

Philosophical Implications of Color Symbolism in Yongle Palace Mural Art

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Abstract

This study investigated the philosophical and religious significance of color symbolism in the murals of Yongle Palace, focusing on how specific colors convey spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical meanings within Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian contexts. Additionally, the research compared these Chinese traditions with color interpretations in Indian and Persian religious art to uncover shared and divergent symbolic meanings. Using a qualitative and interdisciplinary methodology, the study employed textual analysis of classical scriptures, semiotic interpretation, historical contextualization, and comparative cultural analysis. Key texts from the Dao De Jing, the Analects, and Buddhist sutras were examined alongside visual analyses of mural imagery to interpret the symbolic roles of red, gold, green, blue, and white. Findings revealed that each color communicated layered spiritual messages across traditions: red symbolizes vitality, compassion, and authority; gold reflects divinity and nobility; green conveys renewal and harmony; blue represents wisdom and tranquility; and white embodies purity and transcendence. The study concluded that color functions not merely as decorative but as a philosophical language within religious art, reinforcing moral values, imperial legitimacy, and metaphysical teachings. This research contributes to broader discourse in art history, religious studies, and semiotic theory by highlighting color as a powerful medium for visual theology and ideological expression.

Keywords: Color Symbolism; Yongle Palace Murals; Daoism Buddhism Confucianism; Semiotic Analysis; Religious Art Philosophy

Introduction

The Yongle Palace murals established during the time of Yuan maintain their status as a vital religious Daoist artistic achievement which delivers essential knowledge about color symbolism in match with religious and, philosophical and cultural beliefs of that period. The Yongle Palace and its murals emerged during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty emperors. These murals balance their function as both an ancient artifact and a spiritual–religious device while combining Daoist philosophical elements with artistic makeup (Ngan, 2022). The murals contain symbolic color elements that deliver viewers essential Daoist Buddhist and Confucian teachings. In this context Daoism functions as the main religious system but the historical relationship between Daoism and Buddhism and Confucianism remains significant because these religions have shaped Chinese religious traditions since ancient times. These spiritual and ethical concepts transmit through the application of colors in these murals because color serves as more than just decorative elements. Costume harmony and dual force equilibrium form the core principles of Daoism which can be expressed through symbolic color interpretations of natural elements and yin–yang balance. The murals' color usage for representation of social positions and moral standards receives guidance from Confucian beliefs that concentrate on ethical and hierarchical principles. The Yongle Palace murals' colors reflect the Ming court's metaphysical and moral worldview, including the emperor's divine authority and religious–political ideology.

The examination of colors in Yongle Palace walls reveals fundamental knowledge about artistic–religious–philosophical connections of the Yuan time period. Through these artworks religion merges with cultural expression because colors establish a symbolic language to present complete beliefs and ethics of Daoism Buddhism and Confucianism. Chinese artists working in religious contexts of the Yuan used color to communicate complex spiritual messages, moving beyond mere decoration. Research on these murals not only sheds light on Yuan religious art but also offers insights into the philosophical movements that influenced religious practices at the time (Ma, 2024; Xiaojing, 2023).

This study builds on the understanding of color symbolism in the Yongle Palace murals, aiming to explore how religious artworks communicate spiritual teachings and moral values. By focusing on the cultural interpretation of colors within the Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions, the research seeks to contribute to academic discourse on the intersection of art, philosophy, and religion in Chinese culture. Religious and philosophical concepts become visible within Yongle Palace mural art through color symbolism to expose Chinese moral and spiritual

values during the Yuan.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the philosophical and religious significance of colors in the murals of Yongle Palace, as well as how they convey spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical ideas.
2. To compares mural color symbolism to Indian, Persian, and Daoist art and examines how colors relate to Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideologies.

Literature review

1. Related literature on the symbolic meaning of colors

Li (2021) studied the colors in Daoist painting and points out the symbolic significance of colors in Chinese art. Philosophical Basis Color symbolism in art, especially in religious and philosophical contexts, is important in Chinese traditions, where color conveys metaphysical and spiritual meanings. Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism use color to symbolize cosmic harmony, ethical order, enlightenment, and morality. Each philosophical tradition views color and spiritual or ethical expression differently, influencing Chinese art. The most influential philosophical and religious system in Chinese culture, Daoism, promotes cosmic harmony by recognizing Yin and Yang's control over everything. In Daoist cosmology, color represents the five elements—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—which explain creation, destruction, and transformation. Red represents fire, passion, and destruction, while green represents wood, growth, vitality, and life force. Black and white, representing the Yin and Yang forces, represent the Daoist view of opposites as complementary forces that must balance to maintain universe harmony.

Kim (2022) studied Chinese immortals and constellations, and pointed out the reflection of color in Chinese art. In Daoist colors, gold represents a symbol of divinity, nobility, and status; red represents his purity and compassion for all sentient beings. Daoist art depicts the meditative wisdom of Daoist immortals in white, which symbolizes purity and the end of suffering. Peace and wisdom, essential for spiritual liberation, are symbolized by blue and green. Daoist art uses color to teach overcoming ignorance and enlightenment, whether through its serene imagery or through the inner journey of practitioners. Despite their differences, these philosophical and religious systems express profound spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical ideas through color. These color symbols in Chinese art reflect a dialogue between visual representation and philosophical thought, communicating abstract concepts and giving religious art a deeper meaning beyond aesthetics.

2. Literature related to color and ideology

Liu (2021) studied the relationship between color and ideology and pointed out the symbolic significance of colors in the Yuan Dynasty. Yongle Palace murals depict Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian philosophies that shaped Yuan China's religion and culture through color symbolism. Each mural color reinforces metaphysical and ethical teachings of the time. These murals use color to represent the universe, deities, and social norms to express complex ideas about existence, virtue, and enlightenment. The mural paintings of Yongle Palace were created during the Yuan Dynasty. Taoism emerged in the Yuan Dynasty, thanks to the favor of rulers and the social turmoil that led to the pursuit of the spiritual world by the people. The colors and symbolic meanings of the murals in Yongle Palace also reflect the centralization and hierarchical system of the Yuan Dynasty. These murals use color to convey spiritual significance and the social order and ethics of the Yuan Dynasty. The murals depict the complex relationship between Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Ming political power.

Zhao (2024) studied the connection between Taoism and ideology. The Emperor of the Yuan Dynasty strengthened the leadership of the ruling class through culture and religion. Therefore, the color choices of these religious arts reflect concerns about religion, philosophy, and politics. The murals in Yongle Palace connect the murals with Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism to legitimize the rulers' rule and showcase their morality and cosmic order. Mural colors convey spirituality and politics. Yongle Palace mural color symbolism is explained by the Yuan. Murals created during political consolidation and religious expansion needed color to convey the era's philosophical and ethical ideals. These murals are religious art and historical documents that use color to reveal the cultural and political climate of the time, reflecting the complex relationship between religious belief, political power, and artistic expression.

Kindall (2024) studied the use of colors in Confucianism. Confucianism emphasises ethics and social harmony over metaphysics and uses color to convey morality, social hierarchy, and virtue. Color represents Confucian decorum and respect for authority, family, and society. Red and gold symbolize power, nobility, and high status in Confucian thought, reinforcing family and state hierarchies. Rulers and scholars wear them to show morality. Brown and yellow, associated with commoners and lower classes, emphasize Confucian values of respecting one's role in society and following moral order. Confucianism and its ideal society value propriety, respect, and harmony, which color symbolizes. Chinese color symbolism changes as Buddhism emphasises the spiritual

journey to enlightenment and the transcendence of worldly suffering, especially during the Tang and Ming dynasties.

Research Methodology

This study addresses the central research problem: how does color symbolism in the murals of Yongle Palace function not only as decorative elements but as carriers of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian philosophical and religious ideas? How are these symbolic meanings shaped by Yuan Dynasty sociopolitical and cultural contexts, and how do they resonate with broader cross-cultural traditions such as Indian and Persian religious art? To investigate these questions, a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach was adopted, incorporating textual analysis, semiotic interpretation, historical contextualization, and comparative research.

1. Textual Analysis of Philosophical and Religious Canon

Daoist, Confucian, and Buddhist texts interpret colors in deeply symbolic ways. The *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* associate colors with Yin–Yang balance and the Five Elements, highlighting the cosmological roots of color symbolism in Daoism. In Confucian texts such as *The Analects* and *The Book of Songs*, colors reflect moral values, ethical order, and social hierarchy. Meanwhile, Buddhist scriptures like *The Nikkei* and *The Diamond Sutra* explore how colors represent spiritual purity, compassion, and enlightenment. These philosophical texts provide the theoretical foundation for interpreting color in Yongle Palace murals.

Visual analysis of pigment placement, tonal choices, and symbolic function in the murals supplements textual references. Museums, archives, and previous scholarly research further contextualize the religious meanings of colors. This process helps identify the spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical significance of red, gold, green, blue, and white within the framework of Chinese religious thought.

2. Semiotic Interpretation of Mural Color

Semiotic analysis reveals that the murals' color systems function as structured signs. Influenced by the semiotic theories of Charles Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure, this method interprets color as a visual language used to reinforce Daoist cosmic order, Confucian morality, and Buddhist enlightenment. For example, red represents Daoist vitality and cosmic Qi, Confucian authority and hierarchy, and Buddhist compassion.

The murals serve as visual scripts, where specific hues express religious philosophy. This semiotic approach shows how the muralists utilized color not only for aesthetic appeal but also to

convey complex doctrinal messages. The influence of Taoism's imperial promotion during the Yuan Dynasty further shaped the color palette. As Murray (2020) notes, the murals functioned simultaneously as spiritual, political, and ideological instruments. The state's recognition of Taoism legitimized its visual language, embedding political authority in the mural's symbolic structure.

3. Historical and Political Contextualization

Historical analysis explores how political and religious shifts during the Yuan Dynasty influenced the use of color in the Yongle Palace murals. Daoism, favored by the Yuan emperors, became visually dominant, while Confucian ethics and Buddhist imagery were adapted into a unified symbolic system. Murals thus became more than religious artwork—they were also political tools that visually embodied imperial ideology.

This layer of interpretation enriches textual and semiotic analyses by situating the murals within broader Yuan discourse. The admiration of the court for Taoist cosmology and the alignment of Confucian ideals with imperial governance shaped both the content and form of mural compositions. Therefore, color was strategically employed to communicate legitimacy, harmony, and ethical order.

4. Cross-Cultural Comparative Analysis

To expand the significance of color symbolism beyond China, the study conducts comparative research with Indian, Persian, and Buddhist traditions. Textual analysis and semiotic interpretation are applied to red, gold, green, blue, and white across these traditions. In Hinduism, red symbolizes purity and divine energy; in Persian Islamic art, it represents royal sanctity; in Buddhism, it reflects the Buddha's heart and universal compassion.

The *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuangzi* link color to cosmological harmony, while *The Analects* discuss the moral implications of color in social governance. Buddhist texts like *The Nikkei* use color to express meditative insight. Persian Sufi manuscripts and architecture view color as a channel for divine presence. Despite cultural differences, common themes emerge: gold for divinity, green for harmony, and blue for transcendence. This comparison highlights the universality of symbolic color in spiritual traditions, while also affirming the distinctive interpretation seen in Chinese murals.

5. Integration of Visual and Archival Sources

In addition to textual interpretation, the research draws on museum archives and mural documentation to analyze pigment use, composition, and color emphasis. Visual details—such as red outlining divine figures, or gold surrounding emperors—are interpreted within doctrinal contexts. This supports the semiotic reading of murals as visual theology.

Silk Road exchanges, Mongol-era cultural links, and Buddhist transmission from India further inform the study of how foreign influences were absorbed and transformed. The Yongle Emperor's sponsorship of the palace murals exemplifies how Chinese religious art selectively integrated external elements while preserving internal philosophical coherence.

This multi-layered methodology demonstrates that mural colors in Yongle Palace are not simply aesthetic but function as carriers of layered meanings—spiritual, political, and philosophical. By combining classical texts, semiotic theory, historical background, and comparative visual analysis, the study shows how color was used to encode and transmit ideological messages within a broader transcultural and religious landscape.

Research results

1. The philosophical ideas and religious significance of colors in the wall paintings of Yongle Palace

Table 1 Color Symbolism in Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism

Color	Daoism	Buddhism	Confucianism
Red	Passion, Vitality, Life Force	Compassion, Buddha's Heart	Authority, Social Power
Gold	Earth, Material Prosperity	Divine Radiance, Spiritual Attainment	Nobility, Imperial Power
Green	Growth, Nature, Renewal	Wisdom, Inner Peace	Harmony, Balance
Blue	Infinite Wisdom, Tranquility	Omniscience, Meditation	Moral Clarity
White	Purity, Spiritual Receptiveness	Peace, Liberation	Virtue, Ethical Integrity

Table 1 contrasts Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian color symbolism from authentic religious sources. Each shade represents spiritual, ethical, and cosmological views in different traditions. Red denotes vitality and cosmic energy, or Qi, which runs through all living things in Daoism. In Zhuangzi, crimson represents cosmic energy. In Daoism, gold represents soil and riches, uniting the physical and spiritual. Green represents natural renewal and Daoist cosmology's emphasis on human-nature harmony. Blue symbolises knowledge and the infinite sky, representing the Dao's vast nature and harmony. White represents spiritual receptivity, a blank state needed for enlightenment and self-cultivation in Daoist philosophy (Dao De Jing).

Red represents compassion and the Buddha's heart, which loves and protects all beings, according to The Nikkei and the Diamond Sutra. Buddha's wisdom is like ignorance-eliminating light. Green symbolises inner serenity and knowledge in Buddhist meditation. The Vimalakirti Sutra

equates blue with omniscience, tranquilly, and deep insight and serenity. White symbolises purity, transcendence, and Buddhist liberation and peace. In Confucianism, red symbolises authority and social power, and the Analects (Lunyu) use it to depict the emperor's dominion and virtue. Gold represents imperial legitimacy and royal nobility. Green represents harmony and balance, the Great Learning (Daxue) moral order of harmonising society and nature. Confucian knowledge and ethical leadership are symbolised by blue. White symbolises virtue and integrity, highlighting morality in administration and personal conduct, according to the Analects. This examination reveals how Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism employ color to symbolise metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual principles. Colourful Yongle Palace murals support religious and moral values.

Table 2 Key Texts and Color References

Text	Tradition	Color Symbolism Reference	Page/Section
Dao De Jing	Daoism	Red symbolizes vitality, life force	Chapter 28
The Analects	Confucianism	Black representing solemnity and seriousness	Rural Party Chapter
The Nikkei	Buddhism	Blue signifies wisdom and spiritual tranquility	Volume 1

Table 2 shows how Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism use color to express philosophy and spirituality. In Chapter 28 of the Dao De Jing, red represents life force and Qi. This chapter emphasizes balance in Daoist philosophy, where red represents life's constant change and the cosmos' constant movement. Red represents Daoist harmony, natural rhythms, and a physical color, according to this reference. In the "Rural Party Chapter" of the Analects, it is mentioned that black represents solemnity and seriousness. Black symbolizes ritual and solemnity. Colors represent the symbolic meanings of hierarchy in Confucian ethics, and are closely related to moral qualities and emotional meanings (Zhan, 2022). In Volume One of the Nikkei, blue represents wisdom and peace. Blue represents Buddha's deep meditation and worldly-free mind clarity and calm. In this chapter, blue symbolizes enlightenment's mental and spiritual clarity and Buddhism's wisdom and peace. Here, blue symbolizes meditation and enlightenment from deep understanding of existence. In this table, each tradition uses color symbolism to enrich their spiritual teachings by deepening their sensory and interpretive layers of religious texts.



Figure 1 Partial murals of Yongle Palace. (Source: Constructed by researcher)

Figure 1 depicts the colors and forms of expression of certain parts of the murals in Yongle Palace. This figure skillfully shows how the murals' primary colors—red, gold, green, and blue—transmit each tradition's core teachings using color-coded segments. For example, Red and green hues surround Daoist celestial figures in Yongle Palace murals, symbolizing Qi's cosmic flow. Red represents compassion, seen in the Daoist immortal's heart radiating love and mercy. Social and moral leadership are emphasized by Confucian leaders' red accents. Daoist art depicts the Taoist immortal's golden halos as spiritual illumination. Gold represents royalty and nobility in Confucianism and spiritual purity and divinity in Daoism. Each tradition's philosophical and spiritual messages are conveyed through color in these religious artworks. The murals depict the universe's dynamic life force in red, symbolizing Daoism's passion and vitality, Buddhism's compassion and the Buddha's heart, and Confucianism's authority and social power. These philosophical contexts explain cultural and religious syncretism with gold, green, and blue symbols. Gold represents enlightenment and divine radiance in Buddhism, prosperity and earth in Daoism, and nobility and royalty in Confucianism in the murals (Christian, 2021). The palette is enhanced by green and blue, which symbolize growth and nature in Daoism, tranquilly and wisdom in Buddhism, balance and harmony in Confucianism, the infinite sky, and spiritual calm. Figure 2 is an educational tool that visually connects historical and doctrinal narratives and celebrates the rich tapestry of meanings that colors impart on the expansive Yongle Palace murals, reflecting a complex interaction of cultural values and artistic expression.



Figure 2 Semiotic Interpretation of Color in the Murals. (Source: Constructed by researcher)

Figure 2 carefully examines the Yongle Palace murals' semiotics, showing how colors can convey metaphysical and philosophical ideas. This detailed figure shows each color's symbolic meaning and relationship to Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian cosmic balance, virtue, and enlightenment. The figure labels each mural color using a clear semiotic framework, explaining how Daoism's complex symbol of life force and vitality, red, reflects the universe's dynamic energy–tranquility balance. In Buddhist murals, gold symbolizes enlightenment and divine light, suggesting spiritual awakening and higher wisdom. Daoists see nature as an ever-changing canvas that reflects their search for harmony and balance. Green symbolizes growth and renewal. Blue, symbolizing wisdom and tranquilly, represents Buddhist spiritual calm, omniscience, and enlightened serenity. Figure 2 illustrates how the murals' symbolic language of colors are deep semiotic tools that communicate complex philosophical messages, aligning aesthetic elements with spiritual and metaphysical narratives.

Every color in Yongle Palace murals has spiritual and philosophical meanings. Daoism associates gold with divine purity and the cosmos, while red symbolizes Qi. Daoists believe life and nature are one, so green symbolizes growth, balance, and harmony. Red represents compassion, the Buddha's heart, and gold, often seen in his aura or clothing, represents enlightenment and spiritual wisdom. Green represents meditation's peace, while blue represents Buddhist enlightenment's vast knowledge and calm. Red symbolizes Confucian authority and social power, especially in imperial family and moral leadership depictions. To emphasize the emperor's noble qualities and Confucian virtue, gold symbolizes wisdom and royalty. In Confucianism, green

symbolizes harmony and balance, especially in morality and social order. Confucian blue represents morality and wisdom, the intellectual and ethical clarity needed for fair governance and leadership (Shao, 2024). The diagram shows how these colors, while shared across traditions, carry unique philosophical and spiritual messages from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, making them powerful religious and cultural symbols.

2. Comparison of Color Symbols in Mural Paintings and Their Relationship with Ideology

Table 3 Cross-Cultural Color Comparisons

Color	Chinese Tradition	Indian Tradition	Persian Tradition	Buddhist Tradition
Red	Vitality, Passion (Daoism)	Purity, Divine Power	Sacredness, Authority	Compassion, Buddha's Heart
Gold	Spiritual Authority, Wealth	Divinity, Immortality	Eternity, Royalty	Enlightenment, Sacred Knowledge
Green	Growth, Natural Balance	Life, Fertility	Abundance, Rebirth	Tranquility, Meditative Insight
Blue	Wisdom, Universal Harmony	Divine Presence	Celestial Spirit	Infinite Wisdom, Serenity
White	Purity, Cosmic Balance	Spiritual Clarity	Divine Light	Peace, Transcendence

In Table 3, Chinese, Indian, Persian, and Buddhist civilisations interpret red, gold, green, blue, and white differently but together. Certain colors symbolise purity, divinity, religion, philosophy, and history. Chinese Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian culture depicts Qi (life force) and cosmic energy as crimson. Daoist and Buddhist doctrines associate gold with imperial strength, celestial wisdom, and the material-spiritual relationship. Green symbolises progress and equilibrium in Daoist cosmology. Blue symbolises wisdom, harmony, and the Dao's eternal nature. White represents purity, cosmic harmony, Daoist transcendence, and Buddhist enlightenment, which employ emptiness to learn. Hindu and Buddhist ceremonies use red to signify energy, protection, purity, and cosmic strength. Gold represents gods, celestial beings, and soul immortality to Hindus. Green represents Lakshmi and nature's fecundity. Blue skin represents transcendence and spiritual superiority for Krishna and Shiva. White symbolises spiritual clarity, renunciation, knowledge, and mental purity in Hinduism and Jainism.

Red represents sacredness and authority in Persian royal regalia and religious art. Gold represents eternity and royalty, reserved for monarchs, gods, and Persian imperial courts. Persian mythology associates green with prosperity, regeneration, agriculture, and heaven. Blue symbolises divine transcendence and earth-heaven ties in Islamic art and architecture. Sufi traditions associate white with heavenly illumination, spiritual knowledge, and mystical purity. Red represents compassion, the Buddha's heart, universal love, warmth, and protection in Buddhism.

Buddhist statues and thangkas reflect Buddha's wisdom and enlightenment in gold. Green symbolises tranquilly and insight because Buddhism fosters spiritual growth. Through deep meditation and omniscience, blue Buddhas represent boundless wisdom and peace. White represents tranquilly, transcendence, and the final step to enlightenment and pain release (Bellemare, 2021). This comparison shows color symbolism's cultural and universal meaning. Red, gold, blue, green, and white symbolise spirituality, divinity, and knowledge, depending on the culture's intellectual, theological, and historical traditions. Yongle Palace murals show how Chinese religious art integrates local and international influences (Ma, 2024).

Table 4 Color and Metaphysical/Spiritual Meanings

Color	Artistic Techniques and Semiotic Interpretation
Red	Red is often used in the murals to create dynamic contrast, symbolizing vitality and energy through bold, saturated tones. In depictions of celestial beings or divine figures, red highlights their cosmic vitality, drawing the viewer's attention to the force of life and cosmic energy. The placement of red in key areas, such as around figures or in the background, amplifies the connection between the earthly and spiritual realms, reinforcing the Daoist principle of Qi.
Gold	Gold leaf is employed to illuminate sacred figures, conveying divine radiance and the idea of spiritual enlightenment. The use of gold in halos or the surrounding environment elevates figures like the Buddha or important deities, creating a visual symbol of divine presence. Gold's reflective nature enhances the murals' sacredness, visually representing the transcendence of the divine while also reinforcing Buddhist notions of purity and enlightenment.
Green	Green is used to represent spiritual tranquility and natural harmony. In the murals, it is integrated into lush landscapes and the robes of deities, symbolizing the balance between nature and the cosmos. The use of varied green shades highlights growth, renewal, and connection to the earth, aligning with the Daoist principle of cosmic balance and emphasizing the interconnectedness of life.
Blue	Blue is strategically placed in the background skies or around enlightened beings to convey infinite wisdom and serenity. The use of cool blues creates a calming atmosphere, evoking spiritual calm and omniscience. By applying blue in celestial settings, the murals signify the vastness of the cosmos and the boundless wisdom of enlightened figures, reflecting both Daoist and Buddhist ideals of wisdom and clarity.
White	White is used to create a sense of purity and spiritual clarity in the murals. It is applied to highlight sacred figures or the transcendence of suffering, symbolizing enlightenment and spiritual peace. The strategic use of white contrasts with other colors to emphasize purity in the spiritual journey, enhancing the Buddhist focus on liberation from suffering and the Daoist emphasis on balance and receptivity.

Table 4 shows how Yongle Palace murals depict metaphysics and spirituality through color. In art and symbolism, red, gold, green, blue, and white support Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian concepts. Semiotics interprets murals by analysing colors as structured symbols with significance beyond beauty. Charles Peirce's triadic model of signs says mural colors are religious and cultural symbols. In Daoist metaphysics, crimson represents Qi, cosmic energy, and vigour. According to Ferdinand de Saussure's signifier and signified, the paintings' colors convey spiritual, ethical, and intellectual truths. Red contrasts accentuate cosmic energy and celestial beings in art. Daoist semiotics associates vivid colors with qi (life energy). Gold leaf illumination of sacred images promotes Buddhist enlightenment and cosmic transcendence. Buddhism links spiritual understanding to radiant light, and gold's reflection adds meaning. The color green represents Daoist cosmic balance, life's interdependence, and natural renewal. Blue backgrounds or enlightened people symbolise spiritual wisdom and harmony for Buddhist meditative insight and omniscience. White represents Daoist nothingness and Buddhist liberation. Roland Barthes' mythology demonstrate murals' non-aesthetic communication. Colorful Yongle Palace murals reflect religion, imperial legitimacy, and morality. This study combines murals and semiotic theory to illustrate how colors affected Yuan Chinese religious and philosophical discourse.

Knowledge from Research

This study investigates the Yongle Palace murals' color symbolism and its philosophical, theological, and epistemological ramifications. Mural color symbolism links aesthetic philosophy, metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology (Figure 3). These characteristics explain how Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions use color as visual language. Research methods include literary analysis, semiotic interpretation, historical contextualization, and comparative analysis. Classical religious and philosophical books on how colors reflect balance, virtue, and cosmic harmony are explored for aesthetic philosophy. The research shows how religious art colors retain symbolic meanings across cultures and time periods, affecting comparative art studies, cultural heritage conservation, and contemporary religious art. This study compares Chinese, Indian, Persian, and Buddhist traditions to demonstrate the universality of color as a spiritual signifier and how culture affects its interpretation. Color symbolism helps conservationists and curators preserve sacred art while honoring artists' theological and philosophical intentions. Color's impact on religious architecture, ritual aesthetics, and digital religious art can be discussed using this research to connect historical artistic traditions to their global relevance. Color's ability to convey meaning,

devotion, and transcendence can be confirmed by studying how color symbolism shapes religious and philosophical thought in contemporary art and spirituality.

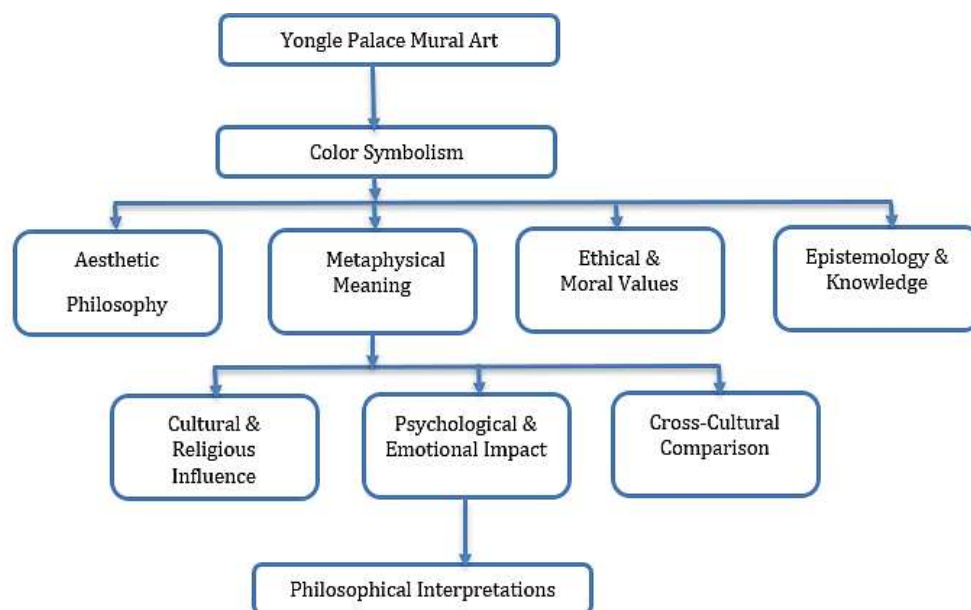


Figure 3 Conceptual Framework: Color Symbolism in the Yongle Palace Murals. (Source: Constructed by researcher)

Discussion

This study reveals that the color symbolism in the murals of Yongle Palace operates as a sophisticated visual system that transmits core metaphysical, ethical, and political messages. Far from being ornamental, colors in these murals encode complex teachings from Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions. Red, for example, symbolizes vitality and cosmic Qi in Daoism, compassion in Buddhism, and moral authority in Confucianism. Gold embodies both divine enlightenment and imperial legitimacy, while green and blue represent harmony, renewal, and spiritual wisdom. White signifies purity and transcendence across all three traditions.

These symbolic associations demonstrate how color functioned as a theological language in religious art, providing viewers with not only spiritual inspiration but also an implicit moral and cosmological framework. The murals thereby serve as a medium of visual theology—what Shao (2024) calls “the political deployment of spiritual symbols”—whereby religious teachings are visually codified and aligned with imperial authority. Through color, muralists articulated divine order while simultaneously reinforcing social hierarchy and ethical conduct sanctioned by the state.

Furthermore, by comparing Chinese color symbolism with that of Indian and Persian religious art, the study underscores both universal and culturally specific dimensions of religious

expression. As Bellemare (2021) notes in her study on Qing Dynasty material aesthetics, color often serves as a trans-civilizational medium for expressing sacredness, but its meaning is always inflected by local cosmology and power structures. In this light, the Yongle Palace murals emerge as both distinctly Chinese and dialogically global—borrowing from broader spiritual vocabularies while preserving their unique philosophical coherence.

In sum, the findings highlight the murals' role in fusing aesthetic design with ideological narrative, situating color at the intersection of art, religion, and governance. They reflect how visual culture in the Yuan Dynasty was instrumentalized to educate, legitimize, and spiritualize the imperial worldview.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that color in the Yongle Palace murals served as an essential medium for expressing Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian philosophies within the religious, political, and cultural landscape of the Yuan Dynasty. Through a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, the research decoded the symbolic meanings of red, gold, green, blue, and white, showing how these colors conveyed not only spiritual doctrines but also reinforced imperial legitimacy and ethical governance.

By situating these murals within their historical context and comparing them with color symbolism in Indian and Persian religious traditions, the study contributes to a broader understanding of visual semiotics in sacred art. It affirms that color functions as both a cross-cultural language and a site of localized philosophical articulation.

This research thus expands the theoretical conversation on religious art by illustrating how color symbolism constructs meaning across multiple domains—spiritual, ethical, and political. It encourages future inquiry into color as a dynamic component of visual theology, cultural memory, and identity formation in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Suggestions

This research's use of semiotic analysis, comparative religious studies, and historical contextualization has provided a holistic framework for understanding religious art's color, allowing future scholars to study similar visual traditions across cultures. To determine if similar philosophical and ethical associations exist, color symbolism in landscape painting, imperial architecture, and textile art could be studied beyond the Yongle Palace murals. Comparing

historical mural color symbolism with contemporary religious and philosophical art may reveal if color meanings have changed with modern spiritual and artistic movements. Yongle Palace murals' color symbolism guides viewers through spiritual reflection, reinforcing religious narratives and ethical teachings. Interdisciplinary research is needed. Future research on modern religious iconography, digital sacred art, and contemporary Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian artistic practices may reveal how color shapes philosophical discourse, cultural identity, and spiritual experience across time and space.

The investigation illuminates how color symbolism conveys spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical ideas, affecting art history, religious studies, and philosophy. This study examines the Yongle Palace murals through Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian lenses to show how art extends philosophical and theological principles and reinforces that color is a deeply embedded symbolic system that communicates sacred knowledge and moral values. This study shows that religious murals' hues are a structured form of visual communication that transcends creative decoration and guides viewers through symbolic representations of enlightenment, cosmic harmony, and ethical governance, improving our semiotic and phenomenological understanding of color. These findings also give religious iconography scholars a new framework for understanding artistic expression and doctrinal philosophy across cultures and time.

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