

Color Symbolism in Thai Culture and Its Influence on Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: This study investigates the role of color symbolism in Thai culture and its implications for intercultural communication. Despite the growing significance of cross-cultural encounters in Thailand, color as a specific nonverbal communication channel has received insufficient systematic attention, particularly within Southeast Asian contexts. This study addresses this gap through a systematic literature review combined with interpretive cultural analysis, drawing on theories of semiotics, nonverbal communication, and cultural dimensions. The findings reveal that key colors in Thailand, namely yellow, white, black, red, and purple, carry layered meanings derived from Buddhist tradition, royal symbolism, and political history. These meanings function as encoded social messages that Thai people expect others to understand implicitly, leading to cultural noise and misunderstandings when foreign nationals fail to interpret them correctly. Case analyses in tourism, business, and national mourning contexts illustrate the practical consequences of color-related miscommunication. The study argues that color literacy should be integrated as a teachable dimension of intercultural competence and provides a structured model for understanding how visual symbols shape social expectations in Thailand. These findings have implications for intercultural training programs, educational institutions, and multinational organizations operating in Thai contexts.

Keywords: Color Symbolism; Thai Culture; Intercultural Communication; Nonverbal Communication; Color Literacy

INTRODUCTION

In today's era of globalization and increasing international migration, the production and distribution of cultural knowledge are crucial for effective human interaction (Liu, 2026). One aspect of culture that can influence human interaction is color, as it is one of the most fundamental categories in human cognition (Lin, 2019). Western scholars have long studied the physiological and psychological effects of color on human perception, including those that can occur during interactions (Elliot & Maier, 2014). However, color also carries deeper cultural meanings that extend beyond mere decoration. These meanings often represent important values related to religion, government, mourning, celebration, and social cohesion. In intercultural communication contexts such as tourism, business, diplomacy, and education, a failure to understand color symbolism can lead to misunderstandings and impact the success of cross-cultural interactions (Samovar et al.,

2021).

Thailand is a prime example of how color symbolism plays a role in intercultural communication. As one of the most visited countries in Southeast Asia and a growing regional hub for international education, Thailand regularly welcomes people from diverse cultural backgrounds who bring with them different symbolic understandings and interpretations, including those related to color (Pongsin et al., 2023). At the same time, Thai society maintains rich internal color symbolism embedded in everyday life, including colors associated with birthdays and Buddhist beliefs, which influence dress practices and cultural identity (So & Kim, 2014). Differences in color interpretation between Thai society and other cultures can influence how individuals understand social symbols, express respect, and construct communication in cross-cultural interactions. Therefore, understanding color symbolism in Thai culture is crucial to supporting effective intercultural communication and reducing the potential for cultural misunderstandings (Aslam, 2006).

Academic literature on intercultural communication has expanded rapidly in recent decades, with researchers paying increasing attention to nonverbal communication dimensions such as gestures, proxemics, silence, and visual symbols (Patterson et al., 2021). However, color as a specific nonverbal channel has not yet received adequate, systematic attention, particularly within the context of Southeast Asian cultures (Hirtescu, 2024). Existing studies addressing Thai color symbolism tend to be ethnographic and embedded within broader discussions of religious practices or royal culture, rather than being oriented toward its communicative implications in intercultural encounters (Thananithichot, 2021). This oversight often leaves international practitioners without actionable frameworks to decode the subtle visual cues embedded in daily Thai interactions. Consequently, this gap constitutes a significant lacuna in the literature, especially given the rapid intensification of cross-cultural contacts in the era of globalization.

This paper aims to fill this gap by conducting a focused, theoretically grounded analysis of Thai color symbolism and its implications for intercultural communication. The objectives of this research are threefold. First, it seeks to map the symbolic meanings inherent in key colors within Thai cultural, religious, royal, and political life. Second, it analyzes how these meanings function as a nonverbal communication system that can be, and often is, misinterpreted by non-Thai individuals (Huang, 2023). Third, it draws implications for developing color literacy as a dimension of intercultural competence (Urgun et al., 2025). By unpacking these layers, the study provides a structured model for understanding how visual stimuli dictate social behaviors and expectations in Thailand. By pursuing these objectives, this paper argues that the visual-symbolic dimension of culture warrants more serious attention in both academic research and applied intercultural training (Sarwari et al., 2024).

The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What meanings do key colors (yellow, white, black, red, and purple) carry in Thai religious, royal, political, and daily life? (2) How does color work as a form of nonverbal communication in Thailand, and what kinds of misunderstandings does it cause between Thai people and foreigners? (3) How does Thai color symbolism relate to national identity, and what challenges does globalization bring to its role in cross-cultural communication?

This section also presents relevant theoretical foundations. This study is grounded in

three interconnected theories. Semiotics, developed by Saussure and Peirce and expanded by Barthes, explains how colors function as signs whose meanings are socially constructed rather than natural. This explains why yellow signals royalty in Thailand but mere caution elsewhere. Edward Hall's (1959) nonverbal communication theory, particularly his concept of high-context cultures, shows that Thai communication relies heavily on shared visual and contextual cues, making color literacy a basic communicative requirement. Hofstede's cultural dimensions model (2010) further contextualizes Thai color norms through the lens of high power distance and collectivism, explaining why color rules around monarchy and religion are so strictly observed and why color choices carry social rather than purely personal meaning.

Research has also shown that color systems differ across cultures and function as semiotic resources. In Thailand specifically, color operates simultaneously across religious, royal, political, and personal domains, often with overlapping or even conflicting meanings (Apiradee & Suchada, 2022; Klausner, 2020). Scholars in intercultural communication further note that misunderstandings typically accumulate from small nonverbal misreadings rather than single large mistakes, a phenomenon described as 'cultural noise' (Neuliep, 2021). Prior research on Thai color symbolism, while growing, remains limited. Studies by Klausner (2020), Kitiarsa (2020), and Apiradee and Suchada (2022) offer ethnographic and semiotic analyses, while Phongpaichit and Baker (2021) and Funston (2020) examine the politicization of color after 2006. None of these works comprehensively addresses the communicative implications for intercultural encounters.

METHOD

This study uses a systematic literature review combined with interpretive cultural analysis. Instead of collecting new data directly from the field, this study gathers and analyzes existing research and publications relevant to Thai color symbolism and intercultural communication.

Sources were collected from several academic databases, including JSTOR, Scopus, Google Scholar, and the ASEAN Citation Index. The search was conducted using keywords such as 'Thai color symbolism,' 'color meaning Thailand,' 'nonverbal communication Southeast Asia,' 'Thai intercultural communication,' 'color politics Thailand,' and 'Buddhist color symbolism.' In addition to academic sources, official reports and documents from organizations such as the Thai Tourism Authority and UNESCO were also used to support the analysis.

For this analysis, this study does not treat color meanings as fixed or permanent. Instead, color meanings are understood as something that can change depending on the social and historical context. Rather than simply listing what each color means in Thailand, this study focuses on when and why certain color meanings emerge, and the social roles they play. This approach is considered more suitable for understanding the complexity of color symbolism in Thai culture.

This study also has several limitations. Since it is based on existing literature, the findings depend on the quality of previously published research. Additionally, this study focuses on national-level patterns and does not fully capture differences that may exist across regions, generations, or social groups within Thailand.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Mapping Thai Color Symbolism: Key Colors and Their Meanings

The symbolic meaning of colors in Thai culture derives from at least three interconnected systems: the day-of-the-week color tradition from astrology and Hindu-Buddhist beliefs; the color meanings used in Buddhist religious life; and the color traditions associated with the monarchy and national ceremonies. These systems sometimes support each other and sometimes have different meanings. In recent years, a fourth system, the political use of colors in modern Thai society, has made color symbolism even more complex.

Yellow (*si lueang*) is the most important and widely recognized color in Thai culture. Its strongest meaning is connected to the monarchy because yellow is the color of Monday, the birthday of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX). Wearing yellow clothing, especially yellow polo shirts, became a symbol of support for the king and the royal institution after the political conflicts of the 2000s (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2021). Yellow is also strongly connected with Buddhism because it represents the saffron robes worn by Buddhist monks and symbolizes sacrifice, merit, and spiritual development. Because of these two meanings: monarchy and Buddhism, yellow has a very special and respected position in Thai society. Foreign visitors who see yellow only as a bright or cheerful color may not realize its deeper cultural meaning and could unintentionally appear disrespectful toward the monarchy or Buddhist traditions (Apiradee & Suchada, 2022).

White (*si khao*) is commonly linked with purity, cleanliness, and spiritual preparation in Thai Buddhism. It is often worn by lay Buddhists when they follow religious precepts on holy days and by family members during the early stages of funeral ceremonies. This meaning differs from that in many Western cultures, where white is mainly associated with weddings and joyful celebrations. A foreign visitor attending a Buddhist event in white clothing may think they are simply dressing formally, but Thai people may interpret the color as a sign of religious observance, which can create misunderstanding or confusion (Klausner, 2020). Members of the Thai royal family also use white during some official ceremonies, which gives the color an additional meaning of dignity and social status.

Black (*si dam*) is mainly associated with mourning, sadness, and loss in Thai culture. Its use is especially important during periods of royal mourning. After the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in October 2016, many people across Thailand wore black clothing for a long period, and bright colors were generally considered inappropriate in public places (Kitiarsa, 2020). Many foreigners living in or visiting Thailand at that time were surprised by the strong expectation to follow these mourning customs. Even outside official mourning periods, black is often connected with seriousness and grief, making it less suitable for festive occasions.

Red (*si daeng*) is one of the most complicated colors in modern Thai culture because it has several meanings. In some Buddhist traditions, red is connected with protection and is used in offerings at certain shrines. In everyday life, red has long been associated with luck, happiness, and celebration due to Chinese cultural influence in Thailand (Funston, 2020). However, since 2006, red has become strongly connected with supporters of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, known as the 'Red Shirts,' opposing the royalist 'Yellow Shirts' movement (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2021). Because of this political meaning, wearing red in

some public situations may be understood as expressing a political opinion even when that is not the intention.

Purple (*si muang*) has become an important color of mourning, especially in royal traditions, because it was historically connected with widows' mourning practices. During the royal mourning period of 2016-2017, many Thai women chose to wear purple as an alternative to black, and the color continues to symbolize respectful and dignified grief (Apiradee & Suchada, 2022). Green (*si khiao*) is associated with Wednesday in the traditional color system and is also linked with Islam in the southern provinces. Orange is mainly associated with Buddhist monks, and using orange in contexts that closely resemble monastic robes may cause discomfort or be considered mildly disrespectful.

Color as Nonverbal Communication: Encoding and Decoding Social Messages

The importance of the color meanings discussed above lies not only in the list of ideas associated with each color but also in how these meanings help people communicate. In Thai society, colors are not merely decorative elements; they often convey messages about a person's social role, group affiliations, and personal attitudes. This idea is related to Hall's (1976) concept of high-context communication, where much of the meaning is shared through context and visual signs that members of the culture can easily understand (Neuliep, 2021).

For example, when Thai people wear yellow on Monday, especially during royal or religious events, they are doing more than choosing a color they like; they are showing support, respect, and connection to certain cultural values. Likewise, when a Thai woman wears black after hearing about the death of an older member of the community, she is expressing not only sadness but also respect for a shared tradition of mourning that strengthens social unity. According to Barthes (cited in Chandler, 2022), these meanings can be seen as cultural 'myths' that appear natural to people within the culture, even though they derive from specific historical and social experiences.

Challenges in intercultural communication arise because these color meanings are often automatically understood by local people. Since Thai people are used to reading colors as messages, they may think that others understand these meanings as well, or they may expect foreign visitors to learn about them before visiting. On the other hand, visitors from other cultures may believe that clothing choices are only a matter of personal preference, or they may not know that such cultural rules exist. As a result, what Neuliep (2021) calls 'intercultural noise' can occur, meaning communication problems happen because people use different cultural systems of meaning.

This discussion leads to an important practical conclusion: understanding color meanings should be viewed as a skill that can be taught, practiced, and measured, rather than something that people can learn only through experience. Research by Kanchanarat and Thanaporn (2023) showed that international students who received direct lessons about Thai color symbolism, including its political meanings, experienced fewer social misunderstandings related to color than students who received only general cultural information.

Cultural Misunderstanding: Cases and Consequences

In tourism, misunderstandings often occur when foreign visitors are unaware of the

cultural meanings associated with certain colors. According to Binson and Phoasavadi (2021), some tourists visiting Buddhist temples in Thailand wear brightly colored clothing, including red, without realizing that such colors may be considered inappropriate in certain religious contexts. While visitors usually follow the official dress code, such as covering their shoulders and knees, information about culturally appropriate colors is rarely provided. As a result, tourists may unintentionally create discomfort among local worshippers.

Similar issues can also arise in professional and business environments. Fong (2019) describes a multinational company operating in Thailand that used red and black as part of its corporate branding. However, these colors carried different cultural associations for Thai employees. Black was often associated with mourning, while red was associated with political movements. Although some employees felt uncomfortable with the color scheme, they were hesitant to express their concerns to management. This situation reflects the hierarchical nature of many Thai workplaces (Stengs et al., 2020). Eventually, the company had to modify its branding and provide intercultural training to improve understanding among staff.

The importance of color symbolism became even more visible during periods of national mourning. Following the death of King Bhumibol Adulyadej in 2016, many Thai people wore black as a sign of respect, and the use of bright colors in public was generally discouraged (Kitiarsa, 2020). Foreign residents and visitors often found it difficult to determine what clothing was considered appropriate during this period. Reports from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2017) indicate that international organizations and foreign communities in Thailand sought guidance to ensure their behavior respected local cultural expectations.

Another challenge involved deciding how far foreigners should adapt to local mourning practices. Some chose to wear black throughout the mourning period as a sign of solidarity with Thai society. In contrast, others felt uncomfortable doing so because they did not personally share the same sense of loss. This situation highlights a broader issue in intercultural communication: balancing respect for local cultural norms with one's own cultural identity (Askew, 2023). Although there is no single correct approach, understanding the cultural meanings behind these practices can help individuals respond more appropriately and respectfully in intercultural situations.

The Influence of Thai Color Symbolism on Foreign Nationals

The situations analyzed in the previous section show that the effects of color-related miscommunication vary significantly depending on the type and duration of foreign nationals' involvement with Thai society. Tourists, international students, expatriate workers, and diplomatic personnel experience Thai color symbolism differently, necessitating tailored approaches to enhance color literacy (Rodpan, 2024).

Tourists, who typically engage with Thailand for short periods and primarily through the mediation of the tourism industry, are least likely to receive adequate preparation for the color dimensions of Thai culture. The tourism literature (Cohen & Cohen, 2022; Tourism Authority of Thailand, 2023) tends to focus on the explicit behavioral requirements of temple visits such as covered attire and removed footwear, without extending that guidance to color choice, which is a more contextually variable and therefore more difficult dimension to communicate through simple rule-based guidance.

International students, who typically engage with Thai culture over periods of months or years, face a different set of challenges. Kanchanarat and Thanaporn (2023) found that international students at Thai universities were often aware of some color-based norms but had significant gaps in their knowledge of the more contextually variable aspects of Thai color symbolism, particularly the political dimensions. Students who had received structured orientation programs that included explicit discussion of color symbolism reported greater confidence in their ability to make appropriate color choices in different social contexts.

For expatriate professionals, the impact of color-related misunderstandings can be significant because the professional context in Thai society involves complex negotiations regarding status, respect, and hierarchy in which visual signals, including color choices play a significant role. Changnon's (2021) research on multinational corporations in Southeast Asia identifies color awareness as one of several nonverbal competencies that distinguish effective intercultural communicators from those who cause unintentional friction. This finding aligns with broader research in intercultural competence development that emphasizes the importance of attending to implicit and nonverbal dimensions of cultural difference (Deardorff, 2020).

Color literacy is also increasingly relevant in digital and social media contexts. As Wiriya and Supaporn (2022) document, Thai social media users employ color symbolically in ways that reflect the broader color system: profile picture frames in yellow or black signal particular loyalties or states of mourning, and the choice of color in graphic design and promotional materials carries the same semiotic weight in digital as in physical contexts (Kaewseenual, 2018). Foreign nationals who manage social media accounts or produce digital content in or about Thailand need to develop color literacy that extends to the digital domain.

Color, Cultural Identity, and National Cohesion in Thailand

Besides serving as a means of communication in everyday life, color in Thailand also plays a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and societal unity. The color system in Thailand is used not only to convey specific messages but also to symbolize togetherness and national identity. For example, wearing yellow as a sign of support for the royal family not only demonstrates respect but also reflects a sense of belonging to values considered important in Thai society (Phongpaichit & Baker, 2021).

This function of color as a symbol of identity also influences intercultural communication. When foreigners follow Thai color conventions, such as wearing yellow at royal events or black during periods of national mourning, this action is seen as a sign of respect for Thai culture and society. This attitude is usually appreciated and viewed positively by the local community. Conversely, if someone ignores the use of colors considered important at formal events or certain situations, it can be perceived as a lack of understanding or appreciation for Thai cultural values (Ting-Toomey & Dorjee, 2021).

Understanding color symbolism in Thailand is not just about knowing the meaning of each color. One also needs to understand how color is used in society. Color choices can indicate one's position within a group, reflect support for certain values or communities, and help maintain Thai cultural identity. In other words, the ability to understand color meanings, or color literacy, is an essential part of intercultural communication skills for

building good relationships and avoiding misunderstandings in Thai society.

Color Symbolism in the Age of Globalization

In the era of globalization, people from various countries are increasingly interacting with Thailand through tourism, education, and business activities. This makes understanding the meaning of colors in Thai culture increasingly important. The influx of global culture, such as Western media, international fashion trends, and the development of digital technology, has given some Thais, especially the younger generation, greater freedom to choose and use colors (Phiwhorm et al., 2024). However, certain colors still hold strong cultural meanings, particularly those related to royalty, religion, and politics.

The rise of social media has also complicated the use of color. The colors used by individuals or companies can have different meanings across cultures (Huda et al., 2023). For example, red is often used internationally to symbolize passion and energy. However, in Thailand, red is also associated with certain political groups. Similarly, yellow is often associated with the Thai royal family. If foreign individuals or companies use these colors without understanding their meanings, misunderstandings or unintended reactions can arise.

Despite the growing influence of global culture, Thais still maintain the meanings of colors that are part of their cultural identity. According to Klausner (2020), the use of colors associated with the monarchy and Buddhism has become even more visible in recent years. This demonstrates that color symbolism remains an important part of Thai culture and national identity. Therefore, anyone interacting with Thai people, such as tourists, international students, diplomats, and businesspeople, needs to understand the meanings of colors in the Thai cultural context, as these meanings can change depending on the prevailing social and political situation.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the complex and multilayered system of color symbolism in Thai culture and its significant implications for intercultural communication. Through a systematic review of the existing literature, interpreted through the theoretical lenses of semiotics, nonverbal communication theory, and Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this paper has demonstrated that colors in Thailand function simultaneously as religious symbols, markers of royal and political allegiance, and expressions of personal and collective identity.

The findings reveal that key colors such as yellow, white, black, red, and purple carry meanings that are deeply embedded in Thai history, Buddhist tradition, and royal culture. These meanings are not static but shift according to social, religious, and political contexts. As a result, foreigners who rely on their own cultural color systems when interacting in Thailand risk producing unintended messages and creating intercultural friction. This risk is particularly salient in tourism, business, education, and diplomacy, where color-based misunderstandings have been documented to affect social relationships, workplace dynamics, and perceptions of respect.

A significant contribution of this study is its argument that color literacy should be recognized as a measurable and teachable dimension of intercultural competence. Structured orientation programs that address not only behavioral norms, such as dress codes, but also the symbolic dimensions of visual culture have been shown to reduce

misunderstandings among international students and professionals in Thailand. This finding suggests that intercultural training programs, both in educational institutions and corporate settings, should incorporate color symbolism as part of broader nonverbal communication awareness.

The study also highlights that the effects of globalization and digital media present new challenges to Thai color symbolism. While younger Thais show greater flexibility in their color practices, traditional associations remain powerful, particularly in contexts related to the monarchy, Buddhism, and national mourning. The digital extension of Thai color symbolism into social media further expands the contexts in which color literacy is needed. Future research should examine how these meanings are being negotiated across generations and in digital environments. It should include empirical studies with cross-cultural participants to validate and extend the findings of this systematic review.

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