

The Interaction Between the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues and Imperial Power in Ancient China

Yanshu Luo^{1,*} and Hua Qin²

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College University, Zhuhai, China

² Department of International Economics and Trade, Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China

* Corresponding Author Email: q030032036@mail.uic.edu.cn

Abstract. As a theory of daring to speculate on the order of historical development and design the system of political rituals, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues attracted the attention of a large number of rulers since it was put forward. It became an important part of the guiding ideology behind the rise of many dynasties or regimes and formed an interactive relationship with the expanding imperial power in Chinese history. Originated from the political ideal of advising the monarch to develop qualities of benevolence, righteousness, and frugality, its original idea was to restrain and supervise imperial power. However, under the background of being used and reformed by monarchs, this philosophical system eventually became a tool to serve the expansion of their power and was then abandoned by them. From the perspective of imperial power, different rulers took different attitudes toward it: some adopted it, others reformed it, while some chose to ignore it. Nonetheless, all these attitudes were based on the same purpose - to expand their own power and ensure the legitimacy and stability of their rule.

Keywords: Circulation Theory of Five Virtues; imperial power; Five Elements (*Wuxing*).

1. Introduction

The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues was created by Zou Yan, a philosopher of the State of Qi in the late Warring States period. It has been attached noticeable importance and applied in many dynasties and regimes, making it a valuable and important research topic in the field of ancient Chinese political and cultural history. The Circulation Theory of Five virtues underwent two main changes in its evolving process and played a crucial role in interacting with the emerging, strengthening, and institutionalizing imperial power, especially during the Qin and Han Dynasties.

However, current studies on this theory have rarely mentioned its political interactions with the imperial power of ancient China. Instead, they have primarily concentrated on its academic logic and historical implications. For instance, Zhang Jian's article, "The Five Virtues" and Political Theology in China," emphasizes how the circulation theory coincided with the emperors' needs on a national scale, such as establishing a united dynasty and stabilizing the regime. However, it does not explore the extent to which monarchs tried to reinforce their own power [1]. Another paper composed by Li Xiang, titled "Exploring the Empire Myth Constructed by Qin Dynasty from 'the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues' and 'Sage Worshipping,'" explains that the whole Qin Dynasty adopted an attitude of taking only the form of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues while discarding its core ideas, which actually shared same traits with Confucianism. The article also mentions that this attitude ultimately led to a significant transformation in the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues but does not further explore the monarch's needs reflected by this attitude—needs related to the consolidation of their own power [2].

Although there is few information in current research about the mutual interaction of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues and the imperial power of ancient China, it is evident that this interactive relationship existed because of the strong importance of both the theory and imperial power in the functioning of a dynasty's political system. This paper seeks to analyze the dynamic interplay between the two through illustrative examples.

2. Definition and Basic Information of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues

During the era in which the inventor of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues, Zou Yan, lived, the philosophic concept of Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire and earth), known as *Wuxing*, already existed. Zou Yan applied the concept of Five Elements to the evolution of dynasties, believing that the order of dynasties is in accordance with an “exceeding” order of the five elements (earth→wood→gold→fire→water), under the instruction of the destiny of Heaven and be shown in a form of positive omens. The whole hypothesis, which posited the basic law or order of historical evolution, is the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues.

The Almanac of Lord Lü provides a detailed account of this cycle: “During the era of the Yellow Emperor, the great earthworm and the great mole cricket were firstly seen. The Yellow Emperor said: ‘The earth(element)’s vitality exceeds.’ The earth’s vitality exceeded, so (at that time) the upheld color of the era became yellow, and the behaviors, including the administration and ceremonial system of the dynasty, were coincident with the earth element. During the era of Yu in the Xia Dynasty, it was noted that grass and trees did not wither in autumn and winter. Yu said, ‘The wood’s vitality exceeds.’ As the wood’s vitality exceeded, the prominent color of the dynasty became green, and the behaviors were associated with the wood element. At the time of Tang in the Shang Dynasty, it is seen that gold blades being born in water, and Tang said, ‘The metal’s vitality exceeds.’ As the vitality of metal exceeded, so the primary color of the Shang Dynasty was white, and its behaviors were linked to metal. During the era of Emperor Wen in the Zhou Dynasty, red crows were seen gathering in the temple of Zhou, holding red messages in their beaks. Emperor Wen proclaimed: ‘The fire’s vitality exceeds.’ With the vitality of fire surpassing, the dominant color of the Zhou Dynasty became red, and the official behaviors were linked with the fire element.

It is certain that water will be the element to replace fire, so when the vitality of the water element exceeds, the new era will feature black as the predominant color, with behaviors linked to the water element. If the water element’s vitality arrives but rulers are unaware, the system will migrate to the earth element if the conditions are met [3,4].” This explanation of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues demonstrates that each dynasty corresponds to an element (virtue) within the five elements (*deyun*, “virtue and destiny”), and the cycle begins with the period of the Yellow Emperor.

The first Emperor in China, Ying Zheng, was also the first practitioner of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues. The Qin Dynasty founded by him also formulated a series of corresponding rituals and systems based on the virtue of water element in the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues. These include setting specific prominent color (black) and number (six) [5].

During the Han Dynasty that followed the Qin Dynasty, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues became intertwined with other academic theories and concepts. These included the Theory of the Three Unification (another theory explaining the order of dynasties, composed by Dong Zhongshu), the concept of heaven-human induction, and divination. In the later period of the Western Han Dynasty, Liu Xiang and Liu Xin further integrated these concepts and theories, and changed the original “exceeding” order of the element cycle in the Circulation theory of Five Virtues into an “interpromoting” order (wood→fire→earth→metal→water), a version that was later widely recognized by most rulers in history [6].

It is worth noting that the fundamental purpose behind the establishment of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues was to persuade the monarch to embody qualities of benevolence, righteousness, and frugality, and to implement the rule of virtue (akin to Confucianism). This also includes administering in certain ways and taking certain ceremonies, both guided by seasonal order. According to the *Records of the Grand Historian*, the central idea and origin of a series of theories put forward by Zou Yan revolved around “humanity, justice, frugality, and the relationships between ruler and ruled, high and low, and kinsmen” [5,7]. However, over time, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues became alienated and evolved into a mere tool to justify the unlimited expansion of a monarch’s power.

3. The Effect of The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues on Imperial Power

Because of the creating motivation of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues is to serve the monarch, it has had an inevitable impact on the imperial power since it was applied in the Qin Dynasty. The influence of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues on the imperial power is mainly in three aspects.

First, the original version of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues has a constraining effect on imperial power. It emphasizes benevolence, righteousness, frugality and the supervision and restraint of the monarch by introduce a concept—the mandate of heaven, which is essentially a requirement for the monarch’s morality [5]. However, as this requirement hindered the unlimited expansion of imperial power, the restraint and supervision in the theory of Five virtues in the Qin and Han Dynasties had been abandoned and alienated, and the influence was very limited.

Secondly, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues played a double-edged role in strengthening imperial power, enhancing the inviolability of imperial power in a new dynasty, but also becoming a threat to imperial power in a specific period. The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues does not focus on the specific policy governance of a regime but rather on the ownership of the mandate of heaven. As a result, the imperial power of a newly established dynasty cannot be easily usurped under its system, even if the emperor’s character is not strong enough or if there are obvious problems in governance.

In actual governance, the effect of strengthening the inviolability of imperial power by the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues is not limited to the establishment period of a dynasty. It can also be observed during the rising period and on occasions where there are disputes over what element(virtue) a dynasty belongs to. For example, in the early Western Han Dynasty, the water virtue (the same as the Qin Dynasty) was used as the official virtue. There was a dispute from the period of Emperor Wen regarding whether the official virtue of the regime should be water or earth. Finally, during the reign of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, the official virtue was changed to earth [5,6]. This virtue dispute lasted for several decades and coincided with a key period during which the Han Dynasty became strong and stable. The dispute actually played a role in consolidating and proving the stability and legitimacy of the Han Dynasty from different sides.

On the other hand, when a dynasty was on the verge of decline, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues could also provide theoretical support for coup d'état events, such as usurpation, civil unrest, and uprising, aimed to overthrow the dynasty with its flowing logic. For example, the Yellow Turban Uprising at the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty justified the overthrow of the Eastern Han Dynasty by using the “exceeding” order of the five elements in the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues [8]. During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the official virtue experienced another modification compared to the Western Han Dynasty, shifting to the fire virtue. The Yellow Turban Uprising troops wrapped their heads in yellow turbans and issued the slogan “The heaven is dead, the yellow heaven should stand”, which corresponded to the earth virtue that could replace the fire virtue in this cycle. Under the framework of the five elements and five colors, the color associated with the earth virtue was yellow.

Third, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues strengthens the mystery surrounding imperial power. The original concept of destiny in the theory explained the mysterious trait of empowering monarchs by heaven from the very beginning. This mystery becomes even more obvious when considered alongside other arcane doctrines, such as heaven-human induction and divination. What these doctrines try to achieve by mystical means is highly similar, namely, to reinforce a hierarchy centered on imperial power. These mystical elements, acting as a backdrop and bolstered by their support, serve to enhance the theological color.

4. The Effect of Imperial Power on The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues

The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues not only acted on the gradual expansion of imperial power, but also was influenced by the expansion. The influence can be observed in three key aspects:

Firstly, the demand for the expansion of imperial power led to the abandonment of the indoctrination parts of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues. Although the Qin dynasty adopted this theory, it did not govern according to its moral education aspects, which advocated benevolence, righteousness, and thrift. Instead, the Qin dynasty implemented harsh laws of “ruthless, implacable severity” [5,7]. The adoption of the virtues and rituals was out of the monarch’s desire to maintain orthodoxy; the further implementation of the severe laws was out of the monarch’s need to expand his actual power. The former was a preparatory work for the latter. Ying Zheng proved the orthodoxy of his rule through the promulgation of the virtues and rituals, and then transformed the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues into a service for the imperial power: with the guarantee of orthodoxy, there was a theoretical support for the deliberate alteration and discarding of the indoctrinating contents of the philosophical theory which did not conform to the need for power.

Secondly, the expansion of imperial power led to the shirking of the original responsibilities of the monarch in the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues. In the Han Dynasty, after the fusion of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues and Confucianism, emperors actively utilized and interpreted Confucianism to strengthen their power of interpretation over the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues. Also, for the need of their own power expansion, the emperors naturally used a new way of thinking to serve the imperial power to interpret the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues, downplaying their own responsibility to be bound by the mandate of Heaven and strengthening the inviolability of their own power. For example, the original interpretation of the Five Virtues of the Final Saying was that the monarch’s failure to follow the way of the king would result in the descent of a plague, but Emperor Xuan shirked part of the responsibility for his own failure to follow the way of the monarchs that “results the descent of the ‘plague’ of the solar eclipse” through the enhanced interpretive power, and let incompetent officials take the responsibility [9]. For this event, the Hanshu recorded: “At summer, on the last day of the fourth month—the day of Xin Chou, the sun has eclipsed. The imperial decree said: ‘the heaven shows plague, to warn my own, is my inability, the officials are not competent. ...citing the wrongful imprisonment, the detection of trespassing for the harsh prohibition of profoundly unchanged.’” [6,9].

Thirdly, the expansion of imperial power played an important role in the eventual elimination of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues as an official philosophy. One direct reason for its elimination was that the contradiction between the Circulation Theory of five virtues and the demand of imperial power gradually emerged in the course of historical evolution and reached an irreconcilable point. In essence, the system of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues was not set up to serve the infinite expansion of imperial power, but actually contradicted the emperor’s expectation that his lineage would be emperors for thousands of generations—that is to say, even after many changes to serve imperial power, its essence was still contradictory to the infinite expansion. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the imperial power was strengthened unprecedentedly, and this contradiction became more pronounced. Various factors contributed to the decline of the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues, including the rise of scientific and technological elites since the Song Dynasty (who disagreed with the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues), the proposal of alternative theories that were easier to operate in guarding the legitimacy of imperial power (such as the reformed orthodoxy theory by Ouyang Xiu in the Confucian system), and the neglect of the Circulation Theory of Five virtues by ethnic minority regimes, which represented by the Yuan Dynasty that did not even establish its official virtue. All these factors influenced the views and decisions of successive emperors, leading to a diminished importance placed on the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues [10].

5. Conclusion

There are clear interconnections between the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues and imperial power. The Circulation Theory of Five Virtues was used by the emperor to influence and change imperial power, while imperial power, in turn, impacted and transformed the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues to serve its own expansion needs.

This dynamic interaction is evident in two key aspects. Firstly, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues evolved from an academic concept into a tool purely used to fulfill the needs of imperial power expansion. Secondly, the theories adopted by imperial power increasingly incorporated elements that served imperial power expansion agenda, while components aimed at restraining imperial power decreased or disappeared. Essentially, the Circulation Theory of Five Virtues underwent a transformation influenced by the practices common within imperial power dynamics.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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