

01

The Five Elements Color Symbols in Costumes of Minnan Glove Puppetry¹

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Abstract

This study conducts a systematic analysis of costume colors in Minnan Glove Puppetry through the lens of the Five-element Color Theory. As a traditional form of folk art, Minnan Glove Puppetry not only conveys ethical and social frameworks within Chinese culture through its exquisite craftsmanship and dramatic performances but also imbues characters with symbolic meanings that reflect their personalities and fates. This paper analyzes the classic play "Nv Zhongkui" and explores the symbolic meanings of colors in their costumes, along with their connections to traditional Chinese Five-element color theory. The study reveals that red signifies power and loyalty, green symbolizes vitality and integrity, yellow indicates the importance of status, black embodies the spirit of integrity, and white suggests tragedy and pure fate. These color choices not only assist the audience in identifying the social status of the characters but also reflect their personality traits and destinies. Additionally, this paper highlights the significance of Five-element color theory in drama costume design, underscoring its profound influence on traditional cultural beliefs, ethics, and social structures. By examining the changes in color, this study reveals the close relationship between character development and changes in fate. Color plays a specific role in conveying emotional tension and symbolizing social class. This paper provides a new perspective for comprehending the cultural value of Minnan glove puppetry, highlighting the philosophical and social significance of color in traditional Chinese culture, thereby reinforcing the understanding of its deeper cultural meanings.

Keywords: Minnan Glove Puppetry / Five-element Color Theory / Costume Color / Cultural Symbolism / Theatrical Costumes

Citation

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ສັນລັກບົນສີເຫັອງຄົປະກອບໃນ ເຄື່ອງແຕ່ງກາຍຂອງກາຣແສດງ ຫຼຸ່ມກະບອກຜ້າໜີ່ນຫານ¹

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บทคัดย่อ

การศึกษาครั้งนี้ ดำเนินการวิเคราะห์สีในเครื่องแต่งกายของศิลปการแสดงหุ่นระบบอ กพ หุ่นหนานอย่างเป็นระบบผ่านทฤษฎีสีตามหลักห้องค์ประกอบ ในฐานะรูปแบบศิลปะพื้นบ้านแบบดั้งเดิม หุ่นระบบอ กพ หุ่นหนานไม่เพียงสื่อถึงกรอบทางจริยธรรม และสังคมของวัฒนธรรมจีนผ่านงานฝีมืออันประณีตและลึกซึ้งที่ตั้งต้นใจ แต่ยังเติมเต็มความหมายเชิงสัญลักษณ์ สะท้อนถึงบุคลิกภาพและโซไซตี้ของตัวละคร บทความนี้ วิเคราะห์หลักคลาสสิก "นวจงชุย (Nv Zhongkui)" และสำรวจความหมายเชิงสัญลักษณ์ของสีในเครื่องแต่งกาย พร้อมกับเชื่อมโยงกับทฤษฎีสีห้องค์ประกอบแบบดั้งเดิมของจีน การศึกษาพบว่า สีแดงแสดงถึงอำนาจและความซื่อสัตย์ สีเขียวแสดงถึงชีวิตและความซื่อสัตย์ สีเหลืองบ่งบอกถึงความสำคัญของสถานะ สีดำสะท้อนถึงจิตวิญญาณของความซื่อสัตย์ และสีขาวซึ่งให้เห็นถึงศอกนาภิกรและโซไซต์ที่ปริสุทช์ การเลือกสีเหล่านี้ไม่เพียงช่วยให้ผู้ชมสามารถรับรู้สถานะทางสังคมของตัวละคร แต่ยังสะท้อนถึงลักษณะบุคลิกภาพและโซไซต์ด้วย นอกจากนี้ บทความนี้ยังเน้นความสำคัญของทฤษฎีสีห้องค์ประกอบในการออกแบบเครื่องแต่งกายของตัวละคร โดยซึ่งให้เห็นถึงอิทธิพลจากความเชื่อทางวัฒนธรรมแบบดั้งเดิม จริยธรรม และโครงสร้างทางสังคม จากการศึกษาพบว่า การเปลี่ยนแปลงของสีเครื่องแต่งกายมีความสัมพันธ์กับการพัฒนาตัวละครและการเปลี่ยนแปลงของโซไซต์ สมัยบทบาทเฉพาะในการถ่ายทอดความตึงเครียดทางอารมณ์ และแสดงสัญลักษณ์ของชั้นทางสังคม การศึกษานี้นำเสนอแนวทางใหม่ในการเข้าใจคุณค่าทางวัฒนธรรมของการแสดงหุ่นระบบอ กพ หุ่นหนาน โดยเน้นความสำคัญทางปรัชญาและสังคมของสีในวัฒนธรรมจีนแบบดั้งเดิม

คำสำคัญ: หุ่นระบบอ กพ หุ่นหนาน / ทฤษฎีสีห้องค์ประกอบ / สีเครื่องแต่งกาย / สัญลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรม / เครื่องแต่งกายการแสดง

วิธีอ้างอิง

หยุ่นเฟย คง, พงศ์เดช ไชยคุตร และ ภรดี พันธุ์ภากร. (2568). สัญลักษณ์สีห้องค์ประกอบในเครื่องแต่งกายของการแสดงหุ่นระบบอ กพ หุ่นหนาน. วารสารคิลป์ พีระครี, 13(1), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.69598/sbjfa273948>



© 2568 ลิขสิทธิ์ โดย ผู้เขียน สาธารณชนสามารถนำทุกมาไปใช้ได้ภายใต้สัญญาอนุญาตครีเอทิฟคอมมอนส์แบบแสดงที่มา (CC BY 4.0) <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

1. Introduction

Minnan Glove Puppetry is a cultural gem of traditional Chinese drama, embodying a long-standing history and profound cultural heritage. As an ancient folk art form, it not only encapsulates the essence of folk theater but also manifests a vibrant and dynamic artistic form through its meticulous puppet craftsmanship, theatrical performance techniques, and symbolically rich costumes. It holds significant cultural influence, particularly in southern China, including Fujian and Taiwan. Through its elaborate costumes, diverse color schemes, and refined performance techniques, Minnan Glove Puppetry conveys intricate layers of Chinese traditional culture, including ethics, social hierarchy, and philosophical perspectives on life. In this performance medium, costume color transcends mere decoration, functioning as a powerful cultural symbol. These colors convey a spectrum of meanings, reflecting the character's personality traits, social status, and even their narrative destiny. The selection of costume colors in Minnan Glove Puppetry is not driven solely by aesthetic preferences but is deeply interwoven with traditional Chinese cultural principles, especially the Five-element Color Theory, highlighting its philosophical and symbolic importance.

In dramatic performance, color holds significant symbolic value, directly influencing the audience's emotional response and cognitive perception through visual stimuli (Song, 2016: 126-129). In traditional Chinese culture, the Five-element Color Theory derives from the foundational principles of the Yin-Yang Five Elements Theory, which correlates the five fundamental elements of nature-metal, wood, water, fire, and earth-with specific colors: white, green, black, red, and yellow. Each of these colors is imbued with distinctive symbolic meaning. The Five-element Color Theory has not only played an essential role in ancient Chinese philosophy, medicine, and architecture but has also been extensively applied in traditional arts such as costume design, drama, and painting (Dai, 2018). Each color within this framework symbolizes not only an elemental force but also corresponds to natural phenomena, including seasons, cardinal directions, internal organs, and climate patterns, positioning the Five-element Color Theory as a critical interpretive framework for understanding traditional Chinese art. Consequently, the application of this theory in traditional drama, particularly in costume design, carries profound cultural and symbolic importance, reinforcing both the visual and narrative dimensions of the performance.

In Minnan glove puppetry costume design, the usage of color is subject to strict conventions, intricately linked to the Five-elements Color Theory. Different colors are employed not merely to signify specific roles, identities, status, or character traits, but to embody profound cultural symbolism (Zhao, 2016: 61). Despite the clear traditional cultural underpinnings guiding color usage in Minnan glove puppetry, systematic academic exploration into the symbolic meanings and theoretical foundations of these choices remains limited.

This study seeks to address these gaps by systematically analyzing costume colors in Minnan glove puppetry through the lens of the Five-element Color Theory. It explores both the symbolic meanings embedded in colors and the broader cultural values they represent. By synthesizing the theoretical framework of the Five Elements with the practical application of color in glove puppetry, this research endeavors to uncover the latent cultural symbols and artistic values inherent in traditional theatrical costumes, thereby offering fresh perspectives and methodologies for the academic analysis of color in traditional theater.

2. Objectives

(1) To critically examine the correspondence between the costume colors in Minnan glove puppetry and the traditional Chinese Five-element Color Theory, elucidating the philosophical foundations and cultural contexts that underpin these color choices within the theatrical framework.

(2) To explore the symbolic significance of distinct costume colors and assess their contributions to character construction and the representation of social status.

(3) To uncover the artistic value and cultural meanings embedded in the costume colors of Minnan glove puppetry, thereby enriching the academic discourse on the application of color in traditional theater.

3. Research methodology

(1) Literature analysis: This method involves a systematic review and analysis of academic papers, monographs, and ancient texts to comprehensively examine existing research and theories pertaining to the costume colors of Minnan Glove Puppetry and their cultural symbolism.

(2) Field research: This involves visiting the Minnan Glove Puppetry Heritage Protection Center to observe performances and document the application of costume colors in character portrayal, thereby obtaining first-hand empirical data.

(3) Case study: The classic play “Nv Zhongkui (_nv_ຈອງ_ຂູຍ_)” is selected for an in-depth analysis focusing on the costume colors of primary and secondary characters. This method investigates the choices and transitions in costume colors, examining their connections to character traits, identities, and fates, while interpreting the embedded Five Elements Color Theory and cultural symbolism.

4. Literature review

China's Five-element Color Theory (blue, red, yellow, white, and black) is intrinsically tied to the Yin-Yang and Five Elements philosophical framework, reflecting ancient Chinese thought on the cosmos, nature, and social order (Yang, 2004). This theory permeates various aspects of Chinese religion, politics, and culture, and is extensively applied in theatrical costume design. Qi (1935) observed that the use of Five Elements colors in drama not only symbolizes characters' traits and fates but also reflects social hierarchies. Cui et al. (2020: 64-73) explored how Peking Opera costumes, specifically through the "upper and lower five colors" system, symbolize characters' identities and social statuses. In Chinese drama studies, color functions not only as a visual element but also as a vehicle for symbolic philosophical and cultural semiotics. Tan (2000) noted that traditional drama employs specific colors to represent personality traits and social roles, with red and yellow often symbolizing loyalty, bravery, and imperial dignity, grounded in the Five-element Color Theory. Wu (1998) further emphasized that the design of traditional theatrical costumes embodies both artistic beauty and specific ethical, social, and cultural values.

Both domestic and international scholars have conducted research on Chinese glove puppetry, encompassing in-depth discussions on the origins and development of Chinese puppetry (Xu & Xin, 2007); exploration of the artistic forms and performance techniques of Chinese puppetry (Chen & Clark, 2010: 333-365); and, with the continuous advancement of technology in recent years, scholars have increasingly focused on the application of digital technology in glove puppetry. For instance, Zhao et al. (2019: 139-154) studied how digital technology can enhance cross-cultural audiences' understanding and engagement with traditional Chinese puppetry. The researchers developed a digital gesture library using three-view archives and tangible interfaces to support cross-cultural appreciation of puppetry. Wu (2009) explored the application of motion capture technology in puppet performances, demonstrating its potential for improving both performance quality and audience experience.

While foreign scholars may not directly engage with China's Five Elements Theory in their cross-cultural research on color symbolism, the universality of color semiotics remains a focal point. Gage (1999), in *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism*, examined color symbolism across cultures, arguing that despite cultural differences, historical and philosophical contexts often shape artistic expression. This cross-cultural approach offers insight into the symbolic use of color in glove puppetry, especially in conveying complex social and cultural meanings.

Research on Minnan glove puppetry has primarily focused on its performance style (Liang, 2015: 57-58), artistic characteristics and aesthetic value (Zheng & Wang, 2019: 58-61), artistic merit (Zheng, 2017: 36), and puppet modeling (Huang, 2017: 124-125). However, there has been limited academic inquiry into the role of color in puppetry costume design. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the symbolic meanings of Minnan glove puppetry costumes through the lens of the Five Elements Theory, contributing to a broader research perspective and deepening the understanding of the puppetry's philosophical and cultural foundations.

5. Results

5.1 Traditional Chinese Five-Color System

The traditional Chinese five-color system is rooted in the Five-element Theory, which has evolved over millennia through continuous cultural enrichment. The five traditional colors—blue, red, yellow, white, and black—correspond directly to the five elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These colors are imbued with deep cultural, social, and religious significance. Widely applied in ancient rituals, religious practices, and official attire, this section will examine the role of the five-color system in traditional clothing, focusing on its standardized color schemes and symbolic meanings.

5.1.1 Formation of the Five-Color System

The traditional Chinese Five Elements Color Theory is rooted in ancient Chinese cosmology and natural philosophy. According to this theory, all phenomena in the universe are composed of five fundamental elements: wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. As articulated in the Book of History, Hong Fan, "The Five Elements are water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. Water moistens, fire burns, wood bends and straightens, metal conforms, and earth nurtures crops and builds walls (Wang & Wang, 2023)." These elements exist in a system of mutual generation and mutual restraint (Figure 1), where wood generates fire, fire generates earth, earth generates metal, metal generates water, and water generates wood; at the same time, metal restrains wood, wood restrains earth, earth restrains water, water restrains fire, and fire restrains metal.

This cyclical and dynamic relationship among the five elements not only explains natural phenomena but also serves as the philosophical foundation for the corresponding color associations in traditional Chinese thought.

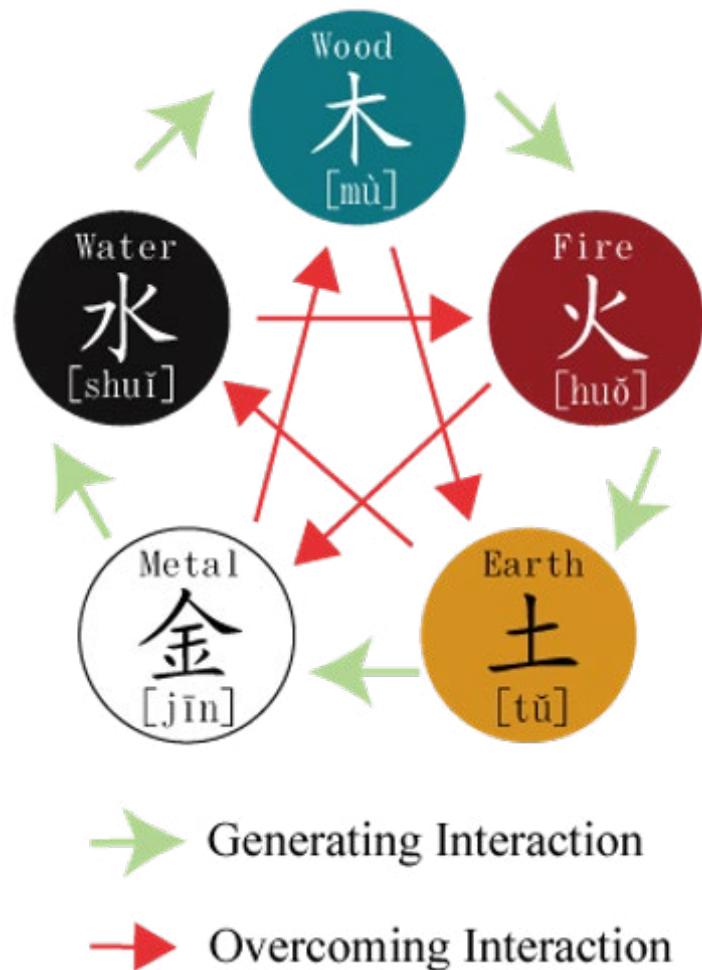


Figure 1

Wuxing

This theory not only influenced Chinese natural philosophy but also profoundly shaped the development of color theory. In the traditional Five Elements Color Theory, each of the five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—corresponds to five primary colors: blue, red, yellow, white, and black. These colors are imbued with specific symbolic meanings and functions within the Five Elements framework. They are not independent entities but rather a synthesis of ancient beliefs in natural laws, mythology, and ritual practices (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1

Correspondence table of the meanings of the five elements and the five colors

Five Elements	Initial Meaning	Five Colors	Symbolic Meaning of Colors
Metal	Metal	White	Purity, Brightness, Calmness
Wood	Plant	Green & blue (Qing)	Growth, Upwardness, Vitality
Water	Liquid	Black	Profundity, Mystery, The Unknown
Fire	Heat	Red	Warmth, Passion, Vitality
Earth	Land	Yellow	Stability, Moderation, Connection to Earth

Note. The above content synthesizes the information from The Colors of a Nation: An Analysis of Traditional Chinese Colors & Modern Matching Schemes Illustrated (Chen, 2021), Five Colors of China (Peng, 2008), and Ten Lectures on the History of Chinese Colors (Xiao, 2020).

5.1.2 Standardization and Symbolization of the Five Colors

In ancient China, traditional colors were often described with reference to tangible objects, such as “lacquer black” (derived from the natural lacquer produced by lacquer trees), “snow white,” and “cinnabar red,” which helped anchor color perception in concrete terms. However, when describing the five fundamental colors—blue, red, yellow, black, and white—single words were typically used. To better standardize the five colors, Xiao (2011) noted that “the feathers of traditional Chinese pheasants ('pheasants') exhibit the full spectrum of these five colors.” This concept is rooted in Zheng Xuan’s annotations to the Zhou Li, which explicitly identified pheasant feathers as the standard for dyeing the five colors. The pheasant, as a symbol of auspiciousness in Chinese tradition, resonated with the ancients’ admiration for beauty. Combined with traditional dyeing techniques, the five colors drawn from pheasant feathers became practically achievable. Consequently, the standardization of these five colors, as derived from nature, is visually represented in Figure 2.



Figure 2

Standard Five Elements Color Wuxing

The Book of Rites mentions “Jade Ornaments” (as cited in Xiao, 2011) states: “The clothes are of the primary color, the skirts are of the secondary color, and only the colors listed above can be worn by the public.” Zheng Xuan’s note: “It means that the crown is black on the top and purple on the bottom.” Kong Yingda’s commentary: “Black is the color of the sky, so it is the primary color; purple is the color of the earth, a mixture of red and yellow, so it is the secondary color. The primary colors are blue, red, yellow, white, and black, which are the five colors of the five directions; the non-primary colors are the five secondary colors, which are green, red, blue, purple, and black (Gao, 2021). From this, we can know that Chinese traditional clothing has divided the primary colors and secondary colors based on the five elements. The primary colors are the colors produced by the mutual generation of the five elements, while the secondary colors are obtained by combining the colors of two elements that are mutually restrained according to the principle of the mutual restraint of the five elements (as shown in Figure 1&3).

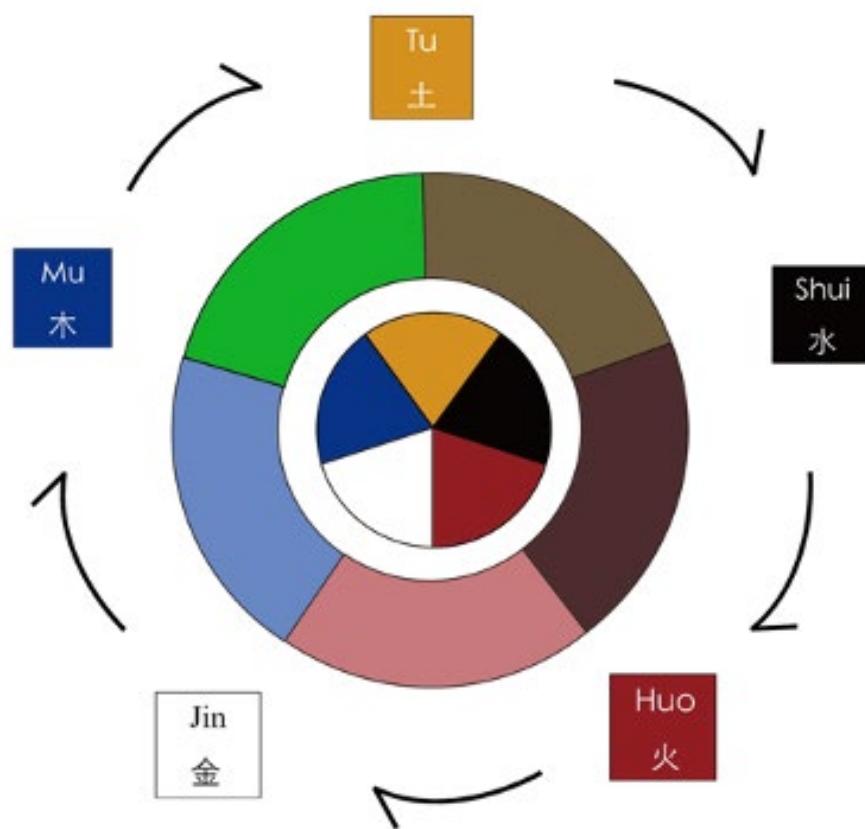


Figure 3

The non-primary colors

Note. The above intermediate colors are taken from the middle value of two adjacent colors, for reference only

Primary colors represent masculine and dominant forces, while secondary colors symbolize feminine and supportive elements. This distinction reflects the Yin-Yang dichotomy inherent in traditional Chinese philosophy, where complementary forces interact to create balance (Zhang, 2014). The division of primary and secondary colors illustrates the unity of opposites, a key principle in Chinese cosmology. By assigning primary colors to active and dominant roles and secondary colors to passive and supportive roles, this color theory further embodies the fundamental balance between Yin and Yang. Intermediate colors are created by mixing two primary colors, thus embodying the elemental attributes associated with both. For instance, pink, which results from the combination of red and white, possesses elemental qualities that include fire, represented by red, and metal, represented by white.

5.2 The "Five Colors" System in Traditional Drama Costumes

The "Five Colors" system in traditional Chinese drama costumes is an extension and evolution of the Five-element Color Theory, refined through long-standing stage practice. This color system not only adheres to the fundamental principles of the Five Elements but also integrates the specific requirements of dramatic performances. By doing so, it enhances the visual impact and cultural symbolism of the costumes, allowing colors to play a pivotal role in reinforcing character identity and narrative significance on stage.

According to Qi's study (1935), the "upper five colors" used in the central part of traditional costumes are red, green, yellow, black, and white, while the "lower five colors" include purple, powder pink, yellow, and lake blue. This differentiation in costume colors reflects varying levels of cultural expression and serves to distinguish social classes and character types. The selection of these colors stems from the Five-element Color Theory, with the emphasis on harmonizing visual aesthetics and cultural symbolism on stage, adapting to historical shifts in color interpretation and audience expectations.

Table 2

Upper and Lower Five Colors System

Color Attributes	Red	Green	Yellow	Black	White
Upper	Red	Green	Yellow	Black	
Use of colors	(1) Tops (2) Upper-class clothing (3) Highlighting character traits				
Color Attributes	Pink	Royal Blue	Lake Blue	Purple	Xiang Se (Fragrance Color)
Lower	Pink	Blue	Cyan	Maroon	Brown
Use of colors	(1) Bottoms (2) Clothing for the lower class (3) Highlighting the character's personality traits				

Note. The above color standards refer to Research on the Characteristics and Formation of the High and Low Five-color System Dressing Regulation in Traditional Peking Opera Costumes (Cui et al., 2020: 64-73) and The Design of Traditional Chinese Opera Costume Design (Tan, 2000)

5.2.1 The Upper Five Colors and the Upper Class

The "Upper Five Colors"—red, green, yellow, black, and white—are primarily in order to represent characters of high social status or special distinction. These colors not only create a striking visual impact on stage but also carry deep cultural symbolism.

Red: Symbolizes passion, power, and loyalty. It is often associated with nobles and loyal, brave characters such as Guan Yu, whose red robe represents both his courage and devotion.

Green: Represents vitality, energy, and harmony. Green is used for upright and brave characters or those living in harmony with nature, such as the earlier depiction of Guan Yu with a green mask, symbolizing justice.

Yellow: Traditionally the imperial color in China, yellow denotes supreme authority. In drama, it is reserved for emperors or high-ranking figures to emphasize their majesty.

Black: Signifies integrity and solemnity. Black costumes often depict upright and resolute characters.

White: Represents purity, integrity, and nobility. It is commonly used for tragic or virtuous characters, and is associated with mourning, hence also used in solemn or tragic scenes.

5.2.2 The Lower Five Colors and the Lower Class

The "Lower Five Colors"—purple, pink, royal blue, lake blue, and fragrance color—are employed to portray lower social strata or civilian characters. These softer colors create less visual impact but offer diverse symbolic meanings.

Purple: While traditionally noble, in drama purple is used for characters of lower status but with mysterious or strong personalities.

Pink: Denotes weakness and gentleness, often used for gentle, soft-natured female characters.

Royal Blue: A solemn color often used for characters of neutral or tragic status.

Lake Blue: A calm and gentle color symbolizing quietness and humility, used for harmless or peaceful characters.

Fragrance Color: A light yellow symbolizing warmth and simplicity, typically used for ordinary, hardworking individuals at the lower end of the social hierarchy.

5.3 Color Symbolism of Costumes in Minnan Glove Puppetry – An Analysis Based on Nv Zhongkui

As a significant form of traditional Chinese theater, Minnan glove puppetry is renowned for its intricate craftsmanship and profound cultural meaning. The play Nv Zhongkui tells the story of the protagonist, Man Jiaorong, who, along with her husband, faces adversity on their way to the imperial examination in Beijing. Disguising herself as a man, she overcomes numerous challenges with wisdom and bravery, ultimately becoming a martial arts scholar. Throughout the play, the evolution of Man Jiaorong's identity is mirrored through the symbolic use of costume colors. This study analyzed the costume colors of the protagonist, key supporting characters, and minor roles in Nv Zhongkui, exploring their relationship with the Five Elements Theory and their role in character symbolism. Through this analysis, the

unique symbolic meaning of costume colors in Minnan glove puppetry will be revealed, demonstrating how color serves as a medium for visual and emotional expression in the performance.

5.3.1 Analysis of the Main Character's Color: The Transformation of Growth

Man Jiaorong is the protagonist of *Nv Zhongkui*, symbolizing the struggle of women for self-realization within a traditional society. Initially portrayed as a diligent housewife, she disguises herself as a man to participate in the imperial examinations. Despite facing numerous challenges, she ultimately succeeds and attains an official position. Her narrative exemplifies the resilience of women in the face of adversity and their quest for equality and respect, prompting the audience to reflect on the challenges and accomplishments of female characters.

As the protagonist of *Nv Zhongkui*, Man Jiaorong's costume colors symbolize not only her evolving identity but also her character development and shifting fate. Over the course of the play, her costume colors can be divided into three distinct stages, each representing a phase of her personal and emotional journey. The following table outlines these transformations, and the corresponding symbolic meanings associated with each stage of her clothing:

Table 3

Analysis of Man Jiaorong's Costume Colors

Stage	Costume Colors	Five Elements	Symbolism	Image
Early	Light yellow, Lake blue	Earth Wood	<p>Represents traditional femininity, softness, stability, and harmony, suited to her early gentle nature. Yellow is typically associated with individuals of noble status. In this context, light yellow is employed to foreshadow the character's significant position in the subsequent development of the plot, as well as to underscore their identity as a major character.</p> <p>Lake blue is selected for Man Jiaorong, reflecting her status as a commoner at this time. Her color choice aligns with the attributes of the five elemental colors appropriate for her societal standing.</p>	
Growth	Pink	A mixture of Fire and Metal	<p>Pink, a mixture of fire and metal (red and white), is typically regarded as one of the lower five colors, symbolizing the lower class. However, its color symbolism and cultural connotations differ at this stage. The color pink embodies the qualities of red, which signifies passion, vitality, and courage, while white represents purity and innocence. Man Jiaorong's choice to wear pink clothing reflects her bravery and tenderness in complex situations, implying her tenacity and wisdom in challenging traditional gender roles.</p>	
Peak	Red	Fire	<p>In this context, the red color symbolizes power and success, marking the pinnacle of Man Jiaorong's destiny as she becomes the "female leader." Her red official uniform serves as a reflection of her social status and authority, underscoring her success and achievements. This choice of color aligns with the character's state of power and glory at this stage of her journey.</p>	

As the narrative of Nv Zhongkui progresses, Man Jiaorong's costume colors shift to reflect her evolving inner strength and changing fate. Initially, the light yellow and blue signify her early vulnerability and traditional demeanor. As she grows, pink represents her emerging independence and strength, signaling her transformation. Finally, red symbolizes her ultimate success, wisdom, and bravery. The relationship between her clothing colors and her fate is closely intertwined, with each change in color marking her personal growth and the significant shifts in her destiny.

5.3.2 Analysis of the Colors of the Main Supporting Characters: Strength and Support

In Nv Zhongkui the two most significant supporting characters are Man Jiaorong's husband, Shi Mingxu, and Princess He Xiuhua, whom she encounters while disguised as a man. Shi Mingxu is a student who loves to study. He studied hard for ten years in order to go to Beijing to take the exam. On the way, he encountered robbers and was rescued by an old man who was knowledgeable in medicine. The old man also taught him his medical skills. In the end, he became an outstanding medical officer through his own efforts. He Xiuhua is the emperor's sister. She has never had to worry about food and clothing since she was a child. She was attracted by the heroine who dressed as a man and became her good friend. In terms of the plot, the characters of Shi Mingxu and He Xiuhua both play active supporters in the story and are positive characters. Shi Mingxu's character symbolizes the integrity and honesty expected of a scholar, while He Xiuhua embodies the gentleness and sweetness characteristic of noblewomen. These traits are strongly conveyed through their costume colors:

Table 4

Analysis of the Costume Colors of the Main Supporting Characters

Stage	Costume Colors	Five Elements	Symbolism	Image
Shi Mingxu	Lake blue	Wood	Lake blue is associated with the lower five colors. The choice to wear clothing of this hue aligns with the character's status at that time as a scholar lacking significant achievements. The blue costume conveys calmness and wisdom. It gives the audience a visual sense of peace, reflecting his rational and thoughtful nature.	
Shi Mingxu	White	Metal	White is the color he chose after becoming an official. It conveys the character's integrity and fearlessness, symbolizing his sense of justice and fortitude. On the other hand, this color choice emphasizes his characteristics as a medical officer. In the traditional Chinese color attributes, white symbolizes purity and holiness, and medical officers who treat illnesses and save lives are representatives of these noble qualities.	
He Xiuhua	Red	Fire	As a princess, He Xiuhua wears red to signify her noble status. Red is a symbol of authority, dignity, and her elevated social standing. In traditional concepts, red is regarded as a festive and noble color, typically reserved for individuals of certain status.	

5.3.3 Analysis of the colors of minor supporting characters: identity and status

Among the minor supporting characters, the costume colors of the two elders are the most distinctive. They include the lively and sharp-tongued old lady in charge of the palace, known as "Wang Po," and the respected elder "Mr. Xiao," who offers assistance to Man Jiaorong. The details are presented in the following table:

Table 5

Analysis of the colors of costumes of minor supporting characters

Character	Costume Color	Five Elements	Symbolism	Image
Wang Po	Red & Black	Fire & Water	Red symbolizes passion and authority, The choice of color reflects her identity as the house-keeper in charge of the palace. As an older woman, she avoids overly bright colors in her clothing. Instead, she opts for black, which best conveys mystery, depth, and stability. This color choice also indirectly suggests to the audience that Wang Po possesses an upright character.	
Mr. Xiao	Dark Red	A mixture of Fire and Water	Red symbolizes energy and authority, while black conveys mystery, calmness, and wisdom. The dark red, a complex blend of fire and water (red and black), represents dignity, majesty, and wisdom. Mr. Xiao's dark red attire reflects his social status and role characteristics, highlighting his authority in both morality and wisdom.	

The costumes of two characters are both composed of red and black. Wang Po's costume features red and black exclusively, while Mr. Xiao's dark red attire represents a combination of red and black. Although the colors differ in intensity, they both fundamentally embody the meanings associated with these two colors.

5.3.4 Different Applications of the Same Color

In the realm of drama costumes, the same color can convey different symbolic meanings for various characters, enabling the audience to understand their inner and social roles from multiple perspectives. For instance, in *Man Jiaorong*, red symbolizes success and inner strength, while in *He Xiuhua*, it emphasizes nobility and authority. This application illustrates that color serves not only as a symbol of identity but also as a carrier of emotion and personality. Through contrast and resonance, colors carry deeper symbolic meanings within the narrative.

The use of the same color in the play can facilitate plot development and enhance emotional tension. For example, Wang Po's red costume employs humor and wit, creating a stark contrast with the red worn by Man Jiaorong and Shi Mingxu. This juxtaposition not only underscores the personality differences among characters but also allows the audience to experience the real challenges and pressures faced by the characters while enjoying the humor. Such applications of color enhance the audience's emotional experience and deepen their understanding of the core conflicts within the plot.

In traditional Chinese drama, color usage adheres to specific cultural and artistic norms. The same color may manifest in different characters to reflect particular social classes and character traits. This flexibility in color application allows the play to portray more complex character relationships and social contexts while remaining rooted in tradition.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion based on the analysis of costume colors in the play *Nv Zhongkui* demonstrates the deep relationship between the costume colors in Minnan glove puppetry and the traditional Chinese Five-element Color Theory. Costume colors serve not just as decoration, but as a symbolic system reflecting characters' identities, destinies,

and personalities. Through the visual and cultural symbolism of the Five Elements colors, the narrative depth and emotional resonance of the drama are enhanced.

Symbolic Meaning of Five Elements Colors: The Five-element Color Theory, integral to ancient Chinese philosophy, guides traditional drama costume design. The colors of gold (white), wood (green/blue), water (black), fire (red), and earth (yellow) embody distinct cultural symbols that allow audiences to identify characters' identities and deeper traits, creating a dual language of visual and cultural symbols.

Color Changes and Character Fate: The dynamic evolution of costume colors, especially for the protagonist Man Jiaorong, aligns with the laws of the Five Elements, symbolizing her growth and the unfolding of her destiny. Her costumes transition from light yellow and blue (earth and wood) to pink (fire and gold), culminating in red (fire), reflecting her progression from a gentle woman to the powerful "Female Champion."

Construction of Emotional Tension: The application of the Five Elements colors also enhances stage emotional tension. Colors such as red (fire) symbolize power and excitement in climactic moments, while black (water) and yellow (earth) convey calm and stability, helping portray characters' emotional shifts and deepening the audience's experience.

Color Symbolism and Social Class: Through a comparative analysis of different characters utilizing the same color, the study reveals the multifaceted functions of color in conveying emotions and social symbols. For instance, the distinct applications of red on Man Jiaorong and He Xiuhua not only reflect their respective identities and personality traits but also deepen the audience's understanding of the characters' inner conflicts. This finding underscores the symbolism and emotional tension inherent in color within drama, providing a fresh perspective for comprehending the complex interpersonal relationships and social backgrounds among characters.

Five Elements Culture and Theatrical Colors: This study reveals how the Five-elements Color Theory is visually expressed through costume design in *Nv Zhongkui*, where colors function both as aesthetic elements and complex cultural symbols. This enriches audience understanding of character development and enhances the artistic expression of the play.

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