The Influence of the Five Elements Color Philosophy on Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

Feifei Fan
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 11600
fanfeifei@student.usm.my

Safial Aqbar Zakaria*
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 11600
ssafial@usm.my

Jie Ma
Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, 11600
majie19910822@student.usm.my

Abstract: This study takes the Five Elements Color Philosophy as a point of departure to explore its contemporary expression in Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design and its impact on the construction of cultural identity. By examining the aesthetic characteristics and philosophical foundations of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design, and integrating theories of cultural identity, the research reveals the symbolic meanings and emotional expressions of the Five Elements Color philosophy within spatial contexts. Adopting a narrative approach within a qualitative research methodology and grounded in a constructivist research paradigm, the study selects representative Neo-Chinese design cases for analysis, supplemented by qualitative interviews. It systematically investigates the manifestations of the Five Elements Color Philosophy in aspects such as color application, spatial layout, furniture and artifacts. Ultimately, it aims to construct a theoretical framework for Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design rooted in national cultural heritage, from the perspectives of color, culture, and space.
Keywords: Five Elements Color Philosophy, contemporary expression, Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design, Cultural Identity, Spatial Narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization, the integration of cross-cultural design languages has had a profound impact on traditional cultures (YU & Zheng, 2005). On one hand, design styles across different countries have become increasingly homogenized, leading to aesthetic convergence (Ye et al., 2022). On the other hand, the dominance of Western modernist design has marginalized traditional aesthetic systems—such as the Five Elements Color Philosophy—within design practices, resulting in their gradual weakening and even facing the risk of disappearance (Song, 2015). In

current interior design practices, there is a widespread tendency to rely on superficial forms and decorative elements. Amid the popularity of the Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design, many spatial designs remain at the level of visual styling, lacking expression of deeper philosophical meaning (Xu, 2013). This stylistic homogenization not only diminishes the cultural legibility of spaces but also weakens users' sense of cultural identity within those environments, leading to what has been termed a "loss of cultural identity in spatial contexts" (Norberg-Schulz, 1976; Wu, 2019).

In response to this reality, the Chinese government has put forward the national strategy of "cultural confidence". Against this backdrop, design—serving as a key medium for cultural transmission—is entrusted with the mission of rebuilding cultural foundations, affirming national identity, and revitalizing traditional culture through contemporary forms of expression (Li, 2002). This study is grounded in that context, aiming to explore the expressive pathways of the Five Elements Color philosophy within contemporary Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design (Relph, 1976). It seeks to construct a theoretical framework that carries both cultural significance and identity value, thereby responding to the dual demands of aesthetic revival and spatial-cultural reconstruction in the era of "cultural confidence."

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

This section aims to systematically outline the core theoretical foundations of this study, covering the following five aspects: first, an exposition of the basic principles of the Five Elements Color Philosophy; second, a comparative analysis of Chinese and Western color concepts; third, a review of the developmental trajectory of cultural identity theories; fourth, an analysis of the origins and evolution of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design; and finally, a summary of the interactive mechanisms among color, culture, and space, thereby providing theoretical support for the subsequent analysis of the application of Five Elements Color Philosophy and the construction of cultural identity (Wang, 2018).

2.1 Five Elements Color Philosophy

The ancients categorized all cosmic life and existence into five fundamental elements, a concept that embodies a profound yet simple philosophical perspective (Birren, 2016; Zhang & Zhang, 2010). These five elements permeate the universe, existing everywhere between heaven and earth. They interact, evolve, and sustain the balance of nature (Hu, 1995).

Over time, the scope of the Five Elements (*Wuxing*) expanded:
- Wood represents growing materials.
- Fire represents substances that emit heat.
- Earth represents nature itself.
- Water represents flowing substances capable of circulation.
- Metal represents solid and durable substances.

Each of these elements corresponds to specific shapes, textures, sounds, and colors (Sun, 2012). As shown in Table 1, the *Yi Zhou Shu* (*Lost Book of Zhou*) also correlates colors with the Five Elements, stating: The Five Elements: First, Black corresponds to Water; Second, Red corresponds to Fire; Third, Green (Cang) corresponds to Wood (Lin, 2010); Fourth, White corresponds to Metal; Fifth, Yellow corresponds to Earth. (Yi Zhou Shu, ca. Warring States period)

Table 1: The Five Elements Correspond to The Five Colors

Five Elements	Water	Fire	Wood	Metal	Earth
The Five Colors	Green	Red	White	Black	Yellow

Source: Adapted from *Yi Zhou Shu*

An argues that the five-part division in two-dimensional space (*Wufang*—Center, East, West, South, and North) expands into a six-part division when viewed from a three-dimensional perspective: Up, Down, and the Four Directions. "Up" refers to Heaven, while "Down" signifies the central earthly realm. This, she suggests, constitutes the Chinese cosmological consciousness. When colors were eventually correlated with spatial directions—east as blue-green, south as red, west as white, north as black, and center as yellow—this indicated that the Five Directional Colors had essentially taken shape (An, 2021; Burgin, 1996). The cosmological significance of this system became increasingly evident during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (Table 2).

Table 2. The Five Firections Correspond to the Five Colors

The Five Directions	East	South	West	North	Central
The Five Colors	Green	Red	White	Black	Yellow

Source: Adapted from An (An, 2021)

When color became associated with spatial directions, it also acquired spatial meaning. The auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of a direction was thus reflected in the auspiciousness or inauspiciousness of its corresponding color. In rituals honoring the cardinal directions, color itself became an object of reverence—a medium through which the Chinese people perceived and expressed their relationship with the cosmos (Song,

2008). For example, during the Lunar New Year, color plays a highly symbolic and proactive role. People wear red clothing, paste red paper-cuttings on windows, and hang red lanterns. In these practices of prayer and blessing, color transforms into a cultural symbol—embodying divine protection and the hope for prosperity (Kuhbandner & Pekrun, 2013; Zhang, 2004). The Chinese theory of the Five Colors carries profound philosophical implications and should not be regarded as backward or unscientific (Du, 2012). The colors red, yellow, and blue-green closely correspond to the three primary colors in modern color theory: red, yellow, and blue. White represents the combination of all colors in the light spectrum, while black results from the mixture of the three primary pigments. It is truly astonishing and admirable that ancient Chinese ancestors, through intuitive practices such as directional rituals and observations of the Five Elements, identified these five fundamental colors with remarkable insight (L.-M. Wang, 2007; Wang, 2005). The Five Elements Theory does not explain the origin of the universe; rather, it serves as an interpretation of the universe's structure, presenting a framework for understanding its composition (Youlan, 1996). This represents the consensus within the academic community regarding the concept of the Five Elements. During the development of the Five Elements theory, the concept of yin and yang was gradually integrated into the system (Peng, 2004). Yin and yang do not refer to specific physical objects, but to two opposing yet interdependent qualities inherent in all things. This is an abstract mode of classification used to describe the dualistic nature of the world, carrying broad spatial and philosophical implications (Pang, 1984). With the integration of the Five Elements and Yin-Yang theory, the originally static system of the Five Elements began to operate in a cyclical manner (Pan, 2009). Zou Yan, a key figure of the Yin-Yang School and founder of the Five Elements theory, proposed the concept of mutual generation (*xiangsheng*) and mutual restraint (*xiangke*) among the Five Elements (Feng & Shi, 2021).

As illustrated, he believed that the elements interact in a sequential relationship, where, for example, wood generates fire, while water restrains fire. The Yin-Yang and Five Elements framework is not merely a static system of categorization, but rather a dynamic system of perpetual cycles—constantly generating, transforming, and restraining one another. When the colors associated with the Five Elements are considered together, a corresponding pattern of mutual generation and restraint emerges within the color relationships as well (Tuan, 1977).

Figure 1: Diagram of The Five Elements
Source: Adapted from Jiang (2013)

As shown in Figure 2, if the colors corresponding to the Five Elements are considered together, a pattern of mutual generation and mutual overcoming also emerges among the colors.
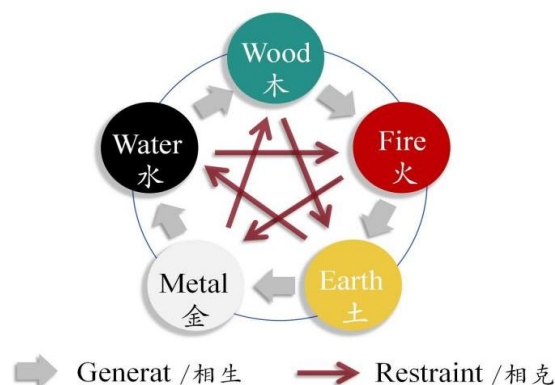

Figure 2: The Mutual Generate and Restraint Relationships among the Five Elements and Five Colors
Source: Adapted from Qian (2022)

The Chinese people's perception of color—marked by dynamic balance, generative and controlling relationships, and vibrant diversity—was formed through the integrated interaction among the Five Colors, the Five Elements, the Five Directions (Zeng, 2005).

2.2 Comparative Study of Eastern and Western Color Philosophy

In *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*, Johannes Itten proposed that color aesthetics can be examined through three dimensions: impression (visual perception), expression (emotional response), and construction (symbolic meaning). His theory has been widely accepted and provides a foundational framework for global color studies. In essence, the understanding of color is not only historical but also deeply cultural—it is shaped by the unique cognitive and value systems of different civilizations. Chinese culture places great emphasis on the ethical symbolism and philosophical significance of color. The traditional

Chinese color theory, exemplified by the Five Elements (wuxing) system, elevates color to the level of cosmological order while also embedding it within ancient life philosophy and spiritual orientation. This system can be regarded as a philosophical color paradigm. In contrast, Western perspectives on color have followed distinct historical and religious trajectories. Starting from ancient Greek explorations of the origin of the universe (e.g., "everything originates from water," "fire," "seeds," or "atoms"), Western color theories evolved along two primary paths: one focuses on the scientific understanding of color as a physical and physiological phenomenon, and the other constructs a symbolic system rooted in Christian theology. The former represents a materialist, empirical approach, while the latter emphasizes color's role in sacred discourse and religious symbolism.

2.3 Philosophical Foundations of Cultural Identity

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic process shaped through history and discourse. Zhou emphasizes that identity is constructed, not given—it emerges through acts of "redefinition" and "repositioning" shaped by historical contexts, power, and representation. Cultural identity is thus about both "being" and "becoming." Building on this, Wang describes cultural memory as "reference to the past" and "the formation of tradition." Cultural memory serves as the soil from which identity grows, encoding shared values and experiences through texts, images, and symbolic forms (Zhou, 2013). It is collective, symbolic, and transmitted through social practices rather than held individually. Hall's framework highlights that these encoding processes are not neutral but shaped by discourse and power. As illustrated in Figure 3, cultural identity emerges through the interaction of memory, symbolic signs, and identity criteria, linking the individual–self with the group–society (Wang et al., 2006).
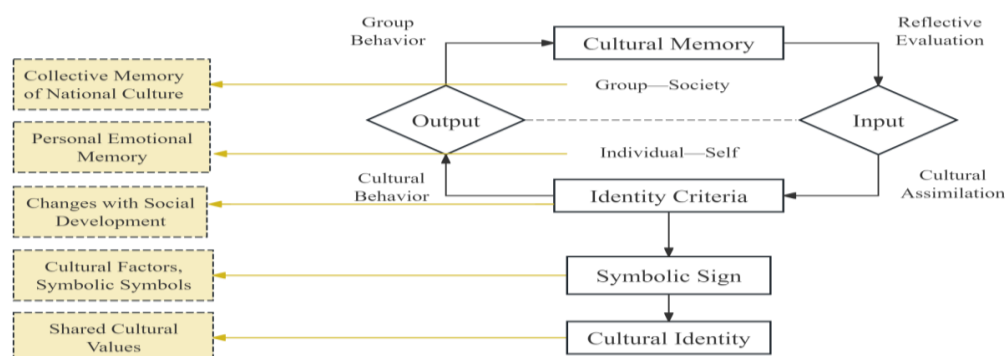

Figure 3: The Construction Pathway of Cultural Identity
Source: Adapted by the Author (2024)

This philosophical foundation supports the present study's exploration of how Neo-Chinese Interior Design incorporates Five Elements Color Philosophy to construct cultural identity, using traditional aesthetics and symbolic memory as active agents in the design process.

2.4 The Emergence and Development of Neo-Chinese Interior Design

In late October 2004, the Interior Design Branch of the Architectural Society of China officially introduced the term "Neo-Chinese Interior Design Style" at the launch event for trends in residential design in China. Since then, this design style has gradually developed and gained widespread popularity. The discussion on the meaning of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design can be approached by breaking down the term "Neo-Chinese" into "Neo" and "Chinese" for separate analysis (He, 2006). In the field of interior design, the term "Chinese style" refers to the spatial layouts, decorative elements, and design philosophies that have been accumulated over thousands of years throughout the development of Chinese civilization, particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties (Hegarty, 2011; Xu, 2010). The understanding and inheritance of tradition can be divided into three aspects:

1) Understanding and inheriting the spirit of traditional culture.

2) Inheriting the design and decorative characteristics of traditional interiors (Hu, 2010).

3) Constructing spatial environments that convey Chinese traditional spirit through tangible forms (Zhou & Guo, 2010).

The "Neo" aspect of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design is reflected in three key aspects:

1) The "Neo" of Time – This style is rooted in the present and oriented toward the future. Beyond meeting the aesthetic needs of contemporary people, it aims to establish influence and guidance, embodying the forward-thinking vision and foresight of modern designers (Liu, 2011).

2) The "Neo" of Style – While Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design values traditional culture, it does not imply mere replication or imitation. Instead, it adopts an adaptive and selective inheritance approach, reflecting a renewed understanding and perception of traditional culture by contemporary society (Zhang, 2012).

3) The "Neo" of Application – With the development of modern society, various new design techniques and materials are constantly emerging. These advancements inevitably lead to a fresh interpretation and expression of traditional culture, giving it a new dimension in contemporary interior design (Psarra, 2009).

2.5 Interactive Narratives of Color, Culture, and Space: Constructing Cultural Identity

This study constructs a theoretical framework for Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design that fosters cultural identity through interactive narratives in three dimensions: color, culture, and space (Ma & Misni, 2024). These three narrative dimensions interconnect and collaboratively influence the construction of cultural identity through multiple mechanisms, including symbols, symbolism, and memory (McAllum et al., 2019). First, the narrative of color offers symbolic carriers, visually and vividly conveying cultural information. Second, cultural narratives endow these symbols with symbolic meanings. By integrating traditional Five Elements Philosophy and cultural symbols into contemporary designs, these color symbols gain profound symbolic significance, thereby reactivating collective memory in a modern context (Ma, 2006). Finally, spatial narratives create sites of memory. In specific interior scenarios, the Five Elements Color Philosophy and cultural elements are integrated to create immersive cultural environments. In *The Poetics of Space*, It is emphasized that a "dwelling" is not merely a physical structure, but a space of memory and imagination. Its poetic spatiality becomes a vital site for the construction of cultural identity. This phenomenological perspective on space offers a valuable theoretical reference for the contemporary expression of the Five Elements Color Philosophy, revealing how cultural identity is awakened and internalized through the interaction between the body and space. Personal experience and emotional memories emerging within these spaces form the essential foundation from which cultural identity grows (Xin, 2017).

3. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

This study adopts Narrative Analysis, a qualitative research method, to explore how the philosophy of the Five Elements color system is integrated into spatial expressions within Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design, and how it influences cultural identity and spatial experience. Narrative analysis is grounded in the stories and experiences people share, emphasizing the interpretation of social and cultural phenomena and emotional meanings through narrative structures. Through storytelling, individuals not only articulate their perceptions of space and culture but also construct their sense of self and collective identity (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988). In the fields of interior design and art, narrative analysis is particularly suitable for examining the philosophical symbolism of color

and its interaction with spatial expression, as well as understanding how users resonate emotionally and identify with the space in the design process (Riessman, 2008).

3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employs semi-structured interviews to collect narrative data from three key participant groups: experts in the Five Elements Colors Philosophy, Neo-Chinese Style interior designers, and users of Neo-Chinese Style spaces. The aim is to explore, from multiple perspectives, how the Five Elements color's philosophy is manifested in Neo-Chinese style interior design and how it contributes to the construction of cultural identity. Participants were selected using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Liang, 2001). The former was used to intentionally recruit individuals with relevant expertise or experience in line with the research objectives, while the latter relied on referrals from initial participants to expand the sample pool and enhance the richness and diversity of the data. The selection criteria included: (1) scholars or art professionals with a research background in Five Elements Color Philosophy; (2) licensed interior designers with experience in Neo-Chinese design projects and practical application of the Five Elements color system; and (3) staff members involved in the observed case studies, who were able to articulate personal perceptions related to color and cultural identity. The interview guide consisted primarily of open-ended questions, encouraging participants to share personal experiences and reflections related to color, space, and cultural identity. This approach not only facilitated free expression but also enabled in-depth exploration of the cultural and philosophical meanings embedded in their narratives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

3.2 On-Site Observation

To supplement the interview data and enhance the credibility of the research findings, this study also conducted in-depth on-site observation. The case selected for analysis is *"Painting Screen"*, a representative Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design prototype room by Ju Bin. The researcher visited the case site in person to conduct observational recording, focusing on aspects such as spatial layout, color application, furniture decoration. Various methods—including photography and written notes—were used to document the observations in detail, aiming to capture the dynamic experiences and narrative expressions emerging from the interaction

between color and spatial environment.

3.3 Data Analysis

This study adopts Thematic Narrative Analysis to examine key themes emerging from interview and observation data, aiming to uncover how the Five Elements Color Philosophy contributes to cultural meaning-making and identity construction in Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design. The analysis was conducted in multiple stages, combining the use of NVivo software and manual coding to ensure both systematic rigor and theoretical sensitivity.

First, all interview transcripts and observation notes were subjected to line-by-line reading and open coding to identify relevant narrative fragments. Initial codes (nodes) such as "color symbolism," "activation of cultural memory," and "spatial rituality" were generated. Both manual annotation and NVivo 14's node management features were employed to capture the semantic richness and narrative structures embedded in the data. Second, related codes were clustered and categorized into broader themes, such as "cultural translation in spatial expression," and "emotional belonging through spatial experience." During this phase, the emerging themes were continuously compared against the theoretical framework—specifically, the Five Elements Color Philosophy, Neo-Chinese design principles, and cultural identity theories—to form a theory-driven analytical logic. Finally, these themes were mapped onto the overall narrative structures to reconstruct participants' cultural experience trajectories, resulting in an interpretive model linking narrative, symbolism, and identity. The analysis particularly focused on the internal relationships among cultural memory, symbolic color meaning, and spatial experience, exploring how Five Elements Color Philosophy function both as vehicles of cultural representation and as triggers of emotional identification in interior environments.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Spatial Narrative Characteristics of the Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design

In interviews, interior designers specializing in Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design consistently emphasized that spaces influenced by the Five Elements Color Philosophy represent more than just an aesthetic trend—they embody a form of spatial narrative imbued with profound cultural

meaning (Chunqiu, 2019). This narrative is constructed through the thoughtful integration of color, spatial layout, furniture and artifacts, decorative elements, materials, and textures, forming a cohesive system of cultural expression. Within this system, space serves as both a medium for narrating traditional culture and a symbolic structure for articulating contemporary identity (Li et al., 2005; Zhang, 2011).

4.1.1 Color: The Contemporary Translation of Five Elements Color Philosophy

The symbolic meanings carried by the Five Elements color system permeate multiple cultural dimensions throughout Chinese history. At its core lies the notion that "color symbolizes auspiciousness" (B.-B. Wang, 2007), a belief that is not the product of a single historical period but one that has evolved across primitive totem worship, feudal ritual politics, and folk aesthetics. Colors became symbolic tools for expressing psychological desires such as blessings, good fortune, longevity, and well-being (Hu et al., 2016). To create a festive atmosphere, the public widely used vibrant and joyful color combinations, forming a folk aesthetic of color with strong emotional connotations. This color perspective reflects the people's longing for a happy life and embodies a distinctly national cultural character (Tang, 2024). An interior designer remarked: The choice of color is never arbitrary—our starting point is always philosophy. The generative and restrictive relationships among the Five Elements provide the foundation for our color schemes. In ancient Chinese thought, generative color relationships were considered auspicious, while conflicting ones were regarded as inauspicious (Ma, 2004). As shown in Table 3, a color that is generated by another is considered lucky, while the one that generates or supports it is viewed as unlucky due to the depletion of its own energy. To mitigate conflicts among colors, theorists of the Five Elements proposed strategies of restraint and resolution. For instance, when green wood overcomes yellow earth, white metal is introduced to restrain green wood (Motamed, 2017). This yields a color triad of green, white, and yellow. Similarly, if white metal overcomes green wood, red fire is used to counteract white metal, resulting in a combination of red, white, and green. Other similar triadic color schemes include black, red, and white; yellow, black, and red; green, yellow, and black. These combinations reflect the principle of restraint and form the basis for three-color composition models.
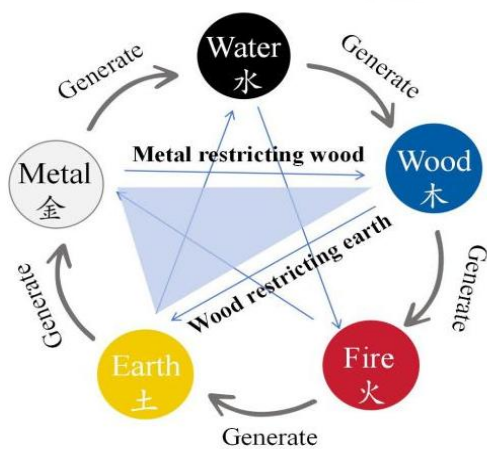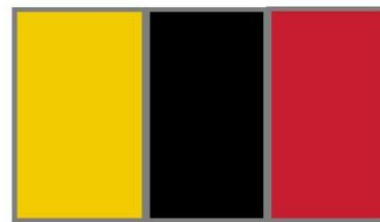
Table 3: (a) Color Matching Combination Under Restriction Concept
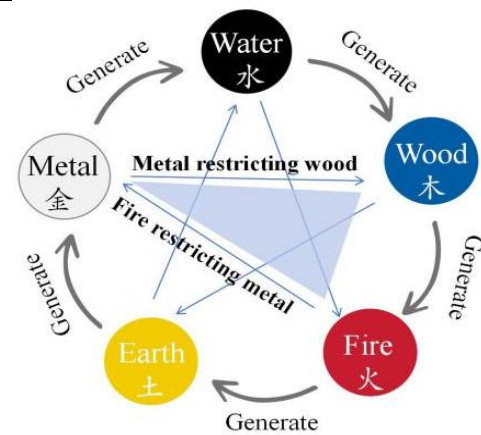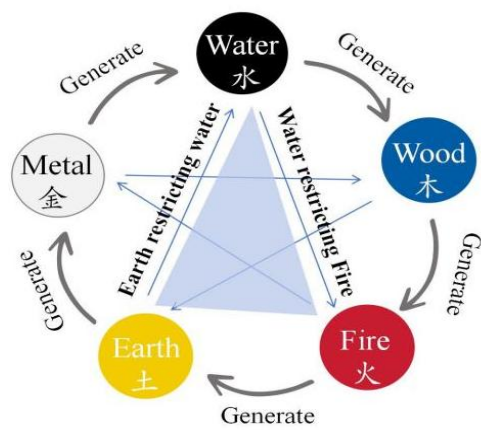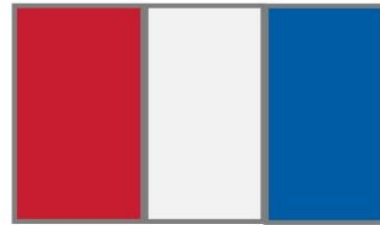
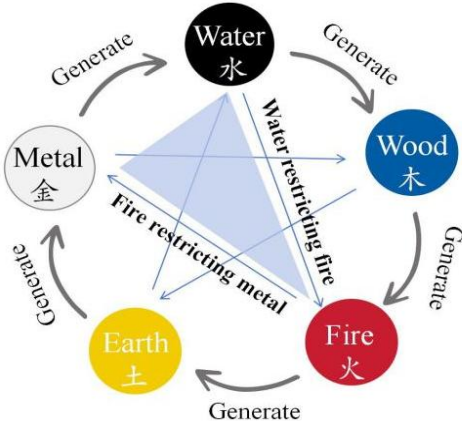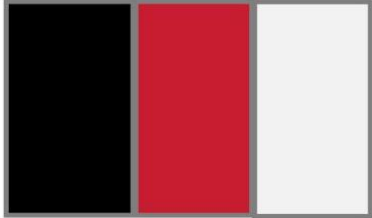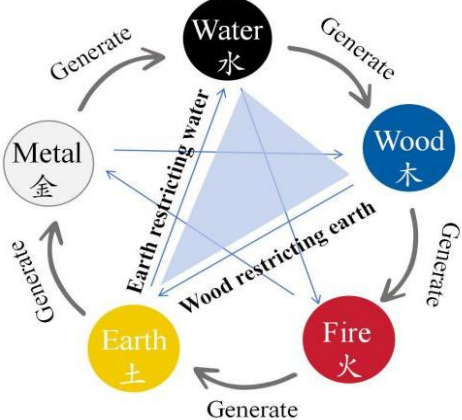| The Generate and Restrict Cycle of the Five Colors	Colour Schemes

Table 3: (b) Color Matching Combination Under Restriction Concept
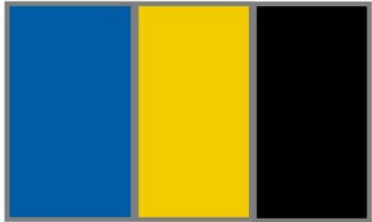
The Generate and Restrict Cycle of the Five Colors	Colour Schemes

Source: Adapted by the Author (2024)

As shown in table 4, resolution refers to the practice of inserting a mediating color between two conflicting ones to neutralize their restrictive relationship (Liu, 2004). For example, when green wood overcomes yellow earth, red fire is introduced between them to resolve the conflict. This leads to a harmonious color triad of yellow, red, and blue. Other combinations follow the same logic, such as: green, black, and white; black, white, and yellow; red, green, and black; white, yellow, and red. These resolved triadic schemes form balanced and interdependent color relationships. In interior design, such color-matching principles derived from Five Elements theory can serve as a practical guideline for achieving visual harmony and cultural coherence in space.
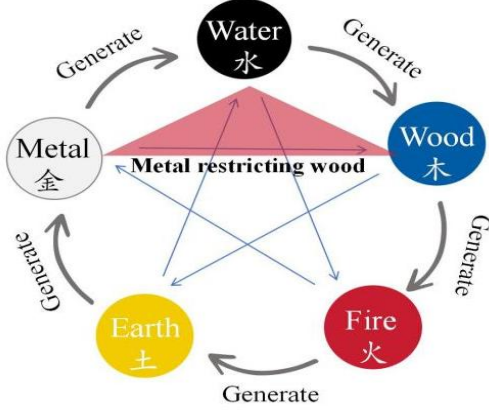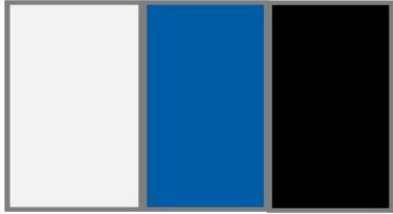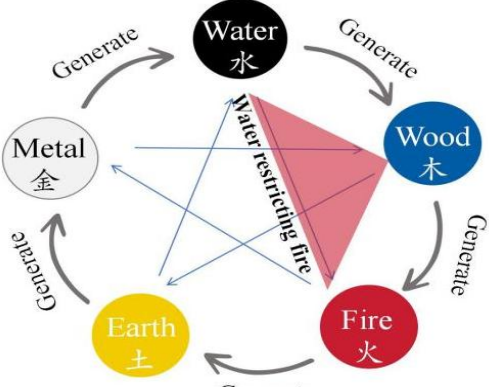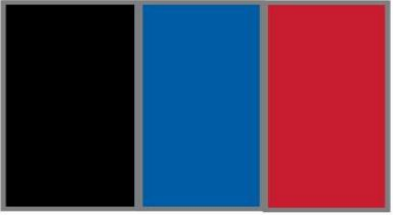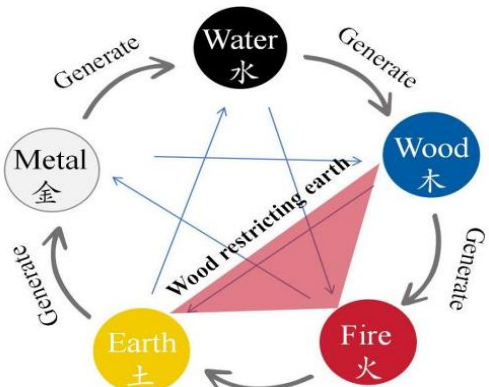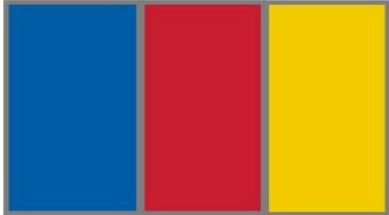
Table 4: (a) Color Matching under the Concept of Defuse

The Generate and Restrict Cycle of the Five Colors	Colour schemes

Table 4: (b) Color Matching under the Concept of Defuse

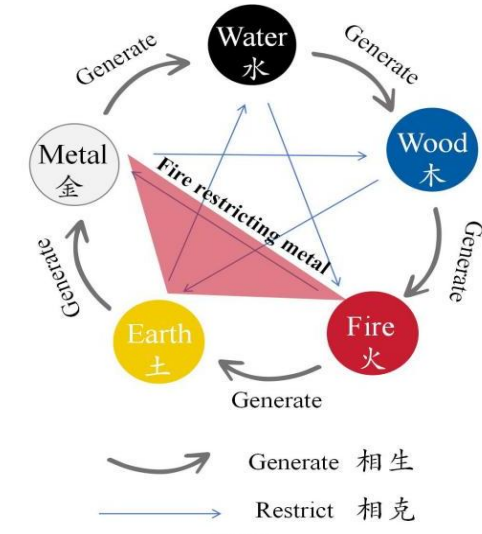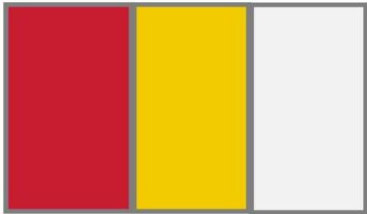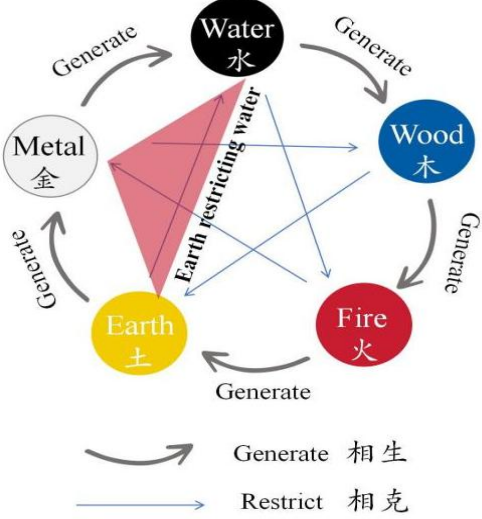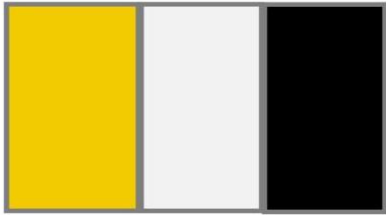| The Generate and Restrict Cycle of the Five Colors	Colour schemes

Source: Adapted by the Author (2024)

In this context, color serves not only a formal expressive function but also operates as a cultural symbol that guides users' imagination of identity and belonging. From the perspective of cultural identity theory, such color narratives visualize traditional philosophical thought, enabling its continued presence in contemporary spaces. What users experience is not merely visual pleasure, but also a sense of psychological and cultural belonging embedded within the spatial environment.

4.1.2 Spatial Layout: From Ritual Order to the Structure of Spiritual Belonging

A Neo-Chinese Style interior designer noted,

We are not imitating traditional courtyards, but reorganizing spatial

rhythms, allowing residents to 'walk through' and naturally experience 'beginning, development, turn, and conclusion.' In our design of spatial layouts, we emphasize the relationship between 'progression' and 'transition,' creating a sense of ritual and psychological passage through semi-open partitions, screens, and winding paths. In Neo-Chinese spatial narratives, spatial layout embodies a logic of ritual order rooted in the philosophy of the Five Elements and their corresponding colors. The veiled entrance, symmetrical hall arrangement, and meandering circulation paths are modern expressions of this philosophy. This layout not only satisfies users' functional needs but also affirms cultural identity. As users repeatedly experience the order embedded in the space, their subconscious attachment to the traditional cultural order and sense of belonging is reinforced.

4.1.3 Furniture and Objects: Cultural Memory and Identity Symbolism

As one designer remarked, When selecting furniture and objects, we pay particular attention to balancing the cultural connotations of form with contemporary comfort. For instance, the structure and proportions of Ming-style furniture may appear simple, but they embody profound cultural symbolism and philosophical meaning. The forms of Neo-Chinese furniture often reflect the philosophy of the Five Elements and their corresponding colors—for example, rosewood furniture serves as a status symbol, while mortise-and-tenon joints and curved proportions showcase craftsmanship aesthetics. Objects also serve the function of "domesticating culture," translating abstract traditions into tangible, everyday life. In the spatial narrative of Neo-Chinese style, the role of furniture and objects goes beyond utility; they act as mediating symbols linking historical memory with contemporary life. These symbols not only evoke users' cultural memory but, through daily use, continuously reinforce their identification with traditional culture, enabling sustained psychological affirmation and cultural expression within modern living contexts. Together, these elements construct a cohesive and immersive cultural narrative. The space itself becomes a medium of visual and experiential engagement, allowing users to inhabit not only a physical environment but also a landscape imbued with symbolic meanings of identity and tradition.

4.2 Case Study: Manifestation of Five-Element Color Philosophy and Cultural Identity in a Typical Neo-Chinese Interior Space

This section conducts a visual analysis of the traditional cultural

meanings and contemporary spatial expressions embodied by the five-element colors, focusing on four dimensions: color, spatial layout, furniture and objects, decorative elements. The analysis is supported by on-site observations and visual documentation.

4.2.1 The Five Elements Color Philosophy and Interior Color Design

The study analyzed the color characteristics of interior spaces in the selected case studies through documents and visual data. Furthermore, interview data were referenced to enhance the reliability and validity of these findings. The folding screen, as a key element in the case study, not only serves to divide space but also plays a significant role in color composition. The screen features rich and vibrant colors, forming a striking contrast with the more subdued tones of the walls, ceiling, and floor. The color choice and spatial placement of the screen also follow the philosophy of the Five Elements color system. According to the Five Elements philosophy, the east corresponds to the element of Wood, with ideal colors being cyan and blue. As shown in Figure 4, in the case, the living room is situated in the eastern part of the layout, where a blue screen has been installed. This indicates that the designer intentionally applied the Five Directions and Five Colors theory in the color selection process.
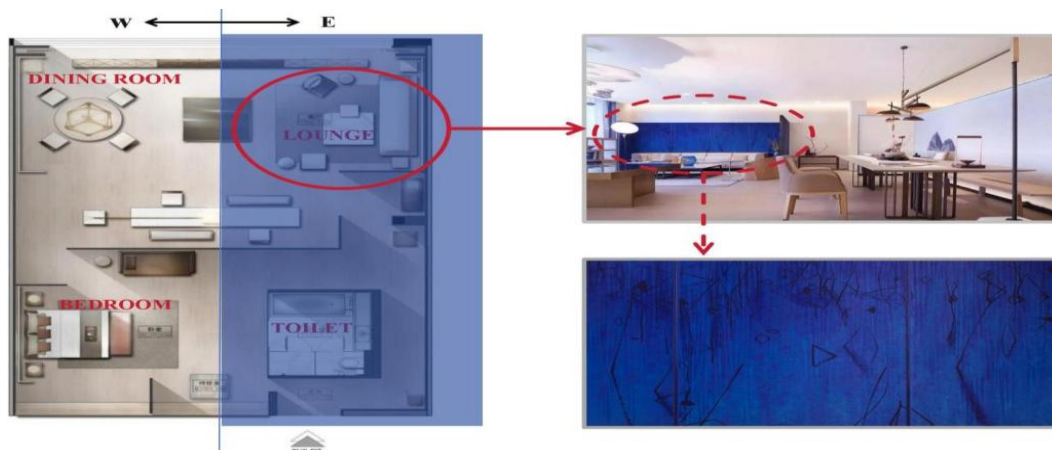
Figure 4: Color Correspondence between the Living Room Screen and the Five Directions and Five Colors System
Source: Author's Measured Drawings (2023)

On the blue screen in the living room is an image of withered lotuses at dusk in late autumn. The withered lotus symbolizes self-awareness, resilience, and the beginning of the life cycle after prosperity. The tranquil lotus leaves resonate with the overall color palette and blur the boundary of imagination, as if expressing personal tastes and aspirations. Similarly, according to the Five Elements Color Philosophy, the south corresponds

to the element of Fire, with red being the most suitable color. As shown in Figure 5, in the case study, the screen in the bedroom is red and is positioned in the southern part of the interior space. This further reflects the designer's adherence to the Five Directions and Five Colors theory in selecting interior colors. The red screen is adorned with peonies—flowers beloved by the Chinese people. In the context of the bedroom, the peonies are rendered in a more delicate and graceful manner. In Chinese culture, the peony has long been celebrated as the "king of flowers" for its magnificent form, vibrant colors, and rich cultural symbolism. The flower signifies wealth, honor, and good fortune, symbolizing the human longing for a beautiful and prosperous life (Li & He, 2001).
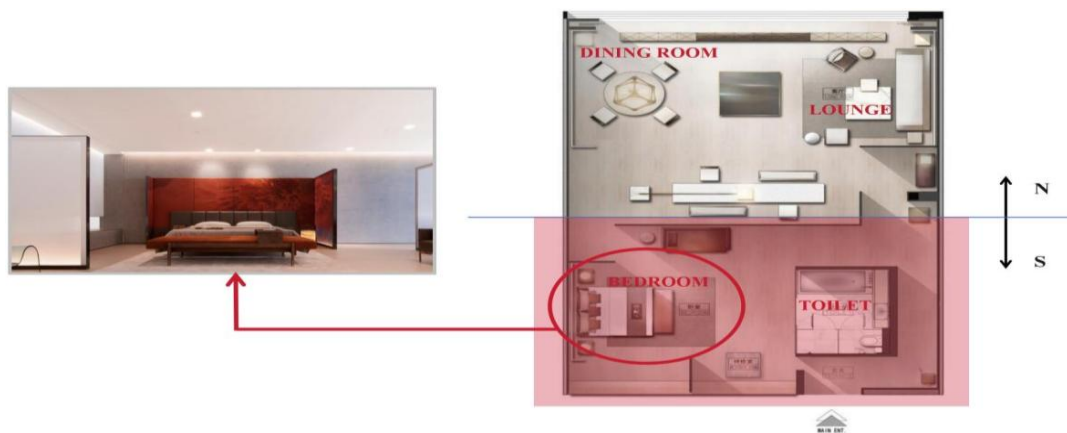
Figure 5: Bedroom's Screen Color Corresponds to the Five Directions and Five Colors of the Map
Source: Author's Measured Drawings (2023)

As shown in Figure 6, the yellow screen in the dining area features ginkgo leaves in late autumn in Beijing. In the Five Elements color system, yellow is often associated with nobility and auspiciousness (Ren, 2011). Particularly in festivals, weddings, or religious ceremonies, yellow decorations symbolize blessings and harmony.

Figure 6: Dining Room Screen Color
Source: Photographed by the Author (2023)

The three vibrant screens constitute the primary colors of the interior space. These colors—intense and vivid—bring a sense of vitality to the entire environment. Notably, they also correspond to the three primary colors in the Western color system, which form the basis for all other colors. This correspondence suggests a scientific dimension to the Chinese Five Elements color system under the influence of philosophical color theory. As shown in Figure 7, these three dominant colors also align with the logic of "color defusion" in the Five Elements system. According to this theory, blue Wood overcomes yellow Earth, but when red Fire is introduced between them, it mediates the tension and achieves balance.
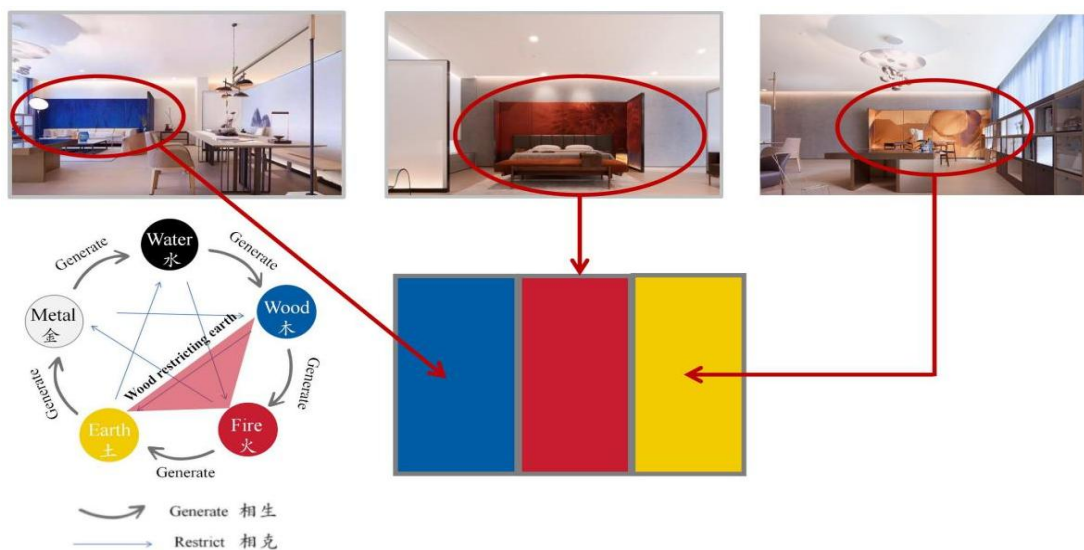

Figure 7: Screen Colors and Five Colors to Resolve Color Matching Chart
Source: Author Drawing (2023)

Although the brightness of the three main colors is relatively low, their saturation remains high, which poses potential challenges to visual harmony. To achieve a balanced and cohesive interior color scheme, the designer employed two key strategies. First, the application area of the three highly saturated colors—red, yellow, and blue—was strictly limited to the folding screens. All other furniture and decorative elements adopted more neutral tones, with reduced brightness and purity, primarily in off-white and natural wood colors, which serve as a harmonious backdrop. Second, As shown in Figure 8, a white screen was strategically placed between the colored screens, effectively separating the primary hues and preventing direct visual conflict. This design approach demonstrates a deliberate manipulation of color proportion and spatial distribution, reflecting the designer's nuanced understanding of the Five Elements theory and its emphasis on harmonious coexistence among elemental colors.
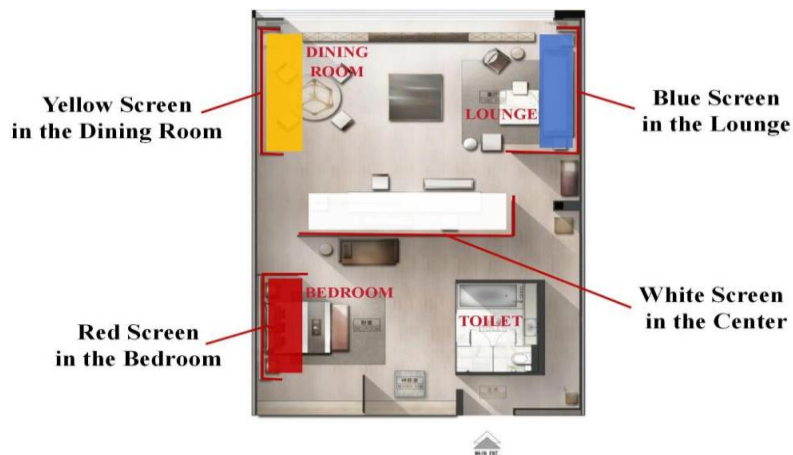
Figure 8: Distribution of Screens in Interior Spaces
Source: Author Drawing (2023)

The white screen in the center serves multiple spatial and aesthetic functions: it connects the living and dining areas, conceals the bedroom, and gently filters the light from the windows. Made of silk, the large, subtly painted screen features abstract imagery that organically integrates with the tea table beneath the modest decorative lighting. Its flexible structure allows for easy arrangement and enclosure, enabling a balance between openness and privacy. With a single block or concealment, the space becomes more intimate. The semi-transparent white screen acts like a picture frame, capturing those who write or drink tea at the table within its visual composition. This spatial treatment embodies the designer's pursuit of Oriental aesthetics and its poetic sensibility (Figure 9).

Figure 9: The Screen Viewed from Different Angles
Source: Photographed by the author (2023)

The use of screens creates a balance between the real and the illusory, enhancing visual interest and enriching the spatial experience. In traditional Chinese aesthetics, there is a cultural preference for reaching a serene destination through a winding path, as opposed to direct and overt depictions, which are often seen as lacking intrigue. The screen, with its non-imposing spatial division, allows the tea room to maintain a subtle

visual connection to the peony motif in the bedroom, while the scent of tea lingers softly in the bedroom, establishing a sensory interplay across spaces. As shown in Figure 10, an analysis of the color palette used for the sofa, stools, tables, and bookshelves in the case study reveals a consistent use of low-saturation tones, including dark brown, light brown, and natural wood hues. These subdued colors contribute to a calm and organic spatial atmosphere. This low-saturation background effectively offsets the vibrant colors of the screens, allowing the highly saturated focal elements to stand out without creating visual chaos, thereby avoiding any sense of spatial oppression.
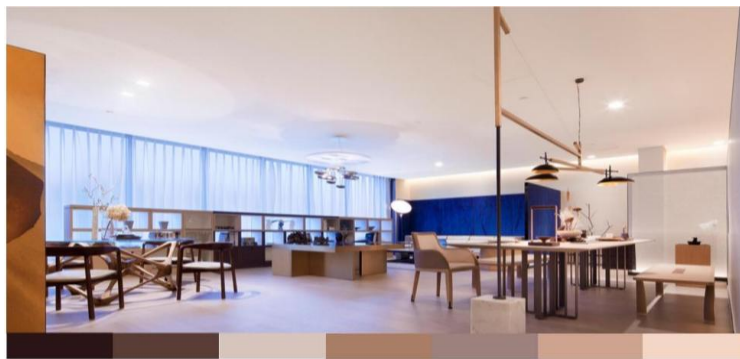
Figure 10: Furniture Colors in Case
Source: Author's Measured Drawings (2023)

4.2.3 The Philosophy of Five Elements in Other Interior Elements

a. Spatial Layout: The spatial layout of the case study embodies a rhythm of "concealment and revelation." Upon entering the space, the initial view is not of the entire interior but is instead partially obscured by the entryway screen. Deeper into the space, additional partitioning is achieved through folding screens, reinforcing the interplay between the visible and the hidden. This spatial strategy aligns with the yin–yang concept of void and solid, central to the Five Elements philosophy.

Figure 11: Garden Tour Circulation Diagram of Case
Source: Author's Measured Drawings (2023)

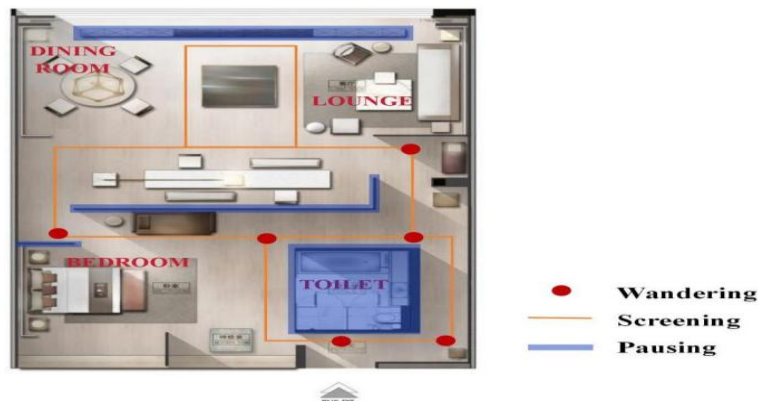b. Furniture and Objects: The chairs featured in the case study draw inspiration from the Ming Dynasty round-back armchair (*quanyi*). Its most distinctive characteristic lies in the continuous curvature of the backrest and armrests, forming a smooth, uninterrupted line that descends elegantly from top to bottom. This design, known for its graceful form and flowing lines, is a uniquely representative style of traditional Chinese seating and has long been appreciated by the public. As shown in Figure 12, the round-back armchair exemplifies a harmonious integration of square and circular forms—a round top and a square base, with circularity as the dominant theme. In Chinese cultural philosophy, the circle symbolizes harmony and unity, while the square denotes stability and groundedness. This formal expression perfectly embodies the traditional Chinese cosmological concept of "heaven is round and earth is square" (*tianyuan difang*), reflecting a deep cultural and philosophical significance (Wang, 2014).
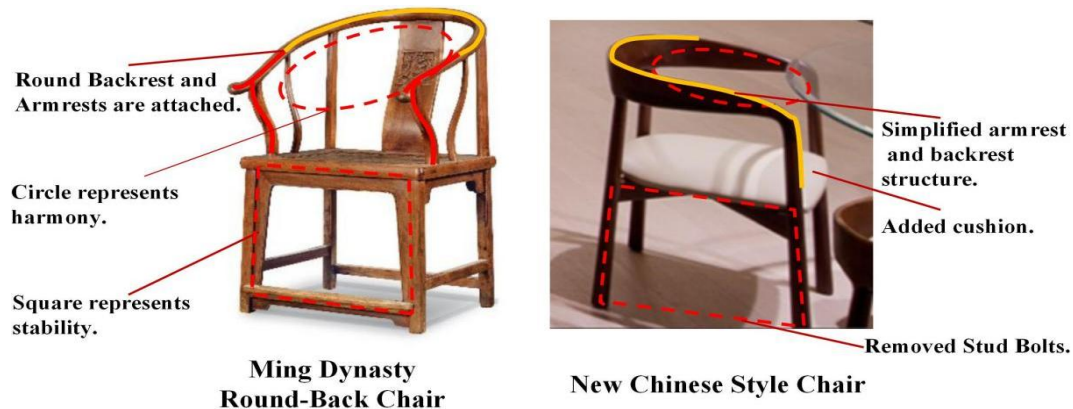
Figure 12: Comparison Between the Ming Dynasty Round-Back Armchair and the Chair in the Case Study
Source: Author's Measured Drawings (2023)

The chair in the case study retains the fundamental structure of "a round top and square base", but adopts a more minimalist form. The backrest is widened and equipped with cushioning, enhancing both practicality and comfort. Through adjustments in proportion, ergonomics, and materiality, the design translates the Confucian concept of ritual propriety—as embedded in the Five Elements philosophy—into a symbol of cultural identity in contemporary living spaces.

5. CONCLUSION

In order to examine the characteristics of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design under the influence of the Five Elements Color Philosophy, this study conducted field observations on a representative Neo-Chinese design

case. The researcher investigated the key color elements within the interior design, finding that color plays a vital role in enhancing the visual identity of the Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design. In addition, the study explored other interior elements, including spatial layout, furniture, decorative objects, and materials and textures. Following a narratological approach, the research conducted a narrative analysis across three dimensions—color, culture, and space—and integrated interview data to ultimately construct a Neo-Chinese design theoretical framework rooted in cultural identity.

1) Color: In Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design, color functions not only as a means of visual atmosphere creation but also as a carrier of profound cultural meanings and philosophical ideas. In design practice, the following principles should be noted:

1) The background color sets a calm and natural tone for the space. Colors such as white and natural wood tones can be used to create a clean and natural atmosphere, producing a sense of visual "emptiness" or intentional blankness, which is a central concept in traditional Chinese aesthetics.

2) The dominant color serves as the visual focal point. It is typically presented using highly saturated primary colors drawn from the Five Colors theory—red, yellow, and blue. These colors can be selected according to the Five Elements' controlling and harmonizing relationships and correspond to the five spatial orientations: east-green/blue, south-red, center-yellow, west-white, and north-black. These colors are not used in isolation but are harmonized through proportion, spatial arrangement, and material contrast to achieve unity in diversity and a balanced coexistence. Moreover, each of the Five Colors carries cultural symbolism: for example, red symbolizes auspiciousness and vitality, while yellow represents nobility and centrality. Thus, color becomes a visualized language for spatial narrative.

3) The accent color, functioning as a visual rhythm moderator, can include contemporary trendy hues such as metallic tones. These are often applied to small-scale furniture, lighting fixtures, or decorative accessories. Accent colors enhance the brightness and purity of the space while introducing a sense of contemporary refinement and rational aesthetics. The inclusion of modern accent tones reflects a strategy of integrating tradition with modernity, allowing the space to maintain a sense of sophistication and contemporaneity while

retaining cultural depth. This approach corresponds to a common technique in Neo-Chinese design known as "using simplicity to highlight vibrancy."

Ultimately, color in Neo-Chinese Style interior spaces is not merely an aesthetic rendering of the "Eastern style," but a means of articulating identity among specific cultural groups. It creates spaces imbued with national symbolism and supports a broader cultural narrative.

2) Cultural Dimension: From the cultural perspective, this study reinterprets the cultural symbols and philosophical meanings of traditional Five Element colors through the lens of cultural identity and narrative theory, exploring their application pathways in Neo-Chinese style interior spaces. For instance, within the Five Elements system, the element Wood corresponds to the color green-blue, the direction east, and the season spring, symbolizing the rebirth and vitality of all living things. This color is often applied in cultural or contemplative spaces to stimulate introspection and self-cultivation. These embedded cultural symbols enhance the expression of cultural belonging within interior design. In the context of globalization, they also play a key role in fostering a sense of identity and cultural confidence among occupants. By incorporating philosophical cosmology and symbolic color theory, Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design becomes more than an aesthetic style—it becomes a medium for cultural continuity and emotional resonance.

3) Spatial Dimension: From the spatial dimension, this study draws upon key concepts from Five Element philosophy—such as ritual order and the dialectic of void and solid —to explore the narrative expression models of Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design in terms of spatial layout, material texture, and furniture form. Through methods of interview and field observation, the research finds that spatial arrangements influenced by Five Element color philosophy emphasize both hierarchical order and a dynamic rhythm of progression—comprising introduction, transition, and climax. Material selection reflects a return to natural authenticity, while furniture design, based on Ming and Qing styles, pays greater attention to symbolic imagery and cultural connotation. In summary, through in-depth analysis and narrative construction of color, culture, and space, this study ultimately constructs a Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design framework rooted in the philosophy of Five Element color theory. The resulting theoretical model not only conveys a clear cultural identity but also integrates philosophical depth, cultural resonance, and practical applicability.

6. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study conducted an in-depth exploration into constructing a theoretical system for Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design that integrates cultural identity and philosophical connotation, certain limitations remain. At present, Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design has only recently emerged, and its relatively short historical span means it has yet to undergo long-term aesthetic evolution and cultural sedimentation. As a result, it lacks systematic and representative characteristics to some extent. Compared with the field of traditional architecture, Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design is largely limited to commercial projects or individual cases, with an insufficient number of well-established and academically constructed exemplars. This inevitably constrains the depth and breadth of case analysis. These limitations do not negate the value of the research findings; rather, they highlight future directions for deepening and expanding the study. If, in the future, Neo-Chinese Style Interior Design practice becomes more prolonged and systematic, leading to the formation of stable aesthetic norms and cultural paradigms, it will significantly contribute to the further refinement and empirical validation of the theoretical framework proposed in this study.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent Statements

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it did not involve human participants, human data, or human tissue, and did not target special or vulnerable populations.

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