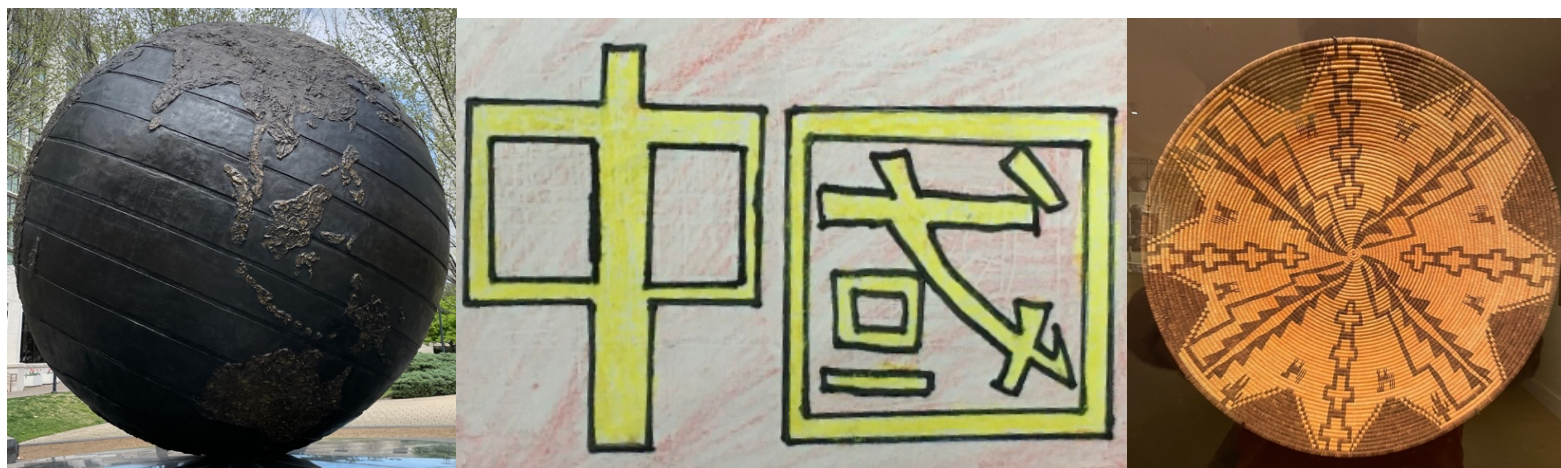


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To a nine year old kid
it all seemed like a riddle
going up to go down
you'd end up in the middle
yet I knew what it meant
much clearer than clear
'around' meant the Earth
the ultimate sphere





Chapter 4 - The Middle Kingdom

At nine years old, the Earth was a ball to me. We had a globe at home which spun around an axis protruding from the north and the south poles. The Biblical creation story I was taught, however, never included a spherical earth. That didn't come along until Copernicus in junior high.

I used to wonder how Chinese kids imagined the original Earth. According to one Chinese "creation story" whose historical roots go back to the Three Kingdoms Period (220 CE), a long time ago, there was no Heaven and no Earth. Everything was contained in a huge black egg. Inside the egg's dark chaos was Pangu (盤古 *Pángǔ*) a giant who had been asleep for 18,000 years. When the egg finally cracked open, Pangu awakened and smiled when he saw and felt how both the light and the dark had separated. The yin had become the earth and the yang had become the sky. Pangu was so enamoured with what he saw that he took it upon himself to nurture both the light and the dark and to keep them apart. Towards the end of his next 18,000 years the earth and the sky had both assumed a permanence and Pangu grew old and died.

It's when I read the next part of the Pangu story that I was struck by its similarity to Native American cosmology stories. When Pangu died, his four limbs became the mountains, his tears and sweat became the rivers, lakes, and oceans. His teeth became rocks and gems and his breath became the wind and clouds.

In the 1995 ABC 8-part documentary mini-series, 500 Nations, a Taos-Pueblo creation story went like this; “When Earth was still young and giants still roamed the Earth, a great sickness came upon them. All of them died except for a small boy. One day while he was playing, he was bitten by a snake. The boy cried and cried. The blood came out and finally he died. With his tears, our lakes became, with his blood, the red clay became, with his body, our mountains became, and that was how Earth became.” (Taos Pueblo) (Grossman, Roberta, Jack Leustig, Kevin Costner, Gregory Harrison, Eric Schweig, Gordon Tootoosis, and Wes Studi. 500 Nations: [disc 1]. Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004).

Similarities among creation stories are not uncommon, yet there are other connections I have been made aware of in my travels around China which may have been purely coincidental, but certainly, on the surface, appear to share common roots.

Coming from Montana, one of my favorite Native American story-tellers was Black Elk, the great Heyoka (a kind of holy man) of the Oglala Lakota people. In his visions, he was taken to the where the six sacred directions converge in the middle of the universe.

To the Chinese who don't speak English, China is 中國 (Zhōngguó) – the “Middle Kingdom”. The term 中國 (Zhōngguó), first appeared in China on a bronze vessel from Western Zhou period (about 1000 BCE) , but it was not until the Qing Dynasty that it begins to appear on international documents as a way of identifying the country the West referred to as China.

I first learned that the word “China” was actually derived from the Emperor Qin (pronounced ‘Chin’) of the Qin Dynasty, the first imperial dynasty of China (221-207 B.C.E.) Some other scholars believe the word “China” may have had Sanskrit origins which predate the Qin Dynasty. The official name of China in English is the “People’s Republic of China” “中华人民共和国” (Zhōnghuá Rénmín Gònghéguó.)

If you said the word “China” to a Chinese speaking person who did not speak English, they would have no idea what you were saying. It would be like a Chinese speaker referring to America as 美國 Měiguó - the way one says “America” in Mandarin Chinese. The literal meaning of 美国 Měiguó is “Beautiful Country “. The word 美 Měi (beautiful) actually sounds like the 2nd syllable in the English word “America.” The 2nd Chinese syllable, 國 guó, in Měiguó means “country” or “kingdom.”