

The Three Realms, The Four Domains, and The Five Elements:

An Investigation into Human Nature

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火 The Element Fire

The element fire is positioned in the south. There is bing (丙 yang) fire and ding (丁 yin) fire. Among the Five Constant Virtues, fire is related to propriety (禮). In Taoism it is related to Primal Spirit (元神). In Buddhism, it is related to the precept against lust. Among the five professions (scholars, farmers, workers, merchants, and officials), fire people tend to be officials. A fire person tends to have a full and robust body, well-rounded and filled out. His face is pointed at the top, and wide in the middle, resembling a flame. Since the color of fire is red, a fire person has a ruddy face. His hair is sparse, and his eyes are small. Fire people move about very quickly, just like a flickering flame. They can't sit still, and find it hard to remain steady and stationary for any length of time. They race around frantically, getting involved in a thousand-and-one odds and ends, and yet, they might not have anything worthwhile to show for it by the end of the day's work.

The greatest defect of yin fire types is in their hatred for people. Hatred leads to cruelty and rage. They would simmer with hatred, to the point that they cannot sleep at night. They will grit their teeth and say below their breath, "I wish so and so would die soon!" Yin fire people have these five negative characteristics:

hate 恨
suffering 苦
discrimination 別
argumentativeness 辯
conflict 衝

Of the five poisons (anger, hatred, resentment, vexation, and affliction), fire types have a problem with hatred. Of the five flavors, it is related to bitterness. Of the five viscera, it is related to the heart. Hatred injures the heart. Therefore, fire types tend to develop coronary ailments. They are also prone to suffer from insomnia, insanity, heart palpitations and fright. Since the heart and the small intestine function as a pair, fire people often experience discomfort in their small intestine, as well.

Yang fire people, on the other hand, are civil and gracious. Yang fire is related to propriety (禮) and reason (理), therefore yang fire people are rational, courteous, and pleasant to deal with.

They are modest and gentle, they do not fight and are not greedy. In Taoism, fire is related to the primal spirit. When the spirit is complete, one is brilliant and intelligent, and is able to transform the myriad things.

Here's a simple analogy for fire people. We burn small lamps before the Buddhas. These oil lamps or candles are not necessarily large, but they are placed right in front of the Buddhas, and so they occupy a most honored position. Only fragrant and clean oil is burned in these lamps. By the same token, yang fire people may not be extensively learned, nonetheless, they are gentle and good-natured, and by their own warm-heartedness, they are able to influence others to reach understanding. This is like a torch. Thousands of people come to borrow light from it, and each brings home a flame which he can cook with or light lamps with. Yet the flame of the original torch does not diminish. It burns brighter all the time. Fire people have that quality of shedding light on things and brightening others as well.

Speaking on a vast scale, the sun is true yang fire. Selfless and greatly public, it shines on everything without exception. We can all examine ourselves, to see what kind of fire we have.

Are you like a forest fire that gets out of control and damages all the trees and creatures? That would be yin fire. Yang fire, on the other hand, contains itself and does not go out of its bounds. Its salient quality is propriety. Decorum and etiquette found expression in ritual and music in ancient China. Confucius had something to say about this. "The ritual and music of the ancients were rustic. The ritual and music of later generations are that of polished gentlemen. If I had my choice, I would choose the mode of the ancients."

In the beginning, when rites and music were first established, people preserved their innocent qualities and did not engage in conscious de-liberation. They did not have such clear-cut discriminations between self and others. They looked upon everybody as one big family, and cherished everyone equally. Therefore, they were called "rustic." They stressed the spirit over the letter of propriety. As time went on, people became more attentive to external format, and overlooked some of the more basic aspects of propriety. They stressed the letter, not the spirit, of propriety. Therefore, Confucius said their system had the air of "accomplished gentlemen"--it was elegant and refined, but maybe a bit contrived.

In ancient times, when people's basic nature was kind and gentle, they did not need to talk about humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and so forth. They embodied those qualities. For this reason, Lau Dz observed, "When the Great Path is abolished, humaneness and righteousness appear. When a country is in chaos, loyal ministers come forth." Only when human nature becomes degraded is there a need to advocate morality and ethics. And so Confucius said he preferred the rites and music of the ancients.

I will now bring up a historical event for discussion. By looking at the personalities involved, we will gain a deeper understanding of the various elements and their properties. During the Three Kingdoms Period (222-265 A.D.), the Imperial Prime Minister Tsau Tsau (曹操) moved the Emperor of Han to a place called Syu Chang (許昌). Tsau Tsau had long harbored the intent of usurping the throne. He domineered the decisions in the royal court and the emperor had been

reduced to a puppet. One time, Tsau Tsau invited the emperor Syan Di (獻帝) to go on a hunting expedition. He was planning to use this as a means to test the devotion of the court ministers. The emperor dared not refuse, and so the royal entourage came out of the city and headed towards the imperial hunting grounds. Lyu Bei, Gwan Yu, and Jang Fei (three blood brothers dedicated to the restoration of the house of Han) with only several tens of men in their company, rode out at the same time. Tsau Tsau commanded an awesome army, a hundred thousand strong. He rode almost abreast the emperor, his steed only a couple of feet behind. So disrespectful and brash was his manner! The civil and military officers all stayed behind. Intimidated into silence, no one dared come near.

Then they arrived at Syu Tyan, the royal game preserve. They had just ridden up a slope when suddenly a large deer sprang from the thistles nearby. The emperor aimed and released three arrows, failing to strike the animal. Then he turned to Tsau Tsau and said, "Why don't you try?"

Tsau Tsau took the emperor's personal bow and golden-tipped arrow, took aim, and hit the deer with one shot. The ministers raced out to where the deer had fallen. Seeing that a golden-tipped arrow had hit the animal, they let out a cheer and said, "The emperor hit it!" and brought the deer back.

Right at this time, Tsau Tsau maneuvered his horse and came right in front of the emperor, and received the offering with a cold smile on his face. The entire group was aghast, Such an act was the height of impudence and discourtesy, but no one dared breathe a word!

At this time, General Gwan Yu, who was mounted behind Lyu Bei, broke out in a rage. Brandishing his sword he was just about to charge with his steed, ready to chop off Tsau Tsau's head at that very instant. Lyu Bei immediately turned his head and waved his hand, motioning no. Gwan Yu thus controlled himself and did not take further action.

Lyu Bei then bowed from his waist down towards Tsau Tsau and politely said, "Surely, the Prime Minister's skill in archery is rare in the world!"

Tsau Tsau laughed, "Ha, ha. I am merely borrowing the great blessings of the emperor!" Then he turned his horse around and congratulated the emperor. But he never returned the imperial bow. Instead, he slung it over his own shoulders and kept it.

From the above incident, we can delve into the personality of the different characters involved. General Gwan, obviously, was a combination of yang wood and yang fire. He had a great sense of chivalry and courage. He could not bear to see Tsau Tsau's impudent insult of his sovereign, and he was ready to kill Tsau Tsau and rid the country of a treacherous minister. Lyu Bei, on the other hand, had yang water. He was sharp and alert, yet steady and composed, able to respond to any situation as it came along. Those are the qualities of yang water. He saw that Tsau Tsau was flanked by his henchmen on all sides, and so the situation would not allow for a single false move. He did not allow Gwan Yu to act on impulse.

Tsau Tsau was a classic example of *yin* fire. Ambitious and contentious, overbearing and oppressive, he was going to browbeat everyone into submission. By shooting the deer, he was able to see the reaction of the ministers of the court. Emperor Syan was *yin* earth-- he was cowardly, intimidated, and indecisive.