THE 5 ELEMENTS

Wu Xing
Wu = 5
Xing = ‘movement’, ‘process’
Also translated as ‘the 5 phases’

* Similar ideas of 5 (or 4) ‘elements’ is found in many philosophical systems, including Greek philosophy and Ayurveda.
* “When the Qi of the elements settles, things acquire form.” The elements are both qualities of movement, and of substance.
* The theory of the 5 elements was developed around the same time as Yin Yang theory.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Yin Organ</th>
<th>Yang Organ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>Liver</td>
<td>Gallbladder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Sm. Intestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Spleen</td>
<td>Stomach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Lung</td>
<td>Lg. Intestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Kidney</td>
<td>Bladder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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THE 5 ELEMENTS IN NATURE

* 5 basic processes of nature
* 5 qualities of natural phenomena
* 5 phases of a cycle
* 5 inherent capabilities of change

5 Elements as Basic Qualities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Sour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Bitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Sweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Pungent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Salty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“*The Five Elements are Water, Fire, Wood, Metal, and Earth. Water moistens downward, Fire flares upwards, Wood can be bent and straightened, Metal can be molded and can harden. Earth permits sowing, growing and reaping. That which soaks and descends (Water) is salty. That which blazes upwards (Fire) is bitter, that which can be bent and straightened (Wood) is sour, that which can be molded and become hard (Metal) is pungent, that which permits sowing and reaping (Earth) is sweet.*”

(1000-771 BC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Bends &amp; straightens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Blazes upward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Sowing &amp; reaping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Moldable &amp; hardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Soaks &amp; descends</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wood bends & straightens; it is both solid and malleable.
Fire blazes upward, creating heat, and transforms by combustion.
Earth permits sowing and reaping of food, thus providing nutrition and sustenance.
Metal can be melted and molded, but also becomes very solid and strong when allowed to congeal.
Water soaks and flows downward, it is liquid and fluid in movement.

5 Elements as Movements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Expansion, outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Upward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Center, stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Contraction, inward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Downward</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These qualities manifest in organ physiology and pathology:
* Wood (Liver Qi) flows freely in every direction.
* Fire blazes upward causing red face.
* Earth is in the center, associated with digestion, which is fundamental to all body processes, and affects the abdomen: the center of the body.
* Metal is associated with the skin, which contains the body.
* Water flows downward as excretion of fluids.

5 Elements as Seasonal Stages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Spring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earth</td>
<td>Indian Summer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>Winter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Earth is associated with the transition between seasons. It is often said to be the ‘Indian summer’, but it also corresponds
with transitional times of the other seasons.

5 Element Interrelationships

1. Generating Sequence
2. Controlling Sequence
3. Over-Acting Sequence
4. Insulting Sequence

- The generating and controlling sequences are physiological.
- The over-acting and insulting sequences are pathological.

The Generating Sequence

Wood → Fire → Earth → Metal → Water → Wood

- The generating sequence represents the idea that each element is the generating force for the following element.
- The generating element is called ‘mother’, as in “fire is the mother of earth”, and “metal is the child of earth”.
- These ideas mimic nature in that wood becomes fire when ignited, water nourishes the trees to become wood, etc...

The Controlling Sequence

Wood → Earth → Water → Fire → Metal → Wood

- The controlling sequence indicates that each element controls, or restrains, one other element.
- The controlling element is known as the ‘grandmother’, and the element being controlled as the ‘grand-child’.
- In nature, we can see that tree roots (Wood) restrain the soil, preventing it from being washed away, and that water extinguishes fire...

The Over-Acting Sequence

Wood → Earth → Water → Fire → Metal → Wood

- The over-acting sequence follows the same sequence as the controlling sequence, but represents a pathological interaction, when one element controls its grandchild too strongly.
- One common manifestation is Wood overacting on Earth. In this case, a
Wood excess, such as high stress levels causes an Earth deficiency, leading to digestive issues.

The Insulting Sequence

Wood → Metal → Fire → Water → Earth → Wood

The insulting sequence is a reversal of the controlling sequence.
In the insulting sequence, the grandchild returns the controlling force generated by the grandmother.

The 5 Elements Correspondences

- There are many correspondences associated with the elements in Chinese medicine, many of which come from observation of nature.
- These correspondences extend to diagnosis and treatment of the human body.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Wood</th>
<th>Fire</th>
<th>Earth</th>
<th>Metal</th>
<th>Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Color</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taste</td>
<td>Sour</td>
<td>Bitter</td>
<td>Sweet</td>
<td>Pungent</td>
<td>Salty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate</td>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>Damp</td>
<td>Dryness</td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage</td>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Growth</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td>Harvest</td>
<td>Storage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense Organ</td>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>Mouth</td>
<td>Nose</td>
<td>Ears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tissues</td>
<td>Sinews</td>
<td>Vessels</td>
<td>Muscles</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>Bones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Pensiveness</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The fire element corresponds to the Heart and Small Intestine, but it also corresponds with two other organs, the Pericardium and Triple Burner (San Jiao).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yin</th>
<th>Yang</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emperor Fire</td>
<td>Heart</td>
<td>Small Intestine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minister Fire</td>
<td>Pericardium</td>
<td>Triple Burner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Generating and Controlling Sequences

* The 5 element sequences can also be applied to the organs.

Generating: LV → HT → SP → LU → KD → LV
Controlling: LV → SP → KD → HT → LU → LV

The Liver is the mother of the Heart:
* The Liver stores the Blood and Blood houses the Mind, which is associated with the Heart. Liver Blood deficiency often leads to Heart Blood deficiency and both affect sleep and dreaming.

The Spleen is the mother of the Lungs:
* The Spleen has digestive functions and provides food-Qi to the Lungs. Food-Qi combines with the breath to form Gathering-Qi, which circulates through the body. Deficiency of Lung and Spleen Qi often occur together.

The Kidney is the mother of the Liver:
* Kidney Yin nourishes Liver Blood. Kidneys are associated with bone, and Liver with sinews. The sinews and bone are inseparable, and together have a clear correspondence with the musculo-skeletal system.

The Liver controls the Spleen and Stomach:
* The Liver controls the flow of Qi, and free flow of Qi helps the Spleen and Stomach to digest food. Liver Qi flows upwards, while Stomach Qi flows downwards. A proper balance between these two is required for food to pass through the digestive system at the proper rate. Liver over-acting on the Spleen is a common pathology, where the Liver Qi becomes excess (stagnant) and in turn interferes with Spleen function.

5 Elements in Pathology

In 5 element terms, the over-acting cycle and the insulting cycle are pathological. The generating and control cycles are physiological. When out of balance, the generating cycle can also cause illness.

There are four basic patterns of imbalance:
1. An element is excess, and over-acts on its grandchild element.
2. An element is excess, and takes too much from its mother element.
3. An element is deficient, and fails to nourish its child element.
4. An element is deficient, and is insulted by its grandchild element.
Over-acting Sequence
This pathology occurs when the controlling sequence is out of balance.

The Liver over-acts on the Spleen and Stomach
- A stagnation of Liver Qi can ‘invade’ the Stomach and Spleen. This prevents the Stomach Qi from descending as it should, causing nausea, and prevents the Spleen from ascending as it should, leading to diarrhea.

The Spleen over-acts on the Kidneys
- An excess accumulation of Dampness in the Spleen can ‘overflow’ and obstruct the Kidneys’ function of transforming fluids. This may appear as a full, heavy feeling in the abdomen (Earth) and frequent copious urination (Water).

Insulting Sequence
This pathology occurs when the controlling cycle is so imbalanced that it becomes reversed, and an element insults its grandmother.

The Liver insults the Lungs
- Stagnant Liver Qi insults the Lungs, preventing them from properly taking in air Qi. This may cause a feeling of tightness in the chest or an inability to take a deep breath.

The Kidneys insult the Spleen
- If the Kidneys do not properly excrete and transform fluids, they can accumulate in the body, and obstruct the Spleen with Dampness. This could manifest as cloudy, scanty urine (Water), and full body edema of (Flesh = Earth).

The Generating Sequence
If the generating sequence becomes imbalanced, there are two possible pathological scenarios:
1. The Mother element fails to nourish the Child element
2. The Child element takes too much from the Mother element

The Liver fails to nourish the Heart
- The Liver stores blood, but if the Liver blood becomes deficient, it may fail to nourish the Heart. When Liver blood is deficient, the nails and eyes can become dry, and deficient Heart blood may cause insomnia and heart palpitations.

The Spleen takes too much from the Heart
- The Spleen is responsible for making blood, and the Heart requires a strong supply of blood. When the Spleen is weak, there may be poor digestion and diarrhea and when the Heart doesn’t receive sufficient blood, there may be insomnia, poor memory, and heart palpitations.

5 Elements in Diagnosis

The story of a clever doctor
There once was a newly elected mayor who came to a village to help the people. Being new, he met many challenges in governing the village and was overwhelmed by his tasks. Soon, he experienced profound pensiveness and felt very sick. One day, he invited a renowned village doctor to his house to help cure him. The doctor felt his pulse and then thought for a while. Suddenly, he had a crazy idea and said, "Congratulations, mayor! Your symptoms are signs of pregnancy. Don't worry too much. You will get better soon." No sooner had the doctor spoken, the mayor shouted angrily, "Get out! I am male. How can I be pregnant? How ridiculous you are!" A short time later, the mayor's illness
disappeared, just as the doctor had predicted.

How was the mayor cured? The answer lies in the generation and restriction abilities of the five elements. According to TCM, the mayor’s sickness belonged to earth disharmony, because pensiveness is part of the element earth. Excessive pensiveness harms the spleen, which is also part of the element earth, but wood restricts earth. While anger is the emotion of liver and wood element, sudden and excessive anger can easily inhibit the excessive earth. Therefore, the renowned doctor deliberately made the mayor angry and effectively neutralized his pensiveness. By controlling the mayor’s excessive earth element, his body’s harmony was restored and he was cured.

Aspects of Diagnosis Related to 5 Elements
1. Color: particularly the facial complexion. Can indicate excess or deficiency.
2. Sound
3. Smell
4. Emotion
5. Taste
6. Tissues
7. Sense Organ
8. Climate

FIRE (Heart)

Color: Red
Sound: Laughing
Smell: Scorched
Taste: Bitter
Tissue: Blood Vessels
Sense Organ: Tongue
Climate: Heat

Emotional Attributes
* Feelings of joyfullness, giving and receiving warmth, the capacity to experience love and emotional closeness, willingness to embrace responsibility, feeling lovable and having a happy heart. In oriental medicine balanced fire pertains to the sun shining in our soul; ‘taking things to heart’, embodying conviviality, propriety, enthusiasm, pleasure, joy.  

Virtue - Propriety

Power – Respect
Poison – Hatred

Prolonged or excessive strain
* Over-excitement of the heart can lead to anxiety, mania, a sense of abandonment or rejection, and lack of joy, and alters/damages the heart.

EARTH (Spleen)

Color: Yellow
Sound: Singing
Smell: Fragrant
Taste: Sweet
Tissue: Muscles
Sense Organ: Mouth & Lips
Climate: Dampness

Emotional Attributes
* The capacity to appropriately support & nourish oneself and others, a sense of belonging, sense of compassion and quiet thought. In oriental medicine balanced earth pertains to security, identity, fulfillment, contentment, gratitude, the ability to empathize and stability.

Virtue – Integrity
Power – Commitment
Poison – Blame

Prolonged or excessive strain...
* Excessive strain in the earth element can manifest symptoms of pensiveness, brooding, obsessive worrying and feeling unsupported by others, and alters/damages the spleen.

METAL (Lung)

Color: White (paleness)
Sound: Weeping
Smell: Rotten
Taste: Pungent
Tissue: Skin
Sense Organ: Nose
Climate: Dryness

Emotional Attributes
* The capacity of letting go following an experience of loss, the ability to accept personal recognition, a sense of connection and feeling of wholeness. In oriental medicine, balanced metal
pertains to clarity about what is important, values that are straight, righteousness, a sense of justice, respect, strength, the true capacity to yield, purity, sparkle, receptivity to one's spirit.

Virtue – Selflessness
Power – Discernment
Poison - Judgment.

**Prolonged or excessive strain**
- Excessive strain in the metal element can manifest grief, melancholia, sadness, and feeling unappreciated, and alters/damages the lung.

WATER (Kidney)

Color: Black (dark)
Sound: Groaning
Smell: Putrid
Taste: Salty
Tissue: Bones
Sense Organ: Ears
Climate: Cold

**Emotional Attributes**
- Assessing risk and responding appropriately, will-power, the capacity of sensing, trusting in dynamic flow. In oriental medicine balanced water pertains to connecting with the sacred origins of life, the mysterious reservoir that supports movement & stillness and peacefulness.
- Virtue – Wisdom
- Power – Awareness
- Poison – Disdain

**Prolonged or excessive strain**
- Excessive strain in the water element can manifest fright, fearfulness, reckless responses, and a lack of will-power, and alters/damages the kidney.

WOOD (Liver)

Color: Green
Sound: Shouting
Smell: Rancid
Taste: Sour
Tissue: Sinews
Sense Organ: Eyes
Climate: Wind

**Emotional Attributes**
- Assertiveness, having structure & boundaries, growing & developing, inner 'vision' and direction in life. In oriental medicine balanced wood pertains to carrying the vision in one’s soul, growth & creativity, consulting one's purpose and then making decisions, looking forward, planning, and the power to overcome obstacles.

Virtue – Benevolence
Power – Containment
Poison – Anger

**Prolonged or excessive strain**
- Excessive strain in the wood element can manifest anger, resentment, bitterness, and repression of a natural flow of emotional energy, and alters/damages the liver.