

A Study on the Colour Elements and Symbols of Foshan Awakening Lion Head

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the colour symbolism of the Foshan awakening lion head, a key element of Foshan's cultural heritage and the lion dance. The lion head's colours are closely tied to the region's history, culture, and community beliefs. The study examines various colours and their meanings, exploring how they contribute to the lion head's visual and symbolic impact. Using qualitative methods, including literature reviews, artisan interviews, and field observations, the research looks at traditional and evolving colour schemes in Foshan Awakening Lion Heads. The findings show that each colour and pattern holds specific cultural significance, symbolising values like auspiciousness and prosperity. The paper stresses the importance of preserving these colour symbols to maintain the cultural identity of the Foshan lion dance, while also recognising the need for respectful evolution in response to contemporary tastes.

Keywords: *Foshan Awakening Lion Head, Colour Element, Colour Symbol*

INTRODUCTION

Foshan Lion Dance, a representative of the Southern Lion, has captivated audiences both domestically and internationally with its unique visual art form and rich cultural connotations. Since 2006, eight Guangdong lion dances have been officially listed as China's intangible cultural heritage, including Foshan Awakening Lion Dance, Suixi Awakening Lion Dance, and Guangzhou Awakening Lion Dance. The Foshan Awakening Lion Head, integral to Foshan Lion Dance, carries the historical and cultural heritage of Guangdong's Foshan region. Lion head making and lion dance activities are interdependent,

with both listed as intangible heritage. In 2008, the Foshan Awakening Lion Head was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list for traditional arts.

This article focuses on the colour elements and symbols of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head mask. The study aims to explore these colour elements, understand their composition and characteristics, and reveal their deeper cultural meanings. By examining the colours used in six traditional lion head roles, this research enhances the understanding of traditional culture enthusiasts, designers, and cultural workers regarding the symbolic significance and artistic language of this traditional art. It also provides valuable data for studying the craftsmanship of Foshan Lion Dance culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The lion dance popular in the Pearl River Delta region of Guangdong, known as the “Southern Lion”, is a unique form of Chinese lion dance deeply rooted in the spiritual soil of Cantonese culture. Social customs greatly influence regional artistic styles. Zhang and Geng (2008) note in their work “Chinese Art Folklore” that lion dance is a significant element in exploring Cantonese culture. They focus on the historical development and current status of Cantonese culture, highlighting the lion dance as an important branch of it and emphasising its historical and present status.

Gong (1999) specifically emphasised the lion dance in his exploration of Cantonese culture. He studied the history and current situation of Cantonese culture, clearly stating that lion dance is an important subculture within it. Similarly, Zhang and Li (2023) pointed out that lion dance, as a representative cultural symbol of the Cantonese region, possesses its unique cultural connotations and symbolic features. They note that lion dance in Cantonese culture carries multiple functions and serves as an important vessel for cultural inheritance. Through the spread and participation in lion dance activities, Cantonese culture continues to thrive, acting also as a bridge for cultural exchange, showcasing Cantonese and even Chinese cultural characteristics to the world.

Foshan, situated in the Cantonese-speaking region, is the birthplace of the lion dance. This study examines the colour craftsmanship of Foshan lion heads. Yu (2015), a Foshan folklore expert, detailed the origins and rise of the Foshan lion dance, highlighting its significance in celebrating prosperity and embodying the Guangdong people's belief in traditional Chinese culture. This study focuses on the Foshan lion dance, lion masks, and colour symbols, emphasising the connection between colour elements, cultural beliefs, and regional customs.

Although lion head masks are significant in art and cultural studies, research on their colour symbols is sparse. Most studies only describe the basic shapes or colours. Li (2017) linked the colours of Foshan Awakening Lion Heads to Cantonese opera makeup, describing Liu Bei's lion as primarily white with yellow and pink accents. However, this contrasts with Zeng-(2017) who noted Liu Bei's lion is mainly yellow, symbolising imperial status. Xie (2023) described it as “yellow-faced with a white beard”. Yin (2018) listed colours as “white, yellow, pink, and liver”, but the images differed. Research often overlooks initial data collection, and challenges in lion head making include material scarcity and fragmented data.

In the preceding research, the researcher conducted a detailed analysis of the visual elements of Suixi region, with a particular focus on the selection and proportion of colours (Zhan, S., & Wan, J.). The basis for this comparison was also determined by the colour choices of Foshan Lion Head, which is the primary subject of this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative research methods, as outlined in the following process (Figure 1).

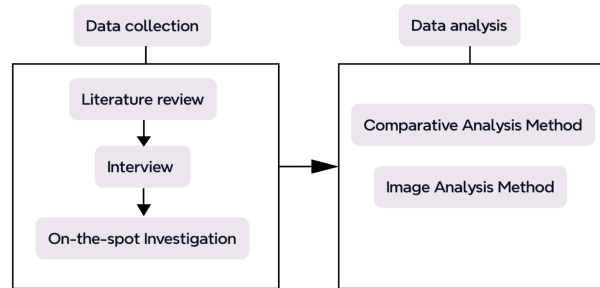


Figure 1. Research methodology framework diagram
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

After focusing the research on the colour symbols of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head, the first step is data collection, including literature reviews, interviews, and field investigations. The goal is to identify the specific colour elements in the Foshan lion mask. An initial analysis of documentary materials provides background information and direction for further data collection. Next, interviews with artisans skilled in making the Foshan Awakening Lion Head masks are conducted. These interviews and field investigations are performed concurrently to ensure comprehensive data collection. Interviews were planned with eight practitioners in the Foshan area, and contacts were established through official websites and museums. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, and some interviewees were anonymised using letters A to H. Main observation locations include workshops of various inheritors, intangible cultural heritage workstations, exhibitions, and museums, such as the Foshan Ancestral Temple, Wong Feihong Culture Museum, Wong Feihong Memorial Hall, Li Wanzhen’s Workshop, and the Foshan De Sheng Musical Instrument Craft Factory. Finally, a comparative analysis of data from literature reviews, interviews, field investigations, and images will help define the colours of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head and understand their cultural meanings and connotations.

FINDINGS

The researcher utilised Nvivo analysis software to create a detailed information table of the colour elements of the awakening lion heads in the Foshan area (Table 1). This comprehensive appendix table clearly displays the colour elements of the lion heads in the Foshan region, achieving the objective of “identifying the specific colour elements”.

Table 1. Keyword List of Foshan Awakening Lion Head Colour Elements

Traditional	Icon	Yellow: golden, Red: Fire, Black: dark night, Green/Cyan: nature in general
	Index	Yellow: treasure, Red: Angry, Black: visual information, Green/Cyan: Green plant
	Symbol	Yellow: Rich/Power/King, Red: good fortune/prosperity, Black: Brave/Power, Green/Cyan: Undefeated, Blue: Funeral/Sadness

Modern	Icon	Yellow: golden, Red: Fire, Black: dark night, Green/Cyan: nature in general, Blue: sea, White: Snow, Pink: Cute/Soft/Romantic, Fluorescent colour: Shine	
	Index	Yellow: Sun/Sunshine/Gold, Red: Hot, Black: ban sign, Green/Cyan: fresh things, Blue: good weather, White: Clean, Pink: Shyness/blushing, Fluorescent colour: bright light	
	Symbol	Yellow: Happiness/Hope/Money, Red: Good fortune/prosperity, Black: Misfortune/Bad luck, Green/Cyan: health/Jealousy, Blue: Honourable, White: Pure/Tidy/Death, Pink: Female/feminization, Fluorescent colour: Cool and dazzling	
Attributes	Innovation should carry auspicious meanings		Develop direction
Relationship	According to customer’s preferences or requests		Develop direction
	Customer don’t pay much attention		Develop direction

As shown in the table above, the colour visual elements of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head mask are complex. The colour elements listed in the table are derived from a combination of data from literature, interviews, and field observations. In this step, the author refers to this information as visual elements rather than visual symbols, because visual elements refer to the “visual reflection of the observed object”, which does not involve the audience’s attitude, interpretation, or the deeper cultural connotations. The author needs to conduct a detailed comparative analysis of the aforementioned colour visual elements to achieve the research objective of investigating the cultural meanings conveyed by the colour visual symbols corresponding to the lion head mask’s colour visual elements”.

“Tying, pasting, writing, and embellishing” are the four major steps in the handcrafting of lion heads. “writing” here can also be understood as drawing. The patterns drawn on the lion head masks are composed of various colours. Compared to modern lion heads, the colour selection for traditional lion heads follows more specific rules. These choices are not only for aesthetic purposes but also carry much of the traditional culture and the artisans’ understanding of their craft. The main characters of the traditional Foshan lion masks are the Liu Bei Lion, Guan Gong Lion, Zhang Fei Lion, Zhao Yun Lion, Ma Chao Lion, and Huang Zhong Lion. Each character has its own thematic colour, each with its own significance. There is a strong correlation between the colour scheme of these lion masks and the facial masks used in drama. The colours of the lion masks are also imbued with emotions and characteristics by the creators.

Liu Bei Lion’s Colour Scheme

The Liu Bei lion mask is uniquely characterised by a yellow base adorned with a multicoloured pattern, symbolising the gathering of five fortunes and the five directions: east, west, south, north, and centre (Figure 2). According to the inheritors, this multicoloured pattern reflects not only five colours but many, incorporating even fluorescent colours. In the ancient Chinese Yin Yang and Five Elements theory, the universe is composed of metal, wood, water, fire, and earth, corresponding to the colours white, green, black, red, and yellow. However, the colours of Liu Bei lion masks go beyond these traditional elements. Innovations in the colours should be seen as craftsmen’s personal insights evolving with customer preferences and cultural changes.

The main hue of the Liu Bei Lion is golden yellow, symbolising land, territory, and the emperor, who was historically associated with this colour (Wang, 2007). Golden yellow and yellow-orange lion

masks resonate with Chinese associations of wealth and prosperity. In “Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, Liu Bei, depicted as the Yellow Emperor, symbolises wealth, honour, and power. Liu Bei as a benevolent and strategic ruler, aligning with this portrayal. Guan (2023) defines Liu Bei's image more precisely, suggesting that during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Liu Bei embodied the political ideal of “reviving the Han dynasty”. This theory aligns with the notion that the lion dance symbolised the political ideal of “overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming”, making the Liu Bei Lion a symbol of national revival.



Figure 2. Foshan Liu Bei Lion Head and Colour
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

Huang Zhong Lion’s Colour Scheme

The Huang Zhong Lion, symbolising loyalty, predominantly features the colour yellow. As mentioned earlier, Huang Zhong is a respected veteran general, so in the traditional image of the Huang Zhong Lion, it should have a visual image with a yellow base, black eyes, white eyebrows, and a white beard.

Although both Liu Bei Lion and Huang Zhong Lion share a yellow colour scheme, there are differences in the types and proportions of yellow used. As shown in Figure3, the yellow used in the Huang Zhong Lion is primarily a medium yellow, visually different from the golden yellow used in the Liu Bei Lion. Lemon yellow, bright yellow, and golden yellow are lighter and clearer yellows, with a high level of brightness and saturation. Because of their high brightness, they are often used in eye-catching designs, suitable for the design of Liu Bei Lion, who is the emperor. Medium yellow is a deeper, richer yellow with an orange tone, giving a more stable feeling, making it particularly suitable for the design of Huang Zhong Lion. To demonstrate the characteristic of Huang Zhong as an “old general”, white fur is used for the hair and beard decoration.



Figure 3. Foshan Huang Zhong Lion Head and Colour
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

According to Interviewee C, based on his colouring experience, the colour design scheme of the Huang Zhong Lion's head has a colour proportion of approximately 60% yellow, 30% white, and 10% other colours (mainly black, with a touch of red for embellishment). However, in artistic creation, this is not the only standard, and artisans can create based on their understanding of the character.

Guan Gong Lion's Colour Scheme

Guan Gong, also known as the "Martial God of Wealth", is noted for both his bravery and accounting skills. The "Shenxian Tongjian" records that Guan Gong attracts exam luck, wealth, and merchant protection. Ren (2010) mentions that 23 industries regard him as their patron deity, symbolising successful business and fulfilment of wishes. This title explains the red face of Guan Gong. The Guan Gong Lion's primary design features a red base with black patterns, inspired by Beijing Opera masks and used in Cantonese opera. In "Romance of the Three Kingdoms", Guan Gong is described with a red face, symbolising loyalty and valour. Figure 4 shows the lion's design with dark and bright red, paired with black fur, aligning with theatrical makeup. Artisans use turquoise on the nose to represent anger, similar to the Zhang Fei Lion. Red in the Guan Gong Lion symbolises loyalty, valour, and financial prosperity. The lion is often used in store opening performances, symbolising good luck and business success.



Figure 4. Foshan Guan Gong Lion Head and Colour
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

Colour Schemes of Zhang Fei Lion and Zhao Yun Lion

Xu (2021) conducted an analysis on the "signified" meanings of the colours in Chinese opera facial masks, positing that these hues symbolise the character's personality. The audience can discern the character's traits through these colours: red signifies a man of loyalty, valour, and justice with robust vitality; black denotes an individual characterised by bravery and sincerity, albeit with a touch of impulsiveness; while green represents a person with a tempestuous and coarse disposition.

Although Zhang Fei Lion and Zhao Yun Lion both belong to the warrior category, these two characters do not have the same personality. However, in the colour spectrum of lion dance heads, both of them use a combination of black and green. The traditional opera shows the character design of Zhang Fei, whose colour only has black and white. The eyes are depicted with large blocks of black, with the corners of the eyes lifted, creating a sense of valour. The black part of the mouth is connected to the beard, showing his momentum as a general. This colour combination accurately expresses Zhang Fei's brave, sincere and reckless character traits. In the design of the Zhang Fei lion head (Figure 5), the green nose emphasises his "hot-tempered, rude" personality flaw. It's evident that the artisans have a deep artistic understanding of the character of Zhang Fei.

Figure 5 shows the colour combination of Zhang Fei's lion head. In the colour scheme of the lion head, the colour of Zhang Fei is not limited to black and white, and the proportion of green is also

significant, forming a rich pattern decoration with black and white. In the colour combination, the creators also added grey as a finishing touch. It is said that the grey part occasionally uses silver because it will shine when it moves, making the stage effect better.



Figure 5. Foshan Zhang Fei Lion Head and Colours
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

Interestingly, the colours used by the Zhao Yun Lion and the Zhang Fei Lion are the same. However, the proportion of colours used is different. Figure 6 shows the colour of Zhao Yun Lion's head, where the proportion of green is more significant. Zhang Fei Lion is mainly black and white, with green as embellishment; Zhao Yun Lion is mainly black and green, with white as decoration.



Figure 6. Foshan Zhao Yun Lion Head and Colours
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

In Beijing Opera, Zhao Yun is portrayed as a likeable character. Zhao Yun's bravery and righteousness are shown through his costume and movements, without using bright colour blocks. Notably, Zhao Yun's costume lacks green elements, featuring blue instead. Interviewee A explained that Zhao Yun, known as the invincible general in "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms", is metaphorically described as "evergreen" in Chinese culture, symbolising perpetual victory. The Zhao Yun Lion, with its green colour, reflects the lion head maker's interpretation of Zhao Yun's noble image. Despite differing from the Beijing Opera costume, this artistic choice effectively conveys his character as the invincible general.

Ma Chao Lion's Colour Scheme

Ma Chao is also a brave and good warrior, but he carries a tragic hue. He was a prominent general born in a famous family during the Three Kingdoms period. However, his father and younger brother were beheaded by Cao Cao on the grounds of conspiracy, which killed more than 300 people in their family. Ma Chao vowed to avenge his family and tried to kill Cao Cao, but ultimately did not succeed. He

later joined Liu Bei's camp but was not trusted, and he died in depression. (Tang, 2023). His costume in the Beijing Opera is mainly white and blue, and his character is still shaped to be brave and valiant.

China News Network published a news story in July 2013 titled "Funeral of Liu Jialiang, a Generation of Hong Fist Master and Famous Kung Fu Director". According to the news footage, three filial piety lions and nine plain lions performed a mourning performance on their knees at the funeral ceremony that day. The filial piety lions sometimes wailed and sometimes knelt down, making the atmosphere on the scene sad and solemn. After the ceremony, the three filial piety lions were burned in front of the spirit position (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Screenshot of the video at the funeral of Hong Fist Master Liu Jialiang
(Source: bilibili.com, 2023)

Ma Chao Lion is known as the "Filial Piety Lion". The whole lion is white, occasionally adorned with blue, looks haggard, and its dance steps are sad, with a slow drumbeat. Since the "Filial Piety Lion" generally only appears at the funeral of highly respected people, it is also called the "Funeral Lion". The props of the filial piety lion will be burned after the ceremony, so traditional Ma Chao lion heads are not common. The Ma Chao lion shown in Figure 8 has some differences from the traditional "Filial Piety Lion". Different lion head makers have different understandings of this. Interviewee C believes that the Ma Chao lion, which combines blue and white, represents funerals. Traditional lion heads basically do not use blue, because blue is not an auspicious colour. Interviewee B, on the other hand, believes that today's lion dance is a mascot, so whether it uses blue or not, it can still represent auspiciousness. Interviewee H remained neutral on this point, because innovative lion head masks can be designed according to the customer's preferences, but completely deviating from traditional practices would indeed lead to cultural misunderstandings.



Figure 8. Foshan Ma Chao Lion Head and Colours
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

The Ma Chao lion that appeared in the funeral ceremony in Figure 8 is mainly white, with black and blue as auxiliary colours for embellishment. The Ma Chao lion in Figure 9 uses a large area of blue, with white and black as auxiliary colours, and some patterns are drawn with orange to dilute the meaning of "mourning". This design is more aligned with Interviewee B's statement. The meaning symbolised by

colour in the visual elements of the lion head is the most complex. Factors such as region, experience, and crowd will change its meaning. Therefore, there is a dispute over the use of blue in the lion head.

CONCLUSION

Foshan, the birthplace of lion dance culture, makes analysing the colour symbols in its lion heads essential. Each visual symbol on the Foshan Awakening Lion Head reflects local culture and concepts, with every colour and arrangement holding symbolic meaning. These colour symbols not only enhance the mask's aesthetics but also convey its symbolic spirit and the unique lion head culture to the public.



Figure 9. Factors Influencing the Formation of Visual Symbols in Foshan Awakening Lion Heads
(Source: Zhan, 2023)

Figure 9 displays an analysis diagram of the factors influencing the formation of visual symbols in Foshan Awakening Lion Heads. Through analysis and sorting, it can be determined that the factors listed in the diagram impact the visual elements of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head. The parts marked in green represent more open factors, indicating that the content in this section changes over time, audience preferences, and the creators' conceptualization. The light grey sections represent unmodifiable factors, which are the cultural core of the Foshan Awakening Lion Head. Any alteration to these core values of representative significance could lead to the culture facing issues of lost identity and meaning. However, even though factors like "visual effect" or "auspicious wishes" can be changed, these changes should not be revolutionary. They need to adhere to a certain internal logic and evolve gradually. Only in this way can the traditional culture embodied by the Foshan Awakening Lion Head be well-preserved and its developmental vitality maintained.

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