



# THE APPLICATION OF WUXING MODEL IN COUNSELING

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## A Brief Historical Introduction to the Theory of Wuxing

*Wuxing* (Wade-Giles romanization: “wuhxing”; Chinese translation: “Five Phases”) is originally a moral theory associated with Zisi, who is the grandson of Confucius (also known as Kong Zi), and Mencius (also known as Meng Zi). In the third century BCE, the sage-chemist Zou Yan introduced a systematic cosmological theory under the same rubric that was to dominate the intellectual world during the period of the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). In ancient Chinese cosmology, the five basic phases, i.e., Tu, Mu, Jin, Huo, and Shui, that explain change in the cosmos are earth, wood, metal, fire, and water, respectively. “These elements were believed to overcome and succeed one another in an immutable cycle and were correlated with the cardinal directions, seasons, colors, musical tones, and bodily organs” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017, para. 1).

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2017), the “*Wuxing* cycle served as a broad explanatory principle in Chinese history, philosophy, and medicine; it was first linked to dynastic history by Zou Yan. The neo-Confucian philosophers of the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) returned to the notion of *Wuxing* as the Five Virtues (benevolence, righteousness, reverence, wisdom, and sincerity)” (para. 2).

Today, the concept of *Wuxing* is also used in counseling though not widely known or explored. In this short article, the authors hope to provide a better understanding of how the *Wuxing* theory is used in counseling.

## What is Wuxing Theory?

According to Theobald(2011), the school of Yin and Yang thought was one of the many schools of Chinese philosophies during the Warring States Period (5<sup>th</sup> Century-221 BCE). The concept of yin-yang is often mentioned side by side with the school of the Five Agents (YinyangWuxingJia).

During the Warring States period, there were two different traditions of the Yin and Yang thinkers. The one tradition connected the Yin and Yang cycle with the cycle of the Five Agents (*Wuxing*). They explained the change of the seasons and gave support to the correlated agricultural activities. The representative writings of this tradition are the chapter *Yueling* in the Confucian classic *Liji*, and the twelve annals (*ji*) of the *Lüshi Chunqiu* as well as agricultural books. The second tradition focused on the Five Agents and their meaning for society and history. Their most important representatives were Zuo Yan and Zou Shi with the lost writings *Zouzi*, *ZouziZhongshi*, and *Zuoshizi*.

Each of the Five Agents was characterized by one element,

each of which had an effective force on all things on earth. The Five Elements (*wucai*) are therefore also called the Five Forces (*wude*). The earliest statement in literature about the Five Agents can be found in the chapter *Hongfan* of the Confucian Classic *Shangshu*, where they are defined as water (*Shui*), fire (*Huo*), wood (*Mu*), metal (*Jin*), and earth (*Tu*).

The five elements in the *Wuxing* Theory (see Figure1) are Wood (“Mu”), Fire (“Huo”), Earth (“Tu”), Metal (“Jin”), and Water (“Shui”).

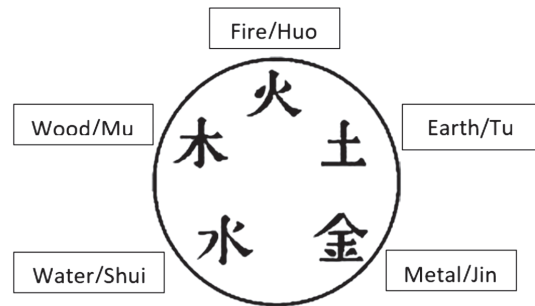


Figure1. Model of *Wuxing*

This order of presentation is known as the “mutual generating” (“Sheng”) sequence (see Figure 2) which is a positive trans-development of oneself: Wood→Fire→Earth→Metal→Water with each of the five elements being briefly explained (Coppola, 2016) as follows:

- Wood (“Mu”): Individuality and relationships; life’s experiences;
- Fire (“Huo”): Enthusiastic, passionate; fun and exciting life; joy and happiness;
- Earth (“Tu”): Alteration, transformation; self-worth and self-trust;
- Metal (“Jin”): Strength, durability, flexibility, longevity; light-hearted attitude;
- Water (“Shui”): Reflection; authenticity; a sense of flow in daily life

There is also the other order of presentation known as the “mutual controlling” (“Ke”) sequence, which is an inhibition of one’s development, follows a different order (see Figure 3): Wood→Earth→Water→Fire→Metal. The interaction between the “Sheng” and “Ke” sequences provides a counselor or therapist another perspective of looking at the inner conflict of a client’s self.

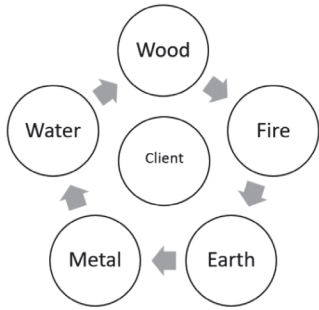


Figure 2. “Sheng”: Mutual Generating

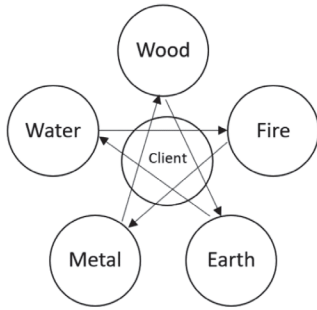


Figure 3. “Ke”: Mutual Controlling

### Application of Wuxing in Counseling

Counseling is a person-centered multi-stage process that involves a series of at least, typically, five face-to-face sessions, physically or online. McElroy (2017) has recommended the following seven stages in counseling and the number of sessions that goes with each stage:

- Stage 1: Crisis Management (1-5 sessions)
- Stage 2: Assessment (2-4 sessions)
- Stage 3: Goal Setting (1-3 sessions)
- Stage 4: Skill Building (1-6 sessions)
- Stage 5: Understanding the Problem (1-5 sessions)
- Stage 6: Resolving the Problem (6-12 sessions)
- Stage 7: Maintenance/Follow-Up (1-5 sessions)

The aim of counseling is to offer a counselee some form of help by facilitating his/her thoughts so that the solution(s) to the issue(s) of concern should come from him/her rather than from the counselor with the hope that the counselee’s attitudes and behavior will change for the better. Counseling is often personal and so it is conducted individually, though group-based counseling (e.g., family counseling) is possible depending on what the situation of a problem entails.

In our own counseling practice, especially when working with Chinese clients, we have found the Five Agents in *Wuxing* theory to be very helpful. To adapt from the explanation given by Coppola (2016) to each of the five elements, we have simplified them as follow:

- Wood (“Mu”): A client’s personality and relationships with others

Personality or personal identity “includes the traits and other characteristics that make each person unique” (Cherry, 2020, para.10). It refers to how one identifies with a collective, such as a community, religion, or political movement.

“Wu” is the first step we take by showing the client a picture of a tree or asking the client to draw a tree. The choice is up to the client. If s/he chooses to draw a tree, we can use the Baum Test (also known as Draw-a-Tree Test or Koch Test) which was developed by a Swiss counselor, Karl (Charles) Koch, in 1952 (see Koch, 1957). It is a projective drawing test that is used in analyzing an individual’s personality and underlying emotional history.

If the client chooses to talk about a tree based on a picture of a tree, we often provide the following instructions and ask the following questions: “Picture yourself as if you are a tree. The tree trunk is your body and you are rooted (roots of the tree) in your individuality. The branches are your friends and family, and the leaves are your experiences during this lifetime. Imagine now that these leaves are reflecting upon months of exposure to troubling times, stressful situations, and lack of light in your life. Now, listen carefully to each of the following questions that you’ll

be asked.” Examples of questions are: For each of the branches, name your family members and/or your friends or colleagues, state an example of experiences, positive and/or negative, on each of the leaves associated with each of these persons stated, and so on. Counselors can always come up with their own questions to ask their clients.

- Fire (“Huo”): The client’s enthusiasm expressed through the mental states of mind

This enthusiasm can be expressed in one or more of the nine mental states of mind (MSoM). According to Chia (2007, 2010), the nine MSoM can be classified under four main categories (see Figure 4): (i) Inquisitive mind, which is further divided into three sub-categories: surrealistic, sensual, and social-emotional;(ii) Ideological mind, which is further divided into three sub-categories: historical, philosophical and spiritual;(iii) Affective mind, which is further divided into three sub-categories overlapping with ideological and inquisitive minds: historical, virtual and surrealistic; and (iv) Imaginative mind, which is further divided into three sub-categories overlapping with inquisitive and ideological minds: social-emotional, moral and spiritual (see Chia, 2007, for detail).

INQUISITIVE MIND			
IMAGINATIVE MIND	<b>Surrealistic Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fantasy</li> <li>• Phantasy</li> <li>• Deja Vu</li> </ul>	<b>Sensual Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exteroception</li> <li>• Interoception</li> <li>• Psychoception</li> </ul>	<b>Socio-Emotional Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sympathy</li> <li>• Empathy</li> <li>• Altruism</li> </ul>
	<b>Virtual Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video</li> <li>• Cyber</li> <li>• Augmented</li> </ul>	<b>Physiological Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neuro-anatomical</li> <li>• Neurochemical</li> <li>• Neuropathological</li> </ul>	<b>Moral Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mores</li> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Virtues</li> </ul>
	<b>Historical Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past Episodic</li> <li>• Prior Experiential</li> <li>• Background Knowledge</li> </ul>	<b>Philosophical Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nihilistic</li> <li>• Ontological</li> <li>• Theologistic</li> </ul>	<b>Spiritual Mental State of Mind</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theistic</li> <li>• Agnostic</li> <li>• Atheistic</li> </ul>
IDEOLOGICAL MIND			
AFFECTIVE MIND			

Figure 4. The Nine Mental States of Mind

“Huo”, being the second step taken in counseling, involves the client telling us about him/herself and the issues of concern that have been troubling him/her. From the client’s account, we are able to put whatever information given or elicited into one or more of the nine MSoM. Once done, we are able to draw lines to connect different desires, ideas, thoughts, and wishes found in different sections of MSoM to form associating memes. In this way, we can better understand the client and plan how to facilitate our next several counseling sessions with him/her.

- Earth (“Tu”): The client’s self-esteem

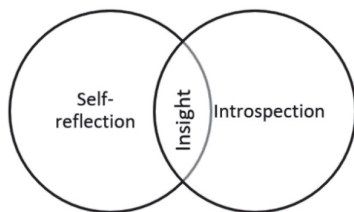
According to the Center for Integrated Healthcare (2013), in its third version of the definition, “[S]elf-esteem is a way of thinking, feeling, and acting that implies that you accept, respect, and believe in yourself” (para. 1). When a person can accept his/her self, s/he is fine with both the good and not so good things about his/her self. It includes respecting one’s self, treating self well in much the same way s/he would treat someone else s/he respects. It also means “[T]o believe in yourself ... that you feel you deserve to have the good things in life ... you have confidence that you can make choices and take actions that will have a positive effect on your life” (para. 3-4). Self-esteem consists of several self-concepts (e.g., physical self-concept, social self-concept, and academic self-concept). Self-concept is defined as an individual’s perception of his/her behavior, abilities, and unique characteristics

– a mental picture of who s/he is as a person within a community” (Bailey, 2003).

In counseling, we adopt Bracken’s(1996) six domains of self-concept by asking certain questions: (i) the social ability to interact with others, e.g., “How are your social interaction with others like?”; (ii) the competence to meet basic needs, e.g., “How are you coping with your daily basic needs like ...?”; (iii) the affective awareness of emotional states, e.g., “How is your day?” or “How are you feeling today?”; (iv) the physical awareness or feelings about looks, health, physical condition, and overall appearance, e.g., “What do you think of yourself, your well-being, etc.?” or “Are you happy with yourself? Why or why not?”; (v) the academic success or failure in school, e.g., “How are you doing in studies, test or examination?”; and (vi) how well one functions within the family unit, e.g., “How do you get along with your father, mother, etc.?”

- Mental (“Jin”): The client’s self-reflection

Self-reflection refers to one’s capacity to exercise introspection and to learn more about one’s fundamental nature (consciousness of one’s mind) and essence (substance of one’s personality). It is one of the three elements of self-awareness (Eyal, 2019); the other two being introspection and insight. Introspection refers to the process of accessing one’s internal psychological processes, judgments, perceptions, or states. Insight, which is the result of self-reflection and introspection, refers to the clear and often sudden discernment of a solution to a problem (see Figure 5).



**Figure 5. The Three Elements of Self-Awareness**

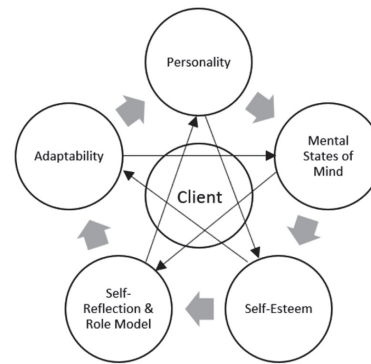
“Jin” is the fourth step taken in counseling. It encourages our client to become more aware of him/herself via introspection. Here are three examples of introspective questions that a counselor can ask the client to self-reflect and it is up to him/her to share with the counselor: “What enjoyable activity do I not engage in often enough?” “Are there any relationships that I want to drop, repair or improve?” “Is there anyone with whom I feel angry or resentful?” “How does it benefit me to hold on to these grudges?”

- Water (“Shui”): Adaptability of the client

This involves how the client adapts to different contexts or situations. Adaptations must benefit either the individual’s chance of survival or reproduction to be considered adaptive and are then passed down to the next generation through this process of natural selection (Schmitt& Pilcher, 2004). Here our focus is on psychological adaptation, i.e., an individual’s functional traits that increase his/her survival fitness in a given environment.

“Shui” is the final step we take in the counseling process. It is during this step we explore with the client how s/he is coping with various challenging issues of concern and what s/he can do by tapping on his/her personality, the nine MSoM, the six domains of self-concept, and his/her introspection to manage the current situation.

In summary, we have adapted and created the *Wuxing* model of counseling (see Figure 6) with a thick arrow refers to the mutual generating/initiating process and a thin single-line arrow refers to the mutual controlling/inhibiting process.



**Figure 6. Wuxing Model of Counseling**

## Conclusion

By understanding a client’s personal identity (personality or individuality) and how he/she relates to others is a counselor’s first step to know and understand better our client in order to engage him/her more effectively. This is followed by the next step that involves dialoguing with the client to establish his/her nine mental states of mind (Chia, 2007, 2010). The third step is to know the client’s perception of him/her self-esteem and concepts. The fourth step is to invite the client to reflect his/her thoughts concerning the current experiences (good or bad) as well as those in the past (pleasant or unpleasant). Finally, we also move into finding out how well the client is coping with his/her psychological adaptation in the current situation that has been changing from the past through the present into the future as it continues to change for better or for worse.

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