

The Five Crossroads

The system of acupuncture based on ancient Chinese medical and pre-medical texts is widely and conventionally known as the “Five Elements” system. There is a strong resemblance between the Elements named, in Chinese translations, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water and Wood, and the four elements of Greco-European thought, Fire, Earth, Water and Air. There are as well some correspondences between the symbols and concepts of each system. In both cases the elements refer to cosmological concepts which were developed as a means of explaining certain worldly phenomena in symbolic language. However, the term “elements” comes near to missing the central concept of the character in its classical usage. It is based on a convention of translation which is neither descriptive nor accurate. Although we have retained the term “Five Elements” since it is the common usage, we would remind the reader of a more literal meaning which arises from the ancient classical texts and which provides a philosophical setting both complete and profound.

The Chinese character we translate as “Elements” is sometimes rendered as “phases” or “movements.” In the ancient writings it meant “crossroads.” This more literal meaning had the symbolic advantage of implying the energetic coordinates of a larger cosmological system. As we translated and researched the origin and significance of this system, a very complex picture began to form. The ancient medical textbook references to the Five Elements quoted directly from earlier pre-medical

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textbooks of philosophy, politics and astrology. We realized that many of the ideas discussed in the medical texts were comprehensible only within the framework of the ancient Chinese philosophies and cosmologies. To understand more of what the Five Elements system was capable of in its greatest extension, we found we had to explore its origins in the more ancient pre-medical texts. This in turn required that we develop a far greater perspective than that with which we began. The rather simplistic theories of correspondence that we commonly associate with the Five Elements began to pale in significance as we changed our focus from the correspondences themselves, the jigsaw pieces, to the entire cosmology, the jigsaw puzzle. It became evident that the Five Elements theory as understood within the context of acupuncture was derived from these older systems of correspondence. It was developed in part as a tool to help explain certain phenomena and in part as a process to bridge certain gaps that seemed to exist when these earlier systems were applied to the body and to medicine. Thus, the theory of Five Elements did not arise in a vacuum but developed over a period of many centuries before it was discussed in the medical texts. The Five Elements system was itself not an isolated and self-contained theory applicable only to acupuncture, but an integral part of a cosmology.

The earliest references to the Five Elements seem to have been made in the *Shu Ching*,¹ a book of political philosophy in circulation between the tenth and fifth centuries B.C. Similar information is found in the *Li Chi*,² or *Book of Rites*, as early as the fifth century B.C. and in the *Guan Dzu*,³ a book of philosophy dating from the fourth century B.C. The Five Elements were further developed as astrological concepts in the *Huai Nan Tzu*,⁴ a discussion of philosophy and astrology written circa 122 B.C.

The first known application of the Five Elements concepts of correspondence to the body and to medicine was in the *Su Wen*,⁵ believed to have been written about 200 B.C. This, probably the first of the Chinese medical classics, was followed slightly later by the *Ling Shu*, where again reference was made

to the Five Elements theories as applied to the body.⁶ The last of these ancient medical texts and by far the most complete and profound was the *Nan Ching*. Here, the development of the Five Elements theories and correspondences was most complete.

Throughout the development of the Five Elements concepts the correspondences underwent numerous changes, as did the cycles or interconnections between them. This created a maze of contradictory ideas. The brilliance of the *Nan Ching* was that it selected and correlated the different theories of the Five Elements left in contradiction by the earlier texts, the *Su Wen* and *Ling Shu*. Equally exciting was that it developed and synthesized the cycles, correspondences and theories while remaining constantly aware of the limitations of the ideas.

However, there are paradoxes and difficulties in the *Nan Ching* which no serious scholar pretends to have satisfactorily explained. Perhaps this is true because of the rarity of the extant body of literature, or perhaps because a written language can give us only a limited view of an idea at a particular stage of its evolution. Perhaps most significantly, however, the Five Elements system was not seen as a hard and fast doctrine but rather as a problem-solving device. Although our orientation in this work is primarily to the application of Five Elements theory to the human body and to healing, the cosmological system itself is not limited to this viewpoint. We would like to present a wider picture of this cosmology prior to explaining its relevance to the diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions.

Yin and Yang

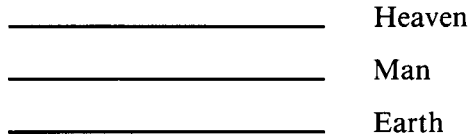
In Chinese philosophy, the system of Yin and Yang was conceived as a way of explaining the Universe. It is a purely relativistic system; any one thing is either Yin or Yang only in relation to some other object or phenomena, and all things can be described only in relation to each other.

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In the Yin ↔ Yang system, we are able to explain relationships between different phenomena or entities. Theoretically, we could explain the relationship of all entities in the Universe. The Chinese themselves attempted to do this in a very general way. They discussed the relationship of Heaven (Yang) to Earth (Yin) and how the two interact. They discussed the relationship of Heaven to Man, and of Earth to Man, and of the complex web of interactions that are set up between these three entities.

This ternary system is very important in Chinese thought. Not only does it describe the relationship of the essential cosmological elements of Heaven, Man and Earth, it also provides the foundation from which other sets of relationships can be explained. It underlies the Trigrams of the *I Ching* and thus the *I Ching* itself.

Heaven, Man and Earth

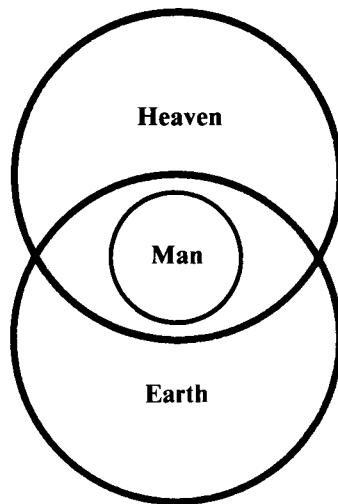


Using this ternary system of relationships we are able to describe how Man can affect and be affected by his environment. The environment divides into two basic facets: the immediate environment, Earth, and the general environment, Heaven. Both the microcosmic and the macrocosmic, Earth and Heaven respectively, interact with Man. The energies of both have specific and general effects on the energies of Man and were also said to correspond to the different energies of Man. It is by this concept of energetic relationship or correspondence that the Chinese model of the Universe is applied to the practices and theories which are presented in the medical texts.

This idea is central to the understanding of the medical applications. It is a precise statement of a co-equal and simultaneous causation or generation. This interpretation is implicit in the nature of Yin and Yang as explained by the classical writings. It is evident that a specific form of Yin ↔ Yang interaction perceived on the macrocosmic level will manifest on the microcosmic level as well. If all things in the Universe are seen to interact, then nothing can exist independently of anything else. Since the Yin and Yang model can theoretically describe all phenomena, the system is not limited by the extent of our ability to perceive or measure the phenomena themselves. Thus if a certain phenomena which we cannot perceive occurs on the macrocosmic level, its effects will be felt and reflected on the microcosmic level where we may be able to perceive them.

As was put forth in many of the Chinese pre-medical classics, the energies of Heaven and Earth interact with the energies of Man. We can summarize the interactions diagrammatically as follows:

Heaven, Earth and Man



Theory

The energies of Heaven and Earth were systematized in this fashion so that the complex interaction of each to human affairs could be more easily discussed.

There are three basic schematas that explain these interactions. They are the Twelve Earthly Branches, the Ten Celestial Stems and the Nine Stars. Briefly, the Twelve Branches were seen as describing the energies of Earth. The Ten Stems were seen more in relation to the energies of Heaven, and viewed as the Yin and Yang aspects of the Five Elements. The Nine Stars were related to the temporal or “Later Heaven” sequence of the eight primary Trigrams of the *I Ching*, and were thought to best describe the world of Man.⁷ (For readers unfamiliar with these concepts, **Appendix II** provides further explanation.)

Each of the three schematas includes correspondences to specific times of the year. By interweaving each of these schematas with each other and with the seasons, certain temporal correspondences can be seen which describe the processes that affect and control the cycles of the seasons. Within the schematas are described the rise and fall of the seasons and the cycles of seeding, growth and maturity of living things.

The concepts underlying each of these schematas were first applied to the body in the pre-medical classics. Each corresponded to different parts of the body as arranged in the “Later Heaven” sequence of Trigrams and governed by the relationships of Yin ↔ Yang.⁸

The Ten Stems were related to the Yin and Yang aspects of each of the Five Elements, the planets of the Solar System and the single digit numbers. The Twelve Branches were related to the twelve main acupuncture meridians, described as the superficial extensions of the internal energies circulating through the organs, abdomen, chest and Hara. Later texts related the Nine Stars to the Eight Extra Meridians through a particular arrangement and relationship of the eight Trigrams of the *I Ching*.⁹

Within a general framework, the Twelve Branches were Yin relative to the Ten Stems. Within the body, the Twelve Branches corresponded to the twelve lower meridians, the six paired meridians on the legs, while the Ten Stems corresponded to the ten upper meridians, the five paired meridians on the arms.¹⁰ The Ten Stems (Yang) corresponded to the ten fingers, while the Twelve Branches (Yin) corresponded to the ten toes, penis and scrotum in men, the ten toes and uterus in women. The uterus in this case is a very westernized translation, as more accurately the correspondence was to the “capacity for becoming pregnant.”¹¹

Such correspondences are numerous and though they may seem contradictory, they point out merely that relative to one another, the Branches are more Yin and the Stems are more Yang. In addition, the meridians (Branches) are thought of as being Yang in relation to their organs. Thus the Stems cannot be a relationship of the organs one to another. They correspond traditionally to the Yin and Yang aspects of each of the Five Elements.¹² This implies that the Five Elements are also more Yang than the Branches (the meridians) and the Organs. The Five Elements thus have some qualities more similar to those of the energies of Heaven. This relationship of Stems, Elements, Branches and Organs is given further import by the fact that the classical texts perceived the correspondences of two of the earthly Branches as being to certain functions of the body rather than simply to parts of the body. It is essential to note that these correspondences were seen as relationships between energies as well as between entities. As we develop the application of the correspondence system to the human system and health, this is a distinction of increasing importance.