

## THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF WHITE COLOR IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE

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**Abstract:** Under the influence of different languages and cultural factors, people have not entirely the same emotions towards certain specific vocabulary, such as color terms, and maybe different in understanding their implicit symbolic meanings as well. Even in the same culture background, for the sake of individual experience, historical influence, context, characteristics as well as ethnic aesthetic psychology and cognitive emotions, interpretations and emotional responses might diverse among different ethnic groups. This paper tries to explore similarities and the diversities of the symbolic meanings of commonly used color words in English and Chinese, so as to enhance the awareness of cross-culture language teaching and communication, help students better understand the languages and cultures.

**Key Words:** white, cultural linguistics, implicit symbolic meaning

Language is not only a social phenomenon, but also a carrier of culture, and an essential component of culture itself as well. Among the various elements of language, vocabulary is fundamental and essential. Cultural differences would inevitably reflect at the lexical level at least, furthermore implicit symbolic meaning as well as its literal meanings of vocabulary show differences between languages .

According to research by Han Qishun(1999): "Semantic attribute differences reflect two different modes of thinking" . Shao Zhihong, (1994)"The perspectives of English and Chinese on observing things are different," "For example, in Chinese,the color of tea brewed from fermented tea is referred to '红 (red) ' ; while in English, it is referred to 'black'" tea. Due to disparities in geography, ethnicity, religion, and values, different ethnic groups in different language and cultures may express the same rational concepts and feelings. However, under the influence of their respective unique cultural traditions, these vocabulary items will inevitably acquire additional symbolic meanings overlaid onto the concepts themselves. Here are the comparably study on **white 白色** color words commonly used in English and Chinese.

In Western cultures where English is used as native language, metaphorical usage of white has nearly 10 different kinds. Mostly white symbolizes positive meaning because of extensions stemming from its original meaning, "purity, happiness, hope, goodness, and innocence." e.g.the Angel in the stories and in the Bible, there always has a pair of white wings, a white halo floating above her head. The bride wears a white wedding dress and white gloves which symbolizing purity and noble characteristic in wedding.

When white is used to describe sth. abstract, the metaphorical meaning appears. Some items such as “a white soul”(纯洁的心灵 pure soul), “a white spirit”(正直的精神 integrity spirit), “the white days”(吉日 auspicious and fortunate day), “white man”(善良的人, 有教养的人 good manner person), “white-haired boy”(幸运儿, 宠儿 lucky bird, lucky person).

When "white" is used to describe a feeling of emptiness, or monotony, it can metaphorically imply timidity or cowardice. “white feather”(胆小的人 timid person), “white-livered”(怯懦的 psychologically weak)

White can be regarded as kind somewhat, for example “white lie”(善意的谎言 benevolent lie), “white magic”(善意的法术 kind-hearted magic)

White also has the meaning of intense and severe to the extent, “white rage”(震怒 turn pale with anger), “white hope”(巨大的希望 great hope)

When white is referred to political issues, its metaphorical meaning is political surrender. E.g. “white flag”(白旗, surrendering flag), “white regime”(白色统治) “white terror”(白色恐怖), “white war”(白色战争), This terror regime typically features mass arrests, imprisonment, executions, and torture, aimed at suppressing political dissent and maintaining the power of the ruling authority. While in economic life, “white war” refers to a war without gunfire, often denoting intense economic competition. “white market”(合法市场 legal market)

When the term "white" appears in reports from governments or international organizations, it refers to the document itself. E.g. “White paper”(白皮书 compiled or printed documents on white paper), white paper of FDA.

“White goods”(大宗商品 large household appliances, such as refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, and stoves, typically finished in white enamel.

“White money”(干净的钱) refers to income or money that is obtained legally and is fully declared for tax purposes. It contrasts with “black money,” which is income earned through illegal means or is not reported to tax authorities.

In Southeast Asian cultures, “white elephant”(白象) was considered as extremely valuable things and were often given as gifts to monarchs who could not put them into work or sold because of their status, and the gifts became financial burden at last. In modern usage, “white elephant” is often used metaphorically to describe any expensive or burdensome possession or project that is more trouble



than it's worth.

In English, "white powder (白粉)" typically refers to a powdered substance that is white in color. It can have various meanings depending on the context, such as flour, sugar, baking soda, or illicit drugs like cocaine.

But in Chinese “白粉 white powder” commonly refers to the drug cocaine because it is a white powdery substance.

In Chinese culture “白white” is always related to the negative meaning. White is often associated with death, mourning, or funerals because in some cultures, it is seen as symbolizing peace and spiritual release. In some traditional funerals, 灵堂 (the funeral hall) is decorated in “白色white”, people may wear white attire(孝服) or use white flowers (丧花) to express respect and mourning for the deceased." For example, some items has closer connection with funeral culture, 白事 (funeral ceremony), mourners typically wear 穿白色孝服 (white mourning clothes), white shoes (白鞋), hang white banners (挂白帆), wear mourning bands (戴白带), white flowers (白花), scatter white coins (撒白钱)。

In Chinese “白” (White) often represents (无)emptiness and poverty (贫穷), as seen in terms like "白衣white clothes" or "白丁white laborers." Expressions like "一穷二白pure and innocent" or "白手起家starting from scratch" also convey associations with “白white”. Similarly, the phrase "starting from scratch白手起家" suggests a situation of poverty or having nothing.

To describe someone who acts innocently and sweetly in order to please others, the term "傻白甜silly, sweet, and innocent" is used as one word. If stupidity, foolishness白痴, 白日梦。

White could be used as understandable by the common people明白 (Clear),), 一清二白、清清白白(understandable).

“白话Official, formal language “originated in the Qin Dynasty, and the government ordered people to write in vernacular Chinese so that those without higher education could understand. During the New Culture Movement, there was also an advocacy for writing in vernacular Chinese, known as 白话文 which was in

contrast to classical Chinese, known as 文言文 (wenyanwen), or 古文 (old literary Chinese) .

When “白White” is used as an adverb to describe a verb, its metaphorical meaning is often associated with waste and futility. e.g. 白看(no use after seeing) ; 白说(useless after saying) ; 白白浪费(waste, ineffective) ; 白吃白喝(eating without paying) ; “白吃了这碗饭”(get no profits or benefit from the work), “白长了这么大个儿”(grow tall for nothing).

White has “Pure, immaculate清白 ; 洁白” the extension meaning from its original color image.

Additionally, “白white” is contrasted with black to signify correctness, justice, righteousness. For example, phrases like "颠倒黑白confuse right and wrong" or "不分青红皂白not distinguishing between right and wrong" emphasize this contrast.

Conclusion: The metaphorical use of colors is closely related to people's cognitive ways and thinking patterns about the world. These usages include cultural factors. Comparative study not only reveals similarities in universal cognition but also reveals the characteristics of different ethnic groups. It helps us to enhance the awareness of cross-culture communication, and language learning and teaching as well.

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