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Uses of the Five Elements in East Asia

SPENCER J. PALMER*

Certain themes have great staying power, known for their endurance in time as well as their transmission in space. Thus, with varying degrees of intensity, it has been possible for the ancient world to influence and guide ways of thinking and events down to the present.

In the Western world, it may be said that Greece and Rome have exerted a continuous influence upon art, literature, religion, politics, and education. As an example, there has been a persistence of the idea of imperial power. From Charlemagne to Mussolini (some would bring this up to de Gaulle), despots have sought to engage the impelling image of Rome's ancient glory. Thus Charlemagne and Frederick II Hohenstaufen, with startling deviation from contemporary artistic norms, deliberately portrayed themselves on their coinage as ancient Caesars and Augustuses—which they were not. The works of Frederick, the thirteenth century emperor, German but ruling from Sicily, showed a self-conscious ambition to restore the power of Rome; and Napoleon, who on the coinage of his time was dressed in incongruous toga and wreath, was inspired by the same vision. During the Renaissance, emulation was at times even more slavish—as illustrated by the coins of Galba (A.D. 68) and Francesco I da Carrara, a petty ruler of Padua. Later, when Charles II of England wanted a symbol for "Britannia" he commissioned a design from a coin of Antoninus Pius (A.D. 138-161).

The eagle as a symbol of national pride derives from the Roman standard. It appears on a coin of Trajan, on the seal of the United States of America, and as the emblem of the German Federated Republic. In architecture, there is a witness of ancient themes in such well-known American buildings as Jefferson's Monticello in Virginia and in the Capitol building in Washington.¹ The classical influence upon West-

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¹These motifs are all beautifully illustrated in photographs and paintings in *The Birth of Western Civilization*, ed. Michael Grant (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), pp. 9-25.

ern political doctrines and institutions is generally recognized but the classical contribution in the realm of myth and literature, although lesser known today, has been continuous and widespread. It ranges from the idea of the bull as a symbol of fertility (what Jack Conrad in *The Horn and the Sword* says is the background of the modern Spanish bull-fight) to sophisticated psychological theories such as Narcissism and Oedipus Complex.

In the cultural history of East Asia, where precedent has been the leitmotif, the influence of classical thought has been profound and extensive indeed. I think it is safe to say that its impact upon the traditions of China, Korea, and Japan has even exceeded in comprehensiveness the Greco-Roman impact upon the West, although such an assertion is not really verifiable.

This article will suggest (not circumscribe) the social, religious, political, and historical implications of one classical Chinese theory known as *Wu-hsing*, usually translated as The Five Elements. Upon this theory, in close association with the so-called Yin-Yang theory, the whole scheme of Chinese philosophy is based.

The earliest mention of the Wu-hsing theory, which involves the elements of fire, earth, metal, water and wood as dynamic and interacting agents or powers, is an inscription on a jade sword-handle which may be dated not long after 400 B.C.² The primary locus classicus for this ancient theory, however, is the "Great Plan" section of the *Shu Ching* or the Book of History, a book which later became one of the five Confucian classics. This text contains the record of a speech delivered to King Wu of the Chou dynasty (1122-255 B.C.) by the Viscount of Ch'i, a prince of the Shang dynasty (1766-1154 B.C.) which King Wu conquered at the end of the twelfth century B.C. The viscount had said that when ruin overtook the house of Shang, he would not be the servant of another dynasty. Accordingly he refused to acknowledge the sovereignty of Wu, who had nevertheless made it possible for the learned Ch'i to be delivered from prison and be invested with territory now connected with north Korea, where he reputedly established a dynasty, between the years 1122 B.C. and

²See Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China: History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1956), II, 242.

194 B.C.,³ surrounding the site of present-day P'yongyang. The viscount apparently felt constrained out of courtesy to appear at the court of Chou, when the king took the opportunity to consult with him on the great principles of government. The result was that he communicated the "Great Plan," with its nine divisions.⁴ The first of these was called Wu-hsing, explained as follows:

The five elements: the first is called water, the second fire, the third wood, the fourth metal, the fifth earth. Water is said to soak and descend; fire is said to blaze and ascend; wood is said to curve or be straight; metal is said to obey and change; earth is said to take seeds and give crops. That which soaks and descends produces saltiness; that which blazes and ascends produces bitterness; that which curves or is straight produces sourness; that which obeys and changes produces acidity; that which takes seeds and gives crops produces sweetness.⁵

In this quotation the idea of Wu-hsing is still crude. In speaking of them, its author is obviously still thinking in terms of actual substances instead of abstract forces bearing these names, as they came to be regarded later on.

From this very inconspicuous beginning, the five-elements theory gradually came to be associated with every conceivable category of things in the universe (the tables at the end of this article set these forth). As Joseph Needham has suggested, many of these ramifications were a natural outcome of the basic hypothesis itself. The association of the elements with the seasons was obvious enough. What could have been more unavoidable than to link fire and summer and the south? The colors invited much speculation. Since the cradle of Chinese civilization was the land of yellow loess soil in the upper Yellow River basin (modern Shansi and Shensi), it is quite plausible to suppose that for the center that color imposed itself. Then white in the west would stand for the perpetual snows of the Tibetan massif, with green (or blue) in the east for the fertile plains or the seemingly infinite ocean. Finally, red in the south may have taken its origin from the red soil of Szechuan, the region which lies just south of Shensi and

³In Korean history Ch'i-tzü is known as Kija.

⁴James Legge, *The Chinese Classics: The Shoo King or the Book of Historical Documents* (London: Oxford University Press, 1865), III, 320.

⁵Bernard Karlgren, *The Book of Documents* (Stockholm: The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), p. 30.

Shansi; there are, moreover, large areas of red soil in Yunnan. But several schools of scholars in China have contributed to the vast schema of correspondences between the Five Powers and the phenomena of society, thought, politics, and morality. These have included the so-called astronomical groups, the naturalists, the Yin-Yangists, and the agriculturalists, so that Wu-hsing has become a significant force in the development of astronomy, astrology, the calendar, the key social relationships, geomancy, alchemy, and the Taoist search for the elixir of life.⁶

The wide-ranging ramifications of the five-elements theory are apparent throughout East Asia even today. On the most superficial level, there is a contemporary children's game called "stone" (earth), "scissors" (metal), and "cloth" (wood), by which easy decisions can be reached. Stone wins over scissors, scissors wins over cloth, and cloth wins over stone. This game reputedly started with the Japanese, but the theory behind it is no doubt an adaptation of the five-elements, which were thought of as being mutually friendly or antagonistic to each other as follows:

Water produces Wood but destroys Fire;
 Fire produces Earth but destroys Metal;
 Metal produces Water but destroys Wood;
 Wood produces Fire but destroys Earth;
 Earth produces Metal but destroys Water.

Another indication of the pervasive impact of Wu-hsing in China, Korea, and Japan is found in concepts of time. In these three countries the names for the days of the week are a perpetual reminder of this fact. The word "Sunday" means literally Sun-source-day and Monday means Moon-source-day, representative of the Yin-Yang theory of correlative opposition between light, buoyance, and generation (Yang), and receptiveness and calmness (Yin). The other five days of the week are associated with the theory of Wu-hsing: Tuesday is Fire-source-day; Wednesday is Water-source-day; Thursday is Wood-source-day; Friday is Metal-source-day; and Saturday is Earth-source-day. Not only days of the week, but hours of the

⁶Wu-hsing and Taoist ideas of alchemy, geomancy, and medicine are elaborated in Homes Welch, *The Parting of the Way* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 96-97, 133f.

day, and the years in the cycle of sixty, have been influenced by the five-elements theory.⁷

In Korea, the construction of names for the newly-born is a fascinating art traditionally much influenced by Wu-hsing. In most Korean families all the children of one generation share the same middle character-name, called *sor'im*. Thus of the three characters which usually comprise a person's name (the first being the surname) only one is strictly peculiar to the individual.

The harmony of characters in the names of a well-educated family has a certain beauty of its own. But superstition may enter in. The practice of counting the number of strokes used in writing a name and ensuring that the total is an auspicious number is not often admitted to, even if it is still practiced, but the dreams of the mother or father while the child is still in the womb may be taken into account. Generation or middle names can be chosen on the basis of several theories. Some families base them on the old Chinese Thousand Character Classic or the set of astronomical characters called the Ten Heavenly Stems. By far the most common basis for the selection of generation names is the cycle of the Five Elements. In one contemporary Korean family the generation character is connected with the element of earth, all the boys' personal characters are connected with daylight, and their order reflects the state of the sunlight at different times of the day.⁸ As a further practical illustration of how the theory may be applied, we will use the example of an unmarried Korean student presently enrolled at Brigham Young University whose name is Kim Ho-min. This young man's great-grandfather's name is Kim *Yong-bong*. His middle name contains a symbol meaning *wood*. The grandfather's name is Kim *Chae-uk* (containing *earth*), the father's name is Kim *Ch'ol-jin* (*metal*), the student's name is Kim Ho-min (*water*), and his infant

⁷The Chinese sexagenary cycle can be thought of in the image of two enmeshed cogwheels, one having twelve and the other ten teeth so that not until sixty combinations have been made will the cycle repeat. The usual view of the so-called ten celestial stems is that they have been developed by combining the Five Elements with Yin-Yang dualism. Tables giving the names and affinities of the ten celestial stems and the twelve branches or horary characters, along with other relevant data for showing the Chinese cyclical character system in terms of the western calendar, are found in *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 1176ff.

⁸Richard Rutt, *Korean Works and Days: Notes from the Diary of a Country Priest* (Rutland, Vt.: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1964), pp. 162-163.

nephew's name is Kim Song-*ch'an* (*fire*). In these five generations we have cognizance of the cycle of the Five Elements: wood, earth, metal, water, and fire in that order.

The theory of the Five Elements entered into social matters fully as much as personal ones. Throughout East Asia, in case of prospective marriage, the Five Elements were called in, shuffled, and consulted, in order to determine whether two young people could expect a compatible life together. Since the time of each person's birth is ruled by a given element, it was a matter of matching these elements so as to provide an auspicious situation. If a young man whose element was wood was mated to a metal girl, he would suffer as wood does from ax and saw and chisel. If he were married to a fire girl, nothing but total destruction would await him. Earth and water were the only safe elements with which wood could mate. Domestic happiness was often explained in terms of the theory of the Five Elements.

Politics and the Cyclical Theory of History

Perhaps the most substantive contribution of Wu-hsing in East Asian tradition has been in the area of practical politics and the philosophy of history. This development starts with Tsou Yen, the father of the five-elements school, who lived in the fourth century B.C. Tsou Yen followed events in the rise and fall of ages, recorded their omens and institutions, and extended his survey backward in time when heaven and earth had not yet been born, to what was profound and abstruse and not to be examined. By making citations of the revolutions and transformations of the Five Powers, he was influential in the development of a new philosophy of politics and history: changes must be interpreted in accordance with transformations of the Five Elements.

The details of this theory are treated in one section of a text called *Lü-shih ch'un chi'iu*.⁹ This work states (XIII, 2):

Whenever an Emperor or King is about to arise, Heaven must first manifest some favorable omen to the common

⁹A congerie of ritual tracts prescribing seasonal activities, of legalist and Taoist theorizing, and containing a number of legends and anecdotes inserted to illustrate points of doctrine. Traditionally this work was compiled under the patronage of Lu Pu-wei (d. B.C. 235), a rich merchant who had befriended the Ch'in prince whose son became ruler of all China as Ch'in Shih-huang-ti. See James Robert Hightower, *Topics in Chinese Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 9.

people. In the time of the Yellow Emperor, Heaven first made huge earthworms and mole crickets appear. The Yellow Emperor said: "The force of soil is in ascendance." Therefore he assumed yellow as his color, and took Soil as the pattern for his affairs.

In the time of Yu [founder of the Hsia dynasty, legendary dates 2205 B.C. to 1818 B.C.] Heaven first made grass and trees appear which did not die in the autumn and winter. Yu said: "The force of Wood is in ascendancy." Therefore he assumed green as his color and took Wood as the pattern for his affairs.

In the time of T'ang [founder of the Shang dynasty, traditional dates 1766 B.C. to 1154 B.C.] Heaven made some knife blades appear in the water. T'ang said: "The force of Metal is in ascendancy." He therefore assumed white as his color and took Metal as the pattern for his affairs.

In the time of King Wen [founder of the Chou dynasty, traditional dates of 1122 B.C. to 255 B.C.] Heaven made a flame appear, while a red bird, holding a red book in its mouth, alighted on the altar of soil of the House of Chou. King Wen said: "The force of Fire is in ascendancy." Therefore he assumed red as his color, and took Fire as the pattern of his affairs.

Whatever will inevitably be the next force that will succeed Fire. Heaven will first make the ascendancy of Water manifest. The force of Water being in ascendancy, black will be assumed as its color, and Water will be taken as the pattern for affairs. . . . When the cycle is complete, the operation will revert once more to Soil.

The Yin-Yang school maintained that the Five Elements produce one another and also overcome one another in a fixed sequence. It also maintained that the sequence of the four seasons accords with this process of the mutual production of the Elements. Thus Wood, which dominates spring, produces Fire, which dominates summer. Fire in its turn produces Soil, which dominates the "center"; Soil again produces Metal, which dominates autumn; Metal produces Water, which dominates winter; and Water again produces Wood, which dominates spring.

According to the above quotations from the *Lü-shih ch'un ch'iu*, the succession of dynasties likewise accords with the natural succession of the Elements. Thus Earth, under whose Power the Yellow Emperor ruled, was overcome by the Wood

of the Hsia dynasty. The Wood of this dynasty was overcome by the Metal of the Shang dynasty, Metal was overcome by the Fire of the Chou dynasty, and Fire would in its turn be overcome by the Water of whatever dynasty was to follow the Chou. The Water of this dynasty would then again be overcome by the Soil of the dynasty following, thus completing the cycle. Although Wu-hsing was but a theory, it soon afterwards had its effect in practical politics, and eventually in the pattern of Chinese history.

China's earliest general history, the *Shih-chi*, or Records of the Historian, written around 100 B.C. by Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145 B.C. to ca. 90 B.C.)¹⁰ inaugurated the series of twenty-four Chinese dynastic histories and has served as the model for subsequent official histories written in Korea and Japan. Chapter 28 of this history is of great importance for the religious history of ancient China. It also contains vital information on the political ramifications of the Five Elements theory as anciently understood.

At an indeterminate time in Chinese history there was a series of Five Emperors (traditional dates 2852 B.C. to 2255 B.C.) who succeeded Three August Personages. From the *Shih-chi* we learn that by 771 B.C. the people associated with the small state of Ch'in (which became the foundation for the first Chinese empire) were already acquainted with the theory of the legendary Five Emperors and the Five Elements. According to this theory, the Four Directions and the Center are bound by a sort of magic participation in the Five Elements and Five Colors, and they are ruled by five emperors and five colors. The Five Elements were bound to directions and colors as follows: Green Emperor, wood, east; Red Emperor, fire, south; Yellow Emperor, earth, center; White Emperor, metal, west; Black Emperor, water, north.¹¹

In the year 221 B.C., the First Emperor of the Ch'in dynasty, known as Ch'in Shih-Huang-Ti (246-210 B.C.), conquered all the rival feudal states and thus created a unified

¹⁰Cf. Edouard Chavannes, *Les Mémoires historiques de Sseu-ma Ts'ien*, 5 vols., Paris, 1895-1905. The best monographic treatment of Ssu-ma Ch'ien available in English, describing the form and content of his work, and indicating something of its importance in Chinese history is Burton Watson, *Ssu-ma Ch'ien Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).

¹¹Max Kaltenmark, "Religion and Politics in the China of the Ts'in and Han," *Diogenes*, No. 34 (Summer 1961), 20-21.

Chinese empire under the Ch'in. As the successor to the Chou dynasty, he actually believed that "the force of Water is in ascendancy," and so, according to Ssu-ma Ch'ien "assumed black as his color" and "took Water as the pattern for affairs." "The name of the Yellow River," says the Historical Records," was changed to that of Power Water, because it was supposed to mark the beginning of the Power of Water. With harshness and violence, and an extreme severity, everything was decided by law, for by punishing and oppressing, by having neither human-heartedness nor kindness, but only by conforming to strict justice, there would come an accord with the Five Powers."¹²

In part because of its legalistic severity, the Ch'in dynasty did not last long, and was soon succeeded by the Han (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). The Han Emperors also believed that they had become Emperors "by virtue of" one of the Five Powers, but there was considerable dispute as to which of the powers it was. At the time of the founding of the Han, when Kao-tzu the first emperor was still a commoner, he once killed a great snake, whereupon a spirit appeared and announced, "This snake was the son of the White Emperor and he who killed him is the Son of the Red Emperor!" When Kao-tzu first began his uprising, he offered prayers at an altar of soil in the city of Feng, and after he had won control of the district of P'ei and become its governor he sacrificed to the warrior god Ch'ih Yu¹³ and anointed his drums and flags with the blood of the sacrifice. During the second year of his reign (205 B.C.) Kao-tzu inquired what deities the Ch'in rulers had worshipped in their sacrifices to the Lords on High and was told that there had been sacrifices to four deities, the White, the Green, the Yellow, and the Red Emperors.

"But I have heard that there are Five Emperors in Heaven," said Kao-tzu. "Why is it that the Ch'in rulers worshipped only four?"

When no one was able to offer an explanation, Kao-tzu replied, "I know the reason. They were waiting for me to come and complete the five!" He accordingly set up a place

¹²Quoted in Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1960), pp. 130-138.

¹³For an engrossing discussion of artistic representations of this long-lasting deity of Han times see: Chêng Tê-k'un, "Ch'ih Yü: The God of War in Han Art," *Oriental Art*, IV, No. 2 (Summer, 1958), 45-54.

of worship for the Black Emperor, called the Altar of the North, with officials appointed to carry out its sacrifices.¹⁴

Also in the Treatise on the Calendar of the same work occurs the following entry.¹⁵

"The Han came to power. Kao-tzu said: The holy place of the north waited for me to give it honor. He thought that he too had obtained the favorable presage of the virtue of water. . . ." Thus it can be assumed that Kao-tzu considered himself as the Black Emperor and that, consequently, the Han dynasty in its beginnings reigned by virtue of water.

Following the Han dynasty, there was a lapse of interest in the Five Elements as a political theory. Yet as late as 1911, when the last dynasty was brought to an end by the Chinese Republic under Sun Yat-sen, the official title of the Emperor was still "Emperor through the Mandate of Heaven and in accordance with the Movement of the Five Powers."

¹⁴This information occurs in the discussion of the Feng and Shan sacrifices, in Burton Watson, *Records of the Grand Historian of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), II, 30-31.

¹⁵Chavannes, *Mémoires historiques*, III, 328.

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THE SYMBOLIC CORRELATIONS

ELEMENTS	SEASONS	CARDINAL POINTS	TASTES	SMELLS	STEMS (denary cyclical signs)	BRANCHES (duodenary cyclical signs) and the animals pertaining to them	NUMBERS
hsing (行)	shih (時)	fang (方)	wei (味)	ch'ou (臭)	kan (干)	chih (支)	shu (數)
Wood	spring	east	sour	goatish	chia i ()	yin () (tiger) & mao () hare	8
Fire	summer	south	bitter	burning	ping ting ()	wu () horse & ssu () serpent	7
Earth	—	center	sweet	fragrant	wu chi ()	hsu () dog, ch'ou () ox, wei () sheep & ch'ou () dragon	5
Metal	autumn	west	acid	rank	keng hsin ()	yu () cock & shen () monkey	9
Water	winter	north	salt	rotten	jen kwei ()	hai () boar & tzu () rat	6

ELEMENTS	MUSICAL NOTES	HSIU	STAR-PALACES	HEAVENLY BODIES	PLANETS	WEATHER	STATES
hsing (行)	yin (音)	hsiu (宿)	kung (宮)	ch'en (辰)	hsing (星)	ch'i (氣)	kuo (國)
Wood	choi ()	1-7	Azure Dragon	stars	Jupiter	wind	Ch'i
Fire	chih ()	22-28	Vermilion Bird	sun	Mars	heat	Ch'u
Earth	kung ()	—	Yellow Dragon	earth	Saturn	thunder	Chou
Metal	shang ()	15-21	White Tiger	hsiu constellations	Venus	co'd	Ch'in
Water	yu ()	8-14	Sombre Warrior	moon	Mercury	rain	Yen

ELEMENTS hsing (行)	RULERS ti (帝)	YIN-YANG (陰陽)	HUMAN PSYCHO. PHYSICAL FUNCTIONS shih (事)	STYLES OF GOVERNMENT cheng (政)	MINISTRIES pu (部)	COLORS ssu (色)	INSTRUMENTS ch'i (器)
Wood	Yu the Great/Hsia/	Yin in Yang or Lesser Yang	demeanour	relaxed	Agriculture	green	compasses
Fire	Wen Wang/Chou/	Yang or greater Yang	vision	enlightened	War	red	weights & measures
Earth	Huang Ti/pre-dyn/	Equal Balance	thought	careful	the Capital	yellow	plumbines
Metal	T'ang the Victori- ous/Shang/	Yang in Yin or lesser Yin	speech	energetic	Justice	white	T-squares
Water	Ch'in Shih Huang Ti/Ch'in/	Yin or greater Yin	hearing	quiet	Works	black	balances

ELEMENTS hsing (行)	CLASSES OF LIVING ANIMALS ch'ung (蟲)	DOMESTIC ANIMALS sheng (牲)	'GRAINS' ku (穀)	SACRIFICES ssu (祀)	VISCERA tsang (臟)	PARTS OF THE BODY f'i (體)	SENSE- ORGANS kuan (官)	AFFECTIVE STATES chih (志)
Wood	scaly (fishes)	sheep	wheat	inner door	spleen	muscles	eye	anger
Fire	feathered (birds)	fowl	beans	hearth	lungs	pulse (blood)	tongue	joy
Earth	naked (man)	ox	panicked millet	inner court	heart	flesh	mouth	desire
Metal	hairy (mammals)	dog	hemp	outer court	kidney	skin & hair	nose	sorrow
Water	shell-covered (invertebrates)	pig	millet	well	liver	bones (marrow)	ear	fear