

AN ANALYTICAL AND COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDIAN AND CHINESE COSMOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

To understand Chinese Cosmology in terms of the Indian system we have to look upon Chinese elements as symbols of the qualities they incorporate. The elements rearranged with the corresponding qualities would be :

As elements: Fire, Water, Metal, Earth and Wood. As qualities: Hot, Cold, Dry, Moist, and Wind. Nothing can be drier than a metal hence dryness is symbolized as Metal. Subsoil is invariably moist, hence moisture is symbolized as Earth. Wood is fresh - wood, like a cutting which transplants another life-form. It is potential life, like an egg, or better still here cosmic egg, the source of all creation. Its content is wind, like *pneuma* in Greek philosophy. Life-breath, the source of cosmic movement, cosmic existence, in fact cosmic soul. Life-energy is creative energy and *Akasha* as container would have cosmic soul as content. This makes wind (as cosmic) = *Akasha*.

1. A problem in comparative cosmology:

By cosmology is understood a system of interpreting the universe in terms of few irreducible factors called Cosmic elements. Now whatever exists in the universe can be either a form of matter, like star, stone and plant, or a form of energy, like heat and light. Further we must recognize entities as being independent of others, like stone as matter and heat as energy. Then what is merely relative, like heat and cold, these would be one and same entity, which concentrated would be called heat and reduced would be felt as cold. Thirdly there would be hypothetical entities logically justifiable but not knowable. When there is multiplicity in the universe they cannot all have independent origins. It is logical to assume that they finally came from a common source. In Indian cosmology the all creative energy is called *Akasha*, which is represented in Greek as *Aether*. But since the universe is the same to all observers, its make-up cannot be explained as different by the authors of two or more cosmologies. Nevertheless there are at least three different systems of cosmology as follows :

Indian : *Akasha*, Wind, Fire, Water and Earth.

Greek : *Aether*, Fire, Wind, Water and Earth.

Chinese : Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water.

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The Indian and Greek systems differ merely in the positions allotted to Fire and Wind, while the Chinese is without Wind, and moreover contains Wood and Metal as elements.

Thus arises a regular problem in comparative cosmology. There has been no previous study explaining the difference between Chinese cosmology and others and the solitary attempt has been by myself in two communications (Mahdihassan 1978 and 1979). These, however, require elaboration and thereby reconsideration.

2. Analysis of Indian Cosmology.

Rather than assume that the Chinese elements really differ as their names imply they may be different symbols of the same entities found for example in Indian cosmology. This would suggest beginning with a fresh analysis of the Indian and Chinese cosmologies.

Taking the Indian system first the most tangible element is Earth. It represents solid matter, something immobile by itself signifying the least amount of energy content. Water comes as the next last. It is again matter, but possessing a labile form, so that by applying heat it volatilizes and reducing its own heat it solidifies as ice. Water can be easily confined to a container. Next comes Fire before water. Fire is clearly heat as energy which challenges a container and is destined to disseminate itself into the spacious universe. Prior to Fire is placed Wind. This is really movement, a subtle form of energy which can be felt when air is blowing. It would even include ultra-sonic energy which, though not audible, is powerful enough even to crush a bacterium. We are finally left with the first element. Divanji (1948) has correctly equated Akasha = Brahma life-donating energy and more the all-creative-energy. Popular cosmology identifies it as Cosmic-soul. Reviewing the order in which the elements are bound in Indian cosmology, the first would be creative energy and the last solid matter, first Akasha and the last Earth. In fact creative energy, as the highest form of energy, becomes an idealized entity and thereby hypothetical. Just for this reason the materialistic school of Indian philosophy, the Lokayata, refuses to acknowledge Akasha. But then it accepts the universe merely as existing ignoring its origin. Even in Greek cosmology Akasha=Aether. Returning to the order in which the cosmic elements have been arranged their final compiler has interpreted the Universe as supported by forms of energy rather than by forms of matter. And this view differs radically from the one generally accepted.

3. The current explanation of the origin of Indian Cosmology:

The best interpreter of Indian cosmology has been Deussen (1906; 112). He writes, "like the Greek philosophers, Philolaus, Plato and Aristotle most

Indian thinkers distinguish five elements, Aether, Wind, Fire, Water and Earth. A dependence, however, of the Greek idea on the Indian or the Indian on the Greek is not to be thought of for this reason, if no other, that the order of the elements is different, in as much as the Greeks place fire between aether and air and Indians air between Aether and Fire. Further, also because on both sides independently of one another the *simple observation of nature* led to the thought of the *five compound states of matter* viz. the solid, the fluid, gaseous, permanently elastic and imponderable as the five component parts of the material universe to which correspond, as we shall see, the five specific energies of the organs of sense. The result is that both in the Greek and Indian philosophies the elements are formed out of simpler concepts." We have explained that in Indian cosmology there are two forms of matter, forms which are tangible, and these are Water and Earth, while Air is not tangible, but in Greek there are three forms of matter Wind as Air, Water and Earth. But in both the Greek and Indian systems there are at least two forms of energy, Aether or Akasha and Heat. Yet Deussen ignores forms of energy and considers the existence only of "five compound states of matter". Moreover one state of matter is qualified as "imponderable" obviously referring to Akasha. Such an explanation throws more shadow than light upon the nature of Akasha. Altogether we have seen that the compiler of cosmology was a deep thinker to have conceived of creative energy or Akasha and next, to have symbolized movement-energy as Wind. That he was no mere observer of nature confining himself merely to the obvious forms of matter is quite clear which becomes more so when we consider how Indian cosmology has developed from its antecedent traceable to Rig Veda.

4. Energy fundamentally more important than Matter:

We have differed from Deussen in finding the author of cosmology to be a philosopher rather than a naturalist, and that cosmic elements are forms of energy more than forms of matter. That the idea of energy-forms is fundamental can be confirmed by a comparative study. Needham (1956; 2: 244) writes that, in Chinese "the term for element would be Hsing, which etymologically had, from the beginning, the implication of Movement". Hsing means "to go, to move, and the inscribed character is a drawing of a cross - roads" (Needham, p. 222). Roughly expressed the elements keep the universe "Moving" in all directions, idealized as four, the four directions indicated by a cross-road, with Earth, as the universe, to represent what is being 'moved'. In this light earth becomes the entity "moved" and the other elements the "movers" and the movers and the moved together constitute the universe, the entire existence. This required a source powerful enough to account for movement or energy permeating all through the universe. In Indian cosmology it is Akasha = Brahma = Creative energy. It has

created the other elements and permeated into them all. It is like a mother having produced an issue thereby has offered it her own blood. Vedic explanation states that the creator produced the universe and then entered into it. This applies easily to creative energy which cannot but be present in all the entities that have appeared as its emanation. The other elements now charged with creative energy become energized and thereby bipolar, mutually reactive, so that they can interact and give rise to a complex, but to an integrated whole, as the Universe. Thus Akasha becomes not only the creator but also the preserver of the Universe.

We now turn to aether of Greek cosmology. From Needham (p. 245) we learn that, Anaximander, 560 B. C. calls it "Apeiron, meaning non-limited". We easily see how Apeiron, the non-limited, becomes a synonym of Akasha, the sky which knows no space and thus would also be non-limited. Moreover "Apeiron is a kind of substratum of the others". Here again Apeiron = Akasha, for Akasha has entered into the other elements while Apeiron has accepted unto itself all the other elements. Then Akasha has energized the other elements which then could interact with one another. Of Apeiron Needham writes that, "the elements warred with one another. Empedocles 450 B. C. associated each element with a particular god. He termed the elements as roots, Rhizomata, and the familiar word, stoicheia, was first used by Plato 428-348 B. C. Stoicheia has no connection with the idea of movement, signifying a small stationary post. It acquired the meaning of simple component". But what Plato tolerated as static had to be interpreted as dynamic by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.). Needham continues stating that, "Aristotle took over the doctrine of four primary sorts of matter, Protasomata, gave it a dynamic twist by considering their qualities. The Stoicheia of Aristotle were no longer fire etc but rather dry, hot, cold and moist". Thus elements were replaced by qualities for these were dynamic. Now "Philolaus, 430 B. C. thought of a fifth element to have some connection between the elements and called it Holkas, the Hull-of-ship, similar to Apeiron of Anaximander. Plato followed this up identifying with Aether, a subtle kind of air. Aristotle relegated it to the *substance of the heavenly bodies* banishing it from the sublunary world". We realize that the universe is something energized and consequently its fundamentals must be energy - forms themselves. On this account elements have been further reduced to qualities which are clear forms of energy. While earth is solid matter, even this is supposed to be a combination of cold and dryness, each as quality of some kind.

5. Qualities recognized as fundamental in cosmology:

We have discussed that the universe is made up of five cosmic elements. To show their function we came to consider their qualities, for while elements are static, qualities are dynamic. In the Indian and Greek cosmologies the elements are constituted of two qualities each as follows :

Water = Cold + Moisture

Fire = Heat + Moisture

Wind = Heat + Moisture

Earth = Cold + Dryness

Akasha/Aether = Creative energy ; this as “quality” is identical with the “element”. Let us now compare the Chinese elements with their qualities. Fulder (1980: 59) offers the following information :

Wood = Wind

Fire = Heat

Earth = Moisture

Metal = Dryness

Water = Cold

It may be noted that Water, Fire, Wind and Earth are mere symbols and they have been selected because they are tangible entities familiar to all. The real entities are forms of energy. But Heat/Cold would be the same form of energy and Moisture/Dryness the properties of vapourized water only quantitatively different. Then if we re-arrange the elements, with their qualities selecting independent entities, not the relative or incorporated ones, we would have Akasha = Creative energy.

Wind = Movement (not Heat + Moisture)

Fire = Heat (alone, dryness being superfluous)

Water = Moisture (cold as superfluous)

Earth = Cold

Now the analysis of Indian Cosmic elements, with their single qualities, enables us to explain the subtle difference between the positions of Wind and Fire in the Indian and Greek Cosmologies. Wind taken as Air, in Greek cosmology, becomes a form of matter, and as such comes after Fire which, as heat represents a form of energy and energy claims priority over matter. The Indian cosmologist took Wind = Movement, then of the most subtle kind, including ultra-sonic energy, which would have preference over Heat.

It means that Wind, being Movement as energy, comes before Heat as energy and explains the priority assigned in Indian cosmology to Wind over Fire. Even this difference between the Greek and Indian cosmologies has not been explained before.

6. Protocosmology in Rigveda:

Now there are three gates to our knowing : What is beautiful, universal and useful. Of these three what is useful is remembered best. The early man was a hunter and a cave dweller. When his family increased he had to exploit vegetable foodstuffs including roots and seeds of grasses. These are nonedible as raw material but roasted they become consumable. Accordingly Leaky (1981:121) informs that already the Peking man, an earlier contemporary of the Neanderthaler, knew the use of fire. Correspondingly we find fire has become god Agni among the Aryans who at the time were also hunters and nomads. Then pursuing game the Aryan often landed himself in localities where water was not available. Here Rigveda 9.79.3 speaks of "Thirst having subdued in the desert". Thus water came to be recognized as most important to life and correspondingly it was projected to become the first substance that was created. Then being the First Principle it gave rise to fire. Fire was then called Apamnapat, son-of-water, and in verse 1.43.1 that "thou art the water's child". Moreover water had the quality Moisture. RV. 1.23.23 states, "the Waters this day have sought and to their moisture we have come". And the corresponding quality of Fire was heat. RV. 10.88.10 maintains that "Agni ripens plants of every form and nature" and common knowledge recognized that it is heat that ripens. We have discussed Water and Fire as indispensable to the Aryan and these two entities are recognized in the proto-cosmology of Rigveda. Now as hunter the Aryan had often to over-exert himself. He therefore came to learn ephedra as drug that makes him fatigue-proof. Hence he took to ephedra with a vengeance, consuming its juice, Soma, thrice a day, since it is an energizer and also euphoriant. Soma later on became the agency of rejuvenation, longevity and resurrection. Even while he remained a hunter he took to pastoral life. What struck most while observing animal life was that multiplicity depended upon procreation. It is otherwise established that the Aryan created the universe projecting himself as Purusha with details in RV. X. Then to get to creation there had to be procreation which would be the best to project. And to assign the power of procreation the choice fell upon Soma. RV. 2.36.5 states Soma "is the strengthener of the body's might". Further 10.25.1 says "Soma, send us a good and happy mind and energy and mental powers". With such virtues pertaining to body and mind, already incorporated in Soma, procreative power could easily be added. Hence RV. Valakhilya 10.30.5 (Griffith's translation p. 424) says "those waters in which Soma is delighted as a youngman with pleasant damsels". The next stanza 10.30.6 explains that, "so maidens (Waters) bow before the youthful gallant (Soma) who comes with love". Then Soma, as lover, rendered the waters, pregnant, which could deliver fire as the son-of-water. There also arose a synonym of Soma which is Durosha. This Bailey (1972 ; 105) explains is an "epithet of the lover's drink". No one could escape

observing that three biological factors, Father + Mother + Son, go to make a consistent whole. With Water as the direct producer and Fire as issue Soma had to be there as the procreative power. Thus the three elements of Proto-cosmology in Rigveda came to be Water, Fire, and Soma, the latter as the precursor of Akasha, or as creative energy. It would be realized that all the three entities were indispensable to the life of the early Aryan.

7. The cosmology of the early agriculturist :

Rigveda represents the life of the Aryan as hunter and as pastoral man, in each case mainly as a nomad. Later on there came the agriculturist. A farmer depends mostly upon water, be it as rain or irrigation; next he wants arable soil and finally the sun indispensable to plant life. When these three factors were projected there arose the first properly formulated cosmology found in Chandogya Upanishad, with Water, Earth and Fire as the elements. No farmer needs air for his farm, hence it has not been considered a cosmic element. Thus in Rigveda its proto-cosmology was the invention of the hunter, while the cosmology of Chandogya Upanishad was that of the farmer. This has been discussed before (Mahdihassan 1980). When the medicine man came to analyse human life he had before him what was essential to plant-life, as earth, water and heat. Now the essentials of human life appeared to be firstly breath or wind. Then he drank water and excreted it as urine and as perspiration, Thirdly it was found that once the body gets as cold as the atmosphere, life has departed which easily makes body heat an essential. Then factorizing the essentials of human life the thinker conceived of three elements Wind, Heat, and Water which as humours became Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, and these together gave the Tridosha doctrine of Indian humorology also discussed before (Mahdihassan 1980). We can find here the realistic basis of the Tridosha doctrine which does not include such substances as "Black-bile" of Greek humorology. This seems to be a mere hypothetical substance to correspond to Dryness recognized as a cosmic quality in Greek cosmology. At any rate the humours of Tridosha doctrine appear to be quite sufficient to explain the essentials of human life.

By now we can easily realize that the elements of Chandogya cosmology explain the requirements of plant life and the humours of Tridosha doctrine the essentials of human life.

8. The progressive formulation of Indian cosmology :

Summarizing the stages representing the development of Indian cosmology we find :

1. **The hunter** : recognized as indispensable to his life, Water, Fire and Soma.
2. **The pastoral nomad** : recognized procreation as an essential of animal life but assigned this quality to Soma.
As result Rigveda has a proto-cosmology with Water, Fire, and Soma, this now as proto-Akasha, procreation being the quality which was projected as creative energy.
3. **The agriculturist** : found as essential to plant-life, Water, Earth and Heat and Chandogya Upanishad records a cosmology with these cosmic elements.
4. **The medicine-man** : found Wind (Breath), Heat and Water essential to human life whence arose the Tridosha doctrine with Vata, Pitta and Kapha respectively.

The essentials of plant and human life explain how each life-form is preserved, but there is no indication of how life originated. The one who thought in these terms realized that Soma has been the element of a proto-cosmology, with procreation as quality. Accordingly projecting procreation this became creative energy, the source of all existence : Soma later gave in to Akasha and Akasha = Brahma which symbolized became Brahma Anda = Cosmic egg, when Soma-Rasa the juice, became the equivalent of Cosmic-soul. The idea of Brahma is found late in Vedic literature but is legitimately traceable to Soma, the element first to represent procreative powers. Then summing up the essentials observed as maintaining plant life, animal life and human life, being the contributions of a pastoral man, a farmer and a medicine-man, there finally arose the cosmology with the following cosmic elements - Akasha, Wind, Fire, Water and Earth. This integrated cosmology has a long past and the final form has been assigned by a thinker or philosopher. It has not resulted on an observer or a naturalist analysing nature at one sitting however long it may have been.

9. Chinese cosmology : its first element and quality.

Only after having considered the nature and origin of Indian cosmology we can turn to Chinese cosmology. Paragraph 5 gives the elements of Chinese cosmology to our left and the qualities of each in the row to our right. The first element appears as Wood and the first quality as Wind. Wind is air in movement, clearly representing energy. Moreover as early thinkers the Chinese believed Blood = Soul. They further observed that freshly split blood gives rise to vapours which rise as "Wind" upwards. Here Palos (1963 : 51) points out that, "Chhi originally, signified Air, similar to Pnuma of the Greeks". It then means, Blood-Vapours = Wind = Pnuma = Chhi = Creative energy. In an earlier article (Mahdihassan, 1982) I have shown that the character Chhi is a drawing of blood vapours arising

like wind upwards and partly of blood as liquid sinking underground. In this light Chhi is primarily blood vapours and not air. Since blood = soul, blood-vapours = soul in ascendance = Creative energy. With this idea an entity was to symbolize the liberated soul as an all-expanding and an all-moving agency. No idea came better than Wind. It is invisible yet it is energy and then eternal movement, which can be present in every corner of the world. It is a universal mover and as such creative energy. Its one quality, spaciousness or limitlessness, easily identifies it with Akasha, looked upon as Sky. Taking Wind as "quality" we have to find an entity to represent an "element". Wind would be the content and the element concerned would be the container. In Chinese cosmology Wood is that element. Mathews (1975) has the Chinese word Mu, Mu, character 4593, which he translates as Tree, Wood and Timber. Now Tree would be a particular life-form, while Timber would be lifeless material but wood alone would be fresh-wood, apparently dead but potentially living, for when transplanted like a cutting it can grow into a tree. Wood is Fresh-Wood, and not dried-Wood, for which the proper word is timber. The wood would be like egg which is also apparently dead but can develop into a regular chicken. Now when the Chinese formulated their cosmology they had been farmers but had not yet known the Chicken, which is an Indian bird and reached China later than the time when their cosmology had been formulated. Egg then was no popular food stuff. Hence instead of egg they chose Wood as symbolizing latency of life. In popular Indian cosmology there is Cosmic Egg and Cosmic Soul; the former is to be looked upon as the container or "element" the latter as the content or "quality". In Chinese cosmology Wind, symbolizing all-moving-energy, becomes the content and quality, while Wood, the symbol of potential or latent form of life, the container or element. Thus to understand Wood as element we have to consider Wood = Fresh-Wood = Egg = Cosmic egg = Akasha = Creative Energy.

10. Final formulations of Chinese Cosmology :

Just as the hunter found what was most essential to his life, and created the proto-cosmology of Rigveda his Chinese compatriot must have done something similar. Then Water would come first to be considered. Now when we are extremely thirsty and drink water the feeling it produces is that of cold. Thus arose water as element and cold as its quality. The Aryan hunter had recognized Fire as next important to water. The Chinese would have agreed and recognized Heat as quality which required a tangible entity to represent it as element when Fire came as the idea. We have pointed out that Chandogya cosmology is the invention of a farmer-as-thinker. His Chinese compatriot earlier must have conceived something likewise for the essential of plant life would be Water, Heat and Earth. Then any one who has been extremely thirsty realized that on drinking water it is found

to be cold. Accordingly Water became element with Cold, its quality, as given in para 5. Water, however, has been placed at the end of the series which has further to be explained. Now a farmer critically observing the growth of cultivated plants would realize that though water is essential the land should not be water-logged. It is soil moisture or absorbed water which best supports field-crops. Hence moisture became quality and, as its container, came as earth. We can further conceive earth as container distinct from moisture as its content, for moist-earth can be dried. On the contrary with Water, as the container of moisture, this as quality becomes inseparable.

Now Chinese thought has been dominated by the doctrine of Yin-Yang, Shadow-Light. This imparts polarity which makes every thing an activated entity. Then the qualities cold and moisture suggest their opposites as Heat and Dryness respectively. Dryness has not been considered and has to be explained. Now of all metals what is found as the purest in nature would be gold. The early man observed gold as granules in some river beds. When these are melted no loss in weight ever occurs, showing gold to be a substance as dry as it can possibly be. Then gold became the element and dryness its quality. Gold later on has been idealized as the metal so that the Chinese word Chin, primarily means gold, but is generally translated as metal. Obviously metal as element came only after the Chinese had come to learn gold and they first exploited it as drug of longevity, as explained in an earlier article (Mahdihassan 1981). In Chinese cosmology the quality dryness is far better represented by metal than what is to be found as part of the quality of Air in Greek cosmology.

11. The order of Chinese elements:

We have now to discuss the order in which the cosmic elements have been arranged in Chinese cosmology. Wood becomes the equivalent of cosmic-egg, Brahma-Anda of popular Indian cosmology. Wind as quality becomes the most subtle form of energy revealing movement which moves every thing. Wind becomes the equal of Cosmic soul. The form of energy which is perceptible comes next as quality and it is Heat, symbolizing Fire as its container. Obviously Fire here is a symbol while Heat a reality. Next to Heat comes moisture being a quality essential to every life-form. Thus from Wind to Moisture we have the first three qualities Movement, Heat and Moisture, to which correspond Wood, Fire and Earth as elements. When a life-form is depleted of its moisture it leads to death, so that Dryness is not an independent entity essential to life. Likewise cold is to be appreciated merely as reduced heat. Then Dryness and Cold are no independent forms of energy and become relative concepts and as such hypothetical. Dehydration or decrease in moisture would be less serious than loss of body-

heat so that Dryness comes as, the last but one, quality, while cold as the last of all. This explains the arrangement of qualities and of corresponding elements. Chinese cosmology then best explains how it arose analysing the essentials of life, which on mere projection resulted in cosmic qualities with tangible cosmic element.

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सारांश

भारतीय तथा चीन के ब्रह्माण्ड मीमांसा का विश्लेषणात्मक तथा तुलनात्मक अध्ययन

एस. मेहदिहसन

भारतीय प्रणाली के अर्थों में चीन के ब्रह्माण्ड विज्ञान को समझने के लिये हमें चीन के तत्त्वों को उनके गुणों के चिह्नों के रूप में समाविष्ट कर देखना होगा। उनके गुणों के अनुसार क्रमबद्ध किए गए तत्त्व होंगे जैसे तत्त्वः आग, जल, धातु पृथ्वी और लकड़ी जैसे गुण :- गर्म, ठण्डा, शुष्क, आर्द्र तथा हवा। धातु से शुष्क अन्य कोई वस्तु नहीं हो सकती इसलिए शुष्कता को धातु का संकेत माना गया है। अबभूमि सदा ही आर्द्र होती है, इसलिए आर्द्रता को पृथ्वी का संकेत माना गया है। लकड़ी हरीमरी लकड़ी है जैसे एक शाखा जो कि एक जीवन के रूप में प्रतिरोपित हो जाती है। यह शक्तिशाली जीवन है जैसे कि अण्ड या इससे उचित ब्रह्माण्ड है जो कि सम्पूर्ण सृष्टि का स्रोत है। इसके अंग हवा है ग्रीक दर्शन शास्त्र में न्युमा के जैसा, जीवन श्वास, अन्तरिक्ष के गतिविधी का स्रोत, अन्तरिक्ष का अस्तित्व, वास्तव में अन्तरिक्ष की आत्मा है। जीवन शक्ति सृजनात्मक शक्ति है और अन्तरिक्ष आत्मा के रूप में आकाश का आधार होगा। इस प्रकार हवा (अन्तरिक्षीय जैसे) = आकाश।