Tracing Political Implications of the Color Red in China From 1919 to 1976

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Abstract: *This study explores the political implications of the color red in China from 1919 to 1976, analyzing its usage and significance within published literature through the lens of historical events and ideological shifts. Utilizing the Google Book Ngram Viewer and Voyant tools, this research traces patterns in the frequency and context of the term "红色" (red) in Chinese texts. The analysis identifies significant peaks in usage corresponding to key historical moments, including the Nanchang Uprising, the Marco Polo Bridge Incident, the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and the Cultural Revolution. The study finds that the color red is uniquely intertwined with political discourse in China, contrasting with other politically charged colors such as black, white, and yellow. Despite the color's symbolic prominence, its direct references in pivotal political texts like Mao Zedong's Quotations are relatively sparse, suggesting a complex interplay between visual symbolism and textual representation. The findings highlight the color red's profound role in reflecting and shaping political ideologies during this transformative period in Chinese history.*

Keywords: Color Red, Political Symbolism, Google Ngram Viewer, Voyant, Historical Analysis, Textual Analysis.

1. Introduction

Every society has unique branding elements that distinguish it from the rest. These dimensions could include, but are not limited to, music, language, food, dress, or commerce. Thus, someone may easily identify individuals from other countries based on these elements. National flags have also enhanced the role of color in geopolitical identification. For example, yellow has been associated with Brazil, while the red, white, and blue mix is synonymous with the United States. Interestingly, color is also used to communicate mood, identify gender, and coordinate transportation. Thus, apart from identifying nations or cultures, color can generate a specific emotion at any time. The political role played by color is also rather profound. For instance, white symbolizes peace or surrender, blue is associated with conservatism, yellow is linked to liberalism, and red is used to symbolize left-wing or communist ideologies. Therefore, analyzing a nation's dominant colors and how the people perceived each color during a specific historical period can allow a researcher to understand the trending political causes and the public's mood and attitudes toward them.

This project was founded on the premise that political colors play a fundamental role as visual symbols of the party's cause. Sawer (2007) argued that political colors help to create and sustain collective identities and illustrate the role of affect in political life, which allows individuals to weigh the emotional life of social movements. This assertion triggered studying how political colors were perceived across Chinese history. The political mood behaved like the color spectrum that lacks definite endpoints for every wavelength of light. In this thought, one political ideology subsides and loses popularity but never fades. For example, radical rightists and leftists still exist, albeit in smaller circles than when their causes were at their peak. Thus, the idea to study the spikes and trends in prominent Chinese political ideologies based on understanding how the culture perceived the color red at different historical points was born. Preliminary investigations with a Google Book Ngram viewer of the word "红色" (red in Chinese) from 1900 to 2000 revealed two spikes around the formation of the Republic of China and the Cultural revolution. Correspondingly, this project was designed to trace the political implication of red change in China between 1919 to 1976 by evaluating how it appeared in published literature.

Studying popularity had already been done by a previous research team. Clark and his team evaluated Google trends in the Chinese Books corpus between 1950 and 2008. This team had decided to generally cover the topic without going into specifics. This study will enrich their work by applying a similar model and using it to analyze a different period. Correspondingly, their main research question was "What's trending in the Chinese Google Books Corpus."(Clark, Zhang, & Roth, 2008) Since most projects are meant to build on existing work, this one was designed to cover the period between 1919 and 1976, with a different area of focus. In this case, the main research questions were

A) What were the patterns of usage of the word Red in the Chinese Corpus between 1919 and 1976?

B) Did any key historical events influence the word's choice and usage during this period?

2. Background of the Color Red in Chinese History

The color red is representative of multiple aspects of Chinese culture. According to Wang et al. (2008), it is associated with various social events and objects. For example, in clothing, wearing it signifies high social status and success. Additionally, red has been used to decorate traditional festivals since it is meant to convey good luck. Wang et al. (2008) also reveal that several other positive expressions are related to red, such as beauty and success. As a result, it has been used in weddings, festivals, and the Chinese New Year.

Due to its profound role in Chinese culture, red is also a political statement. Its position as a political statement is evinced in its dominance in the national flag. Wang et al.

(2008) explain that red represents revolution, hope, and intrepidity in history and politics, such as the red flag, red traveling, red stars, and the Red army. Additionally, further research online reveals that the color red is related to Communism, which has strong political implications. Therefore, since red is one of the unique identifying colors for China, understanding how the perception of the Chinese people towards the color red developed over time could help to understand Chinese and history from another perspective.

3. Understanding the Project Timeline

The project timeframe contains significant events in Chinese history. Several individuals classify the 1919 period as one where China encountered the New Democratic revolution. The revolution began in 1919 with the May Fourth Movement, a mass movement of students and intellectuals who protested against the government's policies and called for political and social reforms. Consequently, the move sparked nationwide calls for change and laid the groundwork for the eventual communist victory in the Chinese Civil war. What made this period significant was the Communist party's recognition of the Chinese people's struggles against imperialism, feudalism, and capitalism (Cheng & Yang, 2020). Therefore, this was a period of considerable political upheaval. However, this period also saw an influx in the use of red. For example, the Red Army had led a spirited armed campaign in the region. Similarly, one of the prolific leaders during this revolutionary era, Mao Zedong, had a red book that he regarded as the bible of wisdom. (Mukhtar, Sherazi, & Ahmad, 2020) Therefore, selecting the post-1919 era as a key duration for understanding the impact or role of the red color in Chinese history and the word's usage and perception in literature published in this era.

For many years, the orthodox view held by the People's Republic of China was that after the demonstrations of 1919 and their subsequent suppression, the discussion of possible policy changes became more and more politically realistic. (Xu, 2021) Duxiu Chen and Dazhao Li, as representative of influential figures, shifted to the left, and in 1921 they founded the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Later in 1939, one of the senior leaders of CCP, Mao Zedong (also known as Mao Tse-Tung), stated that the May Fourth Movement was a critical step toward the success of the Chinese Communist Revolution. As CCP Chairman Mao Zedong formally proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China in Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Mao's Era, referring to the time period when Chairman Mao was in charge of China from 1949 to 1976, began.(Xu, 2021) In 1966, the Cultural Revolution, a critical sociopolitical movement in the early stage of the People's Republic of China, was lunched by Mao stating that the goal of this movement was to "preserve Chinese communism by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society." (Xu, 2021) The structure of Chinese culture underwent major changes between this 10-year movement. Since the proponents of these changes mainly used red as their political color, it would be fascinating to investigate trends to understand the political climate across the six select decades.

4. Research Methods

4.1 The Analytical Tools

Google Book Ngram Viewer was selected to help achieve this study's goals. This tool allows researchers to measure the evolution of functional differentiation and movements towards de-differentiation by analyzing the contents of a large corpus of digitized books. (Clark, Zhang, & Roth, 2008) This computational tool enables users to investigate and explore the frequency of words using data from Google Books to visually present how regularly a specific word or phrase has been used in a certain duration. This search engine generates charts by dividing the number of a word's yearly occurrence by the total number of words in the corpus that year. Additionally, the tool's efficacy is limited to works printed between 1500 and 2008. (Younes & Reips, 2019) Thus, it is a useful assistant for researchers who wish to research word usage patterns across history. In this case, the goal was to explore the implication of the color "RED" by tracing trends of the word's usage in Chinese books between 1919 and 1976. Google Ngram's ability to present frequencies and its optimal analysis duration makes it an effective analytical tool because it has the computational power and resources that allow fall within this project's parameters.

In addition to Google Ngram, Voyant was an equally effective and influential tool used during this project. This technical device is a web-based text reading and analysis environment that enables users to explore and read a corpus using a multi-panel interface. This evaluation tool empowers the researcher to create exportable interactive visualizations that can assist in adding functionality to online projects. Thus, Voyant's operational model is similar to Google Ngram's because it evaluates texts and identifies patterns in word usage. The text's inclusion was to infuse an extra layer of competency into the project. Furthermore, the use of Voyant in this project allowed a closer observation and analysis of a specific book and trace the occurrence of words and the context of the word easily, thus understanding the trend from a micro-level.

4.2 The Corpus

The data came from two significant sources. These resources include Google Book Ngram Viewer Corpus- Simplified Chinese 2019 and Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung – a digital text file in Chinese of the book published on December 16th, 1966. Due to the complicated nature of analyzing complex images, the visual analysis of these texts was avoided. Nevertheless, the two resources allowed for a comparative analysis of the texts and platforms, leading to a more comprehensive evaluation.

While the selected corpus may have its strengths as a source of information, it contains its weaknesses. The challenge with using interpreted texts arises from some meanings being lost in translation. (Hu & Tao, 2013) Hu and Tao (2013) assert that in a broader sense, interpreted texts exhibit a greater tendency towards normalization and explication than written translated texts. Besides, some limitations of the corpus used by Google Ngram Viewer need to be noticed. On the one hand, as the developer group of Google Book Ngram Viewer did not specify that the geographic publication location of books that are included in the corpus, some books in the corpus

"Simplified Chinese 2019" might be books written in Chinese but published outside China and the reatio, to which these books are included in the corpus, is unknown. It would be, therefore, unsafe to conclude that the trend presented by the Google Book Ngram Viewer using this corpus is an accurate representation of the trend in China. On the other hand, during the process of archiving and digitizing the printed books into digital version, scanning errors were inevitable. This could be another issue concerning about the justification of using Google Book Ngram Viewer and its corpus. (Younes & Reips, 2019)

4.3 The Research Process

The project was divided into three major steps to explore the corpus from different scales. The first phase involved utilizing the wildcard search function in Google Book Ngram viewer to identify the most frequently used words with color red. Three more colors were selected as a control group to justify that the color red, compared to other colors, does have more interconnection to politics. To be more specific, yellow, black, and white were selected, because they were believed to be colors with widely shared political implications in the world. Table 1 shows the word list selected to be search in Google Book Ngram Viewer.

Table 1: selected search words list

Cheineses	English translation
红色*	red*
黑色*	black*
白色*	white*
黄色*	yellow*

Then, to obtain an overview of how the term was used across history, the word "红色" (red in Chinese) was searched in Google Book Ngram Viewer with time period set to 1919 to 1976. Through red's overall trends from 1919 to 1976, tracking historical events and understanding the interconnection between color red and its political implication became possible.

Finally, a closer look at the most popular and widespread books in China during the Cultural Revolution, *Quotation of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, was undertaken to trace the occurrence of the color red in this corpus in Voyant. The Book, also known as "the Little Red Book" due to its mount style, is a collection of statements from speeches and writings by Mao Zedong. Due to its profound position and value in China, this book was selected as an example to trace the color red in political books from a micro-level.
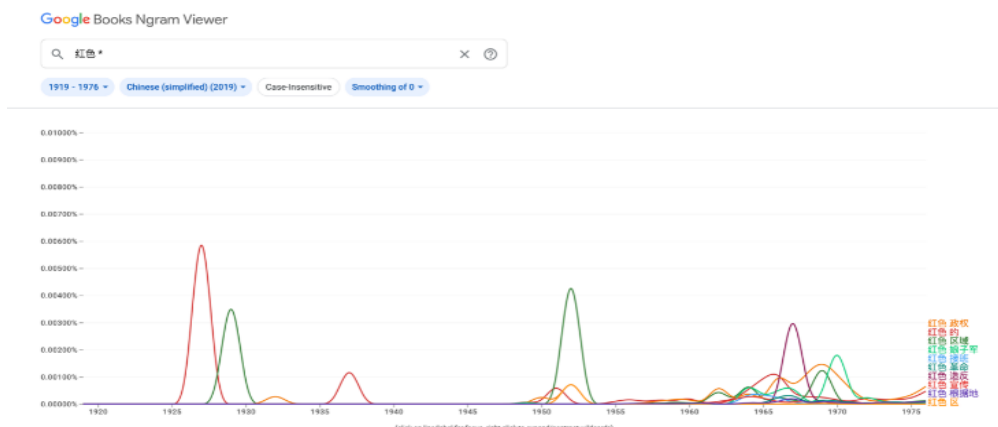
5. Major Findings

Figure 1.1: Top 10 words following the word "红色" (red) from 1919 to 1976 as the search result of "红色*" in Google Book Ngram Viewer using wildcard search function
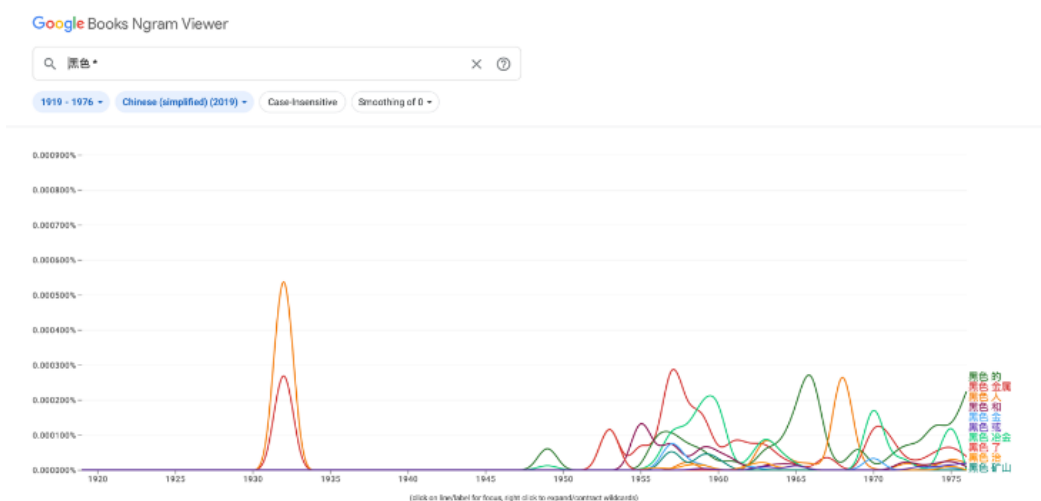

Figure 1.2: Top 10 words following the word "黑色" (black) from 1919 to 1976 as the search result of "黑色*" in Google Book Ngram Viewer using wildcard search function
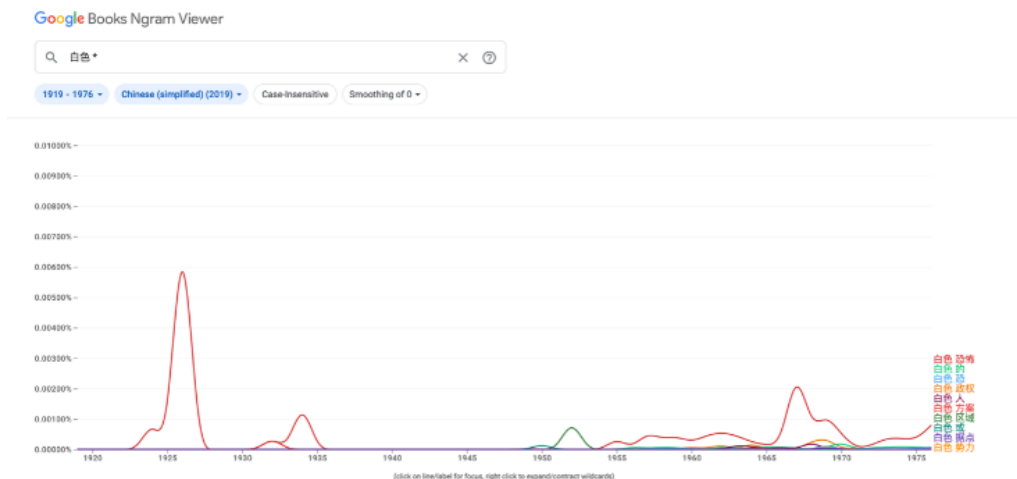
Figure 1.3: Top 10 words following the word "白色" (white) from 1919 to 1976 as the search result of "白色*" in Google Book Ngram Viewer using wildcard search function
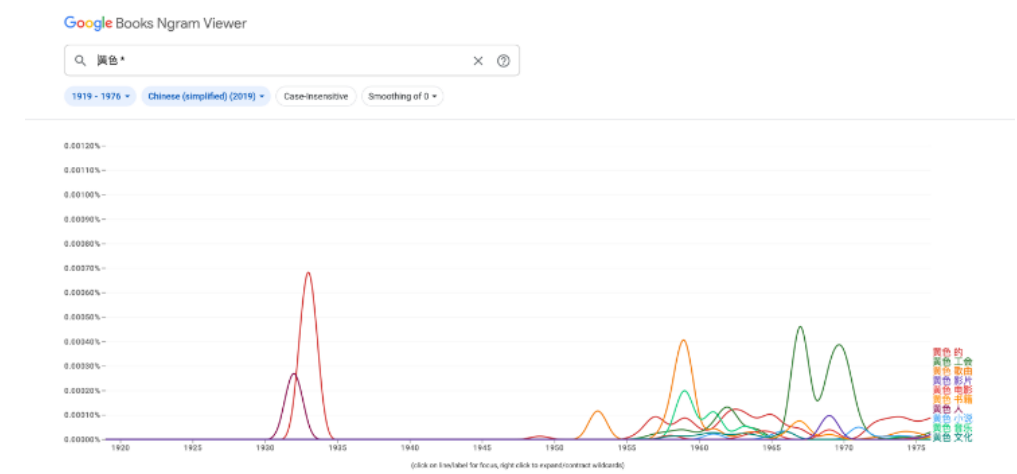

Figure 1.4: Top 10 words following the word "黄色" (yellow) from 1919 to 1976 as the search result of "黄色*" in Google Book Ngram Viewer using wildcard search function

Table 2: Result of wildcard search function of four colors, words with political implications are highlighted

| 红色 (Red)		黑色 (Black)		白色 (White)		黄色 (Yellow)	
Top 10 Words	English Translation	Top 10 Words	English Translation	Top 10 Words	English Translation	Top 10 Words	English Translation
红色 政权	red regime	黑色 的	black(adj.)	白色 恐怖	white horror	黄色 的	yellow(adj.)
红色 的	red(adj)	黑色 金属	black metal	白色 的	white(adj.)	黄色 工会	yellow union
红色 区域	red region	黑色 人	black people	白色 恐	white terror	黄色 歌曲	yellow song
红色 娘子军	red maiden	黑色 和	black and	白色 政权	white regime	黄色 影片	yellow video
红色 接班	red succession	黑色 金	black gold	白色 人	white people	黄色 电影	yellow movie
红色 革命	red revolution	黑色 或	black or	白色 方案	white plan	黄色 书籍	yellow book
红色 造反	red rebellion	黑色 冶金	black metallurgy	白色 区域	white area	黄色 人	yellow people
红色 宣传	red propaganda	黑色 了	black	白色 或	white or	黄色 小说	yellow novel
红色 根据地	red base	黑色 冶	black smelt	白色 据点	white stronghold	黄色 音乐	yellow music
红色 区	red area	黑色 矿山	black mining	白色 势力	white forces	黄色 文化	yellow culture
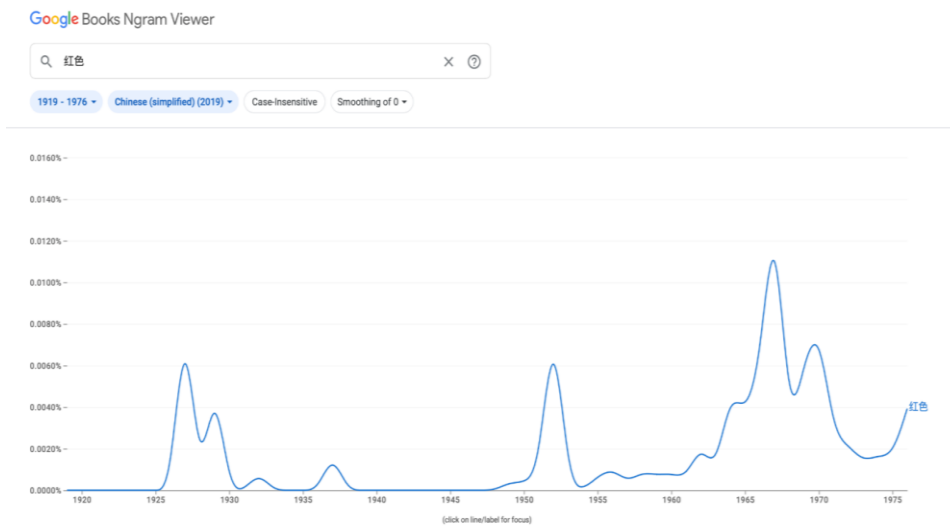
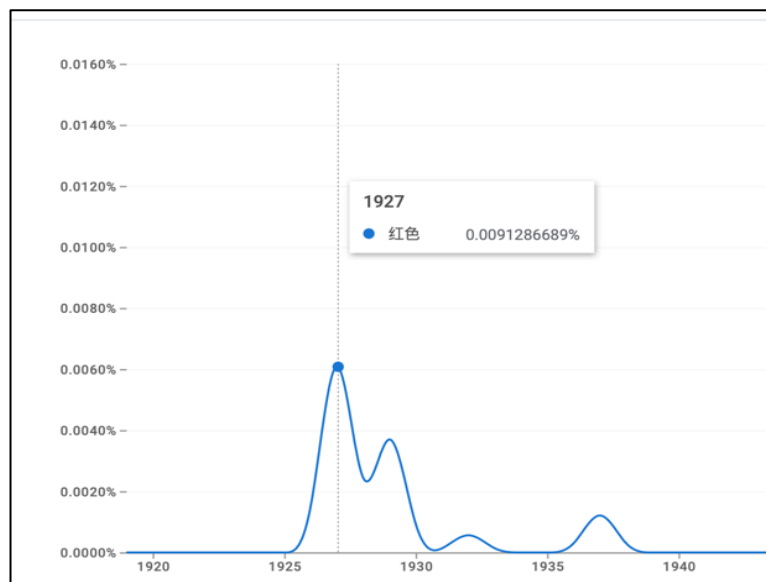**Figure 2:** Result of searching "红色"(Red) from 1919 to 1976 in Google Book Ngram Viewer

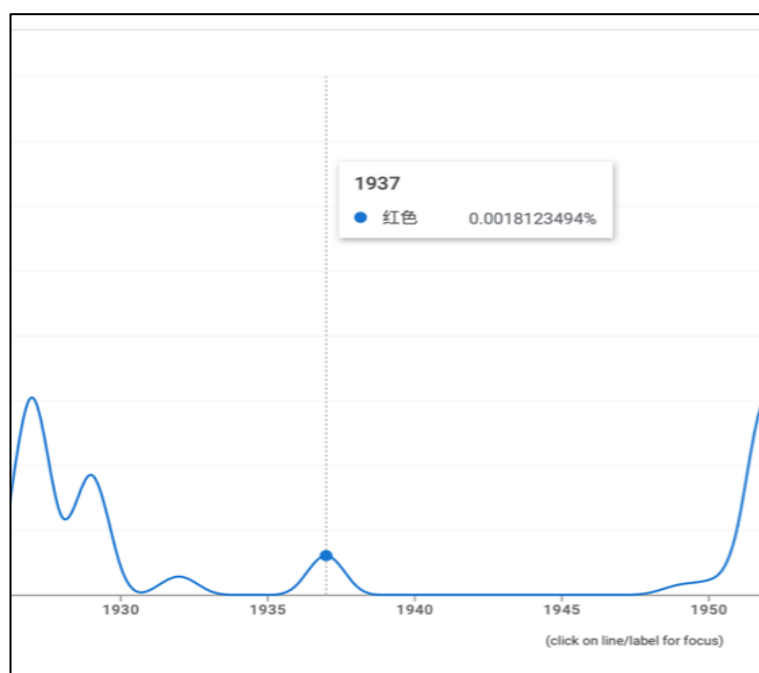**Figure 2.1(top-left):** A spike in 1927;

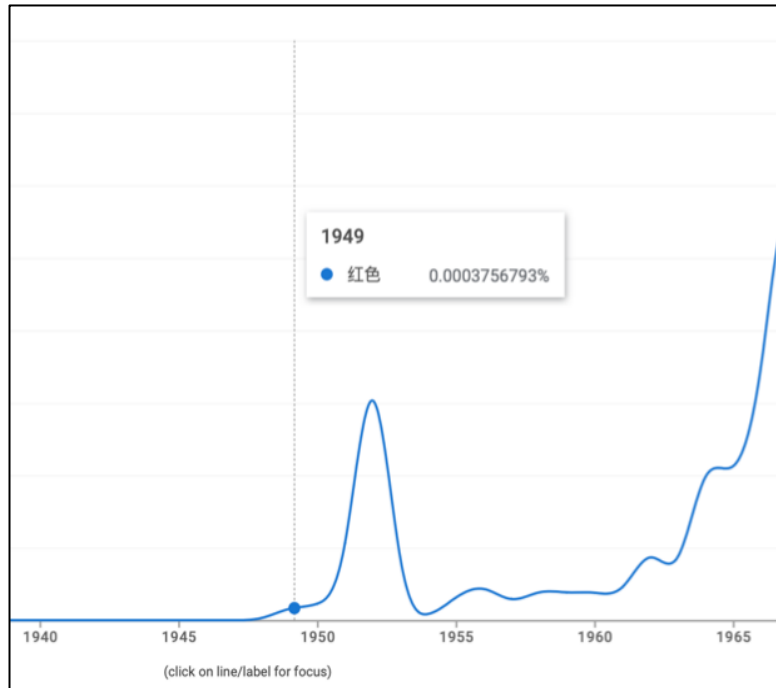**Figure 2.2(top-right):** A small spile in 1937

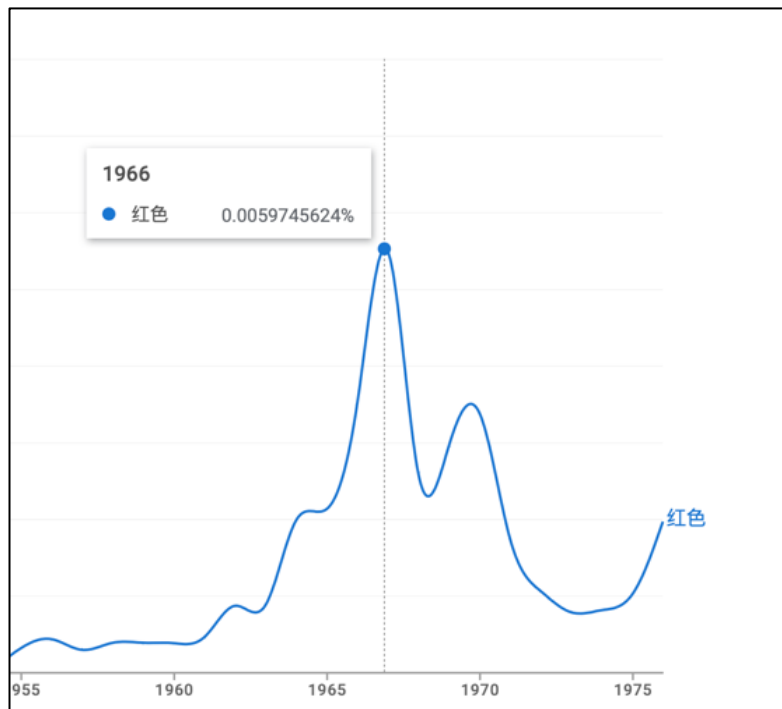**Figure 2.3(bottom-left):** A starting point of a wave

Figure 2.4(bottom-right): A peak in 1966

Figure 3.1: Cirrus Visualization of the corpus, Quotation from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung, using Voyant

Figure 3.2(left): Result for searching "红色"(red noun.) in Quotation of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung using Voyant
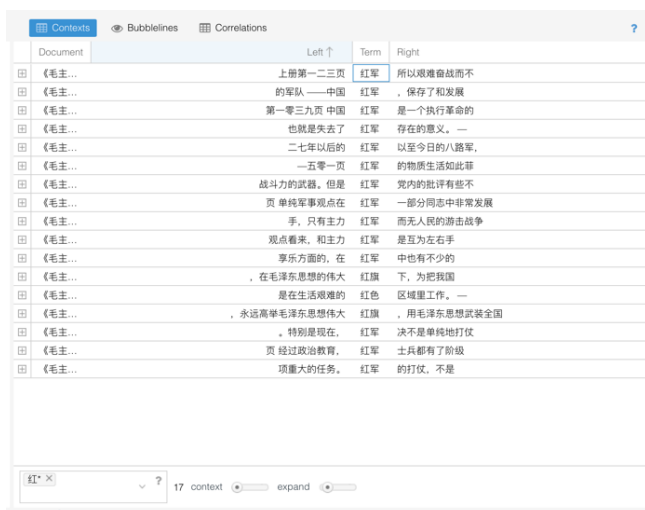

Figure 3.3(right): Result for searching "红*"(red adj.) in Quotation of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung using Voyant

6. Discussion of Key Findings

First, the comparison of top 10 words following the word "red", "yellow", "black" and "white" in Chinese justified that even though the four colors were widely believed to have

political implications worldwide, the color red, compared to other colors, has more interconnection with political words in Chinese culture.

Besides, the word Red peaked during key historical events across China, as shown in figure 2. Figure 2.1's peak was aligned to the Nanchang Uprising in 1927, regarded as the founding of the Chinese Red Army.(Schwartz, 1951) The key historical event that might be the cause of the peak in Figure 2.2 is the Marco Polo Bridge incident of July 1937, which was regarded as the cause to a full-scale war between the Empire of Japan and the Republic of China. To resist the Japanese invasion of China, the ruling Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party allies called the Second United Front and suspended the Chinese Civil War from 1937 to 1945. (Wang, 2004) Figure 2.3 shows a starting point of a new wave in 1949, which might be corresponding to a key historical event – The founding of the People's Republic of China, that also signifies a new era of China. Finally, Figure 2.4's shows the highest peak of the trend from 1919 to 1976. It strongly indicates the start of the Cultural Revolution. These dimensions confirmed that the color Red had significant political usage throughout Chinese history. Previous studies have illustrated that red as a color was used on multiple Chinese occasions. However, even though the spikes strongly indicate an interconnection between the color red and critical historical events in China, more research and analysis of the trend are needed to confirm the correlation between the color red and historical events in China.

At the final step, the visualization of corpus, *Quotation from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, does not show the word "red" as a high-frequency word in the book, as shown in Figure 3.1, indicating that the word "red" was not frequently used by the iconic leader of China, Chairman Mao. This result led to a deeper search of word "红色" and "红" in Voyant to see the occurrence of these two words. As shown in Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3, the word "red" (noun.) only appears once in the corpus and the word "red" (adj.) appears 17 times, forming three words: red army, red flag, and red(noun.). Even though red does not often shows in the book, some other features of the book, for example its red cover, might signify the profound meaning of color red in Chinese political field.

7. ReflectionsN

The project was quite successful because it provided several insights about the project and its results. The goal was to investigate perceptions of the color red by assessing its usage across different Chinese texts across a six-decade duration. The expectation was that spikes would be noted, especially around key historical events in Chinese between 1919 and 1976. In this case, the expectations were met. A preliminary review of the literature on the topic confirmed that the color red was associated with political events in Chinese history. For example, the graphical presentations confirm that the word was used more often when China was transitioning from one political ideology to the next.

While the project achieved its objectives, it presented critical lessons on the efficacy of the analytical tools. One of the main issues raised was whether the corpus used had colors or graphics that could indicate that color use was prevalent

during this period. The inability to undertake similar research on the dominant images in these texts was one of the tool's weaknesses. Younes and Reips(2019) used this tool to examine cross-cultural expressions between 1900 and 2000. Their work confirmed the existence of insufficient OCR, particularly concerning semantic scanning errors, which would affect words such as fail and sail. (Younes & Reips, 2019) This study highlighted a key problem in AI-based text scanning and confirmed that some terms might be poorly scanned, resulting in skewed results. Therefore, the tool's developers may have to create a working model that has improved accuracy for better image-to-text conversation and improved color recognition so that researchers could undertake comprehensive evaluations.

8. Proposed Next Steps

Despite its comprehensiveness, the project would use additional improvements. For example, in the future more visual analysis of the book could be incorporated with text analysis. This presentation relates to the analysis of the covers and images used in several books published in the same duration. This recommendation is based on the notion that some authors may have made their works more attractive to readers by using red imagery. For instance, Mao's book showcases how an author could opt to publish works with certain visual elements to attract and retain their readers. This aspect is necessary due to the cultural implications that the actual color, not the word, has on Chinese people's moods, emotions, and cultural dimensions.

In addition to this evaluation, the work could cover a wider duration. While China may have slightly stabilized after 1976, it experienced an economic transformation in the periods after this duration. This project was mainly skewered towards political and cultural changes. However, China's economic growth has led to globalization and increased interactions with other cultures. Thus, the potential that the term's popularity may have risen or significantly declined is high. Therefore, an expansive study covering key international trade and commerce events may offer newer and more unique insights into how the word is used, leading to better results.

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