

Five Element Concordances (Wu Xing)

This paper provides six tables which list many of the diverse and heterogeneous structures, functions, objects, behaviours, qualities, relationships and phenomena which make up the Concordances applicable in traditional Chinese medicine. Each concordance is associated with one of the Five Elements - Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water.

The presentation here gives a somewhat different approach to the norm in that six categories are created, each reflecting a common theme. These categories are general groupings that provide a broad sense of organisation. To a large extent they are natural groupings, but they are not mutually exclusive, as several concordances may reasonably be included in more than one group.

Introduction to the Concordances

Kaptchuk (1983, p.343-5) notes that "the theory of (the Five) Phases [Five Elements] is a system of correspondences and patterns that subsume events and things, especially in relationship to their dynamics.....each Phase [Element] is an emblem that denotes a category of related functions and qualities."

For Needham and Lu (1980, p. 141) ... "[The Wu Xing is] ... essentially an apparatus of cycles the components of each of which coincided or resonated with those of the others from time to time, producing nodal moments which were felt to be significant of real causation. Several basic ideas were involved in this... One was that no life, no growth, nor disease, nor recovery, could come about if the cooperation of ... heavenly and earthly forces was lacking. The celestial and terrestrial had to combine their powers.

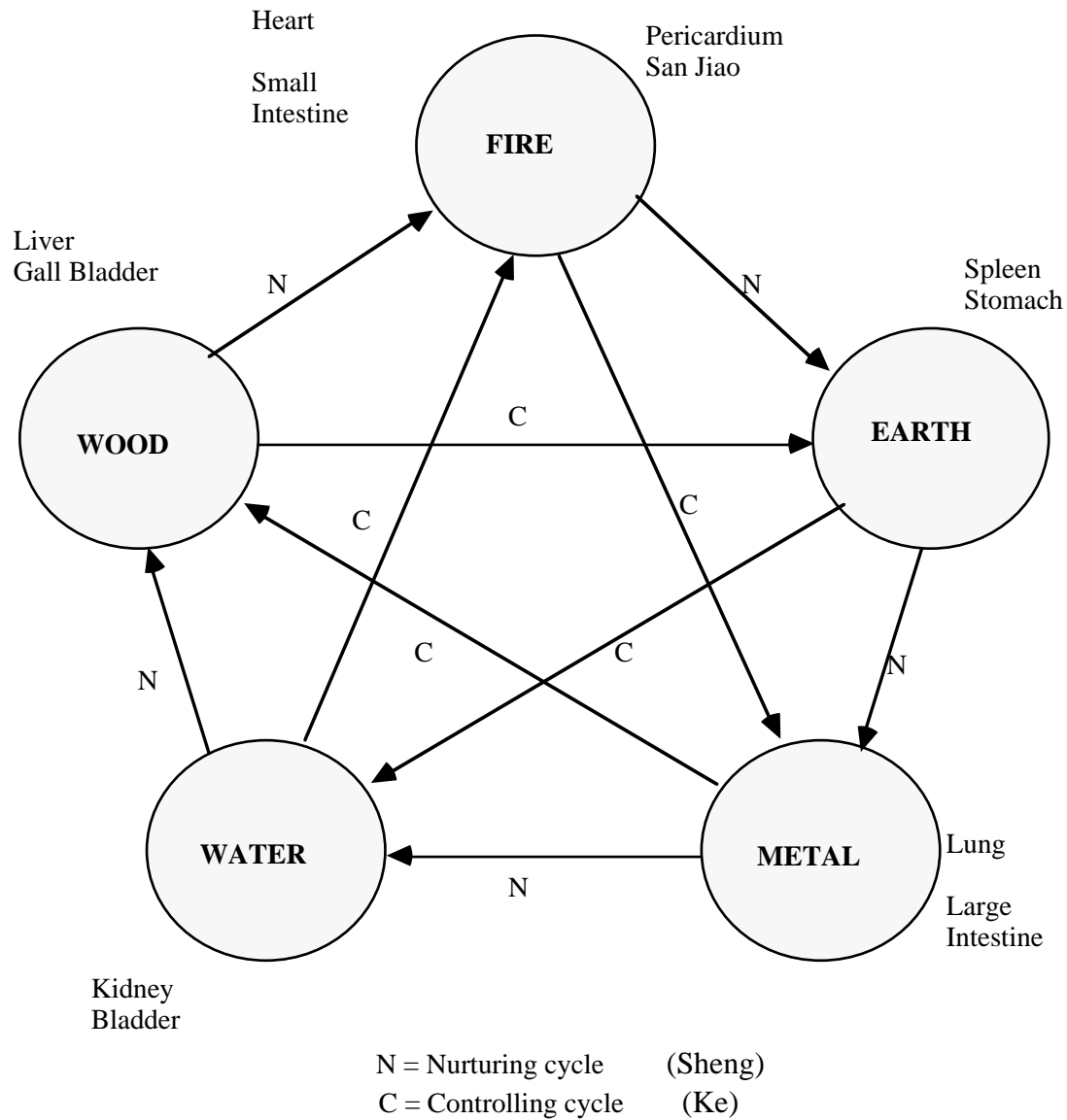
"Another idea was that the affairs of health and sickness proceeded according to a number of subtle rhythms, which, for effective intervention, had to be caught at the right times and moments.

"Then again there was the conviction that man was not isolated from Nature, indeed mirrored in himself the whole, so that cyclical astronomical, meteorological, climatic and epidemiological factors mattered enormously for physiological and pathological processes; and there were conclusions to be drawn, and medical prognostications made, from situations when the weather proved inappropriate to the season.

"The basic law of change underlying the ... (Wu Xing) ... was constituted by the age-old sexagesimal cycle of the ten 'celestial stems' ... and the twelve 'terrestrial branches' ..., two sets of time-keeping characters, the original meanings of which were uncertain already in antiquity."

In a quite direct sense, each concordance helps define the parameters and general attributes of an Element, particularly at the level of focus here - of physiology, disharmony, diagnosis, and behaviour. So the concordances as a group help define the broad scope of an Element, including the general characteristics of its attributes and nature.

There is an essential harmony within each Element that individual concordances either contribute to, or are consistent with. Hence they are in concordance with each other - within their respective Element or Phase. Kaptchuk (p.345) also notes that "in time, the five generic categories [ie. Five Elements], were used to classify many ... perceptions, ... and ultimately everything in the universe."



FIVE ELEMENT RELATIONSHIPS

So the Five Elements and the concordances are intended to provide a sense of order in the midst of apparent chaos. Despite what may appear to be the random nature of the items and phenomena included, they are part of man's continuing quest to make sense of his environment and his place in it.

They should not be thought of as spurious connections. The particular items grouped within each Element have been refined over the centuries to provide a basic characterising framework. Each grouping sketches for an Element the bare bones of its identity and so provides a view of its essential content or meaning.

Thus the concordances provide a thumbnail sketch of an Element, and in doing so capture the intrinsic harmony, or resonance, of its core nature and character.

Accordingly the concordances may be used as a viable shorthand which provide preliminary access to many aspects of TCM theory.

This is true whether their use be the diagnosis and treatment of an individual in the clinic, or whether it is the overall structure of theory which is being addressed.

The concordances in the first five of these groups (A - E) are commonly used in TCM in both clinical situations and in theoretical discussions. The remaining group, Other concordances (F), are rarely used in a medical situation.

The Flavour and Food concordances (E) are of most relevance where dietary advice is important, although the flavours and their various attributes may figure generally in diagnosis, and in therapeutic advice to the patient.

General Concordances

The concordances in this group identify two important general relationships between the Five Elements; the nurturing (Sheng) and controlling (Ke) cycles (see diagram - Five Element Relationships). They also give some sense of the relationship of man to his external environment, particularly regarding seasons, climate, and crop development cycles in agrarian communities. Colour, smell and direction add further information to man's place in the broader world.

From the TCM viewpoint a man's place in his general environment is very important (e.g. physical, family, employment, social and political) as it is thought that these have a significant impact on the wellbeing and general health of the individual.

Indeed it is the impact on the individual of these environmental phenomena that is frequently of key importance from the TCM clinical viewpoint. So it is the manner in which these external circumstances are "internalised", that is, an individual's response to such external stress, which very often requires therapeutic focus.

General Concordances

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Nurtures	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water	Wood
Controlled by	Metal	Water	Wood	Fire	Earth
YinYang	becoming Yang	utmost Yang	Central	becoming Yin	utmost Yin
Energy	Expanding	Yang	Neutral	Contracting	Yin
Colour	Green (Bluegreen), Cyanic	Red, Scarlet	Yellow	White	Black (Blueblack)
Direction	East	South	Centre, Middle	West	North
Season	Spring	Summer	Late Summer, between Seasons	Autumn	Winter
Perverse climate	Wind	Heat, Fire	Damp, Humidity	Dryness	Cold
Development	Birth, Germination	Growth	Transformation, Maturity	Harvest, Reaping, Withdrawal	Storage, Dormancy, Latency
Smell	Rancid, Goatish, of Urine, sour Perspiration	Scorched, Burning	Fragrant, Aromatic, Perfumed	Rotten, Rank, (raw meat, raw fish)	Putrid, Rotten
Flavour, Taste	Sour (vinegar)	Bitter (lemon)	Sweet (honey), Bland	Pungent, Hot, (ginger), Acrid, Heavily Spiced	Salty
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water

Organ Related Concordances

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Yin Organ	Liver	Heart, Pericardium	Spleen	Lung	Kidney
Yang Organ	Gall Bladder	Small Intestine, San Jiao	Stomach	Large Intestine	Bladder
General Function	Equalizing Reservoir	Basis of Life, Seat / Store of Configurative Force (Shen)	Structive Energy, Foundation of Acquired Constitution	Individual Specific Structive Energy	Store / Seat of Structive Potential
Specific Function	Store/ Equalizing Reservoir of Blood	Regulator of Blood Vessels (Pulses)	Storage, Distribution	Basis of Qi, Outer Defenses	Foundation of inborn Constitution
Yin Function	Designs, Strategies	Orientating Influence, Joy and Pleasure	Temporary Depot	Rhythmic Order	Potential of Force
Yang Function	Central Straightness, Initiatives, Decisions	Depository / Transformer of bulk of Food, Water Communications	Intermediate Depository Distributor, Equalizing Reservoir for Energies from Food	Assimilator / Intermediate Depository of Food	Convening Active and Structive Fluids
Orifice, Sense Organ	Eyes	Tongue, Outer Ear (pinna)	Mouth, Lips	Nose	Ear, Lower Orifices
Expands into	Nails	Complexion	Lips	Body hair	Scalp hair
Tissue Nourished	Tendons, Ligaments, Fascia, Sinews (connective tissue)	Blood Vessels (pulse, arteries)	Flesh, Fat, Muscles, Articulations	Skin, Body hair	Bones, Marrow
Fluids	Tears	Sweat	Lymph, Saliva, Synovial Fluid	Mucus	Urine, Spittle
Sense	Sight	Speech	Taste, Touch	Smell	Hearing (Auditory)
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water

Organ Related Concordances

The concordances in this group provide an introduction to the major physiological relationships which are encompassed within each of the Five Elements. The Organs in particular are key components of TCM physiology. They provide a basic framework on which much of the remainder of TCM theory rests.

The philosophy which permeates all Chinese thought is also apparent - the basic identification of all things as either Yin or Yang. Each Element embraces Organs which are classified as either Yin or Yang.

Physiological fluids are related to the Elements, as are the tissues which are nourished by the energy of a particular Element, or which that energy is thought to expand into.

Bodily orifices are also identified, as are sensations which are either received from the world or contributed to it.

As a group these concordances provide a very useful entrée to the TCM physiological picture. It is true however that to fully appreciate the depth of knowledge and understanding encapsulated by these single words or phrases, and their inter-relationships, it is necessary to have a considerable background in either the medicine itself or in TCM theory.

To the initiated, each of these concordances conjures up a world of implications in terms of theory and/or clinical associations. Hence each is a pithy aphoristic key which unlocks a particular group of physiological relationships. Their immediate usefulness lies in this role and hence they are an aid memoir as well as a summary.

Further it should be noted that attempts to make direct comparisons of the organs across paradigms (TCM and WMB) are not only too simplistic to be productive or taken seriously, but are also quite inappropriate, as such approaches do not allow for the inherent complexity of the TCM view. (Refer to various papers on this and other pages of this web site).

Indeed the Organs in TCM may be characterised as 'energetic Orbs' (Porkert, 1974) which may or may not include the complete western knowledge of the structure and function of a similarly named entity. They frequently include considerably more.

Disharmony/ Diagnosis Related Concordances

The concordances of this group provide only the briefest introduction to the world of TCM disharmonies and diagnosis.

TCM has a detailed and centuries old body of knowledge which deals with variations from normal physiological function (Worsley, 1990; Ross, 1985; O'Connor and Bensky, 1981; Wiseman et al., 1985). These are frequently referred to as 'patterns of Disharmony' or 'Syndromes', for that is exactly how such variations are perceived.

The word pathology is not a term which is preferred in TCM teachings, although it is generally adequate. This is largely because a 'pattern of Disharmony' or 'Syndrome' more accurately reflects the TCM conception of the circumstances of illness - as a progression in a process of disease.

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Diseases	Muscles, Tendons	Blood Vessels (pulse)	Flesh, Muscles	Skin, Hair	Bones
Sickness location	Nervous system, Nervous diseases	the Zang (5 Viscera)	Root of the Tongue	Within the back (Lungs)	Within the cavities
Strained by	over use of eyes	over walking	over sitting	over lying down	over standing
Pulse quality	Taut, Excited, Restless	Fine Hammer (slippery)	Irregular	Light and Feathery	Deep and Stone-like
Qi Manifestation	Mild rising warmth	Heat, (Damp)Heat	Neutral	Cooling	Cold
Colour	Green (Bluegreen) Cyanic	Red	Yellow	White	Black (Blueblack)
Season	Spring	Summer	Late Summer, between Seasons	Autumn	Winter
Perverse climate	Wind	Heat, Fire	Damp, Humidity	Dryness	Cold
Development	Birth, Germination	Growth	Transformation, Maturity	Harvest, Reaping, Withdrawal	Storage, Dormancy, Latency
Smell	Rancid, Goatish, of Urine, sour Perspiration	Scorched, Burning	Fragrant, Aromatic, Perfumed	Rotten, Rank, (raw meat, raw fish)	Putrid, Rotten
Flavour, Taste	Sour (vinegar)	Bitter (lemon)	Sweet (honey), Bland	Pungent, Hot, (ginger), Acrid, Heavily Spiced	Salty
Power of Flavour	Astringent, Gathering	Drying, Strengthening	Harmonizes, Retards	Dispersing	Softening
Excess Flavour	Toughens the Flesh	Withers the Skin	Aches in the Bones/ Joints	Knots the Muscles	Hardens the Arteries (Pulse)
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water

Hence it is variation from the normal flow of Qi for any particular Organ, or variation from the harmony of an Organ's normal function, which is of significance when considering a pattern of Disharmony. Recurring or frequently occurring patterns become identified as 'Syndromes'. In this way, such Syndromes contribute to the identification of an organ's normal physiological boundaries, and so help to define the parameters of its normal function.

In concert with this approach of identifying patterns of Disharmony, the focus of TCM treatment regimes is towards re-establishing the inherent harmony of an Organ's normal functional patterns, that is, re-establishing health. And once the harmony of a particular Organ has been re-established, the harmony of the whole patient is pursued. All treatment in TCM has this therapeutic focus.

These concordances identify the tissues which are likely to house diseases for each of the Five Elements, as well as indicating common sites of sickness location. Activities which commonly strain the various Organ systems are also identified.

The normal pulse quality and normal manifestation of Qi are both provided to assist in diagnosis. Similar comments to those about pathology can be made regarding diagnosis. But be aware that these concordances offer only the merest introductory glimpse into TCM diagnosis. TCM has a vast body of diagnostic knowledge and experience in its teachings.

Indeed the world of TCM diagnostic procedures and protocols takes years of study and practical experience to adequately come to terms with - pulse and tongue diagnosis are obvious examples. This is surely true of all medical systems. But because diagnosis essentially derives from a set of practical skills (competency), albeit based on much learning, it is no real surprise that these are not, and cannot be, adequately or comprehensively tabulated for ready access in lists and groups such as these.

Function/ Behaviour Related Concordances

This group is rather different from the others because it is here that variations in behaviour are distinguished - as distinct from focusing purely on physiology or external phenomena. These behavioural concordances are also commonly used in diagnosing patterns of Disharmony. They have been separated here as a group to emphasis that TCM encompasses within its conceptual boundaries consistently identifiable behaviour patterns.

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
General Function	Equalizing Reservoir	Basis of Life, Seat / Store of Configurative Force (Shen)	Structive Energy, Foundation of Acquired Constitution	Individual Specific Structive Energiy	Store, Seat of Structive Potential
Specific Function	Store / Equalizing Reservoir of Blood	Regulator of Blood Vessels (Pulses)	Storage, Distribution	Basis of Qi, Outer Defenses	Foundation of inborn Constitution

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Yin Function	Designs, Strategies	Orientating Influence, Joy and Pleasure	Temporary Depot	Rhythmic Order	Potentiation of Force
Yang Function	Central Straightness, Initiatives, Decisions Communications	Depository / Transformer of bulk of Food, Water	Intermediate Depository Distributor, Equalizing Reservoir for Energies from Food	Assimilator / Intermediate Depository of Food	Convening Active and Structutive Fluids
Attribute	Planning (Liver), Decision making (Gall Bladder)	Intelligence, Emotional Control, Cognitive, Communication, Assimilation of new Ideas	Ideas, Memory, Knowledge, Recognition	Evaluation, Judgement, Discrimination	Will Power, Motivation
Virtues	Benevolence	Wisdom	Faith	Righteousness	Decorum
Modes of Behaviour	Wrenching, Pulling	Sorrowful Demeanor	Retching	Coughing	Trembling
Emotions	Anger, Rage, Wrath, Irritability, Short Temper	Joy, Happiness, Pleasure	Sympathy, Empathy, Pensiveness, Cogitation, Meditation, Preoccupation, Concern	Grief, Anxiety, Sadness, Melancholy, Sorrow	Fear, Fright
Human Sounds	Shouting, Screaming	Laughing, Excess Speech, Giggling	Singing	Weeping, Crying	Groaning, Moaning, Yawning, Sighing
Temperament	Depression, Frustration, Hopelessness	Up and Down, Extreme Variations	Obsession	Anguish	Fear, Phobias
Spirit	H'un (Soul)	Shen (Divine spirit)	I (Ideas, Houses Memory)	Po (Instinct, Animal spirit)	Chen (Will)
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water

It is a notable quality of this group that a broad spectrum of life's experiences is included. This underlines the fact that TCM is an holistic medicine, and that the microcosm - man - cannot be separated from his broader environment - the macrocosm. He is an essential part of it, including both his personal responses to his world and his activity within it - his behaviour.

Included in this group are attributes of mind such as planning and decision making, or evaluation and judgement. Particular modes of behaviour are also identified, as are qualities of emotional expression such as anger, joy, fear, etc.

The sounds associated with some types of self expression are allocated to an element - such as laughing, weeping or moaning and groaning - as are expressions of temperament e.g. obsession.

Even different qualities of spiritual expression are identified with each of the Five Elements, e.g. instinct and animal spirit are associated with the Metal Element and consequently are related in some way to the respiratory system.

Flavour and Food Concordances

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Flavour, Taste	Sour (vinegar)	Bitter (lemon)	Sweet (honey), Bland	Pungent, Hot, (ginger), Acrid, Heavily Spiced	Salty
Power of Flavour	Astringent, Gathering	Drying, Strengthening	Harmonizes, Retards	Dispersing	Softening
Proper food for	Heart	Lungs	Liver	Kidney	Spleen
Excess Flavour	Toughens the Flesh	Withers the Skin	Aches in the Bones / Joints	Knots the Muscles	Hardens the Arteries (Pulse)
Flavour counteracts	Sweet	Pungent	Salty	Sour	Bitter
Counter-acted by	Pungent	Salty	Sour	Bitter	Sweet
Beneficial cereal	Wheat	Glutinous Millet	Rye, Panicked Millet	Rice	Beans
Beneficial meat	Chicken	Mutton	Beef	Horse	Pork
Beneficial fruit	Plums (sour)	Apricots	Dates	Peaches	Chestnuts
Beneficial vegetable	Leeks	Shallots	Mallows, Sweet Potato	Onions	Coarse greens
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water

Other Concordances

Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Number	Eight (8)	Seven (7)	Five (5)	Nine (9)	Six (6)
Symbol, Planet	Jupiter (year star)	Mars (planet of war)	Saturn	Venus (evening star)	Mercury (morning star)
Musical note	Jiao (Me)	Zheng (Far)	Gong (Doh)	Shang (Re)	Yu (So)
Musical Instrument	Lute	36 Reed Mouth Organ	Drum	Resonant Stones	25 Stringed Lute
Chinese year	months 1 & 2	months 9 & 10	months 3 & 4	months 7 & 8	months 10 & 11
Related animals	Hairy coated	Plumed	Naked	Shelled	Scaly
Divine Rulers	T'ai Hao	Yen Ti	Huang Di	Shao Hao	Chuan Hsu
Attendant Spirits	Kou Mang	Chu Yung	Hou T'u	Ju Shou	Hsuan Ming
Sacrifices	inner door	hearth	inner court	outer court	well
Stems	chia/i	ping/ting	mou/chi	keng/hsin	jen/kuei
Beasts of the Directions	Green Dragon	Scarlet Bird	Yellow Dragon	White Tiger	Black Tortoise
Officers	Minister of Agriculture	Minister of War	Minister of Works	Minister of Interior	Minister of Justice
Element	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water