

Yínyáng Cosmology and the Bahá'í Faith¹

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Abstract

The yín-yáng concepts are a pivotal theory in traditional Chinese thought, influencing many aspects of Chinese civilization, government, architecture, personal relationships and ethics. The literacies of this paradigm has astounding similarities with the literacies of the Bahá'í faith, especially with regards to the origin of matter, historical perspective, gender relationships and practices related to health and healing. This paper will set out to discuss the impact of these similarities in the modern encounter between the Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith.

Introduction

From its earliest expression in myth, legend and verse over 3,000 years ago, the *yínyáng* (阴阳) *cosmology* has remained central to the Chinese way of viewing things and can be said to be the primal polarity in Chinese thought. Cosmology here refers to a framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group or culture interprets the world and interacts with it. It is defined in this paper as a “worldview” or a network of presuppositions which may or may not be verified by the procedures of natural science but in terms of which every believer’s experience is interpreted and understood. *Yínyáng* is able to account for many natural phenomena and while the cosmic individual, Chinese or otherwise, does not “control” nature, his or her knowledge of how to “align” the human with the natural will immeasurably enlarge the ability to control his or her life processes.

Yínyáng cosmology is essentially “Chinese” as it is a concept which informs many branches of classical Chinese science and philosophy and has penetrated deeply into the popular culture and dominated the language of medicine, geomancy, and other accepted “sciences” without major challenge. The earliest Chinese characters for *yín* and *yáng* are found in inscriptions made on “oracle bones,” which are skeletal remains of various animals used in ancient Chinese divination practices as early as the 14th century BCE. Its origin is not linked to the vision of any single individual or to any single text and remains a matter of great dispute. Its earliest literary reference is in the *Yi Jíng* (Book of Changes c.700 BCE), which is constructed around sixty-four hexagrams (*gua* 卦 word), each of which is made of six parallel broken or unbroken line segments (*yao* 爻).² Here, *yín* and *yáng* are represented by broken and solid lines. Some tri-grams are more *yáng*: ☰ is heavily *yáng*, while ☷ is heavily *yín*.

Yín and *yáng*, which literally means the polar opposites of “shadow” and “light,” is often symbolized by the following symbol: *Yáng* is the white side with the black dot on it, and *yín* is the black side with the white dot on it.



The *Yín-Yáng* symbol

Like its cosmology, no one knows the person who created this symbol. What is important is to understand the textual and visual history behind this symbol. Here, a circle is drawn to uphold the idea of a timeless creation with no beginning and end. The curve of *yín* and *yáng* is a little like a kaleidoscope and therefore implies that they are mutually arising, interdependent and continuously transforming one into the other. Notice too that there are smaller circles nested within each half of the symbol and this is a reminder once again of the interdependent nature of the black/white opposites and the fact that relative existence is in constant flux and change. The smaller circles also symbolize the possibility that *yínyáng* can be divided into further *yínyáng* ad infinitum. In other words, within each *yín* and *yáng* category, another *yín* and *yáng* category can be distinguished.

The next section will further elaborate on the ideas behind this symbol though four conceptual lenses, namely, relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance.

Relativity

The first notion of *yínyáng* is its relativity, which in essence, expresses a relationship that one notion is the opposite of the other. For example, the son is both *yín* and *yáng*; *yín* because he is believed to be inferior to his father and *yáng* because he is believed to be superior as male. In other words, nothing is absolute – only more *yín* compared to something, or more *yáng* compared to something else. The *Chang Huang T'u-shu pien* (图书编), an encyclopedia edited by Zhang Huang 章潢 (1527-1608) in Ming Dynasty (Forke, *The World Conception* 214-15), describes it in the following manner:

Heaven and the sun, spring and summer, east and south are *yáng*, the earth and the moon, autumn and winter, west and north are *yín*. But during the day heaven and earth are both *yáng*, and at night they are both *yín*. In spring and summer, heaven and earth, the sun and the moon are all *yáng*, in autumn and winter they are all *yín*. In the east and the south the four seasons are

always yáng, in the west and the north they are always yín. The left hand is yáng, the right one yín, in this no change is possible, but raise both hands, then they are both yáng, and put them down, and they are both yín, and no matter whether you raise them or put them down, when they are hot they are both yáng, and when they are cold they are both yín.

Therefore, although it is possible to distinguish yín and yáng, it is impossible to separate them since they depend on each other for definition. For example, one cannot speak of temperature apart from its yín and yáng aspects – for example, dark and light, female and male, low and high, cold and hot, hotness and coldness, water and fire, etc. They are complementary forces (hidden, feminine) and seen (manifest, masculine), that combine to form a greater whole as part of a dynamic system. Each side always contains the others just as night contains day, or a mother “contains” the infant that she will, in time, give birth to. They give rise to each and in turn affect each other.

This notion of relativity as suggested throughout the *Dao-te ching* (c. 450 BC), a small (about 5,000 characters) but extraordinary work on Chinese life and culture written by one called Lao-tze (“old man” or “teacher”):

For what is and what is not beget each other;
 Difficult and easy complete each other;
 Long and short show each other;
 High and low place each other;
 Noise and sound harmonize each other;
 Before and behind follow each other.

– *Dao-te ching*, (Maurer) ch. 2.

Su Shih (苏轼 960–1279 CE), a scholar from the Sung dynasty indicates the importance of perspectives. When there is a shift in our position, the objects appear to change. Therefore, we can no longer be so naive as to assume that what we see constitutes

all there is to see. As in much Chinese classical poetry, the notion of relativity is subtly emphasized:

From the side, a whole range; from the end, a single peak:

Far, near, high, low no two parts alike. Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu Shan?

Because I myself am in the mountain.

– Watson, *Selection from a Sung Dynasty*, 101

This principle of perspective or relativity is remarkably in tune with modern science and explains why Yínyáng cosmology continues to hold relevance today.

Unity

The second characteristic to note in the discussion of the yínyáng correlates is their essential unity. Yínyáng is a “completing” rather than a “competing” theory. For example, “heads” and “tails” are different sides of the coin. The circle is like the coin and the coin contains the two halves and it is what the two sides have in common that makes them the same. In order to get heads or tails, one may flip the coin but whether the coin lands on its head or tail, in terms of the essence of the coin, the answer will always be the same. Hence, instead of the principle of duality and opposition so common in western philosophy, there are instead the theories of succession, e.g., day follows night, night follows day, small becomes big, big becomes small, slow changes to fast, fast slackens to slow, what goes up comes down and vice versa. No entity can ever be isolated from its relationship to the center of our metaphorical “coin,” and if it is detached from the center, it will cease to exist.

This center which it originates from is commonly known as the Dao (道), the life-giving power or principle. It is called *Brahman* in Hinduism, *Dharmakaya* in Buddhism, and *Dao* in Daoism. Because it transcends all concepts and categories, the Buddhist also calls it *Tathata* or Suchness. This idea may also have been borrowed by the Greek philosophers of the Ionian

School (c. 585-540 BCE) e.g., Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, who argued that orderliness could only be explained through the existence of a single unifying substance which were in control of all the parts. This also bears some similarity to the Bahá'í idea of the “first will” or what the ancient philosophers termed the “First Mind.” According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the first will is an emanation which is “not limited by time or place; it is without beginning or end – beginning and end in relation to God are one” [SAQ 203].

Zhuangzi (庄子), an influential Chinese philosopher in the 4th century BCE explains that the manifestation of this first principle in each created being is called *te* (virtue 德) and that Dao and *te* are actually of one essence, the former being the universal essence, and the latter the share of the former deposited in every individual being, what in most world religions is referred to as “God” and “the soul.” In short, Daoist philosophy is to “return to Dao,” namely to align or balance oneself to the “Primeval One,” the “Divine Intelligence,” or the “Source” of all things, which most religions call “heaven” or “the afterlife.” As Zhuangzi puts it:

In the beginning there was non-being. It had neither being nor name. The One originates from it: it has oneness but not yet physical form. When things obtain it and come into existence, that is called virtue (德) (which gives their individual character). That which is formless is divided into yín and yáng and from the beginning going on without interruption is called destiny (*ming* 命). Through movement and rest, it produces all things. When things are produced in accordance with the principle (*li* 理) there is a physical form, and when these follow their own specific principles, that is what we call “nature”. By cultivating one’s nature one will return to virtue. When virtue is perfect, one will be one with the beginning. Being one with the beginning, one becomes vacuous (thus, receptive to all) and being vacuous, one becomes great. One will then be united with the sound and breath of

things. When one is united with the breath of things, one is then united with the universe. (Chan, *Sourcebook* 202)

Similarly, in Bahá'í cosmology, form and substance arise simultaneously and they are interdependent:

They have said that the potentialities (*qábiliyyát*) and the recipients of the potentialities (*maqbúlát*) came into being and were created simultaneously. For example, it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the “Fashioner” (*qábíl*) and the “Fashioned” (*maqbúl*). By “Fashioned” is meant substance (*mádda*) and primary matter (*huyúlá*), and by Fashioner is meant form and shape, which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Makátíb* 2:35; provisional translation by Moojan Momen and quoted in Brown 26)

This “life-giving force” is given the actual name of “God” or “Creator” in prophetic religions such as Islam and Christianity. In the Bahá'í faith, it is stated that “the Word of God ... is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof” [TB 140]. For Zhuangzi, the Dao is the all-pervading principle that exists prior to the existence of the universe, and it is to be found in everything, no matter how trivial or base (Chuang-tzu, chapter 2).

Complementarity

Complementarity refers to the phenomena that in any yín phenomenon there is a little yáng; and in every yáng phenomenon there is a little yín. In other words, the night is never completely dark because there is always some yáng light (from the moon, stars, fireflies), and the yáng day has some darkness (shadows for instance). Yín and yáng transform each other: like an undertow in the ocean, every advance is complemented by a retreat, and every rise transforms into a fall. It is an irretrievable inter-relatedness. Thus, a seed will sprout from the earth and grow upwards towards the sky — an

intrinsically yáng movement. Then, when it reaches its full potential height, it will fall.

We see this same idea illustrated from the Ts'an-t'ung-chi³ (参同契) a classic by Wei Boyang 魏伯阳 from the Eastern Han Dynasty (147-167 AD):

Within light there is darkness, but do not try to understand that darkness.

Within darkness there is light, but do not look for that light.

Light and darkness are a pair, like the foot before and the foot behind in walking.

Each thing has its own intrinsic value and is related to everything else in function and position.

This intricate complementarity embodies a belief that everything, however small, in some sense reflects it. Just as the cells of the body imply the whole, so every part of creation implies the cosmos.

In reference to animals and vegetables, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "... the animal, as to its body, is made up of the same constituent elements as man" [SWAB 153]. "All the elements that are combined in man exist also in vegetables" [SAQ 258]. In addition, quoting Imam Ali, Bahá'u'lláh writes "Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form/When within thee the universe is folded?" [SVFV 34].

The essence of this inter-relatedness reinforces once again the idea of the cosmic whole as interdependent and inseparable. A famous poem by Zháng Zǎi (张载, 1020-77 CE), a Neo-Confucian philosopher and cosmologist, writes:

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (Chan, *Sourcebook* 497)

Similarly, the Bahá'í scriptures points to the significance of complementarity. Members and elements are interconnected and influence one another spiritually and materially:

This limitless universe is like the human body, all the members of which are connected and linked with one another with the greatest strength.... In the same way, the parts of this infinite universe have their members and elements connected with one another, and influence one another spiritually and materially. [SAQ 245-46]

Balance

Balance is needed if complementary opposites are to interact elegantly. A deficiency of one aspect implies an excess of the other. Thus, if yín is excessive, the yáng will be too weak. For example, summer is considered as yáng and isolated as such; it may seem “excessive,” but not so if the whole of the four seasons are taken into account. Another example is that if it is too hot, then there is not enough coolness and vice versa. If the temperature is neither too cold nor too hot, then both cold and hot aspects are mutually controlled and held in check. In human relationships as in a marriage, one can say that here the extent to which one partner can be aggressive depends on the extent to which the other is passive. They exert mutual control over each other. Thus, in a relationship in which yín and yáng are unbalanced for a long periods of time, the resulting transformation may be drastic.

Western philosophies have tended to be lopsided by glorifying one pole at the expense of the other, e.g., the mind is considered to be better than the body, and logic preferable to intuition, the yín-yáng paradigm emphasizes the equality of proportions. When Confucius (551-479 BCE) wrote *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), he meant that both excess and inadequacy were extremes and that only by understanding the “Mean” and holding on to it could harmony be achieved [Doctrine of the Mean, ch. 27]. Hence for Confucius, “To go beyond is as wrong as to fall short” [Analects, 11:15]. Likewise, Bahá'u'lláh said that “In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil” [TB 69].

This notion of “balance” has significant implications on moral values and has been used to explain the relationship between good and evil. For Zhuangzi, nothing can be said to be absolutely right (e.g., the notions of right and wrong do not exist, since right is right only because of the existence of wrong).⁴ Zhuangzi believes that conflict arises when a person departs from Dao and tries to act contrary to nature. This concept of balancing both yín and yáng forces and of being at one with Dao has been used to teach morality throughout Chinese history. Lao-tzu illustrates this paradox within a set of correspondences:

On tiptoe you don't stand.
 Astride you don't walk.
 Showing yourself, you don't shine,
 Asserting yourself, you don't show,
 Boasting yourself won't get you credit.
 Vaunting yourself won't let you endure.
 In Dao, these things are called
 Tumors and dregs, which all things abhor.
 Whoever has Dao does not dwell on them.

– *Dao-te ching*, ch. 24

There is, however, a distinct difference between the concept of balance in the Chinese psyche and that of other prophetic religions with a holy book. While keeping to the mean is imperative for harmony, what exactly is the mean with regards to moral and social behavior is not made explicit, since it is the theoretical mean which is referred to. For other religionists such as the Bahá'ís, the book itself is “the unerring Balance established amongst men” [KA 22].

With these four essential characteristics of Yinyáng cosmology in hand, I will now proceed to a preliminary exploration of four areas, namely, the origin of creation, historical perspective, the relationship of man and woman, and

health and healing, and examine their remarkable relationship across time and space with the Bahá'í Faith.

The Dao of Creation

The idea of causation so central to Western thinking is almost entirely absent in Chinese thought. Indeed, no Chinese thinker who discusses the subject admits the possibility of an initial conscious act of creation since in Yínyáng cosmology things were connected, rather than caused, and things influence each other not mechanically but by a kind of induction. Hence, unlike the ancient Greeks who believed that the essence of knowledge is to grasp the “why” or to prove the existence of the primary cause, the Chinese were most interested in understanding the interrelationships. As Ronan and Needham argues:

The fundamental difference was that in Europe, there was a need to think of God as the creator or the prime mover behind the machine. Not the Chinese. To them the parts of a living body as the universe could account for the observed phenomena by a kind of will: co-operation of the component part was spontaneous, even involuntary and this alone was sufficient. There were thus two traditions of the universe and each went their separate ways. [Ronan and Needham 163]

The word “cause” implies a direct dependency with the effects in much the same way that attributes of knowledge requires the existence of objects of knowledge. Similarly, the term “Creator” assumes its counterpart, the created, in order to be comprehensible. There was therefore no reason to debate on cause and effect since this was already implied or understood. As the first chapter of the Dao-te ching reiterates:

If Dao can be Daoed, it is not Dao.

If its name can be named, it is not its name.

Has no name: precedes heaven and earth;

Has a name: mother of ten thousand things

The First Cause or the Creator is not the focus here and only a description rather than an exploration will suffice. There is an implied acceptance that it exists, and no effort is made to postulate the “hows” or “whys” of its existence. Like other world religions, the Bahá'í Faith, explicitly indicates that while God is the creator of all things, but unlike them, it elaborates that God exists, only outside the order of His creation and like the Dao, is completely unknowable:

Lauded by Thy Name, O Lord my God! I testify that
Thou wast a hidden Treasure wrapped within Thine
immemorial Being and an impenetrable Mystery
enshrined in Thine own Essence. Wishing to reveal
Thyself, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the
Lesser Worlds. [PM 48-49]

In the above, the Greater and Lesser world may be interpreted as the hereafter and this world. It follows then in Bahá'í cosmology that without the limiting constraints of time and space, “the latter world hath neither beginning nor end” [TB 187], something not incomparable with Zhuangzi's notion of heaven as “one of ceaseless revolution, without beginning or end” [Fung 133].

Nevertheless, while not embroiled in the “who's who” of creation, China's ancient philosophers were keen to understand the hows. They postulated the origin of the cosmos as a series of progressions from the T'ai Chi (太极” the one great ultimate”) to the two principles Yinyáng ; the three sources; heaven, earth and humankind; and the five elements represented symbolically by wood 木, fire 火, earth 土, metal 金, and water 水.⁵ The Wu Xing (五行 “five phases”) is a fivefold conceptual scheme used in many fields of Chinese thought both past and present such as feng shui (风水, astrology, traditional Chinese medicine, music, military strategy and martial arts. While the ancient Greeks had recognized the five elements as early as the 6th century BCE, they looked on them as substances or natural qualities, unlike the Chinese which viewed them as “process” or “change.”

Interestingly, Bahá'u'lláh [TB 140] also explains the cause of creation through “two poles” — the active force and its

recipient or the “even” and the “odd,” which by their interaction generates a “heat” or life-giving energy that creates and orders the innumerable beings in the universe:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different.”

Bahá'u'lláh calls that which first results from the active force and its recipient prior to the generation of the world, *al-failayn*, the twin active agents, and *al-munfa'il*, the twin passive agents, and affirms that they “are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God” [TB 140]. In other tablets, He identifies them with the four elements of “fire,” “air,” “water,” and “earth,” [Brown 28, 35-36], two of which are identified as active while the other two as passive, something not quite unlike the Chinese “five phases.”

These four elements are described in the Lawh-i-Ayyi-i-Nur in the following manner:

Know ye that the first tokens that emanated from the pre-existent Cause in the worlds of creation are the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth... Then the natures (*ustuqusat*) of these four appeared: heat, moisture, cold and dryness – those same qualities that ye both reckon and know. When the elements interacted and joined with one another, two pillars became evident for each one: for fire, heat and dryness, and likewise for the remaining three in accordance with these rules, as ye are aware. By them God created all that there is in the worlds of creation, whether of the higher or lower realms. In whatsoever things these natures came into equilibrium that thing endured the passage of time, as ye behold with the sun and the moon; and in whatsoever thing these natures came not into balance, that thing passed quickly into extinction, even as ye observe to be the case with the creatures of the lower worlds. [Brown 35-36]

This quotation suggests, in synchrony with Chinese beliefs, the gradual development of life on earth.⁶ The *Yi Jing* 易经, for instance, views civilization as a systematic and progressive development from simple undifferentiated beginnings towards a complex structure, and the development of the individual as following a parallel course from ignorance to enlightenment and from an unwitting identity with Dao to knowing the Dao. There is a traditional story accounting for the gradual creation of the universe and although caution must be exercised in putting implicit faith in such traditional stories, I am including the following for its popular anecdotal value:

A period of 2,267,000 years was computed to have intervened from the beginning of heaven and earth to the year 480 BC. This period was divided into great sections, each with its own characteristics. Proceeding that period were countless ages of one unbroken black night and the profoundest gloom. The universe consisted of Breath or Gas which was a homogeneous unit without form. Out of this limitless chaos came the Great Limit, or Beginning. Then the grosser particles of the universal gas fell down and became Earth, the finer ascended and became heaven. This was the beginning of heaven and earth. These two in the course of many thousands of years produced the four great Bodies – sun, moon, planets and constellation; and the four less Bodies – water, fire, earth and stone. Then was the eternal stillness terminated. The interactions of these various bodies produced transformations, first of a simple then of a more complex kind till they finally culminated in the reproduction of man.

Though man was the most intelligent of all beings, many ages elapsed before the earliest rudiments of civilization appeared. Some of the remote ancestors of the Chinese dwelt in caves, and wandered without fixed abode till one of their numbers devised a kind of dwelling, which put an end to cave homes. People of another tribe were naked, except for a small covering of plants before and another behind. One of them was a sage who cut wood into slices so thin that they could

cover the body like fish scales and protect it from the winds and the frosts. He taught them to plait their hair so that the heaviest rain would drop off their head... [Ross 1-3]⁷

Such a mythological foundation enabled the Chinese to align relatively easily with later scientific theories such as Darwin's theory of evolution or current concept of cosmology such as those expounded by Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*) where the universe was formed from the dust of space after a "Big Bang." Abdu'l Bahá himself suggests that creation unfolds in a sequential gradual manner, tending towards higher and more complex forms:

That it is clear that original matter, which is in the embryonic state, and the mingled and composed elements which were its earliest forms, gradually grew and developed during many ages and cycles, passing from one shape and form to another, until they appeared in this perfection, this system, this organization and this establishment, though the supreme wisdom of God. [SAQ 182-83, 199]

The Dao of Historical Perspective

With relativity as a key embedded principle, it is not surprising that religious conflict has been less of an issue in Chinese culture.⁸ According to a Chinese saying, "同源共流" – the presence of great religious teachers at different periods of history may be likened to tributaries branching out from the same river – they may start off at different sites and carry different names but the water which each receives is the same. Another Chinese four-word collocation, "殊途同归," visualizes different paths towards the same destination. So too the classical quotation "致化归一，分教斯五." written by 刘勰 (Liu Xie) in c.501-502 CE indicates that while the teaching is from the same source and for the same purpose, it may develop into different branches.⁹ In addition, The Chinese language shows that "religion" has been treated synonymously as "education," and "religious personnel" as "teachers" of

particular schools. Religion is called *Chiao* (教) or “teaching” or “Education,” (育), and the founders of religions as *Chiao Tsu* (主) or “Teaching Master.”

Although there were occasional polemics and religious persecution in China's long history, the traditional attitude was generally one of tolerance rather than dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition, as the existence of strong Buddhist and Daoist elements in Neo-Confucianism make plain. If there was persecution, it was more often a result of a struggle for power rather than a denial of the essential truth of the other's philosophical view.¹⁰ This relative tolerance is also a likely result of the perspective of time as relative, a sharp contrast to religions such as Christianity and Islam, where time “stops” around one revelatory event: the appearance of Christ and the revelation of the Quran. In other words, Chinese and Bahá'í cosmology adopts the “Eastern” view that time is cyclical with no beginning and end, a sharp contrast to “Western” dualist concept of time as historical with a start and end-point.

This sense of wholeness has always led the Chinese mind towards the sense of relativity of particulars within the universal totality, and it was not surprising that the Chinese were among of the first to envisage a future society of world brotherhood and unity. Arnold Toynbee, a philosopher of history, included Chinese civilization among the five survivors of a number of ancient and medieval civilizations that once existed.¹¹ Toynbee found that the Chinese civilization was the only one that aimed to eliminate war by establishing a world government of Great Unity (or Great Harmony) guided by the humanistic precepts of Confucius. While the search for an ideal Commonwealth has been a feature of other civilizations,¹² it was only in China that it formed part of the psyche, not just of the scholar class but also of the common people.

As early as 5th century BCE, the Chinese people have entertained the lofty thought of the “pacification of the world” (Ta-tung 天下大同), bringing to mind 'Abdu'l-Bahá's point that “[t]he most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind” [PUP 31]. Throughout the history of Chinese religion, such calls have

come from its charismatic leaders and visionary prophets. Confucius dreamt of a united world, which he termed “the Great Unity” (大同 or *ta t'ung*). He urged his disciples to strive to produce a paradise covering the whole world. His ideas have been a motivating force to many Chinese legislators, scholars, and authors, especially to reformers and revolutionaries such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic in 1912. Another influential philosopher who was fascinated with the utopian idea of the Great Unity was Mozi (墨子, 479-381 BCE), who developed a concept called “all-embracing love” (*Chien-ai* 兼爱), which emphasized a love of all humankind rather than just the love of the family. Then there was Mao Zedong, the founder-president of the Peoples' Republic of China whose aim it was to establish the “Great Harmony” (世界大同). Although Mao was much influenced by Marx and Lenin early in life, much of his philosophy is interestingly, often in tune with the principles of traditional Chinese philosophy.¹³

While this ideal, a united world characterized by world solidarity, has not been in keeping with actual practice, as reported in historical accounts of European traders and diplomats who were more often regarded as “barbarians” rather than as co-equals in the “middle kingdom,” such isolated individual accounts, most of which occurring in the time of Western imperial expansion, should be better interpreted in the context of the existing political-social situation and do not represent the essential spirit of Chinese thought.

The Dao of Man and Woman

Yín is normally characterized as slow, soft, yielding, diffuse, cold, wet, and passive; and is associated with water, earth, the moon, femininity and the night. Yáng, by contrast, is fast, hard, solid, focused, hot, dry, and aggressive; and is associated with fire, sky, the sun, masculinity and daytime. In the *Yi Jing*, there are many references to male-female relations in both verbal and nonverbal symbols. It begins with the two hexagrams, Ch'ien and K'un, which stand for heaven and earth, yáng and yín, as well as male and female. In particular, Hexagram 31, *Hsien*, (咸) with the lake above the mountain, refers to the mutual

influence and attraction between the two natural forces.¹⁴ In addition, Part II of the *Yi Jíng* also begins with reference to male and female.

Interestingly, in one of his tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the story of Adam and Eve as a metaphor for one being the "active" force and the other its "recipient." This might be said to be related to the two principles inherent in the Primal Will mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh as *al-fa'il*, the active force, and *al-munfa'il*, its recipient:

Adam signifieth that reality which is pervasive, effulgent and active, that is the manifestation of God's names and attributes, and the evidences of His mercy. Whereas Eve is that reality which is the seeker and the recipient of the force, the grace, the message and the influence – that reality which receiveth the impact of all God's Names and Attributes. [Nakhjavani 72]

In Chinese cosmology, while heaven may be spoken in some social-political interpretations as the "powerful male force" and earth as "the weak female force," the two are theoretically equal since Heaven can accomplish nothing unless Earth responds. Both men and women go through *yín* and *yáng* phases, and the personality of each man and woman is not a static entity but a dynamic phenomenon resulting from the play within masculine and feminine phenomena. *Yínyáng* are correlates which may also serve to delineate different stages in life, for example, the first half of life, led by *yáng*, is a time of differentiation, during which we understand ourselves and the world by dividing it into pieces. The second half is characterized by *yín* or the tendency to make whole, to see and experience the connections between things, to replace separateness with harmony.

However, with time this concept was modified to establish a rigid order in which men were supposed to be masculine and women feminine. The patriarchal bias of succeeding dynasties also saw *yín* and *yáng* become associated with moral values, and the correlates were subsequently used to explain the polarity of light and darkness, and good and bad. Good deeds, for instance, stemmed from the principle of *yáng*, which through the patriarchal eyeglass represented principles such as benevolence,

righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, and which added to the spiritual bank of merit. Conversely, bad deeds stemmed from the principles of yín and such principles as passion, anger, sorrow, likes, dislikes, desires, and violence and anything that caused punishment in the afterlife in the other world. Such an interpretation was later symbolized into script so that the character for yín (阴) meant the shady side of a slope and is associated with qualities such as cold, rest, responsiveness, passivity, darkness, interiority, downwardness and inwardness. On the other hand, the character of yáng (阳) stood for the sunny side of a slope and all that was bright and creative.

Yinyáng cosmology was also utilized to portray prototypes of the human social order e.g., “The ruler is yáng, the subject yín; the father is yáng, the son yín; the husband is yáng, the wife yín.” Later writers such as Tung Chung-shu (179-104 BCE), a major representative of the New Text School,¹⁵ taught that “Heaven has trust in the yáng but not in the yín” (Bodde 619). The patrilineal bias in Chinese culture therefore transformed the original theory by elevating the yáng principle at the expense of the yín. Not surprisingly, practices such as female infanticide and foot-binding, and sale of daughters, have shown the status of women in traditional Chinese societies to be unenviable.

The patriarchal bias to equate yín with passivity and yáng with activity is also evident in Western culture. The attempt to portray women as passive and receptive and men as active and creative goes back to Aristotle's theory of sexuality and has been used throughout the centuries as a “scientific” rationale for keeping women in a subordinate role, subservient to men. It should be noted that the symbolism of yín as passivity is not a problem; the problem is when passivity comes to be viewed as undesirable.

Interestingly, in Bahá'í scripture the feminine principle is depicted both as a passive and an active one, which creates, empowers, rears, and nourishes. It is not a fixed condition of sexuality applied to objects in the created world. Mothering images, for example, are used to suggest the divine creative principle of the word of God:

Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. [GWB 142]

The mothering images are used to suggest the divine creative principle of the Word of God. Bahá'u'lláh himself identifies the feminine powers of God with the word "Fashioner":

No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the revelation of His name. [GWB 142]

The theme of masculine-feminine complementarity and interaction is manifested in the Tablet of Carmel.¹⁶ Drewek (1992) refers to this tablet as an instance of the divine dramatization of two forces coming together, the Ancient of Days as the Manifestation and a feminine personification of the Mountain of God, the Queen of Carmel, the site of the Manifestation's holy seat or throne. She describes a kind of courtship dance with feelings of separation and longing for reunion followed by a kind of consummation between heaven and earth. This consummation results in the appearance of "the people of Bahá." In a long-awaited reunion, the feminine principle is now ready to shift from a competitive to a complementary opposite.

Unity or harmony does not mean a merging of the two in which one is subordinated or sacrificed but rather the complementary combination of the two to produce a more aesthetically satisfying whole. It also does not mean a blurring of differences to become an undifferentiated one. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained the concept of complementarity in a manner reminiscent of the yín-yáng principle:

The world of humanity consists of two parts: male and female. Each is the complement of the other. Therefore if one is defective, the other will necessarily be

incomplete and perfection cannot be attained.... Just as physical accomplishment is complete with two hands, so man and woman, the two parts of the social body, must be perfect. It is not natural that either should remain undeveloped; and until both are perfected, the happiness of the human world will not be realized. [PUP 134]

This is reminiscent of Lao-tzu's teachings 2,500 years ago:

Know the masculine;
 Keep to the feminine.
 Be beneath-heaven's ravine
 To be beneath-heaven's ravine
 Is to stay with unceasing virtue
 And return to infancy

Know the white; (yáng)
 Keep to the black (yín)
 Be beneath-heaven's model.
 To be beneath-heaven's model
 Is to stay with unerring virtue
 And return to the limitless.

— *Dao-te ching*, ch. 28

It is impossible to read the above without realizing where Lao-tzu, living in a patriarchal age, placed his true priorities. Replete with yín symbols, it teaches that the sage should adopt the yín qualities. Balance is once again stressed as the essential condition for harmony. If so, the equality of status between men and women is subtly raised.¹⁷

The Dao of Health and Healing

Influenced by Yínyáng cosmology, Chinese medicine is based on the premise that the part can only be understood in relation to the whole. Unlike Western medicine where cause and effect is paramount, for the Chinese physician, it is not so much what x is causing to y but rather the relationship of x to y. A symptom therefore is not traced back to a cause but is looked at as part of a totality. If a person has a symptom, Chinese medicine wishes to discover how the symptom fits into the patient's entire bodily pattern. A person who is well or "in harmony" has no distressing symptoms and expresses mental, physical, and spiritual balance. When the person is ill, the symptom is only one part of a complete bodily imbalance that can be seen in other aspects of his or her life and behavior. Interestingly, Hippocrates (ca 460-600 BCE) also viewed the body as a balanced system, able to heal its disorders from within. This idea is also embodied in the concept of the Hindu-Buddhist karma where the effects of spirit and matter acts on one another.

In contrast, Western medicine is concerned with disease categories or agents of disease, which it isolates and tries to change, control, or destroy. The Western physician usually starts with a symptom and then searches for an underlying mechanism that may be a possible cause for a disease. There appears to be a foundational belief that a disease is a relatively well-defined self-contained phenomenon, although it may affect different parts of the body. Hence, there is a penchant for precise diagnostic frames of narrow areas so the cause may be isolated (Edward & Bouchier, *Davidson's Principles and Practice of Medicine*).

However, the basic premise for Chinese medicine rests in its orientation in finding imbalances and "righting" it. Balance or moderation is the key to the preservation of life. This makes it a more likely candidate for "the medicine of the future," as outlined by Abdu'l-Bahá:

The outer, physical causal factor in disease, however, is a disturbance in the balance, the proportionate equi-

librium of all those elements of which the human body is composed. To illustrate: the body of man is a compound of many constituent substances, each component being present in a prescribed amount, contributing to the essential equilibrium of the whole. So long as these constituents remain in their due proportion, according to the natural balance of the whole — that is, no component suffereth a change in its natural proportionate degree and balance, no component being augmented or decreased — there will be no physical cause for the incursion of disease. [Compilation 1: 465-67]

Biological rhythms go out of synchronization when there has been some violation of natural law, such as the practice of harmful habits, repression of emotions, or incorrect diet. Unbalance will result in cessation of the *ch'i* (气), a force or energy which may be equivalent to what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls the "mind force":

The mind force — whether we call it pre-existent or contingent — doth direct and coordinate all the members of the human body, seeing to it that each part or member duly performeth its own special function. If however, there be some interruption in the power of the mind, all the members will fail to carry out their essential functions, deficiencies will appear in the body and the functioning of its members, and the power will prove ineffectual. [SWAB 48]

In addition, ill health is not only a result of imbalance within parts of the body or of disharmony between the mind and the body but also something that can be brought about by an imbalance between the individual and the environment. The Yellow Emperor's Classic (黄帝内经 300 and 100 BCE), the Chinese equivalent of the Hippocratic corpus, taught that the winds and seasons have marked effects on the human body, certain physical conditions being the response to terrestrial forces. It was therefore crucial for human beings to act in accordance with the seasons so as to avoid disharmony, for each person breathes the breath of the universe, tastes its

atmosphere, and reflects its rhythm. Interestingly, modern medicine is now beginning to investigate the effect of atmospheric and meteorological conditions on the human organism, and it has been shown that the number of breaths each person draws varies according to the time of the year. Much like animals and insects, human beings also respond to a circadian rhythm of sunlight. Humans also experience annual rhythms, and these have been observed in regular changes of bodyweight as well as in seasonal hair loss.

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains this inter-dependency:

For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association. [SAQ 178-79]

Since the primary objective of Chinese medicine is to restore the balance in the body and since each body is different, individualized treatment, therefore, becomes one of its distinguishing features. As in the Ayurvedic tradition, treatment is tailored to the needs of the individual so as to maximize immunity to diseases and to achieve balance. Chinese diagnostic technique does not turn up a specific disease entity or a precise cause, but, rather, renders an almost poetic, yet workable, description of the whole person. The therapy then attempts to bring the configuration into balance, to restore harmony to the individual. In an attempt to discover a pattern of imbalance or disharmony in a patient's body, all relevant information, including the symptoms as well as the patient's other general characteristics, are gathered and woven together.

The validity of individualized treatment of a patient, rather than the uniform treatment of a disease, is acknowledged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

The skillful physician does not give the same medicine to cure each disease and each malady, but he changes

remedies and medicines according to the different necessities of the disease and constitution. [SAQ 94]

While the Yellow Emperor's Classic dealt with acupuncture, moxibustion, and surgery as a means of restoring balance, one major way in which much healing is done is through herbal medicine or food. The Chinese have thus developed a complex classification of foods which range from cold, cooling and neutral, to warming and hot.¹⁸ Things are also classified not only directly as a yín or yáng in nature but also relative to each other. Seaweeds, for example, are yín because they are passive plants that grow in the sea. Fish might also be considered yín because they live in the sea, but compared to seaweed, they are classified as yáng because they are active animals.

The importance of food as a means of curing illnesses is verified in the Bahá'í scriptures:

When highly-skilled physicians shall fully examine this thoroughly and perseveringly, it will be clearly seen that the incursion of disease is due to a disturbance in the relative amounts of the body's component substances, and that treatment consisteth in adjusting these relative amounts, and that this can be apprehended and made possible by means of foods. [Abdu'l Baha, *Compilation* 1:465-67]

Because "medical science appears to be in its infancy" [Abdu'l Baha, *Compilation* 1:473-74], not least because many major diseases are treated by invasive surgery, Bahá'ís are meanwhile encouraged to "develop the science of medicine to such a high degree that they will heal illnesses by means of foods" [Abdu'l Baha, *Compilation* 1:468]. The Faith, however, advises their adherents to refer to qualified doctors and mainstream practices since an alternative medical paradigm is not yet in place.

Despite some promising similarities between Chinese and Bahá'í perceptions on health and healing, there is one essential difference: for the Bahá'í, while medical treatment and a skilled doctor may cure a patient, the actual healer, in reality, is God [Abdul Baha, *Compilation* 1:468]. For the Chinese, as long as the patient is healed, this is not a relevant consideration. In Chinese

medicine, there is therefore little or less emphasis on the spiritual or prayerful aspect of healing, since the existence of God is not considered a worthwhile debatable subject. The Chinese philosophers have traditionally played down the importance of metaphysics and Confucius has gone as far as to refuse to answer such questions. Their focus has been to emphasize processes, relationships and ethics, rather than the concept of the Absolute.

Conclusion

The four principles inherent in yín-yáng cosmology – relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance – have gone a long way in influencing Chinese ideas where the origin of creation, historical perspective, gender relationships, and that of health and healing are concerned. There is a striking similarity of Yínyáng principles with the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith despite its separation in time and place. In both the Chinese cosmological worldview and the Bahá'í Faith, the idea of the unknowability of the Creator and the evolutionary development of life on earth is unfolded. Yín-yáng concepts have also endowed the Chinese with a capacity to interpret events in a larger historical or geographical perspective in terms of comparative religion and world unity. Again in both worldviews, gender relationships are represented symbolically as creative forces which, when in complete balance, results in harmony and prosperity. Last but not least, yín-yáng cosmology has left its mark on Chinese medicinal theory which, corresponding to Bahá'í beliefs, is based on the premise of righting imbalances. Perhaps the most profound discovery is the fact that Yínyáng has enabled the Chinese to be focused on the processes and the relationships rather than an Absolute or a single revelatory event. This perspective is propelled by the Chinese language which does not differentiate between education and religion. In this way, both education and religion are foregrounded as the bedrock of civilization since they are indivisible. The stress on relationships or ethics puts it in profound similarity with Bahai literature which has centrally emphasize deeds over words and the fact that actions and

intentions must and should match, irrespective of our affiliations to any religious teacher.

Meanwhile, the yín-yáng paradigm remains a useful one to explain socio-political, cultural, and economic imbalances at the beginning of the new millennium. In the past, yáng has been favored over yín, and the present world seems to have reached a point of great social, ecological, moral, and spiritual imbalance. It has, for instance, favored self-assertion rather than integration, rational knowledge rather than intuitive wisdom, analysis rather than synthesis, science rather than religion, competition rather than cooperation and expansion rather than conservation. Despite being the parent of Yínyáng cosmology, present day China has not been spared from a currently disjointed view of human life, which has attempted to divorce faith from reason and which has departed from the traditional attitude of tolerance to one of dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition. Since the last 30 years, China has shown a preference for materialism over spirituality and for individualism over the common good, an extremely yáng condition.

Nevertheless, we may take heart in the fact that yáng, having reached its peak, will eventually retreat since among the laws governing change and nature for the Chinese, the most fundamental is the one which states that “When a thing reaches one extreme, it reverts from it” (物极必反).¹⁹

“New age” ideas are gaining popularity, and there is, for instance, the rising concern with ecology, the strong interest in mysticism, the growing feminine awareness, and the rediscovery of holistic approaches to health and healing. This phenomenon was elucidated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá at the beginning of the 20th century, when he explained that the “new age” will be “an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced” [*Compilations* II:99]. In other words, “while the world in the past has been ruled by force, the balance has already begun to shift and force appears to be losing its dominance to mental alertness, intuition, and service” [*ibid.*]. It is, prophetically, a new age where Yínyáng is once again in balance.

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 NOTES

- ¹ This paper was presented at the Irfan Colloquium at the Centre for Bahai Studies, Acuto Italy, July 2012.
- ² The oldest manuscript that has been found, although incomplete, dates back to the Warring States period (circa 475–221 BC) (Balkin 2002).
- ³ Harmony of difference and sameness by Ts'an-t'ung chi, as translated by Ch'an Master Shih-t'ou Hsi-ch'ien (石头希迁禅师) Retrieved on 10 October 2012 from <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/sandokai.htm>
- ⁴ Fung, *Chuang Tzu* 50. See also Magill, *Masterpieces of World Philosophy* 187.
- ⁵ Within Chinese medicine texts the Wu Xing are also referred to as Wu Yun (五运 wǔ yùn) or a combination of the two characters (Wu Xing-Yun) (五行) these emphasize the correspondence of five elements to five 'seasons' (four seasons plus one). Another tradition refers to the *wu xing* as *wu de* 五德, the Five Virtues (:五德始终说 五德終始說).
- ⁶ This contrasts with the literal interpretations of the Bible that the earth is only around 6,000 years old. Bahá'u'lláh states: "The learned men, that have fixed at several thousand years the life of this earth, have failed, throughout the long period of their observation, to consider either the number or the age of the other planets" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 163).
- ⁷ See also Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, and the *Huai-nan Tzu* (淮南子 180–122 BCE).
- ⁸ See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*.
- ⁹ This quotation is taken from the book 《文心雕龙·宗经》. 文心雕龙 (Wenxindiaolong) is a great book on literary critique theories. 宗经 (Zongjing) is one volume of it talking about ideas of ancient saints (confucius and others).
- ¹⁰ There was a persecution in 845 AD where more than 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 smaller ones were destroyed. The issues were basically political and economic e.g. not too many able-bodied men had joined monasteries and thus became unavailable for agricultural production and army or labour conscription, or too much land belonged to Buddhist church and thus became tax exempt. Significantly, confiscated images of bronze were made into currency, those of iron into agricultural implements, those of gold and silver turned to the Treasury and images of wood, clay and stone left untouched. Hence, we may argue that the persecution was not quite anti-religious. See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*, p. 17.
- ¹¹ The other four are the Indian civilization of Asia the Islamic civilization, the Greek Orthodox in Greece, Russia, etc. and Western Christianity in Western Europe and America. See Toynbee, *A Study of History*.

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- ¹² Plato's *Republic* is for example, a model for many. A utopian island also occurs in the Sacred History of Eluthemerus (c 300 BC).
- ¹³ See Chew, *Chinese Religion*, Chapter 7.
- ¹⁴ See Rosemont, *Explorations*. Also the *Yi Jíng*.
- ¹⁵ The New Text School is the Han Dynasty form of Confucianism which were heavily influenced by the five phases and yínyáng theory.
- ¹⁶ See Drewek, "Feminine Forms of the Divine" 18.
- ¹⁷ Similarly, while Confucius did not have much to say directly about women relationships, it must be remembered that he placed great emphasis on being humane and contributed to basic human rights with his depiction of the superior person, the development of the original concept of *jen*, ("every man can cultivate his nature into loving man and embracing all men with benevolence"), his belief in the original goodness of human beings, his teachings on love and the golden rule. Women are included in the Chinese concept of *jen* or "person."
- ¹⁸ In general, foods which grow or live in ponds, lakes, streams, rivers, seas and oceans are colder or more cooling than those which grow on land. Watercress, seaweeds, fish and all kinds of seafood, e.g. have cold or cooling natures, while carrots, leeks, eggs, chicken and red meats have warm or hot natures. The natures of all foods can be changed by the way they are cooked. If watercress is stir-fried for example, it is less cooling than when it is boiled in a soup. And when chicken is steamed it is less "heating" than when it is grilled.
- ¹⁹ See Rene Wadlow, "Are we on the threshold of a New Age?" *Light Voices*, 4, 2, 1999, 7-8. In addition, there is a common Chinese saying, which may probably be derived from Lao-tzu "returning is the motion of Dao" and "to be far is to return." The idea is that if anything develops certain extreme qualities, those qualities invariably change into their opposites.