

An Introduction to the Five Elements

by Richard Bertschinger

Ubiquitous to all classical Chinese Medicine are the Five Elements, or more correctly the ‘five forces’ (*wu xing*). In practical terms, when ‘doing classical Chinese medicine’ they provide five main diatheses whereby patients can be known, and their symptoms categorised. But actually they imply a great deal more. This first article will explore their deeper meaning. Later articles, it is hoped, will look at each element individually. *Xing* actually has the gloss ‘movers’, ‘walkers’ – it also means ‘to circulate’. As practitioners of an energy-medicine, such as acupuncture, this should all make perfect sense, because every day we are dealing with the circulation of ‘qi’. I would suggest that the most fundamental idea in classical Chinese medicine is *qi-flow*. And if you throw out qi – and this I know can be a bone of contention between traditional and medical acupuncturists – you throw out classical acupuncture.

When you link up the idea of qi to the *wuxing*, it is obvious that actually fire, water, wood, metals (minerals) and earth are not elements but stages of change, or becoming. Is it then any wonder then that the prime science book for the Taoist physician was, and still is the *I Ching* (or Book of Changes)¹?

We all have heard of the Five Elements: wood, fire, earth, metal and water, to list them. But let’s look at them in action. Beginning with the image of the tree (wood) we can visualise the growth of its leaves sprouting forth in the spring-time, the flowering and radiance of the plant in the summer and it’s dying back down in the fall – to return to the quiescence of the winter, before new growth returns in the spring. This was the agrarian cycle so close to the heart of all early civilisations. Quite simply, people were concerned with getting enough to eat. And the Chinese were more practical than most. In fact in *Soil and Civilization*, Edward Hyams catalogues our destructive relationship with the soil since the dawn of agricultural cultivation—early civilisations were dependent on the soil for their continued survival. And when the soil was destroyed, so were the peoples and their culture. It is no secret that the early Chinese were dependent on the repeated flooding of their rivers to bring fresh soil to their lands.

One later arrangement of the *wuxing* put soil/or earth at the centre of the five elements (see figure 1).

¹ Note the famous *Yiyi* or Changes in Medicine by Zhang Jeibin (Ming physician), notwithstanding his later *Yiyiyi* or The Meaning of Changes in Medicine!



Figure 1. The Five Elements with Earth at its centre.

The earliest reference to the *wuxing* was in the *Shu Jing*, or Book of History (date variable, but pre-Han), a compilation of ancient records made around the time of the Qin unification. One section of this ancient book is entitled The Great Plan – and it discusses the model for the perfect government of a nation. There were, traditionally, nine divisions to the Great Plan, and the first discussed the Five Elements: “The first is water; the second is fire; the third, wood; the fourth, metal; and the fifth, earth. Water it is, which soaks and descends; fire it is, which blazes and ascends; wood it is, which is crooked or straight; metal it is, which follows form and changes; and the soil which supports seed-sowing and in-gathering. That which soaks and descends becomes salt; that which blazes and ascends becomes bitter; that which is crooked or straight becomes sour; that which follows form and changes becomes acrid; which from seed-sowing and in-gathering comes sweetness.” (trans. RB)

Of great interest here is that water is mentioned first in the elements; secondly that they are described by their *actions*, which derive from their natures; and thirdly that they are tied, distinctly, to their particular flavours, salty, bitter, sour, acrid or pungent and sweet. The Chinese were eminently practical in approach, not theoretical. They were most obviously, again, talking about food-production and the need to sustain a population.

Of course, much later, the *wuxing* became the bed-rock of Chinese science. Tsou Yen (or *Zou Yan* fl. 350-270 B.C.E.) has been credited with the development of Yin-

yang theory, and wrote much on their interaction. This was during the great hiatus of scholarly activity which preceded the establishment of the Qin and the unification of the country in 221 B.C.E.. Indeed Joseph Needham has said that Tsou Yen 'may be considered the real founder of all Chinese scientific thought'. The simplicity of having *Five Agents*, as it were, under one's control, acts as a spur to the imagination, and associations follow readily. The pictures of the elements become repositories for our own thoughts and feelings, leading to an understanding of processes, sometimes beyond our control, in the outside world. This is notwithstanding the fact that 'in the real world', i.e. nature, they underlay all creation and death, the life-force, qi itself.

The five elements underpin the passage of the seasons - spring, summer, late summer, autumn and winter; they each have a corresponding colour (green, red, yellow, white and black or dark blue); and also a corresponding direction (east, south, central, west and north), but note here that earth/central hovers, uneasily between following fire and preceding water, or being central. Thank heaven for a little uncertainty in this! this is more like true life. Somehow the Chinese mind was quite content to live with this - allowing a flexibility of thought unlike that of a mind schooled in Aristotelian logic.

Let us return now to the I Ching for a moment, The Book of Changes. It has something to say, on the true depths and complexities of the *wuxing* at work.

Anyone who studies the I Ching will soon be made aware that much is made of two sketches of the eight trigrams (*ba gua*), the before-heaven (or Fu Xi arrangement, figure 2) and the after-heaven (or King Wen arrangement, figure 3):

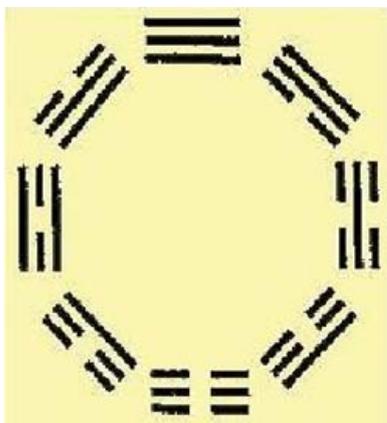


Figure 2. Fu Xi

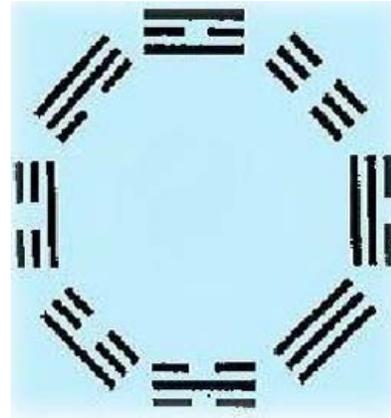


Figure 3. King Wen (world)

It is the after-heaven (King Wen, or Outer World) arrangement which interests us here, as the sequence of eight trigrams mimics the five element sheng (*birth*) order². The Fu Xi or before-heaven arrangement is literally 'before-time' - (what the circulating skies stand for, after all, is change and alteration).³ The *sheng* order, which I described in the passage on the tree and the seasons above, describes how wood gives birth to fire, fire to earth (as it dies down), earth to metal (minerals) and metal to fluids (when smelted). What might seem to be several unrelated facts about the physical world are here starkly related. Let us be under no illusion - there is and was no *one* interpretation! The Chinese language and world-view is organic above all, allowing a multitude of explanations, full of layers and meaning. From the complexities of the living world, a simple elemental cycle gives us a handle, to deal with complex problems, including the progression of a patient's medical condition!

² The earliest reference to this order seems to be around the 2nd Century BC (Needham: S & C VOL II, p.255).

³ Actually in a sense the King Wen diagram is the story of life and death, generation and degeneration. Of course it interests us most. But the fact is that returning to 'before-heaven', returning to before we were/are born was also the goal of the inner alchemists. More on this later.

The trigrams are best understood in pairs:

Heaven		and Earth		Yin and Yang
Thunder		and Mountain		movement and stillness
Wind		and Wetlands		penetration and dissipation
Fire		and Water		light and dark.

The order of the trigrams in the after-heaven sequence copies the *sheng* cycle of the *wuxing*: thunder, wind, fire, earth, wetlands, heaven, water and mountain. It is all much of a muchness.

There is no exact correspondence because there is rarely an exact parallel in nature. Is there a 'perfect' tree around? How often do we have a 'perfect' spring? Just as the so-called 'mutation' of the gene is the foundation of evolutionary change in the biological world and the 'movement' of the electron disallows us any chance to both measure and observe *at the same time*, so the world is full of complex events (which can seem to take us out of time). It is this very mutability which is encapsulated in the *wuxing*, and also in the King Wen after-heaven arrangement.

Thunder stands for *wood*, both arousing and stirring, 'a flowing into form'; the gusts of wind which accompany the thunder, bring the Yin aspect of the wood, they are more penetrating; *fire* occupies the height of both the *sheng* and outer-world and after-heaven cycle; *earth* (or soil), follows in both; the wetlands, where the minerals (*metal*) are deposited, represent the lowest point on the earth, they represent the winding down of both Yin and Yang processes in nature and 'a flowing out of form'; they are followed by heaven, the stern judgemental force of the Yang, where 'the dry bones are left bleached by the sun'; before we descend to water, the lowest point in both the *sheng* and after-heaven cycles, the water which moves minerals back into solution, so the process can begin again. All life needs to return to water, or a fluid environment, to reproduce. In the mountain is the beginning and end of the cycle: the silent and still mountain represents the quietest days of winter, and 'the dark before a new dawn'.

Put very blandly – tree becomes flame, which becomes flower, ripens in the fruit, which yields the stone, falls back to the seas and rivers, which deposit again...making the conditions for rebirth and renewal. This all needs careful pondering: and in doing so and, especially, seeing it in the mind's eye, we can understand the importance of flow and form in all nature.

Renewal and regeneration are intrinsic to the *wuxing*, an idea too easily forgotten by Western minds but quite

clearly represented in the turning Yin and Yang symbol (figure 4), as well as in the shifting lines of the *gua* (trigrams or three line figures).

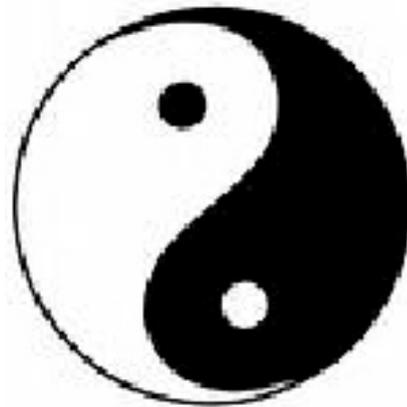


Figure 4. Yin and Yang symbol

In conclusion ponder this diagram from Li Zhongzi's *Neijing Zhiyao* (published 1642, *The Essentials of Medicine*⁴) but copied from earlier texts (numbers identify the hexagrams in the Book of Changes):

⁴ Which formed the basis for my *The Single Idea in the Mind of the Yellow Emperor*, listed below.

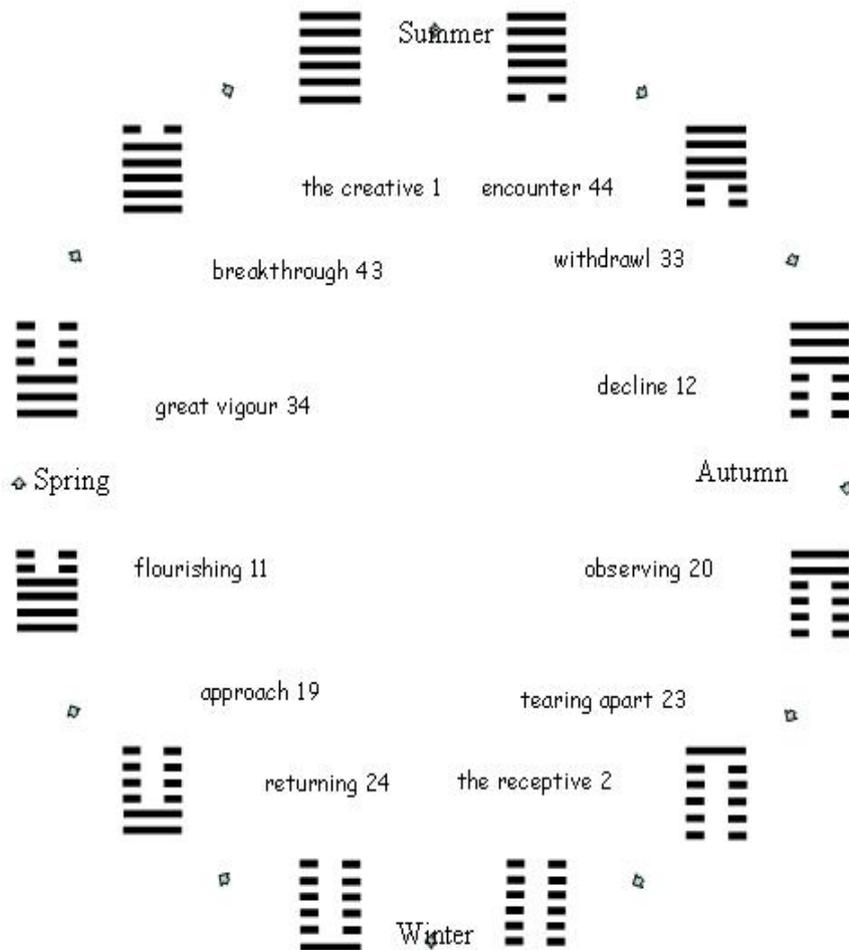


Figure 5. From Li Zhongzi's *Neijing Zhiyao*

The diagram above, a succession of hexagrams, in cycle, also demonstrates the intricate rise and fall of the *wuxing*, in symbolic, pictorial and poetic form. Specifically the *gua* (hexagram) sequence shows the Yang and Yin, rising and falling, flowering and declining. All of this is pertinent to thinking about personal health, patients and treatment.

Below is a simple chart of Yin and Yang, *wuxing* correspondences taken strictly from the text of the *Huangdi Neijing Suwen*⁵.... It is quite fun to see if you can follow the associations between the separate categories in your own mind. Good luck!

⁵ Taken from my translation, with original Chinese text, of the larger part of the *Neijing Zhiyao*, by Li Zhongzi. The *Neijing Zhiyao* is a Ming primer to the *Huangdi Neijing* (cf. *The Single Idea in the Mind of the Yellow Emperor*).

		fire bitter the eye South red the heart sickness present in all five zang the goat millet Mars 7 the tone 'zheng' sickness as in the vessels a scorched odour	
vegetation and trees sourness the eye East blue-green the liver sickness being frightened the cockerel wheat Jupiter 8 the tone 'mi' a sickness in the sinews a rank odour	soil sweet Central yellow the spleen sickness at the root of the tongue ox panicked millet Saturn 5 the tone 'gong' a sickness in the flesh a fragrant odour	classed with metals pungency the nostrils West white the lungs sickness present in the back the horse rice grown in flooded fields Venus 9 the tone 'ray' a sickness in the skin or hair a rotten odour	
		water salty two lower openings North black the kidneys sickness in the muscles the swine peas and beans Mercury 6 the tone 'yu' sickness as in the vessels a stale odour ⁶	

⁶ The True Texts stored in his Golden Casket - *Suwen* 4 of the Neijing Suwen

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