Chapter 3

Wǔ Xíng – the five phases

Goals of this chapter
Explain the concepts of the five phases.

Learning Goals
After this chapter you have to be able to:

• explain the concept of the five phases
• explain the relationships between the different phases
• explain the interactions between the different phases

Introduction
Wǔ means five and Xíng means movement, process, phase, go to, behaviour.
These five basic processes were particularly popular during the Warring States period (476-221 BC).

Assignment
Read page 15 – 34 of The Foundations of Chinese Medicine (G. Maciocia). Study the different models below and write in your own words what these models tells you.

The Five Elements in Nature
The basic movements of the different phases are:

Wood expansive
Fire upwards
Earth neutrality, stability
Metal contractive
Water downward

Stages of a seasonal cycle
Towards the end of each season, the heavenly energies go back to the Earth for replenishment.
The Cosmological Relationship

Water is the basis, the beginning of the cycle.

The order in which the phases are enumerated is closely related to their numerology.

Xiāng Shēng – Engendering Relationship

Each phase generates another and is generated by one, e.g. Wood is the Child of Water and the Mother of Fire.
**Xiāng Kè – Restraining Relationship**
Each Element controls another and is controlled by one. Interrelationships between Engendering and Restraining Sequence: a self-regulating balance is kept at all times.

**Xiāng Chéng – Overwhelming Relationship**
Same as Restraining relation, but each Element “over controls” another, so that it causes it to decrease. If a phase is weak, it can be completely overwhelmed by the other. If Balance is broken → quantitative relationship breaks down.

**Xiāng Wū – Rebellion Relationship**
A reversal of the of the Restraining relationship. A phase is disproportionately strong and rebels against the phase that should normally restrain it.
Main correspondences of Wŭ Xíng

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mu - Wood</th>
<th>Huó - Fire</th>
<th>Tú - Earth</th>
<th>Jīn - Metal</th>
<th>Shuǐ - Water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colours</td>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Black/Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seasons</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>End of each season</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Winter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tastes</td>
<td>Sour</td>
<td>Bitter</td>
<td>Sweet</td>
<td>Pungent</td>
<td>Salty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yīn organs</td>
<td>Gān</td>
<td>Xin</td>
<td>Pi</td>
<td>Fēi</td>
<td>Shěn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yáng organs</td>
<td>Dān</td>
<td>Xiāo Chāng</td>
<td>Wēi</td>
<td>Dà Chāng</td>
<td>Páng Guāng</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense organs</td>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Tongue</td>
<td>Mouth</td>
<td>Nose</td>
<td>Ears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tissues</td>
<td>Sinews</td>
<td>Vessels</td>
<td>Muscles</td>
<td>Skin</td>
<td>Bones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Pensiveness</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climates</td>
<td>Wind</td>
<td>Heat</td>
<td>Dampness</td>
<td>Dryness</td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sounds</td>
<td>Shouting</td>
<td>Laughing</td>
<td>Singing</td>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>Groaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluids</td>
<td>Tears</td>
<td>Sweat</td>
<td>Drool</td>
<td>Snivel</td>
<td>Spittle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entity</td>
<td>Ethereal soul</td>
<td>Spirit</td>
<td>Ideation</td>
<td>Animal soul</td>
<td>Mind</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Wŭ Xíng in Physiology

Relationships among the organs are only a five-element model of relationships - the actual organ functions which the model itself is trying to represent.

The model is a guideline for diagnosis and treatment and refers to clinical practice.

Not all relationships are equally meaningful as a model of organ-function interactions.

Xiāng Shēng – Engendering Relationship

Gān - Liver stores Xuè and Xuè houses the Shén - Mind. If Gān-xuè = weak, then Xin - Heart will suffer.

Xīn-Qì pushes Xuè, so it helps Pí function of transportation.

Pí-Qì provides Gū-Qì to Fēi where it interacts with air to form Zōng-Qì.

Fēi-Qì descends to meet Shèn-Qì. Fēi also sends fluids down to Shèn.

Shèn-Yīn nourishes Gān-Xuè.
**Xiāng Kè – Restraining Relationship**

Gān assists Wèi to rot and ripen food and assists Pí to transform and transport. Gān controls Wèi as well.

Both in the Shàng Jiāo. Xīn governs Xuè, Fèi governs Qì. Qì and Xuè mutually assist and nourish each other.

Both transform body fluids. Pí activity in transforming and transporting fluids is essential to Shèn transformation and excretion of fluids.

Fèi sends Qì downwards, Gān spreads Qì upward.
If Fèi-Qì = weak and cannot descend, then Gān-Qì may tend to rise too much causing rising of Gān-Yáng or stagnation of Gān-Qì (Gān-Qì zhì).

Xīn and Shèn assist and support each other. See also the section below about the Cosmological Sequence.

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**Cosmological Sequence**

**Water as the Foundation**

If Shèn-Yīn = deficient → deficiency of Gān-Yīn and Xīn-Yīn.
If Shèn-Yáng = deficient → deficiency of Pí-Yáng and Fèi-Qì.
**Introduction to Chinese Medicine**

**Introducing Chinese Medicine** – LFRI TCM Foundations Course Module Research Project

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**Relationship Xīn-Heart and Shèn-Kidneys**

This relationship reflects the basic balance between Yīn and Yáng.

- **Shèn**: Source of Yīn-Yáng
- **Xīn**: Source of Jing - Essence
- **Míng Mén**: Source of Water

This relation is of mutual nourishment and assistance. If Shèn-Yīn = deficient → not enough Yīn energy through to Xīn. Xīn-Yīn becomes deficient and Xú-Rè in Xīn will arise.

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**Pí and Wèi**

Tonifying Wèi and Pí indirectly tonifies all the other organs.

- **Pí**: Source of Human physiology
- **Wèi**: Source of Xiān Tiān

At end of season, the energy goes back to Earth for regeneration → Wèi and Pí could be tonified at end of each season to regenerate the energy. (*End of winter)*

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**Pí and Wèi as support of Xīn**

Pí produces Xuè on which Xīn depends.

In case of chronic Xīn-Qì Xù or Xīn-Xuè Xū (particularly if rhythm of Heart is irregular) → essential to tonify Wèi.
Wǔ Xīng in Pathology

Xiāng Chéng – Overwhelming Relationship
The restraining relationship gets out of hand and becomes excessive.
An abnormal exaggeration of restraining, where one of the phases is weakened, causing the phase that under normal circumstances would overcome it to invade and weaken it further.
This relationship is also called 'over-acting'.

If Gān-Qì stagnates → "invades" Wèi → impairing the function of rotting and ripening → Wèi-Qì does not descend → nausea
If Gān-Qì stagnates → "invades" Pí → impairing the function of transporting and transforming → Pí-Qì does not ascend → diarrhoea

Xīn-Huò dries Fèi fluids → Fèi-Yīn Xū.

If Pí holds Shī-Dampness → Pí can obstruct Shèn function of transformation and excretion of fluids.

Seldom happens in practice.
More common: Fèi Xū triggeres off stagnation of Gān-Qì.

If Shèn-Yīn = deficient → Xū-Rè forms → can be transmitted to Xīn.

Xiāng Wǔ – Rebellion Relationship
A reversal of the of the Restraining relationship. A phase is disproportionately strong and rebels against the phase that should normally restrain it.
Also called the insulting sequence.

If Gān-Qì stagnates upwards → obstructs chest and breathing.

Xīn-Huò infuses downwards to Shèn → Shèn-Yīn Xū.

If Pí retains Shī-Dampness → impairs free flow of Gān-Qì.
If Fèi obstructed by Tán-Phlegm → impairs circulation of Xīn-Qì.

If Shèn fails to transform fluids → Pí suffers and becomes obstructed by Shī-Dampness.

**Xiāng Shēng – Engendering Relationship**

There are two possibilities when this relationship is not in balance:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother phase</th>
<th>not nourishing</th>
<th>Child phase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>taking too much from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mother not nourishing the Child**

- **Gān** affecting **Xīn**
  - Gān fails to nourish Xīn.
  - If Gān-Xuè = deficient → Xīn-Xuè = deficient → *palpitations and insomnia.*
  - Dān influences Xīn.
  - Dān makes one courageous.
  - If Dān = deficient → affects the Shén-Mind → *emotional weakness, timidity and lack of assertion.*

- **Xīn** affecting **Pí**
  - The Shén-Mind of Xīn needs to support the mental faculties and capacity of concentration of Pí.
  - If Xīn-Huŏ = deficient → unable to warm Pí-Yáng → *cold feeling, diarrhoea.*
  - (Xīn-Huŏ = derived from Shén-Yáng)

- **Pí** affecting **Fèi**
  - If Pí function (transformation, transportation) of fluids = impaired → Tán-Phlegm.
  - Tán-Phlegm often settles in Fèi → *breathlessness, asthma.*

- **Fèi** affecting **Shèn**
  - Fèi-Qì descends towards Shèn which “hold” it down.
  - Fèi send fluids down to Shèn.
  - If Fèi-Qì Xū → Qi and fluids cannot descend to Shèn → *breathlessness (Shèn unable to receive Qi), dryness of Shèn.*

- **Shèn** affecting **Gān**
  - Shèn-Yīn nourishes Gān-Yīn and Gān-Xuè.
  - If Shèn-Yīn Xū → Gān-Yīn Xū and/or Gān-Xuè Xū → *tinnitus, dizziness, headaches, irritability.*
  - (one of the most important and common relationships in clinical practice)
Child taking too much from the Mother

- Xin affects Gan: Xin is taking too much from Gan. If Xin-Xue general deficiency of Xuè → affect Gan storage of Xuè → scanty periods and amenorrhoea (women).

- Pi affects Xin: If Pi does not make enough Xuè → Xin will suffer → palpitations, insomnia, poor memory, slight depression.

- Fei affects Pi: If Fei-Qi Xu affects Pi-Qi affects → tiredness, no appetite, loose stools. Pi-Qi Xu and Fei-Qi Xu often occur together.

- Shen affects Fei: If Shen-Qi Xu → Shen fails to hold Qi down, Qi will rebel upwards → obstructs Fei → breathlessness.

- Gan affects Shen: Gan-Xuè nourishes and replenishes the Shen-Jing. If Gan-Xuè Xu (long period of time) → possible deficiency of Shen-Jing → dizziness, tinnitus, night sweating, sexual weakness.

Relations of Xü and Shí of phases
Each phase can be out of balance in four ways:

If phase is:

- in excess → over-acts on another along the overwhelming relationship;
- deficient → insulted by another along the rebellion relationship;
- in excess and “draws” excessively from its Mother;
- deficient → fails to nourish its Child.

Excessive

- Wood over-acts on Earth
- Wood draws from Water
- Wood fails to nourish Earth

Deficient
The five phases and diagnosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imbalance in</th>
<th>Face colour [1]</th>
<th>Sounds</th>
<th>Smells</th>
<th>Emotions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

[1] Two colours on the same face are possible. The face colour usually shows the underlying cause of the imbalance. Face colour shows the seat of the root imbalance and the clinical manifestations show the resulting pattern. But use this critically in diagnosis.

The five phases in treatment

If there is any disharmony in an phase, check:

- if this disharmony may be affected by another phase?
- if it is affecting another phase?

If an phase = deficient, check:

- Mother phase;
- if the controlling phase is overwhelming (overacting on);
- if the Child phase drawing too much;
- if insulted (rebellion) by the phase it should control;
- if it is affecting its Child phase.

If an phase = excessive, check:

- if Controlling phase is deficient and fails to control the excessive one;
- if the phase does “invade” the phase it should control;
- if the phase demands too much from Mother phase.

Assignment: make a schema reflecting the above rules.
The five phases in herbal and diet therapy

The “taste” of a food or herb is its intrinsic quality, rather than its actual flavour. Always be careful with too many of anything!

If an organ is diseased → avoid the taste related to the phase that controls that organ along the restraining relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taste</th>
<th>Effect on the body</th>
<th>Precautions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bitter (Fire)</td>
<td>Clears Rè, sedates and hardens. Clears Shǐ-Rè. Subdues rebellious Qi.</td>
<td>Goes to the bones. Excess should be avoided in bone diseases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweat (Earth)</td>
<td>Tonifies, balances and moderates. Tonify deficiency. Stops pain.</td>
<td>Goes to the muscles. Excess can cause weakness of the muscles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pungent (Metal)</td>
<td>Scatters. Expels pathogenic factors.</td>
<td>Scatters Qi. Avoid in Qì Xū.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Knowledge test
1. How can the Xiāng Shēng and Xiāng Kē become unbalanced?
2. Describe what happens when a patient has a disturbed Wood phase?

References
Nàn Jīng chapter 61, 69, 77.
Líng Shū chapter 56.

Bibliography
N. Wiseman & Feng Ye, A practical dictionary of Chinese Medicine, Paradigm Publications, 1998
Course notes.