**dialectics/阴阳(Yīn Yáng)**

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It would be counterproductive to render yin-yang into any concept in English or other Indo-European languages. This is partly because yin and yang are philosophical rather than purely linguistic, and partly because they represent a unique way to perceive the world that is unlikely available in western philosophies. An appropriate interpretation of them, however possible, is conditional on a comprehensive appreciation of their metaphysical, ethical and social meanings and implications. As a matter of fact, all attempts to literally translate or to philosophically interpret them in the past ended in a failure to deliver a pair of appropriate concepts and to reach consensus among scholars, as they would either generate ambiguity in hermeneutical reconstruction of Chinese philosophy or cause new misunderstandings in cross-cultural studies.

Earlier sinologists tended to employ such general terms as ‘the natural forces’ (e.g. James Legge), or ‘dualistic features’ (e.g. Richard Wilhelm’s the dark and the light) to be the equivalents of yin and yang, or to interpret them in terms of contradictory qualities such as negative and positive, passive and active, female and male. These renderings have indeed conveyed part of the original meanings, and can be supported to an extent by textual evidences. However, due to the wide range of applications in which yin and yang are employed, none of them have exhausted all of the attributes of yin and yang, and can be carried through consistently even within one single text. Subsequently they have to be uneasily adapted or awkwardly rephrased from time to time in order to be applicable to different contexts where yin and yang refer to different matters or issues.

Being aware of the impossibility to translate or interpret yin and yang precisely in terms of western concepts, more and more scholars have come to use them simply as they are. Hence yin-yang or yin and yang as legitimate ‘words’ that are listed in almost all contemporary English dictionaries and are used widely in books and articles concerning Chinese culture or in comparative philosophy (e.g. Michael Slote). Without a definitive translation, however, it does not mean that yin-yang is incomprehensible to other philosophies. To grasp the complicated contents and diverse extensions of yin-yang philosophy, we may gain some insight from the following three approaches. First, yin and yang may be conveniently categorized as primary ‘principles’ that ‘guide’ or ‘frame’ all evolutional and existential activities. Yin-yang philosophy does not consider the world a total chaos; instead, all the existential and evolutionary phenomena such as movements, growths, transformations are legitimized by yin, yang and their interaction. In so doing, however, we must keep it in mind that like ‘laws’ or ‘natural laws’ in western philosophy, yin-yang ‘principles’ are mental categories or the constructions of the mind, created in order to derive meanings from internal and external phenomena.

Secondly, the subjective presumption of our first approach must be supplemented by substantial realism, because yin and yang are not merely ‘categories’; they are actually fundamental ‘powers’ that activate and sustain all changes and all events, in the natural and human world as well as in living beings and lifeless things. In other words, yin and yang are real ‘forces’ or creative powers, whose existence and function do not depend on the subject as we think we are. In an ontological sense yin and yang are both ‘entities’ and ‘properties’. However, different from Leibniz’s *monads* in the pre-determined harmony that are non-extended and immaterial entities, as primary and cosmic powers, yin and yang are not only material but also creative and dynamic, constructing as well as being destructive, responsible for the multiple facets and organic diversity of the world. However, unlike material powers such as ‘energy’ or ‘gravity’ in modern science, yin and yang are intangible and cannot be measured. We or some of us can feel and know the existence and moving of yin and yang, because they have a life of their own, are differentiable in genders (male and female *qi*氣), and are animated and spiritualized. In this sense, ‘vital powers’ is probably more appropriate an interpretation than ‘material powers’.

Thirdly, yin and yang are not only actual energies or powers but also organic processes inherent in the formation and evolution of all things and all beings. Yin and yang each and together cause a natural and organic sequence of changes, actions or steps to take place. Unlike other kinds of processes that we often see in daily life, however, yin-yang processes are circular rather than lineal, enabling all things and beings to come into existence and to return to their origins. While yin and yang are fully embodied in the process of changes (yinyang xiaozhang阴阳消长), none of them should be confined to one of these changes, and none of the processes is separable from others. Hence we have our world that is formed and vitalized in interconnected, interacted and mutually penetrated processes.

More complex and important than how to define yin and yang is how to appreciate the relationship between them. Yin and yang must be seen and may be understood only in their relations. Neither yin nor yang can exist and function alone. They are locked or are inherently ‘living’ in relations that are characterised by interconnectedness, interdependence and inclusivity rather than opposition, independence and exclusivity. The former reveals the nature of what are normally branded as ‘polarist’ relations, in contrast to the latter as ‘dualist’. A polaristic relation is defined as such that each of the two is both separable from the other and is related to the other. For example, as polar powers, yin and yang depend and act on each other to initiate changes and to activate events in which they participate in rather than simply oppose each other; as bi-processes, yin and yang require each other as a necessary condition to be as they are and to proceed as they go, relying on each other to start and complete a process; as co-’creators’, their creation comes from interaction and from mutual transformation rather than one creating or destructing the other; as two fundamentals, they are both self-determining and being determined by each other, as stillness (the embodiment of yin), for example, does not consist in a total absence of movement (that of yang), but is rather in a particular ratio (proportion) between them. In one word, this relation is fully dialectic and dynamic, clearly distinguishable from the monotheistic antagonism of God and Satan and from the Cartesian dualism of mind and body.

While it is difficult to conceptualize the relation between yin and yang, the relation may be well illustrated through familiar pairs such as tranquillity-activity, negative-positive, closing-opening, soft-hard. In terms of cosmology, the relation is manifested as heaven-earth, sun-moon, day-night, light-dark, generating(sheng生)-nourishing (yang養). In family, it can be seen from the pairs of male-female such as father-son, husband-wife, son-daughter etc. In old politics, it was often taken as justification of the hierarchical relations of ruler-subject, senior-junior, superior-inferior etc. In psychological and sociological terms, their relation is featured as reason-emotion, will-intuition, aggressive-yielding, harsh-gentle, hard-soft, stern-flexible. In Chinese medicine, yin-yang relation is applicable to all diagnoses and prescriptions, such as the five zang organs (五脏)-the five Fu organs (五腹), fever(re zheng热症)-coldness(han zheng寒症), superficial(xu虚)-deep(chen沉) pulse. In religion, they are manifested as hun (魂, the spirit from heaven)-po (魄, the soul from earth), deity (shen神)-ghost (gui鬼), yang jie (陽界, the residence of gods or spirits, the human world, or the heavenly paradise)-yin jie (陰界, the residence of the ‘dead’, the underworld, or the hell). Religious beliefs and practices concerning the yang world and the yin world did not become popular well after the arrival of Buddhism. However, the *Book of Rites* already uses yin-yang to explain human souls and sacrifices. For example, human beings are said to be produced by ‘powers of Heaven and earth, the interaction of yin and yang, the union of animal and intellectual souls, and the finest qi of the Five Elements’ (*Liyun*禮運); sacrifices are taken as a means ‘to seek the meaning of yin and yang’ (*Jiaotexing* 郊特性), while rituals are traced to their origin in the Grand Unity (*dayi* 大一), which separated and became heaven and earth, revolved and became yin and yang, changed and became the four seasons, and distributed and became spirits and ghosts (*Liyun*).

Neither yin-yang themselves nor their relation should be seen as static. Rather, they are in constant interaction and mutual transformation both in time and in space. Therefore, their relation is characterised by relativity and changeablity. In other words, none should be seen as exclusive and fixed, and even in the highest degree, each would contain the other within. In constant changes, one can be and indeed always is transformed into the other, as what is said in the *Daode jing* that ‘reversion is the action of Dao’. To further illustrate the constant change of yin and yang, we will take family relations as a series of examples. In the father-son relation, the father is yang while son is yin, but when the son gets married, he as husband is yang while his wife is yin. When the wife becomes mother and would be venerated as yang in contrast to her children as yin. Among her children, the male is yang while the female is yin, but among female siblings, the stronger is yang while the weaker/softer is yin. Even a weak female is not a total yin, as she also embodies a balance between yin and yang, and not the least her will is yang, while her emotion is yin. No matter whose emotions, affirmative emotions are yang, while negative feelings are yin. Further, feeling good is regarded as yang, while feeling vulnerable is yin. Changes of the balance between yin and yang as such can be endlessly extended.

Profound and complex, the yin-yang philosophy is central to Chinese culture and civilization. However, the characters of yin and yang themselves did not come from philosophical contemplation, but were derived from pictographic images concerning sun shining and shadows. According to the earliest Chinese lexicon (Shuowen jiezi说文解字), yin (陰) depicts ‘the northern side of a mountain and the southern bank of a river’ while yang (陽) refers to ‘the southern side of the mountain and the northern bank of the river’. In early Chinese texts, yin is used frequently to refer to the shadowy, wet, dark, cold, female sex organ or the qualities associated with them, while yang to the sunning, dry, bright, warm, male sex organ or the qualities derived from them. As far as we know, the character of yang is found in oracle bone inscriptions and the earliest writing form of yin is discovered from the bronze inscriptions. While the yin-yang idea is the backbone of the divination manual, and is carried throughout the text of the *Book of Changes*, the two characters are hardly used together there. Yin and yang appear separately but none of them is sufficiently philosophical, in the extant versions of the early Confucian classics, such as the *Book of Documents*, the *Book of Poetry*, the *Analects of Confucius* and *Mencius*. In contrast, they are used together as a philosophical pair in the *Xunzi* (6 times) and in the *Commentaries on the Book of Changes* (8 times) to explore and explain the underlying power of cosmic transformation as well as the cause of environmental, social and moral changes. Among earlier Daoist texts, yin and yang appear only once in the extant text of *Daode jing*, but as a pair they are used in the *Zhuangzi* for as many as 23 times. The emergence of the school of Yin-yang and the Five Elements led by Zou Yan (鄒衍305?-240BCE) popularized yin-yang ideas and applied yin-yang philosophy to explain natural phenomena such as the four seasons, and social affairs such as the governmental structure. From these textual evidences we have good reasons to conjecture that yin and yang did not become dominant philosophical concepts in Chinese civilization until the late Warring States period (479-221 BCE).

Yin-yang is not merely a philosophical concept that reflects on the essence and laws of all existences, but is also used as a hermeneutic tool for the Chinese to make sense of their world as well as to comprehend social reality and to manage life dilemmas. Yin-yang is philosophized as the universal frame, applicable to all things and all beings, defining the Chinese view of the world and society, so is said by Zhang Zai (张载1022-1077) of the Song era (960-1279): that ‘As there are forms, there are their opposites. These opposites necessarily stand in opposition to what they do. Opposition leads to conflict, which will necessarily be reconciled and resolved’ (Wing-tsit Chan, 1963:506). It may be said that the only thing in their relations that does not change is the interchange between them, as clearly stated by Cheng Hao (程灏1032-85) that ‘all the myriad things have their opposites. When there is yin, there is yang. When there is good, there is evil. As yang increase, yin decreases, and as goodness is augmented, evil is diminished’(Wing-tsit Chan 1963:540-541). This facilitates another perspective from the Chinese organic worldview, according to which everything, being or event is inherently composed of two elements and is driven by two powers. Not simply opposed to each other, these two powers are mutually included and mutually relied on. All existences and phenomena, either cosmological such as heavenly bodies and earthly things, biological such as mind and body or life and death, or ethical such as good and evil, are related and relative to each other. It is in the paradox of contradiction and unification between yin and yang that the world is rendered as organic and the life become dynamic, going through endless generation and re-generation.

In pre-Qin Chinese texts yin and yang are already applied, explicitly or implicitly, to outline a so-called ‘natural genesis’ or ‘cosmogony’ through linking them with another concept, Dao (道), the Way. The most explicit statement concerning the relation between yin-yang and Dao is found in the *Commentaries to the Book of Changes* where it is said that ‘The reciprocal process of yin and yang is called the Way’ (de Bar & Bloom 1999:321). *Daode jing* places the two powers (yin and yang) in the organic regeneration of the world: ‘Dao begets one, one begets two, two beget three and three beget all things’, while the *Book of Rites* uses the harmonization of yin and yang to explain generations of all things (wanwu de万物得). By using Dao, one, yin-yang and harmony, early thinkers drew us a picture of how the world comes into existence and how it evolves. This picture continued to be supplemented and enriched in subsequent ages by great thinkers such as Dong Zhongshu (179?-104? BCE), and was succinctly completed in the Song era, particularly by Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐, 1017-73) who in the ‘Explanation of the Diagram of The Great Ultimate’ (Taijitu shuo太极图说) articulates that yin-yang evolves from the Great Ultimate (太極，often identified as a different expression of the Way) and by the alternation and combination of yin and yang the five agents (五行) arise. Integration and interaction of the Great Ultimate, yin-yang and the five agents engender and transform the myriad things. Of all things human beings are said to be most intelligent whose conscious interaction with the external world cause moral principles to be established, good and evil to be distinguished and human affairs to be engaged and expanded (Wing-tsit Chan 1963:463).

Being identified with Qi, however, yin and Yang are somehow downgraded by Cheng Yi (程颐1033-1107) as secondary elements in the metaphysical construction of the world, when they assert that ‘Yin and yang are qi and so are physical (xing er xia 形而下) while dao is metaphysical (xing er shang形而上)’(Graham 1958:162). This downgrade of yin-yang in the system with a dissolving of them in Dao has further facilitated, explicitly or implicitly, the turning of the Chinese views of the world, life and value from dialectic to hieratical, from existential reciprocal to ideological authoritarian, and from open to closed, which is particularly manifested in politics, ethics and culture throughout the coming ages.