

## A Brief Discussion on the "Coloring According to Type" of Chinese Painting

Xia Jie, Dr. Rina binti Abd Shukor

City Graduate School, City University Malaysia

Email: rina.shukor@city.edu.my, 15221926513@163.com

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i7/22275>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i7/22275

**Published Date:** 19 July 2024

### Abstract

As one of the "Six Laws" of Chinese painting, "coloring according to the type" has rich humanistic connotations. In different historical periods, the coloring concept of "coloring according to the type" in Chinese painting is also different. Combining the traditional Chinese color concept, this paper explores the coloring concept of rock paintings or Chinese paintings in different historical stages such as the primitive period, the Qin and Han dynasties, the Tang and Song dynasties, the Ming and Qing dynasties, and attempts to reveal the relationship between man and nature, man and society, etc. reflected in the process of coloring by the painter.

**Keywords:** Coloring According to Type, Coloring Concept, Meaning of Life, Nature

### Definition of "Coloring According to Category"

Since Xie He of the Southern Qi Dynasty listed "coloring according to the type" as one of the "Six Laws" of Chinese painting, this coloring concept has become an irrefutable truth of traditional Chinese painting. The core concept of "coloring according to the type" is to distinguish the different ways of using colors in painting according to the physical properties of external objects. It not only reflects people's grasp of the colors of all things in nature, but also is the ancient painters' inner refinement of the colorful colors of the external world. "Coloring according to the type" is not a direct portrayal of the colors of the external world. It is always an imitative color with a strong self-spirit formed after people's careful observation of objective objects.

"Sui Lei Fu Cai" is a term used in painting. It was proposed by Xie He of the Southern Dynasty in the "Ancient Painting Records" as a method of coloring. It is a standard for evaluating paintings and a basic principle for the use of colors in Chinese paintings. "Sui Lei Fu Cai" or "Sui Lei, Fu Cai Shi Ye", where "Fu" is the same as "Fu, Shou, Bu", means to apply color. The "Lei" in "Sui Lei" means "category", that is, "object", and "Sui Se Xiang Lei" can be interpreted as the color is similar to the object being painted. Therefore, "Sui Lei Fu Cai" can be understood as giving typified colors to different types of scenes.

At that time, "coloring according to the type" mainly referred to the coloring method of figure painting. Now, its meaning is more extensive. Painters can change the color of objective objects according to their subjective wishes and needs, and can also classify the colors of objects according to the seasons. This term emphasizes the importance of color in painting and the principles that painters should follow when using color. It requires painters to choose appropriate colors to express objects according to the characteristics and attributes of the objects when depicting them, so as to make the picture more vivid and realistic. At the same time, "coloring according to the type" also reflects the characteristics of Chinese painting that focus on verve and artistic conception, and convey the painter's emotions and thoughts through the use of colors.

"Coloring according to the type" is a coloring method proposed by the Southern Dynasty painter Xie He in "Ancient Painting Catalogue". It is a standard for evaluating paintings and a basic principle for using colors in Chinese paintings. It has had many impacts on the development of modern painting colors. The following are some of the main aspects:

The subjectivity of color: "Coloring according to type" emphasizes the similarity between color and the object being depicted, but also allows the painter to make appropriate color changes based on subjective feelings and performance needs. This subjective use of color has been further developed in modern painting, and painters use color more freely to express emotions, atmosphere and personal concepts.

The symbolism of color: The "category" in "coloring according to the category" can be understood as different categories of objects, and color can symbolize or imply the characteristics and attributes of these objects. In modern painting, the symbolism of color is widely used to convey deeper meanings and connotations through specific color combinations.

The expressiveness of color: "Coloring according to type" focuses on the expressive effect of color, making color one of the important means of painting expression. In modern painting, the expressiveness of color has been fully utilized. Painters use color contrast, harmony, exaggeration and other techniques to create strong visual effects and artistic appeal.

Cultural connotation of color: "Coloring according to type" is an important manifestation of the color concept of traditional Chinese painting, which contains rich cultural connotations and aesthetic concepts. In modern painting, many painters combine traditional culture with modern color concepts to create works with unique cultural charm.

### **Five-color Categories and Definitions**

In traditional color concepts, colors can be roughly divided into five categories, namely blue, yellow, red, white, and black. These colors are not only visual expressions, but also carry profound cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. In the sacrificial culture of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the colors of the offerings had a relatively stable correspondence with the sacrificial directions. The "Great Master of the Imperial Clan" records: "Six jade objects are made to worship the heaven, the earth, and the four directions. The blue jade is used to worship the sky, the yellow jade is used to worship the earth, the blue jade is used to worship the east, the red jade is used to worship the south, the white jade is used to worship the west, and the black jade is used to worship the north." From the records in the "Great Master of the Imperial Clan", it can be seen that blue, yellow, blue, red, white, and black correspond to the sky, the earth, the east, the south, the west, and the north respectively. This correspondence also reflects the ancient people's understanding and grasp of the main colors of different directions in the universe and nature. In addition, according to the changes in time, colors are

further subdivided into four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter, as well as different categories such as morning and evening. For example, the ancients believed that the color of spring is green, symbolizing the growth of all things; the color of summer is blue, meaning that all things are lush; the color of autumn is cyan, representing the life of all things from the most brilliant to the withering; the color of winter is black, meaning that all things wither and return to silence. These color changes in each season not only reflect the ancients' keen insight and profound understanding of the color changes in nature, but also make color have life meaning. In the color view of ancient ancestors, color and life are always combined, so that color is not only a representation of the color of all things in nature, but also a symbol of human life spirit.

As for traditional Chinese painting, the principle of "coloring according to the type" requires the painter to present the essential characteristics of objects according to their different properties. The "type" in "coloring according to the type" of course refers to the "category" of the objective object, but this division of the "type" of the objective object is based on the "five colors" as the most basic classification unit. Among them, "white" can usually be expressed by "leaving blank space" in painting, and "black" can be achieved by blending "water" and "ink". In addition, the most basic tones in traditional Chinese painting are the three basic primary colors of dawn red, gamboge, and indigo. Although all things in nature are colorful, they are all blended by combining two, three, or four colors in different proportions among the above five colors. The division of five basic color categories not only helps the painter to grasp and use colors more accurately in the creative process, but also can more faithfully express the essential characteristics of nature and objects. It can be said that "coloring according to the type" is not only a color principle, but also a way to observe and understand nature. It requires the painter to have a deep understanding of the form and structure of the object in the creative process, and also have a keen insight into the color attributes of the object. In this way, the painter can grasp the essential characteristics of the object more accurately, thus presenting a more vivid and realistic natural scene in his work.

### **The History of Color in Chinese Painting**

Chinese painting is also called "Danqing". What is Danqing? Danqing mainly refers to the two commonly used pigments in Chinese painting, cinnabar and indigo. Since "Danqing" is used to refer to Chinese painting, it can be seen that color is important in Chinese painting. The history of Chinese painting is actually the history of the development and change of the use of different colors by painters in different historical periods.

In the primitive period, the colors of Chinese paintings mainly came from minerals and plants in nature. These natural pigments have bright and strong colors, adding rich visual effects to primitive paintings. For example, red mainly comes from hematite powder, which is widely used in primitive murals. For example, the dyeing ornaments of the Shangdingdong people in Zhoukoudian used red. Yellow mainly comes from minerals such as ochre and orthoclase, which are often used to draw patterns on painted pottery in the Neolithic period. Cyan mostly comes from natural minerals such as azurite and malachite, which can be used for painting after being ground into powder. White comes from natural chalk, clam shells, etc., which provide a bright background for painting or are used to outline. Black mainly comes from carbon black, which is often used to depict the outline or details of animals in primitive paintings. In addition, the use of colors in primitive paintings was also influenced by people's cognition of nature and the universe at that time. For example, red is regarded as the color of the sun and fire, symbolizing life and strength; yellow is regarded as the color of the land,

symbolizing harvest and prosperity; blue symbolizes the sky and water, giving people a sense of tranquility and freshness; white symbolizes purity and elegance; black symbolizes mystery and solemnity. Although ancient artists could not depict these emotional colors in detail in their paintings, they had already started the journey of Chinese painting with their casual strokes and smears.

During the Qin and Han Dynasties, the development of color in Chinese painting reached a new height. The painting art of this period involved many types, including tomb murals, silk paintings, and palace temple murals. These different types of paintings all showed unique styles in the use of colors. First of all, the colors of paintings in the Qin and Han Dynasties were pure, bright, and contrasting. For example, in the court paintings of the Han Dynasty, bright and eye-catching colors were often used to depict objects, and exaggerated contrast techniques were used to enhance the visual impact. The strong contrast of black and white, cold and warm, light and dark colors made the picture more vivid and gorgeous. At the same time, color was also used to express the depth and layering of the picture, and the three-dimensional sense of the object was reflected through the light and dark changes and cold and warm contrast of colors. Secondly, the use of color in paintings during the Qin and Han Dynasties was relatively simple, often using large areas of color blocks and simple color combinations to shape the picture, without too much complicated and detailed color expression. The painting colors of this period were mainly black and red. For example, the Han Dynasty silk painting unearthed from Mawangdui in Changsha is a good example. The silk painting directly used vermilion, cooked ochre, stone blue, black, white and other colors, and the color effect of the whole picture was relatively unified. This way of using colors reflects the uniqueness and accuracy of Chinese art's grasp of the laws of color, and also reflects the meticulousness and depth of ancient Chinese color theory.

The Tang and Song dynasties were an important stage in the development of Chinese painting colors. During this period, the art of painting has been greatly developed, and the use of colors has become richer and more mature. In the early Tang Dynasty, Chinese landscape painting began to prevail, and green landscape painting appeared, that is, stone blue and stone green are the main colors, with ochre, cinnabar, juice green and other colors added. The picture effect is gorgeous and rich with decorative effects. "General Li" Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao, father and son, are representative painters of green landscape in the Tang Dynasty. They were influenced by the paintings of Zhan Ziqian in the Sui Dynasty and mainly used green landscape. However, in terms of technique, they also used a lot of calligraphy brush methods, and the vigorous brushwork can be vaguely seen in the colors. The green landscape paintings of the Tang Dynasty mostly express secluded places in terms of painting themes. The painting style is exquisite and rigorous. The landscape is painted with thick colors of gold and green, which is fine and unique. It has created a glorious page of green landscape painting and has a far-reaching influence on later generations. The painting method of blue-green landscape is to first draw the outline with ink and then fill in the color. The coloring rules are roughly based on "blue-green as the base, gold and green as the text", "gold on the sunny side and blue on the shady side". Although the blue-green landscape paintings of the Tang Dynasty are elaborate and complicated, the landscapes painted are golden and green, and have a noble style, reflecting the pursuit of the magnificent, broad and magnificent beauty of the Tang Dynasty scholars.

If the green landscape paintings of the Tang Dynasty represent magnificence and brilliance, then the colors of the paintings of the Song Dynasty represent elegance, freshness, restraint and elegance. In the middle of the Northern Song Dynasty, literati painters

represented by Wen Tong, Su Shi, Mi Fu and others advocated the unity of poetry, calligraphy and painting, emphasizing meaning over form. Literati often created paintings with a self-entertaining mentality, and used paintings to express their emotions and thoughts in order to achieve inner self-sufficiency and self-adaptation. These literati painters no longer need extra colors to embellish their paintings. They pay more attention to the artistic conception and content of the paintings themselves. The painting style also changes from heavy colors to extremely simple ink colors. Influenced by the trend of Confucianism, they pay more attention to "painting meaning" and "painting theory". Ouyang Xiu said in "Appreciating Paintings": "Desolate and indifferent is a difficult concept to paint. The painter can get it, but the viewer may not understand it. Therefore, objects that are close in meaning, such as flying, slow and fast, are easy to see, but objects that are leisurely, peaceful and quiet, and far away are difficult to depict. If the high and low are opposite, and the far and near are repeated, this is the art of the painter, not the work of a connoisseur." For painting, the concept is difficult but the form is easy. The form of flying, slow and fast is easy to depict, but how can the concept of "desolate and indifferent" be painted? This requires that when using colors, the painter should not completely follow the principle of "coloring according to the type", but "coloring according to the heart". Only by using those light, elegant and distant tones can the concept of "desolate and indifferent" be depicted. As the saying goes, "Painting is based on the concept, not the color. People should not discuss the form but the heart". In the view of literati painters, the color of a painting does not need to fully reflect the original color of the external objective objects, but should be colored according to the painter's concept. For example, Su Shi once used cinnabar to paint a red bamboo. Someone asked him where there was red bamboo in the world. Su Shi replied, "Where can I find black bamboo?" This also proves that in the minds of literati painters in the Song Dynasty, the relationship between the color of the painting and the human heart is closer, and the relationship with external objective things has become alienated. Of course, Song Dynasty painters also attached great importance to "painting theory". In the Postscript to the Complete Works of Shanshui Chun in the Northern Song Dynasty, Zhang Huai wrote: "Those who are in accordance with the principles can paint the wonders of things, while those who are ignorant of the principles will lose the truth of things. Why? It is the mechanism of nature. Nature is the body given by heaven; mechanism is the use of human spirit. When the mechanism is activated, all kinds of changes come into being. Only those who paint according to the principles can follow the nature of nature, explore the subtleties of things, understand the mind and the spirit, and tacitly understand the movement and stillness of a single hair. When they are in the world, the form and quality will be dynamic and the spirit will be floating. Therefore, those who are ignorant of the principles will let their hearts be controlled by emotions and their nature be moved by things. They will be distracted by the world and disturbed by the benefits. They will only be controlled by the brush and ink. How can they talk about the truth of heaven and earth?" Zhang Huai's view can be regarded as a summary of the Song Dynasty scholars' emphasis on the concept of "painting principles". Although Song Dynasty literati paintings did not advocate bright colors, this does not mean that they ignored colors. In fact, the Song people's concept of color can better reflect their meticulous observation and high refinement of the colors of all things in nature. They are always good at using light colors and colors to express the changes and levels of colors, making the picture more delicate and realistic. The use of colors in Song Dynasty paintings also reflects the true reproduction of natural scenery. For example, the green and light ink in landscape paintings are the result of in-depth observation and careful refinement of natural scenery.

In short, the Tang and Song dynasties were an important stage in the development of Chinese painting colors. During this period, painting colors were not only greatly enriched and developed, but also began to pay attention to the psychological effects and symbolic meanings of colors. These developments and changes laid a solid foundation for the use of colors in Chinese paintings, and also provided valuable reference and inspiration for the development of painting art in later generations.

After the Ming and Qing Dynasties, a wave of retro style appeared in Chinese painting. Artists admired landscape paintings with ink as the main color or literati paintings with profound artistic conception. At that time, the color aesthetics of Chinese painting entered an unprecedented "decline". Until modern times, the color of Chinese painting showed a new style and trend, especially in the field of freehand flower and bird painting. Modern politics, economy, and culture are all groping forward in turmoil and unrest. Against the background of internal and external troubles, a large number of patriots began to express their patriotic feelings through art. Some went to the West and injected new inspiration and blood into Chinese painting, which was mainly traditional and in urgent need of breakthroughs, through the study and penetration of Western painting. At the node of seeking breakthroughs, Chinese painters began to explore and improve Chinese painting, among which the use of color became an important aspect. In modern times, some outstanding painters such as Xu Beihong, Lin Fengmian and Qi Baishi made bold innovations and attempts in the use of colors in freehand flower and bird painting. Xu Beihong integrated Western classical realistic sketches into ink painting, gradually eliminating the "five colors of ink" in the pursuit of body structure, making the picture more three-dimensional and realistic. Lin Fengmian integrated the Tang and Han dynasties with folk art styles and Western expressionist paintings, seeking "comprehensive color expression" from nature, using the Western painting method of emphasizing light effects to enhance expressiveness, but retaining the elegant style of Chinese painting. Qi Baishi boldly absorbed the bright colors of folk art and created a unique "red flowers and black leaves" painting style, making the colors of the picture more vivid and lively.

In addition to these outstanding painters, the use of colors in modern freehand flower and bird paintings has also been influenced by other factors. On the one hand, with the changes in society and people's aesthetic concepts, the traditional "ink and wash rendering" can no longer meet people's spiritual and aesthetic requirements. Therefore, Chinese painting must broaden the expression space of color and enhance its own expressiveness. On the other hand, the color theory and techniques of Western painting have also provided new inspiration and reference for modern Chinese painters.

In general, the development of color in modern Chinese painting presents a new style and trend in the field of freehand flower and bird painting. Painters began to innovate and experiment boldly, combining the color theory and techniques of Western painting with traditional Chinese painting, creating a more colorful, vivid and realistic picture effect. This development and change not only provides a broader space and opportunity for the use of color in Chinese painting, but also gives the traditional concept of "coloring according to the type" a new contemporary connotation, providing valuable reference and inspiration for the development of painting art in later generations.

**References**

- Xiu, O. (1976), edited by Li Yi'an . Complete Works of Ouyang Xiu [ M ] . Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company , 2001 : 1976.
- Yuan, R. (2009). Commentary on the Thirteen Classics [ M ]. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company , 2009 : 157.
- Zaozhuang, Z. (2015). A Complete Collection of Prefaces and Postscripts of the Song Dynasty [ M ] . Jinan: Qilu Publishing House, : 3628.