

THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF CHINESE COSMOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF
DIALECTICISM

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In Greek and Indian cosmologies, there are four cosmic elements and four qualities¹. In Chinese cosmology, there are five elements: Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth. There is no separate existence of cosmic qualities. Starting with water, as the first substance to have been created, the specialised reasoning of dialecticism conceived fire as its opposite, which became another element. Fire is produced by two dried pieces of wood being rubbed together, when heat of friction causes wood to burn and produce fire. As producer of fire, wood becomes an element. How can wood be compared not only with fire but also with water, the first element, which produced all others? Wood proved to be lighter than water, which then had as its opposite metal, the heaviest thing in the world. Wood and metal each then became an element. Considering metal, it came as the produce of earth; hence metal and earth as opposite became elements. Now earth produces not only metal but also water, as seen in wells and in natural springs. This would make water the opposite of earth, but water is already an element, in fact, the first, so that reasoning comes prematurely to its end. There has been no occasion to consider air as opposite when water easily became the opposite of earth. Then finally we have a cycle of five elements beginning with water and ending with it. A point to realize is that earth can produce water but not air.

In Greek and Indian cosmologies, there are four cosmic elements: Water, Earth, Air and Fire. Commonsense would justify their selection. The surface of the earth is divided between water and earth, water covering the larger part. This makes water the first cosmic element and earth as the next. Then the entire globe is enveloped by air, which comes as the third cosmic element. Finally, we find the heat of the sun reaches our earth, with the result that everything on earth incorporates some heat. Even water is relatively hot, for when it parts with some heat, it freezes as ice. From such consideration heat came to be recognized as a cosmic quality and its representative on earth became fire. Thus arose the four cosmic elements mentioned above. Moreover, in the above-mentioned cosmologies, there are four cosmic qualities: Heat, Cold, Dryness and Moisture.

We now turn to Chinese cosmology. It recognises five element: Water, Fire, Wood, Metal and Earth. There is no positive mention of the corresponding five cosmic qualities, so that our comparison is limited only to the cosmic elements.

There is in Chinese the term *San-Pao*, meaning three powers, which would be Heaven and Earth, as the cosmic parents, and their issue would be water, which

can produce other elements. This makes the three items the most powerful agents. Fig. 1 shows Heaven and Earth connected by a double line, which means these two are one, like a rod of magnet with two opposite poles constituting it as a whole. The primeval couple has produced water as the first substance. Even *R̥gveda* would recognise water as such. Its verse 6-59-7 states: "Waters are the parents of all that is stationed and all that moves". This would mean forms of all matter and all forms of energy, the entire creation. Even the Greek philosophers recognised water as the first cosmic element, the source of all creation.

To establish the cosmic elements of Chinese cosmology comes dialecticism with its specialised reasoning. According to it, every entity has its opposite. Having accepted water as the first element, this representing cold, its opposite becomes fire, which is the hottest thing on earth. This relationship has been established by reasoning. Hence, in Fig. 1, water and fire are shown connected by a dotted or broken line. Nevertheless, *R̥gveda* (ii.351) speaks of fire or *Agni* as *Āpāmnapāt*, meaning issue or child of water. This finally confirms fire as the next cosmic element after water.

On considering fire, the question arose: How is it produced? The early man used two pieces of dry wood and rubbed one against the other. Friction resulted in the production of heat and when its amount increased, there resulted fire. Wood is a non-conductor of heat. On being rubbed, the heat that was produced accumulated at the spot, since wood is a non-conductor, and the amount of accumulated heat increased, resulting in the production of fire. Briefly speaking, wood produced fire, and this makes fire and wood both cosmic elements. Further, dialecticism hopes to find the opposite of wood. Wood can be related not only to fire but also to water, which is the first element and father of other elements. Then wood related to water proves to be lighter. When a piece of wood is thrown in water, it floats, showing that it is much lighter. From this property reasoning assumed it as the opposite for the heaviest thing on earth and this proves to be metal. If wood floats on water, a piece of metal sinks at once. Metal being the opposite of wood, it also became an element. In Fig. 1, wood and metal are shown connected with a broken line, indicating that their connection has been established mainly by reasoning.

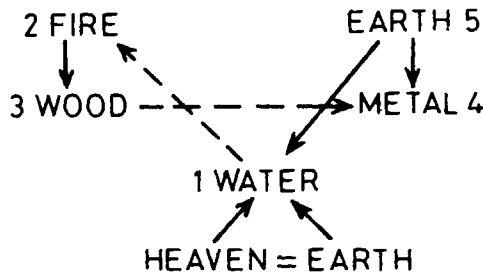


Fig. 1

While considering fire, it was established as the opposite of wood, as it was its producer. Here the question arises: What is the producer of metal? It was found to be ore in the earth, which then became an element like metal. Since metal and earth are the produce and the producer in reality, they are shown in Fig. 1 connected with a whole line and not a dotted line.

Now earth produces not only metal but also water. We find this to be the case in wells and in natural springs. But water is already an element, in fact, the very first. Hence, search for another opposite of water would be impossible and dialecticism would admit this stage to be the last, being unable to deduce further.

We finally find that there has been a cycle of five elements which began and ended with water. We notice that air does not come as the opposite of earth on the face of water taking such a place. We can only state that reasoning came prematurely to its end.

By now we have explained the origin of five cosmic elements that constitute Chinese cosmology. That there is no corresponding qualities as in other cosmologies can only be noted. It must be assumed that here elements implicitly carry their own qualities. But it would be difficult for wood to represent any cosmic quality.

NOTES

1. Indian cosmology recognised the theory of five elements. Ether also constitutes an element in addition to Water, Earth, Air and Fire. There was no explicit mention of 'Qualities'. However, the 'qualities' were recognised in Greek Theory.