

Evolution, Symbolism, and Artistry: A Study on the Colors of Peking Opera Facial Makeup

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Keywords: Peking Opera Masks; Peking Opera; Cultural Connotation; Symbolism in Colors; Aesthetic Significance

Abstract: Facial makeup in Peking Opera is a makeup technique used during Peking Opera performances with the purpose of better shaping the characters on stage. The art of facial makeup, with its rich array of colors, varied designs, and profound cultural significance, has gained wide recognition among the public and has gradually become a symbol of Chinese culture. This paper focuses on exploring the colors of Chinese opera masks as it delves into the cultural connotations, symbolic meanings, and aesthetic significance inherent in this unique art form. Color plays a pivotal role in these masks, not only expressing the distinctive Chinese customs and cultural connotations through the use of color lines and blocks but also imbuing Peking Opera mask art with profound symbolic and aesthetic value.

1. Definition and Origin of Facial Makeup

Peking Opera, also known as Pingju or Jingxi, stands as the most influential traditional Chinese theatrical art form. In May 2006, it was officially recognized and designated as one of the first national-level intangible cultural heritages by the State Council of China.[1] Peking Opera facial makeup, originating from the makeup techniques employed in Peking Opera performances, gradually revealed its distinctive artistic essence and allure throughout its collaborative journey with Peking Opera.

The facial makeup, also known as "Lianpu," in Peking Opera is an essential component of Chinese Peking Opera art. It is used to portray and depict the images and personalities of various characters on the stage. The facial makeup typically expresses the characters' identity, personality, and destiny through intricate lines, vibrant colors, and symbolically significant patterns.

As one of the important performance aids in Peking opera, facial masks contain the unique cultural gene of Peking opera. Peking opera facial masks have rich colors, and their musical forms are complex and diverse.[2]

We can see the mark of our traditional culture through the color composition of Chinese opera masks. It was the worship of totems and sacrificial rites in ancient times that formed the love of natural color in opera masks. The culture of yin-yang and five elements and the harmony of nature and man form the taboo of five colors, which gradually becomes a significant standard and example in the coloring of opera mask and mask color aesthetics. Combined with the harmony of nature and man, the colors of the opera mask can tell the role of the opera. Influenced by the national tradition

and regional aesthetic culture, the love of natural colors, coloring, and aesthetic standards gradually transformed into a custom, and even a fixed mode, and was handed down. Therefore, Chinese traditional culture gives an important impetus and influence on the formation of opera mask color.[3]

From an academic perspective, facial makeup represents an ideologically creative evolution within a confined space. It is an art form that reflects reality but possesses greater typification than reality itself through its unique imagery. In a layman's understanding, facial makeup serves as a significant medium through which people derive sensual and spiritual enjoyment and visual aesthetic pleasure. Its elements of color, graphics, lines, lighting, intensity, and expression enable individuals to comprehend nature, history, and society while being influenced by the cultivation of truth, goodness, and beauty.[4]

2. Symbolic Meaning of Facial Makeup Colors

The art of facial makeup, known as 'Lianpu,' is an essential makeup technique in stage performances, and its essence lies in the harmonious blend of colors. Color, being a silent language, is employed to express the distinctive characteristics of various characters. The use of colors in Peking Opera facial makeup is a meticulous process, deeply influenced by the traditional Chinese concept of 'Wuseguan' (the Five-Color Theory). This theory advocates the application of high-purity, vibrant colors in delineating the facial features of characters, enhancing the overall artistic effect of the stage. In the realm of Peking Opera, color not only contributes to visual aesthetics but also functions as a medium through which diverse character traits are conveyed.[5]

2.1. Character Differentiation

Roles in Peking Opera are distinctly categorized. Generally, characters are divided into four main categories known as "Sheng" (male role), "Dan" (female role), "Jing" (painted face role), and "Chou" (clown role), with each category further subdivided into several branches. For instance, the "Sheng" category is divided into "Lao Sheng" (old male role), "Xiao Sheng" (young male role), and "Wu Sheng" (martial male role). Xiao Sheng represents relatively young male characters, typically appearing on stage with handsome and refined appearances. Depending on the character's costumes and props, Xiao Sheng can be further categorized into Lingshi Sheng (feathered hat), Shamao Sheng (silk cap), Shanzi Sheng (fan), Qiong Sheng (impoverished), and Wuxiaosheng (young martial role).[6]

Lao Sheng predominantly plays middle-aged and older male characters and is further divided into civil and martial types. Wu Sheng specializes in martial arts performances. The classification of Wu Sheng is relatively simple, primarily divided into "Changkao" (long-range) and "Duan Da" (short-range). Qingyi, also known as Zheng Dan, is the main role in the Dan category. Qingyi portrays characters with a dignified and righteous personality. In terms of character portrayal, Qingyi can span various age ranges, from youth to middle age. Laodan, as the name suggests, specializes in portraying elderly female characters. Wudan portrays brave and martial women, such as Sun Erniang in "Wusong Beats the Tiger" or the innkeeper's wife in "San Chakou." Daoma Dan, from its name, indicates a young and strong woman who wields a knife and rides a horse. Therefore, it is given the specific term "Daoma Dan" in Peking Opera.[7]

2.2. Order by Age

In addition to distinguishing age through costumes and voice, the color of the beard area in facial makeup also plays a role in differentiating age. Those who often watch theatrical performances are aware that a black beard represents youth, a white beard represents old age, and a grey beard (ashen

color) is used for characters in between.

For example, in the play "Changbanpo," Liu Bei's facial makeup features a black beard, representing a youthful image. In the play "Two Generals," a gray beard is used to depict him in middle age. In the play "White Emperor City," a white beard portrays him as an elderly character. The change in the color of Liu Bei's beard in these three plays also reflects his ageing process.

2.3. The function of conveying evaluation is one of the most prominent features of facial makeup in Peking Opera

The colors used in facial makeup often emphasize symbolizing character traits and personality. The patternization and rhythmic design of the facial makeup serve as indicators, and they possess rich visual expressiveness. It can be described as radiant, colorful, and vibrant, where the distinctive characteristics of each character are fully revealed through the colors of the facial makeup. The proper selection and application of Chinese opera mask color can hint at the destiny or basic conditions of the role.[8]

For example, the frown of Bao Zheng shows his worry and hard thinking; the face of Xiang Yu with misery eyes shows his tragic fate; the role of Sun Wukong is painted with a monkey's face, which suggests that he is a monkey. Painting the actor's face with colors distances the audience from the plot of the play. Actors with painted faces look quite different. On one hand, it helps the audience focus on the appreciation of opera itself. On the other hand, it can produce a sharp contrast when many actors with different color-painted faces come on stage at the same time. For example, "Junban" has a fine appearance, while "Dahualian" has an absurd face; when they come on stage at the same time, there will be a strong contrast. The face of Jing always is painted with bright and heavy colors, and the accent of Jing is thick and rough, to form a unity of appearance and accent. It produces a strong artistic effect and increases the artistic expression of the opera itself.

The translation provided retains the original structure and format of the text while maintaining clarity and simplicity.[9]

3. Evolution and Development of Facial Makeup Colors

The colors employed in Peking Opera facial makeup not only serve to enhance visual aesthetics but also carry profound symbolic meanings. To provide the most apt analysis of its artistic representation, Peking Opera facial makeup should be examined through an aesthetic lens, fundamentally making it a distinctive form of visual art. Visual art, possessing its unique allure, emphasizes a sensory impact and realism. To evoke an unprecedented sensory experience, the most crucial aspect lies in the manipulation of color and form. The awe-inspiring effect of Peking Opera facial makeup on countless individuals stems from the skilful handling of the relationship between 'color' and 'form'. [10] The striking combinations of vivid colors in Peking Opera facial makeup require creators to not only consider their aesthetic effect but also be mindful of the emotional responses each color evokes. Creators, in the application of color combinations for Peking Opera facial makeup, must simultaneously consider both the aesthetic effect and the resulting emotional response. Such an arrangement ensures that the audience while watching Peking Opera performances, does not harbour psychological aversions to the various facial makeup styles; instead, they instinctively acknowledge facial makeup as the finest embellishment and interpretation of the characters. The use of colors in Peking Opera's facial makeup is not static but has evolved and developed over time in accordance by the changes in society. This evolution is primarily reflected in the usage of colors and their corresponding symbolic meanings.[11]

3.1. The Historical Evolution of Facial Makeup Colors

In the early stages of Peking Opera, facial makeup colors were relatively simple, primarily consisting of five main colors: red, black, white, blue, and yellow. These five colors represented five basic character traits, such as red symbolizing bravery, black representing loyalty, white representing cunning, and yellow and blue respectively representing barbarism and simplicity. As time passed, the colors used in Peking Opera's facial makeup became more diverse. Not only were more colors introduced, but their corresponding symbolic meanings also became richer and more nuanced. For instance, yellow and blue began to symbolize wisdom and contemplation, going beyond their initial associations with barbarism and simplicity.[12]

Historical events and social changes influenced the evolution of facial makeup colors. For example, with the advent and development of chemical pigments, there was a significant improvement in the variety and brightness of colors used in Peking Opera facial makeup. This allowed actors to vividly express their character traits on stage. In the 20th century, influenced by socialist realism in art, Peking Opera facial makeup colors began to pursue more realistic and vibrant color effects, aiming to present more delicate and three-dimensional character images. In the 21st century, with the opening up and diversification of society, the use of facial makeup colors in Peking Opera has become increasingly free and innovative. More elements of innovation have been incorporated to cater to the aesthetic demands of contemporary audiences.

3.2. The Changing Trends of Facial Makeup Colors in Different Periods

Throughout different periods, the selection and application of facial makeup colors have shown noticeable trends of change. In the early stages of Peking Opera, facial makeup colors were relatively simple, focusing on symbolically representing character traits. Over time, the variety and application of colors gradually expanded, leading to the following distinct trends:

Colored Facial Makeup Period: In the early development stage of facial makeup, the techniques for colored facial makeup gradually improved, resulting in a more diverse use of colors. For example, in the classic opera "Red Lantern," the protagonist Deng Shichang uses red facial makeup to highlight his courageous and upright character.

Plain Facial Makeup Period: During the 1950s to the 1970s, influenced by the socialist realism art philosophy, plain facial makeup gained recognition. Plain facial makeup uses white or light tones, emphasizing the expression of characters' emotions and inner world. For instance, in the classic opera "The Peony Pavilion," the female protagonist Du Liniang uses white facial makeup to emphasize her purity and beauty.[13]

Modern Innovative Period: In the 21st century, with the opening up and diversification of society, the use of facial makeup colors in Peking Opera has become more free and innovative. Actors and theater groups have started to experiment with introducing more diverse colors and patterns in facial makeup to highlight character personalities and convey the story. For example, in some contemporary adaptations of Peking Opera, non-traditional colors such as gold, purple, and green can be seen in facial makeup, creating a more modern and visually impactful effect.

4. Production and Techniques of Facial Makeup Colors

The artistry in the creation of Peking Opera facial makeup bears a resemblance to the art of Chinese calligraphy. Calligraphy emerges as an art form from the precise strokes and nuances in writing characters, whereas facial makeup derives its artistic essence from the meticulous brushwork involved in character transformations. Both share a high degree of procedural formalization in their creative processes, a process that leaves no room for deviation. They also exhibit similarities in their

brushwork techniques, emphasizing fluid yet powerful lines, distinct rhythms, and spirited expression. Just as in calligraphy, where the choice of brush and ink significantly impacts the outcome, in Peking Opera facial makeup, the selection of materials and the painstaking production process for colors are pivotal determinants of the final artistic effect.[14]

4.1. Production Techniques and Material Selection for Facial Makeup Colors

Traditional facial makeup pigments are primarily made from natural minerals and plant extracts. Common materials used include cinnabar, safflower, ink, coal, chalk, and pearl powder. These materials have good color stability and safety when in contact with the skin. They need to be ground and processed to obtain fine pigment powders.

The process of color mixing for facial makeup requires a high level of skill and experience. Colorists accurately blend the pigments according to the character's traits and the requirements of the plot to achieve the desired colors. Traditional color mixing is often done manually, while modern techniques also involve digital color mixing and computer-assisted design to ensure the accuracy and consistency of colors.

Drawing facial makeup requires proficient painting techniques and meticulous manual work. Based on the design patterns of the facial makeup, the artist applies the pigments evenly onto the mask, creating the desired color effects. Attention is given to the sense of layers, transitions, and details during the drawing process.

4.2. Traditional Techniques and Transmission Methods for Facial Makeup Color Production

The production of Peking Opera facial makeup colors is a highly specialized skill that requires extensive training and practice to master. During the production process, actors carefully select and match colors based on their character types and the requirements of the plot. Furthermore, the order and methods of applying facial makeup colors are also crucial, often starting from dark colors and gradually transitioning to lighter ones to ensure a sense of depth and three-dimensionality.

Peking Opera facial makeup is typically handmade by experienced Peking Opera actors and facial makeup masters. It is often crafted using techniques such as applying putty, sanding, wood carving, and coloring. These processes are intricate, involving constant polishing, shaping, and coloring. The production of a single facial makeup mask can take hundreds of hours, with great attention to detail.

While modern technology has provided convenience in the production of Peking Opera facial makeup, many Peking Opera troupes and actors actively maintain and inherit the traditional techniques of facial makeup production. They believe that only through hands-on production and application of facial makeup can they truly understand and express the inner world of the characters, thus better fulfilling their performance tasks.

5. Significance and Applications of Facial Makeup Color Research

The research on Peking Opera facial makeup colors not only helps us understand the artistic characteristics and aesthetic value of Peking Opera but also deepens our understanding of Chinese traditional culture and social changes.

5.1. Importance in Character Portrayal

Facial makeup colors play a crucial role in character portrayal, conveying the character's traits and inner world visually. Through the study of facial makeup colors, we can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the artistic portrayal of characters in Peking Opera.

5.2. Application in Peking Opera Performance and Stage Aesthetics

Facial makeup colors play an important role in Peking Opera performance and stage aesthetics. The richness and artistry of facial makeup colors give Peking Opera stages a unique visual impact. It not only provides visual stimulation and enjoyment for the audience but also enhances the three-dimensionality of character portrayals through the use of color brightness, contrast, and layering. The selection and design of facial makeup colors also reflect the style and themes of the repertoire, further enriching the artistic charm of stage performances and enhancing the audience's viewing experience.

5.3. Influence on Modern Design and Makeup

Many designers have extracted colors and patterns from Peking Opera facial makeup, seamlessly integrating them into modern fashion designs. In recent years, fashion brands have incorporated elements of Eastern culture into their modern design works, carrying the profound traditional culture and history of our country. Additionally, the field of makeup artistry increasingly emphasizes individuality and exaggeration, with many makeup artists incorporating the colors and techniques of Peking Opera facial makeup into models' makeup. For example, peachy eyeshadow and blush convey a delicate and feminine aura, leaving a strong visual impact. The integration of traditional Chinese facial makeup elements with modern logo design involves more than a mere reference to traditional facial makeup patterns; it signifies the inheritance of the artistic spirit of Chinese culture. Instead of a straightforward appropriation and replication of the patterns within facial makeup elements, we delve deeper into understanding the essence of these traditional elements. We progressively explore, transform, and evolve these graphical elements, allowing traditional patterns to become a new creative focal point in logo design. By seamlessly blending them with modern design elements, we craft vibrant and dynamic modern logos that reflect both vitality and the uniqueness of aesthetic artistry.

The colors of Peking Opera's facial makeup have a significant influence on modern color design. Their application can be seen in various fields such as graphic design, fashion design, and makeup artistry. However, it is important to note that the colors of Peking Opera's facial makeup should not be applied indiscriminately. Each color carries different meanings and specific cultural connotations. Therefore, when combining Peking Opera facial makeup colors with modern designs, it is essential to ensure that the modern design conveys the corresponding cultural connotations, expressing aesthetic beauty and cultural integration rather than generating aversion. The foundation of modern design innovation should be established upon the bedrock of traditional color culture. Traditional color culture provides visual language symbols that influence the mindset of contemporary visual design. Visual design is not merely a market-driven endeavour; it is fundamentally a proactive cultural act, an act of aesthetics. Understanding the historical origins of traditional color usage allows for a more intuitive appreciation of the historical and cultural characteristics carried by this theoretical framework. Looking back, humanity's ongoing research and synthesis of color have contributed to a deeper understanding of color variations and intentions. This, in turn, has a stimulating and enlightening impact on the mindset of designers.[4]

In summary, the research on Peking Opera facial makeup colors has made important progress in exploring their historical evolution, symbolic meanings, and their application in character portrayal and stage aesthetics. In-depth studies of Peking Opera facial makeup colors not only contribute to the inheritance and development of Chinese traditional opera arts but also provide inspiration and insights for modern design. However, it is crucial to respect the unique cultural connotations of Peking Opera facial makeup colors when applying them in modern designs, ensuring that the expression conveys respect and fusion of traditional culture rather than arbitrary usage. Further research and exploration can expand the application scope of Peking Opera facial makeup colors, contributing to the

inheritance and innovative development of traditional culture. Innovation in inheritance, development in innovation, highlighting the connotation and heritage of Chinese traditional culture, which can make the design with traditional characteristics spread longer and be recognized by the world.

6. Conclusion

The colors of Peking Opera's facial makeup are a unique visual symbol in Chinese traditional opera art. They carry rich historical and cultural information and profound artistic connotations. With their intuitive and symbolic expressions, facial makeup colors provide important visual clues and emotional carriers for character portrayal and plot development in Peking Opera. They efficiently and vividly convey the character's traits, social status, and emotional changes.

From a historical perspective, the development and evolution of Peking Opera facial makeup colors reflect the changes in Chinese society, as well as the evolution of Chinese aesthetic concepts and artistic expressions. From the original five-color facial makeup to the modern multi-colored facial makeup, we can see that Peking Opera art actively absorbs new elements and constantly innovates while maintaining its traditions.

In practice, the production techniques of Peking Opera's facial makeup colors require not only excellent craftsmanship from the actors but also a deep understanding and portrayal of the characters. This not only demands high technical proficiency from the actors but also poses challenges to their artistic cultivation and humanistic qualities. For the audience, understanding and appreciating facial makeup colors also require a certain level of artistic literacy and cultural background knowledge.

Finally, Chinese opera masks reflect many aspects of our real life. Everyone can be a living actor who plays his role on the world stage. Everyone has his unique mask color, pattern style, and personality. Opera masks gradually take shape with the maturity of opera and fixes up. As a completely independent art style, it is an important of world culture. It fully reflects Chinese characteristics and represents China.

We should cherish and protect this art form while actively promoting its integration with modern technology and artistic concepts. Let the art of Peking Opera facial makeup continue to develop through inheritance and innovation, adding more brilliance to the world's treasury of art.

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