

# A study on the color of Miao's Badai culture in Fenghuang County of China

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This paper takes the color of Badai culture, the indigenous religion of the Miao in Fenghuang county of China, as the object of study and analyzes its symbolic meanings in the context of religion. Through fieldwork and NCD color system, this study analyzes the meaning and function of colors in sacrifices, ritual artifacts, and religious clothing.

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## Introduction

### ***The indigenous religion in Fenghuang County***

Fenghuang County is located in the southwest of Hunan Province, situated between 109°18'-109°48'E and 27°44'-28°19'N. It is home to mostly the Miao people, with Hong Miao (Red Miao) exerting the biggest influence [1]. The indigenous religion, Badai (Miao: bax deib), has a history of more than 5000 years.

In Fenghuang County, Badai is also the indigenous term for ritual specialists, a career for men only, which generally falls into three categories: Badaixiong (Miao: baxdeibxongt); Badaizan (Miao: baxdeibruanx), and Badairuan. The first two types are most common that can be seen in almost every village.



Figure 1: Chizhu (eating a pig) Ritual performed by Badaixiong and Badaizan together in Kejia Village, Heku Town.

Badaixiong is the prototype of Badai, worshiping deities and original ancestors with rituals performed in the Miao language. They usually work as scholar-officials who are rational and communicative to inform ancestors.

Badaizan, on the other hand, is another branch combining Badaixiong and Taoism, worshiping ghosts with rituals performed in Han Chinese using written texts to keep record of divine words and ritual processes. They usually work as military officials and the rituals they perform mainly belong to the Han system.

## Badai rituals and color symbolism

One of the most important rituals in Badai culture is *zhuiniu* (literal meaning: killing the buffalo with a spear). During the ritual, a water buffalo is made to get drunk, jump wildly and then sacrificed under a spear. Apart from the animal sacrifice, the Miao people also celebrate the heroic acts of their ancestors and pray for their blessings. As for the religious clothing, Badaixiong is in dark colors, and females and hosts are all fully dressed up, with flags of five colors hanging on the altar, which once again proves the grandeur of this ritual from the color alone [2].

The Ghost Festival of the Miao lasts from July 7<sup>th</sup> to July 15<sup>th</sup> of the lunar calendar. Apart from preparing wine and food, burning joss paper and lighting incense to worship ghosts and spirits, the Miao people in Fenghuang County also release water lanterns made from red paper on the last day of the festival as a symbol of releasing the wandering spirits.

*Dazhu* (literal meaning: beating pigs) is one of the rituals that are performed within the family, with slight differences in the form according to different purposes. One way is to kill pigs with blood slashing, usually using slaughtering knives. It is often performed when something good happens, such as making a fortune, childbirth etc., as a way to inform the ancestors and pray for their blessings. The other is to kill pigs without spilling blood, usually by knocking them to death with certain tools. The ritual is often performed in this way when the family is having bad luck, for instance when family members are sick or in disaster. From different ways of performing *dazhu* and their associated meanings, it can be seen that the color of red is a symbol of luck.

The color of the sacrifices vary from rituals to rituals too. According to *Xiangxi Miao zu Shidi Diaochabaogao* (Field reports on the Xiangxi Miao) by Shi [3], cattles and pigs are used as the sacrifices, with colors ranging from white, black to spotted (having a white head and tail). Another ritual is called *zhuojigua*, divination through chicken parts. In this ritual, the specialist plants flags of five colors on the ground, burns joss paper, hits bamboo tubes, and then cooks the chicken and reads fortune from its bones by using bamboo sticks to measure the depth of the bone holes. The five colors of the flags are red, yellow, black, green, and white, placed in different positions as required. From these two examples, it can be seen that color plays an important role in sacrifices and rune paper in Badai culture.

## Color symbolism of ritual artifacts in Badai culture

### Color symbolism of Badaixiong's ritual artifacts

Badaixiong's ritual artifacts feature various types and shapes, used to connect human and celestial beings, cast out demons, and command gods and ghosts. These include *xintong* (a tube-shaped musical instrument), *lingmai* (a copper bell), *gua* (divinatory instruments), and *shaola* bowl (containing wax to burn). Most of them have the color of the material itself.

*Jinling*, (kenmai in the Miao language), has a copper clapper inside that rings when struck. It is mainly used for supplicating ancestors. The number of cloth strips on the bell stands for the length of employment, and the color for the degree of satisfaction, with red and the alike (such as brown red and brick red) indicating a high degree, while black and the alike (such as dark blue and dark green) a relatively low one.



Figure 2: The symbolic meaning of colors of the cloth strips on Jinling.

### Color symbolism of Badaizan's ritual artifacts

There are seven kinds of Badaizan ritual artifacts, namely *mabian* (a linen whip), *liujin* (a kind of cloth strips), *kang* (divinatory instruments), *denggun* (a double-edged knife), a token, gainian, and a seal. In some places, Chiyou Stick is added to the list [4]. Similar to Badaixiong's, these artifacts (except for *liujin*) also have the same color as their materials.

Among them, *liujin*, a kind of cloth strips used to expel and entertain ghosts, covers the largest area and plays the most important role in assisting body language. The color of *liujin* has a high level of saturation, a variety of hues and a balanced distribution in the color wheel. These cloth strips, together with clothing such as the highly-saturated red robe and the phoenix hat (see more details in the next section), accentuate Badaizan's power through color, building up a carnival atmosphere in the Miao rituals.

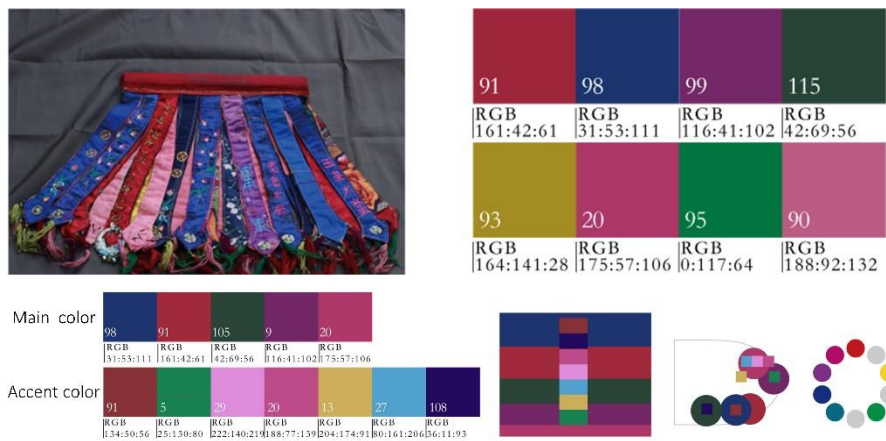


Figure 3: Color analysis of Liujin.

## Color symbolism in religious clothing of Badai culture

### Color symbolism in religious clothing of Badaixiong

Although Badaixiong’s religious clothing is also of daily use, it should be in green and duijin style (with buttons in the middle). Also, Badaixiong wrap their heads with linen in shades of black, so as to differentiate themselves from secular men.

The color of Badaixiong’s religious clothing is mostly blue, with a low value (brightness), saturation, and contrast. This color combination gives an impression of solemnity, awe and authority, which goes hand in hand with Badaixiong’s main duty to communicate with ancestors.



Figure 4: Color analysis of Badaixiong’s religious clothing.

### Color symbolism in religious clothing of Badaizan

Badaizan's religious clothing is mostly red, a color of strength, excitement and aggression, one of the hues that occupy the greatest energy. This is also related to Badaizan's main duty. As the Miao attribute bad things such as diseases, infertility problems, and short-lived livestock to evil ghosts, Badaizan is often invited to expel them by force, and red is a symbol of strength.

In specific, Badaizan wears a red robe, a red headscarf, and a phoenix hat. The red robe is also known as Celestial Master Robe, or aox qinl in the Miao language. It is a deep V-neck cardigan robe, reaching down to the ankle, which facilitates them expelling evil ghosts. The red headscarf is wrapped around the head which should hide hair but not ears [5].



Figure 5: Color analysis of Badaizan's religious clothing.

The hat of badaizan is known as Phoenix Crown, or *guand nhal* in the Miao language. It is made of sturdy and thick kraft board, painted with the image of gods and ancestors. Based on the color analysis, there exists a pattern in color: it becomes cooler and brighter towards the middle, with the two sides being colorless with a low value (brightness).

The color analysis of the paintings indicates a range of five traditional Han colors, namely black, white, red, green and yellow. Among them, blue and green are most widely used, for they are more perceivable to the Miao compared with other hues and are thus their favorite colors.

In conclusion, Badai culture constructs the unique collective unconscious of the Miao in Fenghuang County, Xiangxi of China. The color of the ritual artifacts and religious clothing indicates a division of labor among ritual specialists and symbolizes the supernatural powers endowed.





Figure 6: Color analysis of Badaizan's Headgear Phoenix Crown.

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