



## An Application of Five-Phase Theory in Traditional Chinese Medicine

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### Abstract

In traditional Chinese philosophy, Human body likes a small universe, and the five internal organs are systems that generating each other and controlling each other. The five-phase theory uses the relationship of generating and controlling between each other to discuss the relationship between the five internal organs and the harmonious balance between each other.

In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) clinical point of view, by using the theory of controlling, over acting, generating and insulting sequence between fire phases, it not only can demonstrate the transformation of disease and by regulating the function of each internal organ, it shows the corresponding diagnosis and treatment.

**Keywords:** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM); Five-Phase Theory; Generating, Controlling; Internal Organ

### The origin and concept of the five phases

The five phases are one of the physical views in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). It commonly uses in philosophy, Chinese medicine and divination. Five phases include Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. The Chinese believe that nature consists of these five phases. With the rise and fall of these five phases, it made the changes of nature. It not only affecting human's destiny, but also create the circulation of all living thing in the universe.

The five-phase theory believe that everything in the universe consists of the operation and changes of five basic substances phases: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water. It emphasizes the overall concept of everything in the universe and depicts the structural relationship and transportations of things. If Yin and Yang theory is an ancient opposition-unification-balance theory, then the five-phase can be said to be a general system at present is five different original elements.

As early as the end of the Western Zhou Dynasty (1122 - 771BC) in China, the "five materials theorem" was already existed. "Mandarin: Zheng Yu" mentioned, from the earth, gold, wood, water and

fire, it formed everything. "Zou Zhan" said, it's mention naturally five materials. The people uses them all, can't missing anyone. And "Shang Shu: Hong Fan" said: five phases, first water, second fire, third wood, forth metal and fifth earth, water nourish down, fire hares upwards, wood can be bent and straightened, metal can be moulded and can be harden, Earth permits sowing, growing and reaping. That which soaks and descends (Water) is salty, that which blazes upward (Fire) is bitter, that which can be bent and straightened (Wood) is sour, that which can be moulded and become hard (Metal) is pungent, that which permits sowing and reaping (Earth) is wet. The record begins to found the nature of five phases and apply into all other things. It formed the stable combination structure [6].

During the warring states period in China (475 - 221BC). The ancient Chinese physicians had integrated the theory of Yin and Yang and five-phase theory into Chinese medicine, with the combination and developing of these theories, a better appropriate systematic medical foundation had been established, and today, this system is called "Traditional Chinese Medicine".

In the late warring states period, Zou Yan proposed the generating and controlling sequence. The original intention was to explain the roles of rise and fall of the dynasty and the fixed order of generating and controlling, it forming the pattern of interrelations between things, spontaneously found the relationship of internal structure and the overall idea. At the same time, "The Yellow Emperor's Internal Classics" applied the five phases into medicine. This is important in the research and clinic data collection and forming a unique theoretical system of Traditional Chinese medicine [9].

"The Yellow Emperor's internal classic", or Nei Jing is considered the earliest TCM classic medical textbook, and it has a profound influence on the establishment of the later medical theory. According to legend, "The Yellow Emperor's internal classic" was a description and discussion of the medical treatment from ancient Chinese ancestor Yellow Emperor discussed with Chi Bo, Lei Gong, Bo Gao, Yu Yu, Shao Shi, Gui Yu Qu, Shao Yu and many other ministers. This classic medical text is classified under sub-medical text book in "Si Ku Quan Shu" [5,13].

The Yellow Emperor's was first issue around the warring state period to Qin and HAN dynasty, and it was revised and supplemented during the period from Eastern HAN to SUI and TANG Dynasty. The "Nei Jing" includes two parts, "Su Wen", or "Simple Question" and "Ling Shu", or "Spirit of Soul", with a total of 18 volumes and 162 articles. This book establishes the foundation of traditional Chinese medicine and is the corner stone of the foundation of Traditional Chinese medicine and the development of clinical practice [8,11,12].

### Structure of five phases

The five-phase philosophy includes: five phases are one of the basic categories of Ancient Chinese philosophy. It is the Chinese primitive scientific thoughts "Wu: Five" is wood, fire, earth, metal and water; these five material substance. "Xin: Phase" means extends in all directions, it also means actions, transport, and transformed, it also indicates the changes of transporting and endless of transform. The concept of five phases does not mean five special material substances, but it represents five functional attributes. It is the basic material of five powerful forces that constantly circulating rather than passive and immobile [7].

### The generating sequence

In this sequence, each phase generates another and is generated by another one. "Shen: generate" in this words contains the meaning of breeding, fostering, supporting and promoting, for example Fire is mother of Earths, because of fire generating earth correspondingly, Heart (Fire in five phases) is mother of spleen (Earth in five phases), because heart beat supporting and promoting spleen's function, if the function of heart is insufficient the

spleen will be affected. According to the theory of TCM, the insufficient of heart function will cause heart fail to push the blood in the vessels and the spleen will suffer as it makes and control blood, and which may cause imbalance, this imbalance can be mild, but in severe case, it can cause disease or illness [1,2].

### The controlling sequence

In this sequence, each phase control another and is controlled by another one. This controlling circulation will not stop. The controlling sequence ensures that a balance is maintained among five phases. There is also an interrelationship between the generating and the controlling sequence. It prevents either too much rising or decline in any organ [1,2].

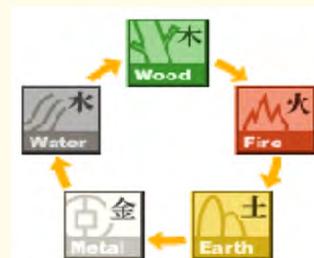
### The generating and controlling system

In Ming Dynasty, Chinese Medicine practitioner Zhang Jing Yue (1563-1640) said: "The mechanism of creation will not be made without generating and controlling. It will not be grow or develop without generating; it will not be over excessive without controlling. The continuously creation of life must be made in generating with control, controlling with generation" [14].

Tradition Chinese Medicine had applied the five-phase theory into the medical field and observes the operation of the human body from the perspective of system structure, and expounds the organic connection between the local and local parts, the local and the whole, and the interaction and unification of the human body and the external environment [9].

The five phases in Chinese Medicine emphasized that there must be a relative dynamic balance in multilateral relations. When it is imbalance, it may cause disease and need to find the specifically adjust, treat and balance it.

The relationship among the five phases are like a model of relationship among the internal organs and between them and the various tissue, sense organs, colors, smell and tastes. And it reveals the dynamic balance adjustment mechanism between the internal and external environment and it clarify the patterns of Health and disease, diagnosis and prevention [10].



**Figure 1:** The Generating Relationship between Five Phases.



**Figure 2:** The Controlling Relationship between Five Phases.

### Five phases system in Chinese medicine

In traditional Chinese medicine philosophy, we believe that Human body are holist, it is a small universe. We also believe the corresponding relationship between five Yin organs, six Yang organ, five tissues, five sense organs with five directions, four seasons and five tastes in the nature. It unify the human body and nature environment together, reflecting the mutual acceptances of the human body and universe, which just reflects the concept of harmony between human and nature.

For example, spring should be in the East, the wind is the main command, so the climate is mild, Yang Qi had generated, every-

thing is breading and corresponding the liver Qi, therefore liver Qi will rise in spring. In addition, regarding the relationship between the human body and the nature environment, such as four season, five natures and five flavors. Traditional Chinese medicine also can be explained by the theory of five-phase [1,2,9].

### Special meaning of five phases in TCM [3]:

- Wood can be bent and straightened. It represents the functions of growing rising, regulating and smoothing. It consists of liver and GB in human body.
- Metal can be moulded and can be harden. It represents the natures of sinking, settlements and convergence. It consists of lung and large intestine in human body.
- Water moistens downward. It represents the functions of nourishing, falling, cold and storage.
- It consists of kidney and UB in human body.
- Earth permits sowing, growing and reaping. It represents the functions of transforming, transplanting, transporting and receiving. It consists of spleen and stomach in human body.
- Fire flares upward. It represents the function/nature of warm, rising. It consists of heart and small intestine in human body.

Phases	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Yin Organ	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lung	Kidney
Yang Organ	GB	Small intestine	Stomach	Large intestine	UB
Tissue	Sinews	Vessel	Muscle	Skin	Bones

**Table 1:** The relationship between the five phases and organs and tissues in human body.

It can be used the interrelationships of five phases to explain the Generating sequence between five internal organs. E.g. kidney (Water) store essence, liver (Wood) store blood, that is kidney water nourish liver wood, that is Water generating Wood. Liver (Wood) store blood, heart (Fire) govern blood vessels, Liver had functions of storage of blood and regulating volume of flow. It support the functions of heart govern blood vessels, it's liver wood rising to support heart fire, that is Wood generating Fire [1,2,13].

Heart (Fire) govern blood vessel, it's house of mind, spleen (Earth) governs transformations and transportations, is the resource of Qi and blood formation. It also controls the blood, the warm heat from heart can warm the spleen Yang. When the function of heart govern vessels are normal, blood can warm, and rich the spleen, therefore spleen are able to transforming, transporting and control the blood properly. It's heart fire warm spleen earth, which means Fire generating Earth.

Spleen (Earth) can transport essence, nourish Qi to rich lung (Metal), which maintain the function of lung govern Qi. It's spleen of generating Lung Qi, that is Earth generating Metal. Lung (Metal) govern Qi and respiration, they control dispersing. Kidney (Water) control the reception of Qi, the descending of Lung Qi will be supporting the kidney essence. The dispersing and descending of lung regulate water passages, it encourages the kidney to govern water, it's lung mental nourish kidney water, that's Metal generating Water.

Equivalently, the controlling relationships between five phases are also applied in the controlling relationships between five organs. E.g. lung (Metal) control dispersing and descending, regulating Qi flow, it can control the liver (Wood) Yang raising, that is Metal control Wood. Liver (Wood) ensure the smooth flow of Qi, it can help to disperse and regulate the stagnation of spleen (Earth) Qi, it is Wood control Earth. The transformations and transporta-

tion of spleen, it can control the overflow of kidney water, it's Earth control Water. The nourishment from kidney (Water), it prevents the over blaze from heart fire, it is Water control Fire. The heat from heart (Fire) can control over dispersing and descending, it's Fire control Earth.

The generating/control relationship in five phases can be also explained the pathology influence between internal organs. E.g. liver disease (condition) can be transported to spleen, it is Wood over-acting Earth. Spleen disease condition can also effect liver and spleen had the same problem and been influence each other, that is stagnation of Wood and deficiency of Earth or blockage of Earth and stagnation of Wood. Liver problem can be also effect the heart, it's mother's disease which effect the son. It's all see in other in other pathology problem, it can be explaining by relationship of generating, controlling over acting and insulting sequence [10].

The applications of the theory of the five phases to traditional Chinese medicine are numerous and very important, it's clinical guide line for diagnosis and treatment. E.g. blood control wood, according to five-phase theory. Liver is Wood, spleen is Earth, so liver can control spleen, therefore we often treat liver and spleen together. That why there is principle of supporting earth and controlling liver. Another example, the color of liver is green, sour in taste, when there is greenish face with desire of sour taste food, it often can be diagnosis as liver channel problems [4].

There are so many examples according to this case. in general, traditional Chinese medicine practitioner can't leave without five-phase theory for their diagnosis, pattern of diagnosis, treatment and medication.

The generating/controlling relationships in five phases are also applied in emotion, which effect the function of five internal organs. The "Simple Question" said: anger damage liver, sadness control anger, joy damage heart, fear control joy, worry and pensiveness damage spleen, anger control worry and pensiveness, sadness damage lung, joy control sadness, fear damage kidney, worry control fear. By using the interrelationship of five-phase theory to control and regulate the emotion, it's also can be treated on mental health [8,11,12].

## Conclusion

In traditional Chinese medicine philosophy, human body likes a small universe, and controlling each other. The five-phase theory uses the relationship of generating and controlling between each other to discuss the relationship between the five internal organs and harmonious balance between each other.

When these relationships been damage or imbalance, it will show over acting or insulting condition, which is pathologic condition. In traditional Chinese medicine clinic point of view, the

generating, controlling, overacting, insulting sequence can explain the transforming of disease, and by understanding the pathologic change in five phases, we can regulate and harmonize the functions of organs and give appropriate treatment diagnosis.

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