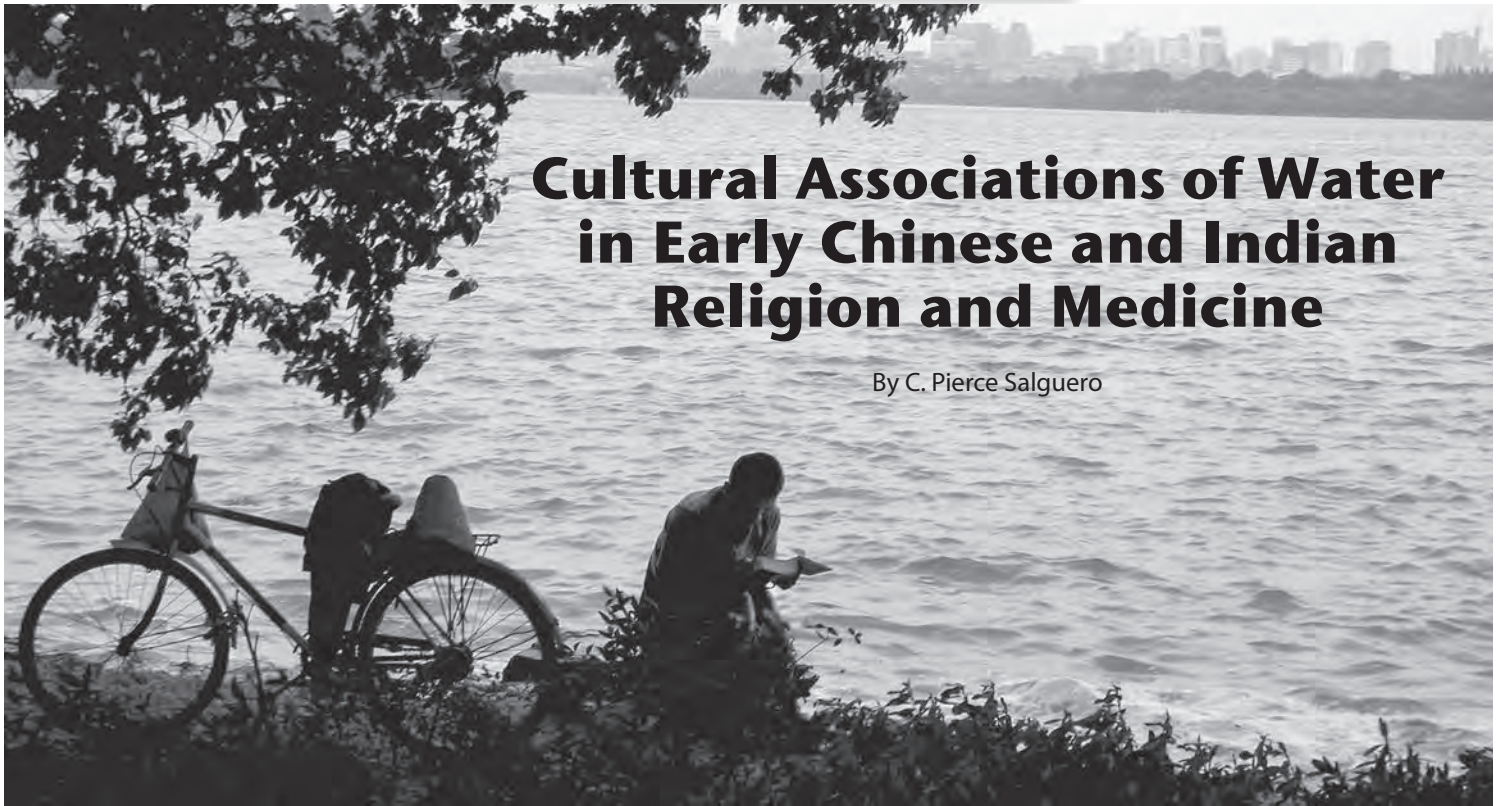


Cultural Associations of Water in Early Chinese and Indian Religion and Medicine

By C. Pierce Salguero



Reading and relaxing by West Lake (Xihu) in Hangzhou, eastern China. Photo courtesy of the author.

While it invariably has been recognized as a necessary part of human life, water has been understood and spoken about in a variety of ways across cultures over the course of history. This article briefly provides an overview of the prevailing cultural associations of water in early Chinese and Indian traditions of religion and medicine. I take a comparative approach, drawing attention to both points of connection and difference between Chinese and Indian systems of thought. While it cannot be comprehensive in such few pages, it is hoped that this short piece may provide starting points for further exploration of the rich webs of connotations water has had in premodern societies globally, and in Asia in particular.

Water (*shui* 水) in Early China

In China, water has been an essential ingredient in personal hygiene, ritual practice, and political ceremony from the most ancient times.¹ These associations are likely to have begun as early as the Shang (ca. 1600–ca. 1046 BCE), for it is said that the posthumous name of the dynastic founder—Tang 湯, literally meaning “hot water”—likely was given to him due to his role in the ritual cleansing of evil. A range of sources from the subsequent Zhou era (ca. 1046–256 BCE) confirms the centrality of bathing in ancient elite ceremonial life. Bathing at regular intervals was required for officials, ritualists, and priests, as well as for rulers before engaging in ceremonies or receiving ministers. On the day of the annual Lustration Festival, participation in ritual bathing extended down to the level of the commoners, as the entire population would bathe in an eastward-facing river to remove their physical and spiritual impurities.²

Aside from ritual purification, water was also understood in early China to have salubrious effects on the physical body. It was instrumental, for example, in regulating the body temperature in order to counter the deleterious effects of seasonal changes.³ Emperors of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) were known to frequent the ornate imperial baths of the Floriate Clear Palace 華清宮 in Chang’an.⁴ The origin of these thermal arsenic-laced pools are shrouded in legend, but concrete historical record of their use dates to at least the Han, and the facility is known to have undergone significant expansion and development through the medieval period.



The “Lotus Pond,” part of the imperial Huaqingchi hot springs complex rebuilt in the Tang dynasty. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/ybd59a4b>. Photo by Alex Kwok.

Bathing at regular intervals was required for officials, ritualists, and priests, as well as for rulers before engaging in ceremonies or receiving ministers.



A seaside temple on Putuoshan, the reputed island abode of the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, Guanyin, off the east coast of China. Photo courtesy of the author.

The seminal medical treatise, the *Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor* (*Huangdi neijing* 黄帝内经), which was compiled in the first century BCE and is still considered a foundational text of Chinese medicine today, echoes the notion that water is good for one's health.⁵ Though this text as a whole is mostly concerned with the advantages of acupuncture and moxibustion (i.e., the burning of mugwort on or near the skin for therapeutic purposes), it does in several places refer to the medical benefits of bathing.⁶ Despite the sanguine outlook on water in certain passages, however, the medical tradition more often discusses its potential dangers. Accumulation of water in the body was a cause of serious disease. Chapter 61 of the *Inner Canon* (which in large part is dedicated to acupuncture treatments for the pernicious effects of water) explains how a blockage in the kidneys might lead to problems with the circulation of the waters of the body:

The kidneys are the gates of the stomach. Hence when the gates do not [open] freely, water assembles and follows its type. Above and below it spills into the skin; hence [this] leads to fu-swelling . . . When one does something with resolve and taxes oneself to the extreme, then sweat leaves from the kidneys . . . It settles in the dark palaces and moves inside the skin. Its transmission leads to fu-swelling. This is based in the kidneys. The name is wind water. As for the so-called "dark palaces," [this term refers to] the sweat openings.⁷

The critical factor in avoiding illnesses associated with the retention of water was to keep the body's fluids moving in accordance with normal physiological patterns. As the kidneys were the visceral system most associated with water in classical Chinese medical thought, their proper regulation through herbs, diet, acupuncture, massage, exercises, sexual practices, and otherwise was essential to the smooth management of all the body's waters.

In addition to referring to actual fluids in the body, water also appears in medical discourses as one of the "five phases" or "five processes" (*wuxing* 五行). This foundational doctrine emerged in the fourth to third century BCE as a moral theory and was further developed through the early Han in order to explain the optimal functioning of *qi* (i.e., the vital energy or essence of the cosmos) within politics, the human body, and other complex systems.⁸ According to the mature five-phase doctrine, *qi* manifests in five discrete temporal phases or stages that correspond with the qualities of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. These phases can unfold in generative or destructive cycles that govern how *qi* transforms and manifests in the material world. *Qi* manifesting with a watery quality, for example, could both vanquish the influences of fire and feed the emergence of wood. Water, in this system, represented a quiescent or dormant phase, a time for regrouping and reconsolidating.

Water's correlating organs were kidney and bladder, its sense hearing, its flavor salty, its season winter.

In medicine, each phase came to be associated with particular organ systems, sensory functions, flavors of medicines, and seasons of the year, among other factors. Understanding the destructive and generative relationships between water and the other phases according to this model could thus lead to a complex analysis of the origins, progression, cure, and prevention of all disorders. The five phases also correlated the *qi* in the body with the *qi* of the cosmos as a whole. In this system, water became a heuristic for organizing an increasingly wide range of phenomena by embedding it in generative and destructive relationships with countless other natural processes.⁹ Water's correlating organs were kidney and bladder, its sense hearing, its flavor salty, its season winter. It was associated with the moon, with cold temperatures, with the color black, with the planet Mercury, and with the pig and rat zodiac signs. Throughout the imperial period, understanding and capitalizing on these and many more connections—a process that scholars have generally referred to as "correlative thinking"—was central to the theories behind an array of Chinese arts and techniques practiced by ritual technicians (*fangshi* 方士), masters of geomancy (*fengshui* 風水), adepts at self-cultivation (*yangsheng* 養生), Daoist priests, and numerous other practitioners of Chinese religious and healing traditions.

The richness of the connotations provided by correlative thinking notwithstanding, water's most enduring association—and the common thread that unites most of the ones mentioned above—is its enduring connection with the quality of *yin*. The first half of the *yin-yang* 陰陽 dyad that is so central to Chinese thought, *yin* represents the yielding, receptive, feminine, and dark aspects of nature.¹⁰ Water is considered to be quintessentially *yin*, and thus symbolic of all these qualities.

This metaphor appears in several places in the seminal *Daode jing* 道德經, the classic philosophical text attributed to a shadowy legendary figure named Laozi 老子, who is traditionally dated to the sixth or early fifth century BCE.¹¹ Chapter 78 of the *Daode jing*, for example, highlights the *yin* nature of water while also emphasizing its hidden strength:

*Nothing in the world is softer than water,
Yet nothing is better at overcoming the hard and strong.
This is because nothing can alter it.*

*That the soft overcomes the hard
And the gentle overcomes the aggressive
Is something that everybody knows
But none can do themselves.*

*Therefore the sages say:
The one who accepts the dirt of the state
Becomes its master.*

*The one who accepts its calamity
Becomes king of the world.
Truth seems contradictory.¹²*

Subsequent literature and poetry in early China reiterated and built upon this imagery, and over the centuries, water became a ubiquitous symbol of pure *yin*. In landscape painting, the downward *yin* motion of waterfalls and streams are juxtaposed with the rising *yang* lines of trees and cliff-top heights. In martial arts, water indicates the *yin*-like yielding or softening that enable one to absorb the fire of an attacker's *yang*-like aggression.¹³ In meditation or contemplative practice, water is the soothing, relaxing release of tension that occurs with the stilling of the overactive body and mind.



Daily life unfolds along the Ganges River ghats in Varanasi, northeastern India. Photo courtesy of the author.

Water (*apas*) in Early India

Archaeological finds from the Indus Valley Civilization (3000–1500 BCE) indicate that these ancient Indian settlements mobilized considerable resources behind elaborate communal waterworks. At the city of Mohenjo-Dhara, for example, archaeologists have found small washrooms attached to private dwellings, a sophisticated covered drainage and sewer system, and what they believe to be a 55x33m (60x36 yds) stone bathing facility.¹⁴ Though the writings of the Indus Valley culture remain undecipherable, and we therefore know comparatively little about what doctrines and practices may have been associated with these structures, such discoveries suggest that a cultural complex combining water, bathing, and purification was present from the very inception of Indian civilization.

The arrival of the Vedic or Aryan culture in the Indian subcontinent in the early second millennium BCE brought new ideas, literature, and customs, including new therapeutic uses for water. In Vedic texts, disease is typically blamed on pernicious demons or is spoken of as a punishment meted out by the gods for one's transgressions against the natural moral order (*rta*).¹⁵ Exorcistic and magical therapeutics employed by Vedic priests often consisted of the repetition of magically charged mantras and the ritual use of plants and talismans. Water played a not-insignificant role as a healing substance in many such therapies. A typical Vedic formula for consecrating water to be used for healing purposes reads thus:

*The waters are indeed medicinal; the waters are the amiva-dispellers and the waters are medicines for every [disease]. Let them make [or be] medicine for you.*¹⁶

This incantation specifically calls attention to the power of consecrated water to dispel *amiva*, a class of demonesses who were thought to attack the body and cause pain as retribution for one's sins.¹⁷

Therapeutic uses for water appear again in the context of the classical Indian Ayurvedic medical tradition, this time within a physiological rather than demonological framework. Coalescing in the first six centuries CE, but incorporating a range of medical opinions from the last centuries BCE, the three most influential Ayurvedic treatises (*Caraka-samhita*, *Susruta-samhita*, and *Astangahrdaya-samhita*) agree that bathing in water is an effective means of fighting exhaustion, stimulating digestion, enhancing sexual potency, and strengthening the body, among other boons.¹⁸ However, the tradition also distinguishes between different types of water for different medicinal applications. For example, according to the *Caraka-samhita*, water drawn in late winter can be used to cure phlegm and wind, while the best for those of delicate constitutions is water drawn in



Excavated ruins of Mohenjo-Dhara, with the Great Bath in the foreground. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y9okvnum>. Photo by Saqib Qayyum.

the autumn. Water originating in the Himalayas and Malaya are best, while one should avoid water from Pariyatra, Vindhya, and Sahya, as it can cause diseases.¹⁹

In Ayurveda, as in certain schools of Indian philosophy, water is understood not only as a curative substance, but also more generally as representing one of the four “great elements” (*mahabhuta*). As a great element, water is one of the essential building blocks that make up the phenomenal world, as well as one of the fundamental components or constituents (*dhatu*) of the human body. While earth, fire, wind, and space elements make up the solids, heat, movement, and empty voids of the physical structure respectively, the water element makes up the manifold liquids that flow through the body's tubes and ducts.²⁰

Early Buddhist texts also engage with the doctrine of the great elements. Written down in the Pali language in first-century BCE Sri Lanka, these texts are reflective of earlier oral traditions from northeastern India and may possibly ultimately be connected with the same intellectual milieu as the Ayurvedic treatises.²¹ One scripture called the *Great Elephant Foot-print Simile* (*Mahahatthipadapama sutta*) contains a list of the parts of the



Shiva Bearing the Descent of the Ganges River, folio from a Hindi manuscript by the saint Narayan. India, Himachal Pradesh, Guler, Bathu, circa 1740. The Ganges is captured in Shiva's matted locks. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y85cz2ms>.



Devaprayaga, the sacred site in northern India where two subsidiary rivers come together to form the Ganges. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y83nhlh6>. Photo by Vvnataraj.

rite is the one that appears in the *Sutra of Golden Light* (Skt. *Suvarna[pra] bhaottama-sutra*). Composed in the first centuries CE, the scripture was translated into multiple languages and came to be immensely influential across the Buddhist world.²⁶

The primary focus of this particular ritual is the goddess Sarasvati, the patroness of erudition associated in Indian religious traditions with the ancient river of the same name.²⁷ The *sutra* instructs the reader to chant dharanis while bathing in water that has been medicated with a long list of medical plants.²⁸ The river goddess promises that upon the performance of the ritual she will appear in person with a “whole multitude of gods” to personally enable the “removal of every disease in that village, city, district, or dwelling.”²⁹ She also promises to eradicate “confusion of the elements,” baleful astrological influences, quarrels, strife, and bad dreams, as well as attack by evil spirits, demons, and zombies.

A Buddhist ceremony that invokes a river goddess for the purposes of purification and protection reminds us also of the iconic role of the Ganges River (or Ganga) in Hindu sacred literature and ceremonial practice. Originating in the glacier fields of the Himalayas (already noted above as a source of medicinal waters), the Ganges flows over 2,500 kilometers (approximately 1,553 miles) across northern India to the Bay of Bengal. Along the way, devotees bathe, drink, pray to, and deposit offerings and cremated ashes within her waters in pursuit of ritual cleansing. Tales from early Indian mythological literature, the *Puranas*, celebrate the Ganges as a powerful goddess and speak of her as a source of purification. In many of these stories, however, the river is too powerful in her own right and needs to be tamed by other figures in order to limit her potentially violent impact upon the world. In the most famous version of the Ganges myth, told in various sacred scriptures, including the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and various *Puranas*, she agrees to come to Earth, but must be trapped in Shiva's long, matted locks as she descends from the heavens so as to prevent her from shattering the world with her awesome force.³⁰ In another narrative from the *Mahabharata* epic, the Ganges's violence manifests as she takes human form, marries a king, and drowns eight of her divine children in her own waters in order to liberate them from a life trapped in human form.³¹

Conclusion

Readers should keep in mind some basic generalizations when thinking about traditional Chinese and Indian religious and medical understandings about water. In early Chinese religion and medicine, water maintained a firmly established association with purification, and ceremonial bathing was an enduring part of both the social life of the elite and the ritual calendar of the general population. Though it could potentially be pathogenic when stagnant, through the doctrine of the five phases, water became

body according to the elements that directly parallels Ayurvedic writings on the same subject. Here, the water element is said to make up:

*bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, skin-oil, saliva, mucus, fluid in the joints, urine, or whatever else internal, within oneself, is liquid, watery, and sustained.*²²

While they may have enthusiastically adopted medical descriptions of the role of the water element in human anatomy and physiology, these early Buddhist writers seem to have been somewhat more ambivalent about bathing in it. The Buddha forbade his followers to engage in self-beautification practices and other “worldly arts” (*tiracchana-vijja*), such as bathing in perfumed water or “giving ceremonial mouthwashes and ceremonial bathing,” which he deemed unworthy behavior for an ascetic in his order.²³ On the other hand, Buddhist literature in many places also suggests that close attention to personal cleanliness—including regular bathing, teeth brushing, and washing of clothing—was recognized as important for prevention and treatment of various ailments.²⁴ Such perspectives are echoed by a range of other early Buddhist texts (both in Indian languages and in Chinese and Tibetan translation) that give practical instructions on the construction of bathhouses, the material culture involved in bathing, and the social practices observed among the bathers.²⁵

Extant Buddhist texts also include plentiful evidence of the continuing use by Buddhists of talismanic water for exorcistic healing purposes. Water could be consecrated by the incantation of mantras or *dharanis*, short spells that call upon the transformative powers of the Buddhas, *bodhisattvas*, and other deities. Perhaps the ultimate example of such a purification



A *sadhu* (holy man) participating in ceremonial bathing in the ocean off the Tamil Nadu coast in southeastern India. Photo courtesy of the author.


In Buddhist and medical texts from the classical period, water is understood both as a physical substance and as an abstract concept.

one of the dominant heuristics for thinking about the fluctuations of qi within and outside the body. In Daoist thought and in other cultural arenas such as self-cultivation and martial arts, water was a common symbol of receptivity, pliability, and stillness, yin qualities that are understood as necessary to balance or neutralize yang aggression and hardness.

Meanwhile, in India, there is some evidence suggesting a role for water in personal and public hygiene in the very earliest cities of the Indus Valley. In Buddhist and medical texts from the classical period, water is understood both as a physical substance and as an abstract concept. As one of the great elements, it is the source of all liquids in the world, as well as in the body. Though not always beneficial and particular uses might be indicative of an obsession with worldly concerns, it is widely valued for its salubrious effects on one's health and vitality. When consecrated with incantations by either Vedic priests or Buddhist monks, water transformed into a curative substance that vanquished diseases—particularly those of demonic origin. Personified in the form of powerful goddesses, water's potency as a purificatory substance was celebrated and worshipped, but was also characterized as potentially dangerous or violent.

Comparing both cultures, the materials overviewed here present us with an interlocking complex of ideas and associations between water and ritual purification, the cure of disease, the maintenance of health, and macrocosmic patterns in both cultures. However, several important differences have also arisen in the above discussion: (1) In China, bathing was a requisite part of elite ceremonial propriety and was used widely for purposes of ritual purification. In India, on the other hand, the renunciation of certain ceremonial bathing practices was the mark of the superior Buddhist adherent whose attention was focused on otherworldly asceticism rather than this-worldly concerns. (2) In the Chinese five phases model, the world is made of qi, which periodically passes through a watery phase. Water in this sequence represents a certain quiescent quality of qi that manifests at a particular stage in a cycle. In the Indian elemental system, on the other hand, water is not a quality but a concrete entity (*bhuta*), one of four constituent substances (*dhatu*) that make up the phenomenal world, as well as the human body. (3) Finally, and perhaps most important, in China, water retains a strong association with the stillness, quiescence, and tranquility of yin, which stood in contrast to the activity and dynamism of yang. Meanwhile, water seems in Indian culture to have retained a more predominant connection with active powers or transformative potentialities. Particularly when personified in the form of river goddesses, such powers were not only potentially beneficial; they could also be destructive and fearsome.

Such summaries and comparisons of long-term cultural associations as I have offered here are always oversimplifications, and the reader should be aware that there are many shades of nuance and many examples of texts that have been overlooked in the interests of space and of making general comparisons. This article is intended as a starting point for investigation, and the information and citations provided here point in the direction of



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further scholarship and primary sources to explore the multifaceted complexity of water in early Asian religion and medicine. ■

NOTES

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3. Schafer, "The Development of Bathing Customs," 64.
4. Schafer, "The Development of Bathing Customs," 72–82.
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7. Unschuld and Tessenow, *Basic Questions*, vol. 2, 90–92 (edited for clarity).
8. General discussions of the history of the five phases theory are available in Nathan Sivin, *Traditional Medicine in Contemporary China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1987), 70–80; Unschuld, *Nature, Knowledge, Imagery*, 99–124.
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12. Translated by A. C. Muller. See *Daode Jing* from his personal website, accessed April 21, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/88ldrr>.
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17. Zysk, *Religious Medicine*, 49.
18. See, e.g., *Caraka* 1.5 (translated in P. V. Sharma, *Caraka-samhita*, [Varanasi: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 2007–2008], vol. 1, 40); *Susruta* 4.24 (translated in P. V. Sharma, *Susruta-samhita* [Varanasi: Chaukhambha Visvabharati, 2004–2005], vol. 2, 498); *Astangahrdaya* 1.2 (translated in Dominik Wujastyk, *The Roots of Ayurveda* [London: Penguin, 2003], 214). For dating and bibliographic information on these sources, see relevant sections of Wujastyk, *Roots of Ayurveda*. See also general overview in B. Rama Rao, "Bath in Ayurveda, Yoga, and Dharmasastra," *Bulletin of the Indian Institute of History and Medicine* 12 (1982): 13–21.
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