1 Introduction

> The sage scrutinizes what is appropriate to the Yin and Yang and discriminates what is beneficial in the myriad things in order to enhance life.
>
> Lüshi Chunqiu

> Those charged with recording the Yin and Yang observe their interaction and can bring about order.
>
> Xunzi

What is yinyang? This question is at once utterly simple and wildly complicated. Thorough scholarly attempts to answer this question are surprisingly few, given the prominence of this concept. This may be a result of that prominence itself. People generally think they know about yinyang, although they usually pronounce yang incorrectly (it should rhyme with the English words "tong" or "bong," not with "sang" or "hang"). Because yin and yang are the most commonly known concepts from Chinese philosophy, they have practically become English words themselves. This familiarity may suggest that their meanings are obvious or that the concepts contain little worthy of deep intellectual inquiry. This would be a serious mistake.

Chinese thinkers themselves have recognized the significance of yinyang in Chinese thought and culture since ancient times. In the *Yantie lun* 鹽鐵論 (*Discourse on Salt and Iron*, 81 B.C.E.), one of the most significant texts in early China, we read: "The middle kingdom (*zhongguo*/China) is in the middle (*zhong*) of heaven and earth and is at the border (*ji* 際) of yin and yang (中國, 天地之中, 陰陽之際也)."[1]

[1] K. Heng, 桓寬. *On Salt and Iron* 鹽鐵論, with commentary by Z. Li. 林振翰校釋 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1934), p. 55.

China is framed here in two contexts: human beings live between heaven and earth and at the intersection of yin and yang. The word *ji* literally means the border or boundary of a land, but it applies just as well to interactions between things. This early text views Chinese culture within the borders of yin and yang. It is also possible to read this claim from the *Yantie Lun* slightly differently, as one contemporary Chinese scholar argues that "middle" and "border" should both be taken as verbs. According to this view, Chinese culture arises from the attempt to stay centered between heaven and earth and to maintain the appropriate relations between yin and yang.[2]

Another early view of the centrality of yinyang comes from a medical text unearthed at the Mawangdui Han tombs that was buried in 168 B.C.E. The "Ten Questions" (十問) begins with a dialogue between the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun:

> Yao asked Shun: "In Under-heaven, what is the most valuable?"
> Shun replied: "Life is most valuable."
> Yao said: "How can life be cultivated?"
> Shun said: "Investigate Yin and Yang."[3]

This statement identifies life itself as the most fundamental value for the myriad things, and the key to fostering life is yinyang. Yinyang is not only offered for matters of basic health but also for the highest levels of self-cultivation. Thus, the oldest extant Chinese medical treatise (written around 200 C.E.), the *Huangdi Neijing*,[4] (黃帝內經) known as *The Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*, states that the "true person" (*zhenren*真人) is one who can: "carry and support heaven and earth and grasp and master yinyang." (餘聞上古有真人者，提挈天地，把握陰陽).[5]

[2] Chen Yun takes this as the mission of Chinese culture: "Moreover, the 'middle' of the 'middle kingdom' functions as the middle between heaven and earth, and 'border' of yin and yang has a verbal sense, meaning that as a kind of civilization, China has the cultural mission of linking heaven and earth and connecting yin and yang." Chen Yun, "The Death of Hundun and the Deconstruction of the View of China-Centrism" 陳贇 "混沌之死"與中國中心主義天下觀之解構 in Discussion Forum for Chinese Thought, http://www.zhongguosixiang.com/thread-23589-1-1.html, October 7, 2010.

[3] D. J. Harper (trans.), "Ten Questions in Early Chinese Medical Literature," *The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1998), p. 399.

[4] The date and author of this text are debatable. The text consists of two parts: the first is a series of questions and answers; the second section is known as the "Vital Axis," which deals with medical physiology, anatomy, and acupuncture. P. U. Unschuld, *Medicine in China, A History of Ideas*, 25th ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 108.

[5] Y. Zhang 張隱庵 (ed.), *Huangdi Neijing Commentaries* 黃帝內經素問集注 (Beijing: Xueyuan Press 學苑出版社, 2002), p. 7.

These passages, spanning four centuries, illustrate the importance attributed to yinyang at all levels, from governing the state to maintaining the health of the body. As Joseph Needham says, yinyang ideas "were the most ultimate principles of which the ancient Chinese could conceive."[6] The *Huainanzi* (淮南子), a synthetic work of the early Han Dynasty (200 B.C.E.) presents the human condition in a similar way: "Heaven as father, Earth as mother, yin and yang as warp, the four seasons as weft."[7] The metaphor suggests that without the binding thread of yinyang, the embroidery of human life would unravel.

Yinyang finds expression in numerous classical Chinese texts and commentaries, especially during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.), and it has retained its preeminence through thousand years of Chinese tradition, and even survived modernization. Popular discussions of yinyang now generally focus on three points. First, yinyang describes a condition in which there exist two opposite but related and interdependent ideas or objects. For example, one popular online dictionary defines yinyang as "Two complementary principles of Chinese philosophy: Yin is negative, dark, and feminine. Yang is positive, bright, and masculine. Their interaction is thought to maintain the harmony of the universe and to influence everything within it."[8] *Webster's Encyclopedia Unabridged Dictionary of English Language* in turn states: "Yin and Yang (in Chinese philosophy and religion): two principles, one negative, dark, and feminine (Yin), and one positive, bright, and masculine (Yang), whose interaction influences the destinies of creatures and things."[9] As we see in these dictionary entries, things like the earth, the moon, water, the night, the feminine, softness, passivity, and darkness all accord with yin, whereas heaven, the sun, fire, day, masculinity, hardness, activity, and brightness can all be attributed to yang. This division simultaneously emphasizes that these two elements are interrelated and interdependent.

Second, yinyang offers a normative model with balance, harmony, and sustainability as ideals. When one compares something to yin or yang,

[6] J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 7 vols. (Cambridge University Press, 1956), vol. II, p. 232.

[7] H. Roth (trans.), *The Huainanzi*: *A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 241. *The Huainanzi* provides the most elaborate early philosophical account of the beginning of the universe. The picture of the universe is carefully drawn in a Daoist framework; however, it integrates many different schools. The text claims an important role in the Chinese intellectual tradition, having inspired approximately 200 commentaries over a span of 2,000 years.

[8] http://www.Dictionary.reference.com

[9] *Webster's Encyclopedia Unabridged Dictionary of English Language* (New York: Gramercy Publishing Company, 1994).

this usually suggests a way of dealing with things through the balance or harmony between two elements. Such advice is popularly applied to almost all fields of action: leadership, business, art, media, sports, and psychoanalysis. Consider a typical example, applying yinyang to parenting:

> In the context of parenting, it is typical of masculine energy to distance ourselves from our children, to push them away, while it is typical of feminine energy to draw them toward us, to open our arms and heart, and comfort them. Pushing away, at the right times, can be the perfect expression of love, because without it, our children will not learn to be independent. Children, therefore, provide women with opportunities to be yang as well as their general inclination to be yin.[10]

In science, there is a life cycle assessment and green chemistry in which one finds phrases like "the yin and yang of industrial ecology" or "the yin and yang of optimal functioning."[11]

Third, a more scholarly understanding involves conceptual construction, whereby yinyang is characterized as a "correlative" mode of thought or cosmology.[12] This "correlative cosmology" as a comprehensive system was formed between the third and the second centuries B.C.E. The focal point is "stimulus and response" (*ganying* 感應) among things and events. An event or action happening or performed in one domain affects corresponding factors in another domain. This cosmology is not based on linear causality between distinct entities, but rather on making a connection between entities and phenomena. In *Yinyang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking*, A. C. Graham explains Chinese cosmology in terms of correlative thinking.[13] Graham explicitly distinguishes this approach from that of the well-known French Sinologist Marcel Granet (1884–1940):

> In Granet's time, it was still natural to assume that in matters of fact as in geometry, demonstration can start from clearly defined terms independent of correlations, so that Yin-Yang thinking – not that he treats it

[10] http://www.modernphilosophy.com/philosophy/parenting.html

[11] E. Voit, *Design Principles and Operating Principles: The Yin and Yang of Optimal Functioning*. http://www.sciencedirect.com

[12] B. I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 351–382. A. H. Black, "Gender and Cosmology in Chinese Correlative Thinking," in C. W. Bynum, S. Harrell, and P. Richman (eds.) *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); D. L. Hall and R. T. Ames, "Sexism, With Chinese Characteristics" in C. Li (ed.) *The Sage and the Second Sex* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2001).

[13] A. C. Graham, *Yinyang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986), p. 1.

> unsympathetically – belongs to a stage which Greek logic put behind it once and for all. By now, however, it has come to seem that wherever you dig down towards the roots of analytic reason, you reach a stratum where thinking is correlative, so that it becomes necessary to look at Yin-Yang from another direction.[14]

Rather than taking it as a primitive form of thought, Graham takes correlative thinking as a fundamental element of all reasoning. In the Chinese context, this correlative thinking is yinyang thinking. For example, yinyang is not just an important tool for grasping the cosmic body, namely the universe; it is also applied to the micro body: "human flesh."[15] The human body bears the same rhythm and properties as the greater cosmic body. Yinyang presents a justification for this association and a conceptual tool for understanding it.

These common views show that yinyang places human flourishing within a rich and deep context involving the interrelatedness of the cosmos and human beings. These interpretations also demonstrate that these relationships and connections must be understood in terms of differentiation between related but distinct forces. This view of yinyang is frequently used to characterize the Chinese worldview as a whole, in a way that situates it in contrast to Western thought: the Chinese focuses on interconnection, immanence, and cyclical changes, whereas Western philosophers emphasize dualism, transcendence, and eternal principles.

Such generalizations are too broad, and they miss the complexity and diversity of both Chinese and Western philosophy. Nonetheless, yinyang can be thought of as a kind of a horizon for much of Chinese thought and culture. It serves as a horizon in the sense that although the terms are invoked in particular contexts for concrete purposes, they imply a deeper cultural background and a paradigm for thinking about change and effective action. Yinyang is a particular term, but it also represents an underlying structure in an enduring tradition. In this sense, we can consider yinyang as a thinking paradigm. Thomas Kuhn develops a concept of paradigm that signifies an exemplary model. He argues that paradigms precede and shape all the operations of rational thinking: methodology, theory building, the determination of facts, and perception. A paradigm is a conceptual configuration that is demonstrated and learned by example, providing a lens through which one can view the world.[16] Yinyang in

[14] Ibid., p. 3.
[15] Ibid., p. 28.
[16] T. Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Chinese culture fits this description. At the same time, yinyang can also be seen as a constellation of lay beliefs and practices, functioning explicitly and implicitly in activities ranging from philosophy to health care and from warfare to a way of life. To capture this broad structure, this book will use the term "yinyang," rather than "yin or yang," "yin-yang," or "yin and yang." This reflects the Chinese usage, in which the terms are directly set together and would not be linked by a conjunction.

Beyond Common Understandings of Yinyang

A careful study of early Chinese texts shows that common accounts of yinyang are far too simple. Yinyang embodies a wide range of linked meanings, many of which are in play simultaneously. The invocation of yinyang itself is always predicated on a particular situation, a unique moment in which we must engage in the world. As Granet points out, "Throughout the period from fifth to third century [B.C.E.], these terms of Yin and Yang are employed by theorists from very different orientations. This very wide usage of these two terms gives the impression that they signify notions inspired by a vast ensemble of techniques and doctrines."[17]

This book illustrates yinyang as a philosophical and cultural paradigm that has multiple dimensions that evolved over time, and lays out the ways in which yinyang works, examining some of the ways in which yinyang functioned as the warp and woof of Chinese thought and culture. The goal is to give a more nuanced, synchronic account of the roles of yinyang within various aspects of early Chinese thinking, while still bringing out common aspects of yinyang as a paradigm and strategy. We can take the metaphor of the tree in the *Huainanzi* to illustrate this. A tree has two basic parts, the roots (*ben* 本) and the branches and leaves (*mo* 末): "It is like the roots and branches of trees: none of thousands of limbs and tens of thousands of leaves does not derive from the roots."[18] Yinyang is like a root (*ben*) of the branches of Chinese thinking: "As soon as you stimulate the root, the hundred branches all respond; it is like the spring rains watering the myriad things."[19] A better understanding of yinyang thus helps to clarify many aspects of Chinese thought and culture.

[17] Marcel Granet, *La pensée chinoise* (*Chinese Thought*) (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1968), p. 73. Thanks to Sonya Ozbey who translated one chapter from French to English for this book.
[18] Roth, *The Huainanzi*, p. 241.
[19] Ibid., p. 796.

We can begin by considering three ways in which the common assumptions about yinyang are inadequate or misleading.

Lived Yinyang: A Multiplicity of Relations

The common understanding of yin and yang as related pairs often takes yin and yang as things or fixed qualities of things. In fact, yin and yang are not simply things, entities, or objects. They can be used to characterize structures in which things exist, but they can also be used to analyze the functions of a thing in any given condition. In Chinese terms, yinyang can be both *ti* 體 (structure) and *yong* 用 (function). In both cases, yinyang always applies in particular and relative contexts. As Alfred Forke puts it, "Ultimately, yin and yang do not mean anything in themselves at all, being only employed to express a relation; one notion is the opposite of the other, the one is positive, the other negative."[20] Even at its inception, yinyang was used to denote the function of the sun in the context of a hill, with yang referring to the sunny side and yin to the shady side. If yinyang is the result of the temporal interplay of the sun and the hill, then does yinyang exist in its own right if either the sun or the hill is absent?

Because of this dependence on context, a single thing can be yin in one way and yang in another. Again, Forke provides a nice illustration: "The left hand is Yang, the right hand is Yin, in this no change is possible, but raise both hands, then they are both Yang, and put them down, and they are both Yin, and no matter whether you raise them or put them down, when they are hot they are both Yang, and when they are cold they are both Yin."[21] These are not contradictory labels, and it would be absurd to argue whether the right hand is *really* yang or *really* yin. The qualities only make sense when one specifies a certain context. The fact that anything is simultaneously yin and yang mirrors the fact that things are always implicated in multiple relations at once. Moreover, which relation is in view depends on the particular purposes and priorities of the viewer.

Aside from the fact that yin and yang differentiate things only within particular relationships and contexts, the precise relationship between yin and yang could be characterized in different ways, many of which can be invoked simultaneously. It is important to point out that yinyang is neither dualistic in positing two absolutely independent entities, nor even simply dialectical in projecting one single pattern for change. Yin

[20] A. Forke, *The World-Conception of The Chinese: Their Astronomical, Cosmological and Physico-Philosophical Speculations* (London: Late Probsthain & Co., 1925), p. 214.
[21] Ibid., p. 215.

and yang contest each other in a temporal framework and in multiple ways. To better encapsulate the complexity and multiplicity of yinyang thought, we can generalize these different relationships into six forms.[22]

1) *Maodun* 矛盾: Contradiction and opposition. Although yinyang thought may prompt us to think of harmony, interconnection, and wholeness, the basis of any yinyang distinction is difference, opposition, and contradiction. Any two sides are connected and related, but they are also opposed in some way, like light and dark, male and female, forceful and yielding. It is the tension and difference between the two sides that allows for the dynamic energy that comes through their interactions. It is also this difference that enables yinyang as a strategy – to act successfully, we must sometimes be more yin and sometimes more yang, depending on the context.

This aspect of yinyang is often described in terms of *maodun* 矛盾, which literally means "shield-spear" and originates from a story in the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (280–233 B.C.E.). A person who sells shields and spears promotes his shields by saying they are so strong that nothing can penetrate them, whereas he promotes his spears by saying they are so sharp they can penetrate anything. Someone then asks him – what happens if one tries to use your spear to penetrate your shield?[23]

The *Hanfeizi* story raises opposites as logical contradictions. In this sense, something cannot be yang and yin (light and dark, masculine and feminine) in precisely the same way, at the same time, and in the same context. This approach to distinctions can be seen as the one of most fundamental in European philosophy. Such an approach, however, works only in the abstract. In reality, we not only find that opposites exist through interaction with and in dependence on each other, but also that the same thing can be considered to have opposite qualities depending on the context, as it is not a logical contradiction to say that one thing is small (in comparison to a mountain) but large (in comparison to an ant). In thinking about opposition and difference, Chinese thinkers concentrate much more on these latter aspects. The best-known modern example comes from Mao Zedong (1893–1976) who took *maodun* as the title of one of his essays, *On Contradiction* 矛盾論 (*Maodun Lun*), which highlights the unity of opposites as a force for class struggle and change.

[22] A further specification of the ways in which yin and yang can be related will be given in the discussion of the body in Chapter 5.

[23] Chen, Qiyou 陳奇猷. *New Annotation of Hanfeizi* 韓非子新校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press 上海古籍出版社 New Commentary, 2000), p. 204.

2) *Xiangyi* 相依: Interdependence. One side of the opposition cannot exist without the other. This interdependence can be seen on several different levels. On one level, it points out the interdependence of opposites as relative concepts. In labeling something as "high," one must implicitly label something else as "low." One cannot have a concept of "good" without there existing a concept of "bad" (*Daodejing*, chapter 2). According to yinyang thinking, however, the interdependence of opposites does not simply refer to the relativity of our concepts, but also to how things themselves exist, grow, and function. One way that this interdependence appears most clearly is through the alternation of yin and yang. The sun is the best example of yang – bright, warming, stimulating growth, and giving a rhythm – but when the power of that yang is developed to the extreme, it is necessary for it to be anchored, regenerated, and sustained by the force of yin. The sun must set. Although yang is the obvious, it cannot thrive without attention to yin. This interdependence appears in traditional Chinese medical texts, where the surge of *yangqi* 陽氣 depends on the regeneration of the *yinqi* 陰氣 of the five internal organs. Without the *yinqi* of the organs, there will be no a surge of *yangqi* or its extension outward.

The *Gui Guzi* 鬼谷子(*The Master of Spirit Valley*), a classic text of the school of *Zongheng* 縱橫 (School of Strategy) in the Warring States Period (451–221 B.C.E.), illustrates this interdependence, using an opening and closing door as a metaphor. To be a door, it must be able to open and close as two interrelated modes; otherwise, it will be simply a wall (that does not move) or an open space (that does not close). The *Gui Guzi* gives this a cosmic significance: "Opening and closing are the way of heaven and earth. Opening and closing change and move yinyang, just as the four seasons open and close to transform the myriad things."[24]

3) *Huhan* 互含: Mutual inclusion. Interdependence is linked closely to mutual inclusion. If yin depends on yang, then yang is always implicated in yin; in other words, yin cannot be adequately characterized without also taking account of yang. The same is true of yang – it necessarily involves yin. Regarding things themselves, even something that is strongly yang can be considered yin in some relations, as we have seen. The constant alternation between yin and yang also entails that yang always holds some yin and yin holds some yang. In the cycle of four seasons, summer is the most yang of the seasons, yet it contains a yin force, which will begin to emerge in the summer, extend through the fall, and reach its culmination

[24] F. Xu (ed.), 許富宏 *Gui Guzijishi*, 鬼谷子集釋, *Master of Spirit Valley* (Beijing: Chinese Press, 2008), p. 13.

in the winter. Winter is the highest stage of yin, yet it unfolds a yang force that will attain its own full swing through spring to summer. This mutual inclusion is best captured in the famous yinyang symbol that will be discussed in Chapter 6, which includes a small circle of yang within the fullest yin and a small circle of yin within the fullest yang.

Similarly, in the *Yijing* 易經 (*The Book of Changes*), all yin hexagrams have a dominant yang line and all yang hexagrams have a dominant yin line. This mutual inclusion has important consequences in terms of strategy because it indicates that, when one thing appears to you as present, that thing also entails opposite forces that are hidden and in motion but that have not yet appeared.

4) *Jiaogan* 交感: Interaction or resonance. Each element influences and shapes the other. If yin and yang are interdependent and mutually inclusive, then a change in one will necessarily produce a change in the other. Thus, as yang ebbs in the autumn, yin strengthens, and as yin declines in the spring, yang grows. For example, in Chinese traditional medical diagnoses, too much yin in the body is a sickness of yang, and too much yang in the body is a sickness of yin.[25] Changes in yin will affect yang, and vice versa.

This mutual resonance is crucial to yinyang as a strategy because it entails that one can influence any element by addressing its opposite, which in practice most often takes the form of responding to yang through yin. The Eastern Han dynasty (25–220 C.E.) text, the *Taipingjing* 太平經 (*Classic of Great Peace* 31–7 B.C.E.), which is a valuable resource for early Daoist beliefs and practices, applies this yinyang resonance to oppose female infanticide, as we will see in Chapter 3.

In medical treatment, yin and yang should be fostered at the same time. It is said, for example, that yin will not respond to the drug or acupuncture without a certain amount of yang. The *Lüshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (c. 240 B.C.E.)[26] takes this resonance as a general principle, approached through the relationship between action and nonaction: "Not to venture out is the means by which one does venture out; not to act is the means by which one acts. This is called 'using the Yang to summon the Yin and using the Yin to summon the Yang.'"[27]

[25] Zhang (ed.), *Huangdi Neijing Commentaries*, p. 46.

[26] The *Lüshi Chunqiu*, compiled around 240 B.C.E., is the one of the great monuments of Chinese thinking. As Knoblock and Riegel put it, it is "a philosophical manual for the universal rule of the coming dynasty.... It belongs in the first rank of classical Chinese philosophy." J. Knoblock and J. Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. vii–viii.

[27] Ibid., p. 410.