

# *A Comparison Between Anaximenes's Arche and the Wuxing in the Hongfan*

Xiyu Deng<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College, Zhuhai, 519087, China

a. 2939807282@qq.com

\*corresponding author

**Abstract:** While there are numerous similarities between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy, there are also significant differences that make them extremely distinct from each other. The views of Milesian philosopher Anaximenes and the Wuxing (五行) in pre-Qin Chinese philosophy can be taken as examples, though they are rarely compared together. In actuality, their understandings of natural substances and how air (psyche) or Qi (氣) changes between substances present a framework that is very comparable. But from these comparable frames, two different modes of functioning finally developed. As an illustration, this paper will contrast Wuxing in *Hongfan* (洪範) with arche in Anaximenes's ideas. Starting with the natural materials that are present in both philosophies, this paper compares them through textual analysis. According to the definitions and orientations provided by the two philosophies, conclusions can be drawn that Wuxing emphasizes relevance and people, whereas Anaximenes concentrates on the search for the most fundamental principle and the supreme power in the universe.

**Keywords:** Anaximenes, arche, Wuxing, Hongfan, Chinese and Western philosophy

## 1. Introduction

The Miletus school was the first in the annals of Greek philosophy to investigate the one principle of the world. Chinese philosophers were also thinking about similar topics at the same time. However, it can be seen from the available materials that there are relatively significant discrepancies between the two philosophical approaches in understanding how and from what angle to interpret these natural things. This paper particularly describes the correlation and differences between these two philosophical approaches, namely the Material Monism and Theory of Change of Anaximenes and the Wuxing described in the *Hongfan*, a chapter of the pre-Qin Chinese Classic *Shangshu* (尚書). This paper first concentrates on how these natural substances are understood specifically under the two ideologies. Then, to highlight each mode's unique qualities, the author outlines how these two modes are used and function differently. Based on the analysis of texts expressing Anaximenes ideas and texts associated with *Hongfan*, this paper can provide a way of understanding the arche of Anaximenes and the Wuxing of *Hongfan*, as well as some viewpoints and text analysis on the similarities and differences between early Chinese philosophy and the

philosophy of the Miletus school. This can offer a fresh research perspective and add to existing studies on the distinctions between Chinese and Western philosophy.

## 2. Anaximenes's Arche and the Nature of Wuxing

In Anaximenes' ideas and *Hongfan*, several identical words appear: fire, water, and earth. But what they refer to under the two systems, or rather their definitions, reflect different emphases. Early studies of metaphysical ideas need a physical basis, which may explain the existence of the physical substances in both Anaximenes's and *Hongfan*'s ideas. After giving them a metaphysical concept, the meaning that these words can express is expanded, and then the emphasis is revealed. According to ap. Simplicium in phys. of Theophrastus: Anaximenes of Miletus, a companion of Anaximander, says that underlying nature is one and infinite like him but not undefined as Anaximander said. He believes that underlying nature is definite, for he identifies it as air; and it differs in its substantial nature by rarity and density. Being made finer, it becomes fire; being made thicker, it becomes wind, then cloud, then water, then earth, then stones, and the rest comes into being from these. He believes that motion is eternal and changes come from motion [1].

From the perspective of Theophrastus, Anaximenes's ideas can be summarized as: (1) Anaximenes believes that all things had a definite arche; (2) he believes that the arche is air (psyche); (3) he believes air appears as water, earth, and so on according to the different qualities; (4) he believes that changes are achieved through motion. The summary is roughly in line with the Standard Interpretation of Anaximenes proposed by Daniel W. Graham, whose interpretation of Anaximenes's ideas is commonly approved by other scholars. Therefore, Graham's classification of Anaximenes's ideas is worth referring to: one is designated Material Monism, and the other is the Theory of Change [2]. Material Monism reflects that in the process of treating water, earth, and other materials, Anaximenes hopes to find the most fundamental source, and other substances can be composed of it. In other words, Anaximenes' arche is eternal and unchanging, and thus the Theory of Change can be better explained. However, fire, air, wind, cloud, water, earth, and stone are basic forms in Anaximenes's ideas and can be directly composed of air; other natural substances are compounds of these basic forms [1]. Therefore, in Anaximenes' discussion of arche, everything can be divided into three levels: arche (the one principle), some natural substances (basic forms), and other natural substances.

Contrarily, *Hongfan*'s interpretation of these materials does not attempt to identify their shared characteristics, which means that the most fundamental arche, but rather assigns each material a "nature". In the *Hongfan*, the Wuxing, namely metal, wood, water, fire, and earth are clearly interpreted: "The first is water; the second is fire; the third is wood; the fourth is metal; and the fifth is earth. (The nature of) water is to soak and descend; of fire, to blaze and ascend; of wood, to be crooked and straight; of metal, to yield and change; while (that of) earth is seen in seed-sowing and in-gathering. That which soaks and descends becomes salt; that which blazes and ascends becomes bitter; that which is crooked and straight becomes sour; that which yields and changes becomes acid; and from seed-sowing and in-gathering comes sweetness [3]."

After each material's nature is described, these natures are then connected to taste. In the case of fire, food scorched by fire has a bitter taste, so the characteristic of fire "blazes and ascends" is associated with bitterness [4]. This demonstrates how certain people's experiences will be incorporated into people's knowledge of the Wuxing in *Hongfan*. At the same time, it can be concluded that when discussing the Wuxing, compared with Anaximenes discussing arche, *Hongfan* does not summarize a one principle but describes the content related to the Wuxing. Anaximenes' ideas begin with the materials, extending with vertical thinking, and end in the same location, the one principle, arche. In contrast, the concept of the Wuxing appears to start from the five materials, extending with lateral thinking, and ultimately result in five nets woven in the same

way. It is hard to determine if these five nets can be joined together to build a larger net just by studying the five materials in the Wuxing, which will be explained in the following section.

In conclusion, both the arche of Anaximenes and the nature of Wuxing can reflect some of the qualities of naive materialism. It is possible to understand them as the process of abstracting consistency from physical substances whether Anaximenes differentiates natural substances and deduces their principle or *Hongfan* summarizes the nature of natural substances.

### 3. The Way Basic Forms and Wuxing Work

After determining how the two philosophies understand natural substances differently, it is possible to investigate their applications. It is clear from Anaximenes' thoughts (3) in the preceding section that the variable air quality affects how various basic forms convert into one another. This process, in accordance with Anaximenes' quantification, "entails that change is no longer spontaneous or capricious" [5]. During the process, the ideas of heat and cold as well as rarefaction and condensation are brought up. According to Plutarch de prim. frig.: "...or as Anaximenes thought of old, let us leave neither the cold nor the hot as belonging to substance, but as common dispositions of matter that supervene on changes; for he says that matter which is compressed and condensed is cold, while that which is fine and 'relaxed' (using this very word) is hot [1]."

The concepts of Anaximenes associated with human experience and feelings are reflected in hot and cold, similar to the example of taste in the *Hongfan* above, proving the common characteristics of the two philosophies. Based on these two states, rarefaction refers to hot, and condensation corresponds to cold. This indicates that the two forces of condensation and rarefaction, which can be seen to make up everything, are responsible for the alteration of substances [6]. This emphasis on condensation and rarefaction as a technique of altering different material types is reminiscent of another way to interpret the word arche, the "archon," and it demonstrates how the theory of change corresponds to the historical background. Arche can be interpreted as the way power works and is closely related to the ideas that predate ancient Greek philosophy. For instance, Hesiod's Theogony, whose systematization is determined by blood but whose fundamental idea is dominance and power. The proposition of arche can be seen as an argument that supports the will to power rather than blood ties [6]. The notion of change, in essence, represents the time's emphasis on power and dominance among Greek scholars. Since arche appears in Anaximenes' cosmology, this implies that arche occupies a supreme position and represents the supreme force. Condensation and rarefaction are two examples of this capacity.

*Hongfan* did not elaborate on the relationship between the five material substances after determining their properties, which is also the reason this paper mentioned in the previous section that the five nets were formed. To be sure, Wuxing was not a fully developed system at this point, so this process can only be found in relevant texts. Qi is an essential part of the later Wuxing system. In contrast to the operation of air (psyche), the feature of Qi's operation is cyclic. Although both air and Qi are in constant motion, the motion of air does not have an exact direction. In *Huai Nan Zi·Tianwen Xun* (淮南子·天文訓), it shows how the Wuxing system works: "Water generates wood; wood generates fire; fire generates earth; earth generates metal; metal generates water [3]."

It is a closed loop, and it is endless. Unlike basic forms in Anaximenes's ideas, one of the substances cannot change directly from one to another, which means that from water to fire, it must go through wood. In addition, even though the Chinese translation of air (psyche) is Qi, their connotations are very different. In the text of *Tianwen Xun*, Qi is also regarded as the one principle, but it refers to all things arising from it, rather than Anaximenes's things composed of air. But how Wuxing comes from the Qi is vague, since the text focused more on the impact on the physical world phenomenon. For instance, "when the Qi of water is dominated, the environment becomes

wet, so it corresponds to the summer [3]”, which is in line with people’s experience and also reflects the practicality of the Wuxing in People’s daily life.

*Huainan Zi* also combines Wuxing with government decrees [7], a feature that has already been demonstrated in *Hongfan*. In general, *Hongfan* mainly outlines a set of political principles, but the source of them is the Heaven rather than the sage and the king [8]. The king is much less qualified to manage political issues than Heaven is. “Di (帝) is the title of the Heaven, and wang (王) is the title of man,” then the nine common principles become divine laws [8]. When these divine laws are used in the human world, the secular rulers are able to extend their power to the maximum, and the five material substances here exist as resources that the rulers can coordinate [9]. In the process of elaborating each material substance in the Wuxing, the relation between individual senses and them is mentioned. Here, the relation between the ruler and each material substance is reflected too: the ruler governs them. In contrast to Anaximenes’s ideas, the operation of material substances can be separated from the existence of human beings and governed by arche, the correlation of the Wuxing in *Hongfan* is established by the ruler, that is, human beings. Later, Zou Yan referred to the nature of five material substances as the five virtues of sports, and he claimed that once people possess these virtues, they are able to construct a more sensible and dynamically balanced life [10], which further reflects the trend of combining Wuxing with human beings.

Compared with the previous section, which is restricted to the internal analysis of the two philosophical works, this section of the analysis expands beyond the texts and combines more macro viewpoints to understand how they are used. Their style of operation, or the time background represented, may more accurately reflect the correlation between the theory and the time environment and stress the differences between the two. If the five material substances in *Hongfan* are called for movement, it is challenging to function without the effect of people, but tend to remain static in the absence of outside influence. This theory’s later development also has something to do with the relation between people and them. Although there is a propensity towards science, mobility is everlasting in Anaximenes’s ideas.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the various definitions and interpretations of the same substances, which may be influenced by various circumstances, illustrate the disparities between Anaximenes’s theories and Wuxing in *Hongfan* perspectives. The first section mostly clarifies the two various definitions of material substances. The method to develop metaphysical knowledge, according to the Miletus school or pre-Qin Chinese thinkers, is to pay attention to material things. Anaximenes attempts to locate an arche while characterizing physical items. The emphasis in *Hongfan* is on nature, which is also related to peoples’ sensory perceptions. In light of this distinction, the second section of this paper combines the historical context of the development of Greek philosophy with the textual context of the Wuxing of *Hongfan* to explain how the distinction in the first part came to be. Power was revered at the time that Anaximenes lived, and arche, as the one principle, represented this quality. *Hongfan* embodies the trend of combining the Wuxing with people. Due to the long history and lack of the original text, the views put forward in this paper need to be further improved. The contrast between Chinese philosophy and Western philosophy can also be studied with more methods and documents in the future.

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