life, while deep inside him is the desire to interfere with political life, to play the role of monarch. However, it is a very intuitionistic impression of Laozi. As Xu Fuguan debated in his *Xianqin Sixiangshi*, if Laozi is truly a hypocrite in power, he would not say the soft overcomes the hard. Instead, he believes that beauty and ugliness, similarly good and evil, are relative and can switch their position in certain conditions. Therefore, he honestly believes that people will be happier and more fulfilled if they are not very well-educated. We may find some consistency between Laozi and some famous persons in the aspect of anti-intellectual. For instance, Su Shi has a poem saying that can be translated into “the worries of life start from becoming literate and remembering your name is enough to stop learning.”⁵⁷³ Su Shi is a literary giant who went through a rough life due to his untimeliness caused by his knowledge. The thing in common between the two is their conflict between time and their foresight. Xu Fuguan also considers Lao Zi’s attitude as worldly wisdom to keep himself safe. And this kind of attitude rise to philosophy, in which Laozi believes that the weak are better than the strong from the heart because the warring state period is such chaos and turmoil. If

⁵⁷¹ “生而不有，為而不恃，是謂玄德” (It gives birth to them but does not possess them; it acts but does not rely on its ability; this is called Profound Virtue). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu 老子注* (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 133.

⁵⁷² “故以智治國，國之賊；不以智治國，國之福。知此兩者亦稽式，常知稽式，是謂玄德。玄德深矣，遠矣，與物反矣，然後乃至大順” (To rule a state with wisdom is to be a thief to the state; not to rule a state with wisdom is a blessing to the state. To know these two is also to have a model. Constantly knowing the model is called Profound Virtue. Profound Virtue is deep and far; it goes in the opposite direction of things, and only then is the Great Harmony reached). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu 老子注* (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 164–65.

⁵⁷³ “人生識字憂患始，姓名粗記可以休” (The worries of life begin with learning to read; remembering one’s name is enough to stop learning). Su Shi 蘇軾, “Shier yue ershiba ri ye yu jishi jiaoshu xiao yin” 十二月二十八日夜與記室家叔曉飲 (Drinking at Dawn with my uncle, the Secretary, on the Night of the Twenty-eighth Day of the Twelfth Month), in *Su Shi shi ji 蘇軾詩集* (Collected Poems of Su Shi), ed. Wang Wengao 王文誥 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 6:289.

remaining ignorant can bring peace, then it's normal to view foolishness as a more advanced shape than complete smartness with a sharp edge. So, it's reasonable to view ignorance as a kind of progress compared to simple and clear cleverness. Thus, we can conclude that Xuan is a complicated word in this sentence. Laozi used it to refer to the status which in the metaphor of colour is beyond pure black and white. Therefore, Xuan is like the third level of Hegel's dialectics. In addition to the above, Laozi also uses luminance which is related to colours to show his dialectic thoughts. In Chapter 52 he says, "Seeing the wispy is called Ming. Keeping the weak is strong."⁵⁷⁴ And Chapter 58 says "The saint...is light but not dazzling."⁵⁷⁵

(3) *In the Context of Ming De (明德)*

Chapter 55 states: "Knowing *he* (和, harmony) is called *chang* (常, constancy/regularity), and knowing *chang* is called *ming* (明, illumination)."⁵⁷⁶ Therefore, Laozi also canonizes luminosity, which coincides with his attitude toward black and white and which makes his act of presenting the concept *xuande* more mysterious.

The meaning of *xuande* is especially clear when compared to *mingde*. It seems like a backwash to the complicated concept raised in the Zhou dynasty. De is a quite complicated concept in the research of ancient Chinese ideology. To understand *xuande* better, we need to have an overall comprehension of De as it is the background. In oracle bone inscriptions, *de* is written as ⁵⁷⁷ signifying looking around at the road as it draws an eye in the middle of the road. Also, in context, it is used to express the meaning of petrol like "The king's petrol stopped here",⁵⁷⁸ "The king is out on petrol".⁵⁷⁹ Therefore, it is easy to understand why Laozi put *dao* and *de*

⁵⁷⁴ "見小曰明, 守柔曰強. 用其光, 復歸其明, 無遺身殃, 是為襲常" (Seeing the wispy is called Clarity; keeping to the weak is called strength. Use its light, but return to its Clarity; do not leave behind calamity for the self; this is called following the constant). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 136.

⁵⁷⁵ "是以聖人方而不割, 廉而不剝, 直而不肆, 光而不耀" (Therefore, the sage is square but does not cut; sharp but does not prick; straight but does not overextend; light but does not dazzle). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 151.

⁵⁷⁶ "知和曰常, 知常曰明" (Knowing Harmony is called Regularity; knowing Regularity is called Clarity). Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 143.

⁵⁷⁷ Xiaotun dierben: Yin xu wenzi: Jia bian 小屯第二本: 殷墟文字: 甲編, no. 2304.

⁵⁷⁸ *Jiaguwen heji* 甲骨文合集 (Collected Corpus of Oracle Bone Inscriptions), ed. Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1978–82), no. 16152. "王德于止若".

⁵⁷⁹ *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 7231. "王德出".

together. Their original meanings are related to the road. While *dao* is used in an abstract sense in Laozi as well as in the pre-Qin period, *de* cannot simply represent the road. What does *de* mainly mean in Laozi's dynasty? There is another meaning of *de* whose relationship with virtue, the later and more general meaning of De, is closer. *Shi Ming* (释名) says, "*De* is gaining something."⁵⁸⁰ Other oracle bone inscriptions record The King's virtue (power) is upright",⁵⁸¹ "Today, the King's virtue (power) attacks *Tufang* (土方)",⁵⁸² "The King's virtue [results in] *Di* (the High God) bestowing upon us".⁵⁸³ *Tiande* (天德) and *Gaozu Zhi De* (高祖之德) are not the virtue of Heaven and ancestors but the gain from Heaven and the gain of ancestors. While at the same time Zhou dynasty revered Heaven's will, they do not have blind faith in it and begin to value the power of humans. For instance, they added the character *xin* (心, the heart) under the character *zhi* (直) which may reveal that the people of Zhou relate gain to one's virtue. This could be the reason for using *De* (德) to represent virtue. Thus, in Laozi's time, De is related to virtue in a general sense. Then it is unique to advocate a virtue modified by a vague colour, especially compared to the prevalent term *mingde* of the Zhou dynasty.

Ming De is a vital concept of the Zhou Dynasty—the precondition of gaining Heaven's will and thus the essential quality of kings, like *Shangshu* says "From Cheng Tang to Di Yi, no one did not demonstrate their virtue and emphasize sacrifice."⁵⁸⁴ The reason that Ming De occupies an important position might be its relationship with *di* (帝). As I have argued, worshipping white is a presentation of Zhou's worship of the day. I proved this argument with numerous pieces of evidence. The main evidence is the colours in the *Zhouyi*. Because in divination colour is a special component believed to have an impact on reality in ancients' eyes. This point can be identified by the tradition of divination. In Laozi's era, *mingde* is the general background. It seems that Laozi proposed *xuan* to fight against this political thought. It was because *mingde* contradicts the destruction of the rite system of Zhou. And it descends from a requirement of

⁵⁸⁰ Liu Xi 刘熙, *Shiming shuzheng bu* 释名疏证补 (Annotations and Supplements to the Explanation of Names), ed. Bi Yuan 毕沅, suppl. Wang Xianqian 王先谦 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 109. "德，得也，得事宜也" (Virtue is obtaining; it is obtaining the appropriateness of matters).

⁵⁸¹ *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 7231. "王德正".

⁵⁸² *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 6399. "今者王德伐土方".

⁵⁸³ *Jiaguwen heji*, no. 6737. "王德方帝授我".

⁵⁸⁴ "自成湯至於帝乙，罔不明德恤祀." (From Cheng Tang to Di Yi, none did not illustrate their virtue and emphasize sacrifices). *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Correct Meaning of the Book of Documents), in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 18:233.

dynastic rulers to a method

10.2 The Ultimate, the Mysterious and the Virtue

Overall, we can conclude that Xuan implies the meaning of the ultimate, the mysterious and the virtue beyond morality and amorality.

10.2.1 From Darkness to Implicit Brightness

At first look, Laozi seems to be against colours. In chapter 12 he says “Five colours blind people.”⁵⁸⁵ *Wu* is a functional word which refers to many. Similarly, in Chapter 53 he says “Dressing colourfully is not dao.”⁵⁸⁶ He mentioned *pu* (朴, “simplicity”) repeatedly. In Chapter 32, he says, “Although *pu* is small, the world does not dare to take it as a servant.”⁵⁸⁷ In Chapter 37, again he mentioned *pu*: “After the evolvment here raises desires, I will suppress them with nameless *pu*”.⁵⁸⁸ Chapter 57 says that “If I do not have desires then the people will be *Pu* spontaneously”.⁵⁸⁹ *Pu* is unfinished wood, therefore, signifying the state without colour. Similarly, in Chapter 35, he attaches importance to the word *dan* (淡, “bland”) by saying “When *dao* is out of the mouth, it should be too bland to taste and hard to see”.⁵⁹⁰ But colourlessness is a colour. And tastelessness is also a taste. Specifically, Laozi was objecting to excess colours that symbolize chaos resulting from excessive desires, not the colour itself.

Because Laozi worships white. Chapter 29 says “Knowing its white and guarding its black is the rule of the world.”⁵⁹¹ If we pay attention to the context, here white and black are a pair of one thing. Because they are in a peer position to *xiongci* (雄雌) and *rongru* (荣辱). White and black are indeed the two poles of colours. While in this context, it not only represents the antithesis but also refers to the same thing. As we can see, *Xiong* and *Ci* are different genders to divide animals. Also, *Rong* and *Ru* are different attitudes toward comments. So, what is the origin of the sides of *bai* (白, “white”) and *hei* (黑, “black”)? The first thought, Heaven is the only huge and universal thing to own these two colours. White is like *xiong* (雄, “male”) and

⁵⁸⁵ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), ch. 12.

⁵⁸⁶ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 35.

⁵⁸⁷ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 32.

⁵⁸⁸ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 53.

⁵⁸⁹ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 37.

⁵⁹⁰ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 57.

⁵⁹¹ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 28.

rong (荣, “glory” or “flourishing”), indicating something masculine, positive, strong, etc. While black is like *ci* (雌, “female”) and *ru* (辱, “humiliation”) indicating feminine and negative.

Xuan in essence is an approach to the ultimate state but it also became a state during this process. Thus, why Laozi proposed the concept “*Xuantong*” (玄同). *Tong* (同) means “the same”. “We should blunt our sharp points, and unravel the complications of things; we should attemper our dazzle, and bring ourselves into an agreement with the obscurity of others. This is called Xuantong.” Because of the era Laozi was living in, it is natural for him to be eclectic. And then this means attaining Dao gradually became a state that vaguely exceeds simple good which can spell disaster due to its dazzle.

The last character exemplifies Xu Fancheng’s view that Laozi’s philosophy is super-moralism⁵⁹² which is not specially adapted to a certain social structure. While in my view, instead of super-moralism, the absolute theory of original goodness of human nature proposed by Liu Xiaogan is more suitable to define Laozi’s philosophy. Because chapter 41 writes: “The great virtue (*dade* 大德) is like a valley and the Great White (*dabai* 大白) is like being tainted.”⁵⁹³ Therefore, the super-moral state is a superficial phenomenon covering the truth that Laozi pursues ultimate goodness.

10.2.2 An Aesthetic Form

Except for the content, the expression form of Laozi’s philosophy is also worthy of notice. It is common to use perceptual forms in the early period of philosophy. While it is unusual for Laozi to put the sensual form in such an important position, it is more unusual for the later generation to use this term to represent philosophy. Because Laozi already created abstract concepts like *dao* (道, “road”), and *ming* (名, “Name”), even though these terms are also material objects they are used in an abstract sense. Meanwhile, the important concepts of Laozi are nouns, but *xuan* is an adjective. Interestingly philosophers of the Wei and Jin periods chose the adjective among many concepts to follow Tan which should be followed by a noun. *Xuan*

⁵⁹² “Xuanli cantong” 玄理參同 (The Integration of Profound Principles), in *Xu Fancheng wenji* 徐梵澄文集 (Collected Works of Xu Fancheng), vol. 1 (Shanghai: Huadong shifan daxue chubanshe, 2006), 147–48.

⁵⁹³ “上德若谷，大白若辱。” Laozi 老子, *Laozi zhu* 老子注 (Commentary on the Laozi), annotated by Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 113.

bears the primary qualities. This shows the aesthetic feature of Chinese philosophy.

In later textual records, we can still find it became a tradition. Like in *Shi Ji*, the author made the black and white parallel to good and evil, which is obvious that black and white are not used in the meaning of colour.⁵⁹⁴ Zhuangzi uses black and white as the representation of the two poles.⁵⁹⁵ Mengzi uses the connection between colour to make a comparison to the relation between *sheng* (生, “life”) and *Xing* (性, “human nature”)⁵⁹⁶. *Xuan* can explain why aligned black and white are usually viewed as an auspicious omen.⁵⁹⁷ Even further, we can understand why Chinese traditional paintings prefer to use black and white and they all look like in the mist.

At first sight, the Daoist classics appear to advance a radical rejection of colour, while the *Zhuangzi* repeatedly mocks the seductive power of brilliant hues. In the chapter “*Pianmu*” we read: “Those who cling to brightness confuse the Five Colours; they indulge in ornamentation—are the dazzling splendours of blue, yellow, and embroidered finery not precisely this? Such was Li Zhu.”⁵⁹⁸ In “*Quqie*,” the text urges: “Eliminate ornamentation, disperse the Five Colours, glue shut the eyes of Li Zhu, and only then will the people preserve their innate clarity.”⁵⁹⁹ The “*Tiandi*” chapter similarly warns: “The Five Colours confuse the eye and obscure its natural brightness... these five are all harms to life.”⁶⁰⁰ And in “*Gengsang Chu*” the list expands: “Form, movement, colour, texture, qi, intention—these six mislead the mind.”⁶⁰¹

⁵⁹⁴ “天出五色，以知黑白。地出五谷，以知善惡。” (Heaven brings forth the five colors so that one might know black and white; Earth brings forth the five grains so that one might know good and evil). Sima Qian, *The Grand Scribe's Records*, Volume IX: The Memoirs of Han China, Part II, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 378.

⁵⁹⁵ “夫鵠不日浴而白，烏不日黔而黑。黑白之樸，不足以為辯”(The snow-goose does not bathe every day to be white; the crow does not dye itself every day to be black. The simplicity of black and white is not sufficient to be a matter of dispute). Zhuang Zhou 莊周, *Zhuangzi jishi 莊子集釋* (Collected Explanations of the Zhuangzi), ed. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 14:512.

⁵⁹⁶ “孟子曰：生之謂性也，猶白之謂白與？曰：然。白羽之白也，猶白雪之白；白雪之白，猶白玉之白與？” (Mencius said: “Is ‘life is nature’ like ‘white is white’? Yes. Is the whiteness of a white feather like the whiteness of white snow, and the whiteness of white snow like the whiteness of white jade?”). *Mengzi zhushu 孟子注疏* (The Mencius with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), in *Shisanjing zhushu 十三經注疏* (The Thirteen Classics with Annotations and Sub-commentaries), ed. Ruan Yuan 阮元 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 11:2748.

⁵⁹⁷ “黑牛生白犢，為吉祥之兆” (A black cow giving birth to a white calf is regarded as an auspicious omen). Liezi 列子, *Liezi jishi 列子集釋* (Collected Explanations of the Liezi), ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), 8:256.

⁵⁹⁸ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), chap. 8.

⁵⁹⁹ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, chap. 10.

⁶⁰⁰ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, chap. 12.

⁶⁰¹ Zhuangzi, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, chap. 23.

Taken literally, these passages seem diametrically opposed to the colour valuations found in *Zhouyi* or in early Confucianism, both of which tend to privilege clarity, brightness, and white as symbols of correctness. Yet this apparent antagonism dissolves upon deeper examination. Daoism does not reject colour itself; rather, it rejects attachment to colour, the sensory entanglement that draws the mind away from its original stillness. The Daoist critique is aimed at excess, indulgence, and artificiality, not at chromatic reality as such.

The key to understanding the Daoist colour vision is the concept of *xuan*. The *Daodejing* opens by describing *Dao* as “dark and again dark —the gateway of all mysteries.”⁶⁰² *Shuowen* glosses *xuan* as “remote, deep,” and Wang Bi famously interprets it as “dim, silent, without-being.” *Xuan* is not a literal shade of black. It is the pre-differentiated, unfathomable ground from which all perceptible qualities, including colours, emerge. *Xuan* is the primordial state before brightness and darkness are separated; it is the ontological mother of all chromatic manifestation.

This metaphysics becomes explicit in the *Daodejing*’s colour dialectic: “Know the white, but keep to the black; this is the model for all under Heaven.”⁶⁰³ Here, “white” and “black” are no longer sensory colours but philosophical symbols. White represents manifestation, clarity, the visible, the articulated. Black represents depth, concealment, potentiality, the unshaped and unforced. The sage is one who “knows” the manifest realm (white) but “keeps to” the hidden origin (black). Only through this rootedness can one “return to the limitless” and act as a paradigm for the world.

Daoism therefore proposes a remarkable chromatic logic: darkness is not the opposite of brightness but its source. To achieve the highest form of clarity (white), one must return through the deepest darkness (*xuan*). Daoism achieves the strongest by way of the weakest, the manifest by way of the hidden, the luminous by way of the obscure. Darkness is not the goal. It is the method. It is the womb of brightness.

⁶⁰² Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. Stephen Addiss and Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), ch. 1.

⁶⁰³ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 28.

This logic underlies the Daoist exaltation of *simplicity* and *uncarved*. “See the uncarved, embrace the plain,”⁶⁰⁴ says *Daodejing*. *Zhuangzi* adds: “When one is serene and limitless, all beauties follow.” And elsewhere: “Plainness is such that none under Heaven can compete with it.”⁶⁰⁵ Here “plainness” (*su* 素) is not white; it is the pre-ornamental, unworked state of things—raw silk not yet dyed, wood not yet carved. It is a condition prior to the Five Colours, not opposed to them. From this undifferentiated origin, all true beauty arises.

Seen in this light, Daoist colour thought forms one of the most sophisticated chromatic theories in early Chinese philosophy. Rather than denying colour, it philosophizes colour: rooting all hues in a primordial darkness, treating obscurity as the condition of illumination, and understanding simplicity as the matrix from which multiplicity emerges. The Daoist valorisation of the dark, the feminine, the weak, and the hidden is not moral inversion but ontological restoration. In many ways it revives an archaic cosmology predating the Zhou emphasis on brightness and moralized Heaven. Its “dark Heaven” (*xuantian*) recalls early, pre-Zhou visions of a deep, unfathomable sky rather than the luminous, ethicized Tian of Zhou ideology. This is one reason Daoism stands as an “exceptional” current in Chinese intellectual history: it retrieves and revalorizes a cosmological sensibility far older than the moral-solar brightness of classical Zhou thought.

11. Colour, Heaven, and the Mysteries of Antiquity

11.1 The Contest between Light and Night

In the pursuit of truth within ancient history, a coherent explanatory system illuminates a probable path. The contest between light and night is possibly a transformation of the ancient faith system. When chromatic preferences converge with astronomical calculations, mythological evolution, and the semantics of royal names, the notion of revering Heaven while suppressing the night reveals itself as a profound cultural logic. This section follows that path, tracing the long contest between light and night that unfolded in the dawn of Chinese civilization.

⁶⁰⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, ch. 19.

⁶⁰⁵ *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 119.

11.1.1 Severing Heaven and Earth

The story of “Heaven and Earth no longer communicating”⁶⁰⁶ has traditionally been read as an allegory of the concentration of divine and royal power. Yet, when one shifts focus to the pivotal celestial offices—*Nanzheng* (南正, “South Regulator”) and *Huozheng* (火正, “Fire Regulator”)—a grander cosmological picture emerges, one that concerns the reconstruction of time, faith, and cosmic authority.

According to *Guoyu*, Zhuangxi (顓頊) “appointed Chong as the South Regulator to oversee Heaven and the spirits, and Li as the Fire Regulator to oversee Earth and the people.”⁶⁰⁷ The Fire Regulator, as confirmed by *Zuozhuan*, was responsible for observing the Great Fire Star (*xinxiuer* 心宿二, or Antares) to determine agricultural seasons: “In the month of *jianchen* (建辰), when the Fire Star sets in the south, the people are instructed to kindle fires”—a clear reference to slash-and-burn cultivation. Thus, by observing the rise and fall of celestial fire, the Fire Regulator marked agricultural timing, mediating between Heaven’s cycles and human subsistence—an office literally in charge of Earth.

It is noteworthy that in *the Book of Han*, Treatise on the Five Elements, Mars (*yanhuo* 炎火) was regarded as the punitive star that governed the political order of summer (*xiazheng* 夏正). The name “Fire” star may derive from this connection. Around the time of the spring equinox, the Great Fire appears on the eastern horizon. *Guoyu* states that when the Fire appears, “the pure winds dispel the cold.”⁶⁰⁸ Around mid-summer, it appears at the meridian in the southern sky, which is why *the Book of Documents* says, “the Fire star is used to determine mid-summer.”⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁶ Wei Zhao 韦昭, comm., *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States], annot. Wei Juxian 卫聚贤 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1988), 562–564.

⁶⁰⁷ Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States], Mingdao ed. (Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing House, 2009), 217. Note: The text here follows the Mingdao edition’s reading of “Huo Zheng” (火正); see also Sima Zhen’s *Shiji suoyin* 史记索隐 [Seeking the Obscure in the Records of the Grand Historian], which identifies the character “*bei*” (北) in other versions as a scribal error for “*huo*” (火).

⁶⁰⁸ Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, *Guoyu* 国语 [Discourses of the States] (Nanjing: Phoenix Publishing House 凤凰出版社, 2009), 27. The original text reads, “火见而清风戒寒” (When the Fire Star appears, the cool wind warns of the cold). Note that 见 is used here in the sense of “appearing.”

⁶⁰⁹ *Shangshu zhengyi* 尚书正义 [Correct Meanings of the Book of Documents], commentary by Kong Anguo 孔安国 and Kong Yingda 孔颖达, in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三经注疏 [Annotated Thirteen Classics] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju 中华书局, 1980), 121. Note: The phrase appears in the “Yao Dian” 尧典 chapter.

However, due to the precession of the equinoxes, although the trajectory of the Fire star remains unchanged, the time of its appearance has been delayed. Therefore, the Fire Official Li was responsible for managing affairs on earth, namely, observing the Fire star to determine the agricultural seasons and thereby governing the people.

According to Wei Zhao's annotation, the south is the position of yang, a significance rooted in the fact that for most regions of China, the midday sun stands directly in the southern sky.⁶¹⁰ Observing the sun's zenith was not merely a matter of determining noon but enabled the precise measurement of solstices and equinoxes through the use of a gnomon and shadow. This technique is materially confirmed by the lacquered measuring rod unearthed at Taosi site. The Rites of Zhou records that the office of the keeper of the Sacred Jades utilized an earthen gnomon, or *tugui* (土圭), to measure the seasons and the celestial motions of the sun and moon, a process *Kaogongji* further systematizes by emphasizing precision and centrality as key attributes of solar order.⁶¹¹

This technical focus underscores the mythic severing of Heaven and Earth as a revolutionary bifurcation of solar and stellar systems of reckoning. As the scholar Pang Pu reconstructed, the ancient Fire Calendar, which relied on the heliacal setting of the Fire Star Antares, had grown increasingly inaccurate over centuries due to the precession of the equinoxes.⁶¹² Zhuanxu's reform effectively separated the solar calendar governed by the South Regulator from the stellar calendar of the Fire Regulator. While the stellar system remained relevant for agricultural timing, solar rituals gained ideological superiority, redefining the sacred hierarchy to favour the day. Archaeologically, this transformation aligns with the transition from the late Longshan to the Erlitou periods, during which religious and administrative roles became increasingly specialized.⁶¹³ The division between the divine order of Heaven and the human order of Earth

⁶¹⁰ Wei Zhao 韋昭, annot., *Guoyu 國語* [Discourses of the States] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2008), 18:512. The text reads: “南，陽位也” (The south is the position of yang).

⁶¹¹ *Zhouli zhengyi 周禮正義* [Correct Meaning of the Rites of Zhou], vol. 38, “Chunguan: Dianrui” 春官·典瑞, ed. Sun Yirang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1987), 1541. The text describes: “以土圭測土深，正日景，以求地中” (Using the earthen gnomon to measure the depth of the earth and correct the solar shadow to find the center of the earth). See also *Kaogong ji zhu 考工記注* [Annotations to the Artificers' Record], ed. Wen Renjun (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 1993), 142.

⁶¹² Pang Pu 龐朴, “Huoli kao” 火曆考 [A Study of the Fire Calendar], in *Zhongguo wenhua 中國文化*, no. 2 (1990): 1–17. Pang argues that the shift from the Fire Star to the sun was a response to the “Fire Star” (Antares) no longer serving as a reliable seasonal marker.

⁶¹³ Xu Hong 許宏, *Erlitou no guo 二里頭：最早的中國* [Erlitou: The Earliest China] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局,

served as the institutional blueprint for early state formation, transforming a mythic expression into a marker of epochal differentiation between cosmic and political authority.

11.1.2 Xi He and Chang Xi: The Mythic Descent of Sun and Moon

The sun and moon, archetypes of day and night, encapsulate the duality of illumination and obscurity. The shifting mythological status of the solar mother Xihe (羲和) and lunar mother Changxi (常羲) mirrors the ideological reordering that privileged day over night.

In the earliest source, the *Classic of Mountains, and Seas*, the two stand as equals: “Xi He, wife of Di Jun (帝俊) gave birth to ten suns;” “Chang Xi, wife of Di Jun, gave birth to twelve moons.”⁶¹⁴ They represent the embryonic dual calendar system—the ten-day cycle (*shun*) and the twelve-month cycle (*nian*). This parallel structure may preserve the memory of an early attempt to harmonize two temporal systems: solar and lunar reckoning.

Over time, however, their mythic fates diverged. In Qu Yuan’s *Li Sao*, Xihe evolves from the birthing mother of suns into the majestic charioteer of the sun: “She who drives the six dragons that draw the solar chariot.”⁶¹⁵ By contrast, Changxi fades into obscurity. *The Heavenly Questions* interrogates the lunar phases without invoking her name; the moon’s cyclical rebirth supplants the earlier narrative of twelve rotating moons.

This transformation—from *creatrix* to *driver*—marks not degradation but consolidation: Xihe’s divinity becomes solarized and authoritative, while Changxi undergoes depersonalization, reduced to a mere celestial body. By the Wei-Jin period, Guo Pu, citing *Gui Zang* (归藏), already conflates the two, declaring that Xi He governs both sun and moon. In historical retrospection, *Shiben* (世本) still records “Huangdi appointed Xi He to observe the sun, and

2009), 156–160. Xu discusses the transition from Longshan to Erlitou in terms of social complexity and the specialization of ritual spaces.

⁶¹⁴ Guo Pu 郭璞, comm., *Shanhaijing 山海经* [Classic of Mountains and Seas] (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2015), 343. The text reads: “羲和者，帝俊之妻，生十日”

⁶¹⁵ Hong Xingzu 洪興祖, ed., *Chu Ci buzhu 楚辭補注* [Supplementary Annotations to the Songs of Chu] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1983), 26. The commentary by Wang Yi 王逸 reads: “日乘車，駕以六龍，羲和御之”.

Changyi to observe the moon,”⁶¹⁶ but by the canonical *Yao Dian*, “He appointed Xi and He, in reverence of High Heaven,”⁶¹⁷ the lunar counterpart disappears altogether.

This omission was not accidental. It reflects a bureaucratized astronomical system centred on solar observation and an ideology that systematically suppressed lunar elements. The mythic absorption of Changxi by Xihe thus allegorizes a historical process—the triumph of solar hegemony over nocturnal cycles. The moon’s pale light, once coequal with the sun, was slowly overwhelmed by the blinding clarity of solar reason.

11.1.3 A Cosmogenic Sequence in Shang Genealogy

In “*Changfa*” (长发), the Shang ancestor Qi is honoured as *xuanwang* (玄王, “the Dark King”).⁶¹⁸ The term Xuan, which denotes a deep black or profoundly dark hue, recalls the colour of the Black Bird (*xuanniao* 玄鸟), the mythic progenitor of the Shang lineage. In oracle bone and bronze inscriptions, *xuan* may be related to the image of silk being dyed, where threads turn from raw white into dark tones, a metaphor for primordial transformation. For the Shang, *xuan* signified the sacred, the unformed, and the mysterious origin of existence, a cosmological valuation later echoed in Laozi’s dictum, “The dark within darkness is the gateway to all marvels”.⁶¹⁹

The Shang genealogical sequence proceeds as follows: Qi, also Xuanwang, then his son Zhao Ming(昭明), and then Xiang Tu (相土).⁶²⁰ Xuanwang embodies the primal, undivided darkness preceding creation. Zhao Ming, meaning “illuminated brightness,” signifies the first emergence

⁶¹⁶ Wang Mo 王謨, ed., *Shiben* 世本 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 28. “黃帝使羲和占日，常儀占月”。

⁶¹⁷ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III: The Shoo King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 18. “乃命羲和，欽若昊天”。

⁶¹⁸ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. IV: The She King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 638. The original text from the “Chang Fa” 長發 reads: “玄王桓撥” (The Dark King was martial and successful).

⁶¹⁹ Laozi 老子, chap. 1, in *Laozi daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注, ed. Wang Bi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 2. The text reads: “玄之又玄，眾妙之門” (Darkness within darkness, the gate to all mysteries).

⁶²⁰ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian], vol. 1, “Yin benji” 殷本紀 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 91–92. The lineage is recorded as: “契卒，子昭明立... 昭明卒，子相土立” (Qi died, and his son Zhao Ming was established; Zhao Ming died, and his son Xiang Tu was established).

of light and order. Xiang Tu, meaning “Surveyor of the Land,” represents the establishment of terrestrial governance and spatial order.

Together, these figures trace a cosmogenic triad, from dark chaos (*xuan*), to light (Zhao Ming), to earth (Xiang Tu). This sequence reflects not only a metaphysical order but also a theological self-understanding of the Shang: Heaven as origin, Darkness as beginning, Light as differentiation, and Earth as culmination. This structure parallels the Qian Hexagram, where the first line, “The dragon lies hidden,” corresponds to Xuan Wang; the second line, “The dragon appears in the field,” corresponds to Zhao Ming; and the third line, “The gentleman works ceaselessly,” corresponds to Xiang Tu.⁶²¹ In this way, the Shang royal genealogy materializes a cosmological process in ancestral form, functioning as a sacred dramatization of cosmic genesis. By contrast, the Zhou reformulation of this worldview inverted the hierarchy by privileging daylight, clarity, and Heaven’s authority over the nocturnal and chthonic. The titles of Zhou kings, such as Zhao Wang (“King of Radiance”) and You Wang (“King of Obscurity”), embody this symbolic reversal, namely the elevation of light as virtue and the demotion of darkness as vice.

11.1.4 Two Hypotheses on the Origins of Zhou Chromatic Preference

The transition toward an ideology of brightness, whiteness, and daylight during the Zhou period may be explained through two primary factors: symbolic tribal counter-identity and astronomical necessity.

The Book of the Later Han preserves a memory of colour-based tribal distinctions, recording nine Yi(夷) groups including the Yellow, White, Red, and Black Yi.⁶²² This suggests that colour served as a fundamental marker of identity in early China. While the Shang identified with the “dark bird”, representing the colour of darkness and the mysteries of the night, the Zhou

⁶²¹ Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 3rd ed., Bollingen Series XIX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 7–9. The original text for the Qian 乾 hexagram lines includes: “潛龍勿用” (Hidden dragon, do not act), “見龍在田” (Dragon appearing in the field), and “君子終日乾乾” (The gentleman is creatively active all day long).

⁶²² Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 [Book of the Later Han], vol. 10, “Dongyi liezhuan” 東夷列傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 2807. The text mentions: “夷有九種，曰畎夷、于夷、方夷、黃夷、白夷、赤夷、玄夷、風夷、陽夷” (There are nine types of Yi: Quan, Yu, Fang, Yellow, White, Red, Black, Feng, and Yang Yi).

likely adopted a chromatic opposite, white, as a symbolic counter-identity. Although ritual texts like the *Liji* describe the Zhou as favouring red, this very flexibility highlights that colour change was a political act—a semiotic revolution marking the legitimacy of a renewed cosmic order.⁶²³

Religious change was also dictated by astronomical shifts. The Shang “Fire Calendar” relied on the phases of the star Antares (Dahuo), but this system gradually lost precision due to precession.⁶²⁴ As the Zhou expanded across broader western latitudes, they required a more universally applicable solar system. Evidence of this shift appears in “*Qiyue*” (七月) from the *Shijing*, which outlines a solar agricultural rhythm, and in bronze inscriptions that prioritize day-names over stellar signs.⁶²⁵ As agriculture expanded, the sacred rhythm of “working at sunrise and resting at sunset” elevated sunlight to a central position, rendering the exaltation of daylight a historical and economic inevitability.

11.2 Yellow Emperor: Divinity, Titles, and Historical Construction

The study of the Yellow Emperor begins with his ontological ambiguity: he stands as the sage-king leading the Five Emperors, the Heavenly Sovereign of the Centre, and the primordial ancestor of Daoist tradition. This multilayered identity, shaped through centuries of reinterpretation, makes it difficult to uncover an original form. However, a genealogy of early texts allows us to trace a clear evolution from mythic figure to historical progenitor. This development is most visible in the cosmological associations of his title, Huangdi, which is systematically explained within the Five Phases theory of the late Warring States period. In this system, the colour yellow corresponds to the centre and the element of Earth, identifying Huangdi as the ruler who harmonizes the four directions. While *Shiji* describes “*Xuanyuan*” (軒轅) as a yellow dragon residing in the celestial court,⁶²⁶ early sources such as the *Zhuangzi* and *Lüshi*

⁶²³ *Liji zhengyi* 禮記正義 [Correct Meaning of the Book of Rites], vol. 10, “Tan Gong shang” 檀弓上, ed. Kong Yingda (Beijing: Peking University Press, 1999), 234. The text notes: “周人尚赤” (The people of Zhou favoured red).

⁶²⁴ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. III: The Shoo King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 154–160. This refers to the observation of the “Great Fire” (Dahuo 大火) in the Shangshu.

⁶²⁵ James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, Vol. IV: The She King (Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1991), 226–233. The poem “Qi Yue” (七月) in the Bin Feng (邠風) section describes the solar agricultural cycle.

⁶²⁶ Sima Qian 司馬遷. *Shiji* 史記 [Records of the Grand Historian]. Revised Edition. Vol. 4. “Tianguan shu” 天官書. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2013, 1642. The text states: “軒轅, 黃龍體” (Xuanyuan has the form of a yellow dragon).

Chunqiu suggest that the association between yellow and centrality likely predates the formal codification of the *wuxing* system.

The centrality of the Yellow Emperor is further defined through his relationship with his southern counterpart, the Flame Emperor (Yandi). Yandi represents the element of Fire and the south; in the Five Phases framework where fire gives birth to earth, he is often narrated as the predecessor or elder brother of Huangdi. The legendary war between them at the Field of Banquan symbolizes the transition from the virtue of Fire to that of Earth, a myth-historical episode that established Huangdi's supreme sovereignty. This transition also represented a civilizational shift, particularly through the conflation of Yandi with Shennong (神农). In this context, Huangdi's victory signalled the superseding of a primordial agrarian culture by a new, organized social order.

This process of simplification reached its peak during the Han dynasty through Sima Qian's historicization of these materials. In *Shiji*, Sima Qian candidly explains his editorial principle of selecting refined accounts while discarding the inelegant sayings of various schools. He deliberately removed the supernatural elements found in the *Shanhaijing* to present a rationalized, moralized hero who could serve as a legitimate ancestor for the Han Empire. While Sima Qian's version became the authoritative standard, other traditions preserve the facets he omitted, including the military strategies listed in the *Hanshu*, the medical dialogues found in Mawangdui manuscripts, the fluid philosophical imagery of the *Zhuangzi*, and the archaic mythic warfare of *Shanhaijing*. These heterogeneous portrayals reveal that Huangdi was a shared cultural symbol claimed and reinterpreted by competing traditions before his image was canonized as the sagely founder-king.

Building upon the foregoing source analysis, we may now re-examine the textual representation of the Yan–Huang relationship and its ideological underpinnings.

Dimension	Yellow Emperor (Huangdi)	Flame Emperor (Yandi / Shennong)
Five Phases Symbolism	Emperor of the Center; Earth virtue; colour yellow	Emperor of the South; Fire virtue; colour red
Divine Character	Heavenly Sovereign, God of War, Civilizational Founder	Solar deity, God of Agriculture and Medicine
Major Achievements	Pacified the world, established institutions, invented vehicles, clothing, and music	Invented the plough, taught agriculture, tested herbs, created medicine

Dimension	Yellow Emperor (Huangdi)	Flame Emperor (Yandi / Shennong)
Literary Representation	From mythic deity to moralized culture hero	More singular image; often conflated with Shennong, symbolizing the pre-dynastic agrarian age
Battle Relationship	Conqueror and founder of order (Battle of Banquan)	Defeated representative of the old age
Philosophical Meaning	Embodies order, balance, and inclusiveness (Earth's virtue as stabilizing and containing)	Embodies vitality, growth, and destruction (Fire's virtue as ardent and consuming)

Consequently, any rigorous inquiry into the Yellow Emperor should extend beyond the singular narrative provided in the Records of the Grand Historian. *Shiji* must be read intertextually with other early sources, including *Shanhaijing*, *Zhuangzi*, *Lüshi chunqiu*, and excavated manuscripts from Mawangdui. While Sima Qian provides the structural framework of Huangdi's historicized persona, the marginalized "Hundred Schools" traditions preserve the older mythic dimensions of the figure. A synthesis of these perspectives reveals how Huangdi evolved from a regional tribal deity into the deified progenitor of Chinese civilization.

11.3 Colour, Cosmology, and Intellectual Horizons in Early China

In early China, colour functioned as a sophisticated medium rather than a purely visual or decorative element. It intersected with cosmology, ritual, aesthetics, and linguistic categorization, revealing the structural foundations of ancient thought. While this dissertation focuses on colour terminology within oracle-bone inscriptions and *Zhouyi*, these sources consistently point toward broader cultural inquiries. This chapter integrates these significant peripheral issues, treating them as interrelated reflections that constitute the indispensable background of ancient chromatic function.

The mythic place-name *Kongsang* (空桑), frequently appearing in early texts like the *Shanhaijing*, illustrates the intersection of colour, geography, and cosmology. Textual studies suggest *Kongsang* was a sacred territory shared among early polities, including the Yin people.⁶²⁷ In Liu Xiang's "*Jiutan*", the deity *Xuanming* (玄冥), whose name evokes darkness and the colour black, is situated in *Kongsang*. Apocryphal traditions further associate Confucius with a "Black Deity" (*heidi* 黑帝) born in this region. Such traditions demonstrate a persistent cultural link between blackness and mythic origins.⁶²⁸ *Guizang* (归藏) describes cosmic alternations of

⁶²⁷ Chen Bingliang 陳炳良, *Zhongguo gudai shenhua yu lishi zhi guanxi* 中國古代神話與歷史之關係 (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 1970), 55.

⁶²⁸ Chunqiu yanzhuan kongtu 春秋演孔圖, in *Gu weishu* 古微書, ed. Sun Jue (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 12. This apocryphal text associates the birth of Confucius with the Black Deity.

brightness and darkness, characterizing the cyclical nature of light.⁶²⁹ Early communities were deeply attuned to the sky's texture, specifically the transitions of dawn and dusk. Oracle-bone inscriptions show the Yin people making offerings to the star Antares, associated with fire and directional cosmology. Given their emphasis on nocturnal ritual, locales like *Kongsang* likely served as ritual centres for astral sacrifices.

This cosmological orientation may have influenced the *Zhao-Mu* (昭穆) ancestral order. *Zhao* (昭) is associated with brightness and the east, while “*Mu*” (穆) is linked to solemnity and the west. Inscriptions associate yellow offerings with the “Eastern Mother,” suggesting that yellow was tied to sunrise. Consequently, the alternation of “bright” and “solemn-dark” in lineage structures may have echoed celestial chromatic paradigms. Colour is central to the aesthetic tension between *wen* and *zhi*. Philosophers used colour metaphors to articulate this balance: Laozi and Zhuangzi critiqued excessive ornamentation, warning that “the five colours blind the eye”.⁶³⁰ This was not a rejection of colour itself but a suspicion of decoration that obscured essential principles. *Zhouyi* addresses this in the Bi hexagram, where colour serves as a tool for thinking about restraint and balance. In this context, beauty was a visible sign that remained subordinate to underlying order.

The ambiguity of ancient colour terms provides a site for examining the relationship between “names” (*ming* 名) and “reality” (*shi* 实). Early Chinese terms often covered broad ranges, meaning that ancient referents differ significantly from modern expectations. This discrepancy raises questions about how naming reflects specific modes of thought and how divination prescribed colours when the terms possessed multiple layers of meaning.

In Shang sacrificial practices, chromatic specificity was integral. Divination frequently determined the appropriate animal colour, as colour selection formed part of the ritual logic regulating communication with the divine. While *Zhouyi* is more abstract, it similarly embeds colour

⁶²⁹ *Guizang* 歸藏, in *Yuhan shanfang jiyi shu* 玉函山房輯佚書, ed. Ma Guohan (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1990), 42. The text describes the cycle as “一明一晦” (one brightness, one obscurity).

⁶³⁰ Laozi 老子, chap. 12, in *Laozi daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注, ed. Wang Bi (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2011), 28. The original text states: “五色令人目盲” (The five colors cause a man's eyes to go blind).

within ritualized imagery, reflecting ceremonies and hierarchical relations. As *li* evolved into moral-political regulation, colour acquired deeper ethical and cosmological meanings.

Early Chinese intellectual culture relied heavily on analogical reasoning. Colours functioned as carriers of abstract meaning, used to express ethical distinctions or metaphysical states. Mozi used the paradox “less black is black, blacker is white”⁶³¹ to discuss perception and morality, while Laozi spoke of “knowing the white and guarding the black.” By the Wei-Jin period, *xuan* became the emblematic colour of metaphysical inquiry.⁶³²

Eventually, systems like the Five Phases and the Five-Virtue Cycle transformed colour from a ritual reality into a stable cosmological symbolism. This process rationalized colour, turning it into a vehicle for reasoning about political legitimacy and natural cycles. While the ritual focus of oracle bones differs from the metaphorical system of *Zhouyi*, both presuppose a world where colour conveys order and efficacy.

11.4 Colour and Divination Beyond the *Zhouyi*

Although the central argument of this dissertation concerns the colour system embedded within the early *Zhouyi*, it is worth briefly noting how colour continues to interact with divinatory thought in later periods. Medieval physiognomic traditions, such as those reflected in *Mayi Shenxiang* (麻衣神相), developed elaborate methods of “reading colour to determine fate” (*chase ceming* 察色測命).⁶³³ While these systems do not provide direct evidence for early Zhou practices, they nevertheless illustrate a persistent conceptual affinity between colour, *qi*, and omens within the broader history of Chinese divination.

⁶³¹ Mozi 墨子, chap. 45, “Xiaoqu” 小取, in *Mozi jiangou* 墨子閒詁, ed. Sun Yirang (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 452. The text presents the paradox: “少黑謂之黑，多黑謂之白” (A little black is called black, but much black is called white).

⁶³² Laozi 老子, chap. 28, in *Laozi daodejing zhu* 老子道德經注 [Commentary on the Laozi Daodejing], ed. Wang Bi 王弼 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2011), 70. The original text reads: “知其白，守其黑，為天下式” (Know the white, but keep to the black, and be a model for the world). Regarding the rise of Xuanxue 玄學, see Wang Bi 王弼, *Laozi zhilue* 老子指略 [Brief Outline of the Laozi], in *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋, ed. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1980), 195–198.

⁶³³ Ma Yi Daozhe 麻衣道者, *Mayi Shenxiang* 麻衣神相 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 45–48; Zhuangzi 莊子, chap. 13, in *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, ed. Guo Qingfan (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 457. The text critiques “五色亂目” (The five colors confuse the eye).

In these later traditions, the Five Phases theory provides a framework for interpreting human complexion as an indicator of fortune, health, and annual destiny. Colour becomes a mobile sign: it flows, accumulates, and dissipates, and is diagnosed as auspicious or inauspicious according to its correspondence with cosmological processes. Such practices demonstrate how colour, once embedded in ritual and sacrifice, evolved into a diagnostic vocabulary for reading individual fate.

These developments belong to a different intellectual context, yet they underscore a broader continuity: colour remains a meaningful vehicle for expressing and interpreting the relationship between human beings and the cosmos. Though transformed, its symbolic power endures. The medieval physiognomic systems, therefore, are best seen not as evidence for early Zhou divination but as later variations that reveal the longevity and adaptability of colour as a divinatory language.

Reconstructing these systems resembles the work of restoring a fragmented image. With only a small number of colour terms preserved in the transmitted *Zhouyi*, many of which remain debated or obscure, the task is to piece together the remnants of an earlier symbolic world. Later traditions cannot restore the missing pieces, but they help illuminate the cultural horizon in which colour and fate remained intertwined. By examining both the early traces and the later transformations, we gain a clearer sense of the depth and durability of colour's role in Chinese divinatory thought.

12. Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that colour in early China should not be understood merely as decoration, symbolism, or aesthetic embellishment, but as an ontological and epistemological structure embedded in ritual practice, divination, and cosmological thought. In early Chinese culture, colour was not simply perceived; it was believed to participate actively in the ordering of reality itself. The dissertation has therefore proposed that colour functioned as an independent conceptual category.

At the core of this system lies what this study has termed *se she ji xiong* (色涉吉凶), namely the belief that colour participates in the production of auspicious and inauspicious outcomes. The evidence of oracle-bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, and the *Zhouyi* demonstrates that colours were not passive descriptors of objects, but operative factors within sacrificial and divinatory processes.

This chromatic logic appears across three interconnected layers. First, there is the level of material colour: pigments, sacrificial animals, jades, bronzes, garments, blood, and textiles. Second, there is the ritual layer, in which colours classified sacrificial propriety, ritual hierarchy, political legitimacy, and omenological interpretation. Third, there is the cosmological layer, in which colour became embedded within broader structures of Heaven, time, directionality, luminosity, and seasonal transformation.

The Shang material reveals that this system was fundamentally structured through a polarity between light and darkness. White and black formed the primary chromatic opposition, corresponding respectively to daylight and night. Yellow, meanwhile, emerged as a mediating colour associated with solar radiance. The evidence suggests that these colours reflected a chromatically structured conception of Heaven itself. Heaven in early China was not colour-neutral: it was experienced and conceptualized through changing relations of brightness, darkness, radiance, and visibility.

Within this framework, Shang ritual and divinatory culture may be understood as grounded in a dual structure of reverence toward both day and night. The repeated prominence of white sacrificial animals, black sacrificial animals, dark ritual terminology, and the cosmological significance of celestial luminosity all point toward a system in which both darkness and light possessed sacred efficacy. The Zhou transformation did not abolish this ontology, but selectively reorganised it. Black gradually lost its elevated ritual status, while yellow and white became increasingly dominant markers of political legitimacy, ritual centrality, and moral order. This shift reflected both a political reconfiguration of Shang cosmology and a broader transformation in ritual emphasis, especially the growing centrality of solar order, calendrical regularity, and visible ritual hierarchy.

At the same time, red underwent a significant transformation. In earlier contexts, red was strongly associated with blood sacrifice and sacrificial potency. Over time, however, especially in Zhou discourse, red increasingly absorbed and represented the prestige previously attached to yellow and daylight reverence. Thus, the traditional claim that “the Zhou revered red” should not be understood simplistically as a preference for a single colour, but as the result of a longer process in which sacrificial, solar, and political meanings converged within red ritual symbolism.

The dissertation has further argued that the later Five Phases and Five Colours systems did not originate chromatic cosmology, but rather formalised and systematised a much older ontological structure already implicit in Shang and Zhou thought. The *wuxing* system represents the culmination and codification of an earlier chromatic logic that had long permeated ritual, omenology, kingship, and cosmological imagination. What later became articulated as a comprehensive correlative cosmology was therefore rooted in much earlier ritual perceptions.

From this perspective, the development of Chinese intellectual history appears not as a sequence of ruptures, but as a recursive reorganisation of a persistent chromatic ontology. Confucianism did not eliminate this structure, but moralised it. Concepts such as *su*, ritual moderation, and the praise of balanced ornamentation transformed earlier sacrificial colour categories into ethical and aesthetic principles. Daoist and *xuanxue* discourse likewise did not abandon chromatic ontology, but metaphysically reconfigured it through concepts such as *xuan*, in which darkness, obscurity, and invisibility acquired new philosophical significance. Colour thus persisted across different intellectual traditions, though redistributed into new ritual, ethical, and metaphysical forms.

Methodologically, this dissertation has demonstrated that such a chromatic ontology can only be reconstructed through the combined use of philology, palaeography, archaeology, transmitted texts, and material culture. Oracle-bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, ritual classics, excavated manuscripts, and later exegetical traditions together preserve traces of a worldview.

Ultimately, this dissertation proposes that colour is one of the most enduring structuring principles in early Chinese thought. Yet despite the prominence of chromatic systems such as the Five Colours theory, the religious and cosmological origins of colour thinking have rarely been systematically traced back to the context of Heaven worship and early ritual practice.

This study therefore does not claim to present a final historical truth. What this dissertation seeks to demonstrate is that there existed a coherent mode of thinking through colour. Colour functioned as a medium through which the relationship between Heaven, ritual, political authority, agriculture, and human action was perceived and organised. Even if some individual historical reconstructions may remain open to revision, the broader logic revealed by the evidence remains persuasive: colour in early China operated as a religious, cosmological, and epistemological principle before becoming an aesthetic category. This stands in marked contrast to much of the dominant Western philosophical tradition, in which colour was often treated as an external or secondary quality attached to an underlying essence or “thing itself.” In early Chinese thought, by contrast, colour was frequently understood as constitutive of the phenomenon rather than merely superficial to it. Colour was not simply an attribute of reality; it was one of the ways realities manifested and became intelligible.

The broader significance of this dissertation therefore lies not only in its specific conclusions regarding early Chinese religion, but also in its attempt to reconstruct a forgotten logic of colour, a way of thinking in which chromatic order mediated the relationship between Heaven, ritual practice, political legitimacy, and the material world itself.

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