

# Water Philosophy in Ancient Society of China: Connotation, Representation, and Influence

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This essay attempts to explore a kind of philosophy about water that was formed in ancient China, which the author names it “water philosophy”. Historically, the spirit of water philosophy has rich cultural connotations and diverse social representations, and has a far-reaching impact on the promotion of social development in China. In fact, although it is only a common substance, water is an important object of Chinese traditional culture, and especially is a key cultural symbol in Chinese philosophy, politics, poetics, etc. The formation and goal of water philosophy are not to probe into the objective physics of water and its logic of knowledge, but to research the philosophical significance of water as a symbol and object of thinking. Because of its key role in social development, water has been one of the important sources of Chinese philosophical thinking. It is in this metaphysical thinking process that water philosophy with Chinese cultural traditions and characteristics is formed. More importantly, the cultural connotations and characteristics formed by the thinking of shape, nature, emotion, rhyme, momentum, and reason of water have exerted an extensive influence on formation of national character as well as social development. Although water philosophy is the product of Chinese agricultural civilization era, more meaningful is that the positive spirit of water philosophy is also of great value today.

*Keywords:* water philosophy, Chinese traditional culture, water connotation, water representation, water influence, water power

## Introduction

There were the philosophies depending on and focusing on water in both western and eastern societies. In fact, water was not only the real source of philosophy and but also one of the early concerns of philosophy. In this sense, the author called the philosophy related to water as “water philosophy”, which is an ideological system based on water as the thinking object in ancient China. The form of civilization based on the society mainly belonged to agricultural civilization. As will be noted below, water philosophy had very rich connotations in Chinese traditional philosophy. From water philosophy, it extended to water politics, water poetry, water aesthetics, water military science, etc.

## Water Is the Source of Chinese Traditional Philosophical Thinking

It is generally known that Chinese traditional society depended on agriculture for survival and development.

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**Acknowledgement:** This essay is supported by the National Social Science Fund of China (19BZJ020).

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### Water Is Regarded as the Earliest Source of the World

In the whole world, water is the earliest productivity used by human beings, which is both cheap and convenient. Moreover, water, sunshine, air, earth in early civilization were the easiest things to feel inseparable in a flash. In a sense, the mindset of water philosophy occurred in all cultures and was also the source of Human Philosophies everywhere.

Thales of Miletus in old Greece, for example, who was at least in the west considered to be the first philosopher in human history, once said that water is the *archē* (source or basic causal factor) of everything. According to *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, on the grounds moisture is ostensibly both the “seed” (originating source) and “food” (source of growth and sustenance) of all things. However, it is worthwhile pointing out what he called water was not water narrowly defined but fluid generally (Borchert, 2006, Volume 9, p. 405).

In old India, Buddhism held that it is four basic elements that created all the material world, which are the so-called “four basic elements” or “four material elements” containing “earth” (or solidity), “water” (or fluidity), “fire” (or heat), and “wind” (or air or movement) (Buswell, 2003, p. 63). Because of the ontological characteristics, they were called “the Four Greats” (四大) in the Buddhist ideological system, namely *catvārimahā-bhūtāni* by Sanskrit as a Buddhist terminology. If empty added, Buddhism calls them “the Five Greats” (五大), *pañcamahā-bhūtāni* by Sanskrit. It is worth emphasizing that similar ideas existed in different forms in other schools of Indian traditional philosophy.

Correspondingly, collectivity of the five elements (water, fire, wood, metal, and earth), which were called as Wu Xing (五行) in Chinese traditional culture, a thought system that formed in the ancient times of China in the Yellow River basin, has been an important part of Chinese philosophical thinking. These five names sometimes have the concept of concrete matter, and sometimes they also have the symbolic character of metaphysics. These two connotations generally existed in traditional Chinese medicine, Kanyu (堪輿, a way of geomantic omen in Chinese traditional society) and other cultural systems. The thinkers also matched the Five Elements with the five virtues, and believed that the replacement of the Five Virtues (water virtue, fire virtue, wood virtue, metal virtue, and earth virtue) in proper order was the necessity of history. The Five-Virtues will be mentioned later. Water is the first place in this system of Wu Xing thought, which was a reflection of the importance. This is to say: “Water is the smallest, so it’s the first; Fire became obvious, so it was the second; Wood is concrete, therefore the third; Gold is solid, therefore the fourth; The soil is big, so it is the fifth” (Sun, 1986, p. 296). Undeniably, although it is distinctly different from western ontological philosophies, water in the Five Elements system still had some connotations of “starting point” or “noumenon”. Water also became the premise of logic and the foundation of the thought and the system, which were from micro to prominent, from virtual to real, from soft to solid, from concrete to abstract.

### Water Is the Core Object of Chinese Traditional Thinking

Similarly, water is the soul and the lifeblood of agriculture. In the land of China, the demand of farming civilization for water is more direct, abundant, and even more critical. Therefore, the attitudes towards water, such as closing to rivers, respecting water sources and bodies, became the spiritual sustenance of farming civilization very long ago. For thousands of years, seeking, harnessing, and using water have been one of the most important activities in all government affairs. As one of the results, in different dynasties, both sides of many rivers such as the Weishui River, the Yellow River, and the Yangtze River and their delta regions were the sources and the central regions of Chinese civilization. What’s more, on the one hand these areas have also

been accommodating and nurtured large numbers of people from ancient times to today, while maintaining ecological harmony in these areas. On the other hand, in some historical periods, these areas carried out political, economic, and cultural radiation through road, canals, and rivers or other means of transportation.

Essentially, the mode of thinking that water was regarded as the leading was about nature rather physics, about politics rather nature. Furthermore, water can take different forms and exist in different states, such as rivers and canals, natural and artificial lakes, marsh, streams, pools, wells, springs, reservoirs, seas, and even rainstorms, snow mountains, and morning dew, as well as Holy Water, Divine Water, Fairy Water, and their totems and metaphors, which showed different various names and functions in different historical stages or in different cultural backgrounds.

As a concrete manifestation, the Myth of Flood in ancient times basically existed in every nation. Especially in China, the present state of national geography is considered to have been laid down by Da Yu (大禹) in the era of half-faith history, who may live between 4600 and 4000 B.C. according to the archaeological findings. Da Yu did two great things in his life: One was to regulate rivers and watercourse for controlling flood; the other was to designate China as "Jiuzhou" (九州), namely, nine parts, which were in effect the administrative divisions of China at that time. The legend of Da Yu's water control had a far-reaching influence in Chinese political ethics culture and folklore. Another well-known credible fact existing in true history was that Ximen Bao managed the Zhanghe River. Ximen Bao, who lived in the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.) in China, showed the power of wisdom and secular politics by mocking the river god when he governed Ye City (in present Anyang, Henan Province). *Historical Records*, a historical and biographical work by Sima Qian (145 or 135-? B.C.), described some matters about him vividly (1963, Volume X, pp. 3211-3214). The story is the most popular legend or historical story in China until today.

Obviously, in ancient times, the Chinese people paid much attention to the manual intervention of various water bodies, and on this basis formed many important water conservancy projects, such as Ximen Bao organizing the people to dig 12 canals to irrigate Ye's farmland with water from the Zhanghe River, Zhengguo Canal (郑国渠, in present Shaanxi Province, built in about 246-256 B.C.), Dujiangyan (都江堰, in present Sichuan Province, built in about 256-251 B.C.), Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal (京杭大运河, beginning in the Spring and Autumn Period), Hangzhou West Lake (杭州西湖, natural formation, artificial continuous renovation and beautification), etc. They have been inherited in the form of philosophy, literature, art, or folklore.

### **Water Is a Symbol of Chinese Philosophy**

In Chinese folk culture, every body of water has a deity, or the deities of family existence, such as the gods of rivers, gods of lakes, gods of seas, and gods of wells. The supernatural beings were strictly arranged the hierarchical ranking in the thought system and Immortal Genealogy of Chinese Taoism. In fact, all these gods are not frightening; on the contrary, they are often full of temperament and secularization in Chinese folklore and art works. One of the main functions of these gods is to ensure that rivers are waterlogged and seas are not angry, in order to achieve good weather, and bumper grain harvest. This is the utilitarian basis for the existence of water philosophy. As scholars have pointed out, whether it rains during drought is also related to the gods of ancestors (Lévy-Bruhl, 1997, p. 418). In this way, the image of water is sublimated from an ordinary natural substance to a symbol: Natural water is endowed with ideological, thus becoming a sacred philosophical symbol. The images of gods such as river gods, sea gods, rain gods, Dragon Kings, etc., were precisely the

historical product of this philosophical water.

In other words, water philosophy of China includes mythological thinking, religious thinking, and artistic thinking as well as scientific thinking. The knowledge system based on these thinking and thoughts is both national and regional. Therefore, the thinking and the system of water philosophy are the abstraction of this knowledge system.

### **Explaining Life and Human Nature With Water Philosophy**

In the Chinese value system, the so-called water has two connotations: concrete and material, abstract and metaphorical.

#### **In a Material and Concrete Sense, We Care About the Function of Water, Which Is Beneficial or Harmful**

Unlike early European countries, ancient China is a society based entirely on agricultural production. Water is not only the lifeblood of agriculture, but also may cause harm to society and life in view of specific characteristics of China's geomorphic. For agriculture and society, the good side of water is self-evident. There's no need to say much here. As for the harmful role of water, it has always been the focus of the government. For example, Guan Zhong (管仲, 723-645 B.C.), who was the Prime Minister of Qi State during the Warring States Period of China, once pointed out that the state must solve "five kinds of disasters": water; drought; wind, fog, hail, frost; severe; insects. He also believed and emphasized to the king that the solution was to set up a special water control officer from the government to the countryside. In this way, water that is well-organized can not only be an important productive force, but also be the motive force of civilization. To Qi State, one of the most important results of Guan Zhong's strategy of governing the country, it became the one of the several strongest countries of the time.

As concrete and material water, its function can be simply expressed in two ways: beneficial or harmful. However, water hazards, such as flowage, can also be studied and utilized, especially in military activities. In traditional Chinese military thought, water was also an important weapon and widely used in war. Watershed by floods or diversions is also a means of siege. *Sun Tzu's Art of War* (孙子兵法), which is an important war science book by Sun Tzu (545-470 B.C.) in China, had a consummate research on it. Firstly, Sun Tzu used the situation of water to describe the situation of war. He said:

Military tactics are unto water; for water in its natural course runs away from high place and hastens downwards. So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong and to strike at what weak. What shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing. Therefore, just as water retains no constant shape, so in warfare there are no constant conditions. He who can modify his tactics in relation to his opponent and thereby succeed in winning, may be called a heaven-born captain. (1910, Chapter VI, p. 49)

Secondly, water is also a specific way of attacking and defending war. He said: "After crossing river, you should get far away from it" (1910, Chapter IV, p. 60). "Hence those who use fire as an aid to the attack show intelligence; those who use water as an aid to the attack gain an accession of strength" (1910, Chapter XII, p. 91). However, water, whether as an offensive or defensive way, can not only cause large-scale damage to the enemy, which was called "flooded three armies of the Left and Middle and Right Wing" (水淹三军), but also to the military personnels of their own and injury to civilians on both sides. Maybe, from the perspective of utilitarian ethics, war is for victory, and all methods are for victory, "War is thus an act of force to compel our

enemy to do will” (Clausewitz, 2006, p. 13). In Crossewitz’s words, so the means to bring victory are undoubtedly moral. But Confucianism is a philosophical thought of motivation theory, so both Confucius (551-479 B.C.) and Mencius (372-289 B.C.) opposed the immorality or non-benevolence of the means of war. This is the fundamental reason why Mencius said that there was no righteous war in the Spring and Autumn Period (770-476 B.C.). From this point of view, water is a terrible evil and harmful force.

### **In the Sense of Abstraction and Thought, We Discuss the Metaphysics, Which Is Positive or Negative**



Philosophy of life is one of the main content of Chinese traditional philosophy. The nature of water also affects the main forms and basic propositions of philosophy of life. In especial, the shape of water can be illusory (such as water mist) or real, the state of dynamic or static, the feeling of soft or hard, and its image can directly represent the deepness of Life Philosophy. Lao Tzu, who was a thinker in the Spring and Autumn Period in China, said:

The highest good is like that of water. The goodness of water is that it benefits the ten thousand creatures; yet itself does not scramble, but is content with the places that all men disdain. It is this that makes water so near to the Way. (Lao Tzu, 1993, Chapter 8, p. 17)

and Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200), a thinker of the Song Dynasty, said: “Things can born, water is flowing, not the body of Tao, but the body with Tao” (Zhu, 1997, p. 873). What they said is that the body of water is the body of Tao, and the principle of water is the principle of Tao; Tao is not water, but Tao is no different from water. It is this power of flexibility like water that Lao Tzu regards as inaction (无为, Wu Wei).

In the spiritual world of Chinese people, self and nature have never been a dual existence of opposites. Instead, they are the unity of thing and self, and the harmony of inside and outside. All the phenomena in the world are not mysterious and unknowable. For instance, the nature of the world is known from the vast world of flowers, birds, fish, and insects; impermanence of life is learned from the prosperity and decline of grass and trees, wind, snow, and moon; and the social changes are seen through from the sun, moon, stars, rivers, and rivers. In a word, nature deserves respect, but it needs no worship. Social change should be reflected carefully, but without fear.

In Chinese academic discourse system, the shape of water and the image of water have long been used to construct a predictive philosophical thinking, and thought achievements had existed as a knowledge system.

The manifestation of Jian Gua (蹇卦, ) , which was the 39th one of 64 diagrams, is composed of upper water and lower mountain. This signified that a gentleman can cultivate his virtue by back to himself even in great adversity. As for Jie Gua (节卦, ) , which was the 61 of 64 diagrams, the manifestation is composed of upper water and lower pond. This means that a gentleman can be restrained by himself at all times. This is because, as an early philosophical thinking, objectives and methods of the so-called 64 Gua are to acquire meaning or implication according their morphologies and orders. It is not only an objective social need, but also reflects the level of thinking at that time. In other words, the shapes of mountains and rivers are the metaphors for life and society. They are not only for individuals, but also for countries as an idea and a prophecy.

### **In the Sense of Symbols, We Explore the Political Sanctity of Water, Which Is Moral or Immoral**

The way of thinking of the five elements in the traditional Chinese view of history represented by the five

acts, the Five Elements theory was not only the understanding of the law of social development, but also the expression of its motive force. Because of this, the physical nature of water was converted to metaphysical nature, and its metaphysical nature was transformed into the moral nature of water.

It is in this process of transformation from secular to holy and from physical to metaphysical that the water of the Yellow River was sacred in the political practice of ancient China. One of the reasons for this thinking was that these regimes were established in the Huanghe River Basin. This is precisely because they can awedly feel the turbulence and infinite strength of the Yellow River, and can appreciatively realize the significance of the Yellow River Basin to agricultural production. The general sense of “water” and the specific sacred sense of “river” had a mutually reinforcing internal force. Therefore, “*Hetu*” (河图) and “*Luoshu*” (洛书), two abstract illustrations with characteristic of sacred and prophecy, were believed that the former was form the Yellow River and the latter was from the Luo River. According to a moral concept, they were written by Fu Xi (伏羲), who was a tribal leader that lived between 7000 and 4000 B.C. and has been respected as the ancestor of the Chinese people and culture, and Da Yu respectively, the two ancient sage chiefs. The significance of its cultural genetics is that Fu Xi drew Ba Gua (Eight Diagrams) and Da Yu controlled the flood and governed the world (Jiuzhou) according to *Luoshu*. Because people believe they only appeared at the time of divinity-wisdom rulers, so “*Hetu*” and “*Luoshu*” were regarded as the ontological basis of all moral politics in traditional China. The statements are obviously mythical and fictional, but they laid the foundation of Confucian political ethics in China.

In our eyesight, these traditions and concepts showed a philosophical expression of the inevitability of social and historical development. It meant that the grant of monarchy in accordance with the spirits of “*Hetu*” and “*Luoshu*” was from Tao of Heaven or natural law, so the sovereignty is providence, hereby, divine and moral. Qin Shi Huang (秦始皇, 259-210 B.C.), the first Emperor of Qin Dynasty (in ancient China) believed that he replaced the fire morality of Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 B.C.) with Qin’s water virtue (Sima, 1963, Volume I, p. 237). He also established the inherent logical inevitability between the “water morality” and the dynasty. According to the thought of the Five Elements, “water” can overcome “fire”, so the emergence of the Qin regime was the inevitability of history and legitimacy of morality. That is to say, to become a ruler in the order of five virtues, he was in accordance with both the natural principles and historical inevitability (奉天承运).

### **Appreciating Water Can Appreciate the Feelings of Heaven and Earth**

In the spiritual world of Chinese people, man and nature have never been a dualistic existence, but the absolute unity of inner spirit, so the way of thinking of Chinese philosophy has its own characteristics.

#### **The Pleasure of Mountains and Rivers Is the Pleasure of Human Nature**

More than two thousand years ago, Confucius, a Chinese philosopher, to be precise, should be an ethicist and educator, said: “The wise delight in water; the humane delight in mountains. The wise move; the humane are still. The wise are happy; the humane live long” (Confucius, 2007, p. 45). It means that the wise people are happy with water and mountains; benevolent people can appreciate the charm of mountains and rivers. The nature of mountains and rivers is inseparable from human temperament. The rhyme and meaning of water are appreciable and learnable. In a sense, in the view of traditional Confucianism, it was not only a kind of “natural” and “emotional” recognition, but also reflected the achievement of moral construction of individual life in

essence that we can feel happiness in the mountains and rivers and realize the harmony between man and nature (Wang, 2018, p. 52). Perhaps, one of the biggest differences between Chinese traditional philosophy and ancient Greek traditional philosophy is that Chinese philosophy is more sensibility and agility. On the contrary, which initiated by ancient Greek philosophy focused on the conceptual construction of an idea and the logical derivation of a theory. This is especially reflected in Aristotle, Descartes and Leibniz, and German classical philosophy.

When facing the torrential current standing by the river, Confucius expressed the sigh of “It flows on like this—does it not?—never ceasing, day or night” (Confucius, 2007, p. 62). From the perspective of life, he revealed the psychological feeling of the people who want to achieve great things that is too young to pass away, and time is no longer there. Running water has rhyme, but running water is ruthless and calm. Although talked about water and rivers, what he said was very different from Heraclitus of Ephesus, an early Greek philosopher who lived around the end of the sixth century B.C. Heraclitus said: “you could not step twice into the same river”. It means that these words indicate an extreme sort of change in which nothing retains its identity. The “river fragments” suggest something less extreme, that things constantly change but retain their identity: “As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them”. The rivers remain rivers; only the water that constitutes them is constantly changing (Borchert, 2006, Volume 4, pp. 318-319). To be brief, Confucius described the truth of life with flowing water; on the contrary, Heraclitus used running water to explain the laws of the universe and expressed a dialectical way of thinking.

Besides its philosophical connotation of life, Chinese traditional philosophy before the North Song Dynasty (960-1127) was in essence a kind of philosophy of aesthetic sense. Historically, all kinds of positivist ideas and Ge Wu (格物), which is the thought of studying the phenomena and the essence of nature with physical methods and ideas, enriched the thinking rivers of Chinese philosophy, but they did not become the mainstream, nor did they change the direction of the thinking rivers. In other words, in Chinese culture, the philosophy of all matters is not “physical”, but temperament. It’s not like what western philosophy did, for instance, Rene Descartes, who expected to use the reliability of mathematics to prove philosophy principles. So water has not only philosophical significance, but also aesthetic significance. In other words, such as Qu Yuan’s (about 340-278 B.C.) “Leaves fall on the ripples of Dongting Lake” (“洞庭波兮木叶下”; from his poet “The Lady of the Xiang”) and Du Fu’s (712-770) “The Yangtze River is rolling with endless billows” (“不尽长江滚滚流”; from his poet “Heighting”), it is one of the greatest characteristics of Chinese philosophical thinking to fully display the aesthetic feeling about water in philosophical thinking. Either fluttering leaves or rolling water, just reflected the poets’ sentiments at a particular moment.

### **The Nature of Water Can Reflect the Truth of Heaven**

The so-called logos in the west, expressed in terms of Chinese philosophy, is roughly equal to the Tao of Heaven. It is mainly a concept of moral noumenon. The Confucianists in Song Dynasty regard it as “heavenly principles” (天理): being above the world, existing in all things. Tao or Heaven manifests itself through all things, just as the moon is reflected in all rivers (月映万川), which means that a moon is divided into many waters and but each of them has a full moon. This reflects the relationship between truth and reality, one and many, mind and matter, situation and emotion in Chinese philosophy.

The metaphor of “water” and “moon” not only embodies the aesthetic character and connotation of Chinese philosophical thinking, but also has profound metaphysical significance and the meaning of life. If

there is no moon, water has no spirit; if there is no water, the moon shows its loneliness.

Especially, the relationships among water, moon, and people are not only beautiful, but also smart, lonely, and profound. It is based on this philosophical thinking which pays attention to aesthetic feeling that water charm, monthly character, and human feelings can be integrated and touched each other. Both Yongjia Xuanjue (永嘉玄觉, 665-713), a Zen Master, and Zhu Xi, a Confucianism, all can get inspiration from the water and moon, which may be attributed to their deep feeling of the water and moon charm in the south of the Yangtze River. The Zen Master said: "A round of the moon can show all the water, all of the water and the moon can be contained, all Buddhas and Dharmas enter into the self-nature, and then the self-nature is in harmony with the Buddha" (Zen Master Yanshou, 1975, p. 492c).

Obviously, this kind of thought and realm can only come from the water moon in the south of the Yangtze River rather than the desert sunset in the north. Because the south is full of the spirit of water, while what we feel in the vast north is the desert sunset and wind sprinkles in the wasteland and farmland. Perhaps it can be said that it is precisely the melting and agility of the water and moon, and the unity of the body of the water and the moon, that can produce Zhu Xi's thought of "One principle making countless differences" ("理一分殊").

This is only Taiji, and all things have their own inheritance and acceptance, and each has its own Taiji. If the moon is in the sky, only one, and scattered in the rivers and lakes, it can be seen everywhere, it cannot be said that the moon has been divided. (Zhu, 1997, p. 873)

In evidence, it is impossible for this idea to come into being in the north of China, where was full of grasslands and deserts. This may be an important reason why there were differences between the South Chan and the North Chan in Chinese Buddhism, because the sunset in the desert and the swallow twittering gave certainly people different feelings. Of course, there will be different manifestations of Zen people's thinking and their way of practice and understanding.

### **Water Can Annotate Life and Human Nature**

Water is both variable and condensable, both soft and hard. The reason why water can shock people's thinking is that people can understand his metaphor, observe social phenomena, and feel the true meaning of life according to its image. In this sense, it can be said: "that there can be teaching without words, Value in action that is actionless, few indeed can understand" (Lao Tzu, 1993, Chapter 43, p. 92). It means that water teaches without words, benefit without action. Its function and capabilities are unparalleled in the world.

The good and evil of human nature have always been one of the central issues in Chinese philosophy or virtue ethics, and there have been many views and arguments about it in history. Kaou Tsze (告子), a scholar or philosophy quoted in *the Works of Mencius*, said:

Man's nature is like water whirling round in a corner. Open a passage for it to the east, and it will flow to the east; open a passage for it to the west, and it will flow to the west. Man's nature is different to good and evil, just as the water is indifferent to the east and west. (Mencius, 2017, Chapter IX, p. 832)

Obviously, in his opinion, just as the direction of the current is uncertain, human nature is not fixed. This is the famous theory of "Human nature is neither good nor evil" in history.

In response to this statement, Mencius asked in reply: "Water indeed will flow indifferently to the east or west, but will it flow indifferently up or down?" (Mencius, 2017, Chapter IX, p. 833) What Mencius said meant that: With regard to water, way up is to good nature, and way down is to evil. Xun Zi (about 313-238 B.C.), a



pre-Qin philosopher after Mencius, said: "People's hearts (i.e. nature) like still water in the dish water. When it is still, turbidity is below, and clear water is above" (Wang, 1988, Volume II, p. 401). Good is manifested in this situation. Similarly, people all deliberately show good and hide evil. Conversely, when the water rolls, evil may manifest itself. By the way, a Chinese idiom "The Nature of Water and the Flower of Poplar" (水性杨花) is often used to describe a woman who is willing to degenerate and has a bad life. But in contrast, the gentle and elegant women were praised for "tender and soft as water" (柔情似水).

Water was often also used to describe political affairs. In Chinese traditional politics, there were three main kinds of daily affairs: governing the people (for example, collecting taxes and maintaining public order), management of public affairs or provision of social welfare (for example, controlling locust and plagues, regulating the rivers, dredging rivers regularly or daily, digging canals), and securing the border. Here's just an example of governing people. Human nature is like the nature of water, guiding it to be good is good, and guiding it to be bad is bad. As far as water politics is concerned, governing people is like planning stream way, developing its good and dispelling its evil.

This is exactly what Guan Zhong, mentioned earlier, once pointed out (Li, 2004, Volume 3, p. 1054). This was the reason why later thinkers and educators of Traditional Confucian School emphasized importance to the rule of virtue, and on this basis, virtue of water is also an important research object of Chinese traditional virtue ethics.

Because human nature is like water; so for rulers, the most important affairs is that managing people is like downstream water, guiding humanity to be good. The opposite expression is that if the ruler does not allow the people to express their opinions freely, it will do more harm than deliberately blocking rivers (防民之口, 甚于防川).

### **Water Can Explain All Social and Historical Phenomena**

Water is great significant to the development of agriculture and human society; it can be said that if there were no water, there would be no agricultural culture; and there would be no human society without agriculture.

It is generally known that planned agricultural production is based on the use of water resources, and a series of early human water projects have promoted the rapid development of civilization. So far as it can be said, if there is no water that can be used effectively, there will be no human civilization. In the era of low productivity, organizing the power of water is not only the basis of organizing people, but also far from difficult to organize human society. Therefore, the philosophy and thinking about water is the rational basis for the emergence of human civilization. This is because that effective social organizations must be established for the development and use of water resources, and "permanently changes the relationship between people and nature" (Toynbee, 2005, p. 27). More importantly, the potential of water can be flexible or rigid, be weak or strong, and be implicit and obvious. It is itself a remarkable and distinctive powerful force, which can explain all historical and social phenomena. The power of water is not only surging and raging, violence and destruction, but also a force of peace and harmony. Water can be made square in square container, and be made circle in the circle. Water is not only all-pervasive and everywhere, but cannot be fixed to anywhere.

Water is both the weakness and strength, and hereby water shows invisible power and visible power. The weakness and strength of the water force and the functions were very detailed in *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu. For instance:

Nothing under heaven is softer or more yielding than water, but when it attacks things hard and resistant there is not one of them that can prevail. For they can find no way of altering it. That the yielding conquers the resistant and the soft conquers the hard is a fact known by all men, yet utilized by none. (Lao Tzu, 1993, Chapter 78, p. 165)

It means that the world is not weaker than water, and it is useless and weakest that water is the most strong among who attacks. Soft wins hard; weak wins strong. If this viewpoint is introduced into the field of social history, it is the famous the metaphor of “people are water” and “monarch is boat” in traditional Chinese politics. It means that water can carry a boat smoothly or overthrow a boat easily and furiously. How to recognize and obey this power is also the core value proposition of Chinese traditional political philosophy. The power of water is not only latent, but also realistic, powerful, and eternal.

### Conclusions

In fact, water is very common as a natural substance, but in view of weakness and reversibility, the water is endowed with the meaning and function of philosophy as a metaphysical symbol in the Ancient Chinese academic system. In the sense of philosophy, water has the meaning of generation, and displayed the role of ontology. As one of the basic contents of Chinese philosophy, water philosophy does not care about its ontological nature, rather, what water philosophy concerns is its moral symbolic significance and political ethical connotation. The thinking process of water philosophy is as follows:

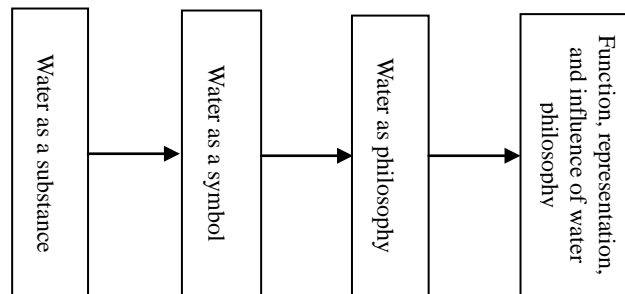


Figure 1. Thinking process of water philosophy.

As a philosophy of power, China's traditional water philosophy can still play an important role in the complex contemporary international relations.

Firstly, the Taoist School established a water-like outlook on life from the physical properties of water. That is to say, we should follow nature in everything we do; should follow the trend of society and do nothing. Confucianism established an ethical view with political significance or a political significance with ethic from the naturalness of water. Confucian political ethics emphasized that the rulers and the ruled should be maintain the relationships between fish and water, or boat and water. At any time, the government should serve the people. This is also the moral legitimacy basis for the existence and exercise of government power.

Secondly, water philosophy advocates the plasticity of a world relation. If human nature is like water, then the nature of nations is like water, and the nature of international relations is also plastic like water. If we regard it as justice, it will become justice. If we regard it as evil, it will become evil. In other words, peace or turbulence, prosperity or poverty in our world depends on our thinking orientation.

Thirdly, water philosophy is activist philosophy. Competitive relations among countries should not be regarded as inevitable, hard power should give way to soft power, and strong intervention should give way to homeopathy. The legend of Da Yu's water control told us that all success can only be achieved if we follow the

trend. Lao Tzu's water philosophy told us that only the potential of water is the greatest power to transform society.

Fourthly, water philosophy is a peaceful philosophy. The power of gentleness is often the strongest. As a vivid symbol of flexible force, water signifies harmony, no contention and enterprise. Happy world comes from good heart; fair international comes from moral political practice. To put it more plainly, we have confidence in the world precisely because the future of the world depends on ourselves. And our goodness can be developed and magnified. Is not that just like water?

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