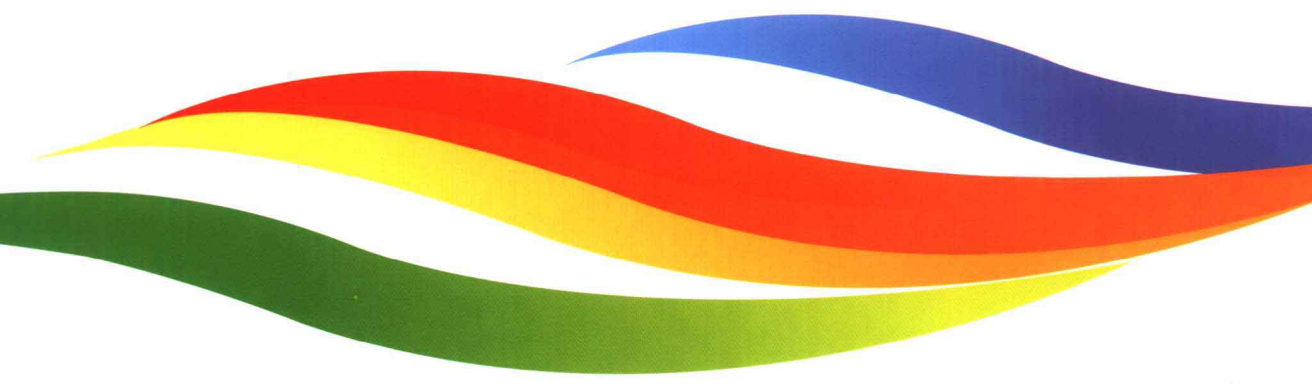




COLORFUL CHINA



CHINA
INTERCONTINENTAL
PRESS



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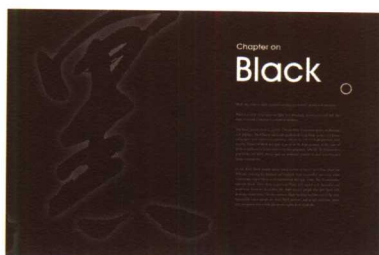
Written by Liang Minling

Translated by Liu Bingwen & Pan Zhongming

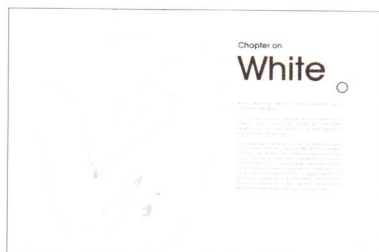
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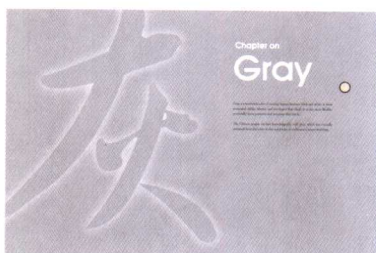
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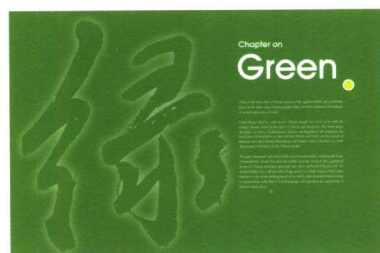
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A Colorful World

The world becomes lively because it is decorated with a myriad of colors. In either the countryside of blossoms amid lush green vegetation of nature or cities with metropolis buildings of attractive styles and forms, we are always surrounded by a world of colors.

According to scientists, colors are merely impacts of light of varying waves on the human visual nerves. But to mankind, colors are not just physical phenomena. They are means of emotional expressions, for they convey values, ideas and aspirations. In the long human history, colors have attained profound cultural connotations that transcend their natural attributes.

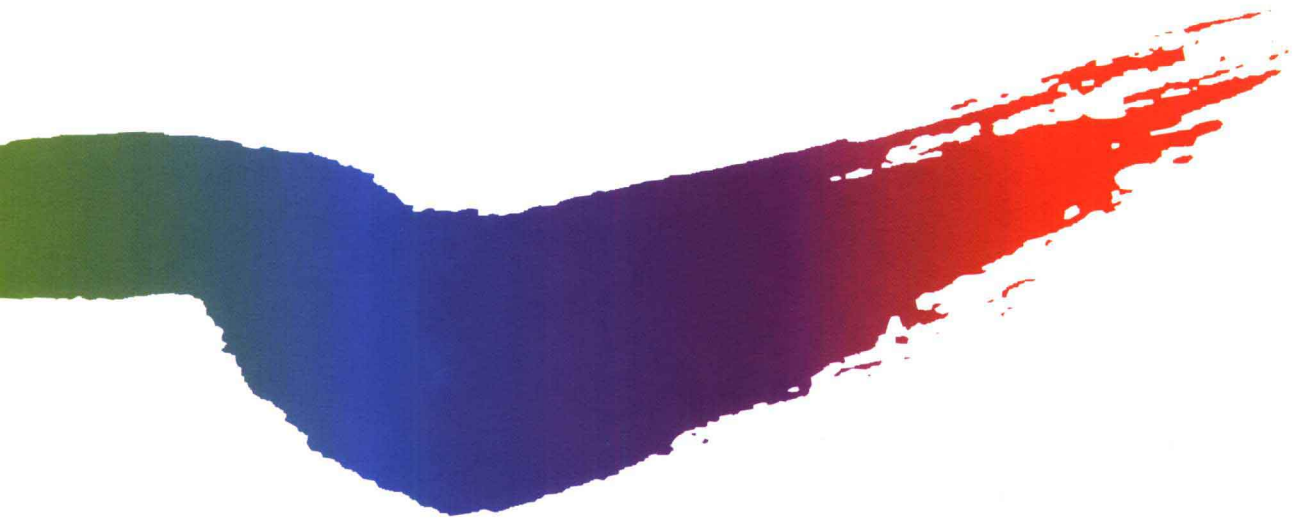
A sage once said: "Color is a kind of language of the most popular nature among all artistic tools." Color originates in nature, appears in daily life and finds its expression in history. A particular color therefore may become the favorite of one nation, a symbol of a country, the keynote of a culture.



The Chinese are a nation good at using colors. All colors in the great nature may lend tremendous inspirations to the Chinese, whether it is the golden yellow ears of grain crops on the vast Chinese hinterland, the white snow of northern China, the green mountains and rivers of southern China. In the traditional Chinese culture, and its art in particular, colors may present themselves in dazzling brilliance of numberless hues or in sober quietness of black, white and varying grays in between; in the majesty of the imperial palaces that hold commoners in awe or in the blue of indigo print garments of rustic folks; in paintings and embroidery of bright tints or in the purity of white porcelain and translucent jade...

And colors have instilled vigor and vitality into the daily life of the Chinese common people. The people of Han nationality in the villages in the Yellow River valley like to paste brightly red scrolls and New-Year pictures on their doors and walls during the Spring Festival. Young ladies of Miao hamlets in the mountainous Southwest China add to the festivity of their national holidays with their national costumes of cloth woven with yarns of black, white, yellow, blue, purple, red and orange colors. On the vast Inner Mongolia grasslands, the herdsmen love to dress in red robes against the backdrop of green grasslands and azure sky with floating puffs of white clouds. At the foot of the snow-capped peaks, Tibetans prefer to have their outer walls plastered in pure white and honor their guests with white silk ceremonial scarves which they call "hata."

Colors in their numerous manifestations are in correspondence to different facets of people's lives. Red, for example, reminds people of festivity and auspice among the Chinese people whereas the color of white sometimes means bad omen in the Han culture. Even colors like bright yellow, deep purple and transparent blue were the monopoly of certain social strata at certain periods of time in Chinese history and those colors with their original attributes lost for long today remain to arouse associations in people's minds.



The richness of colors serves as a deposit of the sentiments and wisdom of the Chinese people and meanwhile it carries the unique cultural memories of the Chinese. It has the function of a key to a special door of the Chinese mind and it is capable of ushering outsiders to savoring the flavors of colorful China.

Chapter on

Black



Black, the color of night, represents mystery, profundity, gravity and solemnity.

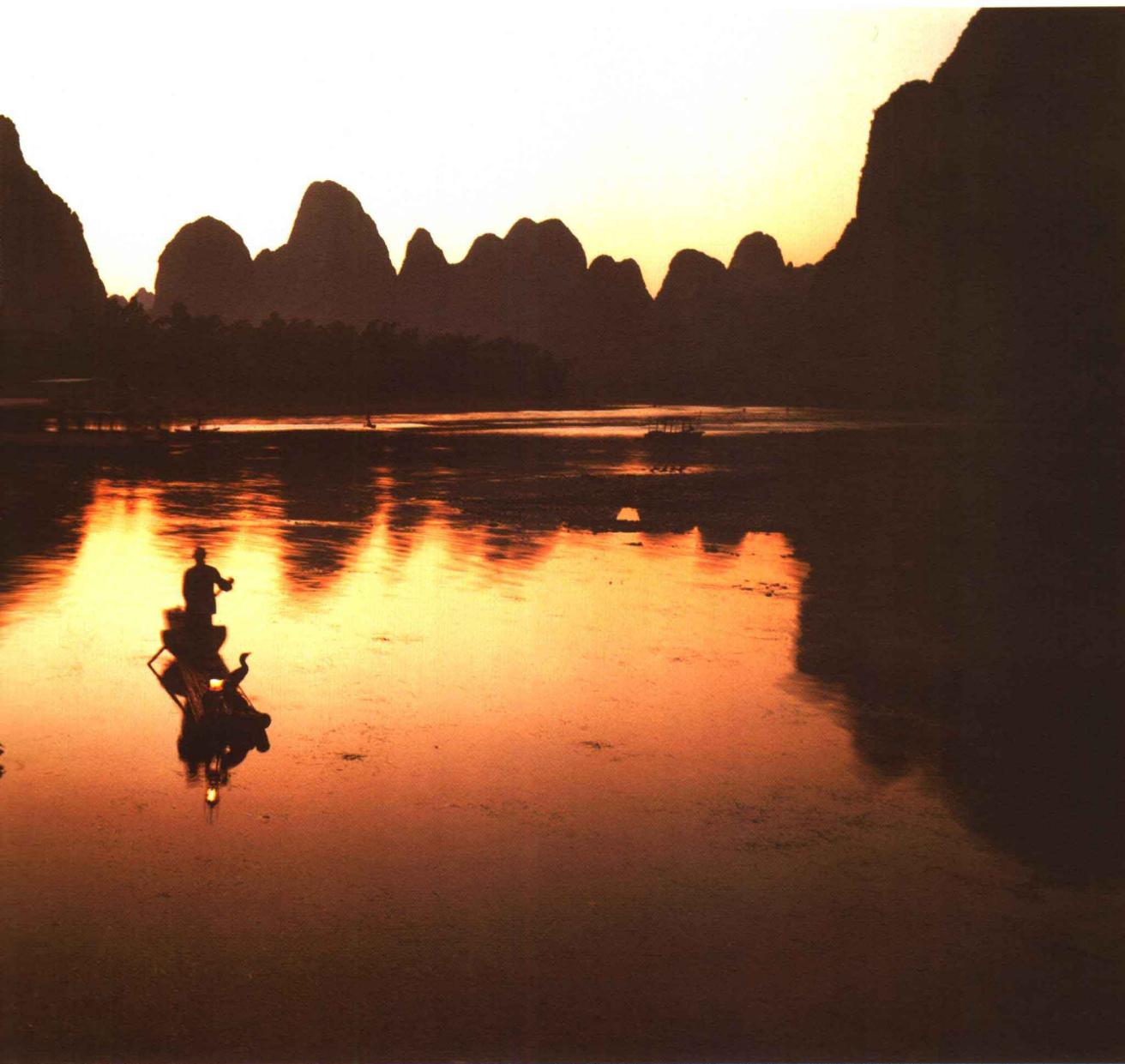
Black is a color of no color, no light. It is seemingly monotonous and dull. Yet, there is no lack of interest in a world of darkness.

The black pottery fired in ancient Chinese kilns is literally jewels of plainness and elegance. The Chinese ink-brush produces flowing black strokes of Chinese calligraphy and traditional paintings that bring out vivid perspectives with varying degrees of black and gray, a proof of the high position of the color of black in traditional Chinese culture. In their pragmatic daily life, the Chinese love gray bricks and black tiles to spell out profound symbols in their time-honored house construction.

In the West, black usually means grief, sorrow or terror. In China, black has different meaning for different nationalities. Han nationality and some other nationalities regard black as an inauspicious and ugly omen. But Yi nationality upholds black. They show respects to black and regard it as beautiful and auspicious. However, in modern life, there are few people who link black with anything inauspicious. On the contrary, black has even become one of the most fashionable colors people are after. Black garment accessories, furniture, sedan cars, computers and mobile phones are a great favor of people.



Lijiang River in Guilin, The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. After night falls, everything is vested in black.





The crescent-shaped black earth belt that stretches in the basins of Songhua River and Liaohe River in Northeast China covers a total area of about 1 million square meters. It is the most fertile and arable land in China. Under the frigid weather in the area, the dead vegetation, after long time decay, finally evolves into a layer of black earth with an average thickness of 30 to 100 cm. Local people often refer its fertility as that “50 grams of black earth can produce 100 grams of edible oil.”

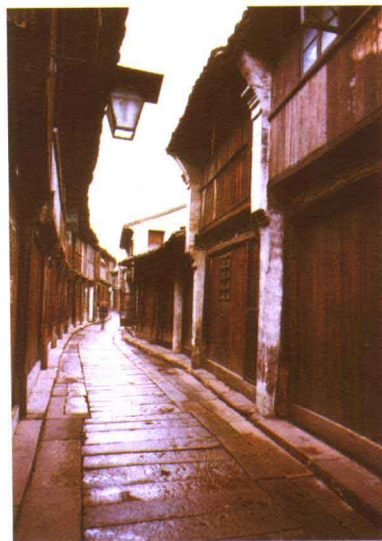
This piece of black land is one of the three black earths in the world. (The other two are scattered at the Ukraine plain and the Mississippi River basin in North America.) For many years, the area is the largest grain production base in China, hence the name of “Great Northern Granary”.



Wuzhen Town at the northern part of Tongxiang in Zhejiang Province has a history of more than 1,300 years. It is said that because local residents paint a layer of black paint on their walls and black is called “Wu” in the local dialect, the town thus gets the name “Wuzhen”.

Upon arriving at Wuzhen, you may discover that this ancient town has really closely connected with black. Looking up, all the roofs are in black. Walking on the narrow and deep streets with stone steps, the wooden walls, doors and windows of the houses along both sides are all in black. On the small river that traverses through the town, small boats with a black cover pass by slowly. The black cover of the boat is a great match to the black tiles on the roof of house on the banks. The water reflects the inverted image of old wooden house on the bank...

The basic color of black has made the town quiet as if time had been halted for several hundred years. The simple and unhurried Wuzhen has a special flavor of the water town in the south of the Yangtze River as if it were a poem and a dream.



Archaeological finds of ancient pottery shards indicated that ancient Chinese began making pottery some ten thousand years ago, which should be in the early Neolithic Age. By late Neolithic Age some 4,000 years ago, after the decline of red pottery, gray pottery and colored pottery, the art of black pottery sprang up.

Black pottery was characterized by its simplicity in designing and decoration, entirely without decoration or with very little decoration of simple lines or incised holes. The entire body of a black potter is shinningly black. The simplicity of the black pottery articles conveys a profundity through plainness with a powerful artistic impact to the viewer.

With the onset of the Bronze Age, black pottery gradually resigned from the arena of history. However, the art of Chinese black pottery has led people of the succeeding centuries infinitely to marvel at and sing high praise from the bottom of their hearts. People call the art of black pottery “an art of blending earth and fire, integration of strength and beauty”.



The black pottery pot unearthed at the Hemudu Culture Relics dating back about 7,000 years ago



The black pottery high-handle cup unearthed at the Longshan Culture Relics dating back about 4,000 years ago. As this kind of black pottery is bright and as thin as eggshell, it is called “eggshell pottery”.



The black writing ink we use today is mostly in liquid form, but in the old time writing ink was in the shape of rectangular or round sticks which produces black writing ink after being rubbed on ink stone with water.

The black writing ink used in Chinese calligraphy should occupy the highest position among all things black in the Chinese history, especially in Chinese culture. For thousands of years, the Chinese used ink brush with black ink to write and paint. Ancient Chinese scholars deemed the black ink stick as one of the four treasures in the study (the other three are the writing brush, ink grinding stone and paper).

The black writing ink must be coupled with the ink brush to produce works of calligraphic art. Manipulating the ink brush with black ink liquid absorbed by the brush tip may produce prized works of calligraphy, which through the centuries has become a unique art. And calligraphy remains a branch of art in China today, an art that boasts the greatest number of professionals and amateurs among all artistic forms in this country.

The characters of the Chinese written language are entirely different from the letters and words of the written languages of the Western world in their structures. The Chinese characters which number tens of thousands differ from one another in structure and the Chinese calligraphic art encompasses strokes of varying shapes and degrees of strength, the varying shapes of the characters, the combinations of the characters of strokes of different thicknesses and different sizes of characters in each column or row and the harmonious formations of the columns or rows and the composition of the characters in a whole page.

Accomplished calligraphers all strive to achieve the highest degree of artistic beauty and artistic styles of their own in each stroke of a character, each character in a column and each column in a page and the composition of a whole page or sheet. The Chinese calligraphic art falls into different schools and styles, being elegant and refined, or vigorous and untrammled, or spontaneous and flowing, or elaborate and delicate.

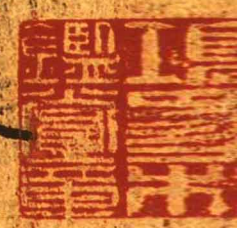
永和九年歲在癸丑暮春之初會

于會稽山陰之蘭亭脩禊事

也羣賢畢至少長咸集此地

崇山峻嶺茂林脩竹又有清流激

湍映帶左右引以為流觴曲水



The water-ink painting is a branch of the traditional Chinese painting. It is done entirely with the black ink, but executed in the full spectrum of blackness ranging from very black to varying degrees of gray. It is known generally that this style of black ink painting first appeared in the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and artists of this school hold that “the black is color and the black ink produces a multitude of colors.” The mastery of the full spectrum of blackness enables the artist to bring out objects on the paper in dimensions and perspective, the shades of light, and the qualitative differences of the material of the objects. That is why traditional Chinese painters believe in the saying that “blackness without colors is more expressive than colors.”

Although painters occasionally apply very light colors to their water-ink paintings, black color still dominates the works. The magic variations of black hues and symbolic approaches of the water-ink paintings are capable of bringing out the charm and flavor of the artistic works which ancient Chinese scholars described as “the charm of the ink.” Wang Wei (701–761), the famous poet and painter of the Tang Dynasty, was the first to point out that “the water and ink constitute the highest of paintings.” In the succeeding centuries, the form of water-ink paintings has remained the favorite of Chinese scholars who believe that this form of art has rendered the spontaneity of Nature in artistic creation. In their eyes, the blackness of Chinese writing ink on the white paper suffices to depict everything in the universe. To them, “the beauty of simplicity is supreme and peerless.”



Mountains in Lanrong painted by Dong Qichang (1555–1636)



Prawns painted by Qi Baishi (1864–1957)



Special patterns sketched on the face of opera figures with certain colors are called “Opera mask” in China. The Peking Opera has more than 1,000 kinds of masks. It can be divided into red, purple, white, yellow, black, blue and green according to the main color of the face. Different colors with different connotations are painted in different patterns to symbolize different identities and characteristics of the roles.

Black facial mask is generally used for a character with moral integrity, honesty and bravery. Among the facial masks of Peking Opera, the most famous black face figure is Bao Zheng. Bao was a real person in Chinese history. He lived in the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). As an official, he was never afraid of power and position. He upheld justice and was impartial and incorruptible. He was honored as “Upright Official Bao” by Chinese people.