

## COLORS AND PATTERNS IN ASIAN TRADITIONAL CLOTHING

Olga SURUGIU<sup>1</sup>, Hristina CARASEVA<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Group TDCT-221, Faculty of Design, Technical University of Moldova, Chișinău, Moldova

\*Corresponding author: Liliana Prozor-Barbat, [liliana.prozor@lm.utm.md](mailto:liliana.prozor@lm.utm.md)

Coordinator: Liliana PROZOR-BARBALAT, university assistant, Department of Foreign Languages, TUM

**Abstract.** *This article reflects the particularities of certain colors, patterns and symbols, which are used to carry the cultural history of some nations. However, to each, these have either similar or different meanings. As we observed, in Asian cultures, there are five main colors which are the most important: red, yellow, black, blue, white, which are also being strongly associated with nature. There are colors that are typically associated with elements like earth, water or with the seasons. Even though it might seem like an obvious thing to perceive them similarly, there are still subtleties to each culture, especially the way these are being used. As for the pattern, it goes the same way, some figures might have some intersecting meanings, but the context might be different.*

**Keywords:** colors, patterns, symbols, nature, traditional clothing

### Introduction

Across all cultures in the world, we can observe certain colors, patterns and symbols being used to carry the cultural history of these nations. However, to each, these have either similar or different meanings. As we observed, in Asian cultures, there are five main colors which are the most important: red, yellow, black, blue, white, which are also being strongly associated with nature. There are colors that are typically associated with elements like earth, water or with the seasons [1]. Even though it might seem like an obvious thing to perceive them similarly, there are still subtleties to each culture, especially the way these are being used. As for the patterns, it goes the same way, some figures might have some intersecting meanings, but the context might be different.

### Colors and patterns in Korean traditional clothing

The fundamental structure of the traditional Korean dress, specifically jacket, trousers and skirt, was established during the Three Kingdoms of Korea (57BCE to 668 CE), and the design features have remained relatively unchanged to this day.

Besides, the color of Korean Hanbok is always associated with the philosophy of yin and yang and the five elements according to the oriental concept [2]. Koreans believe that the lower part of the outfit belongs to the yin (female) character, while the upper part belongs to the yang (male). The colors of Korean Hanbok also contain many special meanings. The colors and designs of Hanbok are often designed to highlight the elegance of the wearer. The most popular color gamut is blue, yellow, red, white and black, corresponding to the five elements according to the theory of the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth [2]. Among them, white is the most popular color because it represents the integrity and purity of the Korean people.

Nobles often wore clothes made of hemp, patterned plain silk, and other high-grade lightweight materials. As for ordinary people, due to limited conditions and laws, cotton is the best and most popular choice.

The longing for a realistic desire or association with the world through a specific object is the principle of charm for Korean patterns. Traditional patterns can be seen as incantation prints depending on whether a wish is realistic for an ideal life.

Since the Three Kingdoms Period, traditional Korean patterns were generally involved with Buddhism, in addition to Confucianism and Taoism [3]. The major patterns used in Korea are a peony in bloom, symbolizing wealth. A carp pattern symbolizes success in life, as presented in a myth.



**Figure 1. Korean female traditional clothing**



**Figure 2. Korean male traditional clothing**

### **Colors and patterns in Chinese traditional clothing**

During the different periods that a nation goes through, there occur specific changes or developments in the clothing too. Despite this fact, the traditional Chinese clothing has its unique features which make it recognizable, especially by the patterns and bright colors. In Chinese culture, different colors reflect from the style of life to the values of familial generations and thus their status. There are five main colors that influence their traditional clothing: cyan, red, black, white and yellow, however there are also used secondary colors. These five colors were mostly used by the upper class, typically bright colors so as to show the clothes status and elegance [4].

The patterns used in this culture symbolize different values and express certain types of emotions and wishes. As being mentioned before, Asian cultures have a strong bond with nature when coming to their lifestyle, therefore, commonly the patterns used in Chinese traditional clothing are animals, plants, flowers, mountains, architecture, geometrical patterns or other auspicious designs [4]. Some of the most prominent pattern designs are auspicious designs, which by meaning refer to a positive and successful future. There are four categories in which these are divided: “Fu” – rich or good harvest; “Gui” – power and prestige; “Shou” – longevity and safety; “Xi” – marriage and friendship. There is a large variety of themes being used in these designs, such as: birds, beasts, flowers, trees, fish and others [5].

Usually by using natural elements, people are trying to apply to themselves their properties like the widely used Chinese dragon which represents power and honor. An example of how status was shown is the fact that in some dynasties, the patterns of the golden dragon with five claws were only used in royal families [5].

Some other examples of symbolism in patterns is the use of pomegranates and grapes as a wish for more blessings or the use of peach and crane to suppose a long life [5].



**Figure 3. Chinese female traditional clothing**



**Figure 4. Chinese male traditional clothing**

### **Colors and patterns in Japanese traditional clothing**

Just like in Chinese and Korean cultures, in Japanese culture different kinds of patterns carry auspicious meanings and wishes for happiness. These can be found on kimonos in different styles with different meanings. The patterns in this culture usually represent geometric shapes. An example mostly recognized is Seigaiha, which consists of overlapping concentric circles. This pattern suggests peacefulness, strength and fortune. It first appeared in Japan in the 6th century, but before this it used to represent oceans and seas on old maps [6, 7].

Another pattern often used is the "Asa No Ha", which is influenced by hemp leaves. This pattern is a symbol of strength and vitality in Japanese culture. Consequently, it is often used on children's clothes believing that this will help them to develop healthy qualities as the plant [6, 7].

The Shippo pattern refers to harmony and its name originates from Buddhism "seven treasures", which combined with its circular shape symbolizes harmony [7].

Another pattern often met in Japanese culture is the Uroko pattern, which is formed from triangles of different colors. These geometric figures resemble scales of dragons, snakes or fish, just like the name Uroko means scale in Japanese. It is believed that this pattern protects you and brings good luck [6, 7].

In Japanese culture, colors just like patterns carry a specific meaning. For example, white symbolizes purity, divinity and truth. The color black is associated with formality, elegance, evil, fear, unhappiness. Red represents authority, strength, sacrifice, happiness. In Japanese culture, red is considered an auspicious color, moreover when used together with the white. Blue refers to the sky or the sea and its meaning includes dignity, calmness and stability [8].

A color that symbolizes a new beginning in Japan is green, which represents the nature and good luck. Just like green, pink also means a new beginning. This color is especially representative for Japan because it symbolizes the sakura flowers, which suggest youth, the cycle of life and spring [8].



**Figure 5. Japanese female traditional clothing**



**Figure 6. Japanese male traditional clothing**

### **Conclusions**

To conclude, it is proved that clothing and culture often go hand in hand. National dresses show the level of civilization, aesthetic tastes, spiritual life and customs of each country. From the design to the color and pattern, clothes serve as symbols of social or marital status, or signify an important occasion. The color and pattern in the national costume have a deep symbolic meaning. They reflect human emotions and the soul of the people. Every color and every pattern has its own meaning and used in different cases.

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