

“Dialectical thought” in “The Five Elements Theory” in ancient China

“Pensamento dialético” na “Teoria dos Cinco Elementos” na China antiga

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ABSTRACT

The Five Elements Theory is one of the earliest theories in the history of Chinese philosophy. The birth of the doctrine marked a turning point in the process of perception of the world with the five basic elements of metal, wood and water, fire and earth. These five factors are perceived in the form of experience, the level of awareness is still rudimentary, and the most general characteristics of matter have not yet been generalized. However, with the two laws of the Five Elements of mutual birth, the five opposite elements complement each other when explaining the formation, development and transformation of the material world. These are two laws that are applied to explain the laws from nature, to society and the human body. The Five Elements Theory shows that things and phenomena in the universe and society do not stand still, but are always moving, changing and rotating constantly. In this article, we will focus on clarifying the dialectical thought of The Theory of the Five Elements in nature, society and in the human body. The article will open up a new approach to The Theory of the Five Elements and the next research direction is the application of the theory in oriental medicine.

Keywords: Theory. Five elements. Dialectic. Conduct. Mutuality.

RESUMO

A Teoria dos Cinco Elementos é uma das primeiras teorias na história da filosofia chinesa. O nascimento da doutrina marcou uma virada no processo de percepção do mundo com os cinco elementos básicos de metal, madeira e água, fogo e terra. Esses cinco fatores são perce-

bidos na forma de experiência, o nível de consciência ainda é rudimentar e as características mais gerais da matéria ainda não foram generalizadas. No entanto, com as duas leis dos Cinco Elementos do nascimento mútuo, os cinco elementos opostos se complementam ao explicar a formação, desenvolvimento e transformação do mundo material. São duas leis que se aplicam para explicar as leis da natureza, da sociedade e do corpo humano. A Teoria dos Cinco Elementos mostra que coisas e fenômenos no universo e na sociedade não ficam parados, mas estão sempre em movimento, mudando e girando constantemente. Neste artigo, nos concentraremos em esclarecer o pensamento dialético da teoria dos Cinco Elementos na natureza, na sociedade e no corpo humano. O artigo abrirá uma nova abordagem para a teoria dos Cinco Elementos e a próxima direção de pesquisa é a aplicação da teoria na medicina oriental.

Palavras-chave: Teoria. Cinco elementos. Dialética. Conduta. Mutualidade.

Introduction

The Theory of the Five Elements is one of the important and influential theories in the history of Chinese philosophy. The doctrine was born around the 20th century BC, it is recorded in the book "One is water, two is fire, three is wood, four is metal, five is earth" (CONFUCIUS, 2004). The Theory of the Five Elements was born initially with the purpose of explaining the formation of the universe from five basic elements. These five elements do not stand still, but always move, relate, complement each other, penetrate each other, and transform each other. These five factors are both consistent with each other and contradict each other. This theory was formed in society and was transmitted orally until later, it was generalized and developed by philosophical schools. "The 'yin' and 'yang' school" (TASHA; GILLILAND, 2019) is considered the first school to generalize into the Five Elements of mutual birth and the Five Elements that are incompatible. The Five Elements of mutual birth is the process by which the Five Elements interact to transform each other, creating a continuous transformation in the universe and all things. A burning tree produces fire, a fire that burns all things produces earth, the earth that sticks together produces metal, and a molten metal produces water. The Five Elements Contradictory is the process of the Five Elements that overcome, oppose, and cancel each other. Wood carvers earth because its roots go deep into the ground, earth carved water because earth blocks the flow of water, water cuts fire because water can put out fire, fire cuts needle because fire can change metal from a solid to a liquid state, carpentry needle because when metal is made into a working tool, it can cut down trees. These five factors can replace each other, swap places to occupy a dominant position in the order of similarity and incompatibility.

During the past few thousand years, since ancient times, The Theory of the Five Elements has been one of the important doctrines, having a great influence on Chinese philosophy and Eastern culture in general. This proves that this is a consistent, complete theory. The Theory of the Five Elements is not only aimed at explaining the origin and operation of the universe, but also contributes to the explanation of laws in society. As a theory that has had a great influence in the East countries and has transcended all time, The Theory of the Five Elements has transcended the scope of philosophy and made its mark on many different fields. The doctrine has had a strong impact on social life not only in China but also in neighboring countries such as Vietnam, Japan, Korea, etc. Studying The Theory of the Five Elements is not only to discover a unique system of reasoning when discussing the origin and structure of the universe, but also

to give us application in many social fields. The application of The Theory of the Five Elements to medicine has also achieved significant achievements in the method of observation, finding the correlation of physiological activities, pathology of internal organs to diagnose and treat diseases. In this article, we will focus on clarifying the dialectical thought in The Theory of the Five Elements in ancient China.

Methodology

The article studies the history of Chinese thought of a theory, so we choose the approach according to the basic methodological principles of the science of history of philosophy.

In order to perform well the research objectives and tasks, the article must implement the rigor of history, that is, the research is comprehensive, multi-dimensional, historical – specifically, considering the dialectical thought in the research. The Theory of the Five Elements in many relationships, with different angles, specific times and spaces, in the historical conditions of China. During the length of the formation and development of the doctrine of the Five Elements and is marked when it is recorded in the scriptures. The Theory of the Five Elements was born initially with the purpose of explaining the formation of the universe from five basic elements. These five elements do not stand still, but always move, relate, complement each other, penetrate each other, and transform each other. When people have not yet been able to explain the composition of the universe and the phenomena occurring from nature to society, relying on observational experience to explain is an inevitable job. The Theory of the Five Elements using five material factors to explain is very advanced and is considered one of the first bricks to be reached to build a complete dialectic theory later. At the same time, as a theory that comes from the people, that theory is always associated with specific historical conditions, so the research must be through information sources from thinkers. to obtain objective, comprehensive and in-depth research results.

When studying the doctrine of the Five Elements, we approach research problems from the perspective of dialectical philosophy and cultural philosophy to analyze and explain the content of its dialectic.

To accomplish the above objectives and content, the article relies on the worldview and methodology of Marxism-Leninism to consider the scientific issues of the article. The author also use the following specific methods:

Historical-logical method: The article uses the historical method to understand the conditions for the formation of The Five Elements Theory as well as to consider and evaluate the theory in each specific field. Based on the historical method to study the events and scientific issues that the article has achieved. On the basis of historical data to draw out the regularity of the movement and development of The Five Elements Theory.

Method of literature study: We will be faithful to the text of the works to learn and research scientific issues. At the same time, we study the original works, compare the works to analyze and clarify the content of dialectical thought in The Five Elements Theory in historical periods.

Methods of collecting information and documents: We collect documents such as books, newspapers, magazines in Vietnam and other countries about dialectical thought in The Five Elements Theory.

Methods of analysis and synthesis: The article uses this method to analyze the dialectic of the theory in nature and society. On that basis, we generalize and synthesize conclusions about the dialectical thought of The Five Elements Theory.

The method of comparison-comparison: Along with the dialectical thought in The Five Elements Theory, there is also the theory of Yin and Yang and other theories, so it is necessary to use this method to have comparisons and clarifications the thought in the doctrine of the Five Elements.

Content

The views on the theory have been presented by many researchers in a very diverse and rich manner under many different angles. Through our research, we have approached the following points of view: (USEEM, 1980, p. 357) "Individuals are most likely to join social movements when they have few personal ties within a community and a weak sense of identification with that community"; Hempel (1965, p. 240) puts it, "in empirical science, the explanation of a phenomenon consists in subsuming it under general empirical laws"; (ABEND, 2006). "While they are rarer in U.S. sociology, theories are a staple of some Latin American and European sociological traditions"; (GABRIEL ABEND, 2008) 'Theory' is one of the most important words in the lexicon of contemporary sociology. From that research, we believe that theory is a system of ideas, theoretically explained in a field, a science.

"Over thousands of years of the historical accumulation of traditional Chinese culture, a unique philosophical ideological system of cognizing the world was formed. Five-element theory, which arose during the Chinese Warring States period (475-221 BC), is one of the outstanding representatives of this unique system" (ZIMI MA, 2014). The doctrine of the Five Elements consists of five basic elements, the first is Water, the second is Fire, the third is Wood, the fourth is Metal, and the fifth is Earth. Water in the middle; Fire is hot on; Wood is curved, straight; Needle is citable; Land is for crops. In terms of taste: They is salty; Fire is bitter; Wood is sour; Kim is spicy. "Respectively, the Five Elements Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire, and Water correspond to yellow, blue, white, red, and black" (YUAN CHEN, 2014). At that time, people chose the five elements above associated with the five physical objects available in nature to explain the existence of the material world. Towards the end of "the Western Zhou period (1045-771 BCE) (YITZCHAK JAFFE, 2020), The Theory of the Five Elements was applied to explain the growth of all things in the universe and raised it to a new level as the doctrine of philosophy. After the Warring States period, The Theory of the Five Elements developed in a relatively complete way with the birth of the five elements. This theory holds that this world exists because of mutual and incompatible substances. In order for a new thing to be born, it is necessary to combine two different things. In the universe, the replacement of the seasons of the year is also due to the order of the five elements. In society, this theory also laid the foundation for the birth of the doctrine of the five virtues and was applied to forms of social consciousness. Thus, "the Five Elements are the ancient Chinese philosophical concept indicating the five basic elements of the universe, on the basis of the five objects closest to humans, wood (wood, trees), fire (fire), earth (earth), metal (gold, metal), water (water)" (Vietnam Encyclopedia, 2003, p. 143). The Theory of the Five Elements is the first general and abstract theory of ancient Chinese philosophy. This theory was born with the purpose of explaining the origin, structure and transformation of things in the universe. This theory marks the development of materialist scientific thinking to oppose the idealist view when explaining the world.

Dialectical thought in The Theory of the Five Elements when explaining nature

Thought is a form that reflects the world around people, synthesizing concepts into a single body. Dialectics "based on relationships between opposites" (XINYAN XINYAN, 2013, p. 443). Dialectic is the science of the most general laws of development of nature, society and thought. Dialectics is used to study the origin, development, and decay of all things. Dialectics of nature is a philosophical work published by Engels in 1925. "Engels already outlines how he sees the cell as the realisation of the "idea" of life, while comparative physiology demonstrates how quantitative changes give rise to qualitative leaps." (HUB ZWART, 2020, p. 4).

The Theory of the Five Elements since its birth has explained nature by itself. This interpretation was an important step in the cognitive process and laid the foundation for the development of scientific thinking. The Theory of the Five Elements is one of the first theories of ancient China to explain the origin, structure and evolution of all things in the universe. Although the explanation of the composition of the world by The Five Elements Theory has just stopped at the intuitive, naive, and simple form of the world, this is a very advanced explanation. We know that, at the time when The Five Elements Theory appeared and circulated orally in society, in China, it was around "the Early Zhou Period" (DU; LUN, 2017, p. 67). In this period, the idea of divine destiny is occupying the highest position. The head of the Zhou Dynasty is called "the son of heaven". To govern the country, the king divided the territory, appointing rulers called vassals. The vassals had the annual duty to tribute wealth and material things to the son of the Zhou dynasty. The rule of the Zhou Dynasty was carried out by courtesy and morality. This was the beginning of the birth of Chinese philosophy.

The Theory of the Five Elements explains the directions in nature such as: Wood is on the left, metal is on the right, fire is in front, water is behind, and earth is in the middle. Wood in the East controls the Spring Qi, Fire in the South controls the Summer Qi, Metal in the West controls the Autumn Qi, Shui in the North controls the East Qi, and Tho in the middle is called announces shift of power. The dialectical thought of The Five Elements Theory with the laws of mutual coexistence and contrast of the five elements, which was formed from the first Five Elements of the ancient Chinese, explaining the operation of the natural world is very interesting. These two laws always work and complement each other to create an egalitarian state in the material world. The explanation is that if the material world only exists with the law of mutuality, the development to a certain extent will be destroyed. On the contrary, if the physical world exists according to the law of incompatibility, the material world will be narrowed down to death.

The mutuality and contrast in the doctrine of the Five Elements is the first thought about the movement, transformation, and transformation of the dialectic of nature. This thought is superior to the idea of destiny and other ideas of the time when it comes to the concept of the world. The movement of the material world in the direction of reciprocity is a very new and progressive methodology. It indicates that things and phenomena are always in a state of constant movement, change, development and transformation. It is said that the movement of the Five Elements is a permanent movement. In the process of movement, it does not disappear by itself, but only transforms, coordinates, interacts, and inhibits each other. The movement of the Five Elements has changed the four seasons and things in nature. The dialectic of The Five Elements Theory is not only used to explain natural phenomena according to laws, but also to explain phenomena in society.

Dialectical thought in The Theory of the Five Elements when explaining society

The Theory of the Five Elements holds that the change of dynasties in history is an inevitable law. "Social self-organization is a self-referential, cyclical, reflexive, interconnected, double-sided, dialectical process of mutual production" (CHRISTIAN FUCHS, 2006, p. 7). The Five Elements Theory states that society is also governed by five basic elements: metal, wood, water, fire, and earth. This domination requires humans to operate according to its laws or else will be punished by unusual phenomena of nature. The Theory of the Five Elements says that when spring comes, the spring wind blows to melt the cold of the remaining winter. When spring comes, the air of the sky will radiate down, the air of the earth will rise, the heavens and the earth will harmonize with each other, and the trees will begin to sprout. During this season people are not allowed to cut down trees, catch fish and use the army to expand the territory. If the king does not grasp the laws of nature to govern society, it will lead to disaster. For example, if the order of summer is implemented in spring, it will cause weather disturbances, wither grass and crop failure, leading to hunger and poverty to the people. If spring executes the autumn command, great plagues will appear. In spring, the execution of winter's orders will lead to floods and snow. Thus, the king must base on each season of the year to execute orders accordingly to balance society and bring life to the people.

The Five Elements Theory holds that each dynasty in Chinese history is associated with a certain element of the five elements, and the changes of that rule obey its operating laws. Just as the Zhou dynasty replaced the En dynasty, which embodied the law of "fire and gold", the Qin dynasty unified China to express the law of "water conquers fire". Based on the ruler of the dynasty, the king regulates the dress. "Xia worships wood color, Yin worships gold color, Zhou worships fire color, the different colors of different dynasties, which was not only related to aesthetics, but also related to national politics." (CHUNGUANG REN, 2020). The dressing code from mandarins to people has regulations, if anyone wears clothes against the regulations, they will be punished. In the Qin dynasty, the executioner should follow the rule of water to carry out everything. Instead of the beginning of the year being January 1st of the lunar calendar, the Qin Dynasty changed the beginning of the year, tribute, and congratulation must all start from October 1st every year. The Qin Dynasty is of the water spirit, the color of the spirit is white. However, in order to keep the Qin Dynasty prosperous for a long time, the king chose black as the color of mutuality. That's why costumes and flags are all black. Besides, the Qin Dynasty also took the number 6 as the unit of measurement, so the length of the string of the conical hat was 60 cm, the axle of a coach was 6m long. All take the water element as the basis to change accordingly. The construction of the palace must also follow the Five Elements of mutual birth in order to avoid disasters. Later, the law of the Five Elements of mutual birth and contrast was also applied in people's weddings.

The laws of society also always operate according to the laws of nature. The ancient Chinese believed that in society, heaven and earth were included, and then all things were born. The functioning of society is extremely complex; therefore, the king must know how to reconcile relationships in society, based on the circular law to rule. They also pointed out that in society, there exist relationships such as king - me, father - son, friend - friend, army - god. In the process of existence, these relationships may oppose each other, but they do not cancel each other, but exist in parallel. Because of that rule, "Wu King organized the government, comforted the people, but made the Zhou dynasty strong and prosperous" (CONFUCIUS, 2007, p. 38). The

transformation in The Five Elements Theory shows that each thing is born from a certain element. When they were born, they had the opposite of another thing, even in the things themselves there was opposition. The ruler must be able to see both what happens before and after, to see the movement in the things themselves. When governing, the rulers must act according to the time, when it should be hidden, it should be hidden, if it should be visible, it should be visible, if it should be static, then it should be static, if it should be dynamic, then it should be dynamic. In short, the king must understand the movement laws of society, grasp the doctrine of the Five Elements to control the country for harmony. The movement of natural laws and social laws is very strong and fast, so the king must be flexible.

The purpose is to be *"in accordance with the logic of life, so the way of heaven is yin and yang, and the way of earth is hard and soft, and the way of man is benevolent"* (CONFUCIUS, 2007, p. 57). In life, the house that accumulates good things will usually be blessed, if not, it will have disaster. In society, chaos is caused by people not grasping the movement of society, because the rulers do not know the five elements of mutual birth and incompatibility.

In society, everything is in a dynamic state, but because people understand the five elements of mutual birth and opposition, the society is not disordered. It is by following that law that things are constantly changing. The movement of society takes place in a closed circle, that movement ends a process, then it returns to the original one. Because of such a perception of the periodic law, the kings of dynasties always wondered how the cycle of a dynasty could be extended. In order for that circle to expand, it is necessary to know social balance. Because according to the thinkers of this period, social laws as well as natural laws are cyclical, up and down, it's like an inevitable law. The ruler of this period advocated that if he wanted to know about the upcoming merger, he had to base it on the present. A dynasty that wants to last for a long time must clarify the past and consider the future. The representative of the universe is heaven and earth; the representative of all things is human. Heaven, earth, and people are in the same body, so people are placed on an equal footing with heaven and earth, forming a set of "three talents". Heaven (earth) and people have a close relationship with each other, the rules of heaven and earth serve as a model for human behavior. A dynasty to last five hundred years and more must be for the balance of society. The king must have a sincere heart, rule according to morality, and deal with all events in society with wisdom and will not be replaced. The rulers should follow the law of moderation of heaven and earth in the four seasons, sunny, rainy, hot and cold, in moderation, and govern the people: restricting people's desires and luxuries, forcing people to work as hard as they can, so does not waste wealth, does not harm the people. The rule of the ruler should not make the society too prosperous because the prosperity is too bad, but it must make the society keep the balance, making the cycle expand. However, the change of dynasties in ancient Chinese history is an inevitable law of historical operation. The law that is recognized by people is also the recognition of change as a necessity of society. However, rulers have always sought to harmonize relationships in society, but in fact, regulate the relationship between the king and the people according to the doctrine of the Five Elements.

To manage society in ancient times, the ruling class divided society into five basic relationships such as: king and servant; father and son; husband and wife; younger brother and older brother; friends. These five relationships are shown in a reciprocal direction from top to bottom. Servant must be loyal to the king, a son must be filial to his father, a wife must be faithful to her husband, a younger brother must be respectful to his older brother, and friends must be faithful to each other. If the country is stable, the family will be stable, and the husband and wife will be happy. Good parents makes filial children, and harmonious brothers. When there is harmony in the family, when going out, friends will always keep their trust in each other.

Contrary to the law of mutuality, there is law of contrast, if friends do not keep their trust and deceive each other, society will be unstable, children are not filial to their parents, children do not respect their older brothers or older sisters, the family will be in discord. If a wife is unfaithful to her husband, she will lose her family, if servants are not loyal to the king, the king will lose his country. In order to reduce the incompatibility, the king must have the obligation to lead his people how to cultivate so that they can have a full life, when life is good, the people will not think of treason and are loyal to the king. Parents must raise their children so that their children can understand and grow up so that their children will be filial to their parents. A husband must be faithful to his wife, then the wife will be faithful to her husband. If older brothers or older sisters take care of the younger on behalf of parents, the younger will always respect the older. If friends keep their faith together, society will not have any war. Thus, the relationship in society according to the five elements of mutual birth, the king is considered the starting point. "Within the gigantic power structure, the local had to obey the central, the inferior had to obey the superior, and ultimately all had to obey the ruler." (LIU ZEHUA, 2015).

Dialectical thought in The Theory of the Five Elements when explaining the human body

The Theory of the Five Elements "looks human body as a holistic system including five Organ systems, which interconnect each with other, even more it deals with the disease connecting the human and the surrounding environment" (JIFA GU, 2007). Based on that view, The Five Elements Theory holds that the human body is built by a coherent and meridian system. "Everything in the surrounding universe can be attributed into five elements. Human organs can be also linked to the five elements" (SUN KU CHUNG *et. al.*, 2017). In ancient China, the theory of meridians was used to study physiological functions, pathological processes and the relationship of yin and yang in the human body. In ancient China, the meridians were discovered, including 12 main meridians, 8 meridians, 12 distinct meridians, and 15 distinct meridians. When qi and blood operate continuously and circulate non-stop, the parts of the body have enough nutrients to develop. Since the meridian is the organ that transports and distributes nutrients to the whole body, it is the key to human health and longevity. However, the transport of meridians depends on the points on the body. Acupoints are where the meridians and qi of the viscera come and exit, the location to apply acupuncture and medical procedures. The effect of the acupoint is to transform energy (qi) and is also the place of entry of evil qi. Therefore, acupoints are the place to diagnose and treat diseases. Ancient Chinese thinkers divided acupoints into three categories: meridians, non-meridians, and pain points. On the basis of research, analysis and classification of features, uses and characteristics of acupressure points, ancient Chinese physicians discovered many acupoints with similar therapeutic effects. Acupressure points are distributed in certain locations and have effects on specific organs. Like the acupressure points in the "Thủ thái âm Phế" meridian, they all have the effect of treating diseases in the lungs, bronchi and pharynx. At the same time, when acupuncture at these points will appear a feeling of numbness, gradually running along a certain path. "Earth face, the force or energy of Earth comes from the organ of spleen and stomach and the basic properties of element is assumed to be the state of binding or cohesive each other" (JANG, 1998). Ancient Chinese thinkers observed acupoints and discovered that there is a linear relationship between them, so they called it the meridian system. By explaining the laws of mutuality and contrast in nature to explain the phenomena in the body and at the same time explain the causes of human diseases.

Considering the human body as a miniature universe, The Five Elements Theory has used the law of the large universe to explain the small universe with five elements. Each element will correspond to an acupuncture point on the body, each acupuncture point always has a relationship with the other four acupuncture points. "Most illness and disturbances are rooted in interruptions or imbalances in a network of meridians. Interruptions include stagnation and irregularities, and imbalances are deficiency and excess" (CHANG-BEOHM AHN *et. al.*, 2009). The incompatibility of the Five Elements is the cause of human diseases. Among many causes of disease, this theory has been generalized into three main causes: group of causes due to external influences; group of causes affecting from within and group of other causes. The group of external causes is caused by the attacking climate environment, including wind, cold, hot, wet, dry, and fire. The group of internal causes is the personality, psychology, and emotions of people who cause disease for themselves. Another group of causes is due to eating and working a lot.

According to The Theory of the Five Elements, all parts of the body exist in a mutual relationship and are mutually dependent. The functioning of any organ has a certain relationship with external circumstances. Because of that relationship, when a certain organ is sick, it will be related to other organs, so it is necessary to be comprehensive when judging the treatment method. The doctrine has associated the five organs with the five qi, the five flavors, etc. All of these issues are based on the dialectical point of view of mutualism and contrast to explain the physiological phenomena of the viscera.

Conclusion

The dialectic in The Theory of the Five Elements is succinctly expressed in the following two points: first, this is the theory that recognizes movement as the mode of existence of matter from nature, society to thought. The physical world is always in a state of constant change and rotation. Secondly, the theory has shown that the cause of the movement of all things from the universe to society is the impact and transformation between the Five Elements in the mutual relationship. The Five Elements Theory denied the role of the divine worldview and tried to explain the world's change through atheistic dialectical thought. However, this explanation only stops at intuition and feeling, so it cannot avoid cognitive limitations.

The Theory of the Five Elements has made a cognitive contribution when explaining the world, which is to explain the world by the physical world itself without referring to the role of gods, demons. With the two laws of the Five Elements of mutual birth and the Five Elements that are incompatible, the doctrine has shown the origin of the formation, growth and transformation of all things and phenomena.

By explaining the laws of nature, The Five Elements Theory has also implemented laws in society. This theory holds that the movement of society leading to the change of dynasties is an inevitable occurrence. However, through the laws of mutuality and incompatibility in society, the authorities can slow down that change by regulating relationships. In ancient China, there were five basic social relationships: king-servant, father-son, husband-wife, siblings, and friends. These five relationships are always inextricably linked, complementing each other to coexist. If a king wants to rule for a long time, he must regulate these relationships according to the balance. That process must not make any relationship prosperous, nor should any relationship fail. If it is too high or too low, the transformation of that cycle will close.

The Theory of the Five Elements leads us to perceive the world in the first five forms of matter, these five forms always change according to a certain law. Not only does it stop at

explaining the laws of nature, the laws of society, but also explains the movement of the human body when dividing human organs into five organs: heart, liver, spleen, lungs and kidney. These five organs have a relationship with each other and govern each other according to the laws of mutuality and incompatibility. To this day, this theory is still valid and is applied in many different fields, the most prominent of which is the field of Oriental medicine.

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