

# Japanese Traditional and Ceremonial Colors

Excerpted from G.Thompson at [www.temarikai.com](http://www.temarikai.com)

**Red and White** are auspicious colors (good luck). You will find the two colors used for many special occasions, such as weddings, and births. I do not know the origins, but surmise as you do, that being one of the easier natural dyes to create, that it would become the more widely used. Since tassels are used to decorate things of celebration, red and white are the colors you will find (unless it is black and white, or all black for a funeral). There is an observance in Japan that you may find amusing - you are in a train station and see a couple. The man is in an all black, double-breasted suit, the woman in an all black kimono. Both are carrying a shopping bag (yes, a shopping bag) containing gifts. Are they returning from a funeral or a wedding? The only way to tell is if the woman's obi is colorful, or solid black, and the man's tie is white or black. Colorful/white is for a wedding, black/black is for the funeral.

**Blue and White** are also prominent colors in Japanese fabrics and dishware. *Yukata* is a blue and white cotton fabric used to make summer *kimonos* called "*yukata*". It is also used for the "*temari*-like" patterns found throughout their dishware. So many times, I hear western women moan about how the dishes they bought just won't match their color scheme at home. "Doesn't it come in green?" Hard to change a thousands of years old "tradition". : ) One group member follows a Usenet group where the same topic for different reasons was being discussed and offers the following reference. The color list is referenced to Liza Dalby's book "*Geisha*", about her study of Japanese *geisha* life. The layering of colours for *kimono* and their surface decoration vary with the season and even the month. Apparently, as ceremonial *kimono* are very expensive, only *geisha* follow the tradition of changing colours for each month. This is one list of colours from a traditional school of Japanese etiquette. ( *Note - Japanese culture is closely linked with the seasons, so each month is also represented by a nature reference.* )

- **January**      *Pine*: sprout green and deep purple
- **February**    *Redblossom plum*: crimson and purple
- **March**        *Peach*: peach and khaki
- **April**         *Cherry*: white and burgundy
- **May**          *Orange Flower*: deadleaf yellow and purple
- **June**         *Artemesia*: sprout green and yellow
- **July**          *Lily*: red and deadleaf yellow
- **August**       *Cicada wing*: cedar bark and sky blue
- **September**   *Aster*: lavender and burgundy
- **October**      *Bush Clover*: rose and slate blue
- **November**    *Maple*: vermilion and grey-green
- **December**    *Chrysanthemum*: lavender and deep blue

## Kimono

*Ao* (blue-green) - corresponds most closely to turquoise-green

*Moegi* (sprout-green) - could also be called grass-green or apple-green

*Kurenai* (scarlet-pink) - a bright, slightly yellow-toned pink produced from the *benibana*, safflower, an herbal dye source. The closest thing to red in the fashion palette, since truer red, "*Ake*" was primarily used to indicate rank.

*Kobai* (plum-pink) - a light red with a purple cast.

*Suo* (maroon) - another red, wandering in tone from purple to brown to orange. It is the name of the tree (sappanwood) from which the dye comes.

*Ki* (yellow) - the purest yellow

*Kuchiba* (old-leaf tan) - described as dead-leaf yellow. (lit. rotted leaves). If it were a bit brighter it would approach mustard.

*Yamabuki* (golden yellow) - a tree-shrub, the *Kerria japonica* with a roseate yellow blossom. A golden yellow like that of the common freesia.

*Murasaki* (purple) from the root of the gromwell, difficult to work with and restricted for the use of those of high rank. A fragile colour, tended to fade. A range of purples included shades called *fuji* (wisteria), *keshi murasaki* (a greyed mauve), *ebi* (red-violet), *koki* (deep violet) and *usuki* (pale violet).

*Shiro* (white)

*Kon* (black)



## Generalized Color Meanings

- Yellow - In the Far East, a sacred color; but in the West it can mean treachery.
- Red - Passion; gets the blood flowing more intensely.
- Orange - Represents knowledge and civilization.
- Violet - Stately and royal
- Blue - Cool, passive, and also symbolizes fidelity (as in true blue)
- Green - Restful and fresh
- White - Purity and truth
- Black - Gloom, sorrow and depression.

## Color Associations

Excerpted from "Japanese culture and daily life" web site [www.tjf.or.jp](http://www.tjf.or.jp)



**Red ( *akai, Seki, Shaku* )**

***Taiyoo no iro* - The color of the sun.** If you ask "What color is the sun" most Japanese will answer, "Red."



***Koohaku no mizuhiki* - Red and white gift wrap string ornaments**

*Mizuhiki* are made by rolling thin strips of paper into strings which are then covered with glue and dried. Red and white are colors used to decorate and enhance places where auspicious and happy occasions are held. The photograph shows *shuugi-bukuro*, gift wrap string ornaments for weddings and other auspicious occasions.

***Akachan* - Baby.** A newborn baby is bright red, thus the name.

***Koohaku manjuu* - Red and white bean-jam sweets.** Pairs of red and white *manjuu* are frequently presented as gifts to guests attending wedding receptions, and other auspicious commemorative events.

**Sekihan - Red-bean rice.** Rice cooled with *azuki* beans. Like *koohaku manjuu*, *sekihan* is a dish frequently served on auspicious occasions.



**Koohaku taikoo - Red and white team competition.** Competitors at elementary schools and of other groups are usually divided into "red" and "white" teams. When large groups are divided into several teams, other colors such as blue, yellow, and green may be used, but whenever there are two sides, they are usually called the "red" and "white" teams.

### **Daruma**

Doll representing the meditating figure of *Daruma (Bodhidharma)*, the founder of the *Zen* sect of *Buddhism*. The base of the figure is weighted so that even when toppled over, the doll stands upright again. The eyes are simply a pair of white circles, as here. You make a wish and paint in one eye. When the wish comes true, you can celebrate by painting in the other.



### **Phrases**

**Akaku naru:** Embarrassment, to blush

**Makka ni natte okoru:** Grow red with anger

**Akaji:** Red ink, deficit spending, loss (cf., **kuroji** : black ink, profits)

**Aka no tanin :** A complete or perfect stranger



**White( *shiroi*, *Haku* )**

**Yuki** - Snow

**Shiromuku** - Wedding kimono used in traditional style ceremony.

### **Phrases**

**Hakushi ni modosu** ( lit., "go back to the blank page" ) : Means going back to the beginning, starting at "square one," etc.

**Shiroi me de miru** ( lit., "look with the whites of one's eyes" ) : To scorn, treat coldly



**Black( *kuroi*, *Koku* )**

**Sumi** - Black ink

Calligraphy is brushed on pure white paper with pitch black ink. The *kanji* "sumi" consists of the *kanji* (black) and the *kanji* radical (earth).



**Mo - Mourning.** Black and white are the usual colors of mourning today. This tradition goes back to the formal wear frock coats introduced from Europe in the late nineteenth century. Before that, mourning attire was white or made of undyed linen fabric. The photograph shows a *kooden* (condolence gift) envelope strung by black and white *mizuhiki*.

**Kami and me - Hair and eyes.** There are various shades of black, but "black" figures in many words and expressions referring to hair and eyes.

*Kurokami* (Black hair) : Synonymous for "beautiful hair" of a woman.

*Shirome* and *kurome* ( lit., "white eye, black eye") : White of the eye and iris (and pupil) of the eye

## Phrases

*Shirokuro o tsukeru* ( lit., "draw the line between black and white" ) : Clarify whether right or wrong, good or bad

*Me o shirokuro saseru* : To roll one's eyes in fright, surprise, or anguish

*Haraguroi* ( lit., "black belly" ) : Ill-intentioned, evilhearted



## Yellow ( *kiiro, Ko, O* )

*Himawari* - Sunflower

*Tampopo* - Dandelion

*Fumikiri* - Railway crossing

*Kodomo booshi* - Schoolchildren's caps



The Japan Industrial Standards ( JIS ) code designates yellow and yellow-and-black stripes as signifying warning. Yellow is used at railway crossings to indicate caution, school children's hats are bright yellow to increase visibility for motorists, and the bumpy lines installed in station floors and sidewalks to guide the visually impaired are yellow.

## Phrases

*Kuchibashi ga kiroi* ( lit., "beak is yellow" ) : Refers to someone who is inexperienced or young

*Kiroi koe* ( lit., "yellow voice" ) : The shrill voice of women and children



## Blue ( *aoi, Sei, Sho* )

*Aozora* and *Umi* - Blue sky and sea

**Ao and Midori - Blue and green.** The new, young foliage of spring is called *shinryoku* ( lit., "new green" ) or *aoba* ( lit., "blue leaves" ). This usage of *ao* when referring the new spring foliage also suggests "youth," "newness," "immaturity," as seen in the words for "youth" and "young man" : *seishun*, *seinen*, *aokusai*, and *aonisai*.

## Seifuku - School uniform



Traditional blue fabric was colored using indigo dyes, and even today indigo blue is a common color in Japanese clothing. The suits (called "recruit suits") worn by university students visiting potential employers for job interviews as well as the standard attire of office workers is often dark blue of various shades.

## Phrases

*Aoku naru* ( to grow pale ) : To pale when ill or stricken by fear or worry



## Green ( *midori, Ryoku, Roku* )

*Ryokucha* - Green tea. Green tea is made by a process that preserves the green color of the tea leaves. ( *Cha*, or tea, as a general term is associated with the color " brown. " )

*Ryokuooshoku yasai* - Lit., "green and yellow" vegetables; colored vegetables. Vegetables whose edible parts contain 600 or more micrograms of carotene per 100 grams, such as spinach, carrots, squash, and tomatoes, come under this category. When packing a *bentoo* lunch, care to include foods of different colors helps assure a nutritional balance. Red can be represented by vegetables like tomatoes and carrots, green by leafy vegetables or asparagus, and yellow by egg or citrus fruit.

*Midori no hi* - Greenery Day. Green is the color widely used to mean "vegetation," "trees" and "foliage" in general. April 29th, the birthday of the Emperor *Shoowa*, who was especially devoted to nature and natural science, is celebrated as a national holiday dedicated to gratitude for nature's bounties and spiritual enrichment through appreciation and enjoyment of nature.

## Flowers

Chrysanthemums are a favorite flower for the Japanese. In general, they prefer flowers that drop their petals one by one, rather than fall off in one clump. That is why the rose is not popular, and even considered bad luck. *Sakura* (cherry blossoms), daisies, plum blossoms are greatly admired. Something with many petals can also be related to many years of life (long life) which is another "good fortune" wish.