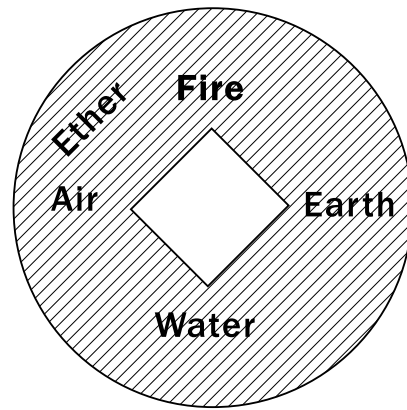


While earth, air, fire, and water were able to account fully for naturally occurring phenomena, philosophers and poets began to wonder about the space in which these occurrences took place. It would not be long before a new element appeared on the scene.

In a text commonly attributed to the Pythagorean Philolaus (470-385 BCE), it is said that "The bodies of the sphere are five: the fire in the sphere, and the water, and earth and air and fifth the vehicle (or envelope) of the sphere."⁵ The envelope was known as Ether. Here one immediately notes that word the Greeks used to describe Ether (envelope), appears in the Chinese word for the Pericardium, the Heart-Envelope.



In their insistence on the existence of an additional element which envelops the others, the Pythagoreans were not alone; in the 4th century Aristotle (*De Caelo* book I) lists five elements and assigns Ether to the outer circumference of the spherical universe.⁶

It is fascinating to note that by 4th century BCE Ether was redefined from its poetic meaning of 'lighting the sky to the quasi-philosophical meaning of 'celestial fire.'⁷ This of course is quite odd considering that the Chinese had decided to define that element which represented the enveloping Heavens as 'ministerial fire.' In another uncanny coincidence, according to one historian, Empedocles made use of the term Ether in the 5th century BC, and here 'aither seems in his terminology to stand not for ether but for fire.'⁸

Meanwhile, in India the fakirs were coming up with their own solution to the problem...

In the 'earliest exposition of ancient Indian atomism...the Buddha's contemporary Ajita Kesakambala asserts four elements, then lists them as earth, water, fire, and air - then adds the fifth element, akasa, evidently without regarding it as an element, but as the space within which the elements exist.'⁹ Interesting solution: the Indian scientists add the fifth element, Ether, 'without regarding it as an element.'

But the Aryans in their need for clarity would not stop there in their attempt to reconcile the elements with their 'sphere' or 'envelope.' In the *Aitareya Upanishad* the akasa (Ether) was formally admitted to the roster of elements without preconditions and the muddled whispers of its not *really* belonging:

And these five great elements (mahabhutani), namely earth, air, ether, water, light (fire).¹⁰

The Chinese were working hard to resolve the same dilemma and, for some, they would ultimately take a similar solution as Ajita. The enveloping element would 'be and not to be.' Shadows of its existence could be seen flitting across the diagnostic landscape of both classical medicine and cosmology like will-o-the-wisps which leave the would-be observer wondering if he was having an authentic vision or merely a vague, intuitive insight.

Yes, there is a sixth element known as Ministerial Fire. At the same time there remains an assertion that there really are only five elements, as that 'other element' is just an appendage to Fire. We could say that they, like Ajita, are adding an element 'without regarding it as an element.'

The most oft mentioned quality which sets the Pericardium and Triple Burner apart from the others has been their 'formlessness' and their 'enveloping' nature. They are both enclosures rather than enclosed, enveloping rather than enveloped. It was said that 'the Triple Burner externally encloses all the body's depots and palaces.'¹¹ As for the Pericardium, its Chinese name, *xin bao*, means quite literally 'heart envelope.'

It is because of their unique quality of enclosing rather than being enclosed that the Pericardium and Triple Burner have been the cause of such confusion throughout the centuries. When we look at Heaven (consciousness), the sixth coordinate to which this inimitable duo belongs, we see that it maintains the same properties. Take for example the passage mentioned above from the Huainanzi:

Though you look for it, you will never see its form;
 Though you listen for it, you will never hear its sound;
 Though you hold it, you will never feel its contours.
 It is a formlessness from which forms are created...
 Because the entire world is encircled by it,
 Names and realities converge.¹²

One almost wonders whether this passage refers to Heaven or the Pericardium itself. This image of Heaven as an encompassing formlessness is reinforced in the text found at the same Mawangdui grave sites as the texts which claimed only eleven meridians,

The Emperor stated, ‘what is Heaven’s form?’
 Yi Yin replied, ‘Heaven’s form has no [text illegible]...it covers over and gives birth to the myriad phenomena; it gives birth to thing but it is not itself a thing. Everything is named by it, but it cannot make two names for something. This is the form of Heaven.’¹³

Like Heaven, the Pericardium, ‘covers over...but is not itself a thing.’ The ancient Chinese, like Ajita in India and the Pythagoreans in Greece, would clearly indicate that there was indeed a sphere in which the early elements ‘live and move and have their being’. It was called Ether or Heaven.



The question must now be asked as to why all the hubbub. What does it really matter whether we ‘add’ Ether as an element or take the conservative tack of grouping Pericardium and Triple Burner into a subset of Fire?

A minor reason for this shift is to set the record straight by highlighting the fact that the element which corresponds to these organs is truly a distinct entity. It is as distinct from Imperial Fire as it is from Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. Insisting upon the Pericardium’s element as being an ‘appendage’ of Fire only furthers the obvious theoretical (as well as clinical) incongruence which began way back in the Mawangdui texts. The need to

stress the independence and uniqueness of the Ministerial Fire should be sufficient motive for such an ideological shift.

The reason we have chosen Ether as the name for the 6th element is hopefully clear by now. It is the element which represents the sixth coordinate of Heaven. Having garnered a position on the elemental roster in several cultures, including Greek and Indian, Ether is common nomenclature for the heavenly spheres and has been used to describe the space which encompasses the other elements. Continuing to call it Ministerial Fire only furthers the ambiguousness of its true nature. The nature of Ether, enveloping physical reality rather than constituting it, has throughout history been considered tenuous cause for its omission from the elemental roster, yet the absurd inconsistencies involved in denying its elemental status make continuing the charade counterproductive.

These considerations aside, the primary reason for the individuation of Ether as its own distinct element has to do with clinical implications of a six-element system versus a pentagonal one. As we shall see in the next section, the well-known pentagonal generative dance of the elements (Earth generates Metal, Metal generates Water, etc.) actually had a precursor which was more in line with a six-element model. A return to the even pairing of a six-element system allows us to use this ancient interplay between elements which is motored by a yin/yang balance of polarities. The clinical results of applying this more ancient mode of interaction are truly miraculous.

PART II

AND NOW THEY INTERACT

*A Western scientist might ask (as a few Chinese writers did):
'Are there five or six basic functional systems in the organism?'
A proponent of the pattern approach characteristic of traditional
Chinese medicine might have answered: 'It depends! Five if you wish
to apply the Five Phases pattern, and six if you prefer to apply the
yinyang pattern.'*

Paul Unschuld

INTRODUCTION

In the present section we will examine the exciting ways Su Wen and its predecessors envisioned inter-elemental relations. The elements themselves could be considered as parts of a magical motor used in rituals and, most importantly for us, the medical field which includes acupuncture. But how does the motor work to bring about changes? The answer to that of course would depend on what the motor consists of. Are there five elements or are there six? This discrepancy as to the true make-up of the cosmological motor would give rise to two very different systems of elemental interaction.

In Chapter 1 we examine the two different models of elemental interaction which battled it out for predominance in ancient China. Those who subscribed to a five-element model would avidly support a phasal approach which includes the well-known generating and controlling cycles. In contrast, proponents of a six-element structure would support an axial model which functioned on three axes of yin/yang polarities. This model can also be called the directional model as it is based on a six-coordinate structure. Each paradigm would imply vastly different ideas as to how acupuncture should be practiced.

In the next chapter, 'Tsou Yen and His Magic Machine,' we meet the ancient celebrity Tsou Yen, whose phasal model was all the rage amongst the rulers in ancient China. Here we get a close-up view of that graceful circle dance he choreographed amongst the elements.

In Chapter 3 we rediscover an altogether different system of interaction, the axial model, which was quite at variance with the generative/controlling cycles, so in vogue in ancient China.

Next, in 'Here comes the Shun' we make an adventurous foray into the distant past, examining some of the oldest Chinese literature extant, to find

that this more ancient system of interaction was truly ‘nothing new.’

In the following chapter, ‘Understanding Reality’, we find that this system did not disappear with the passing away of Taoist influence and managed to stay alive in certain Taoist circles, who, despite their cryptic language, give us an unambiguous presentation of the directional model.

Thereafter we travel back to the turning of the 1st millennia to listen in on an unusual conversation between the feisty Qi Bo and the Yellow Emperor. Here Qi Bo himself gets in on the game, bringing this alternative model of elemental interaction into the medical sphere.

The alternative structure of elemental relations which we examine throughout this section battled it out briefly with the phasal system for dominance. As the five-element structure gained ascendancy, this yin/yang based interaction, which required an even number of elements, took to the shadows. For when applying a yin/yang model with contrasting pairs in a field with an uneven number of participants, ‘one element necessarily remains left over, for which there can be no correlate.’²

In many ways the confrontation was over a simple matter of arrangement. Did Earth occupy a central position between the four directions in a six-coordinate model? Or was it just another element occupying an outer position in the circular dance of the elements? Though both of these systems existed prior to the *Su Wen*, this text would be the front line in which they would meet and battle it out for intellectual supremacy. The phasal model would ultimately prevail, while the axial model would sink into relative obscurity, to the extent that for the most part we are unaware that this decisive battle was ever waged.

CHAPTER 1

AND NOW THEY DUEL

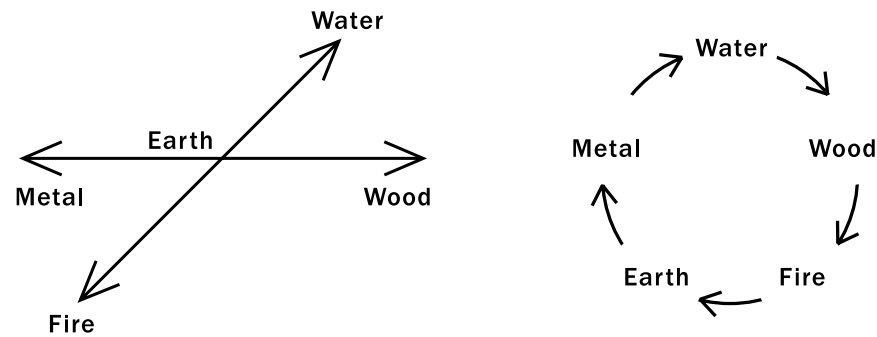
One may suspect that it is the correlation of the numbers with the Four Directions which is most ancient, older than the Five Processes.¹

A.C. Graham

The *Su Wen* was not written overnight, and those who put it together didn’t bake the whole thing up from scratch. As mentioned earlier, many of its constituents were prepped in the preceding centuries. Thus we refer to the ‘editors’ of the *Su Wen* rather than the ‘authors.’ Evidence would suggest they were drawing from a pretty vast assortment of literature. There was no attempt at hiding this fact and several primary texts are mentioned briefly in the work itself.

One of those primary texts was titled ‘Yin Yang’ and seemed to promote a theoretical approach. According to Unschuld, other titles such as ‘Comparison of the Likes’ and ‘The Natural Approach’ were most likely written as part of a movement against giving predominance to theoretical constructs. Still other schools, whose titles such as ‘Classic on the [Movement in the] Vessels,’ and ‘Essentials of the Vessel [Movement]’ stressed pulse diagnosis. These schools were not always in strict competition, but at times would serve to mutually enhance the clinical efficacy of one another. Others, however, would have been deeply antagonistic to one another.²

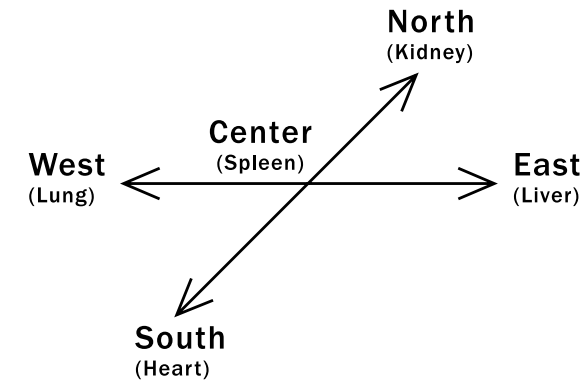
Two schools in clear competition at the time of the *Su Wen*’s compilation were those representing the phasal and axial models. The directional, or axial, model was based upon the four directions with Earth occupying the center. The phasal model, on the other hand, pictured the earth located in the outer circle like any other element.



It may seem like such a nitpicky cat fight that one just might decide to give this argument a pass. What does it really matter if earth sits in the center or dances in an outer loop, joining hands with the other elements as equals? As we shall see, the resolution of this problem has enormous implications; for the participants in this seemingly arcane scuffle are in truth waging battle over how we are to view elemental interactions. As we are about to see, things could get downright dirty in this ancient conflict.

The confrontation begins in Chapter 4 of the *Su Wen*, at the first mention of a pentagonal system of correspondence. Interestingly, the contents provided to form this structure (which would only later take on the name of elements) is that of the four directions plus center. There is no mention here of a circular paradigm which would accommodate the elements as phases.

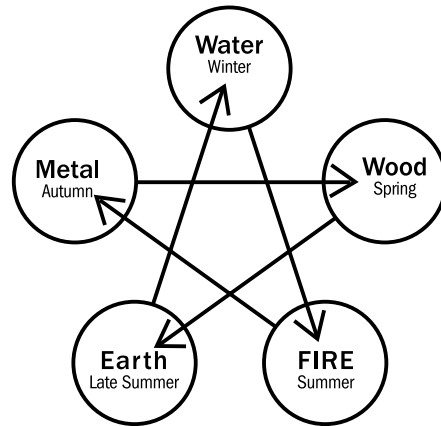
The East wind is generated in spring;
[it causes] a disease in the liver....
The South wind is generated in summer;
[it causes] a disease in the heart....
The West wind is generated in autumn;
[it causes] a disease in the lung....
The North wind is generated in winter;
[it causes] a disease in the kidneys....
The center is the soil.
The diseases are in the spleen.³



It would appear that the directional paradigm, with Earth at the center of things, was to have its day from the outset. The five directions are initially given with their corresponding organs without any mention or implication of any relationships based on phases. Or was there? The answer to that depends on whether you refer to the early *Su Wen* text as composed in the Warring States/Early Han periods or the text as handed down in later additions.

It seems that in its initial writing, this chapter presented a clear portrait advocating a directional structure for the elements, with Earth occupying a central position with two axes (North/South and East/West) comprising the 4 directions. And that is the way it might have remained were it not for the fact that a later (and rather mischievous) editor decided to throw some of his own ingredients into the pot. According to the Japanese commentator Tanba, some roguish editor inserted a description of the phasal model via Tsou Yen's dominating cycle into the passage immediately preceding the presentation of a directional model.⁴

Spring (Wood) dominates late summer (Earth),
Late summer (Earth) dominates winter (Water),
Winter (Water) dominates summer (Fire),
Summer (Fire) dominates autumn (Metal) and
Autumn (Metal) dominates spring (Wood).⁵



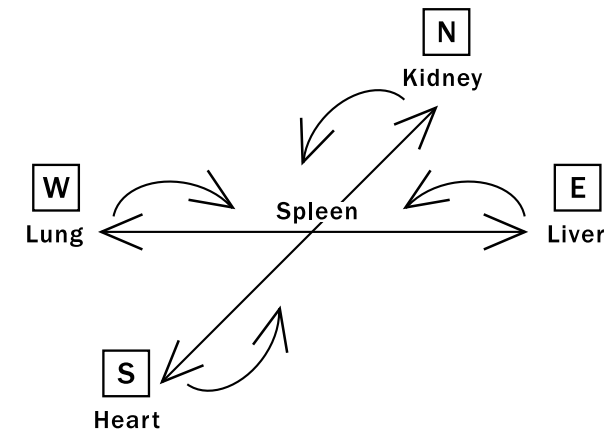
This quote has been smuggled in as if it were an integral part of the text; most translations present this passage as if it had been there all along. The original version of this chapter clearly promotes a directional structure in which Earth occupies the center position and has not been assigned a season, while the sly insertion of a contrary model works nicely to cast doubt on that arrangement.

A later passage would confirm Earth's peculiarity, making it clear that Earth does not have a specific corresponding season, and was to occupy a central position:

Huang Di: The spleen does not rule [a specific] season;
How is that?
Qi Bo: The spleen, that is the soil.
It governs the center.
Throughout the four seasons it tends the four depots...
It cannot rule an [entire] season by itself.⁶

The centrality of Earth (soil) would be stressed again and again throughout the *Su Wen*. In another passage Qi Bo is heard uttering to the Yellow Emperor:

Sir, you say that the spleen is a solitary depot;
It is the center, [i.e.] soil, from which [qi] is poured in the four sides.⁷



While the folks at the 'directional school' were constantly insisting on the centrality of Earth, it is clear that a different current was hard at work to undermine their influence. The war was on. The posthumously inserted passage quoted earlier reverses this insistence on the directional model and promotes a phasal view of the elements by assigning Earth a season (late-summer), placing it in the circle dance as an equal between Fire and Metal. The effect is of course a somewhat disjointed read, as well as a sense of incongruence as if lines from two separate symphonies were being played simultaneously. The fact is they were.

Unschuld says that it is one of the 'characteristic traits of the history of ideas in Chinese medicine' that 'whenever antagonistic sub-paradigms emerged within one of the major paradigms, the resulting contradictions appear to have been solved only rarely, if ever, in a manner familiar to the historian of medicine and science in the West.' Rather there was 'a continual tendency toward a syncretism of all ideas that exist (within accepted limits)⁸ The case of the two competing elemental models was no exception to this tendency. The syncretism mentioned above has been a valuable aspect of Chinese medicine and has allowed several valuable paradigms to coexist, much like our physics today. But what if we were for a brief moment to separate the two opposing models of reality, abandoning the contrived philosophical maneuvering it took to hold them together? Thus we can distinguish the tendencies which each has contributed to oriental medicine.

Let's first take a look at the implications which a phasal model holds for elemental interactions.