

## The Five Elements in Balance: A Journey through Traditional Chinese Medicine Practices

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**ABSTRACT:** Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has been used for the prevention and treatment of various diseases for over 3000 years. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) makes heavy use of the five-element principle. The principle of the Five Elements categorizes everything as wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, defines their interrelation, and their effects on health. Any such sort of imbalance brings a rise in health-related problems. Probably, by the principle of contagiousness, the coupling of the internal organs was done. The internally linked organs were divided into five components under the rule of similarity, and the theory of five elements was applied to a variety of objects, including seasons, colors, tastes, sentiments, and so forth. Five Element theory consists of Yin, Yang, Sensory, and Emotional aspects. Four Characteristics of Syndrome Differentiation Based on Yin–Yang (FCSQ) have been derived from Yin–Yang theory. This theory deals with the knowledge of the laws of nature and climate change and their effects on human diseases. Further studies on quality, safety, and effectiveness will therefore help align traditional Chinese medicine with modern medicine for the comprehensive prevention and treatment of diseases.

**Keywords:** Earth; Fire; Metal; Water; Wood

### INTRODUCTION

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is one of the oldest systems of medicine in the world (Yap et al., 2022).

Traditional Chinese medicine has great potency to prevent and treat diseases (Xu et al., 2019). The disease prevention through preservation or re-establishment of the harmony and balance of the yin-yang energies within the human body is one of the significant elements of TCM. - Factor Yin-Yang imbalance is frequently the cause of an ailment. In that respect, the creation of bodily constitution is tied to TCM theory, consisting of five viscera, named heart, liver, kidney, and lung. Kidney and spleen, and five vital constituents, namely, blood, essence, body fluids, spirit, and Qi, which in turn are intimately related. Compromised visceral activity with dysregulation of its basic chemicals gives rise to biased bodily makeup. The Long-term body constitution theory in TCM (TCMBC) considers each individual's distinct physiological, psychological and physical characteristics. During a person's life, both could be acquired and inherited, and in turn, are influenced by variables. Diagnostically, TCMBC affects an individual's response to therapy, as well as their vulnerability to specific virulent causes and Disorders, it is the foundation of TCM. Practitioners' illness diagnosis, treatment, and prevention may be modified because of the unpredictable nature of TCM (Li et al., 2019). A prejudiced composition can be changed to a neutral one by including acquired elements like food and exercise. A healthy level of

exercise helps strengthen bones and muscles, improve visceral functions, and increase blood flow and Qi dynamics. Conversely, inactivity causes swollen muscles, constricted blood and Qi flow, and compromised spleen and stomach functions, all of which can lead to the development of a Phlegm-dampness constitution (PDC). In addition, an imbalanced diet and malnutrition may result in a fragile constitution, whereas a nutritious diet and adequate nutrients can generate a resilient body with good constitutions (Agrawal, 2022).

Biased and imbalanced constitutions are frequently found in depressed individuals. It was earlier reported that women with insufficient Yin-Yang constitutions are inclined towards despair, while it has been discovered that unhappiness was more prevalent in college students with incomplete and stagnant Qi constitutions (Xian et al., 2020). A person with a constitution with Qi-stagnation usually does not deal easily with a stressful situation. It is characterized by mood swings, overthinking, suspicion, and excessive worry, with body is slender. Secondly, owing to their weakened immunity, these individuals quickly tired. They readily get affected by sudden changes in temperature and are prone to coughing, excessive sweating and cold. These people take longer to recover from illness. On the other hand, those whose constitution is Yin-deficient are outgoing and intolerant, with warmth in the hands and soles (Sun et al., 2018). These patients detest hot, dry conditions, prefer cold beverages, and always feel thirsty.

Conversely, those with a Yang-deficiency constitution tend to be shy, silent, introverted, and their hands and feet tend to be cold. They choose summertime over winter, along with hot meals. With the modernization of medical models in this contemporary era, TCM is being increasingly recognized. It has, therefore, profound value because of its demonstrated curative effects (Berman et al., 2010; Xiong et al., 2013). The influence of TCM is then increasing in the whole world (Zhang et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2019).

### **HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE IN THE THERAPY OF DISEASES**

TCM has been an integral part of Conventional Chinese culture, evolving along the course of Chinese history. Tracing back to the ancient past, certain creatures, plants, and minerals were applied by Chinese ancestors to relieve their symptoms. Several theories and modes of TCM were gradually formed by assimilating the essence of humanities and natural science. These theories and modes were further quoted in many books. Bian Que complied with the five methods of diagnosis (inference, inspection, auscultation and olfaction, inquiry, and palpation) in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period (770-221BC). During Qin and Han times, the theoretical framework of TCM was explained in the Huang Di NeiJing—the Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon. The primary theoretical fundamental of TCM was that, during the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Zhongjing established the Shang Han Za Bing Lun, which means Treatise on Febrile Diseases and Miscellaneous Illnesses. It is the discussion on how to formulate appropriate diagnoses by distinguishing patterns of various illnesses (Ke, 2000). During the same period, this masterpiece laid the groundwork for TCM pharmaceutical theory: the "Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing" (Shennong's Classic of Materia Medica), which guided prescriptions and ensured safe applications to enhance the therapeutic effects of TCM. Later in the Ming Dynasty, from 1368 to 1644, Ben Cao Gang Mu was recorded by Li Shizhen, which was the first purely scientific categorization of medical herbs in the world and had a summary about the TCM pharmaceutical theory in detail. Huangdi Neijing is an ancient book on health and disease, which first describes the use of TCM in the treatment of infectious diseases. Some new concepts about TCM, like the five-element theory, holistic theory, etiology and doctrine of "Qi," were explained in that book (Huang et al., 2021; Luo et al., 2020).

The "Yijing", 3000 to 5000 years old, systematically outlines a course of life according to a mathematical regulatory model. It describes its changes and modalities, advises on personal emotional lifestyle and guidance, while the "Huangdi Neijing" is comparable in its significance to the Hippocratic Corpus in Greek medicine (Sertel et al., 2010). These books transformed clinical experience into a comprehensive summary of TCM theories, systematically detailing its principles and treatment methods, the physiology of humans, symptoms of illness, and preventative care. The progress of the PRC from 1949 was flourished by TCM. One of the three guidelines for health work during the early period of the PRC was to unite Chinese and Western medicine. For guiding the pharmaceutical products in China, the first edition of the

Chinese Pharmacopoeia was published in 1953, while Traditional Chinese Medicine was first included in the second edition of the Pharmacopoeia in 1963. In 1978, the Ministry of Health's "Report on Implementing the Party's Policies Regarding TCM and Cultivating TCM Practitioners" was distributed across the country by the CPC Central Committee that forcefully promoted TCM. Improvement of both modern medicine and TCM is mandated by the Constitution of the PRC to safeguard the health of Chinese citizens. The State Council was established in 1986 for the administration of TCM. Then established the corresponding administration of TCM in all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities as the basic organization of TCM management in China. Then, in 1991, at the 4th Meeting of the 7th National People's Congress, putting equal emphasis on Chinese and Western Medicine was made as one of the five principles to guide health work in the new period PRC. Later, a whole TCM policy system was completed by two other documents: Regulations of the PRC on TCM, issued in 2003, and the Opinion on Supporting and Promoting the Development of TCM, issued in 2009 (Wang et al., 2021).

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF TCM**

TCM has been used in the treatment of many diseases for more than 3000 years (Luo et al., 2020). TCM has been used in the treatment of many diseases worldwide and local diseases. For example, Chinese medicine has been proven very beneficial in controlling previous pandemics like the SARS outbreak in 2003, the MERS outbreak in 2012, and seasonal epidemics caused by flu and dengue viruses (Li et al., 2020). During the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic in China, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) was widely employed to prevent (Lau et al., 2005) and treat SARS (Chen and Nakamura, 2004). It was proven helpful in shortening hospital stays, suppressing side effects from steroid treatments, and relieving dyspnea and fatigue. TCM has also been proven to perform antiviral activities against some viral strains, like HIV, hepatitis B, and the influenza virus (Xian et al., 2020).

### **BASICS OF FIVE-ELEMENT THEORY**

According to the five-element theory, all phenomena occurring in the universe can be classified into five categories due to the formation of a system of correspondence. The natural tendency to move and transform in the universe is represented by these categories. The natural phenomena like wood, water, metal, earth, and fire are associated with these categories. The changes occurring in nature are well described by a correlation between these categories. Every category/element symbolizes a category of some functions and qualities. Flowering, awakening, growth, childhood and morning are some corresponding states of wood. Maximum activity, fast growth, an open flame, excessive happiness and noon are associated with fire. The earth is associated with the end of summer to signify the transition to autumn. States like moisture and equilibrium are symbolized by Earth. Metal is associated with states like no precipitation and crystallization of clarity. State of decay, accumulation, rest and the development of new potentials, levels of will and fear are

**Table 1.** Five elements and their corresponding states as described by Catic et al., (2018)

	Fire	Water	Earth	Metal	Wood
<b>Direction</b>	North	Center	West	East	South
<b>Meat</b>	Pork	Veal	Horse	Chicken	Goat
<b>Color</b>	Black	Yellow	White	Green	Red
<b>Organ</b>	Kidney	Spleen	Lungs	Liver	Heart
<b>Senses</b>	Ear	Mouth	Nose	Eyes	Tongue
<b>Tissue</b>	Bones	Muscles	Skin	Tendon	Blood vessels
<b>Climate</b>	Cold	Humid	Dry	Windy	Hot
<b>Season</b>	Winter	Late summer	Autumn	Spring	Summer
<b>Emotions</b>	Fear	Concern	Melancholy	Anger	Pleasure
<b>Viscera</b>	Colon	Abdomen	Colon	Bladder	Small intestine

related to water. In China, these categories are applied to everything that exists in this universe. There are two linkages between five elements – sheng (incentive) and ke (control) connections, which are natural and necessary. Sheng refers to a connection where one element arises from another. An example is quoted to demonstrate it. Wood will generate fire, and ultimately, fire generates earth. Earth, in return, generates metal, metal generates water, and then water generates wood. As each element in this cycle acts as the mother that stimulates the next in the sequence, that’s why this cycle is named the mother-son relationship. The elements regulate one another by using a circle. The zang and fu viscera, and the acupuncture channels, are directly associated with the Five Element theory as they are also classified in the same manner. The five-element theory is also used to interpret the physiology and pathology of going, by this, it relates the human body with the natural environment. Therefore, the theory of five elements relates to etiology, diagnosis, treatment, and prognosis. Of the five elements, this is the most important statement. Zang organs are also associated with this theory. Tree which represents the liver, that manages the free flow of qi; heart is represented by fire, which warms the entire body; spleen is represented by Earth, which controls transport and transformation in food; metal-lungs that can allow the relief of qi, symbolized by water -the kidneys that are in charge of storing essence and regulates body fluids (Catic et al., 2018). According to this theory, the interpretation and diagnosis and treatment of diseases can be guided by the characteristics of the Five Elements and the relationship of the Five Elements: Wood restrains Earth, Earth controls Water, Water extinguishes Fire, Fire restrains Earth, and Earth restrains Wood (Chunyong, 2023). The disruption in balance among these five elements may lead to increased health problems.

**Complementary and controlling relationships of the five elements**

Considering that it has already been established that the elements complement and control each other, this relationship can be explained. Wood serves as fire, as the blood moving through the liver, then directs toward the heart, allowing the heart to regulate its circulation. The earth is stimulated by fire, as heat, which is worthy for the proper functioning of the spleen, is provided by the heart. Earth arouses the metal, as important nutrients are transformed and transported to the lungs for their regeneration and are supported by the spleen. Metal promotes water, as yin fluid is conveyed to the kidneys by the lungs. The tree is stimulated by water, as blood is replenished by kidney which then continues to the liver. The

soil is controlled by wood, as the liver's cleansing effect prevents the spleen qi from stagnating. Fire regulates the metal, as the rhythm of your heartbeat helps ensure that the lungs are not reduced to a minimum. Earth regulates water, as the excessive flow of fluid through the kidneys is prevented by transportation by the spleen. Metal regulates wood, as purification by the lungs reduces the burden on the liver's qi. Water regulates fire, as Yin’s flow through the kidneys relieves Yin in the heart(Catic et al., 2018).

**ASPECTS OF FIVE ELEMENT THEORY**

An early reference for this may be found in the prehistoric Huangdi Neijing literature, which most likely goes back to 300 B.C. However, many human holds to that belief still today. The five components show how nature and our surroundings are interrelated with all facets of human health, including food, exercise and emotions (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2023; Zhang, 2011). The five elements are fire, wood, earth, water and metal. The corresponding organs of the five elements are mentioned in Table 2.

**Yin Aspect**

All five elements help in the free flow of 'Qi' with their corresponding channels of the Yin organs: meridians. For Example, the Wood Element has the liver as its Yin Organ that governs and controls the liver and blood required by every sufficed for proper working of all organs. The Meridian of Yin for elements of fire goes down from the rib cage to the arms and hands. These correspond to intimacy, relationships, touching, etc. It is through the feeling of touch sense that we proclaim friendships, express our life, share, disperse Warmness, give and receive (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2023).

**Yang Aspect**

The Yang Five Organs elements help in the pushing of nutrients and waste material through and out of the body. For Example: Yang organ of Metal, i.e., functions like absorption of water and electrolytes, forming and pushing the feces towards the rectum for removal from the body, are performed by the large intestine. The Yang organ of the Earth element, i.e., Stomach, rots and ripens the food after intake and forms the "qi" which is then transported to the spleen (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2023).

Table 2. Description of elements included in Five Element Theory

Elements	Corresponding Organs of YANG	Corresponding Organs of YIN
Fire [Major (called Emperor)]	Small Intestine	Heart
Fire Minor [called Minister]	Triple Warmer	Pericardium
Earth	Stomach	Spleen
Metal	Large Intestine	Lung
Water	Urinary Bladder	Kidney
Wood	Gall Bladder	Liver

### Sensory Aspect

The Five Elements exhibit different tastes and odors. For Example: Wood element has a sour taste rancid odor. Fire elements taste bitter and smell burning. The Earth element has a sweet taste and a slightly sweetish odor. Water element tastes salty and smells putrid (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2023).

### Emotional Aspect

The five elements showcase different emotions, so if any person has an imbalance of any element, he/she exhibits specific emotions related to that element. For example: Wood element exhibits the emotions: angry. The Earth element demonstrates Emotions of worry. Metal element exhibits the emotions of grief (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2023).

### THEORY OF FIVE CIRCUITS AND SIX Qi

The theory of five circuits and six qi (FSCQ) refers to wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, while six qi refers to wind, cold, summer heat, dampness, dryness, and fire. It is a very important constituent of traditional Chinese medicine. Such a theory finds its manifestation in holistic thinking that early doctors held regarding the relationship that exists between heaven and man. It's the concept that deals with the knowledge of the laws of nature and climate change and their effects on human diseases. Five Circuits and Six Qi are derived from the theory of 'yin and yang' and make use of symbols like "heaven" and "earth" as deductive tools. Originating in the times of Huang Di NeiJing, it has been passed down. One series of studies was completed by using current information about the disease incidence and occurrence, meteorological data, finding the relations between FCSQ and climate, and patterns of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Bangze et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2015).

Due to meteorological observations and the mode of climate, these studies demonstrated a different degree of coherence between the complete meteorological data. Besides, some internal medicine and TCM patterns have revealed an FCSQ relationship with common diseases. All the above work provides objective verification that various human activities are affected by FCSQ and has given a theoretical foundation for the application of FCSQ theory in treating diseases in clinical practice. In the treatment of epidemic cerebrospinal meningitis and respiratory syndrome in China in the 1950s and 2003, respectively, the effects of TCM treatments guided by FCSQ were proven beneficial. The FCSQ has been the subject of numerous publications within the last few years. Nevertheless, the FCSQ theory is highly arguable in TCM, and many doubts have been cast since its appearance in views. Several researchers disagreed with the theoretical guidance of FCSQ. For example, during the Ming Dynasty period, Xiyong

Miu wrote a chapter entitled "On the Falseness of FCSQ" in his book Commentary on Shen Nong's Classic of Materia Medica. FCSQ theory, as later defined, proved ineffective in treatment since there is no reference to such a theory in the works of Zhongjing Zhang, Tuo Hua, Shuhe Wang, and other scholars. Evidence has been given to deny the importance of FCSQ theory in relation to Traditional Chinese Medicine by Xiyong Miu. Within the field of TCM itself, there were two main controversies regarding FCSQ during the Republic of China from 1911 to 1949, where stances of denial or abolishment were majorities. One of the representatives who held this kind of stance, Yuanlei Lu, published an article entitled "Overthrowing FCSQ fundamentally" in 1934, trying to express that there is no reason for the existence of the FCSQ theory. FCSQ literature proliferates now, but in Clinical practice, the uses of FCSQ in relation to traditional Chinese medicine have not been given significant attention. Do the Five Circuits and the six Qi theory improve the efficacy of treatments? This question cannot be answered simply by means of extrapolation by just reviewing classical literature, reports and theoretical derivations. Therefore, systematic collection and evaluation of RCTs reporting on Five Circuits and Six Qi theories in the treatment of disorders to furnish evidence-based medicine about this controversial issue in TCM (Tang et al., 2018).

### FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

TCM, as the saying goes, is 'Prevention first, then cure.' Prevention methods, such as physical fitness and dietary therapy, are very effective in preventing diseases. Conceptual attention towards preventing diseases is gaining increasing attention (Pan et al., 2020). In addition, TCM is combined with Western medicine to treat some complex diseases that Western medicine alone could not handle (Luo et al., 2021; Qi et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016; Zheng et al., 2015). There is a growing need for evaluation on the quality, safety, and effectiveness of Chinese medicinal materials. Further research in TCM should aim at developing models and parameters of efficacy assessment that better integrate TCM into modern medicine for disease prevention and treatment. The Five-Element Theory is a holistic aspect of TCM, providing insight into the intricate relationships within the human body and how it relates to the external environment, thereby aiding in diagnosis and treatment. It influences diagnosis and treatment, and the understanding of man and his functioning.

### CONCLUSION

TCM insists on the integration of body, mind, and spirit to achieve holistic health. The dominant application of the Five-Element Theory is associated with the understanding of relationships between human body parts themselves and their interaction with the environment. Therefore, integrating TCM

with modern medicine in developing evidence-based assessments will enhance quality, safety, and efficacy for traditional Chinese medicinal materials in disease prevention and treatment.

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