

Yin Yang

1 陰 陽

The concept of Yin-Yang is probably the single most important and distinctive theory of Chinese Medicine. It could be said that all Chinese medical physiology, pathology and treatment can, eventually, be reduced to Yin-Yang. The concept of Yin-Yang is extremely simple, yet very profound. One can seemingly understand it on a rational level, and yet, continually find new expressions of it in clinical practice and, indeed, in life.

The concept of Yin-Yang, together with that of Qi, has permeated Chinese philosophy over the centuries and is radically different to any Western philosophical idea. In general, Western Logic is based upon the opposition of contraries which is the fundamental premise of Aristotelian logic. According to this Logic, contraries (such as "The table is square" and "The table is not square") cannot both be true. This has dominated Western thought for over 2,000 years. The Chinese concept of Yin-Yang is radically different to this system of thought: Yin and Yang represent opposite but complementary qualities. Each thing or phenomenon could be itself and its contrary. Moreover, Yin contains the seed of Yang and vice versa, so that, contrary to Aristotelian logic, A can also be *NON-A*.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The earliest reference to Yin and Yang is probably the one in the "Book of Changes" (*Yi Jing*), dating back to about 700 BC. In this book Yin and Yang are represented by broken and unbroken lines (Fig. 1).

The combination of broken and unbroken lines in pairs forms four pairs of diagrams representing utmost Yin, utmost Yang and two intermediate stages (Fig. 2).

The addition of another line to these four diagrams forms, with varying combinations, the eight trigrams (Fig. 3).

Finally, the various combinations of the trigrams gives rise to the 64 hexagrams. These are supposed to symbolize all possible phenomena of the universe, and it therefore shows how all phenomena ultimately depend on the two poles of Yin and Yang.

The philosophical school that developed the theory of Yin Yang to its highest degree, is called the Yin -Yang School. Many schools of thought arose during the



Fig. 1 Yin Yang diagrams



Fig. 2 Four stages of Yin Yang



The Eight Trigrams

Fig. 3 The Eight Trigrams

Warring States period (476–221 BC), and the Yin-Yang school was one of them. It dedicated itself to the study of Yin-Yang and the 5 Elements and its main exponent was Zou Yan (c. 350–270 BC). This school is sometimes also called the Naturalist School as it set out to interpret Nature in a positive way and to use natural laws to man's advantage, not through attempting to control and subdue Nature (as in modern Western science), but by acting in harmony with its laws. This school represents a form of what we might call naturalist science today, and the theories of Yin-Yang and the 5 Elements served to interpret natural phenomena, including the human body, in health and disease.

The theories of Yin-Yang and the 5 Elements, systematically elaborated by the Naturalist school, later became the common heritage of subsequent schools of thought, particularly the Neo-Confucianist schools of the Song, Ming and Qing dynasty. These schools combined most of the elements from the previous schools of thought to form a coherent philosophy of Nature, Ethics, Social Order and Astrology.¹

I will discuss Yin-Yang from a general philosophical point of view first, and then from a medical point of view.

NATURE OF YIN-YANG CONCEPT

The Chinese characters for "Yin" and "Yang" are related to the dark and sunny side of a hill. The characters are:

陰 陽
YIN YANG

- 阝 represents a "mound" or "hill"
- 云 represents a "cloud"
- 日 represents the "sun"
- 旦 represents the "sun over the horizon"
- 勿 represents the "rays of light"

Thus the character for Yin indicates the shady side of a hill, whilst the character for Yang indicates the sunny side of a hill. By extension, they therefore also indicate "darkness" and "light" or "shady" and "bright".

YIN-YANG AS TWO PHASES OF A CYCLICAL MOVEMENT

The earliest origin of Yin-Yang phenomena must have derived from the peasants' observation of the cyclical alternation of day and night. Thus Day corresponds to Yang and Night to Yin, and, by extension, Activity to Yang and Rest to Yin. This led to the first observation of the continuous alternation of every phenomenon between two cyclical poles, one corresponding to Light, Sun, Brightness and Activity (Yang), the other corresponding to Darkness, Moon, Shade and Rest (Yin). From this point of view, Yin and Yang are two stages of a cyclical movement, one constantly changing into the other, such as the day giving way to night and vice versa.

Heaven (where the sun is) is therefore Yang and Earth is Yin. The ancient Chinese farmers conceived Heaven as a round vault, and the Earth as flat. Hence, Round is Yang and Square is Yin. The Heaven, containing the sun, moon and stars on which the Chinese farmers based their calendar therefore corresponds to Time; the Earth, which is parcelled out into fields corresponds to Space.

Because the sun rises in the East and sets in the West, the former is Yang and the latter Yin. If we face South, East will be on the left and West on the right. In Chinese cosmology, the compass directions were established assuming that one faced South. This was also reflected in imperial ceremonials when *"The Emperor faced South towards his subjects who faced North. . . The Emperor thus opened himself to receive the influence of Heaven, Yang and South. South is therefore like Heaven, at the top; North is therefore like Earth, at the bottom. . . By facing South, the Emperor identifies his left with East and his right with West"*.²

Thus, Left corresponds to Yang and Right to Yin. The "Simple Questions" relates the correspondence Yang-Left and Yin-Right to physiology. It says: *"East represents Yang. . . West represents Yin. . . in the West and North there is a deficiency of Heaven, hence the left ear and eyes hear and see better than the right; in the East and South there is a deficiency of Earth, hence the right hand and foot are stronger than the left."*³

The characters for "left" and "right" clearly show their relation with Yin and Yang as that for left includes the symbol for work (activity = Yang), and that for right includes a mouth (which eats products of the Earth which is Yin).⁴

左 右
LEFT RIGHT

工 represents "work"

口 represents "mouth"

We therefore have the first correspondences:

Yang	Yin
Light	Darkness
Sun	Moon
Brightness	Shade
Activity	Rest
Heaven	Earth
Round	Flat
Time	Space
East	West
South	North
Left	Right

Thus, from this point of view, Yin and Yang are essentially an expression of a duality in time, an alternation of two opposite stages in time. Every phenomenon in the universe alternates through a cyclical movement of peaks and bases, and the alternation of Yin and Yang is the motive force of its change and development. Day changes into night, summer into winter, growth into decay and vice versa. Thus the development of all phenomena in the universe is the result of the interplay of two opposite stages, symbolized by Yin and Yang and every phenomenon contains within itself both aspects in different degrees of manifestation. The Day belongs to Yang but after reaching its peak at midday, the Yin within it gradually begins to unfold and manifest. Thus each phenomenon may belong to a Yang or Yin stage but always contains the seed of the opposite stage within itself. The daily cycle clearly illustrates this (Fig. 4):

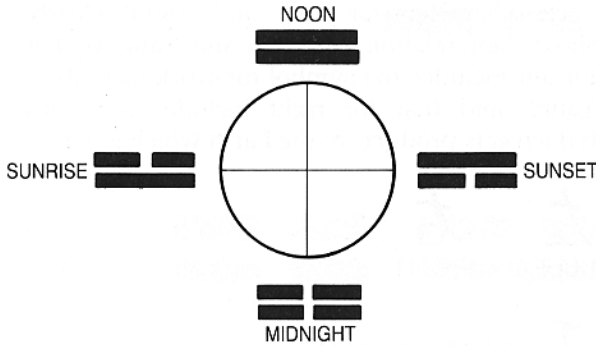


Fig. 4 Yin Yang in daily cycle

Exactly the same happens with the yearly cycle and we only need to substitute "Spring" for "dawn", "Summer" for "noon", Autumn" for "dusk" and "Winter" for "midnight".

Thus:

- | | |
|--------|--------------------|
| Spring | = Yang within Yin |
| | = growth of Yang |
| Summer | = Yang within Yang |
| | = maximum Yang |
| Autumn | = Yin within Yang |
| | = growth of Yin |
| Winter | = Yin within Yin |
| | = maximum Yin. |

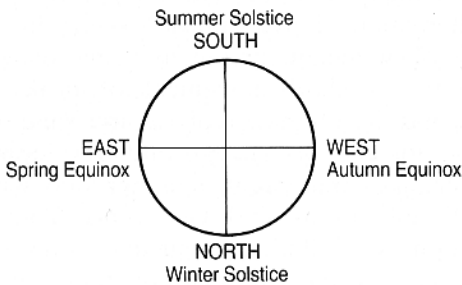


Fig. 5 Yin Yang in seasonal cycle

The two intermediate stages (dawn-Spring and dusk-Autumn) do not represent neutral stages in between Yin and Yang: they still pertain primarily to one or the other (i.e. dawn-Spring pertain to Yang and dusk-Autumn pertain to Yin), so that the cycle can always be narrowed down to a polarity of two stages.

YIN-YANG AS TWO STAGES OF TRANSFORMATION

From a different viewpoint, Yin and Yang stand for two stages in the process of change and transformation of all things in the universe. As we have seen above, everything goes through phases of a cycle, and in so doing, its form also changes. For example, the water in lakes and seas heats up during the day and is transformed into vapour. As the air cools down in the evening, vapour condenses into water again.

Form can be more or less dense material. From this point of view, Yang symbolizes the more immaterial, rarefied states of matter, whereas Yin symbolizes the more material, dense states of matter. To use the same example, water in its liquid state pertains to Yin, and the vapour resulting from heat pertains to Yang. This duality in the states of condensation of things was often symbolized in ancient China by the duality of "Heaven" and "Earth". "Heaven" symbolized all rarefied, immaterial, pure and gas-like states of things, whereas "Earth" symbolizes all dense, material, coarse and solid states of things. The "Simple Questions" in chapter 2 says: "Heaven is an accumulation of Yang, Earth is an accumulation of Yin".⁵

The important thing to understand is that the two opposite states of condensation or aggregation of things are not independent of each other, but they change into each other. Yin and Yang also symbolize two opposite states of aggregation of things. Lie Zi, a Daoist philosopher (c. 300 BC) said: "The purer and lighter [elements] tending upwards made the Heaven; the grosser and heavier, tending downwards, made the Earth".⁶

In its purest and most rarefied form, Yang is totally immaterial and corresponds to pure energy, and Yin, in its coarsest and densest form, is totally material and corresponds to matter. From this viewpoint, energy and matter are but two states of a continuum, with an infinite possible number of states of aggregation. The "Simple Questions" in chapter 2 says: "Yin is quiet, Yang is active. Yang gives life, Yin makes it grow... Yang is transformed into Qi, Yin is transformed into material life".⁷

As Yang corresponds to creation and activity, it naturally also corresponds to expansion and it rises. As Yin corresponds to condensation and materialization, it naturally also corresponds to contraction and it descends. Thus we can add a few more qualities to the list of Yin-Yang correspondences:

<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yin</i>
Immaterial	Material
Produces energy	Produces form
Generates	Grows
Non-substantial	Substantial
Energy	Matter
Expansion	Contraction
Rising	Descending
Above	Below
Fire	Water

The relationship and interdependence of Yin-Yang can be represented in the famous symbol (Fig. 6). This symbol is called the "Supreme Ultimate" (Tai Ji) and it represents well the interdependence of Yin and Yang.

The main points of this interdependence are:

- a) Although they are opposite stages, Yin-Yang form a unity and are complementary.
- b) Yang contains the seed of Yin and vice versa. This is represented by the small black and white spots.
- c) Nothing is totally Yin or totally Yang.
- d) Yang changes into Yin and vice versa.



Fig. 6 Symbol of Yin and Yang

FOUR ASPECTS OF YIN-YANG RELATIONSHIP

The main aspects of the Yin-Yang relationship can be summarized into four.

1) The opposition of Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are opposite stages either of a

cycle or of states of aggregation as explained above. Nothing in the natural world escapes this opposition. It is this very inner contradiction that constitutes the motive force of all the changes, development and decay of things.

However, the opposition is relative, not absolute, in so far as nothing is totally Yin or totally Yang. Everything contains the seed of its opposite. Moreover, the opposition of Yin-Yang is relative as the Yin or Yang quality of something is not really intrinsic, but only relative to something else. Thus, strictly speaking, it is wrong to say that something "is Yang" or "is Yin". Everything only pertains to Yin or Yang in relation to something else. For example, hot pertains to Yang and cold pertains to Yin, so we might say that the climate in Naples is Yang in relation to that in Stockholm, but it is Yin in relation to that in Algiers.

Although everything contains Yin and Yang, these are never present in a static 50/50 proportion, but in a dynamic and constantly changing balance. For example, the human body's temperature is nearly constant within a very narrow range. This is not the result of a static situation, but of a dynamic balance of many opposing forces.

2) The interdependence of Yin and Yang

Although Yin and Yang are opposite, they are also interdependent: one cannot exist without the other. Everything contains opposite forces which are mutually exclusive, but, at the same time, they depend on each other. Day is opposite to night, there cannot be activity without rest, energy without matter or contraction without expansion.

3) Mutual consumption of Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are in a constant state of dynamic balance, which is maintained by a continuous adjustment of the relative levels of Yin and Yang. When either Yin or Yang are out of balance, they necessarily affect each other and change their proportion and so achieve a new balance. Besides the normal state of balance of Yin and Yang, there are four possible states of imbalance:

- Preponderance of Yin
- Preponderance of Yang
- Weakness of Yin
- Weakness of Yang.

When Yin is preponderant, it induces a decrease of Yang, i.e. the excess of Yin consumes Yang. When Yang is preponderant, it induces a decrease of Yin, i.e. the excess of Yang consumes Yin.

When Yin is weak, Yang is in apparent excess, and when Yang is weak, Yin is in apparent excess. This is only apparent, as it is only in excess in relation to the deficient quality, not in absolute.

These four situations can be represented by the following diagrams (Fig. 7). These diagrams will be discussed again in detail when dealing with the application of Yin and Yang to Chinese Medicine. Although the diagram of a normal, balanced state of Yin and Yang shows equal proportion of the two qualities, this should not be interpreted literally: the balance is achieved with different dynamic proportions of Yin and Yang.

It is important to see the difference between Preponderance of Yin and Weakness of Yang: these may appear the same, but they are not. It is a question of what is primary and what is secondary. In case of Preponderance of Yin, this is primary and, as a consequence, the excess of Yin consumes the Yang. In case of Weakness of Yang, this is primary and, as a consequence, Yin is in apparent excess. It looks like it is in excess, but is only relative to the deficiency of Yang. The same applies to Preponderance of Yang and weakness of Yin.

4) The inter-transformation of Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are not static, but they actually transform into each other: Yin can change into Yang and vice versa. This change does not happen at random, but only at a certain stage of development of something. Summer changes into Winter, day changes into night, life into death, happiness into unhappiness, heat into cold and vice versa. For example, the great euphoria of a drinking spree is quickly followed the next morning by the depression of a hang-over.

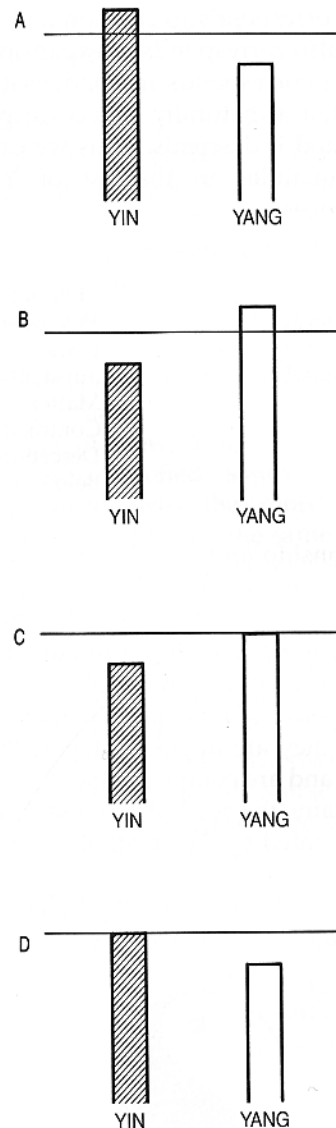


Fig. 7 Preponderance and weakness of Yin and Yang

There are two conditions for the transformation of Yin into Yang or vice versa.

a) The first concerns internal conditions. Things can only change through internal causes primarily, and external causes secondarily. Change only takes place when the internal conditions are ripe. For example, an egg changes into a chick with the application of heat only because the egg contains within itself the capacity of turning into a chick. Application of heat to a stone will

not produce a chick.

b) The second condition is the time factor. Yin and Yang can only transform into each other at a certain stage of development, when conditions are ripe for the change. In the case of the egg, the chick will only hatch when the time is ripe.

APPLICATION OF YIN-YANG TO MEDICINE

It could be said that the whole of Chinese Medicine, its physiology, pathology, diagnosis and treatment, can all be reduced to the basic and fundamental theory of Yin and Yang. Every physiological process and every symptom or sign can be analysed in the light of the Yin-Yang theory. Ultimately, every treatment modality is aimed at one of these four strategies:

To tonify Yang

To tonify Yin

To eliminate excess Yang

To eliminate excess Yin.

Understanding the application of the theory of Yin-Yang to medicine, is therefore of supreme importance in practice: one can say that there is no Chinese Medicine without Yin-Yang.

YIN-YANG AND THE BODY STRUCTURE

Every part of the human body has a predominantly Yin or Yang character, and this is important in clinical practice. It must be emphasized, however, that this character is only relative. For example, the chest area is Yang in relation to the abdomen (because it is higher), but Yin in relation to the head.

As a general rule, the following are the characters of various body structures:

<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yin</i>
Superior	Inferior
Exterior	Interior
Posterior-lateral surface	Anterior-medial surface
Back	Front
Function	Structure

More specifically, the Yin-Yang characters of the body structures, organs and energies are:

<i>Yang</i>	<i>Yin</i>
Back	Front (chest-abdomen)
Head	Body
Exterior (skin-muscles)	Interior (organs)
Above the waist	Below the waist
Posterior-lateral surface of limbs	Interior-medial surface of limbs
Yang organs	Yin organs
Function of organs	Structure of organs
Qi	Blood-Body Fluids
Defensive Qi	Nutritive Qi

Each of these will need to be explained in detail.

Back-Front

The Back is the place where all the Yang channels flow. These carry Yang energy and have the function of protecting the body from exterior pathogenic factors. It is the nature of Yang to be on the Exterior and to protect. It is the nature of Yin to be in the Interior and to nourish. Thus the channels on the back belong to Yang and can be used both to strengthen Yang and therefore as resistance to exterior pathogenic factors, and to eliminate pathogenic factors after these have already invaded the body.

The Front (abdomen and chest) is the place where all the Yin channels flow. These carry Yin energy and have the function of nourishing the body. They are often used to tonify Yin.

Head-Body

The head is the place where all the Yang channels either end or begin: they therefore all meet and flow into each other on the head. The relation of the head to Yang energy is verified in different ways in practice. First of all, Yang energy tends to rise and in pathological situations, Heat or Fire will tend to rise. Since the head is the topmost area of the body, Yang energy (be it physiological or pathological) will tend to rise to the head. In pathological circumstances, this will cause red face and red eyes.

The head is also easily affected by Yang pathogenic factors such as Wind and Summer-Heat.

Finally, the head being the convergence place