

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF THE COLOR TERM "WHITE" IN MONGOLIAN AND CHINESE

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**Abstract:** Language is not only a tool for communication but also a carrier of culture. Each language contains unique cultural characteristics of its people, especially in terms of color terms. This paper aims to compare the cultural connotations of color terms in Mongolian and Chinese, focusing particularly on the cultural symbolism of "white," revealing the differences between the Mongol and Han ethnic groups in terms of lifestyle, history, culture, and religious beliefs, and discussing how these differences are reflected in the languages and cultures of the two ethnic groups. Through in-depth analysis, this paper uncovers the different cultural cognitions and symbolic meanings of "white" among the Mongol and Han ethnic groups, as well as how these differences are manifested in their linguistic and cultural practices. The study not only provides new perspectives and materials for fields such as linguistics, cultural studies, and comparative literature but also offers valuable insights for cross-cultural communication and the harmonious development of ethnic relations. The results emphasize the close connection between language and culture, showing that language is not only a bridge for communication but also a key to understanding and appreciating the diversity of different cultures.

**Keywords:** Cultural connotations; Color terms; Mongolian and Chinese; Cross-cultural communication

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are inseparable. As a part of language, color terms not only have literal meanings but also carry rich cultural symbolism and metaphors. Different ethnic groups have different understandings and symbolic meanings of colors, which reflect their unique social and cultural backgrounds and historical traditions. Language is the cornerstone of human communication; it not only conveys information but also embodies culture. Among the many elements of language, color terms stand out due to their immediacy and emotional connotations. Color terms are not just vocabulary that describes colors in nature; they also contain deep cultural connotations, which are vivid manifestations of the interweaving of language and culture. Different ethnic groups, due to their unique social and cultural backgrounds and historical traditions, have their own interpretations of colors and their symbolic meanings. For example, red often symbolizes celebration and good fortune in Chinese culture, while in Western culture, it may be associated with danger or warning. This diversity not only enriches the variety of languages but also provides us with a window through which we can glimpse the history, beliefs, values, and social structures of a nation[1].

The study of color terms is of great significance for promoting the exchange and integration of different cultures. In the context of globalization, cross-cultural communication is becoming increasingly frequent, and the understanding of the connotations of color terms, as part of culture, is crucial to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts. For instance, the improper use of color terms in commercial advertising, international communication, and even daily conversations may lead to unnecessary misunderstandings, affecting interpersonal relationships and the success of business cooperation. Therefore, in-depth research on the cultural connotations of color terms is not only helpful for linguists and cultural researchers but also practically instructive for diplomats, businessmen, educators, and others who need to engage in cross-cultural communication.

Furthermore, the study of color terms can help us recognize the value of cultural diversity. Each culture has its unique language of colors, which is an important part of cultural identity and tradition. By studying color terms, we can better understand and respect the differences among cultures, promoting mutual understanding and respect. This understanding and respect are the foundation for building a harmonious international community and are also key to promoting the protection of global cultural diversity.

The importance of color term studies extends beyond mere academic interest; it is a practical necessity in our interconnected world. As globalization accelerates, the frequency of cross-cultural interactions has never been higher, making the accurate interpretation of color terms a critical skill. Whether in the design of international brands, the selection of colors for diplomatic gifts, or the choice of attire for global events, understanding the cultural implications of color is essential to convey the intended message and to avoid inadvertently causing offense.

For example, in the realm of advertising, a color that is perceived positively in one culture might be associated with negative connotations in another, potentially leading to a campaign that backfires rather than resonates with the target audience. In official communication, the choice of colors on flags or in official statements can carry historical or emotional weight that influences international relations. Even in casual conversations, the misinterpretation of color symbolism can lead to confusion or offense, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of color in cultural

contexts.

As shown in Figure 1, the study of color terms also plays a vital role in fostering an appreciation for cultural diversity. Colors are not just elements of design; they are woven into the fabric of cultural narratives, rituals, and beliefs. They are used to mark significant life events, to express social status, and to symbolize spiritual concepts. By delving into the cultural significance of color terms, we gain insight into the values, histories, and worldviews of different societies.

Moreover, this understanding fosters a climate of respect and openness, which is essential for international collaboration and peace. When we appreciate the diversity in color symbolism, we are less likely to impose our own cultural interpretations on others and more likely to approach cross-cultural interactions with empathy and curiosity. This mindset is crucial for the development of inclusive global policies and for the creation of educational curricula that celebrate the richness of human culture.



**Figure 1** The Narrative of Color in National Culture

## 2 THE CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF "WHITE" IN MONGOLIAN

### 2.1 Cultural Symbolism of "White" In Mongolian Culture

"white" (tsagaan) has multiple meanings, not only representing the color itself but also symbolizing purity, kindness, and celebration. Here are several cultural connotations of "white" in Mongolian:

**Purity and Simplicity:** Opposite to "black," it symbolizes unobstructed and simplicity, such as "tsagaan zam" (unobstructed road).

**Kindness and Innocence:** Refers to kind-hearted people, such as "tsagaan setgeltiin hun" (kind-hearted person).

**Celebration and Joy:** Related to festivals, such as "tsagaan sar" (Spring Festival)(Figure 2).

**Light and Plain:** Refers to vegetarians, such as "tsagaan hooltoin hun" (vegetarian).

### 2.2 Combinations of "White" with Other Color Terms

"White" combines with other color terms to form new color expressions, such as "tsagaan saaral" (white ash). Adjectives combined with "white" can describe varying degrees of white, such as "huvhai tsagaan" (pale).

### 2.3 The Special Status of "White" in Mongolian

Culture "White" holds a special place in Mongolian culture, symbolizing the color of milk and representing kindness and good character. Here are a few specific manifestations of "white" in Mongolian culture:

#### 2.3.1 White and white food

Mongolians refer to dairy products as "white food" (Tsagaan idee), which is not only a part of daily diet but also an important item for entertaining guests and offering sacrifices. In important festivals and ceremonies, such as the New Year, Naadam, and weddings, white food plays a significant role.

#### 2.3.2 White and white month

White Month is a traditional festival celebrated by Mongolians, similar to the Spring Festival. During White Month, Mongolians thoroughly clean their homes in preparation for the new year.



**Figure 2** Mongolians Wear White during Festivals

### 3 THE CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS OF "WHITE" IN CHINESE

In Chinese, "white" is usually associated with purity, freshness, and brightness, but in certain contexts, it is also related to funerals, representing bad luck. This difference reflects the cultural cognitive differences between the Han and Mongolian ethnic groups[2].

The association of the color "white" with purity, freshness, and brightness in Chinese culture is deeply rooted in the nation's history and traditional values. White is often seen as a color of cleanliness and innocence, which is why it is frequently used in weddings and other celebrations to symbolize the start of a new and pure chapter in life. It is also the color of the moon and clouds, elements that are central to Chinese poetry and art, embodying tranquility and natural beauty. In contrast, in Mongolian culture, "white" (tsagaan) carries a different set of connotations, which are more closely tied to the nomadic way of life and the importance of dairy products. The color white is associated with the milk of livestock, which is a staple in the Mongolian diet and a symbol of nourishment and life-sustaining forces [3].

However, in Chinese culture, the color white also takes on a somber tone when it comes to funerals and mourning. This is because white is the color of mourning in Chinese tradition, symbolizing the death and the loss of a loved one. The use of white in this context is a stark contrast to the joyous and auspicious red that is used in celebrations and during the Chinese New Year. It is a color that represents mourning and sadness, a time to reflect on the life of the deceased and to honor their memory.

This dichotomy in the symbolism of white between the Han and Mongolian cultures is a reflection of their distinct historical and cultural backgrounds. For the Han, the color white is a reminder of the cycle of life, with its dual roles in both the joy of new beginnings and the sorrow of loss. It is a color that encapsulates the complexity of human emotions and experiences. In Mongolian culture, the color white is more uniformly positive, tied to the sustenance provided by their livestock and the purity of the natural world around them [4].

### 4 ANALYSIS OF THE CAUSES OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MONGOLIAN AND HAN ETHNIC GROUPS

The differences in the cultural cognition of "white" between the Mongolian and Han ethnic groups can be analyzed from the following aspects:

**Differences in Lifestyle:** The Mongolian ethnic group is based on animal husbandry as a production method, which is a nomadic culture, while the Han ethnic group mainly consumes rice and wheat, supplemented by vegetables, meat, and bean products. These different living habits and production methods affect the understanding and use of color terms by the two ethnic groups.

**Differences in Religious Beliefs:** The Mongolian ethnic group mostly believes in Tibetan Buddhism, while the Han ethnic group has always adopted an inclusive attitude towards various religious beliefs, with the worship of heaven and ancestors being the main traditional concepts of Han religion. The differences in religious beliefs also affect the construction and understanding of the cultural connotations of color terms by the two ethnic groups [5].

**Differences in Historical Culture:** There are obvious differences between the Mongolian and Han ethnic groups in terms of food and dietary culture. The Mongolian ethnic group mainly consumes livestock products and prefers roasting, stewing, and boiling cooking methods; while the Han ethnic group mainly consumes grains, vegetables, and beans, and is good at frying, steaming, and boiling cooking methods. These differences are not only reflected in dietary habits but also in the understanding and application of the cultural connotations of color terms by the two ethnic groups.

### 5 CONCLUSION

Through the comparative study of the cultural connotations of "white" in Mongolian and Chinese, this paper reveals the differences in cultural cognition and symbolic meanings between the Mongolian and Han ethnic groups. By analyzing the multiple meanings of "white" in Mongolian and its special status in Mongolian culture, we not only deepen our understanding of Mongolian culture but also recognize the profound connection between language and culture. As a part of culture, color terms have rich connotations and profound meanings. In Mongolian culture, "white" is not only a description of color but also an embodiment of values such as purity, kindness, and celebration. The diversity and depth

of this cultural symbolism provide us with a window to observe and understand the history, beliefs, and lifestyles of a nation. Through comparative analysis, we find that although the Mongolian and Han ethnic groups have commonalities in their understanding of "white," such as both considering white as a symbol of purity and freshness, they also show obvious differences in specific symbolic meanings and cultural practices. These differences not only enrich our understanding of the cultural connotations of color terms but also promote respect and understanding for the cultures of different ethnic groups[6].

### **COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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