Al-Farasah International Training Center & Capacity Building

مركز الفراسة العالمي للتدريب وبناء القدرات

Exploratory Research Paper

The Five Elements and Personality Balance

An Exploratory Study Using the Five Phases and Body Language Methodology

العناصر الخمسة والاتزان في الشخصية

Dr. Mohammed Elfatih Masad Eltayeb

د. محمد الفاتح مساعد الطيب

Founder and Director, Al-Farasah International Training Center & Capacity Building — Cairo

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Abstract

Data from 47 respondents suggest that personality balance is associated not with an even spread of the five elements, but with a low "imbalance load": 38% were classified as balanced and 30% as highly imbalanced, and the number of self-reported somatic symptoms correlated strongly with shadow personality traits ($\rho = 0.64$).

The paper analyzes two questionnaires collected through Google Forms between August and September 2025: a "Five Elements" questionnaire (54 responses → 47 after de-duplication) and a "Marital Attachment Patterns" questionnaire (41 responses → 37). Responses were coded according to the Five Phases (Wu Xing) methodology into four domains: body type, personality, seasonal response, and symptoms of imbalance. Three indices were then built: structural dispersion, imbalance load, and the light-to-shadow ratio.

Key findings: Wood (32%) and Water (30%) dominate constitutionally; Metal appears mostly in its shadow form (31 shadow traits vs. 12 light traits); and the number of cognitive biases correlates with imbalance load ($\rho = 0.53$). In the attachment questionnaire, 62% were classified as secure and 19% as fearful-avoidant, with total-scale internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.82$. The paper proposes a protocol for observing the body-language indicators associated with each phase, in order to test self-report rather than rely on it alone.

Keywords: Five Phases, Wu Xing, psychological balance, body language, attachment theory, cognitive biases, modern physiognomy.

1. Introduction and Research Problem

The Five Phases are used in Arabic-language training as a tool for describing personality, yet Arabic field data testing their internal consistency remain scarce. This paper addresses part of that gap with data from participants in Al-Farasah programs, most of them Sudanese living through war or displacement.

The central methodological problem is how to define "balance": is it an even distribution of the phases, or harmony between the dominant phase and its behavioral and bodily expressions? A validity question follows: do the four domains the questionnaire measures point to the same phase in the same person?

Research questions:

1. What is the sample's dominant elemental map, and which phase is least present?
2. Does self-reported body type agree with personality, season, and symptoms more often than chance would predict?
3. What is the level of balance in the sample, and what is it associated with (symptoms, shadow traits, cognitive biases)?
4. How are marital attachment patterns distributed, and how reliable is the scale used?
5. How can the findings be translated into observable body-language indicators?

Significance: The study moves the Five Phases from the level of training description to the level of testable hypotheses, and builds on the Center's methodology paper linking the Five Phases to body language with its first field test. The guiding principle of interpretation is "probabilistic weighting, not certainty" (al-tarjīḥ lā al-jazm).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Five Phases as movement, not matter

The elements are understood here as dynamic "phases" (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) that describe the direction of energy rather than material components. The phases are linked by two cycles: the generating cycle (sheng), in which each phase nourishes the next, and the controlling cycle (ke), in which each phase restrains another. Beinfield and Korngold (1991) adapted this model to describe Western personality types, and it is the closest source of the items in this study's questionnaire.

2.2 Balance: harmony, not equality

In the Chinese system every person has a constitutionally dominant phase, and this is not considered an imbalance. Imbalance arises when a phase expresses itself in its shadow form (anger instead of decisiveness, grief instead of discipline) or when it appears in the body as symptoms. The paper therefore defines balance operationally as low imbalance load, and treats evenness of the phases as a secondary indicator to be tested.

2.3 Body language as an expression of the phase

The Center's methodology assumes that each phase has a "movement signature" in posture, gesture, voice, and face. Facial expressions are read with the Facial Action Coding System, FACS (Ekman & Friesen, 1978); self-soothing movements through the concept of "adaptors" (Ekman & Friesen, 1969); and freezing and withdrawal through Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011). The following table is a probabilistic hypothesis, not an established finding.

Phase	Movement direction	Body language in balance	Possible indicators of imbalance	Associated emotion
Wood	Forward and upward thrust	Leaning forward, directed gestures, quick stride	Jaw clenching, raised shoulders, pressed lips, finger pointing	Anger
Fire	Outward expansion	Lively face, genuine smile, open gestures	Fidgeting, rapid speech, widened eyes, scattered gaze	Joy / anxiety
Earth	Centering	Settled posture, affirming nods, sustained listening	Self-touch for soothing, hesitation, heavy movement	Worry and overthinking
Metal	Contraction and inward ordering	Upright stature, few precise gestures, measured voice	Collapsed chest, shallow breathing, raised inner brows	Grief
Water	Descent and stillness	Calm, patient observation, economy of movement	Freezing, withdrawal, gaze avoidance, horizontal lip stretch	Fear

2.4 Attachment and cognitive biases

The attachment questionnaire is built on the two-dimensional model (anxiety × avoidance) developed by Brennan, Clark and Shaver (1998), and the four-category model of Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). The bias item in the Five Elements questionnaire draws on Tversky and Kahneman's (1974) heuristics-and-biases program, on Fischhoff (1975) for hindsight bias, and on Janis (1972) for groupthink.

3. Methodology

An exploratory descriptive-correlational study on a convenience (non-probability) sample; it generates hypotheses and does not generalize to a population.

3.1 Sample and data cleaning

Instrument	Collection period	Raw responses	After de-duplication	Cleaning notes
Five Elements questionnaire	25 Aug – Sep 2025	54	47	Last response kept for each duplicated name
Marital attachment questionnaire	15–27 Sep 2025	41	37	11 cells with two choices replaced by their mean; 3 invalid names kept anonymously

The two questionnaires were analyzed separately, because too few participants completed both to allow statistical linkage. All results in this paper are aggregated and anonymized, and no individual participant is described.

3.2 Instruments

Five Elements questionnaire: five multiple-choice items. Four are coded by the letters A–E corresponding to the phases (A Wood, B Fire, C Earth, D Metal, E Water):

- Body type: one choice from 5 descriptions.
- Personality: 14 traits, classified for each phase into "light" traits (strengths) and "shadow" traits (vulnerabilities).
- Seasonal response: 5 seasons (spring, summer, late summer, autumn, winter).
- Symptoms of imbalance: 24 self-reported physical and psychological symptoms, not a medical diagnosis.
- Cognitive biases: 12 descriptions of well-known biases (not coded by element).

Marital attachment questionnaire: 15 statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The statements were assigned to two dimensions:

- Attachment anxiety (7 statements): 1, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 14.
- Attachment avoidance (7 statements): 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 15.
- Statement 13 ("love means feeling no pain") was analyzed separately as a romantic belief.

3.3 Constructed indices

1. **Constitutional profile:** each phase's share in body type, personality, and season, averaged equally across the three domains so that no domain dominates through its number of options. Dominant phase = highest share.
2. **Structural dispersion index (H):** normalized Shannon entropy, from 0 (a single phase) to 1 (equal phases): $H = -(1/\ln 5) \cdot \Sigma\, p_i \ln p_i$
3. **Imbalance load (L):** the mean standardized score of the number of symptoms and the number of shadow traits. Classification: balanced ($L < -0.5$), relatively balanced, highly imbalanced ($L > 0.5$).
4. **Light ratio:** light traits ÷ (light + shadow).

3.4 Statistical analysis

Spearman's correlation (ρ) was used because the variables are ordinal and skewed; partial correlation to control for a "many-choices" response style; a binomial test to compare agreement with chance; and Cronbach's alpha for reliability. The analysis was run in Python (NumPy and SciPy).

4. Results

4.1 The sample's elemental map

Wood and Water dominate the sample constitutionally (15 and 14 of 47 respondents), while Earth is the least present in body type and the least frequent in symptoms.

Phase	Constitutionally dominant (n)	Body type (n)	Personality selections	Preferred season	Reported symptoms (share of 271)
Wood	15 (32%)	15	47	24	68 (25%)
Water	14 (30%)	14	45	27	36 (13%)
Fire	7 (15%)	8	53	7	70 (26%)
Metal	6 (13%)	6	43	28	63 (23%)
Earth	5 (11%)	4	55	13	34 (13%)

A discrepancy between domains stands out: Fire is rare in body type and season (only 7 selections for summer), yet it leads the symptoms (mild anxiety, sleep difficulties, loss of joy). This probably reflects situational emotional strain more than a Fire constitution.

4.2 Light and shadow in personality

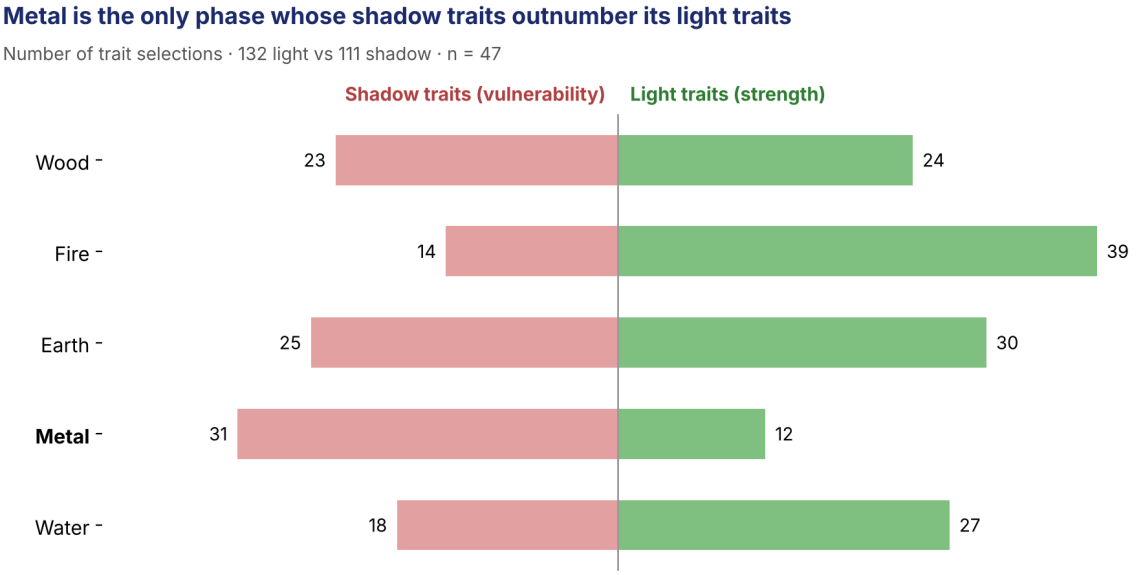

Figure 1: Light and shadow traits by phase (number of selections, n = 47). Source: Five Elements questionnaire, August–September 2025.

The mean light ratio was 0.55, meaning that nearly half of the selected traits were vulnerabilities. The most frequent shadow traits were "I can become unsettled when things are turbulent, and I am prone to mild sadness" (Metal, 25 selections) and "I am prone to worry or overthinking" (Earth, 25 selections).

4.3 Level of balance

Eighteen respondents (38%) were classified as balanced, 15 (32%) as relatively balanced, and 14 (30%) as highly imbalanced. The mean number of symptoms was 5.8 per person (SD 4.4), and mean structural dispersion was H = 0.75 (SD 0.14).

Relationship	Spearman ρ	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Symptoms × shadow traits	0.64	< 0.001	Strong; remains 0.73 after controlling for response style

Relationship	Spearman ρ	Significance (p)	Interpretation
Cognitive biases × imbalance load	0.53	< 0.001	Moderate to strong
Biases × symptoms (partial)	0.41	0.004	Remains after controlling for response style
Structural dispersion H × symptoms	0.34	0.018	Weak to moderate, opposite to expectation
Light traits × symptoms	0.28	0.054	Not significant; indicates a response style

The fourth relationship runs against the common assumption: those whose phases were evenly spread reported more symptoms, not fewer. Balance is probably associated with a clear dominant phase rather than with equality among the phases.

4.4 Agreement across domains

The body-type phase agreed with the dominant personality phase for 21 of 47 respondents (45%), against 36% expected by chance (p = 0.15, not significant). Agreement with season (43% vs. 42%) and with symptoms (26% vs. 30%) was at chance level. At least one symptom of the dominant phase appeared in 27 of 47 respondents (57%).

Likewise, the relationship between the dominant and the weakest phase showed no distinctive pattern within the generating and controlling cycles: cases were spread between 10 and 14 across each of the four possible relationships, close to a random distribution.

4.5 Cognitive biases

Respondents selected an average of 3.1 of the 12 biases. Hindsight bias ("I knew it all along") led with 31 selections (66%), followed by illusory correlation (18), confirmation bias (16), the halo effect (15), and groupthink (14).

4.6 Marital attachment patterns

Twenty-three of 37 respondents (62%) were classified as secure, 7 (19%) as fearful-avoidant, 4 (11%) as anxious, and 3 (8%) as avoidant (cut-off of 3 on each dimension).

Indicator	Value
Mean anxiety (SD)	2.57 (0.88)
Mean avoidance (SD)	2.58 (0.84)
Correlation between the two dimensions	r = 0.56, p < 0.001
Reliability of anxiety dimension (α)	0.75
Reliability of avoidance dimension (α)	0.69
Reliability of total scale (α)	0.82

The most-endorsed statements were emotional overreaction during conflict (mean 3.14; 16 agreed), escaping into work and hobbies (3.09; 16), and difficulty calming down after an argument (2.81; 14). Statement 7 ("my own feelings are responsible for my security") correlated

weakly with its dimension (0.10), as did statement 15 (0.23), so both need rewording. The belief "love means feeling no pain" correlated with anxiety (r = 0.41).

5. Discussion

5.1 Balance as clarity, not equality

The results favor the classical reading of the phases: the balanced person is one who knows their dominant phase and expresses it in its light form, not one whose phases are equal. High dispersion may be an expression of a scattered identity under pressure, in which a person draws on multiple phases to cope without a stable center.

5.2 Metal in its shadow form: a reading in the context of loss

Metal is the phase of letting go, boundaries, and grief. Its shadow expression (instability, mild sadness, fatigue, shortness of breath), together with the scarcity of its light traits (discipline and method), probably reflects grief tied to loss and displacement more than an innate constitution. This is a possible contextual interpretation, since the questionnaire did not measure the experience of war directly.

5.3 Absent Fire and weak Earth

The rarity of Fire constitutionally, combined with its lead in symptoms (anxiety, insomnia, loss of joy), points to a depleted Fire rather than an excessive one. In the generating cycle Fire nourishes Earth, the weakest phase in the sample; this may explain a weakened sense of being centered and grounded, and the prevalence of worry and overthinking. The pattern did not appear cyclically at the individual level (Section 4.4), so it remains a hypothesis to be tested.

5.4 Cognitive biases as the mental face of imbalance

The correlation between biases and imbalance load ($\rho = 0.53$) suggests that body, emotion, and thinking become imbalanced together. An alternative explanation remains: the respondent most candid in admitting vulnerability may also be the most willing to admit bias. The prominence of hindsight bias has direct training relevance for physiognomy programs: a reader who believes they "knew it all along" after the fact is prone to overestimating the accuracy of their readings.

5.5 What the results mean for reading body language

The weak agreement between self-reported body type and the other domains is the strongest argument for adding behavioral observation. People describe their bodies with limited accuracy, whereas posture, rhythm of movement, and facial expressions can be observed directly. Many of the reported symptoms have a visible counterpart: neck and shoulder tension and teeth grinding (Wood), shallow breathing and a collapsed chest (Metal), fidgeting and distraction (Fire). The paper therefore proposes that the questionnaire be the starting point, and observation the tool for weighting.

5.6 Attachment and the phases

The correlation between anxiety and avoidance (r = 0.56) is higher than theory assumes for two independent dimensions, which is consistent with the proportion of the fearful-avoidant pattern

(19%). Attachment anxiety may correspond to the emotions of Fire and Earth (seeking reassurance and worry), and avoidance to the Water and Metal phases (withdrawal and boundaries). This link is hypothetical and requires a single sample that completes both questionnaires.

6. Proposed Behavioral Observation Protocol

The protocol aims to compare self-report with observable bodily indicators recorded by two independent observers, in a single 20–30 minute session.

1. **Baseline (5 minutes):** neutral conversation in which the natural rhythm of movement, voice, and gaze is recorded.
2. **Emotional activation (10 minutes):** recalling a conflict of limited intensity, with the participant free to stop at any moment.
3. **Coding:** each observer records the indicators in the table below (0 absent, 1 brief, 2 recurrent) without seeing the questionnaire result.
4. **Comparison:** inter-observer agreement is calculated (Cohen's kappa), then agreement between the observed phase and the self-reported phase.

Phase	Posture and movement	Face (FACS action units)	Voice and breathing	Corresponding reported symptom
Wood	Raised shoulders, leaning forward, directed pointing	Brow lowerer AU4, lip presser AU24	Sharp tone, interrupting	Neck tension, teeth grinding, headache
Fire	Fidgeting, frequent shifts in seating	Upper lid raiser AU5, incomplete smile	Rapid speech	Mild anxiety, sleep difficulties
Earth	Self-touch for soothing, heavy movement	Inner brow raiser with brow lowerer AU1+4	Hesitation and drawn-out speech	Mental fog, craving for sweets
Metal	Collapsed chest, contracted gestures	AU1+4+15 (sadness configuration)	Shallow breathing, sighing	Fatigue, shortness of breath
Water	Freezing, pulling back, gaze avoidance	AU1+2+4+5+20 (fear configuration)	Low voice, long silences	Joint pain, inner fear

The sadness and fear configurations are taken from FACS; linking them and the other indicators to the phases is the Center's proposal, which this protocol tests. No phase is inferred from a single indicator, but from a recurring cluster of indicators across more than one channel.

7. Limitations, Ethical Considerations, and Recommendations

7.1 Limitations

- **Sample:** convenience-based and small (47 and 37), drawn from the Center's program audience; results do not generalize to a wider population.
- **Missing demographic variables:** age, sex, and marital status were not recorded, although the attachment questionnaire presumes an existing marriage.

- **Instrument:** the element items are coded with visible letters (A–E) in some versions, which may lead respondents to stay consistent with a particular letter. Some items are worded in the feminine form, and one statement in the attachment questionnaire (statement 10) contains an untranslated English fragment.
- **Response style:** multiple-choice items make the count-based indices sensitive to a person's tendency to select many options; this was only partly controlled.
- **Validity:** there is no external criterion for comparison, and the symptoms are self-reported, not diagnosed. The cut-off points (3 for attachment, ±0.5 for balance) are arbitrary rather than normed.

7.2 Ethical considerations

- The identities of all participants are withheld, and raw data linked to names are not published.
- Explicit informed consent for research use is recommended before any peer-reviewed publication.
- Five Phases and body-language results are tools for understanding and self-development; they are not to be used in hiring, disciplinary decisions, or extracting confessions.
- High levels of physical symptoms call for referral to a health professional, not for an elemental interpretation.

7.3 Recommendations

1. Merge the two questionnaires into a single instrument administered to the same sample, adding items on age, sex, region, and experience of displacement.
2. Remove the visible letters, randomize option order, and use gender-neutral wording.
3. Convert the element items to a Likert scale instead of free selection, to allow reliability to be calculated for each phase.
4. Revise statements 7 and 15 of the attachment questionnaire and translate statement 10 in full.
5. Apply the observation protocol (Section 6) to at least 30 participants with two trained observers.
6. Re-measure after 3 months to test the stability of the dominant phase against change in imbalance load: the former is expected to be stable and the latter to change.

8. Conclusion

This study suggests that the more useful criterion of balance is imbalance load rather than equality among the phases, and that somatic symptoms, shadow traits, and cognitive biases move together. It also shows that self-report alone is not sufficient to identify the phase, since agreement across domains barely exceeded chance. This is where body language adds value: what the tongue describes hesitantly, the body may state clearly, and the weighting grows stronger when the two agree.

Proposed next step: apply a unified instrument together with the observation protocol to a new sample, in preparation for peer-reviewed publication.

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Source reliability tiers: **Gold** = peer-reviewed or foundational primary source · **Silver** = academic book or authoritative translation · **Bronze** = applied or institutional source, not peer-reviewed.

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Data availability: The Google Forms response files for both questionnaires (August–September 2025) are held by the Center. Raw data are not published in order to protect participant identity. Anonymized data are available from the author on request for research purposes.