

Colors in my garden of the four elements

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ABSTRACT

Nature is the origin of human life and the source of energy. In all the ages and in all countries, it is the object of philosophical speculation and a source for artistic expression. Humankind understands the world through nature and attains pleasure and enlightenment while communing with nature. It is an artistic source that continuously delivers beauty and pleasure to humankind. The aesthetic impulse of a human depends on a person's sensual and visual experiences. Therefore, its output or artistic works may represent the unique features of a certain region or culture. However, the four elements of nature are the most primitive and universal subject matters for artistic expression. This paper is about creative writing activities that are based on mankind's philosophical and artistic imagination regarding the four elements.

Four Elements • Symbols • Colors

In all the ages and in every place, in exploring the nature that underlies various phenomena in the world, philosophers have explained the principle of all creation through the concept of elements. Colors in accordance with this concept of elements have played a crucial role in replicating nature and representing a world of imagination through nature.

In the East, the creation of the universe is explained by the theories of yin and yang and the five elements - endless interactions of synergy and antipathy among the five elements. Yin and yang were perceived as a principle of formation and order in the creation of the universe. The five elements (fire, water, wood, metal and earth) are used to classify all things in the universe. This principle represents the universal order and harmony of human life. In the Chinese symbolic system, the Four Gods are associated with the five elements and the colors associated with them are ideological according to the rules of rituals: the blue dragon in the east symbolizes blue or green and wind; the red phoenix in the south represents red, wind and fire; the black turtle in the north signifies black, earth and water; the white tiger in the west stands for white, fire and water. Wind and fire are seen as active and masculine and represent yang, while earth and water are associated with passive and feminine qualities and are symbolic of yin.

In the West, although the number of elements differ, the ancient Greek natural philosophers had explained the origin of all matter as being in four elements: earth, water, air and fire. Empedokles declared that the four elements are materials in different states: earth is solid and dry; water is liquid and cold; air is gas and evaporates; fire is the movement of particles with the attributes of fluid ether that move in the midst of light and heat. He added that the transformative force that combines and separates these four elements are the dynamic elements of *philia* and *neikos*. From Thales to G. Bachelard, element-based thinking has played a role in the development of philosophical thought and symbolic systems of color. It inspired many artists to depict the fundamental power and beauty of earth, water, air and fire and enriched their imagination as regards materials.

In general, a symbol reflects human experience as a whole. Therefore, color symbols indicate how people think, deliver their ideas and develop culture through colors. Historically, the colors of the four elements were used as visual and metaphorical symbols of nature. The four elements have symbolic shapes and physical properties as well as color. For instance, water is represented by waves, inverted triangles, blue or green, dampness, fluid and viscosity, while fire is symbolized by flame, light, a pyramid or triangle, red or orange, heat, inflammability and dynamics. Earth is expressed in the forms of squares or a rectangles, brown or black, coldness and solidity. Wind or air is represented by a circle or arc of sky, blue, golden blaze, dryness, light and mobility.

흙 • 土 • Terra

In both the Orient and the Occident, earth usually symbolizes richness and reproduction. The Ancient Chinese believed that the world consists of heaven and earth and all creation thrives in a harmony between yin and yang. The Chinese character '土' (earth) is a hieroglyph depicting a bud covered with soil as the plant shoots out from the ground. In inscriptions on bone, as well, a character representing earth suggested the image of something rising from the earth. This is based on the understanding that the earth plays a major role in the growth and propagation of all creation. The Chinese believed that life comes forth from the earth and returns to the earth. To them, earth and soil were the origin and basis of one's life and a safe haven after death. Earth is the primary space where life comes into being, grows and dies, and has symbolic meaning by being linked more broadly to the spirit of a race. This belief is found in Japan and Korea as well.

Most creation myths describe a chaotic state being divided into heaven and earth, from which the concept of a dichotomous contrast is derived. Heaven and earth are likened to male and female, and heaven is associated with father while earth is compared to mother. This originates from the richness and productivity of earth that enables plantation and cultivation. In Greek mythology, the Earth goddess Gaia was known as Mother Earth and has been a symbol of richness. The worship of a mother earth goddess with the associated image of richness and reproduction and the concept of child-bearing is evident in the case of Isis in Egypt and extends to Saint Mary in Catholicism. In Korea as well, earth has stood for an earth goddess-like richness. According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (a dictionary on the Chinese characters), earth creates all things under the sun, and Chuang Tzu said, "Heaven and earth are the parents of all creation." In the religious system of the Japanese, too, earth is a symbol of richness.

Earth is a basic material that is responsible for the unique features of nature and climate, which play a crucial role in formulating a critical eye on color and the customs of the people who live within them. Earth is a natural pigment that has been used by mankind from early times. As seen in the reds and ochers of wall paintings in ancient caves, reddish and brownish colors were mainly used, but black, white and green also exist. In the East, earth is represented by yellow, which also indicates center in the theories of yin and yang and the five elements. In Korean, the root of *norang* (yellow) is *nol-*, while the roots of its adjective forms *norata* (yellow) and *nureota* (golden yellow) are the nouns *nol-* and *nul-*, respectively, which mean earth. Like *cheon ji hyeon hwang*, which literally means sky, earth, black and yellow, in the beginning of the One Thousand Characters, earth was perceived to be deep yellow. The place people go after death is referred to as "yellow spring," "yellow earth" or "yellow soil". In feng shui, when one decides on one's grave site and digs there to lay down a coffin, if the soil is yellow, it is considered an auspicious site. On the other hand, if it is black, it is regarded as ominous because it contains water and will impoverish descendants. This originates from the association of earth with yellow in the five elements.

Meanwhile, Korean ancestors believed that evil spirits were scared of red and would run away at a sight of red hues. Therefore, a person chosen as a priest to perform a town's rituals used to sprinkle red earth in front of his gate to prevent evil spirits from entering the house. The practice of painting walls or floors with red earth when building a house or using red earth as a medicine comes from the belief that earth is a kind of guardian and has the same function of chasing away demons. In China, red has been considered a color representing life since the prehistoric age. Red sand and red earth were sprinkled next to the corpse in an old tomb. It was an incantational act aimed at bringing a lost life back to this world.

물 • 水 • Aqua

In most cultures, the important symbolic meanings of water are the origin of life, purity and reproduction. In a myth about the creation of Jeju Island, the blue droplets from the sky and the dew springing from the earth combined and began creating all things through the interaction of yin and yang. According to Goguryeo Kingdom mythology, Lady Yuhwa, the mother of King Dongmyeong, came from Ungsimyeon (a pond), which represents water. This is similar to a myth that Aryeong, the wife of Bak Hyeokgeose (the founder of Silla), came forth from Aryeongjeong (a well). The tale of

Yuhwa becoming the wife of Haemosu, a man of the sky, and of Aryeong becoming the wife of Bak Hyeokgeose, a sky god, are mythical symbols of life found in water.

In a religion, there is usually a rite associated with water that cleanses sin. Such cleansing symbolizes the purifying power of water. In Buddhism, it is believed that one can be born again in a paradise on the other shore, where one is freed of worldly desires and dirt as the body is cleansed with water. Also, a cleansing rite is performed for the soul of the dead to be guided to paradise. This is because only those souls from which dirt from the secular world is washed away can take a part in rituals for the Heavenly Way. When one makes a sacrifice or prays to a god for the well being of his or her family at home, he or she first takes a bath and places a bowl of pure water on an altar. The purity of water itself is believed to be powerful enough to chase away impurity. The reason for the use of a bowl of pure water is to purify one's mind and body. Pure water is a symbol of a purified soul and mind to be displayed to the gods of heaven and earth.

In addition, water has a meaning of resurrection, of bringing back the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed that water regenerated all things. It was water that flew out of Osiris and released humankind from the permanence of death. That is why Istar, a goddess of Babylonia, had to enter the world of death in order to obtain the water of life. In Korean shamanism as well, mineral water carried by Princess Bari represents the source of life and regeneration. In this case, regeneration may have the complex meaning of the renewal of richness.

Of the four elements, it is water that cannot be restored. Therefore, although its source is singular, it is the only element that appears in different forms such as vapor, dew, ice, snow, etc. This feature provides it with aesthetic effects: transparency, liquidity, mirror effects of a calm surface, play of light of water droplets, vitality from movement, and the graceful form of a water spout. Moreover, as a substance symbolizing the source of life, purity and regeneration, water is perceived to be colorless and transparent or blue like the deep sea. In fact, as there are bodies of water named the Red Sea, the Black Sea and the Yellow Sea, the color of the sea can vary depending on the particles in the water.

As Bachelard mentioned in the foreword of *Water and Dreams*, water is closely associated with our sensitivity that is distant from all rationalism and is an element that inspires us. Accordingly, while Bachelard was of the opinion that fire could be rational in terms of objective knowledge or from a psychoanalytical perspective, he perceived that water could not. As in the famous legend of Atlantis, a utopian city submerged in water and a symbol of a lost heaven, although water is always an atypical universe with unlimited possibility, it is considered a substance that can submerge a gigantic world or conceal numerous mysteries.

공기 • 風 • Aer

Although air itself is transparent and cannot be seen, it is the blue sky, clouds, birds, and wind that allow us to feel the existence of air. Air is an element that forms the universe. The sky is the origin of light that creates all matter in the world. It represents infinity and is symbolic of heaven, gods, God and man, or the immaculate heavenly world where angels live.

Air exists between the sky and earth and is perceived as a medium linking the two worlds, which is symbolized by a bird that moves about freely through flight. The wings of a bird stand for release from spatial constraints and moving to other places while its feathers represent freedom from gravity. In Korean shamanism, an altar shaped like a bird was believed to represent the souls of ancestors and link the earthly world to the heavenly one. In addition, an altar is designed to rise high toward the sky and is considered a medium delivering all the wishes of the earth to the gods in the heavenly world. In Korean custom, the bird was regarded as a heavenly guide. In the *Byeonjin* section of the tale on the Eastern Yi in the *Book of Wei of The History of the Three Kingdoms*, it is written, "In *Byeonjin*, when a person dies, the funeral home is adorned with the feathers of large birds, wishing for the dead to soar to the sky." People in ancient times believed that because humans' native place is the sky, if they die after having a life on earth, they will return to heaven. In such a case, a bird appears as a guide to lead the body and the soul to heaven. In the Altai Republic, Mongolia and Nepal, when someone dies, a platform burial takes place even today. This is because they believe that birds take humans in their bellies and return to heaven.

We sense the existence of air through clouds. We dream about transformation through the image of ceaselessly changing clouds. When air is dynamic, it becomes wind. Ancient civilizations that observed the composition of the universe from a dynamic perspective believed that wind is the force of the sky, and furthermore the breath and power of the universe. The Lord of Heaven in China is described as the personification of the sky, and wind is the representation of the functions and providence of the Lord of Heaven. In the myth of Dangun (legendary founder of Korea in B.C. 2333), among several gods accompanying Hwanung (father of Dangun), Pungbaek (a god of wind) is more highly revered than Usa (a god of rain) and Unsa (a god of clouds) because of the universal symbolism that places greater importance on wind. In addition, in feng shui, wind is the life and power of the universe in which the fate of a person is affected by the power of nature.

In the West, wind represents the breath of richness and a sacred spirit. It also has strong religious importance as it is symbolic of the words of gods and the energy of the universe. Such an idea is comparable to *ki* (energy) in Korea. In the Old Testament, it is written, "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life." Here, air that a god breathes to bring life is wind. From the viewpoint of Korean shamanism and folklore, the soul is the vitality of humankind and exists in all living people. The soul, as a necessity for the psychological and physiological existence of individuals, was considered to be "breathed in and out." Korea expressions such as "the soul is out" (absent-minded) or "the soul is in" (back to one's senses) remind us how humans breathe in and out. In some superstitions, the soul is symbolized by fire or flames. This would be the origin of *honbul*, which literally translates as "soul fire." It is believed that a person dies a few days after the "soul fire" exits his or her body. As described, in both the East and the West, the soul is depicted as an immortal element of human life, a creative power, an energy within humans, and light.

Air is colorless and transparent, is unlimited in quantity and found everywhere, enabling every life on earth to exist. The color of the sky varies depending on the substances blended in the air. The sky's blue shade becomes stronger when the air is dry and pure. The effects of air on light sometimes generate amazing color phenomena such as auroras, the red rays of a setting sun and a violet hill seen through a fog.

불 • 火 • Ignis

For quite some time now, fire has sparked our imagination, resulting in a wealth of fire-related metaphors and symbolism. Rising flames recalls the vitality of life whereas a burning fire could represent death and purification as it consumes and destroys that which it burns. In Buddhism, one way in which to achieve passage to eternity is to completely be consumed by fire. When one dies, he/she is cremated. There is a tale of a monk who voluntarily burned himself alive in order to hold a mass for the Buddha. This is related to a seemingly paradoxical logic of Buddhism that professes one must give up everything in order to receive everything. In ancient Korea, there was a shamanism that served Jowang, a god of Fire that guards the kitchen. It was believed to have the miraculous ability of informing the heaven about the behaviors of the family and purifying all impurities at the end of each year. It is commonly believed that since it was used in kitchens, making them more dangerous, people quite naturally came to worship fire. Jowang appears to have originated from a faith of deifying and worshipping fire as evidenced by customs of deliberately not putting out a fire when a family moves to another house or through the custom of presenting matches to those moving into a new house. People worshiped Jowang by placing a small bowl of water on a kitchen stove because they believed that Jowang possessed the power of purification since the kitchen is a place where both water and fire are used. The reference and domain of Jowang has changed from being a god of fire, to a god of the kitchen, and again to a god that guards the home.

In both Eastern and Western cultures, fire usually symbolizes purification and rebirth. In parts of the West, there is a ceremony for kindling new fire using flint and iron on the eve of Easter. In Europe, there is a folktale in which saints revitalize their bodies by passing through fire, as well as treat the sick or rejuvenate the elderly by subjecting them to fire. In ceremonies marking rebirth through death, fire shares a similar symbolism to that of water used in baptismal ceremonies. In Christianity, the color red is used to portray the image of god, symbolizing the sufferings of Jesus Christ and the fire of the Holy Spirit. Just as when the prophet Isaiah was overwhelmed with sins, the

seraphim (angels) purified these sins by taking hot coals from the altar and placing them to Isaiah's mouth, fire is often a symbol of purification as it does not negate itself and has the power of burning that with which it comes into contact.

In Greek, *phoenix* means red, a color representative of fire. The phoenix represents immortality and regeneration as it is reborn from the ashes after being consumed by flame. When its life nears its end, a phoenix constructs a nest from fragrant branches while singing beautiful songs. When the sun's brilliant rays ignite the nest, the bird burns to death in the fire. Shortly after, a young phoenix is born from the ashes and this newly born phoenix takes the remains of its mother to Heliopolis, the City of the Sun in Egypt, and places these remains upon an altar for the Sun god. The phoenix, with its brilliant red and gold feathers, symbolizes gracefulness, integrity as well as immortality. It is because regardless of where it perches or stands, the phoenix doesn't leave any trace and feeds only on the morning dew.

As a sacred fire on an altar is divine and pure, it atones for the sins of people who are filled with disgrace. The Olympic torch symbolizes the bright light of the sun as revelation from a god to human. The torch is lit by the sunlight and relayed to ignite the fire on the Olympic flameholder placed in a stadium. In Korea also, when the national sports festival is held, a torch kindled at the altar of Chamseongdan, of Mani Mountain, is used to ignite the flame. The *Chamseongdan* is a place where Dangun used to hold rituals for the sky. The fire is kindled there in order to reproduce the fire on Earth as the fire from the beginning of the world. It means that the bright light of the sky is passed on to the human world and the people celebrate a holy festival according to the great power and genius of the sky.

Generally we recognize red as the color of fire although the true color varies depending on combustion materials and temperatures. When the temperature of the flames is low, they appear red or yellow. The higher the temperature, the more blue they become. Additionally, various shades and colors can be produced such as white, yellow and blue depending on the chemicals being burned.

Material • Color • Imagination

In philosophy, materials can refer to things that exist beyond or apart from human awareness. The four elements of earth, water, air and fire are basic building blocks for materials. Depending on their properties and composition, their colors will vary. In classical Korean texts and modern writings, a word representing "dyed color" means "a hue after being attached to an object". This refers to the colors that appear when combined with certain materials as well as the colors of the dyes themselves. Color has also been used throughout different eras to represent that which is tangible or intangible, things which are material or immaterial.

Just like the human body is described in Buddhism using the four major elements (earth, water, fire and air), human life is itself element-like and cannot exist beyond or apart from these primary materials. The beginning as well as the end of human life is contained in the elements. Among all living things on Earth, humans are the only species that does not completely adapt to nature surroundings. They build civilizations by analyzing, re-combining and restructuring nature around them. The starting points and conclusions of civilizations created by humans are also elements. Between the two, human beings use and amuse themselves with elements, through which they demonstrate a vast artistic imagination.

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Young in Kim, Indio Paradiso, 2004, silk, gauze, plastic, mulberry paper
The land of dream, color of the sun, rhythm of the wind, and Indio Paradiso full of floral odor.