

MISSION OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS



FOUNDATION - ISSUE THREE HEAVEN IS ROUND



Heaven is Round

New Perspectives on the Five Phases

Cover - Thanks to the Xavier House Ignatian Spirituality Centre for the image of Matteo Ricci. Map of the Far East (1602) is a Wikimedia file

Acknowledgements - The three critiques of *wuxing* by Matteo Ricci are drawn from an article by Hsu Kuang-tai (p.8, n.17). Many thanks to Catherine Jami, editor of the East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine journal for permission to quote Hsu's translations of Ricci's work.

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- * I use the Chinese phrase, *wuxing*, when I refer to the traditional theory and the five phases for the new perspectives.
- * I use lower case for the natural resources (fire, water, etc.,) and upper case for the abstract processes (Fire, Water, etc.).
- * The dates of people, dynasties and eras can be found at the bottom of the relevant page or section.

F3 Chinese words – tone marks, page nos. and traditional characters

Listen to the Audio Guide to learn more about the tones in Mandarin.

Read a simple guide to Chinese characters (F2, 18 – 21). I use *pinyin* unless it's a quote or a common phrase like Tai Chi.

<i>wúxíng</i>	iii	五行	Tiān	4	天
Míng dynasty	iii	明朝	Shàng Dì	4	上帝
Běijīng	2	北京	Tiānzhǔ	4	天主
Wànlì emperor	2	萬曆帝	Shāng dynasty	5	商朝
<i>Shàngshū</i>	4	尚書	<i>qì</i>	11	氣
<i>Shījīng</i>	4	詩經	Yáo	14	堯
<i>Yījīng</i>	4	易經	Shùn	14	舜
<i>Lǐjì</i>	4	禮記	<i>yīn-yáng</i>	15	陰陽
<i>Chūnqiū</i>	4	春秋	<i>zhīxíng</i>	16	知行
<i>Lúnyǔ</i>	4	論語	Lǐ Yìngshì	17	李应试
<i>Mèngzǐ</i>	4	孟子	<i>fēngshuǐ</i>	17	風水
<i>Dàxué</i>	4	大學	Guō Shǒujìng	19	郭守敬
<i>Zhōngyōng</i>	4	中庸	Zhōngguó	19	中國

Introduction

The five elements is the best-known translation of *wuxing*. It is used by Westerners doing their Tai Chi classes and indeed most Chinese people. In the last few decades, however, the five elements has been deemed to be inaccurate by scholars, east and west, and alternative translations have been put forward. But it's been around for so long! Four centuries, in fact, so goes one argument for upholding the elemental status quo (F2, n.26). Besides, if Chinese people use this translation, surely, it must be authentic. Perhaps, but where did they get it from?

It was Jesuits priests on a mission to convert Chinese souls to the Catholic faith in the late 16th century, who chose to translate *wuxing* as the five elements. An obvious choice, no doubt, since Jesuit education was still steeped in Aristotelian logic including the mutable properties of the Greek four elements: fire, water, earth and air. As they compared *wuxing* to their own traditions, the theory was deemed to be illogical!

Renowned among the Jesuits in China was Father Matteo Ricci. He paved the way for Jesuits to work at the upper echelons of the Ming imperial court. Towards the end of his life, he was even invited to live and work within the hallowed grounds of the Imperial City. A prodigious author and able linguist, Ricci translated classics of western thought into Chinese and classics of Chinese thought into Latin, thus conveying the ideas and ideals of Europe and China to each other for the first time.

Through studying revered ancient Chinese texts, Ricci formed an impression of *wuxing* from some its earliest descriptions. I introduce the conclusions he reached and how they reflected the mission as a whole.

MISSION OF THE FIVE ELEMENTS

Climbing the ladder of influence

Mid-16th century job description: are you ambitious, intelligent, curious, a pragmatic idealist? Do you want to travel the world, learn languages, and meet people of other cultures? Do you aspire to high standards of moral conduct? Can you endure hardship to support a cause you believe in? Are you passionate about educating the heathen masses in the ways of Our Father and His mathematical modelling of the cosmos? Enter the Society of Jesus founded in 1540 by Ignatius of Loyola, a former soldier whose austere ways were in such contrast to Catholic indulgences that the Jesuit Order helped to stem the Protestant tides flooding through Europe at that time.

These men of divine action did not hang about in the back alleys of Rome offering to read your fortune for a few ducats or live secluded lives in wealthy monasteries. Young Jesuits studied Greek, Latin, history, logic, rhetoric, mathematics and astronomy before progressing to four years of theology and then dispatched to missions around the world.¹

Matteo Ricci was born during the Council of Trent, the Catholic ecumenical council set up in response to the Protestant Reformation. Copernicus had recently published his work on heliocentric theory (that the earth orbits the sun) submerging western cosmology in ever deeper water. In the year of his birth the first Jesuits landed on Chinese shores and tentatively knocked at the door of the Middle Kingdom. When Ricci arrived in China, aged thirty, fresh from the final hurdles of priesthood, that door began to edge ajar.

As was the case in all four corners of the missionary globe, Jesuits faced considerable obstacles to establishing a presence in China. Only a handful of them were given the 'China brief' yet there were at least 60 million Chinese. In terms of potential converts, it was a ratio of about 12 million per Jesuit.² The road from the port of Macau to the Imperial City in Beijing was dogged by political and spiritual potholes. In the early days converts were thin on the ground. On the leader board of saved souls Jesuits in Japan were scoring far higher.

The Ming imperial court not only had the headache of western merchants and missionaries washing up on Chinese shores; fears of foreign invasion were further exacerbated by a terrifying force of fifteen thousand Japanese Christian soldiers marching up the Korean peninsula. Their fearsome presence would have hardly helped the uphill struggle of public relations for Jesuits in China.³

As a result, the policy of proselytization was to make Christianity and its bearers of glad tidings palatable to the cultural tastes buds of the Chinese. The initial approach was straightforward enough: blend in. Tall hairy Mediterranean men shaved their heads, dressed in the robes of Buddhist monks, and learned local customs. Quite how far this strategy of accommodating Chinese ways for Christian ends could stretch before losing integrity plagued the mission throughout. Eventually it came to affect all orders with missions in China. With stark consequences.

The Jesuits found that their presence was best supported by local government officials wherever they could establish good relations with them. However, the imperial civil service traditionally operated on the basis of transfer every few years. Therefore, just as the Jesuits had built up enough goodwill and protection to set up shop, so to speak, if their local ally was transferred to a far-flung outpost of the Chinese empire their missionary groundwork was undone, and their safety jeopardised. This led Ricci to concentrate on scaling the tiers of government to gain a steadier foothold. Only a settled mission could attract more converts and offer continuing pastoral care for them. His ultimate goal was the very top: if the reclusive Wanli Emperor would wave a benign flag over

Wanli Emperor 1563 – 1620, 14th emperor of the Ming dynasty

the Jesuits' presence their passage through the empire would be slightly less fraught with mortal danger.

Over time Ricci came to realise that Buddhist monks were too low on the social ladder to climb its slippery rungs. Status cuts both ways when a deal is being sought, even a spiritual deal. To impress those of high status he had to indulge in power dressing. After spending over ten years wearing the robes of a Buddhist mendicant, he sought permission from his Superior to change his outfit to the fine swathes of silk worn by the educated elite when they visited each other's residences. Adorned in silks and transported in a sedan chair Ricci attended social networking events with the Ming dynasty *literati*, a word the Jesuits chose to refer to the learned men who comprised the vast ranks of government.

The majority of these men of letters were however drawn to the mathematical and scientific knowledge of the Jesuits rather than their religious beliefs. The oil painting of a mother and child on the wall of the mission house was less enticing than whirring clocks, colourful prisms, and the fascinating computations of astrolabes. Moreover, conversion to Christianity meant forsaking the company of concubines, let alone the humiliation of bowing before a foreign priest during a service. Such slights of status did not befit men of their standing. Those willing to convert were more likely to be retired as the perils of the career ladder and pleasures of concubines no longer held their former appeal.

The paradox was plain and simple: to safeguard the mission as a whole the Jesuits needed to gain friends in high places, yet the *literati* were the social strata least likely to become Christians. The more time spent entertaining their intellectual curiosity the less time was available for the grassroots work of conversion. All souls have equal worth in the light of the Lord but if they could not establish a safe basis to save souls in the first place everyone was doomed. Healing the sick and infertile among the lower orders led to more converts, but the greatest miracle of all would be the emperor's approval. Onwards was upwards.

Proving the existence of God in ancient China

The literati were versed in a set of texts collectively known as the Five Classics. For all young men aspiring to join the ranks of government, the first rung of the career ladder was to pass a written examination in these venerable works. This system had been in place, more or less, for one and a half thousand years. By the Míng dynasty the core curriculum had expanded to include the Four Books, and centuries of commentaries also had to be digested and regurgitated.⁴

Five Classics		Four Books	
Documents	<i>Shangshu</i>	Analects	<i>Lunyu</i>
Odes / Songs	<i>Shijing</i>	Mencius	<i>Mengzi</i>
Changes	<i>Yijing</i>	Great Learning	<i>Daxue</i>
Rites	<i>Liji</i>	Doctrine of the mean	<i>Zhongyong</i>
Annals	<i>Chunqiu</i>		

The exams were ferociously tough, no was cheating allowed, and they provoked such stress levels that some candidates appeared to be possessed by demons. Students today would surely sympathise. Jesuits also had a high-brow education with tests that were equally exacting. Ricci thus felt at home not only with the rigours of study but also the content of these great works, replete as they were with worthy counsel on how to live a virtuous life.⁵

Ricci was given the daunting task of translating excerpts of these works into Latin. The project led him into deep theological water. In the Classics he noticed two terms that implied some sort of supreme deity: Tian (Sky or Heaven) as well as Shang Da. *Shang* means high, above, or lofty and *di* means a deity, a god, or an emperor.

Tian and Shang Di appeared to be used interchangeably as if one supreme god had two names. Michele Ruggieri, a Jesuit who arrived in China earlier than Ricci had already translated Deus as Tianzhu (Lord of Heaven). The more Ricci delved into the Classics, however, the more he was convinced that the people of ancient China had worshipped only

one God. In this thinking, the myriad deities of the 16th century must have deviated from a once pure monotheistic source. In other words, for Chinese people, the Lord of Heaven was a foreign god worshipped by missionaries and their converts, but for Jesuits there was only one God, ever, anywhere.⁶

Shang Di was in fact the high god of the Shang dynasty. However, the oracle bones were still buried in the soil during Ming dynasty times. The scope of Shang beliefs was only unearthed in the 20th century (F2, 1 - 4). Shang Di certainly had the lofty attributes of a creator god, but nature spirits and royal ancestors also populated the Shang pantheon. Polytheism was not a deviation from a once pure monotheistic source; it had been the norm for at least two thousand years before Ricci came to China. But as far as he was concerned, or wanted to be concerned, Shang Di was not a god but The God. He writes:

He who is called the Lord of Heaven in my humble country is
He who is called Shang-ti in Chinese.⁷

As a result, he permitted the converts to use Tian (or Tian Di, Shang Di and Tianzhu interchangeably since they were all names for God.⁸

In the Five Classics, Ricci gleaned the presence of a supreme god. In the Four Books he gleaned a humanistic practice of self-cultivation associated with the teachings of Confucius. Combined, he drew parallels to his Catholic faith. The allure of monotheism and humanism inspired his missionary zeal. The tenets of Christianity were not religious imports from the far west; equivalent beliefs lay in Chinese antiquity. All he had to do was reveal this universal truth through these venerable texts. If God had simply been forgotten about in the mists of time Ricci was saving the Chinese from their own fall from grace. Lucky them!

Steeped in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, Jesuits held that the natural light of reason was the first step along the path to conversion. The existence of God and validity of Christian doctrines had to be proved by reason. More to the point, to use reason to point out the fallacies of other faiths. I think only Mr. Spock (of Star Trek) could be persuaded to convert on this basis, and I doubt he would subscribe to any religion in

Confucius, c. 551 – c. 479 BCE

Thomas Aquinas, 1225 – 1274

the first place except for arcane rituals to honour Vulcan ancestors. Poor and illiterate converts were persuaded by miraculous healing not logical argument. The natural light of reason was only reasonable if it made a tangible difference to their meagre lives.⁹

To elevate the link between the Chinese Classics and Christianity Ricci set out to refute other native traditions. In his scholastic line of fire were Buddhists, those low-status veggie-eating atheists whose robes he wore for ten years with scant missionary success; Daoists, polytheistic idol worshippers obsessed with elixirs of immortality; as well as Neo-Confucianists who sought to restore the true Confucian way from earlier eras but drew on Daoist and Buddhist ideas. Clearly, they were a bunch of lost souls caught in a quagmire of cross-spiritual purposes. All Ricci had to do was to lift the veils of Buddhist atheism, Daoist polytheism, and Neo-Confusionism and all the veggie-eating alchemical smoothie-drinking lost souls would surely see the light of the one true God.

Taoists and Buddhists are all produced by our great Father, the Lord of Heaven, and we are therefore all brothers. For example, if my younger brother goes mad and falls to the ground, should I, as his elder brother, pity him or hate him? What is most important is that we should employ reason to explain the truth and make things clear to them.¹⁰

Pretty patronising, don't you think?

Ricci aimed to disprove Buddhist and Daoist beliefs through the guise of familiar Confucian teachings (an older brother looking out for a younger brother) but with the ulterior motive of proving the superiority of Christianity. It would be as if a Buddhist monk lifted choice passages from the Bible to teach the Dharma to Christians, while pointing out inconsistencies in the Holy Scriptures in order to persuade Christians to convert to Buddhism. Hardly a way to win friends and influence people. A Chinese scholar wrote:

The Barbarians began by attacking Buddhism. Next, they attacked Taoism, next the later Confucianism [Neo-Confucianism]. If they have not yet attacked Confucius that is because they wish to remain on good terms with the literate elite and the mandarins, in order to spread their doctrine. But they are simply chafing at the bit in secret and have not yet declared themselves.¹¹

He admitted as much when he wrote to his Jesuit Superior:

‘And I am very keen that they should also regard me in that light [i.e. praising Confucian teachings] for we should have much more to do if we were obliged to fight against all three sects.’¹²

Four Elements of Greek natural philosophy

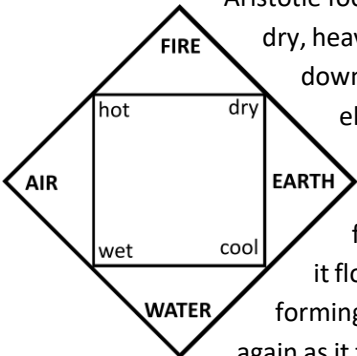
Ricci used a similar tactic to critique *wuxing*. In this case he employed Aristotelian logic to refute the tenets of the theory. Jesuit education lay at a tricky cusp of Christian beliefs, Greek natural philosophy, and the scientific revolution. Jesuits were keen scientists but in the 16th century the periodic table of chemical elements had not yet been formulated. Therefore, the four traditional elements of earth, air, fire and water still held sway as the material means by which God had created the world.

Natural philosophers in the 6th century BCE envisaged a kind of primordial matter which could be neither created nor destroyed, and from which all phenomena were borne. Water was a prime candidate as well as *pneuma* (air, breath, wind, and spirit).¹³ Following on from this idea, Empedocles posited four primordial substances – earth, air, fire, and water which he called ‘roots.’ He also described them as deities thus stressing their eternal nature. While the four roots could be neither created nor destroyed, he proposed two forces, love and strife, that act upon the four roots. Love was the force of attraction by which the roots combined in different ways to create phenomena. Taken to an extreme the force of Love would merge the four roots into a sphere of unity but then there would be no distinct forms. Strife was the force of repulsion that impelled the roots to go their separate ways, creating distinctions, but if all were rent asunder in the vortex of Strife nothing would exist at all. It was the dynamic tension of love and strife acting on the four roots that engendered everything from stars to plants. Empedocles should be compulsory reading on all relationship counselling courses.¹⁴

Plato chose the word, *stoicheion*, for earth, air, fire, and water which implies the basic units of a composite. For example, the letter D cannot be reduced to a more basic letter but combined with O and G it

Empedocles c. 494 – 434 BCE

can form different words. Another example is primary colours (red, blue, yellow) which combine to make secondary colours such as purple and orange. The four elements are primary bodies out of which composite bodies such as plants and animals are formed. It is this word, *stoicheion*, which has been translated as 'element'.¹⁵



Aristotle focused on their properties: hot, cold, wet, dry, heavy and light, but since hot things can cool down and damp things dry out, so the four elements were mutable and relative. As the heaviest element the propensity of earth was to move downwards and form land. Water was relatively heavy as it flowed around land. Air was relatively light, forming the atmosphere, and fire was lighter again as it formed the sun. As for the fifth element, aether, in Aristotle's thinking, it was the composition of stars, and its motion was circular. Aether made the heavens go round.

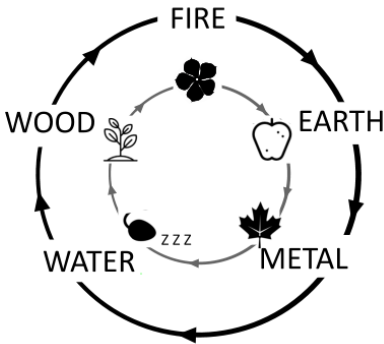
Educated in such esteemed traditions Ricci naturally compared *wǔxíng* to the four elements, but looking at one theory through the lens of another the logic of the Chinese system did not stack up. He writes:

By adding metal and wood, and subtracting air, they count five elements: metal, wood, fire, water, and earth. Still worse, they make out that these elements are engendered the one by the other, and it may be imagined with how little foundation they teach it, but as it is a doctrine handed down from their ancient sages, no one dares to attack it.¹⁶

In fact, *wuxing* attracted critics as far back as its initial dissemination, but venerable axioms are indeed hard to challenge! Firstly, the logic of how one 'element' led to another did not make sense to him. Second, he was confounded by the lack of air but a surfeit of *qi* (F1, 8). Third, he saw metal and wood as composite not primary bodies, the elemental equivalent of purple and orange. Let's take a look at each point in turn.¹⁷

Upending the Logic of Transformation

There are two main sequences by which the five phases generate and control each other. Describing the cycle of generation, he writes:



“Thus, it was said that

- wood comes from water
- fire from wood
- earth from fire
- metal from earth
- and water from metal.

It is really hard to follow this theory.”¹⁸

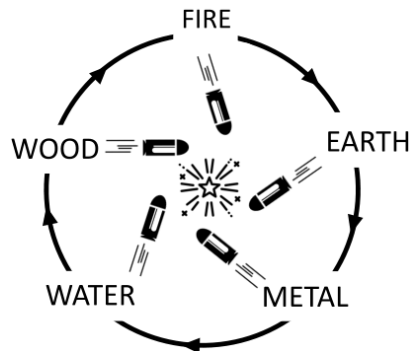
I sympathise. Metal generating water is really pretty weird. A traditional mnemonic is that water nourishes trees; timber is used to make fires; the ashes of fire feed the soil; ores lie within the earth; and the last one is always tricky, but mines may have contained water.¹⁹

Ricci used the self-evident reasoning that trees cannot grow from water alone to pick holes in the logic of the generating cycle. He writes:

Wood is of fire [sunlight] and earth [soil]. How could it be generated by water alone? And before the existence of fire and earth, how could wood have been completed on its own? If wood were generated before the existence of earth, where should the already existing tree be planted?²⁰

Each phase generates the next one but regulates the one after that. The mnemonic for this complementary sequence is:

- earth dams water
- water extinguishes fire
- fire melts metal
- metal chops wood
- wood breaks up earth (a possible reference to wooden ploughs)

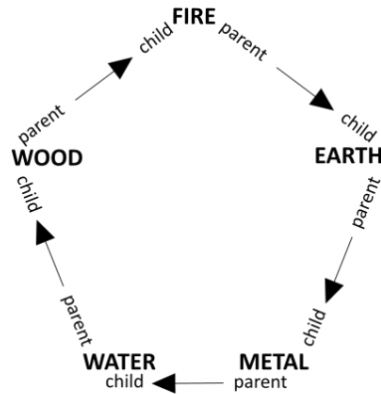


The theory operates on the basis that the five phases mutually regulate each other's powers, so balance is maintained. The generating cycle ensures the waxing of each phase, it comes into its full power, and the control cycle ensures its powers wane in favour of the next phase. The traditional term for the control cycle implies conquest but because both cycles operate simultaneously there is no outright destruction.

For example, if Water generates Wood, which in turn produces Fire, Water cannot completely destroy Fire because Wood is providing enough fuel to keep the flames alight. Yet Water ensures that Fire does not get out of control; it fans the flames down so that Fire can transform into Earth. In this way, the two cycles create a constant flow of change and interaction, forming a dynamic model of self-regulation which was not as vogue in Ricci's time as it is nowadays.

Instead, Ricci used the traditional descriptions to question the logic of how the two sequences operate together. In the following quote, written about two thousand years ago, the generating cycle is likened to the parent-child relationship.

What bestows anything is always "the parent," what accepts it is always "the child." Constantly relying on the parent to direct the child is the Way of Nature... Therefore, the five phases are actually the actions of the filial child and loyal minister.²¹



In this quote, the generating cycle is described as a natural order. Parent and child, ruler and minister reflect the natural hierarchy of above and below, like heaven and earth or hills and valleys. Human relationships must reflect this natural order. In other words, it is simply natural to feel eternally grateful to our elders and betters. More to the point, feelings of disloyalty are unnatural and not the Way of Nature!

Whatever the political subtext of this passage may have been the parent-child analogy subsequently stuck like glue to the generating cycle, and Ricci used it to critique the flimsy logic of *wuxing*. In Chinese

family values grandfather and grandson share an innate sympathy and similarity. If Wood is Fire's parent, then Water is Fire's grandparent.

As water brings forth wood, and wood produces fire, then, because water is the grandfather and fire the grandson, how come that grandfather and grandson are so dissimilar to each other? Why is grandfather so heartless to his grandson and always wants to destroy him?²²

In short, why does grandpa throw a wet towel over his grandson's sunny personality and extinguish the bright light in his eyes? The argument was designed to tug at the intellectual heartstrings of the literati: "Come on, you love your grandson, right? He's got your nose and eyes. So how come your five-element theory does not reflect the affection you feel for him?" It was a typical Ricci ruse to use a tenet of Chinese beliefs and practices he agreed with, such as harmonious family relations, in order to disprove the logic of those he did not favour such as *wuxing*.²³




Exorcising Qi

Another of Ricci's critiques of *wuxing* was the dearth of the element, air, and a preponderance of *qi* (F1, 8). *Qi* is typically translated as life force, energy, or vitality but since a precise translation is elusive, I'll continue to use *qi*. He writes:

As they do not know what air is, where we say that there is air, they affirm that there is a void.²⁴

There was not a void, as such, but highly diffuse *qi*. It is *qi* that is inhaled and exhaled. *Qi* can also mean to breathe.

Qi is not only air as a source of life; it also imbues food with its

rice grains  oracle script	cloud  oracle script	<i>qi</i>  character	nutritive value. The <i>qi</i> of mountain air and fresh food has more vitality than polluted city air and stale food. Although the word, <i>qi</i> , is not found on the oracle bones, its two graphs do date back to the oracle script.
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The top graph depicts vapours or clouds, and the bottom graph is grains of rice. Before rice became a staple grain it may have been provided as a luxury food or drink (rice wine) at feasts.²⁵

Feasts were a key part of ancestor worship as far back as Shang times. *Qi* not only implies steam and vapour but also smell, such as the wafting aromas of cooking rising up to the sky. Ancestors were enticed to come down from their celestial abodes by these sumptuous aromas. They feasted on the sights, sounds, and smells of a spectacle presented in their honour. Having been wined and dined these spiritual elders and betters conveyed messages to distant ancestors who would then inform the high god, Shang Di, about the good deeds of their living descendants. The ancestors and Shang Di could bring fortune or misfortune upon the living: fertile crops and animals or floods and droughts (F4, 10 - 12). *Qi* implies power and vitality from an ineffable invisible source; perhaps that source was once ancestral? ²⁶

Another rendering of atmosphere is feelings and moods, not only of people but also places and events. *Qi* is seen to be the source of those subtle qualities. Is the *qi* of love or strife gaining the upper hand in the couples therapy session? Spirits are also atmospheric entities. An exam candidate possessed by a demon bent on career failure needed to have malign *qi* exorcised from his stressed-out nervous system. Ricci however wanted to exorcise *qi* and replace it with air, because its cosmological remit did not fit his ancestral paradigm. Since both theories shared fire, earth, and water, and *qi* does have an atmospheric nature, *qi* is surely air, and his Chinese colleagues are surely mistaken.

Rather than thinking in terms of the four elements, it is perhaps better to compare *qi* to the earlier strata of Greek natural philosophy in which all phenomena is borne out of the same primordial substance. Water was one proposition, and *qi* has been likened to water's changes of state from solid to fluid to gas. Another was pneuma (air, breath, wind, spirit) which is an older translation of *qi*. In recent decades *qi* has been likened to quantum field theory, but a 16th century viewpoint is perhaps more appropriate in this context than waves and particles; in which case, I would like to focus on its similarities to pneuma.²⁷

Pneuma was seen as an internal form of air, a life-giving vapour that circulated in the body alongside blood and nourished vital organs. Pneuma was also seen as the source of thoughts and feelings. Aristotle envisaged an innate form of pneuma, a hot foamy substance similar in composition to stars which originated in the heart and was transmitted

by semen as the essence of life to offspring (women only providing their physical form!).²⁸

In Chinese medicine, likewise, *qi* nourishes vital organs; the heart is the source of thoughts and feelings; and both *qi* and blood circulate along internal channels. At least the *qi* of men and women provided the essence of life to the next generation!²⁹

In meditation practices, the more you can refine the *qi* circulating in your body through subtle breathing techniques and a calm heart, the more spirit-like you will become. You may even live forever. Or certainly longer than people whose vitality ebbs away due to polluted city air, stale food, low-status ancestors and other social ills. As *pneuma* was still part of medical practice when the Jesuits came to China, the similarities would have only strengthened Ricci's argument that *qi* was in fact air. Blowing his own trumpet as if to prove the existence of air he writes:

Father Matthew [Ricci]... told them that they were four elements, no more or no less, possessed of contradictory qualities, and he taught them where each element was found ... Father Matthew wrote a commentary on this subject in Chinese, in which he did away with their five elements, as such, and established the four, to which he assigned locations, and of which he showed illustrations. This commentary was received with great interest. They had numerous copies of it made, which were everywhere accepted with the same high praise as his other writings.³⁰

The Four Elements are Closer to Genesis

The philosophical notion of a primordial substance, such as water or *pneuma* or Empedocles' four roots was superseded by the Christian creed that only God is eternal; all matter can be created and destroyed. Yet the first lines of Genesis still allude to this legacy of wind and water.

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters.³¹

The 'mighty wind' is also translated as the 'Spirit of God', meaning the Holy Spirit that is closely associated with *pneuma*. (Pneumatology is the

study of the Holy Spirit, not the study of car tyre pressure). A devout Christian's thoughts and feelings are guided by the Holy Spirit in accord with God's Will. The 'waters' were the protean matter separated by God in order to create heaven and earth.

I am not sure how the four elements are construed from Genesis but for 16th century Jesuits God fashioned the cosmos through earth, air, fire, and water. They are simple elements from which everything else is formed. For Ricci, wood and metal were not simple elements but rather products of the four elements. He writes:

It is admissible to speak of water, fire, and earth as simple elements. But what reason would there be to regard metal and wood as primary elements? If one, for instance, examines the composition of the myriad things, such as human beings, insects, birds, and animals, then one will readily see that most of them are not composed of metal and wood.³²

Chemistry was still playing catch-up in the 16th century let alone that metals and carbon are first forged in stars. And who knows where the bionic human race is going? But there was another twist to the plot of relegating metal and wood to the secondary league tables of creation.

I have read in the *Shangshu* [Documents] about the inception of things by Yao and Shun [two legendary prehistoric rulers]. But it is only said they are crucial for the people's livelihood, and nowhere are metal, wood, water, fire, and earth called primary [elements] and origin of the myriad things.³³

He is right. The scant references to metal, wood, water, fire, and earth in the Classics do emphasise them as natural resources for daily life. Ricci held great store by the Classics because he read into them proof that ancient Chinese people had once worshipped a single creator god, Shang Di, whom he believed to be God. By extrapolation, anything else in the Classics was closer to the source - of God in ancient China - while other literature had digressed from this abiding truth. Perhaps he took the same stance with *wuxing*: references in the Classics were authentic, the real meaning, while other descriptions were suspect.

On this basis he could consign not only metal and wood but all of *wuxing* to a secondary stage of creation. By means of the four elements God fashioned the sky, earth, dry land, plants, animals, and humans all

within six days. Ask a busy deity. The material resources for daily life are post-Fall. Cast out of the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve faced the brave new world of earning a living. However, chopping wood and carrying water, making fires, smelting metal, digging soil, and growing crops had nothing to do with the origins of the cosmos. The Chinese five elements were a functional by-product of the Greek four elements.³⁴

There is an important issue of timing here. Early descriptions of *wuxing* imply natural resources. By the time Jesus was in nappies, if they had nappies back then, the theory had been reconceived as five phases of *qi* which had a cosmogonic remit. Primordial *qi* initially differentiated into sunny lighter *yang qi* to form the sky and dark heavier *yin qi* to form the earth. *Qi* then further differentiated through *wuxing*. For example, Water *qi* engendered water as a substance as well as watery things such as turtles, fish, and a salty taste. Fire *qi* engendered birds with feathers for flying. Metal *qi* gave animals their cutting fangs and biting stings. In short, while *yin-yang* was bequeathed the elegance of physics, *wuxing* was saddled with the complex variables of life and evolution. At least the Chinese envisaged cosmogenesis taking place over aeons whereas, for Ricci, God created the world using four elements in six days followed by a day's rest. A robust dialogue no doubt accompanied many a social networking event.³⁵

Back to the issue of timing, the Classics incorporated a range of stories, speeches, poems, and state records. In the 2nd century BCE this material was consolidated in order to form a curriculum for the newly-instigated examination system. All young men aspiring to join the ranks of government had to take the test. By then, *wuxing* had already begun to transform into a theory of cyclical cosmic powers but in literature that either post-dates the Classics or was never incorporated into them. Ricci would have surely known of the cosmogonic remit of *wuxing*, but he had grounds to dismiss it because this development was not included in the Classics. As such it could not have been the belief of those ancient Chinese people who worshipped the one true God. Or so he imagined.³⁶

Translating *Wuxing* as the Five Elements

Among the early Jesuits in China, Ricci was the most able linguist and a prolific author. Translating *wuxing* as the five elements may not have been his choice alone but its dissemination in Europe, as well as the Four Elements in China, was initially by his hand. He knew very well that *xing* meant to go and to do (F2, 3 - 7). He used it this way in one of his first publications in Chinese. In the *Book of 25 Paragraphs*, Ricci adapted the sayings of the Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, in order to convey Christian values to a Chinese audience. The Stoic teachings are about not dwelling on events beyond your control but focusing on what you can control, which is your behaviour. The wise words of Epictetus were undergoing a popular resurgence in Europe during the 16th century.

In order to translate this work Ricci drew upon Chinese phrases and ideas that would have been familiar to his readers. One such phrase was *zhixing* (knowledge and action). In brief, and in light of previous descriptions of *pneuma* and Chinese medicine, if the heart is the seat of consciousness, it is also the seat of conscience. With moral awareness comes an imperative to act in line with your beliefs - to walk your talk. *Xing* implies your conduct, the step-by-step actions that are guided by your heart. *Xing* also implies skilled action such as craftsmanship. With practice your moral actions can also become more skilful. That is the gist of self-cultivation that I assume Ricci saw as a common thread in Stoic, Christian, and Confucian teachings, but it is speculation on my part.³⁷

Perhaps the connotation of skilled action also reiterated his view that *wuxing* concerned practical livelihood not cosmogonic processes. If so, it could have been translated as the Five Actions or Five Resources. Yet having decided that *wuxing* was a theory of basic elements, but one that did not make sense if viewed through the lens of Aristotelian logic, the five elements were a misguided inferior version of the four elements.

Aside from comparing Chinese and Greek natural philosophies or Christian and Confucian moral sensibilities, a simple reason to translate *wuxing* as the five elements was its similar practical applications to the

Epictetus, d. 135

four elements. Both were used in medicine, astrology, and alchemy. The grey area for Jesuits in both systems was divination. To scope out your future through divination and thus stave off potential misfortune was, effectively, to lack trust in God. God's Will is divine; it does not need to be divined. One fervent acolyte, Li Yingshi, was not only a decorated military veteran but also a renowned *fengshui* expert. In order to make the leap of faith required to become Christian his treasured, expensive collection of divination manuals were put on a funeral pyre and burnt to ashes along with the beliefs they contained.³⁸ Ricci did not pressure him to convert, and supported him in the wake of such a sacrifice, but the use of *wuxing* in divination would have hardly endeared the theory to a Jesuit priest.

Indeed, Ricci grew weary of rumours that the hairy medicine men of the far west knew the alchemical means to turn mercury into silver rather than any true interest in the miracle of divine intervention. Such solutions were still sought after by ageing emperors who drank dubious protein shakes that promoted eternal life. Or just improved their libido sufficiently to reinvigorate themselves through the regenerative allure suffusing their pleasure quarters. If only Ricci could persuade the Wanli Emperor, a world-weary overweight recluse, that seeing a miraculous apparition of the Virgin Mary was a more fulfilling form of regeneration. The Emperor must have been a sorry sight, stuffing his face with comfort food in the recesses of his palace. No wonder he stayed out of view.³⁹

Since a fifth element had always been floating around the aether the similarities of the two theories must have made the five elements an obvious choice. After all, the Jesuits were grappling with translating hallowed Chinese texts into Latin, cautious diplomatic encounters with the imperial court, violent attacks on their properties and brethren, all the while predicting eclipses and teaching trigonometry. An accurate translation of *wuxing* could hardly have been a priority. That Ricci gave the theory any attention at all is testimony to his resolve to learn about all things Chinese. It would have been only natural to translate *wuxing* as the five elements, as natural as an emperor in the throes of a mid-life crisis being attracted to nubile young women.

Mapping Heaven and Earth

It took Ricci and his companions close on two decades to navigate the political and spiritual potholes from Macao to Beijing. The invitation to live and work in the Imperial City was due to their astronomical, rather than religious knowledge of Heaven's Order. Some of Europe's leading astronomers were Jesuits.

Incorporating a new god from the far west was no problem. The more the merrier in the Chinese pantheon. Of greater importance was to ensure that all deities were venerated on the right day. This had been true since the Shang kings had wined and dined their spiritual superiors at ancestral feasts. To do so entailed precise astronomical observations and mathematical calculations. If the calendar goes out of sync with the seasons, which it easily does over a few generations, a ruler is asking for misfortune to knock on fate's door.⁴⁰ His spiritual backers might back off if he requests their blessings on the wrong day.

The astronomical records and instruments of the Ming imperial court were in dire need of recalibration since their heyday under Kublai Kahn four centuries earlier. Highly-advanced astronomical instruments lay weather-worn and neglected at the Beijing observatory because no one knew how to use them. Ricci was certain they had been made by a foreigner versed in western science, but they were in fact made under the watchful eye of Kublai Kahn's foremost astronomer, Guo Shoujing, who had calculated the length of a year to within 30 seconds.⁴¹

While China's astronomical cutting-edge may have become rusty its printing and paper industries were far head of Europe's. Publishing was an easy inexpensive means to proselytise rather than preaching hell and damnation at the corner of the marketplace. To get the Word out Ricci became a prolific author. Yet his most popular work in China was neither a religious nor astronomical treatise; it was a map of the world. He made several versions of this map, but the crowning glory was the one commissioned by the Wanli Emperor.⁴²

Created with cartographical precision gleaned by globe-trotting Jesuits, the known world of the early 17th century was displayed across six huge panels. Prophetically re-positioned it was Asia not Europe that lay at the centre of the map. After all, the Chinese call their country, *Zhongguo*, the Central States or Middle Kingdom. Its mountains, rivers, and neighbouring countries were drawn with the help of Ricci's Chinese colleagues. The Jesuits' knowledge of the solar system was set around the edges of the map: the distance between the earth and other planets, proof that the sun is larger than the moon, and an explanation of the four seasons. Since His Imperial Majesty was the pivot of Heaven and Earth it was only fitting that his entire domain was on display. Ricci never failed to educate through flattery when the opportunity arose.⁴³

The map was also a diplomatic gamble to put Europe and China on equal footing. Europe was not the barbaric other; that was assigned to heathen tribes consigned to the far-flung edges of the map. Rather, these two great civilisations with their lengthy eminent histories could complement and learn from one another.

At the mission house in the Imperial City, Ricci hosted legions of hopefuls who had come to Beijing to sit the civil service entrance exams. The young men had scant interest in conversion, they were just tourists checking out the local scene, but he entertained their intellectual curiosity, nonetheless. After they left, he burned the midnight oil not only to translate Chinese texts into Latin but also classical western texts such as Euclid's *Elements* into Chinese.⁴⁴

It is thought that Ricci died of sheer exhaustion. With permission from the Wanli Emperor, whom he never met, his body was laid to rest in Beijing, an exception to the rule for foreigners whose remains were usually shipped back to Macau. Since disgruntled bones were believed to wreak havoc on the living, trusting that foreign bones would behave themselves as ancestral relics might have been the closest the Wanli Emperor came to an act of faith.⁴⁵

The limitations of a four centuries' old missionary agenda might be readily apparent in hindsight, but we would not have such a breadth of cross-cultural knowledge nowadays without the pioneering efforts of people like Ricci. Jesuit accounts of the ways of foreign peoples were popular in Europe. The German polymath, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz,

admired China's civil service with its rigorous exams based on classical literature. He urged European countries to adopt the same system.⁴⁶ Today's civil servants are indeed mandarins. Leibniz was also fascinated by the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). Its hexagrams of broken and unbroken lines inspired him to formulate a binary system of counting which sowed the computational seeds for computer programming as binary code in later centuries. Where would we be today had Ricci not burned the midnight oil?⁴⁷

It is also necessary to pay special attention before the truth, goodness and beauty of God. They should always be considered together and are precious allies in the commitment to defend human dignity, in building a peaceful coexistence and in carefully preserving creation. This carefulness gives rise to a serene, sincere and strong view of events which is illuminated by Christ. Great figures such as Matteo Ricci are a model of it.⁴⁸

His Holiness, the late Pope Francis

That Ricci favoured the Greek four elements over the Chinese five is not something I hold against him. I only wrote this article to explain why I do not use the five elements as a translation of *wuxing*. To learn about his remarkable life along the way has been a bonus. Only a man of his intelligence and determination could have kept going throughout years of adversity. There were so many opportunities to lose faith, not least when Chinese converts were murdered by their own kinsmen.

As much as Jesuits appropriated Chinese ways to Christian ends, they also accommodated them, for example, a form of ancestor worship was still permitted. It was hard enough to persuade potential converts to forsake a favourite concubine, or bow in front of a foreign priest; to renege on ancestral duties was too much to ask. Other Catholic orders who followed the Jesuits into China alerted the Vatican to the wayward practices, not least, that the Jesuits permitted their converts to call Deus by unorthodox names such as Shang Di.

One century after Ricci's death this controversy had become so entrenched that all Catholic orders faced a stark choice between Beijing and Rome: to gain an imperial permit to stay in China the example of

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, 1646 - 1716

Matteo Ricci must be followed, but anyone who did so would be excommunicated. The missionaries were stuck between a religious rock and a spiritual hard place. A final papal bull in 1742 decreed that no one was even allowed to discuss the matter. And so things remained for two hundred years until 1939 when this ban was lifted. By then, the oracle bones had been unearthed and the Shang pantheon revealed.⁴⁹

On the topic of ancestral veneration Ricci is still undergoing the lengthy administrative process of beatification. Whether he or not he will be deemed a saint is also controversial since his missionary methods have been both revered and chastised. His credentials are a little sparse according to the traditional criteria of miracles, but without doubt he performed miracles that were appropriate for his time.

The China Millennium Monument in Beijing is a hundred-metre-long relief built to commemorate the year 2000. Depicting five thousand years of Chinese history and its influential figures, Ricci is one of just two westerners to be honoured on this great wall of fame. As an ancestor he achieved great merit.⁵⁰

NOTES

Online and open sources are underlined. Stable URLs are not dated; otherwise, the date of access is provided.

Climbing the Ladder of Influence
1 - 4

¹ The Jesuit Order set up schools to educate a wide range of young men, not only those aspiring to the priesthood, hence the broad curriculum.

² John D. Durand, "The Population Statistics of China, A.D. 2-1953", *Population Studies* **13** (3) March 1960, 235

³ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, (Penguin Books 1985), 50.

⁴ A nascent form of the civil service examination began in 136 BCE.

⁵ Mary Laven, *Mission to China, Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Encounter with the East*, (Faber & Faber 2011), 132 – 136.

Proving the Existence of God in Ancient China
4 - 7

⁶ *Tianzhu*, Lord of Heaven, was in fact a Buddhist deity. Ricci's predecessor in China, Michele Ruggieri, drew heavily on Buddhism in order to translate Christian concepts into Chinese. It is thus ironic that *Tianzhu* was permitted as a name for God while Shang Di and Tian were banned by the Vatican (see also p. 21).

Ambrose Ih-Ren Mong, "The Legacy of Matteo Ricci and his companions", *Missionology: an International Review* **43** (4) 2015, 391.

⁷ Matteo Ricci S.J., *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-Chu Shih-I)*, trans. Douglas Lancashire, Peter Hu Kuo-chen S.J., Edward Malatesta S.J., (Taipei: Institut Ricci, 1985), 121.

⁸ Sangkeu Kim, *Strange Names of God: the missionary translation of the Divine Name and the Chinese "Shangti" in Late Ming China, 1583 - 1644*, (Peter Lang Publishers, 2004), 55 – 60 & 197 – 212.

⁹ The 'natural light of reason' is associated with Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) whose teachings were part of Jesuit education. Aquinas sought to reconcile Christian truth with the philosophical truth of Aristotle.

John O' Malley, "How the First Jesuits Became Involved in Education", *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum: 400th Anniversary Perspectives*. Vincent J. Duminuco, S.J., Ed. (Fordham University Press, 2000), 58. Acc: 2nd September 2025

¹⁰ Ricci S.J., *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven*, 101

¹¹ Wang Qiyuan writing in 1623, 13 years after Ricci's death. Quoted in:
Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, translated by Janet Lloyd, (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 52

¹² Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, 52

Four Elements of Greek Thought

7 - 8

¹³ Such ideas are called *material monism*: a primordial matter transforms into all other phenomena. For example, Thales, c. 624/3 – 548/5 BCE posited water as the protean substance; Anaximander, c. 610 – 546 BCE proposed *apeiron* (unlimited, indefinite) as the inexhaustible source of all phenomena but which itself was beyond definition; and Anaximenes, c. 586 – 526 BCE is associated with *pneuma* or *aer*.

F.E. Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms, a Historical Lexicon*, (New York University Press, 1967) 19 – 20 & 160 – 161.

¹⁴ *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Empedocles*. Acc. 2nd September 2025

¹⁵ Peters writes that *stoeichon* is first used by Plato, *Theat.* 201e in which 'it is obvious that Plato still feels the original connotation of letters of the alphabet. By the time of Aristotle, the original meaning is largely ignored and *stoeichon* means the basic ingredient of a composite'. Peters also notes that Empedocles was the only thinker to see earth, air, fire, and water as irreducible primary bodies. His successors envisaged yet more basic bodies (e.g. atoms) or how the four elements aggregated into more complex bodies. Aristotle referred to them as the "so-called elements."

Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms*, 180 – 182.

¹⁶ Henri Bernard, S.J., *Matteo Ricci's Scientific Contribution to China*, trans. Edward Chalmers Werner (West Haven: Hyperion Press, 1973), 48.

¹⁷ These three critiques are drawn from the article by Hsu Kuang-tai. See:

Hsu Kuang-Tai, "Four Elements as "Ti" and Five Phases as "Yong": The Historical Development from Shao Yong's "Huangji jingshi" to Matteo Ricci's "Qiankun tiyi"", *East Asian Science Technology and Medicine*, **27**, Special Issue: Western Learning in Late Ming and Early Qing China, 2007, 42 – 57.

Upending the Logic of Transformation**9 - 11**

¹⁸ Matteo Ricci S.J., *Qiankun tiyi (Structure and Meanings of the Heaven and Earth)*, reprint of *Wenyuange siku quanshu* **787**, 761. Trans. Hsu Kuang-Tai, quoted in "Four Elements as "Ti" and Five Phases as "Yong"", 47.

¹⁹ The speculative point of water in mines is my own. In early China, working in mines provoked a fear of a watery underworld called the Yellow Springs. One Zhou dynasty mine was 50 metres deep.

Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, (State University of New York Press, 1991), 30.

²⁰ Ricci S.J., trans. Hsu Kuang-Tai, *Qiankun tiyi* quoted in "Four Elements as "Ti" and Five Phases as "Yong"", 48.

²¹ Dong Zhongshu, Mark Csikszentmihalyi, trans., *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*, (Hackett Publishing 2006), 177.

²² Ricci S.J., trans. Hsu Kuang-Tai, *Qiankun tiyi* quoted in "Four Elements as "Ti" and Five Phases as "Yong"", 50.

²³ In traditional ancestral temples, the tablets that housed the spirit of an ancestor were arranged so that grandfather and grandson were next to each other, hence the affinity between them.

Exorcising Qi**11 - 13**

²⁴ Bernard, S.J., *Matteo Ricci's Scientific Contribution to China*, 48

²⁵ For rice as a luxury food in feasts, see:

Brian Hayden, *The Power of Feasts from Prehistory to the Present*, (Cambridge University Press, 2014) 152 – 153

Ping-ti Ho, "The Loess and the Origin of Chinese Agriculture", *The American Historical Review* **71**, (1), October 1969, 26.

²⁶ Zhang & Rose note the links between *qi* 氣, *xì* 饗, *qǐ* 乞 and *chī* 吃 and how characters with a similar sound or meaning can stand for another (see Issue One pp. 17). *Qǐ* 乞 means to beg or humbly request, *chī* 吃 means to eat (mouth radical 口 is added), and *xì* 饗 means 'to give rice' or 'to give nourishment'. They suggest that by adding rice, 米, to the original character for *qi*, 气, the nutritive qualities of *qi* are emphasised.

Zhang Yu Huan & Ken Rose, *A Brief History of Qi*, (Paradigm Publications, 2001), 3 – 6

Allan suggests there is no semantic link between *qǐ* 乞 and *qi* 氣 but she does note that the addition of the rice graph indicated the steam of

cooked food and ‘it might signify the essence of that food, that which is consumed by ancestral spirits when it is given as an offering’.

Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (State University of New York Press, 1997), 87 – 88.

Xi 饗 also implies the food eaten at feasts. Who received how much food and in what order of the lineage hierarchy was an important part of ancestral feasts. Humbly requesting food could relate to a person’s status at a feast.ⁱ

²⁷ Fritjof Capra, *Tao of Physics*, (Flamingo, a HarperCollins Imprint, 1982), 236 – 247.

²⁸ Libbrecht notes that pneuma was called *aer* when it is outside the body and *phusa* when inside the body.

Ulrich Libbrecht, “Prāna = Pneuma – Ch’i?”, *Thought and Law in Han China*, edited by W.L. Idema and E. Zürcher (E.J. Brill 1990), 50 – 62.

²⁹ In Chinese medicine, men and women share the same *jīng qi*, 精氣, a ‘quintessential generative essence, in semen for men, and in women’s reproductive fluids.’

Vivienne Lo and Li Jianmin, “Manuscripts, Received Texts, and the Healing Arts” in *China’s Early Empires, a Re-appraisal*, eds., Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 382.

See also note 26, the two graphs of *jīng* 精 both mean rice. As well as generative essence, *jīng* can also mean finely polished rice.

³⁰ Matteo Ricci S.J., *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci 1583-1610*. Trans. Louis J. Gallagher (Random House, 1953), 327.

The Four Elements are Closer to Genesis

13 - 15

³¹ New English Bible, (Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, 1970), 1.

³² Ricci S.J., trans. Hsu Kuang-Tai, *Qiankun tiyi* quoted in “Four Elements as “Ti” and Five Phases as “Yong””, 51.

³³ Ricci S.J., trans. Hsu Kuang-Tai, *Qiankun tiyi* quoted in “Four Elements as “Ti” and Five Phases as “Yong””, 53.

³⁴ Ibid. Hsu notes that Ricci uses two phrases to describe the relationship between the four elements and *wuxing* – *tǐ* 體 (substance) and *yòng* 用 (function). He traces this use back to a Song dynasty philosopher, Shao

Yong (1011 – 1077) who proposed four forms (earth, air, fire, and stone) in preference to the five phases. Hsu considers whether his preference for four over five may have been known to Ricci who appropriated *ti/yong* as well as *yuán* 源 (origin) and *liú* 流 (flow) analogies to surmise that the Greek four elements were the ‘substance’ and ‘origin’ of *wuxing*.

³⁵ For a wider account of these robust dialogues it is worth reading the rebuttals of western religious tenets by Chinese philosophers, see:

Gernet, “Chinese Heaven, Christian God” in *China and the Christian Impact*, 193 – 238.

³⁶ *Qi*, *yin-yang*, and *wuxing* are thought to have had separate origins before combined into an overarching cosmology.

Michael Nylan, “Yin-yang, Five Phases, and Qi”, in *China’s Early Empires, a Re-appraisal*, eds., Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 398 – 413

Translating *Wuxing* as the Five Elements

16 - 17

³⁷ *Zhixing* 知行 is a philosophy of unity and action propounded by Wang Yangming (1472 – 1529). It is likely that Ricci met some of his students. Ricci paraphrased his work to write sections of the *Book of 25 Paragraphs*.

Yang Huilin, “Matteo Ricci and Michel Foucault’s Readings of Epictetus: A Quest of “Zhi” (知 Knowing) and “Xing” (行 Application)”, trans.

Cathy Zhang Jing and Chloë Starr, *Christianity & Literature* **68**, (1), 2018, 44 – 46.

³⁸ Spence, *Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, 249.

³⁹ In Chinese medical theory, the more a woman’s male partner absorbs her *relatively* yin female fluids which increase as she experiences greater pleasure, the more his own *qi* can be reinvigorated.

Lo & Li, “Manuscripts, Received Texts, and the Healing Arts” in *China’s Early Empires, a Re-appraisal*, 382 – 383.

Mapping Heaven and Earth

18 -21

⁴⁰ Due to a phenomenon known as the ‘precession of the equinoxes’. Acc. 2nd September 2025

⁴¹ Michela Fontana, *A Jesuit in the Ming Court*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 166.

⁴² The printing industry of 16th century China also proliferated because men who had failed the civil service exam became publishers etc.

Laven, *Mission to China*, 140 - 148

⁴³ [The world map presented to the Wanli Emperor](#) can be viewed online. Acc. 2nd September 2025.

⁴⁴ Some of these relationships did endure over several years, however, resulting in a few conversions to his “holy faith.”

Willard Peterson, “The Ming Dynasty, Part 2: 1368 – 1644” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8. Eds., Denis. C. Twitchett & Frederick W. Mote* (Cambridge University Press 1998), 801

⁴⁵ In folklore, improperly buried corpses are unable to rest and transform into dangerous spirits. Given the importance of ancestors, incorrect funeral rites also indicated a breakdown of social order.

Mark Edward Lewis, *Construction of Space in Early China*, (State University of New York Press, 2006), 55 – 60.

⁴⁶ David Graeber & David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, (Allen Lane, 2021), 27 – 33.

⁴⁷ James A. Ryan, “[Leibniz' Binary System and Shao Yong's 'Yijing'](#)”, *Philosophy East and West* **46** (1), January 1996, 59-90.

⁴⁸ [Address by His Holiness Pope Francis to the Community of Writers of “La Civiltà Cattolica”](#), June 2013. Acc. 2nd September 2025

⁴⁹ Known as the Chinese Rites Controversy, an article by Giovannetti-Singh summarises the different stages and actors of this long dispute.

Gianamar Giovannetti-Singh, “[Rethinking the Rites Controversy: Kilian Stumpf’s Acta Pekinensia and the Historical Dimensions of a Religious Quarrel](#)”, *Modern Intellectual History* **19** (1) March 2022.

⁵⁰ The other person being Marco Polo (1254 – 1324). The relief is housed in the Beijing World Art Museum. By promoting the phrase, ‘five thousand years’, the antiquity of Chinese civilisation equals its western counterparts in Egypt and Mesopotamia. A state-funded archaeological project was initiated in the PRC in the 1990s to provide evidence for this antiquity.

Li Liu & Xingcan Chen, *The Archaeology of China: From the Late Palaeolithic to the Early Bronze Age*, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17 – 19.