

# The Religious Connotation and Aesthetic Studying of the Color in Tibetan Architecture

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## Abstract

Amid our national culture with a long history, Tibet enjoys distinctive cultural beliefs and a sense of national aesthetics. With the characteristic of unique geological position, namely plateau, natural environment and weather influence give birth to its mysterious color and peculiar national charm. Influenced by its distinctive natural environment and historical culture, Tibetan architecture shows its unique national nature from structure, figure, decoration methods as well as colour. Among all the Tibetan architecture, the identification of architecture colour is more prominent. For Tibetan religion and history exerted great influence upon the decoration color of Tibetan architecture, a certain architectural color culture has been formed. However, with the impact of high-speed development of the city and foreign culture, partly Tibetan architecture is facing the situation of being damaged. Therefore, this article aims to further interpret and illustrate the Tibetan traditional architecture color system, and explore the new developing direction of Tibetan architecture oriented in the inheriting and protection of Tibetan national culture, combined with historical and religious influence.

## Keywords

Tibetan Architecture Colour, Religious Aesthetics

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## 1. Introduction

With an altitude of approximately 4500 meters, Tibet is located in the Qinghai Tibet plateau. Influenced by the unique natural environment and cultural environment, the distinctive color aesthetics has been formed in daily producing life of the local people. As we all know, as one part of Tibetan culture, religious culture enjoys a significant cultural status. It has permeated every aspect of Tibetan life. Its externalization is embodied through the aspect of Tibetan architecture

color, having distinctive features and religious symbolism.

## 2. Formation of Tibetan Architecture Colour

Generally, Tibetan architecture decoration has strong tension and ability of emotion expression. Local natural environment and cultural environment have influence upon the formation of color. Natural weather, geomorphology, hydrology plants are involved in the natural environment and politics, economy, history as well as religion and other aspects are included in cultural environment (Yang, 2004). Compared with architecture colour in other regions, the most obvious difference is in the aspect of religion. Under the unique natural environment, Tibetan ancestors gradually had the concept of “god”. Numerous gods such as mountain god, water god, and heaven god appeared afterward. With the development of primitive Tibetan society, these concepts of “god” gradually matured and then evolved into the most primitive religion—Bon. Among the Bon, the world is divided into three aspects, namely “the Divine, people, ghost”. Colour “white” represents “sky”, colour “yellow” represents “air”. Colour “red” represents “the surface of the Earth”. Colour “blue” or “black” is used to represent “the Underground”. After being transmitted into Tubo 7th century AD in ancient China, Buddhism experienced the “fighting” against with Tibetan Original religion—Bon and combine with each other, forming a Tibetan Buddhism with a distinctive characteristic and exerted more profound influence over the Tibetan architecture especially religious architecture, expressing richer colour semantics. In the meantime, the Buddhist scriptures in Tibetan Buddhism gave a completely new interpretation of the colour. From its interpretation, any cause in the world can be abstracted into the following four aspects and each has a corresponding colour. “Peace” in the colour of “white” represents “mild”, “increase” in the colour of yellow represents “development”. “Contain” in the colour of red represents “Authority”. “Conceal” in the colour of black (blue or green) represents “evil”.

Throughout the history of Tibetan religion, transmission of Buddhism exerted a certain crash and impact on the Bon initially, but ultimately. Bon has absorbed and transformed it. Moreover, Buddhism developed rapidly with the substantial base accumulated by the Bon. This kind of Absorbing mainly embodies in the following aspects: making redefinition based on the Bon and incarnating it with richer connotations. Consequently, the belief which was inveterate to Tibetan has been inscribed into their national culture and finally formed a unique aesthetic intention of colour.

## 3. Religious Connotations and Applications of Main Colour of Tibetan Architecture

The colour of Tibetan architecture is bright, which has strong colour identification, providing people a feeling of pure and unadorned, warm and magnificent. Among them, white, yellow, red, black are widely used and incarnated profound

religious connotations.

### 1) White and Black

Colour white in Bon's culture is incarnated a positive connotation of "faithful, benevolence, nice" and so on. On the contrary, the implication of black represents darkness, unlucky and evil (Pan, 2008). What has been recorded in Bon's scripture "sparzop" is that: from the legend, there was a white person called wosedan born from a white light who can bring happiness, auspicious and every good thing to people. With his guidance, Tibetan ancient sages built monastery temples, bridges and roads. There was a black person born from a black light, named as vanabo, who symbolized darkness and represented bitterness, abhor as well as covetous thoughts. Therefore, a world outlook of "a world of duality" has formed. For Buddhism was transmitted from India and Indians are in favor of "white" just as Tibetan, it's more and more intense of affinity of white for Tibetan ancient sages. In the doctrine of Buddhism, white is regarded as one of "five colour". It is the colour of water and tranquility, which symbolizes "the root of all beings" and be called as "initial colour". Goodness is also named as "white kindness". Opposite to that, black means "hatred" and "anger"; the "evil creature" in the Buddhist scriptures is also known as "black creature".

White prayer flags, white monastery temples and Avalokitesvara's attire in Buddhism generally seen by us are in the colour of white. The "White House" in the Potala Palace architecture group is mainly used for Dala Lama to dwell and deal with political and religious affairs. On the outer wall of the building (Figure 1), a huge amount of white has been used in the decoration. Yet, among Tibetan architecture, black doorframe and window frame (Figure 2) is most universal and they symbolize "the two corners of the great vajra" and have the implication of Exorcism and disaster avoidance. In architecture decoration, black has an interpretation of "guidance", which is a main reason why people apply it to the



**Figure 1.** Decorative effect picture of window frame and door frame of Potala Palace (the source of the photo: self taken by the author).



**Figure 2.** Detail of window of Potala Palace (the source of the photo: self taken by the author).

parts of access. However in some regions which still in worship of the Bon, they will also take black to brush the outer wall of architecture. Although it seems simple to understand black and white, they contain profound religious doctrines. Especially to white which is regarded as the most representative color in Tibetan architecture, enjoying comparably higher identification, which is the typical representative of color of Tibetan architecture.

## 2) Yellow

Yellow, \ symbolizes ground in Bon's culture. The ground nourishes everything and contains the meaning of prosperity, also representing sublime and belief. It is said that after Shakya Mani abandoned the throne and gave up luxurious cloth and food, living a plain life and starting his spiritual practise. He cleaned up the old yellow shroud of the zhodo tidro Hermitage and then twisted it around him, this as a result, this kind of yellow cloth has been preserved and inherited and became the most adored color of monks and believers. Yellow has been incarnated a sacred status and represents a kind of belief according to Tibetan Buddhism.

Yellow also frequently appears on the outer wall of temple scripture hall and some architecture with significant meaning, which almost enjoys noble status and has been well-known until today. For example, many important palaces and practise rooms in the Potala Palace, Longyi Temple (**Figure 3**), same are accustomed to be painted by yellow such as main hall of minzhulin Temple, the Qiangba Buddha Hall of zhebong temple, and the "Buzi Golden Hall" of Sangye temple, while the common Tibetan residents haven't qualification to wear yellow cloth. Yellow has comparably higher color purity among Tibetan architecture decoration, which is highly decorative. It usually presents in various forms of point, line or surface in architecture color and forms decorative line with different styles, which has abundant art decorative effect. For example, Langyi Temple (**Figure 4**) which is most well-preserved, decorated by yellow lines and presenting abundant art effect, which represents the distinctive aesthetic characteristic of Tibetan religion.



**Figure 3.** Overall effect of the facade of Longyi Temple (the source of the photo: self taken by the author).



**Figure 4.** Partial decoration effect of the facade of Langyi Temple (the source of the photo: self taken by the author).

### 3) Red

During the period of Bon, red represents blood. Killing the lives for sacrifice is popular among Bon. The believers of the Bon will kill thousands of livestock on site in large-scale sacrificial activities. During sacrifices, animal blood is used to soak the sacrifice stones and dye them red. Then these stone, as sacrifice, dedicated to the divine of evil. It is also believed that smearing red can drive out evil spirits and avoid disasters. During the period of Tubo Dynasty, there was a tradition of painting the overall face with red. However, people gradually renounced this tradition in later development. While it was gradually kept in the wall of architecture.

Red is regarded as west, symbolizing conciliation. The body of the divine of conciliation is totally red (Jiao, 2001). Tracing back to ancient India two thousand five hundred years ago, believers of Buddhism took red as the most common and universal colour so as to represent their willingness of pursuing the ideal state of being supermundane and refined. As a result, red has become a specialized color for eminent monks and temples. Among the earlier Buddhism schools in Tibetan, red is also a representative of Ningma sect. This representative is the earliest esoteric doctrine which was introduced to Tibetan and formed with the combination of partly content of the Bon. Monks in this sect wear red hats and this is the reason why the Ningma sect is called red sect or red hats reli-



gion.

Red symbolizes authority. Tibetan residents usually don't paint ordinary room with red. It is commonly used in significant stupas, temples, and official villages of chieftains. Therefore, red, as a religious architecture colour, is usually applied in to religious architecture. In the NaiQing protecting temple of zhebeng temple and "the feeling Dharma protectors" in Sangye temple, are mostly painted red. With fierce colour tension, red has strong colour identification and always makes people impressed. We can choose the "Red Palace" (Figure 5) from religious architecture group as an example. Red Palace is a sacristy dedicated to the spiritual pagoda of the Dalai Lama for all generations, located in the center position of the overall Potala Palace, embodying the self-evident statue. It also has the significance of commemoration and sacrifice as well as an intense religious symbolism.

#### 4. Religious Aesthetic of Tibetan Architecture Colour

The relationship between art and religion can be expressed as the relationship between aesthetics and belief. While religion is usually regarded as a matrix of aesthetic and art. To a certain degree, the experience of religion nourishes the experience of aesthetics. Religion ritual also nourishes the art form. As a part of art form, Tibetan architecture decoration colour has strong religious aesthetic implications. The profound cultural motivation and religious motivation which are contained in it prompt it to express the following distinctive religious aesthetic characteristics.

##### 1) Religious aesthetics is derived from life and complies with history

This is no doubt that religious belief is the most essential component of productive life of Tibetans. Whether how complex the developing process is, the base of development of architecture colour and forming a stylized combination is originated from people's daily productive lives. As Max Mueller (2010: p. 3) described in the "Origin and Development of Religion", "the emerging and development of religion is unfolded on three basic clues, Namely the material religion formed from natural objects. The human religion formed from human himself, and then collaborated in psychological religion".



**Figure 5.** External facade of the Red Palace of Potala Palace (the source of the photo: self taken by the author).

## 2) Interposition of religion and aesthetic

Religious influence makes this specific Tibetan architecture colour form has a mass character (Cai, 2012), namely aesthetic basis. Conversely, Tibetan architecture with specific colour form such as ancient Tibetan architecture provided a significant guarantee for the existence and development of religious aesthetics. To some extent, the religious tendentiousness of architecture colour is in line with the people's religious psychological requirements and meets the religious aesthetic desire of people. The interaction of both makes this kind of aesthetic consciousness deeply rooted among people's heart. The religious aesthetic consciousness of Tibetan architecture color can be described to restore the directness, natural attributes and pure *gegebenheit* given by aesthetic experience itself.

## 3) The transcendence of religious aesthetic

The Earl of Shaftesbury (2018: pp. 414-415) regarded beauty as something transcendental. According to his thoughts, only through the mysterious intuition of "inner eyes" or "inner sensory" can it be perceived. In fact, such conception coincides with people's conception of religious belief. The aesthetic experience brought by religion often goes beyond the scope of traditional ideology. The expression of Tibetan architecture is more likely to spread a kind of belief, unfolding people's spiritual pursuit of beautiful and fantastic world. As one of a carrier, architecture colour Acts as a bridge between people's aesthetic emotion and religious spiritual world.

## 5. Conclusion

As a first visual language, the charm of colour is its capability to directly reach into people's deep heart and can cause emotional resonance with people in an extremely short time. In the article, colour which is used in high frequency in Tibetan Architecture has been concluded and organized from the perspectives of history, religions as well as culture in order to study the using regulation of colour and specific methods applied to Tibetan architecture. This high brightness colour with artistic infection contains profound religious connotation, symbolically transmitting the distinctive national culture of Tibetan architecture color system, not only reflects a strong national identity and is more likes a unique emotional expression, which gradually forms a "language system" (Ding, 2009), exerting profound significance over exploring the colour phylum. Besides, these highly artistic and vivid colors contain profound religious meaning and convey the unique ethnic culture of Tibet through its symbolism energy. This kind of meaning isn't simply embodied in the level of appreciation or simulation. Instead, we should conclude the characteristics and connotation of the colour and organically combine them with Tibetan colour language family and other art expressive words. When we succeed in protecting, inheriting and developing colour of the nation, we also ought to expand and enrich modern colour designing language so as to promote the diversified development of the design.

Specifically speaking, what has mentioned above brings us more profound en-

lightenment for determining the methods of updating and improving the blueprint and design of architecture in ethnic minority and means of further exploring ethnic culture and organizing designing resources scientifically and rationally so as to design the masterpiece with characteristics of “ethnic spirit”. Because of the restrictions of time and studying requisites in follow-up studying, the colour of Tibetan architecture can be further categorized. For example, we are able to intimately categorize the relevant colour of Tibetan architecture according to brightness degree, saturation and specific data. It’s necessary to differentiate aesthetic tendency in different periods and different religions in detail. Besides, we shall ultimately realize the purpose of applying relevant pragmatical practise of Tibetan colour resources issued by ourselves into the modern designing field.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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