

The Early Semiosis of Five Phases by Zou Yan

Lan Xing

Abstract: The focus of this study is the early semiosis of Five Phases. Although now perceived as a sophisticated sign, in its initial stage the Five Phases concept did not appear qualified to be regarded as a sign, even according to the broadest definition. The semiosis of Five Phases is therefore probably still emerging. The aim of this article is to identify the catalyst for the early semiosis of Five Phases, and puts forward the argument that Zou Yan, a prestigious thinker in the Warring States, is responsible for this development.

Keywords: Five Phases, Zou Yan, similarity, semiosis

邹衍思想中的五行早期符号化进程研究

兰 兴

摘 要: 本文旨在研究五行早期的符号化进程。如今，五行已被视为一个内涵丰富的符号，但在其诞生之初，即便根据有关符号的最宽泛定义，五行依然难以被视为一个符号。因此，五行的符号化进程研究可以说是一个目前尚未充分展开的课题。本文的目的在于揭示导致五行早期符号化进程的关键原因，并进而指出战国时期著名思想家邹衍在这一过程中所扮演的关键角色。

关键字: 五行，邹衍，相似性，符号化进程

DOI: 10.13760/b.cnki.sam.201801017

I . Introduction

The origins of modern semiotics have been sought in recent years

(Cobley, 2010, p. 13). The classical semiotics of China have also attracted more attention and been the subject of noteworthy research. A landmark study is *Semiotic Thinking in Pre-Qin Philosophy* by Zhu Dong, published in 2014. Here, Zhu comprehensively investigates the ancient Semiotics of China and provides a theoretical framework for further studies. Other studies have suggested a background and accessible approaches, which can facilitate more research in this field. In this article we focus on an examination of Five Phases 五行.

Five Phases is a key concept in the philosophical and intellectual history of China, to the extent that it is believed to have shaped Chinese patterns of thinking. In retrospect, it is clear that both intellectuals and civilians were accustomed to using the Five Phases to categorise and explain different phenomena in the social and natural worlds. From the perspective of semiotics, Five Phases is also an important symbol in traditional China. Many Western sinologists, such as Graham (2016, p. 1) and Needham (1987, p. 232), have used the term “correlative thinking” to describe the features of Chinese thinking patterns according to structuralism. In terms of correlative thinking, all things or phenomena in the universe exhibit some level of reaction, correspondence or resonance (Fung, 2010, p. 298). Five Phases is central to this and signifies various phenomena, and as de Bary (1999, p. 349) stated, the correspondences derived by analogy according to Five Phases are innumerable.

As Five Phases plays a central role in the classic semiotics of China, it undoubtedly deserves further research. In this article, we investigate the early semiosis of Five Phases.

II . The Initial Stage of Five Phases

As suggested, Five Phases is perceived today as a complex sign with countless interpretations. However, it probably was not initially regarded as a sign, and its semiosis was still a long way off.

Before we expand on this assumption, we should establish what enables an object to be regarded as a sign. Broadly speaking, anything can be a sign as long as it can be interpreted as “signifying” something—referring to or

standing for something other than itself (Chandler, 2007, p. 13). According to this broad definition, however, Five Phases cannot count as a sign at its first stage because it never goes beyond its literal meaning. To clarify this issue, we should examine the source of Five Phases.

In retrospect, Five Phases has its origin in *Chapter Hong Fan* (Grand Principle) 洪范 of *Document Classic* 尚书. *Hong Fan* describes a conversation about state affairs between King Wu 武王 of the Zhou Dynasty and Prince Ji Zi 箕子 of the Shang Dynasty. In this conversation, Ji Zi suggests nine administration policies called *Jiu Chou* 九畴, and the first is Five Phases:

Of the Nine Policies, only a portion of the fifth and the ninth are produced here. The first is called Five Phases.

The First is named Water; the second Fire; the third Wood; the fourth Metal; the fifth Earth.^①

Technically, *Hong Fan* does not provide any precise definition for Five Phases; however, many scholars have attempted to discern its meaning from the context. Among them, Fu Sheng 伏胜 (268-178 BC), a specialist in *Document Classic*, provided the earliest known and best-acknowledged interpretation. In his *Grand Commentary of Document Classic* 尚书大传, Five Phases refers to five inseparable materials in human life.

Water and Fire are used for cooking; Metal and Wood are used for building; Earth is the basis for everything. Therefore, Five Phases means five materials used by the human.

水火者，百姓之所饮食也；金木者，百姓之所兴作也；土者，万物之所资生也。是为人用五行，即五材也。

As mentioned above, *Hong Fan* is a conversation about state affairs, so Fu's interpretation seems reasonable in light of the context. His statement is collected and approved by *The Authorized Meaning of Document Classic* 尚书正义, the official commentary on *Document Classic* from the 8th century. Therefore, Fu's interpretation is regarded as convincing and still widely

^① This translation is based on *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (de Bary, 1999) with a minor revision. The remaining translations were performed by the author unless otherwise noted.

accepted today. Despite slight disagreements over some details, most scholars in general agree with Fu and believe that the Five Phases in *Hong Fang* merely refers to the five substances around us. Thus, unlike sophisticated symbols with a considerable number of interpretations, Five Phases is very straightforward in this stage. Technically, it does not stand for anything other than its literal meaning, so it seems too remote to be a sign at this point.

Thus, Five Phases could not be initially regarded as a sign, but this conclusion in itself raises an intriguing question: how did such a non-symbolic concept become a vital sign? Five Phases must have undergone a process of semiosis. In this study we illustrate the catalyst of this process, and initially assume that Zou Yan 邹衍 (305-240 BC) triggered the further interpretation of Five Phases.

III . The Deliberations of Zou Yan

As the first landmark in the development of Five Phases, Zou's dedication has met with the approval of many scholars. Some conclusions can be related to the scope of semiotics, either implicitly or explicitly. Feng Youlan (1947, p. 202) suggested that Zou transposed Five Phases from the five materials to five forces of nature, while Xu Fuguan (2011, p. 11) argued that Zou shifted it from five materials to five gases. Henderson (1984, p. 34) argued that Zou probably helped transform the meaning of Five Phases from the functional "five substances" to a cosmological concept. These three studies provided convincing arguments that Zou launched the semiosis of Five Phases, thus supporting this study. However, none of them attempted to examine how Zou accomplished this. Although they identified and acknowledged Zou's role, they did not investigate how he achieved it.

To address this research gap, we examine Zou's accomplishments in the semiosis of Five Phases from two aspects. We first establish how Five Phases becomes a sign that reveals the Will of Heaven, which is a prevailing interpretation in traditional China, and then explain the methodology used by Zou.

1 . A Sign Signifying the Will of Heaven

As a prestigious Chinese intellectual, Zou's thoughts on the "Rotation of Five Virtues" (RFV) 五德终始说 are regarded as extremely significant. His theory is quite broad, so our study includes only the most relevant part. RFV demonstrates that the Will of Heaven is also in an on-going cycle of Five Phases. The Will of Heaven determines the rise of dynasties in the human world, and Five Phases acts as a decisive omen that signifies the corresponding heavenly message.

Although Zou's texts failed to survive after the 7th century, we can still find some fragments in other texts:

Whenever an emperor or king is about to rise, Heaven will always first manifest some good omen to the ordinary people. In the time of the Yellow Emperor, Heaven made a large number of earthworms and mole crickets appear. The Yellow Emperor said, "The force of Earth is dominant". When it came to the time of Yü, Heaven first made grass and trees appear which did not die in the autumn and winter. Yü said, "The force of Wood is dominant". When it came to the time of Tang, Heaven first made some metal blades appear in the water. Tang said, "The force of Metal is dominant". When it came to the time of King Wen, Heaven first made fire appear, while red birds holding a red book in their bills gathered on the altar of the soil of the House of Chou. King Wen said, "The force of Fire is dominant".

This quotation was preserved in *The Spring and Autumn of Lü*, and is believed to be an outline of RFV. Although it cannot fully describe the RFV, it still provides some essential information. The paragraph reveals that the rise of an emperor is determined by the Will of Heaven. Before the appearance of one of the individual forces of Five Phases, Heaven will manifest the corresponding omen in advance. When the potential monarchs witness the omen, they can foresee the forthcoming Heavenly mandate. For example, when the Wood force was about to dominate, the representative grass and trees did not die in the autumn and winter. From this omen, Yü discerned that the force of Wood was about to rise. Five Phases thus becomes a certain

omen of the Will of Heaven and stands for the rise of a new king in the near future, rather than the five substances in *Hong Fan*. At this point, Five Phases becomes a sign because it stands for something other than itself. Furthermore, in comparison with the ancient semiotics of the West, Zou's RFV is very similar to an early use of signs in Mesopotamian divination, a primary origin of Western semiotics. As Manetti (2010) stated, a significant aspect of Mesopotamian divination is that it is centred on a distinct notion of the sign, which allows specific conclusions to be drawn from specific facts. Manetti (2010, pp. 13–14) also demonstrated that Mesopotamian divination “allows us to infer something hidden or non – present from something perceptible or present (‘if p , then q ’).” For example, “if the moon is seen on the first day, reliable speech, the land will be content” and “if the 30th day is lengthened to its full time, a reign of long duration” (Koch–Westenholz, 1995, pp. 102–103). Using this measure, the doctrine of Zou also reaches the same conclusion. As discussed, Zou's doctrine transforms Five Phases into an ominous sign that infers the Heaven mandate, which is non–present.

In summary, from the contribution of Zou Yan, Five Phases becomes a sign that parallels the early use of signs in the West.

ii. The Correlation between Five Phases and Other Interpretations

In the previous section we have seen how Zou's RFV interprets Five Phases as an ominous sign implying Heaven's mandate. We also aim to explain how Zou obtained a theoretical model for the semiosis of Five Phases. In fact, Zou's accomplishment in this regard seems relatively extensive, according to his biography in *Shi Ji*.

(Zou) Was sure first to illustrate them (Five Phases) through small things, extending these to larger things, reaching finally to infinity... Accordingly, he recorded a system for interpreting omen... He described from the splitting of Heaven and Earth the ways the Five Phases revolve. ①

① This translation is based on Nienhauser with a minor revision.

This briefly describes Zou's views of Five Phases. Zou's elaboration is extensive, involving small and larger things, and even "reaching finally to infinity". For the interpretation of Five Phases, Zou has "recorded a system" rather than rely on random hunches. Judging from this text, Zou probably conceived a methodology that appears similar to the "infinite semiosis" of Peirce.

Although this hypothesis may lead to significant discoveries, the loss of Zou's texts largely precludes any further attempt. However, several sentences by Zou concerning the wood for the ritual fire have been preserved in subsequent texts and provide a clue in this regard.

Zou Yan stated: "to adopt the fire of Elm and Willow in the spring, to adopt the fire of Jujube and Apricot in the summer, to adopt the fire of Mulberry and Maclura at the end of summer, to adopt the fire of Oak and Quercus and the fire of Locust and Sandalwood in the winter". (*The Commentary of The Ritual of Zhou*).

邹子曰：“春取榆柳之火，夏取枣杏之火，季夏去桑柘之火，秋取柞櫟之火，冬取槐檀之火。”（《周礼注疏》）

The wood for ceremony fire is changed along with the colours of Five Phases. Elm and Willow are green; spring is green while Wood is green too, so Elm and Willow are adopted in the spring. Jujube and Apricot are red; summer is red while Fire is green too, so Jujube and Apricot are adopted in the summer. Mulberry and Maclura are yellow; the end of the summer is yellow while Earth is yellow too, so Mulberry and Maclura are adopted at the end of the summer. Oak and Quercus are white; autumn is green while Metal is white too, so Oak and Quercus are adopted in the autumn. Locust and Sandalwood are black; winter is black while Water is black too, so Locust and Sandalwood are adopted in the winter. (*The Commentary of Analects*)

改火之木，随五行之色而变也。榆柳色青，春是木，木色青，故春用榆柳也。枣杏色赤，夏是火，火色赤，故夏用枣杏也。桑柘色黄，季夏是土，土色黄，故季夏用桑柘也。柞櫟色白，秋是金，金色白，故秋用柞櫟也。槐檀色黑，冬是水，水色黑，故冬用槐檀也。（《论语义疏》）

These two paragraphs describe how to choose wood for the fire in different seasons. The former section authenticates the origin of the words while the latter provides the arrangement in terms of Five Phases. Huang Kan 皇侃 (488–545), the author of the latter section, lived in the 6th century; as such, this quotation is highly likely to imply Zou's general idea, as it has been proved that the original texts were lost until the 7th century.

The woods of different trees and seasons appear irrelevant, but Zou relates them to Five Phases. His interpretation read as follows.

First, Zou integrates Five Phases into the four seasons because of the inconsistency in number. Zou employed a concept called 'the end of summer' to divide the summer season in two. Each season can then be correlated with a component in Five Phases, and the similarity has previously been discussed (Yin, 1991, p. 31). In this step, Five Phases is the interpretation of the seasons.

In contrast to the first step, Five Phases next becomes a sign and produces a new interpretation of colours according to their similarity to Five Phases. This similarity is fairly comprehensible and straightforward. Wood appears green, Fire seems red and Earth usually seems yellow. In addition, according to *The Grand Principle of Five Phases* 五行大义 and other studies, Metal is believed to be white because it shines while Water is assumed black because seas and lakes sometimes appear dark. Therefore, Five Phases correlate with these different colours.

The final step is to describe the trees according to their particular colour. The selected trees are associated with different seasons according to the colour suggested by Five Phases. Conceived as such, the two separate items of the seasons and trees used for the fire are connected firmly by Five Phases.

Seen from this perspective, Zou's idea is similar to the concept of "Hermetic Drift" conceived by Umberto Eco in *The Limit of Interpretation*. As stated by Eco, Hermetic Drift is the interpretation of signs from similarity to similarity. In Eco's (1990, p. 24) words, "everything can be connected with everything else, so that everything can be in turn either the expression or the content of any other thing". Zou's interpretation is a vivid example of Eco's theory, as Five Phases acts as the expression at first and then

transforms into content for further interpretation.

Hermetic Drift also explains why the so-called “unlimited semiosis” or “infinite semiosis” is applicable: every interpretation can be translated into the content without interruption. Likewise, Zou’s analogy can “reach finally to infinity”, as suggested in his biography. Zou may therefore share something in common with Eco’s theory.

In conclusion, although the existing materials are insufficient, we can still infer that Zou’s interpretation of Five Phases is similar to Hermetic Drift. This approach has become well accepted in the semiosis of Five Phases. For example, Zheng Xuan 郑玄 (127-200 AD) used Five Phases to elucidate the function of the different medicines described in *The Ritual of Zhou* 周礼. Technically, Zheng followed Zou’s approach as follows. This paragraph is in the original words of *The Ritual in the Zhou*:

For medicines, sourness heals bones, spiciness healstendons, saltiness heals vessels, bitterness heals the spirit and sweetness heals muscles.

凡药，以酸养骨，以辛养筋，以咸养脉，以苦养气，以甘养肉。

Although this paragraph has nothing to do with Five Phases, Zheng used the concept to explain the relationship between different flavours and organs:

The curative effect is determined by the similarity. Soreness is the flavour of Wood. Wood is upright on the ground, which seems like the bones. Spiciness is the flavour of Metal. Metal ties up different matters, which looks like the tendons. Saltiness is the flavour of Water. Water flows underground so seems like the vessels. Bitterness is the flavour of Fire. Fire is invisible which is similar to the spirit. Sweetness is the flavour of Earth. Earth bears all things as well as muscles.

以类相养也。酸，木味，木根立地中，似骨。辛，金味，金之缠合异物，似筋。咸，水味，水之流行地中，似脉。苦，火味，火出入无形，似气。甘，土味，土含载四者，似肉。

Zheng arrived at this conclusion in the manner of Zou. Initially, Zheng correlates the different flavours with Five Phases. This correlation can be found in *Hong Fan*. In this stage, Five Phases is the expression of flavours

of medicines. Zheng then revealed the similarity between Five Phases and human organs, and Five Phases then becomes the content. Zheng therefore appears to have followed Zou's approach. In fact, there are other similar instances, but they are somewhat beyond the scope of this study.

IV. Conclusion

This study reveals the preliminary semiosis of Five Phases as described by Zou Yan. As a key figure in the development of Five Phases, Zou provided the RFV, a far-reaching interpretation, and transformed Five Phases into predominantly a sign. Zou also provided a methodology that was similar to Hermetic Drift and became a model for subsequent scholars.

However, although Zou provided the early semiosis of Five Phases, the potential for further research into this issue is enormous. As a significant and sophisticated symbol in Chinese philosophy and intellectual history, Five Phases deserves further semiotic study from multiple perspectives. Further exploration in this regard should help to extend research progress into the classic semiotics of China.

References:

- Cobley, P. (Ed.) (2010). *The Routledge companion to semiotics*. London & New York: Routledge.
- De Bary, W. T. (1999). *Source of Chinese tradition*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Doeringer, F. M. (1982). The gate in the circle: A paradigmatic symbol in early Chinese cosmology. *Philosophy east and west*, 32(3), 309–324.
- Eco, U. (1990). *The limits of interpretation*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Fung, Yiu-ming (2010). On the very idea of correlative thinking. *Philosophy compass*, 5/4, 296–306.
- Graham, A. C. (2016). *Yin-yang and the nature of correlative thinking*. Melbourne, AUS: Quirin Press.
- Henderson, J. B. (1984). *The development and decline of Chinese cosmology*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Koch-Westenholz, U. (1995). *Mesopotamian astrology*. Copenhagen, DK: University of Copenhagen Press.

- Nangen, Y. (1991). A brief discussion about the enrichment and abstraction of Five Phases during the period of Spring and Autumn. *The social science in Gansu*, 2, 30–32.
- Needham, J. (1987). *Science and civilization in China* (Vol. 2). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Schrammer, L. (2010). *Divination and interpretation of signs in the ancient world*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Youlan, F. (1947). *The history of Chinese philosophy*. Shanghai, CHN: Zhonghua Book Company Press.

Author:

Lan Xing, Ph. D. Candidate in Chinese Studies at Macquarie University, his research interests are classical semiotics and Confucian hermeneutics.

作者简介:

兰兴，澳大利亚麦考瑞大学汉学研究博士候选人，研究领域为古典符号学、儒家阐释学。

Email: lxgoalsky@gmail.com