

RIDING THE WAVES
OF CHANGE



FOUNDATION – ISSUE ONE
HEAVEN IS ROUND

Heaven is Round

New Perspectives on the Five Phases

The five phases is a 2000-year-old Chinese theory which is used to align human action with natural cycles of change. Learn about its history as well as new perspectives which reflect contemporary ideas and issues. Its Chinese name is *wuxing*. The phases are called Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth.

Cover - Artwork by [Thyme Leng](#)

Acknowledgements - See pp. 6 & 18

FOUNDATION SERIES

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| F1 | Riding the Waves of Change
Introduces Heaven is Round and the Foundation series. |
| F2 | Rules of Conduct at a Crossroads
<i>Wu</i> means five. This issue explores the myriad meanings of the word, <i>xing</i> , plus a simple guide to Chinese characters. |
| F3 | Mission of the Five Elements
The Five Elements is the oldest translation of <i>wuxing</i> . A missionary agenda lay behind this choice. |
| F4 | Long Live the Ancestors
Myths and rituals of water, trees, fire and soil, and auspices of five related to the Xia and Shang eras, 2 nd millennium BCE. |
| F5 | Celestial Configurations
Myths and rituals of metal, and auspices of five during the Zhou dynasty, 1 st millennium BCE. |
| F6 | Heaven's Order
The theory of <i>wuxing</i> applied to the art of ruling |
| F7 | Balancing Act
<i>Yin-yang</i> in early Chinese thought |



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- * I use the Chinese phrase, *wuxing*, when I refer to the traditional theory and the five phases for the new perspectives.
- * I use lower case for the natural resources (fire, water, etc.,) and upper case for the abstract processes (Fire, Water, etc.,).
- * The dates of people, dynasties and eras can be found at the bottom of the relevant page or section.

F1 Chinese words – tone marks, page nos. and traditional characters

Listen to the Audio Guide to learn more about the tones in Mandarin. Read a simple guide to Chinese characters (F2, 18 – 21). I use *pinyin* unless it's a quote or a common phrase like Tai Chi.

Shāng dynasty	1	商朝	<i>wúwéi</i>	11	無為
Zhōu dynasty	1	周朝	<i>dé</i>	14	德
<i>Lǎozǐ</i>	1	老子	<i>mìng</i>	14	命
<i>Dàodéjīng</i>	1	道德经	<i>dào</i>	14	道
<i>wúxíng</i>	1	五行	Qín	15	秦朝
<i>fēngshuǐ</i>	3	風水	Hàn	15	漢朝
<i>Yì jīng</i>	8	易經	Xīn	15	新朝
<i>qì</i>	8	氣	Qín	15	秦始皇帝
<i>yīn-yáng</i>	9	陰陽	Shǐhuángdì		

Introduction

Riding the Waves of Change opens with a light-hearted scene-setting of what was happening in China when this theory arose. You'll notice from the beginning that I do not write history in a formal sense. The style is closer to a historical romance. By that, I do not mean a sweeping epic with clandestine affairs and political betrayals but a story-telling feel with jovial asides and liberal doses of poetic licence.

Next up, I explain my background and how I started to have new insights into the Five Phases. Then I introduce the Foundation series – the seven issues which cover the theory's tenets and historical context. I also explain which parts of the traditional theory I keep, and which not.

The second half of this opening issue is an overview of future series which introduce the new perspectives.

The Psychology series explores the Five Phases as states of mind: our thoughts, feelings, and actions. The focus will be human needs, the pressure to meet other people's needs as well as our own, and how our nervous system shapes our sense of self.

The Evolution series is definitely a sweeping epic from bipedal apes to Bronze Age rituals. To give this epic some structure, the human use of the five natural resources—fire, water, trees, soil and ores— will act as a mirror for various stages of human evolution.

The Philosophy series revisits the historical era when the theory arose. This time, the new perspectives on the Five Phases are the lens to analyse other ideas which developed at the same time as *wuxing*.

The Society series focuses on current issues in the workplace, the world at large, the intertwining crises of mental health, climate change, political movements, and so on. This series will run in parallel with the Philosophy series. I'll move back and forth between what we face nowadays and what was happening in early China, an era which was also one of immense change and uncertainty.

RIDING THE WAVES OF CHANGE

Heaven's Encyclicals

In China, 250 BCE, no one was the Son of Heaven. The Zhou dynasty, which rose to power eight centuries earlier had all but lost its political might and divine right to rule. The last Zhou king had just died in prison, and the race to become the founder of a new dynasty had turned into a marathon. Worse still, it was an arms race. Noble warriors lay wasted on the battlefields of the Art of War. Conscripts coerced into the cause kept falling along the Way. For every ten thousand days of war there were but seven days of peace. If Chinese philosophy waxes lyrical about balance and harmony, it is because the opposite was closer to reality.¹

The Zhou dynasty origins were steeped in a creed that Heaven, the sky as a supreme deity, had bestowed a mandate upon its founders to rule in place of the former Shang dynasty, whose kings had grown too corrupt to remain worthy of Heaven's favour. Or so went the rhetoric. As time wore on, however, the royal suits of armour began to lose their invincible sheen of stardust. Battles were lost, droughts brought famine, and royal authority slowly but surely paled to insignificance. Into the power vacuum flowed the ambitions of regional lords wishing to adorn themselves with the mantle of supreme rule. Their incessant rivalry gave rise to five centuries of continuous warfare.

Yet, surely, Heaven's favour could not be won by military might. Sages set out to define divine right. Ideals of best practice abounded amid the worst of practices as words of wisdom were forged alongside the furnaces churning out weapons. The *Art of War*, the *Way and Power* (*Laozi* or *Daodejing*) and the *Analects* (of Confucius) were reflections on how to navigate the complexities of living in this era. As for the theory of *wuxing*, it was one among the burgeoning number of ideas about how the world works. Or how it should work if it did work at all.²

The five components of the theory, Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth were first grouped together as essential resources for daily life. As the theory evolved, they were reconceived as five types of action that wax and wane in successive phases. For instance, Metal is the phase of decay and severance. Echoing a sharpened blade, Metal elicits pangs of grief that cut you in two, or sighs of relief once a leaden weight is lifted. While Metal is busy issuing redundancy packages, the impetus of Wood is to grow and evolve. Growth rarely follows a straight path, however, reflecting the warp of timber, as the myriad things (life on earth) wend their way through complex webs of interaction.³

According to one weighty tome on the art of ruling even dynasties rose and fell by its lore.⁴ The radiant power of Fire that had governed the Zhou dynasty had lost its spark. Water was due to rush in and take its place. Whoever could get on their surfboard and ride the waves of change could be the next supreme ruler. Any provincial powermonger with delusions of grandeur would do well to heed Heaven's next encyclical.⁵

Regional lords consulted spiritual hackers to crack the codes of Heaven's Order. They drew up charts of lucky and unlucky days; interpreted omens; studied the stars; and brewed elixirs of immortality. *Wuxing* formed part of their code-breaking arsenal: 'The Five Phases of Building a

Successful Dynasty'; it would have been hot off the shelves! All you have to do is face the right direction, on the right day, at the right time, eat the right food, wear the right coloured robes, give the right command, and have sex the right number of times in the right positions. If doing so gives you an edge on the competition, surely, it's worth a try? But did the wannabe emperor's new robes offer genuine efficacy or were they mere figments of his political imagination unlikely to withstand any real bullets of change.

Frankly, any semblance of order was welcome when uncertainty was rife, and a nasty death was much more likely than everlasting life. Yet so many rules to follow and rituals to enact led to a busy schedule

土	EARTH
Fabled era of the Yellow Emperor	
木	WOOD
Xia era	
金	METAL
Shang dynasty	
火	FIRE
Zhou dynasty	
水	WATER
Next dynasty?	

for a harassed lord trying to keep his head above water, or at least not get it chopped off. Should he really wear green, in spring, eat sour food, and issue prohibitions against tree-felling in order to harness the waxing power of Wood? The year planner was already full of sacrifices to the ancestors. Keeping the dead in good spirits required inordinate degrees of time and expense. Could he follow the latest trends in power dressing as well? Apparently, green has become so last season.

The rise and fall of dynasties according to Heaven's encyclicals is long gone, but the theory is still used today to gauge the ups and downs of life. In the practical arts of medicine, astrology, *fengshui* (geomantic design) and numerology, your health and future prospects are assessed through the dynamic interactions of Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth. You too can ride the rip tides of change and avoid getting wiped out.

As for this work, *Heaven is Round*, I barely visit the theory in its familiar haunts. I offer no counsel on how to improve domestic harmony by adding the warm yellow tones of Earth to your kitchen makeover. Or couple counselling for fire horses and water rats should the harmony project fail to deliver.

Early Chinese teachers and statesmen lived amid constant battles for power. They thought about how to increase a state's resources, persuade rulers to have a semblance of morality, and how ostentatious displays of wealth left many people struggling to survive. Such concerns still loom large nowadays. The five phases can illuminate similar issues, I believe, but to do so I divest the theory of its colour-coordinated robes of cosmic harmony. Nor do I wax lyrical about going with the flow or any other soundbites of sagacity forged during centuries of warfare. I do still use the premise of natural processes which wax and wane in successive phases but how do those processes affect what we think, feel and do: How we form groups; split up into factions; worry about security; adopt shared beliefs and face moral dilemmas.

In *Heaven is Round*, I elucidate patterns of human behaviour by drawing on examples from human evolution, the historical era when the theory was formulated, as well as the challenges we face nowadays. In short, I offer a modern western take on this ancient theory of change but one that I think is no less authentic for being so.

Heaven is Round – the backstory

Let's shift gear now with a change of focus: a potted personal history in order to frame how these new perspectives came about.

As a student I trained as a contemporary dancer. In my last year of college, I found myself drawn to Asian performing arts. I became the apprentice to a Korean dancer who taught me moving meditation. I was a member of the New York City taiko group (Japanese drumming). Later, I learnt traditional techniques of making taiko with a Japanese master craftsman. I also received a two-year scholarship to study percussion and moving meditation in Indonesia.⁶

Aware of the hand-to-mouth existence of her students, as we did all sorts of odd jobs to get by, one of my movement teachers said to me, "Do Shiatsu, it's good for you and good for the planet." Upon my return to the UK I trained in Movement Shiatsu, a form of bodywork pioneered by Bill Palmer, which explores how the channels of Chinese medicine reflect stages of infant movement development. His creative approach to the five phases has been especially influential. I also trained as a Core Process Psychotherapist; a practice rooted in Buddhist psychology.⁷

I say all this to stress my background as a practitioner rather than a scholar. Yet I am also quite intellectual. I am curious about the world and all its political shenanigans. Studying, teaching and working abroad made me acutely aware of social inequalities and environmental issues.

While training as a therapist I worked as a team leader at a centre for ecological studies, Schumacher College, where leading luminaries came to impart their wisdom. Fritjof Capra, author of the Tao of Physics, was one of the visiting teachers in my day. Through the college network, I teamed up with colleagues who worked in organisational development and conflict resolution. Our aim was to help organisations to collaborate effectively. While developing this work, I kept having new insights into the five phases. The insights seemed to come out of the blue. In other words, these new perspectives were not a conscious decision. However, upon reflection, I think I needed a model, a hook around which to pull together my diverse occupations and preoccupations.⁸

With the support of my colleagues, I gave a talk on how different models of organisational change can be mapped across the five phases. For example, if an organisation needs to generate ideas for new ways of working or products, reflecting the phase of Water, a model called Open Space Technology might be appropriate. Or if there are tensions about pay and validation, echoing the phase of Earth, Transactional Analysis could be beneficial. After the talk, a colleague asked me if I had thought of writing a book. I had not, but why not? The book could begin with a brief account of the historical context followed by contemporary case studies. However, because I knew the five phases as a practitioner, my knowledge of early Chinese history was at Level Zero. To write that brief account I needed to delve into a few history books.⁹

Initially, I would look up *wuxing* (or its various translations) in the index and read those specific paragraphs or pages. Often enough, there only were a few paragraphs or pages; hardly any books had *wuxing* as the primary focus. Moreover, getting to grips with early Chinese history felt like doing a jigsaw puzzle with an ever-expanding number of pieces. Over time, it was the history which held me ever more tightly in its grip. Utterly absorbed in the world of early China, *wuxing* became just one piece of the jigsaw puzzle, or let's be generous and say five pieces.

Bewildered by the mirage of an emerging picture, as historians turned the kaleidoscope to reveal new patterns, I began to use my own insights into the five phases to piece together the puzzle. In other words, the new perspectives became the lens to study the era when the theory arose. I found myself ensconced in a kind of meta-analysis. Plus, mission creep spread backwards to earlier eras of human history. I amassed lots of draft chapters, but I was shy about sharing my musings with others.

As for being a five-phase change agent, I didn't feel I had enough experience running organisations to help others manage theirs. Having moved to a new city and with a young child to care for, instead, I turned to setting up community projects. I worked with school-excluded young people, refugee families, and in cross-cultural heritage. I ran one course on facilitation skills for voluntary sector workers using the five phases, but the ideas largely fell on deaf ears. My heart sank, ironically, when a participant who knew a tad about the theory said, "Fire is all about love." That's not untrue, but Fire is about a whole lot more as well. Minimum,

if I say, “I love you” in a hollow tone of voice, the glowing embers in the hearth of Fire may at best last until the morning after.

I separated the two strands of my life. The new perspectives on the five phases became a private world, as if winding down from a day’s work by idly seeing if a missing piece of that large jigsaw puzzle on the coffee table can be located. I ran many interesting community projects, but I no longer tried to do any public work centred on the five phases. Nevertheless, the years go by, and while I am in good health if I do not overcome the self-doubt, which is the primary problem, I may keel over and not even AI would be any the wiser.

So, allow me to sketch out the vision. Rather than one book I have dreamt up the equivalent of five. Coincidence not intended! And that does seem overwhelming, so instead of feeling the weight of books, I’ll focus on writing series of articles. Each series will have at least six issues of 20 – 30 pages in length or approximately 1 - 1 ½ hour’s listening time. We are practising long-form as your Tai Chi teacher would tell you.¹⁰

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| Foundation | This series is the brief account of the historical context, albeit not as brief as I once imagined. |
| Psychology | This series introduces the new perspectives with a focus on human needs. |
| Evolution | This series is the mission creep which spread backwards to earlier stages of human history. |
| Philosophy | This series is the meta-analysis in which the new insights become the lens to study the era when the theory arose. |
| Society | This series is the original idea of applying the five phases to 21st century organisational practices and social issues. |

There will be a cross-referencing system. For example, if I want to refer to this page in another issue, it will be abbreviated to F1, 6 (Foundation One, page 6), or simply p.6 if the reference is in the current issue.

To keep the narrative flowing and light-hearted I do not mention sources as we go along. I weave many strands of research into attractive patterns, but the scholarly knots are all hidden on the reverse side. To check sources, go to the Notes at the end of an issue. If you are reading on a device, you can also hover over a number at the end of a paragraph, and its requisite note will pop up; likewise, for online links in the Notes.

Foundation

The Foundation series is written with a few basic questions in mind:

- You say its Chinese name is *wuxing*; what does that mean?
- Isn't this called the Five Elements?
- How does the Chinese system compare to the Greek elements?
- Why five? What's special about the number five?
- Why those five? Why fire, water, wood, metal and earth?
- You call it a theory; what is it a theory of?
- Is there a connection to *yin* and *yang*?

This theory suffers from a surfeit of translations: five phases, elements, processes, agents, forces and more. *Wu* means five, no problems there. *Xing* is an ancient but common word with all sorts of meanings.

F2 - Rules of Conduct at a Crossroads weaves the multiple meanings of the word, *xing*, into an overall picture. This issue also has a simple guide to the development of Chinese characters.

F3 - Mission of the Five Elements introduces how the Five Elements as a translation came about, and how the Greek elements—earth, air, fire and water were first compared to their Chinese counterparts.

F4 – Long Live the Ancestors focuses on why five and why those five. I introduce the significance of five in cycles of ritual time and divisions of sacred space, as well as myths and rituals of water, trees, fire, and soil associated with the Xia and Shang eras (p. iii).

F5 - Celestial Configurations continues these two themes into the Zhou dynasty, the Mandate of Heaven, and myths and rituals of metal.

F6 - Heaven's Order focuses on *wuxing* as a theory.

The word “theory” refers to large, overarching ideas with predictive and explanatory powers.¹¹

The large overarching idea of *wuxing* is that phenomena of the sky, the natural world, and human life are interconnected. Events in one sphere spontaneously resonate with the other two like cosmic musical strings. Harmonic resonance is orchestrated by ensembles of quintets, e.g., five

tastes, colours, sounds, and so on which are the basis for the prognostic (predictive) and diagnostic (explanatory) use of *wuxing* in the practical arts. I'll illustrate how the theory was applied to the art of ruling.

F7 - Balancing Act introduces how this same premise underlay *yin-yang*. We'll start with *yin-yang* as observations of the sun, moon and weather. Then turn to the theme of cosmogenesis: a great unity morphs into the *yin-yang* complements of light-dark, hot-cold, light-heavy. We'll touch upon the political agenda of associating women with *yin*, and lastly how *yin-yang* and *wuxing* do (or do not) work together.

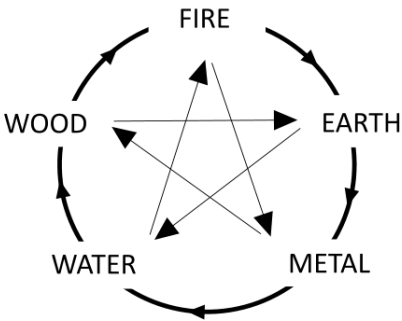
Before introducing the other series, I would like to clarify which aspects of the traditional theory I continue to use and which not. Not all these topics have been introduced yet, but they will be covered in more detail throughout the Foundation series.

First, I drop the idea that celestial, terrestrial, and human activity share a cosmic reverb. The corresponding lists of phenomena— the five tastes, colours, sounds, planets, internal organs, and so on are likewise largely relinquished.

Second, as mentioned, I do not visit *wuxing* in its familiar haunts. Books and websites on Chinese medicine, martial arts and so on abound. Many include a section on *wuxing*, usually as the Five Elements. Books written by master practitioners are comprehensive guides to their field. I have little to add, especially since I do not use the traditional methods of diagnosis and prognosis. I also apologise for my lack of interest in the *Yijing* (*I Ching, Book of Changes*). Contemporary guides to this venerable work are readily available.

Third, another bite out of the traditional theory is *qi*. In Chinese cosmology *qi* is the protean substrate of all phenomena be it solid, liquid, gas or emotions. Phenomena of the sky, the natural world, and human life are interconnected because they share the same type of *qi*. I do not ask whether *qi* is real or if it reflects the energy-matter spectrum, albeit framed in ancient beliefs. Both may be true. Simply, because I do not use the premise of cosmic resonance, I do not need to explain my ideas through the medium of *qi*. This is handy because *qi* is not easy to put into words anyway. Sometimes translated as life force or energy, like *xing*, no single English word encapsulates the semantic breadth of *qi*.¹²

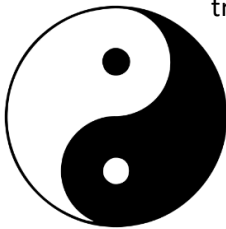
One aspect of the traditional theory I do keep is the two basic cycles through which the five phases generate and regulate each other. They will be introduced in Mission of the Five Elements (F3, 9 - 11) and again in Heaven's Order (F6).



This is a standard modern depiction of the two main cycles of *wuxing*.

The outer arrows are the generating cycle; the inner arrows are the regulating or control cycle.

I also keep *yin-yang*. When I first experienced new insights into the five phases, its cosmic chessboard of mystical moves didn't interest me. Yet the more engrossed I became in the five phases, the more that *yin-yang* kept spontaneously arising in my train of thought. And as a



train of thought, because the complementary pairs that came to mind were states of mind. Typical complements are inner and outer, lunar and solar, lower and higher, feminine and masculine, but the complements I envisaged were, for example, risk and security, novelty and familiarity, humanity and inhumanity, difference and indifference. Their apparent

tensions will be explored in the Psychology series.

By losing traditional tenets, I drop aspects of *wuxing* that might come across as superstitious or at least contrived. But even with a pared down, updated model of the five phases, is there any objectivity to it? If the generating cycle is a lifecycle, and the regulating cycle reflects the self-regulating properties of living systems, so far so good. Whether a lifecycle can be delineated as five phases is harder to ascertain. Hence, it's still a theory, a large overarching idea. I use its explanatory powers, but I do not try to predict anything. Alice's unified theory of everything is a way of thinking about human behaviour. You can gauge whether or not the ideas seem plausible. Let us now peer through the looking glass.

Psychology

The Psychology series interweaves three themes. First, I'll convey each phase as a quality of human experience, a palette of thoughts, feelings, and actions. As mentioned early on, Metal is the phase of decay and severance that elicits pangs of grief or sighs of relief. Wood is the phase of growth with its twists and turns as we navigate our way through the complexities of careers and relationships. Hence, I still see these five phases as natural processes, I do not wholly abandon the influence of heaven and earth, but I will endeavour to describe how these natural processes underlie what we think, feel, and do.

Second, I will map human needs over the cycles of *yin-yang* and the five phases. I work on the basis that needs are survival drivers. If we do not meet a need we will die or at least suffer ill-health. If we cannot breathe, we will die pretty quickly. If we lack autonomy in the workplace or recognition in our social group, we will not keel over but our nervous system can still react as if our life is under threat. As a social species, we evolved to meet the majority of our needs collectively or in relationship. If you are ostracized from your group, you are more likely to get mauled by a predator. While that might not be the case nowadays, if a teenager does not get a response to their social media post within an hour, or if an employee is micro-managed, a sign of low status, our nervous system may nevertheless elicit stress responses which undermine our health.

I do not think in terms of needs and wants. I prefer to focus on strategies, resources, and threats. In short, a strategy is how you meet a need, a resource is what meets a need, and a threat stands in the way of meeting a need. Depending on the context or proportion, the same thing can be a resource and a threat. A parent or carer can be a resource and a threat. Fire and water are resources and threats.¹³

Most animals have a limited range of strategies, meaning, what they do to get food, water, shelter, safety, a mate. A hungry cougar stalks a herd of alpacas; she does not open a café on the shores of Lake Titicaca serving fair trade quinoa and bean burgers to tourists. Most animals also rely on a specific range of resources. Giant pandas evolved to eat a diet that is 99% bamboo and struggle to branch out. The human capacity to

invent new strategies and resources is a part of our success story as a species. The catch of the creative brain is that it consumes a lot of energy.

Theme three, therefore, I'll frame the process of meeting needs in light of how our brain saves energy through habitual perceptions and action. What we think, feel, and do shifts into auto-pilot. These learned behaviours are incredibly useful: they enable us to cycle safely through heavy traffic or use a kitchen knife without chopping off our fingers, but they can also work against us. Strategies we adopt as children, perhaps to stay safe in a dangerous situation, can become life-limiting as adults: we survive, we get by, but we struggle to thrive.

Resources change; threats change; our strategies must adapt to change. However, our nervous system embodies our identity, the feeling of who we are. Habitual perceptions and actions become synonymous with that feeling, the comfort zone of your familiar sense of self, and the people, objects, and belief structures that shore up your familiar world. To undo an outdated strategy, to let go of a precious resource, to update your brain's guide to the world of threats, even when you are fully aware of the benefits of doing so, can still feel disorienting and overwhelming. Possible, yes, easy, no; old habits die hard.

I'll begin with the complementary states of mind; link them to human needs; explain different types of resources and threats; and use a touch of neuroscientific story-telling to introduce how our brains learn, save energy, and embody strategies which shape our sense of self. I'll then work my way around the five phases. For example:

What is this? Comparing a Korean Zen meditation practice with the 'orienting response', a reflex which helps animals (including humans) identify new resources and threats. This issue will relate to the phase of Water, albeit not exclusively.

Negotiating Wu Wei – *Wuwei* means non-action but with a gist of no contrary or abrasive action. We'll reflect on the balance of light and heavy in our relationships at home and work. Who pulls their weight; who throws their weight around; or who is getting off lightly? These perceptions underlie our sense of fairness about the everyday actions of meeting needs collectively. This issue will highlight the phases of Wood and Earth, but again not exclusively.

Heaven is Round, the project title, will also be a theme of this series. A rounded heaven was a vision of the shape of the sky in early China, but we'll look at a more psychological interpretation. Heaven in the sense of a paradise can have a linear feel of being somewhere above and beyond our daily reality. I'll explore an all-around, intimate view of heaven as it transpires in the phase of Fire and transition into Earth.

Let's turn now to the next series and explore how our habits, our learned behaviours and a shared sense of identity have shaped human cultures.

Evolution

Human evolution is as vogue as meeting needs, and the two are closely related. I think my interest in human evolution was sparked by *'Talking to My Daughter about the Economy'* written by Yanis Varoufakis, who recommended reading *'Guns, Germs, and Steel'* by Jared Diamond. One footnote led to another as I kept coming across broader anthropological themes which reflected myths of leadership in early Chinese texts.¹⁴

In the blink of an evolutionary eye, I found myself reading about how the northern and southern banks of the Congo River had delineated the behavioural traits of chimpanzees and bonobos. Human evolution is fascinating, but it's also very long. How could I wend my way back to the fertile flood plains of the Yellow River in northern China, one of the first sites of complex societies along with the flood plains of the Nile (Egypt), the Tigris and Euphrates (Mesopotamia). Oh, how mountains and rivers delineate our cultural parameters! Even for our primate relatives.¹⁵

As I became absorbed in ever more obscure articles in scientific journals, with all the attendant pedantry of which fragment of bone fits which part of the anatomical jigsaw puzzle of evolution, I started to think about how the role of fire in human evolution reflected the phase of Fire.

The phase of Fire is a useful angle from which to explore the evolution of speaking and listening, of shared stories and values which create social bonds within and among communities.

The phase of Earth will likewise be a guide to the significance of soil and earthenware as the domestication of plants and animals slowly but surely shifted our relationship to food in the Neolithic era.

The phase of Metal will mirror how metal objects became symbols of status and wealth as social hierarchies developed in the Bronze Age. Even stirrups featured in the borderland skirmishes between pastoral nomads and settled agricultural communities.

While I do not think these connections are wholly contrived, they will be primarily story-telling devices. I'll chart human evolution from bipedal apes to Bronze Age rituals through the practical use of water, trees, fire, soil, and ores. The attendant irony is the absence of stone on the *wuxing* list of natural resources. Timber does not leave such an indelible mark on the archaeological record as arrow heads and megaliths.

In preparation for working my way back to the flood plains of the Yellow River, I'll keep track of a few key themes: power, leadership, and methods of social control; religious beliefs and rituals; as well as cooking and sharing food. The themes will be framed in light of how we evolved to meet needs collectively.

We'll also look at how the five phases operate as a cycle of cultural evolution. By culture, I mean the process of passing on skills, knowledge, and beliefs. There is one species of human nowadays, the 'wise humans' (we wish), but human cultures are as diverse as if we were ten thousand species each with their own adaptive niche.

The key to understanding how humans evolved and why we are so different from other animals is to recognize that we are a *cultural species*. Probably over a million years ago members of our evolutionary lineage began learning from each other in such a way that culture became cumulative... hunting practices, tool-making skills, tracking know-how, edible-plant knowledge began to improve and aggregate.¹⁶

To begin with, however, I draw on this collective know-how to introduce the driver of natural selection, which reflects the transition from Water to Wood. The phase of Water is not only a good diving point into the primordial soup of single-celled organisms but also how chance and random circumstances shape the game of life. Several million years ago, selective pressures led some apes to make short journeys from one patch of woodland to another on two legs rather than four.

Philosophy

As mentioned in the opening gambit of this issue, renowned works of early Chinese thought were initially forged during an era of continuous warfare. If *wuxing* was one among a burgeoning number of ideas about how the world works, the Philosophy series explores the other ideas.

The last era of the Zhou dynasty is the Warring States (5th – 3rd C BCE). Living amid ferocious battles, the thinkers and statesmen of this era were preoccupied by how to improve state administration, dissuade rulers from swallowing magic bullets peddled by charlatans and the exorbitant costs of keeping the dead in good spirits. The five phases will be the lens through which to frame their concerns. From a baseline of human needs, we'll look at the strategies they proposed to increase resources and reduce threats for individuals, families and lineages, and for rulers and states. We'll continue the themes of power, leadership, methods of social control; religious beliefs and rituals; preparing and sharing food at lineage feasts; and cultural transmission.

I'll return to the waning authority of the Zhou kings and waxing might of their regional lords. I'll explore the nuances of *de*, another key term which belies translation. Power, potency, and virtue are common choices. I'll begin with *de* as the charismatic power of lineage founders and rulers. I'll bring in a closely related word, *ming*; this is the 'Mandate' of Heaven. *Ming* is often translated as fate or destiny, but it also means a command. To fulfil Heaven's Command, you'll need charismatic power. I'll use the five phases to explore how *ming* and *de* were passed down generations and accumulated spiritual and political kudos for a lineage.

We'll explore how a loss of charismatic power in the royal lineage and if not a waning, then, certainly a changing perception of Heaven's Mandate led to the burgeoning ideas of the Warring States. These ideas were often expressed as *dao* (*tao*), a word which is usually translated as the Way. As Warring States thinkers sought to court regional lords, in order to gain influence, they endeavoured to persuade rulers that their Dao, their Way, was the only correct one, the one which would lead to success in some shape or form. Part of their persuasive tactics was to deride other Ways which were clearly heading down the wrong path.

Dao, the way, can also imply a method, a way of doing something skilfully such as the Way of Archery (F2, 12). Zhou dynasty archers learnt how to shoot arrows while standing in a chariot that was moving across bumpy terrain. A whole new meaning to leading a balanced life! We'll explore this skilful action in light of how our brain saves energy through learned behaviours. The difference between habitual and spontaneous action was one of the Warring States debates. Indeed, these thinkers were also practitioners – of ceremonial rituals, meditation, exercises to promote health (libido and longevity), music and craftsmanship.

These ideas and practices eventually become known in the West as Confucianism, Daoism (Taoism), and other so-called schools such as Legalism or Mohism. Scholars balk at the use of these labels, however, especially projected backwards onto the Warring States era. Seeds were sown, yes, but the labels were retrospectively applied, not least to form a classification system for part of the collection of the imperial library.¹⁷

By analysing the ideas and practices through the five phases I do not rely too much on these labels anyway. Nor do I use a categorical approach in which, say, Daoism corresponds to the phase of Water or Legalism to Metal. A more nuanced exploration emerges if these various Ways are analysed through all five phases and their interactions.

The Zhou dynasty came to an end in 256 BCE when its last king died in prison. While the authority of the royal house waned over time, the Zhou is still China's longest-serving dynasty lasting eight centuries. In the next thirty years, the state of Qin conquered all the other warring states and unified China under the rule of Qin Shihuangdi, better known as the First Emperor of China. His famous mausoleum was initially found by farmers in the 1970s. It contained over 8000 terracotta soldiers who were created to defend him against his many enemies in the afterlife.

The Qin dynasty, China's first empire, was a formative period but it didn't last long. After fifteen years it collapsed under heavy rebellions. The ensuing Han dynasty lasted for four centuries albeit with the equally short-lived Xin dynasty half-way through. Although the seeds of *wuxing* were sown during the Warring States the theory took root during these early empires, the Qin, Han, and Xin.¹

¹ Qin 221 – 206

Han 206 BCE – 220 CE

Xin 9 – 23 CE

Society

How to improve the efficiency of state administration, persuade rulers to have a semblance of morality, or how eye-watering degrees of wealth contrast with many people struggling to survive. Sounds familiar? The Society series focuses on contemporary social issues and organisational practices. I will write this series in tandem with the Philosophy series because an interesting dialogue could emerge between the two. I would not put comparisons in the same issue but rather as parallel concerns. In this way, the Philosophy issues do not become too abstruse, and the Society issues benefit from historical context.

For example, a philosopher called Master Mo was preoccupied by the ethics of larger states invading and annexing smaller neighbours. Russia's actions in Ukraine come to mind. Another example is whether a government official should speak truth to power, especially as power veers in autocratic directions. Do you remonstrate with your boss at the risk of losing your livelihood, or even your life, or do you keep your head down and collect your salary? Harking back to the point about pay and validation, complacency can set in during the phase of Earth.

Whose needs should take priority was another Warring States debate. Working in the voluntary (nonprofit) sector for many years, I am aware of the tensions of priority. Many nonprofits are set up to address the needs of a group which are being overlooked, or their contribution is undervalued. A rare species is surviving but a targeted campaign could help it to thrive. Most run on the basis of insecure funding sources, yet they aim to deliver sustainable solutions for their clients or cause. The balance sheet of 'too much - not enough' is indicative of the phase of Earth. This issue will be called the Paradox of Sustainability.

Another possible parallel is the lucrative business of consultancy. As the Zhou kingdom fractured into numerous warring states, one path to kudos and financial gain was to advise regional rulers on the correct *Dao*. In a modern context, how much should a company outsource work to consultants? Is there a pragmatic reason to do so or do you assume your staff are too set in their ways to think outside the box? Because to equate thinking outside the box with consulting outsiders is still thinking

inside the box. New ideas, fresh perspectives, are indicative of the phase of Water but another aspect of Water is untapped resources, the ones hiding in plain sight. No doubt more topical themes will emerge, but I hope these examples give you a flavour of this series.

Acknowledgements

In 2009, by chance, I met an eminent historian of China's early empires. We were both regular visitors of residents at a care home in Cambridge. Following a respectful period following the loss of his beloved wife I got in touch. Remarkably, he remembered me and invited me to lunch at his college. Michael Loewe (1922 – 2025) was a generous mentor and a cherished friend. Rather than dismissing me because I did not belong to an academic institution, he wrote letters of recommendation so I could access specialist libraries. I was reluctant to burden him with my breezy approach to the gravity of his field. Instead, over many years and many delicious lunches, I asked questions when I was puzzling over an obscure reference in a scholarly tome. When I lamented to Michael that I found it hard to write a brief account of the historical context of *wuxing*, as brevity was simply not possible, he replied with characteristic aplomb, "I should think not!" In the last few years of his life, having lost his sight, I read excerpts from books and journals to him when I visited his home. He often seemed to be asleep, but just as I was about to tiptoe out of the door he would say, "Go on." No longer able to use his private library, he also kindly let me borrow his books. I do not tread in his footsteps; quite the opposite. He never jumped to conclusions nor borrowed other people's whereas I do both! However, I would not have tried so hard to identify the myriad pieces of the jigsaw puzzle had I not met him. His counsel on the mirage of an emerging picture was usually, "We know so little." Perhaps so, but anyone who has encountered even a smidgen of early Chinese history will see more of that picture because of his diligent scholarship, numerous publications, and unstinting generosity towards his colleagues and students.¹⁸

NOTES

Online and open sources are underlined. Stable URLs are not dated; otherwise, the date of access is provided.

¹ Hsu Cho-yun calculated that from 722 – 222 BCE there were only 127 non-consecutive days when no battle was fought. That ratio works out as approximately ten thousand to seven days or 26 000 weeks of battles to 18 weeks without battles.

Hsu Cho-yun, *Ancient China in Transition, An Analysis of Social Mobility, 722 – 222 B.C.* (Stanford University Press, 1965), 56 – 64.

² I mention these three works because they are well-known nowadays but the ease with which we can buy what appears to be a book with an ancient Chinese sage as its purported author belies the complex journey of how they came to be so. This topic will receive more attention in the Philosophy series. For further details on the authorship and dates of the *Art of War*, *Laozi*, and the *Analects*, respectively, see:

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War, A New Translation by Michael Nylan* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 9 – 14.

Robert G. Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 1 - 22.

Hanmo Zhang, "The Author as the Head of a Teaching Lineage: Confucius, the Quotable Author", *Authorship and Text-Making in Early China* (De Gruyter, 2018), 93 – 174.

³ These descriptions of Metal and Wood are largely my own.

⁴ The 'weighty tome on the art of ruling' refers to the *Lushi Chunqiu* (Annals of Lu Buwei) dated to 239 BCE.

John Knoblock & Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lu Buwei, A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 283.

In the relevant passage, however, Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire, and Water are referred to as *wude* 五德 (five powers) rather than *wuxing*, but the sequence still follows the control cycle, albeit in reverse order.

⁵ Arguably still heaven-sent, an encyclical is in fact a letter from the Pope to all the bishops of the Catholic Church. It is a literary ruse on my part.

⁶ I was the apprentice to Sun Ock Lee, pioneer of Zen Dance, and a member of Soh Daiko, a taiko group in New York City. Joji Hirota, a

Japanese musician based in London invited me to study with the taiko maker, [Toru Hatamoto](#). I was awarded a [Darmasiswa scholarship](#) to study percussion in West Sumatra and Amerta Movement with [Suprpto Surydarmo](#) in Central Java. Acc. 13th October 2025

⁷ [Maureen Fleming](#) suggested that I trained in Shiatsu. Bill Palmer has written articles on [Movement Shiatsu](#). I trained in Core Process Psychotherapy with Maura and Franklyn Sills at the [Karuna Institute](#). Acc. 13th October 2025

⁸ [Schumacher College](#) was an initiative of Satish Kumar and the Dartington Trust. The Tao of Physics is cited in F3 n. 28. Jenny Edwards, Alison Harper and Dunia Hategekimana and introduced me to the practice of [NonViolent Communication](#). Acc. 13th October 2025

⁹ For further information on these two methods, see:

Harrison Owen, *Open Space Technology, A User's Guide* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1997).

Julie Hay, *Transactional Analysis for Trainers, Your Guide to Potent & Competent Applications of TA in Organisations* (Sherwood Publishing, 1996).

¹⁰ Tai Chi is written in the Wade- Giles script. In *pinyin*, the spelling is *Taiji*. Listen to the Audio Guide or read F2, p. 18 for more details.

¹¹ The description of a theory is from Jeremy DeSilva, who used it in contrast with a hypothesis: "For an idea to be scientific it has to generate predictions that can be compared with actual data."

Jeremy DeSilva, *First Steps, How Walking Upright Made Us Human* (William Collins, 2021), 35 – 37.

¹² The five phases as a translation of *wuxing* is associated with a mature stage of the theory's development when Water, Wood, Fire, Earth and Metal were types of *qi*. See:

Michael Nylan, "Yin-yang, Five Phases, and Qi" in *China's Early Empires, A Re-appraisal*, eds. Michael Nylan and Michael Loewe, (Cambridge University Press), 398- 413.

However, I use the five phases to emphasise stages of a sequence, specifically, a lifecycle, rather than as qualities of *qi*.

¹³ Jenny Edwards, pers. com., explained the difference between a need and a strategy to meet a need, an insight drawn from a talk by Marshall Rosenberg, pioneer of Non-Violent Communication. This point will be explored in more detail in the Psychology series.

¹⁴ The two books that sparked my interest in human evolution:

Yanis Varoufakis, *Talking to my Daughter about the Economy: A Brief History of Capitalism* (The Bodley Head, 2017).

Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs and Steel: A Short History of Everybody for the last 13, 000 Years* (Vintage 1998).

¹⁵ The different behavioural traits of chimpanzees and bonobos who live on the north and south sides of the Congo river is explained in:

Richard Wrangham & Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males, Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* (Bloomsbury, 1997), 220 - 226.

¹⁶ Joseph Heinrich, *The Secret of Our Success* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

¹⁷ Kidder Smith and Sima Tan, "Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, 'Legalism,' 'et cetera'", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, **62**, (1) February 2003, 129 – 156.

¹⁸ In his nineties, Michael Loewe worked on a comparative history of Rome and Han China, which was published posthumously through the dedicated support of his co-authors.

Michael Loewe, Michael Nylan, T. Corey Brennan, *Imperial Institutions in Ancient Rome and Early China, A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomsbury 2025).

Thanks also to his dear friend and colleague, Michael Nylan, who gave me several books from Michael Loewe's library. We worked together to catalogue the collection, so it could be passed onto a younger generation of scholars.