

After 20 years of lecturing TCM in the West, practitioners and students have often asked me about some difficult and knotty questions concerning TCM theory and acupuncture. Due to insufficient information on TCM theory and some misunderstanding in translations, many issues of acupuncture and TCM theory remain unclear.

In this series of columns, I will explain 81 difficult questions by using the classical texts of TCM and acupuncture to answer these questions to enhance the level of TCM theory of those who desire to explore the treasure of wisdom of Traditional Chinese Medicine.



Question 6: What is the difference between Wǔ Xíng – the Five Motions, and Wǔ Cǎi – the Five Elements?

Wǔ Xíng (五行) as ‘Five Element’ theory has been taught in the west from the beginning of TCM education as part of the fundamental TCM theory. However, due to various reasons, the teachings of the concepts and the mechanisms of Wǔ Xíng still remains unclear and somewhat confusing.

When I ask students to explain the generating and controlling relationship of Wǔ Xíng, they often give answers like: “Wood can make fire; the ash of the fire creates earth; earth contains mines that have metal; metal can make a well to find water”, or “a metal mirror has water on it in the morning.” An example of the controlling relationship is, “A metal knife can cut through wood.”

These explanations are from a mechanical point of view and are not correct according to the root of TCM – the TCM classics.

The ancient dictionary *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* describes ‘Xíng’ as ‘a man stepping or walking’. This indicates a movement, not a solid unmovable element.

The original concepts of Wǔ Xíng describe the heavenly qì and the changing of the seasons. Li Shu states that Huáng Dì studied the calendar of heaven and established the Wǔ Xíng system to understand the information of the universe.

The *Li Ji-Yue Ji* defines this as Wǔ Cháng (五常) or the Five Universal Laws. Therefore, in many classical texts Wǔ Xíng is also named Wǔ Qì (五气 five qì), Wǔ Shí (五时 five seasons), or Wǔ Yùn (五运 five motions).

This is also mentioned in Chapter 66 *Tiān Yuán Jì Dà Lùn* and 67 *Wǔ Yùn Xíng Dà Lùn* of the *Huáng Dì Néi Jīng Sù Wèn*. So, Wǔ Xíng should be translated as ‘Five Phases or Motions’. Not as ‘Five Elements’.

Until the period of the work *Shang Shu-Hong Fan* the nature and characteristics of the ‘five elements’ wood, fire, earth, metal and water were used from a material point of view. These five elements are named ‘Wǔ Cǎi’.

As the *Gao Li Shi-Wu Xing Zhi* states: “... there is Wǔ Xíng in Heaven and Wǔ Cǎi on Earth.”

After the period of the work *Shang Shu-Hong Fan* most TCM texts use the Wǔ

Xíng to describe the motion of qì according to their characteristics. Such as, wood represents the qì of spring as it expands to all directions like a tree in spring. The branches, leaves and roots grow in all directions. Then, summer comes and continues the movement. It is a new phase of qì motion, and it represents fire. The flowers are blooming, the roots stop growing, and all qì moves upward. After the summer-fire, the yáng qì is saturated, the heavenly qì becomes moderate, and the earth holds the moist (damp). It is the earth-long summer phase. Then, autumn arrives. The heavenly qì starts to astringe and concentrate, and seeds are formed. This is the metal phase. Metal is more concentrated than the soil of the earth. And finally, the heavenly qì starts to move downwards like water. The winter has arrived.

The above description is the generating cycle of the Wǔ Xíng, but not that of the Wǔ Cǎi. The motion of Wǔ Xíng is spontaneously and continuously transforming. In terms of the Wǔ Xíng: if wood is too excessive, then use the astringent quality of metal to control it. Another example, if a wood-type person is extrovert, then we're defining his character or personality. This is according to Wǔ Xíng. However, putting people into categories according to their physical body is Wǔ Cǎi.

The *Nán Jīng* chapter 64 and 65 describe the application of the Wǔ Xíng and the 'five shū' in acupuncture. It defines Jīng-well points as spring-wood and Hé-sea points as winter-water to explain the

motion of the meridian qì from the yáng phase to the yīn phase and from the outside to the inside of the zàng-fǔ. This is the meaning of heaven-man-earth from a holistic point of view.

We can see that the original concept of Wǔ Xíng as Five Motions is formless. It is describing qì. Wǔ Cǎi as Five Elements, on the other hand, are the earthly formed materials. For example, a real piece of metal.

Often, today's TCM education and textbooks confuse the concepts of Wǔ Xíng and Wǔ Cǎi, and use Wǔ Cǎi to explain Wǔ Xíng.

The main difference between Wǔ Xíng and Wǔ Cǎi is that Wǔ Xíng describes the qì motion of the universe and meridians, and Wǔ Cǎi describes the five materials. Therefore, the mechanism of holistic qì motion is misplaced when using Wǔ Cǎi to explain Wǔ Xíng. It narrows the understanding of the pathological mechanisms and the use of Wǔ Xíng in clinical applications.

I would recommend that the original classical concepts of Wǔ Xíng are clarified in western TCM education.

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