

# *The Five Phases Theory: A Structuralist Interpretation in Traditional Chinese Thought*

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**Abstract.** To explore the symbolic meaning of the Five Phases theory within traditional Chinese thought, this paper takes it as a signifier system that is restructured to reflect a semiotic meaning of natural phenomena. The Five Phases is used in a Lacanian epistemological paradigm, where the anchored signifier produces new signifiers in the form of particular situations, and the provisional meaning in the form of the differentiations between signifiers. These relations permit the signifiers to gain temporal stability, and to create an articulated chain of signifying instead of being attached to already established referents. To further elaborate on the Lacanian structuralist theory, the paper examines how the Five Phases act as signifiers in an active signifying chain, with the crucial point being that meaning is created through the differentiation of relationality and not the one-to-one representation. It then discusses the dynamic forms of interplay between the Five Phases, as well as the inherent variety to which the Yin-Yang principle has brought, to show how these relational processes maintain the openness of the system as well as the productive power of the system. It is through this structure that the Five Phases serves as a meta-symbolic system that is capable of correlating to a variety of features of the world and, in the process, constantly producing newer sets of meanings without draining the symbolic system itself.

**Keywords:** Five Phases Theory, Lacanian Epistemological Paradigm, Signifier System

## **1. Introduction**

The Five Phases theory takes up an important role in the traditional Chinese thought and denotes the fundamental elements of fire, earth, metal, water, and wood. The idea of the Five Phases occurred in the early civilization period, which was marked by nature worship and primitive materialism. Contemporary society tends to consider it as superstition or something mystical. Even until the May Fourth Movement, however, the indigenous Chinese culture was organized as Yin-Yang and the Five Phases; the notions of generation and restraint in the Five Phases could be applied to all spheres of consciousness and acted profoundly on the whole life. Due to this reason, it becomes nearly impossible to gauge the Chinese system of culture without knowledge of the yin-yang and Five Phases schema [1].

Through this cultural phenomenon, the question of this paper is: how has this irrational variety of ancient wisdom produced a long-lasting presence in the various aspects of Chinese civilization and become a form of method that has significantly influenced the way of thinking in China?

To describe the comprehensive and extensive use of this theory, it is not enough to stay at the stage of testing its empirical effectiveness only. Instead, one should acknowledge the fact that the meaning of the Five Phases theory is, by its nature, a symbolic system that serves as a continuous process generating connotations. On this note, the insight of the Five Phases is that it requires a theoretical methodology which will be centered on signs and structures and the production of meaning [2].

Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst and structuralist philosopher, reconstrued the work of Freudian psychoanalysis with the help of linguistics developed by Saussure. Thus, which made psychoanalysis the focus of language and based on the signifier, the signified, and the symbolic system, Lacan created an epistemology based on symbolic structure. Using the structuralist theory of language and other symbolic systems developed by Lacan, this paper will endeavor to interpret the five phases as a form of ancient experiences and explain the logic that will make the five phases work and survive as symbolic systems.

## 2. Conceptual definition

To align Five Phases with structuralism, this paper will first clarify some essential terms in linguistics and psychoanalytic theory, especially how Lacan reinterprets and conceptually elaborates the meaning behind Saussure's signifier-signified duality. The semiotic model developed by Jacques Lacan is used to offer some theoretical explanations on how elementary objects of symbols lead to meaning construction by the presence of differentiation and distribution of positions.

### 2.1. Lacan's rework on saussure

Language can also be seen as differentiations and not a mere naming mechanism, as defined by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. In *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure contends that the idea of language is neither an association of already existing ideas, but instead a symbolic system that consists of signifiers and signifieds, where meaning emerges not through a necessary relationship between them, but through the variations among signs in the system itself [3].

Lacan abandons the signified-signifier relation developed by Saussure and says that the signifier prevails over the signified. To say the least, language is not mirrored by reality but creates meaning through the chains of signifiers and diversifies and organizes the world of experience through the difference between signifiers.

In the Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, Lacan provides an example: when one meets with two restrooms in a dimly lit bar, one is unable to distinguish whether one is male or female based on visual perception, but people can do it through an act of name-giving that separates them [4]. This example indicates that the stimuli of the world would be an indifferent and unshaped mass without language, and it is through linguistic notions that such a chaos can be divided into discrete and concrete entities.

### 2.2. The differentiating and relational chain

The partitions and names have a history in language, and these signifiers lack a pre-determined sense; meaning is acquired through the discrepancies between signifiers. It is herein the foundation of the signifying chain as the concept of Lacan. A meaning is only produced as a result of this interaction of difference and relation between the signifier and signified, as he himself once

remarked, a signifier only signifies to another signifier. Like this internal organization, Lacan refers to it as the signifying chain.

A good example is that the signifier of student does not have a definite meaning, and instead it derives a meaning through its differential position in a particular chain of signification. The meaning of the signifier student is tied to context when it is put in the context of a university. When the student gets attached to the signifier like employment as a professional, it changes its meaning and gets a structural change, to mean a person who is not yet a member of the professional order, or one who does not receive income. This goes to show that meaning is an implication of the difference between signifiers and not an intrinsic property of a particular signifier.

### **2.3. The positional role of the signifier**

Lacan develops the meaning-generating mechanism in Seminar III: The Psychoses by establishing the notion of quilting point (point de capiton). According to Lacan, in the signifying chain, the signified constantly makes a shift amongst various signifiers and cannot occupy a particular location. The symbolic order could not provide meaning because, without some device that can temporarily fix the chain of signification into place, meaning would not manifest itself as stable. The sliding signifying chain contains a specific signifier that is not involved in some perpetual metonymic displacement but holds a place of meaning correction, which is called the point de capiton [5].

Lacan explained the role of point de capiton through a dialogue of the tragedy *Athalie* by the French author Racine. To start with, Officer Abner, in a state of frenzy, speaks a line of indefinite phrases of fear, the discursive quality of which is, in turn, indefinite and does not have a definite meaning. The High Priest says, I am afraid that God, but I am not afraid of other things. In this instance, fear of God reshapes the cognition of the speaker, pinpoints the ambiguous and fragmented meaning that was wandering there previously, and in that way influences the place of the subject in the system of symbols [6].

## **3. The Five Phases as a dynamic signifying structure**

The last chapter has introduced the way in which the notion of the Five Phases as fundamental signifiers creates meaning in their differentiation to one another. It will then look at how the Five Phases create a signifying chain of endless operation of mutual interaction according to the structural dynamics, and also look at how Yin and Yang provide a differentiation mechanism with the Five Phases without closing the system. The paper thus resorts to Lacanian structuralist psychoanalysis as the main theoretical approach to the Five Phases system analysis, instead of other variants of the structuralist theory. This decision is informed by the focus of Lacan on the dynamism of the signifying chain, the sliding of meaning, and the non-final nature of the symbolic order that is much closer to the structural properties of the Five Phases system, to which meaning is constantly recycled based on the relations of generation and restraint.

### **3.1. The Five Phases as basic signifiers**

The initial concatenation of the idea of the Five Phases was a pragmatic categorical structure of the Five Phases developing out of the technical consciousness of the utilization of resources in the Bronze Age. According to the *Shang Shu Da Zhuan*, water and fire were what the commoners drank and ate; metal and wood were what the commoners used to make; earth was what supported all

living things, and this is used by people. This fundamentally means that the early Five Phases concept was also an intuitive and experiential thought process, which was still in a naive materialistic phase of nature worship. The Hong Fan part of the Shang Shu also says: Water is moistening and downward, fire is blazing and upward; wood is bending and straight; metal is following transformation; earth is sowing and harvesting. The moistening and downward saltiness, the blazing and upward bitterness, the bending and straight sour, the following the grass pungent, sowing sweet, and harvesting sweet [7,8].

These descriptions show that the five phases include a material classification of everything in the world, with the five phases indicating five functional qualities of natural law, not in the form of specific substances. On this premise, the Five Phases have developed to be an ancient structure of five material elements into a classification unit, covering the universe. The material qualities of the Five Phases were also eroded gradually into a methodology that had a profound impact on the ancient Chinese ways of thinking [9].

The creation of meaning in the semiotic system of Lacan takes place not according to the signifiers which refer directly to the external world, but according to the relations of difference and positions placed between the signifiers. Thus, in the case of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water, it can be seen that they are simple signifiers, which do not merely mirror some physical reality, but an operable system of symbols; they occupy different positions in the system of symbols that coordinates the production of new signifiers.

### 3.2. The differentiating relations of the signifying chain

The Five Phases in effect was a systematic categorization of the experience in the natural world by ancient people. The Five Phases all spell out various properties, and this is to exemplify the concept of Lacan that meaning is created by the differential relation of signifiers.

One more manifestation of the structurality of the Five Phases as a signifying chain is their relations and dynamic operations. The Western Han-era Dong Zhongshu in Chun Qiu Fan Lu was the first person to explicitly suggest the generating cycle of the Five Phases, saying that wood generates fire, fire generates earth, earth generates metal, metal generates water, and water generates wood. Wood is warm, and there is fire in it; it is possible to make fire by drilling wood, or wood can be burned to make fire. This is also a political analogy, as compared by Chun Qiu Fan Lu to the Minister of Agriculture(wood) and the imperial court(fire). When ores(metal) are inculcated in the mountains and land stipulated to the earth, and as such, they are said to originate on earth. This is because the ancient observers have found that dew readily condenses on the metal surface in the morning, or that metal is easily melted at high temperatures to form water, causing this conclusion. Water can fertilize trees and facilitate the growth of plants; therefore, water produces wood.

Accordingly, the generating and producing relations of the Five Phases are a signifying chain wherein meaning is determined by position and difference, where each concept is defined in terms of its differences and relations to the other. The Five Phases constitute a cycle, produced by the generation and inhibitory interaction between the latter, and this is an actual representation of the signifying chain that Lacan defines.

### 3.3. Yin-Yang as an internal differentiation

When speaking in depth about the Five Phases in the history of the Chinese intellectual thought, one inevitably has to apply to another group of signifiers that, without being necessarily dependent on the five elements of the system, adds structural tension to this signification system: Yin and Yang.

Structurally, Yin-Yang is not a parallel classificatory system but is, so to speak, a principle of differentiation which acts internally on the Five Phases. When the Five Phases manage to use a first division of the experiential reality into five main signifiers, Yin-Yang enacts further division in each of these signifiers and avoids the solidification of signifier into closed units of meaning. That is, Yin-Yang does not add new signifiers to it but maintains the functionality of the system of symbols on its part by creating tension and division among signifiers that already exist.

Yin and Yang are the ideas that developed later than the Five Phases, although they quickly became the key conceptual methodology of the Chinese culture. It is commonly agreed among scholars that the cognition of Yin-Yang began with the worldly manifestation of the experience of natural rhythm by early Huaxia communities. By observing the regular patterns of sun and moon, seasonal temperature variations, and the periodic patterns of phenological cycles over a long period, ancient agrarian cultures came to develop an experience of the bipolar pattern of cosmic organization. The writing on bronze vessels and pre-Qin writings make it clear that Yin-Yang was not originally abstract or metaphysical, but a principle of discrimination based on natural experience, whose main purpose was to distinguish and provide order in perceptions [9].

As productive forces developed, though, the Yin-Yang idea came to be gradually divorced from all reliance on the specific natural events and raised into a generalized binary cognitive pattern. Light and darkness, warmth and cold, movement and motionlessness, superiority and inferiority were categorically included in Yin-Yang opposites. The ontological changes of Yin-Yang thought during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were the realization of the concept of *qi*, which was no longer rooted in its original experience and had undergone a cosmogenetic transformation to become a metaphysical concept. Li Zehou notes that the theories of Yin and Yang and Five Phases aimed at bringing astronomical, geographical, meteorological, seasonal, flora and fauna, social institutions, political order, and corporeal and mental phenomena, to a single cosmic framework of connection and interdependence of universal law [10]. Such a meta-signifying system also shows the peculiar but essentially integrative spatiotemporal worldview of the ancient Chinese civilization.

Lacan stresses that the sense of a signifier does not exist based on its ability to refer to a fixed signified, but on its way or relation positions and operations of difference in the symbolic system. The inclusion of Yin and Yang is making the Five Phases not just a collection of signifiers but the signifying chain that has internal movement. The meaning of each of the phases no longer has a single, definite meaning, but rather represents a figurative stance of difference and a manner of dynamic functioning. Within this regime, the symbolic order is unable to reach a self-closure by stabilising a specific signifier; it supports its logic tension by ensuring a free circulation of signifiers.

Such openness is exemplified by the fact that the symbolic value of each element of the Five Phases system is not the basic meaning, but the ability to act as a group of signifiers, which can be created, temporally and spatially, and moved around by various subjects. In that sense, Yin-Yang turns the Five Phases into a symbolic taxonomic concept into a working epistemic framework.

This is the very same structure that, at this level, the incorporation of Yin and Yang and the Five Phases gives Chinese metaphysical thought the stability of a form, as well as the semantic openness. This duality trait allows one to constantly create new meanings of the system in various historical periods and areas of knowledge, thus forming a living meta-theory of the Chinese traditional culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, the theory of structuralism of Lacan is used to reinterpret the Five Phases theory. It demonstrates that the persistence of the Five Phases theory both within the Chinese intellectual

history and in all the areas of practice is not related to the fact that it was able to truly mirror the physical world, but instead, it will be associated with how it was made a symbolic system with the inclusive and generative characteristics.

The meta-signifiers, the Five Phases, offer the underlying system of symbols; Yin-Yang serves as a system of differentiation that keeps the framework open. In such a case, the Five Phases system is not an explanation structure anymore, but the structural system, which offers the circumstances for making a subject transit to the symbolic order and gain positional orientation.

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