

# Fire and Water - Part Two of an Introduction to the Five Elements

by Richard Bertschinger

There is a creation myth of the Chinese<sup>i</sup> which states:

*When our oldest ancestor Pangu died, his four limbs became pillars marking the four corners of the world. His breath became the wind; his left eye the sun and his right eye the moon; his solid body became the mountains; his bones the rocks; his bone marrow, precious gems; his voice the thunder; his blood, the rivers; his muscles, the fertile lands; his hair, the plants and trees; his fur, bushes and forests;; his teeth and nails, metals and minerals; his sweat, rain and dew; and the fleas on him, the fish and animals on the dry land.*

In this picture we see the oneness of man and the Universe: the idea of the organic - which unpins the traditional Chinese view of the world. Five-element (*wuxing*) science, the oldest science of mankind – is tied to nature, into a transformative view of the world, with its roots in the mesolithic, the dawn of agriculture, hunting, cooking, medicine and cosmology. *Fire* (red, summer, the heart), *water* (blue-black, winter, the kidneys), and their like, concern the passage of the seasons, the cooking-pot, our aggressions, fears, suffering, the warming sun, the waxing and waning moon.

There is another myth, buried in the *Yi Jing*: *Anciently, when Fu Xi had come to rule all under heaven, looking up, he saw the brilliant forms exhibited in the sky, and looking down surveyed the patterns shown on the earth. Thus he came to a spiritual understanding (shen ming) of things<sup>ii</sup>.* The Chinese knew well their origins.

In the last article we took an over-view of all five ‘elements’ (*xing*), or ‘movers and shakers’, as they might more accurately be translated. Here we look at fire and water. Let us use natural intuition: what do we intrinsically know about fire and water? Well, anyone would say that fire is warming and blazing upwards and water, cooling and flowing downwards. Indeed, this is how the chapter *The Great Plan* in the *Shu Jing*<sup>iii</sup>, or ‘Book of Documents’ records their actions... ‘water it is, which soaks and descends; fire it is, which blazes and ascends...’. In a nutshell, here, we have the internal dynamic of the Five Elements. In a deeper sense, fire and water act in different ways – they represent Yin and Yang, sun and moon, rising and

falling, heating and cooling, summer and winter – they are all *life*, in action.

Another reference occurs in the *Shuogua* (or eighth wing to the *Yi Jing*). Here we read: “The skies and the earth settled in position, the hills and wetlands mixed their breaths, thunder and wind intertwined, water and fire did not provoke each other.” The use of the ‘negative’ shows it is fire and water in peaceful cooperation that is crucial, of that the natural world works, as it were.

From the *Huangdi Neijing Suwen* comes a famous passage detailing the action of fire and water, the Yang energies tied to heaven (the sun) and the Yin earthly energies, in action between heaven and earth:

*The energy of the skies is clear and pure, brilliantly shining. The skies have a store of virtue unending, and are inextinguishable. But if the skies were to take it on themselves to shine, the sun and moon would not be able to shine, and the evil harm them through invading an opening. The Yang energies blocked off, the earthly energies would obscure their light. Clouds and mists neither rise nor distil, nor the clear dew respond and descend above. Their interpenetration is not externalised in the life of the myriad creatures, their breaths are not bestowed...their polluted energies do not emerge, gales and storms rage unchecked and the clear dew not descend. Then all growth withers in the bud and none are able to prosper. Damaging winds arrive endlessly and storms constantly arise. The skies, the earth and the four seasons offer each other no mutual support. They lose track of each other and before midway along the path, any order collapses.*

It is clear then what happens when fire and water, Yin and Yang, do not speak to each other or communicate!

*Harmony* above all is central to health – a harmony within all Five Elements (and *a fortiori* between the body’s internal organs). Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the balancing of fire (Yang) and water (Yin): the flame and the well – the cooking pot, poised above the fire and the bucket, sent down into the earth on a long rope. Both were technological achievements central to civilization. Without food and water, a population could not be sustained. In such a manner, indeed do ‘fire and water not provoke one another’. The quotation above from the *Suwen* states that ‘if the

skies were to take it on themselves to shine, the sun and moon would not be able to shine'. This is because the Yang is vaunting itself, too proudly. As the Taoist *Huangdi Neijing* compiler Wang Bing (8<sup>th</sup> century) explains:

*Heaven stores up its virtue, because it wishes to conceal its great enlightenment. Hence if its great light were to be seen, then the small lights must perish. The virtue of its great light must always be stored up. For if Heaven were to enlighten itself, the light of the sun and moon would, once and for all, be obscured.*

Wang Bing explains the *Suwen* passage as grand conceit - taking the heavens as an image of the human condition. This is typically Taoist stuff. The body is one small heaven. The folly lies in the Yang fire vaunting itself, one's understanding, or intelligence (*ming*) becoming over-arrogant; in other words virtue lies in 'caring for the Yang' (*yang yang*), not letting the fire get out of hand - as it also lies in 'caring for one's health' (*yang sheng*). This encourages the 'interpenetration of the energies of heaven and earth' (*tian ti qi jiao*), because, as the Yang finds its proper place, the correctness of the Yin will also emerge naturally. In the human body this implies the dispersion and regulation of the Yang energies within to enable the passage of the Yin fluids and essences.

This is why in this article I consider fire and water together. Because they must always work together for us, as practitioners, to enable health.

We must remember that traditional Chinese physicians always had a leaning towards alchemy, the cultivation of a spiritual elixir, an internal transformation, commonly called an enlightenment (*ming*) – which ran parallel, as it were, with their concern for promoting physical health.

Fire, being primarily Yang and a transformative power, was central to all. Indeed the *neidan* practitioner Zhang Boduan (and founder of the Southern School) said:

*Fundamentally there is just  
One taste - Mercury,  
Circulated around everywhere  
For several hours<sup>iv</sup>.*

Here he is using the courtesy-name 'mercury' for fire.

When we look at the 'tokens', the symbols, the courtesy-names and imagery used by the alchemists in their practice, we find them pointing most fundamentally to the trigrams, those small three line figures which originated far back before the Han times. Thus Li stands for Fire and Kan for Water:



Fire (upward rising, etc) Water (downward falling, etc)

And, to remind you, the Fu Xi (inner world) and King Wen diagrams (outer-world) are thus:

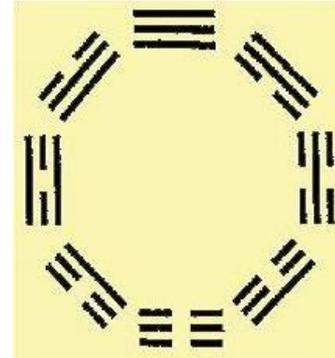


Figure 1. Fu Xi Diagram

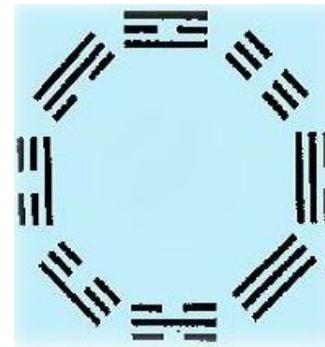


Figure 2. King Wen Diagram

The King Wen diagram concerns the outer world of space and time. Here Fire (Li) is above and Water (Kan) below.

But Zhang Boduan (founder of the Southern School) also states:

*The Sun dwells in Li's position contrariwise as a Woman,  
Kan's Toad sits in its Palace - but is Male.  
If you cannot understand within each the idea of topsy-turviness  
Cease your tunnel-vision and high flown chatter!*

So take this slowly. Li (fire, the sun) is female; she is the second daughter in the pantheon of eight trigrams. Yet she represents the Yang (male) Sun, which is Yin and Yang topsy-turvy! Kan (water, the moon) is male; he is the second son. Yet he holds to himself the squat Dusky Toad of the Yin (female) Moon. This is Nature's wisdom of no extremes. The miracle of

harmonious living together. Cease your tunnel-vision and high flown chatter!

Further on, in the next article, on metal and wood, we will understand how to 'extract the gold', from within this harmony. Enough to say that the poem above continues 'take then the solid centre lying within Kan, to reform the soft inner belly of Li'. This is the secret. But I will leave you a few months still to digest water and fire!

Now the fundamental act of the alchemist is to promote the continuance of the Yang (by softening it with Yin) and to contain the Yin (by reinforcing it with Yang). Thus to ensure a smooth harmony of qi-flow, within the individual and within his world. In such a way, Yin and Yang come together, in the Tao, the Dao, the Way. This smooth flow is described also in the *Tao-te Ching* (Ch.42. 'The Way Transformed'):

*The Tao gave birth to the One; the One gave birth to the two; the two gave birth to the three; the three gave birth to the ten-thousand things. The ten-thousand things all bear the Yin their backs and embrace the Yang; they are all throughout infused with a single breath, a soft harmony.*

Heshang gong<sup>v</sup> says on this passage:

*The myriad creatures all contain within themselves the original breath of life. Through acquiring it, they are able to act gently and softly. It is similar to the organs within the chest, the marrow within the bones, the hollow stalk of a plant. As a single breath pervades and infuses them all, it perpetuates their life.*

This is the kernel of the science of Taoist Yoga, also called the practice of *neidan* (the brewing of an internal (*nei*) elixir (*dan* more literally, 'cinnabar') which we now call the practice of Qi Gong.

The opening text of the Candong Qi state:

*Heaven (qian) and earth (kun) are the door and gateway to Change,  
Father and mother to the various hexagrams;  
Thus water (kan) and fire (li) greatly assist  
Turning the hub on its proper axis.*

*Male and female, four in number (heaven, earth, fire, water),  
They are the bellows which revive the fire.  
Travelling the path of Yin and Yang is like driving a team of horses:  
Adjust the dark reins,  
Seize bit and bridle,*

Here the alchemy of heaven and earth, fire and water is described as 'travelling the path of Yin and Yang', as 'driving a team of horses'. No doubt the trigrams are as

horses – pulling the carriage of great Change. Heaven and earth above and below; water and fire admixed between. These are 'the bellows which revive the fire'. We are counselled to 'adjust the dark reins' – they are not easy to see; and to 'seize bit and bridle', in order to control its passage. This is one way to achieve a soft harmony.

Further on the Candong Qi states:

*The sages guessed at an approximation,  
Decided upon an order as foundation:  
These four (heaven, earth, fire, water) in makeshift chaos  
Directly enter back on into the void.*

*While the sixty hexagrams are about them  
Spread out, expanded like a carriage:  
Being yoked up with mare and dragon,  
The enlightened ruler manages the times.*

*When at peace, he follows ahead  
Travelling a level path without turning:  
But if he strays off course he is gone,  
Overturning the family and state!*

It is this smooth blending of fire and water into a soft harmony ... so that they 'do not provoke one another' (see *Shuogua* phrase above) which is *central* to the practice of classical Chinese medicine, and furthermore behind all attempts at promoting health.

The fire kept in check? This also brings to mind the parable of the 'burning house' in the Lotus Sutra. The world is described as a burning house, burning with the fire of desire. And the Sakyamuni Buddha has come to save us from the fire, by giving us the means to escape from the great conflagration.

Master Shangyang (who 'honoured the Yang'), properly titled Chen Zhiyu (fl.c.1330) muses on this 'command of the Yang fire' in the 'cycling five' (*wuxing*):

*The cycling-five gone along with,  
The whole world ablaze as a fiery pit!  
The cycling-five turned on their heads,  
The great earth produces seven jewels*

He goes on: *By this is meant taking the linking together of water and fire as the guiding principle. In this way they can overcome each other faults.*<sup>vi</sup>

Closer to home, in the *Grand Discourse on Essentials of the Utter Truth* of the Neijing Suwen (Ch.74), speaking of treatment, we read:

*If cold, then warm them. If hot, then cool them. If the condition is slight, you can go against it. If it is severe, then go along with it.*

*Massage it, bathe it, thin it out, break it apart, open it out and help it express itself. All your actions must accord with the conditions.*

We must awake to the work in hand! In such a manner we learn to tackle the harmony of water and fire. Next issue we will focus on wood and metal.

## References

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## End Notes

<sup>i</sup> We ought not to get too concerned about whether this myth is original or not – after all it is only a myth! A summary of some recent Chinese research as to its origins is at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pangu>.

<sup>ii</sup> From the *Xi Ci*, or Great Appendix, to the historical oracle – ‘The Book of Changes, or Yi Jing’.

<sup>iii</sup> If you remember this is the oldest reference to the five elements in the preserved Chinese literature (date variable, but pre-Han),.

<sup>iv</sup> From his famous Western River Moon alchemical poem, contained in the *Wuzhen Bian* (‘Essay Written upon Awakening to the Truth’).

<sup>v</sup> The original commentator on the Tao-te Ching.

<sup>vi</sup> Note that Hexagram 63 *Already Overcome*, symbolises water above and fire below, as they have ‘overcome each other’s faults’. The King Wen text reads: ‘Blessings in small things, devotion favourable. In the beginning good fortune, at the end confusion.’ Such is Chinese wisdom.