

**The Five Elements of  
Chinese Martial Arts (Hung Gar)  
As Interpreted by Gam Bok Yin**

Version 1: July, 2004

**金博賢**

The Hung Gar system incorporates the five elements of Chinese Medicine – fire, earth, metal, water and wood. Each element has a particular characteristic of defense and attack, which has been included within the Hung Gar system. Many other Chinese martial arts styles incorporate these into their systems in a very similar way.

In order to appreciate and understand the elements specifically within the Hung Gar system, it is important first to broadly consider a basic observation and description of them in the context of their characteristics, and how this observation may help condition or prepare the martial artist in developing fighting skills.

Fire	Earth
The fire element is characterized by lightning fast and rapid straight punches and kicks. Like a bolt of lightning. It is used to rush an opponent with extremely fast and powerful techniques until the attacker is stopped.	Earth is characterized by externally strong attacks coming from the ground upwards. They are always well rooted and represent a powerful upward or lifting force.
Metal	Water
The metal (or gold) element in Hung Gar involves strong and heavy hand and forearm (or leg) movements where the whole limb is used as a powerful unit to destroy an oncoming attack or punish the attacker. Metal movements are done with the arm slightly bent at the elbow. They are usually descending strikes as if intended to cut, split or divide like a metal weapon (sword, knife, axe, etc).	The water element involves long and swinging movements of the arms or legs, which are powerful and destructive. Like a large wave approaching that is difficult to defend against.
Wood	
The wood element generally involves short medium-range movements to simultaneously block and strike. Both penetrating and intercepting simultaneously they are powerful techniques. As wood can be molded easily into shapes to suit the task, the arms can also take on these characteristics.	

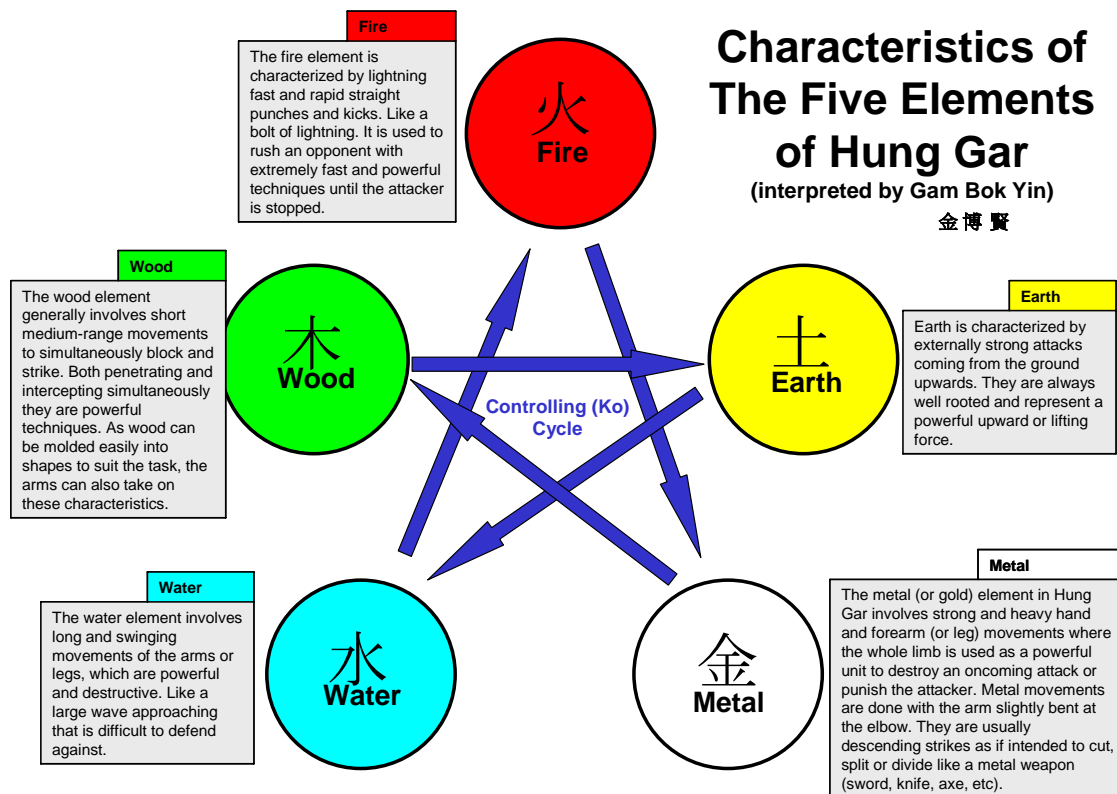
As described above, each of the elements is quite different and very distinct. By observing and considering these distinctions we can begin to appreciate the fundamental nature of these elements as they have been translated and integrated into the Hung Gar system.

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The following diagram provides an overview of the elements' as described above. This helps to provide an understanding of the application of particular element techniques within the Hung Gar system.



The diagram is intentionally drawn in the sequence representing the five elements within nature. Starting from the top (red) and moving clockwise these are fire, earth, metal, water and wood. These elements are basic to much of ancient traditional Chinese thought which asserts that the elements exist as an essential part of everything in nature and life. Each of the five seasons was attributed to a corresponding element, and it was usual to attribute almost everything in life as belonging to one of the elements.

There are many ancient texts describing these correspondences to the theory of the five elements and seasons. To demonstrate the practice and extent of this theory I have included below at the end of this article a table of correspondences that is relevant to Chinese medicine that I personally have been using since the 1970s. Within five elements theory, as it applies to Chinese medicine, there exists four ways, or cycles, in which the elements interact with each other. One of these cycles is particularly relevant to Chinese martial arts. The cycle I refer to is the controlling cycle, sometimes referred to as the Ko cycle or the grandparent-grandchild cycle. I have shown this particular controlling cycle

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in the above diagram as the blue arrows. The remaining three cycles I am not going to explain here, as they are more applicable to Chinese medicine than to martial arts.

The controlling cycle is very easy to understand if first we consider the five elements (fire[red], earth[yellow], metal[white], water[blue] and wood[green]). In this cycle fire controls metal and is controlled by water; earth controls water and is controlled by wood; metal controls wood and is controlled by fire; etc. You can now also appreciate why this cycle is sometimes referred to as the grandparent-grandchild cycle, where the grandparent controls the grandchild.

As these correspondences were an integral part of Chinese culture, it was therefore quite a logical progression for them to also be applicable within Chinese martial arts.

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General Correspondences of the Elements from Chinese Medicine					
Elements	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water	Wood
Color	Red	Yellow	White	Black	Green
Yin Organ	Heart, pericardium	Spleen	Lung	Kidney	Liver
Yang Organ	Small intestine, three heater	Stomach	Colon	Bladder	Gall bladder
Controlled by (Ko cycle)	Water	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal
Season	Summer	Late Summer	Autumn	Winter	Spring
Development	Growth	Transformation	Harvest	Storage	Birth
Climate	Hot	Humid	Dryness	Cold	Wind
Emotion	Joy	Sympathy	Grief, worry	Fear	Anger
Sound	Laughter	Singing	Crying	Groaning, yawning	Shouting
Sense	Speech	Taste, touch	Smell	Hearing	Sight
Orifice	Ears	Mouth/lips	Nose	Lower	Eyes
Attribute	Intelligence	Memory / ideas	Evaluation/judgment	Will power	Planning
Associated temperament	Up and down	Obsession	Anguish	Fear	Frustration, depression
Nourishes (& disorders will show in)	Blood vessels (pulse, arteries)	Flesh, fat, muscle bulk	Skin, body hair	Bones, teeth, bone marrow	Ligaments, muscle function
Its energy expands into	Complexion	Lips	Body hair	Scalp hair	Nails
Sickness location	5 viscera	Root of tongue	Within back (lungs)	Within cavities	Nervous diseases, muscle spasms
Diseases, disorders show in	Pulse, tubes, veins	Flesh, muscles	Skin, hair	Bones	Muscles
Strained by too much	Walking	Sitting	Lying down	Standing	Use of eyes

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Fluid	Sweat	Lymph, saliva (from under tongue), sinovial fluid	Mucus	Urine, spittle (from sides of mouth), spinal fluid, cerebral fluid	Tears
Smell	Scorched	Fragrant	Rotten, fishy	Putrid	Rancid, sour
Direction	South	Centre	West	North	East
Flavor	Bitter (lemon)	Sweet (honey)	Hot, pungent (ginger)	Salty	Sour (vinegar, vitamin C)
Power of flavor	Drying, strengthening	Harmonising, retarding	Dispersing	Softening	Astringent, gathering
Effect of excess flavor (ko cycle)	Withers skin	Aches in bones	Knots muscle	Hardens arteries	Toughens flesh
Planet	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury	Jupiter
Spirit	Shen – Divine spirit	I - Ideas	Po – Animal spirit, instinct	Chen - Will	H'un - Soul
Musical Note	Chih Ku - Fa	Kung - Doe	Shang - Ray	Yu - So	Choi - Me
Number	7	5	9	6	8
Cereal	Millet (glutinous)	Rye, panicked millet	Rice	Beans	Wheat
Meat	Mutton	Beef	Horse	Pork	Chicken
Fruit	Apricots	Dates	Peaches	Chestnuts	Plums
Vegetables	Shallots	Mallow (sweet pot)	Onions	Coarse greens	Leeks
Pulse	Slippery (like pearls on a plate)	Irregular	Feathery and light	Deep and stone like	Taught (like the strings of a musical instrument)

Notes:

1. Although all of the above detail is not particularly relevant to Chinese martial arts, it gives the reader an appreciation of the depth of this concept of the five elements to Chinese thought and daily life. No wonder it also became an integral part of the martial arts.

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