

Five Emotions of Chinese Medicine

By, Michael LaFemina, MS Ed, MS Ac.

Emotions are inner forces that move us in specific directions. They can sometimes be overwhelming, especially if we do not have a clear vocabulary and system for defining, relating, and contextualizing them. This system of Chinese Medical understanding of the emotions is offered as a map to the otherwise nebulous landscape of our feelings.

One of the most important and distinguishing aspects of the emotional experience in Chinese Medicine is that there is no separation between body and mind. The emotions and the mind live in the body, in the organs, and they move through and are dependent on the blood. In Chinese Medicine, there is no such thing as separating the body and mind, and there is no such thing as untethering a human being from nature.

Emotional health from a Chinese Medicine perspective means that a person is in dynamic relationship with their world and emotions arise and are expressed authentically and appropriately. Then, like water flowing through a stream, the emotion moves on and the stream keeps flowing. Pathology of emotions can therefore be categorized in four ways: too much of an emotion, not enough of an emotion, the emotion is suppressed and not expressed, or an emotion is stuck. If we want to increase our peace and allow life to flow more smoothly, working to understand and harmonize the emotion that got us out of our rhythm is the way to start. To do this, we need slow down the thought process by putting some space and time between comprehension and action. A daily breathing, meditation, or Qi Gong practice prepares us for this like training for a race prepares us to be in the race. Practice develops our ability.

In Chinese Medicine, there are seven emotions. Five can be physiological and pathological, and two of them are always pathological. The Five Emotions are generally listed as Anger, Joy, Pensiveness, Sadness, and Fear, and the additional two are Shock-Fright and Worry. Any time there is talk of 'five' of anything in Chinese Medicine, it must be related back to the primary appearance of five - the "Five Elements." To understand these five emotions, we must understand the Five Elements from a Chinese Medical perspective.

Five 'Elements' and their Emotions

To call them the Five Elements is actually a misnomer. In Chinese, 五行 - *Wu Xing* - actually translates to 'The Five Movements.' This is foundational to physiology from a Chinese Medical perspective: if something is alive, it moves. If it moves freely and in harmony, there is health. If it does not move freely, it is stuck, and there is pain, disease, and ultimately, death. These 'elements' are the building blocks of life, which is perhaps why they are called 'elements,' but it must always be remembered that they are dynamic, not static. We will refer to them as *Wu Xing* for the rest of the essay to indicate that the concept is both the five elements and five movements simultaneously. These *Wu Xing* are forces of nature that appear in everything that exists. Everything, including our bodies and minds, is comprised of certain balances of the *Wu Xing*.

The *Wu Xing* are Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. We can look at them as building blocks, actual physical substances, and we can also look at them as directional movements. This essay will follow the format of one of the classics of Chinese Medicine in their presentation - introducing a direction, one of the *Wu Xing*, and then the Five Emotions.

These *Wu Xing* are presented in the ancient text of Chinese Medicine called the Huang Di Nei Jing Su Wen, in Chapter 5 (and elsewhere). When we look to their presentation in the classic text, we find that they are actually introduced as originating from a direction, and relative to climatic conditions. Once introduced, a list of correspondences for that *Xing* is revealed, including the emotion (志) that is associated with it.

The text introduces each element in the same way: a direction gives rise to a movement of Heaven (climatic force), which gives rise to the *Xing* on Earth. They each are presented here in the order they appear in the original text. For the purposes of this discussion, we will not go into great detail about the climatic forces, but rather focus on the direction, the *Xing*, and the emotion.

“東方生風，風生木 - Eastern Direction gives rise to wind, wind gives rise to Wood.
... 在志為怒 - as a will (emotion) it is anger...”

The East is where the Sun rises, so we see this as a direction of moving upwards. The *Xing* Wood carries with it this inherent quality of rising and moving upwards. The color is later given as green, and we see almost everything we associate with green in nature, like trees and plants, as having a strong ‘Wood’ quality to them, meaning they are either actually made of wood or have an upward direction that defines their existence. Anger is therefore seen as the emotion that carries this direction - moving upwards. Anger is not the full picture of the upward direction, it is given as the exemplary emotion that moves us to be bigger, louder, taller. This is the case with all of the emotions – they are indications of the direction the emotion takes us. If we don’t know how to recognize the exact feeling, we begin by noticing the direction. When the Wood element is in balance, the upward direction manifests in confidence, clarity, and vision.

"南方生熱，熱生火 - Southern Direction gives rise to heat, heat gives rise to Fire.
...在志為喜 - as a will (emotion) it is joy.”

The South is where the Sun spends the day (Northern Hemisphere perspective) moving across the sky. If you’ve ever interacted with fire, you know from experience that its natural tendency is to spread to anything combustible. From this, we see the directionality of Fire as outward, and the emotion of joy is one in which we are outward, spreading. Think about someone joyfully playing in a field - you can probably imagine them with their arms spread out wide and the lips spread wide in a smile. Joy is an emotion that leads us to move outwards. When in balance, Joy is a beautiful expression of our emotional body-mind. It brings us into connection with others and helps us celebrate life. When Joy is out-of-balance, it is called mania. We can also see rage and fury as excessive out-ward directions. These are clearly ‘fed’ by the Wood element – Anger builds up so much that a person becomes furious and ‘explodes’ on everyone around.

“中央生濕， 濕生土 - Central (orientation) gives rise to dampness, dampness gives rise to Earth.
...在志為思 - as a will (emotion) it is pensiveness”

Earth is at the center of everything. Gravity holds us to the Earth and this becomes an important quality when we layer the emotion of Earth. The Earth is grounding, nourishing, supporting. In a person, this manifests as consideration of others, which we can see as a quality of pensiveness. There is no movement out from center, it is a way to orient us before we move - we consider something, and then move from there. That is why Earth is given as an ‘orientation’ rather than a direction. When no movement is appropriate and takes place for a reasonable amount of time for a situation, it is called pensiveness or compassion. When it goes on too long and no action is being done, it is called ‘over-thinking.’

“西方生燥， 燥生金 - Western Direction gives rise to dryness, dryness gives rise to Metal
...在志為憂 - as a will (emotion) it is sadness”

West is where the Sun sets, so we recognize the direction as downwards, the direction of Metal. The emotion associated with this direction is sadness. Sadness in context is very important because it helps us see down as necessary, not bad or good. Every thing or feeling that moves up, must move down at some point. Sadness is an important feeling to help us move through changes, particularly loss. It can be a beautiful expression of love to experience and express sadness. When a person is stuck in sadness and cannot experience anything else, this is called ‘depression.’ Depression is like carrying a very heavy weight that presses you down.

北方生寒， 寒生水 - Northern Direction gives rise to cold, cold gives rise to Water
...在志為恐 - as a will (emotion) it is fear”

Now that we’ve seen rising, moving outwards (spreading), centrally orienting, and descending, the only direction left is moving inwards. This completes the cycle of four directions relative to center. When it is cold, we keep our limbs close; we bring them inward. When there is fear, we can retract inward as well. This is how we experience the direction of Water is inward. Fear is a very important feeling that can keep us alive and it speaks to deep survival instincts in us. When someone is connected to that deep level of their essences, it can also show up as great power. Like the ocean, whose power is hidden and deep, water can carry a ship the size of a building and wash away a house in an instant. There is another power of water worth mentioning – the power to cleanse.

These are the *Wu Xing* presented as directions relative to center. There is another presentation where each are seen as generating and controlling another. This is an important set of relationships that allows for deeper understanding, but also can create some confusion. As such, it is omitted for now.

Su Wen Chapter 5 does not present Shock-fright and Worry, perhaps because they are not physiological. These emotions only arise in a state of pathology, when an experience overpowers us and there is no free-flow, there is something stuck. If we are looking at emotions as directional, we can see worry as too much central that we are actually spinning around in circles

not moving in a direction, and shock-fright as an extreme experience of inward movement, so much so that we can not move up and out.

When we see the emotions as directional, we see the *motion* in emotion, which is true to the root of the word in Latin, to move outward. This is why emotions need to flow, which we can experience as arising, expressing, transforming, and dissipating. Healthy emotions from a Chinese Medicine perspective is about having a relationship with all of these directions and working to keep them in dynamic harmony.

How Do These *Wu Xing* Show Up In Our Lives?

Even though everyone has each of the *Wu Xing* as part of their body and mind, each person has usually one *Xing* that predominates. Here are descriptions of each of the *Xing* as they manifest in people. We can use these descriptions to better understand our dispositions, as well as avoid certain natural imbalances that each of the *Xing* tend towards. This becomes very useful in self care, but even more so in parenting. When we are able to see the elemental forces that dominate our children, we are able to see them as unique and requiring different parenting strategies if we want to have the most profound connection and impact with them.

The following chart is shared because we have found that in recognizing certain tendencies, we can honor the uniqueness of our personal needs, and the ways in which we will best be received and cared for in our lives. If we can identify a pattern and name it, we can recognize it in our daily life and begin to harmonize it if it is out of balance.

	Wood "The Pioneer"	Fire "Bright Light"	Earth "The Harmonizer"	Metal "The Mountain"	Water "The Ocean"
Gifts	Curiosity, Drive, Quick-thinker,	Creativity, Charismatic	Caring, Helpful, Comforting, Grounding	Detail-oriented, Focused, Precise	Creativity, Deep, "Old Souls"
Emotional Tendencies	Competitive, Excitable, Confrontational	Joyful Playful, Charming, Enchanting	Considerate, Compassionate, Caring	Protective, Slow to warm up, formal	Intuitive, Empathetic, Reserved
Prone To (Medically)	Stress-related conditions, behavior problems as child	Anxiety, Sleep issues, Heart problems, 'burn-out,'	Digestive Problems, Overeating, Stress-eating	Respiratory and Dermatological conditions	Back pain, slow to hit milestones as child
Socially	Makes friends easily, pushes the limits, natural leader	Life of the party/star of the show	Everyone's friend, loves bringing people together, puts others first	Likes order and structure, rule-follower, can be rigid	Likes alone time, goes with the flow, self-sufficient
Emotional Challenges	Anger, irritability,	Mood-swings, "melt downs," impulsive	Worry, Over-thinking	Sensitive, sadness, can be insulting to others	Fearful, Self-doubt

There will be one, or maybe a combination of two, that speak most to you. Below, you will find some more descriptions of how they manifest in a personality. This can lead to greater

understanding of ourselves and also of the people who are close to us in life. This understanding can lead to greater peace in your body-mind and relationships.

Earth - “The Harmonizer”

The Earth Element is the energy of the Earth - grounding, comforting, and nourishing. The Earth supports, provides, and sustains. The Earth element in a person manifests the same way.

In a personality, the Earth element manifests as the harmonizer - the person who makes sure everyone in the group is attended to and happy. They care about family, community, and each person's well being. There is a 'song in their voice' and it sounds like they sing when they speak - think of the way most people speak to and care for babies as the primary example of the Earth element showing up.

The Earth element is connected to digestion and has an affinity with taste and smell. Just as all food comes from the Earth, people with strong Earth love food: cooking, eating, and sharing meals. They love bringing people together in any way, but especially around the table.

Earth element loves making other people happy. This appears early on as 'Mommy's helper' or 'teacher's pet' behavior. It's their nature to help and please. Relationships are paramount to them, so if someone in the 'tribe' is unhappy or hurt, they will feel it too.

Because they care about other people so much, and are so connected to their feelings, there are two ways that the Earth element typically goes out of balance emotionally:

- 1) Self-sacrifice: they put others before themselves and would rather see someone else happy before doing what they want.
- 2) Over-eating: they love food and need comfort, and if they don't get it from caring people in their world, they get it from eating - usually sugars, dairy, or greasy foods.

The Earth element is kept in balance by encouragement, teaching them to care for themselves too, appropriate exercise, and opportunities to be with people they love.

Fire - “The Bright Light”

The Fire Element is the energy of summer - the warmth, the playful, expressing the joy of the year when everyone wants to be outside, traveling, celebrating.

Fire animates, illuminates, and warms. Similarly, the Fire element in a person manifests as warmth, playfulness, creativity, and a natural calling to perform.

In a personality, the Fire element is like fire in nature - just as a campfire attracts everyone around it, the person with a strong fire affinity will be naturally attractive and the center of attention. They thrive in this environment - all eyes on them - and love the attention. Fire is like the sun - it shines!

There is enchantment with fire, but there is also the possibility of being burned. These people are very fun to be with, but sometimes a little intense.

The Fire element is connected to the Heart in Chinese Medicine, and we see this manifest in an innate ability to make emotional connections with almost anyone, and quickly. There is a 'spark' that 'brightens your day' when you're with them. But, if not contained, fire can spread easily and burn everything in its path. We see these imbalances translating to people in clear ways:

1) The 'meltdown' - think of a child who is spread out on the floor, limbs flailing, and no way to be consoled. But then magically, from one minute to the next, everything is better and all is forgotten. Adults have meltdowns in their own ways, but likely hold on to the experience a lot longer. When this is coupled with exhaustion, things get worse.

2) The 'burnout' - fire can lead people to 'burn the candle at both ends' because they are so excited about everything, especially having fun at night. This can result in people feeling 'fried' and depleted.

The fire element is kept in balance with opportunity to shine, play, and create, and also appropriate amounts of rest and down time. They need to be reminded and supported on how to manage their energy and prevent meltdowns and burnouts.

Wood - "The Pioneer"

The Wood element is the energy of spring -the rising, beginning, breaking through the heaviness to grow and grow and grow. The wood element creates, plans, and initiates. The wood element in a person manifests as a drive to build, succeed, and pioneer.

In a personality, the wood element manifests as confidence, determination, and need for growth. These people are also usually quick thinkers, comfortable in discussion and disagreement, and willing to be independent. They rarely back down from a challenge and are often motivated in competition.

The Wood element is connected to the spirit eyes in Chinese Medicine, and we see this manifest in capability to envision, be a visionary, and be an explorer.

Wood element translates into a natural desire for leadership, but they can be consumed by power and begin to take over and dominate a room or group. Because they are comfortable in challenging situations, they can sometimes become defiant. They like making the rules and if

there is already a rule in place, they enjoy pushing the limits, bending the rules, or even breaking them.

Wood element tends to lead to quick thinking, quick growth, and likewise, quickly bored. Because they have strong feelings and like to be heard, they can sometimes have outbursts, usually of anger. If unchecked, this can turn into rage and fury. Wood generates fire, so to speak.

The wood element is kept in balance with space to explore and rest. In children and adults alike, this means getting out into nature with plenty of time to play or wander. This will keep them calm and grounded. In general, the need for quiet time, slowing down, and relaxation needs to be actively encouraged.

Metal Element - “The Mountain”

The Metal element represents the solidification of Earth - crystals, metals, and stones. In a season, it is the Autumn - cool, dry, and yet resplendent. Metal in nature is strong, sharp, and precious.

In a personality, the Metal element can show up a few ways, and it mimics the ways in which we see metal appear in nature. In the same way metal can make a strong shield or fence to protect what is inside it, the Metal element in a person can make them very protective over others. Like metal swords, the mind and words of these people can be very penetrating and even piercing. They generally ‘get right to the point,’ which can be a little ‘sharp’ for people to handle.

Like stone and metal, it can take a while (and a lot of energy) for a person with strong Metal element qualities to ‘warm up’ to others or situations. Because they might say things very pointedly, their words can sometimes scare people off. Metal may be difficult to break, but sometimes easy to dent. And once dented, the mark of the dent will last forever. So too with the emotions and memory of the person with a strong Metal element - they can hold onto things for a very long time and are not quick to forget what you did or said to them.

For a person with strong metal, if you have a clear plan and stick to it, things will likely go smoothly. If you change the plan without warning, this could spell disaster. They see things as clearly black or white, right or wrong. They love rules and structure and can follow orders very well. The Metal element in a person can make them like a mountain - they teach you what you’re made of as you try to climb to the top, and as you go on, they show you more and more of your potential and wider views of a beautiful world. But it is not an easy ‘walk in the park.’

The Metal element is kept in balance with play, especially spontaneous play that still feels safe for them. For people interacting with Metal, it’s good to be fluid and spacious, as to not take what they say too personally or as an attack if it comes off as offensive. Look for them to show love in actions not words. Encourage and support these people to go outside their comfort zone as to not become too rigid or closed off.

Water Element - “The Mystic”

The Water element is the energy of winter - it draws in, holds, and keeps safe. Water is fluid, it can run deep, and it can sustain a whole hidden world beneath the surface. So too, in a person, the Water element can manifest as mysterious and deep, and yet you feel like ‘on the surface’ there isn’t much going on.

For these people, they truly can ‘go with the flow’ and be happy. They may say “it doesn’t matter what we do or where we go,” and they mean it. They rarely have an agenda. Like water finds the lowest point and stays there until something or some force moves it, a person with strong Water element also tends to stay still, unless someone strongly encourages them to get moving.

Water element creates a deep and mysterious personality. They won’t say much, and tend to keep to themselves, but there is a lot going on that does not meet the eye immediately. Like a river, once you get it going it can be quite strong, the Water element can create incredible momentum and power when channeled.

Water has an inner power to it, like a wave that sweeps you off your feet before you even know what hit you. The Water element in a person gives them this force, yet they are usually very gentle. There is a gravitas, a quiet dignity, and a grace that comes with someone like this. They have nothing to prove and are usually very humble.

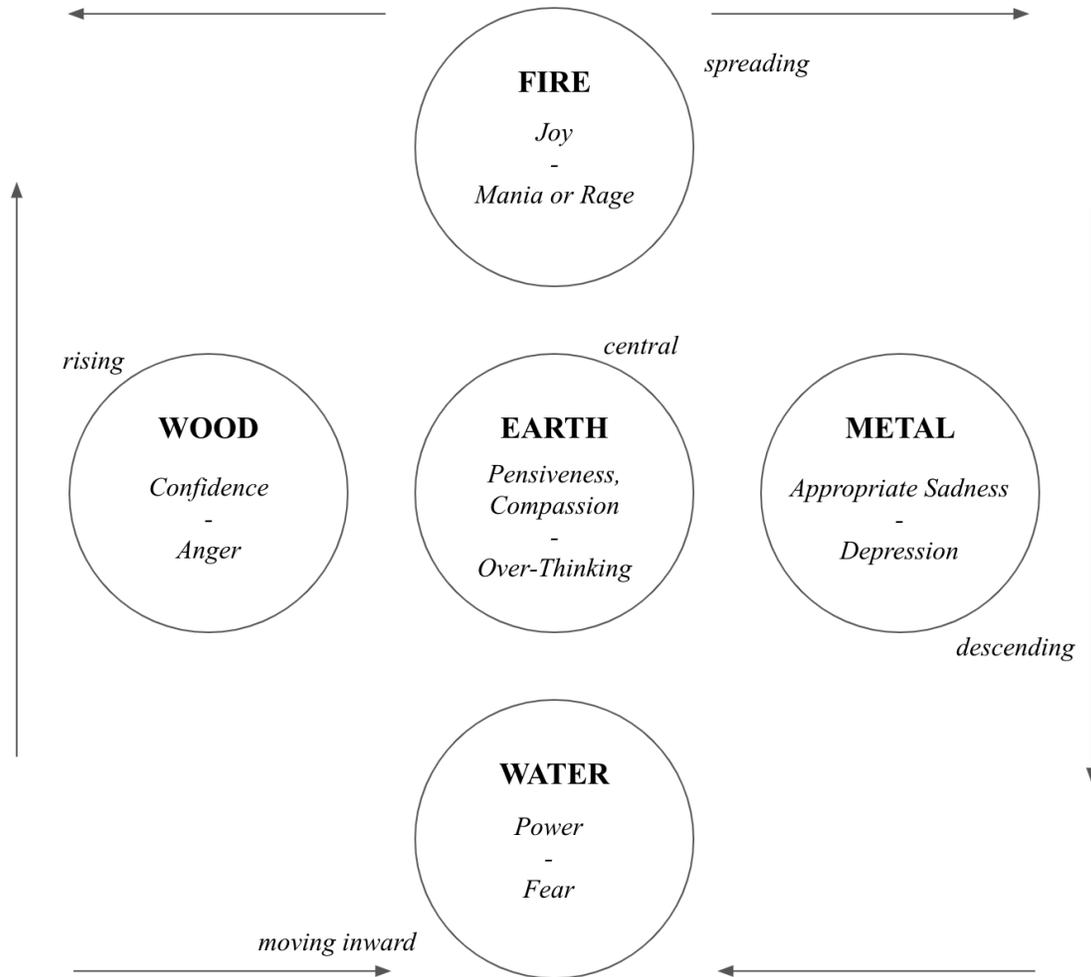
A body of water is healthy so long as it is not stagnant. To keep the Water element in balance, keep it moving. Keep it flowing. Encourage these people to take risks, to try new things. If they get sad, depressed, or ‘down on themselves,’ which tends to happen, get them up and moving again as soon as there is an opportunity. Encourage their natural creativity, mystic qualities, and compassion, all of which will be strong.

How To Utilize This Information

There are more than five or seven emotions as possibilities for our experience, but if we ever feel lost or overpowered by our feelings, the five directions of emotions can be a map to help us find our way. If we stop for a minute and think about what is going on (pensiveness arising from but also creating centrality), we can look at the way a feeling is moving us to better understand it. We are dynamic beings and need to keep flowing, emotionally, physically, etc.

The Five Emotions are kept in balance by authentically experiencing any one of them - not judging, rushing, shunning a certain feeling, but embracing, honoring, and expressing that feeling when the time is right.

If we know ourselves well, and we know how we tend to go out of balance, then we can work to identify situations that usually become triggers, and prepare ourselves for the ‘challenge’ ahead. If we stay grounded, and in our peace, we can experience reality with a sense of serenity. When we bring the emotions, directions, and *Wu Xing*, it begins to look like this:



We can cultivate our relationship with any of the *Wu Xing* by spending time with that element in nature - being in the forest, making a bonfire, walking the Earth barefoot, being on a mountain, or sitting by or in water are all easy examples, but there are other ways to develop familiarity with the *Wu Xing*. If we are able to see the strengths, vulnerabilities, and directionality of each of the five, we will be better suited for working with these forces and keeping our minds peaceful and our bodies healthy. We can have a more honest relationship with our feelings and needs and build our reflective practice to bring more peace to our life.