

# The Dialogue between Yin-Yang Concepts and the Bahá'í Faith

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## Abstract

The yin-yang concept is a pivotal theory in traditional Chinese thought influencing many aspects of Chinese civilization, government, architecture, personal relationships and ethics. There are significant similarities between this ancient paradigm and the spirit and principles of the Bahá'í Faith, especially regarding the origin of matter, the nature of history, man-woman relationships and health and healing. Bearing in mind the UN Year 2001 for a Creative "Dialogue Among Civilizations", this paper will set out to discuss how these similarities may be helpful in the modern encounter between Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith.

## 1. Introduction

From its earliest expression in myth, legend and verse over 3,000 years ago, the yin-yang concept has remained central to the Chinese way of viewing things and can be said to be the primal polarity in the individual and the cosmos in Chinese thought.<sup>1</sup> While this observation of the prominence of the principle of duality in the frame of things is not unique to China,<sup>2</sup> it is highly pertinent to speak of it as essentially "Chinese" since it has penetrated deeply into the popular culture and dominated the

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<sup>1</sup>The origin of *yin-yang* is not linked to the vision of any single individual or to any single text and the question of its beginning remains a matter of great dispute. Such a concept may have existed even in Neolithic China before the rise of high civilization. It was first recorded in texts of the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC).

<sup>2</sup>One of the Hermetic texts repeats the same theme: "All things are but two: that which is made and that which makes. And the one cannot be separated from the other, the Maker cannot exist apart from the thing made, nor the thing made apart from the Maker" (Libellus 14:5, qtd. in Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter" p. 26).

languages of medicine, geomancy, and other accepted “sciences” without major challenge.

The ancient Chinese first postulated the notion of two opposing basic forces springing from the framework of Tao (道: “One/Totality”) to explain the tension between stability and change in the seasons. For the Chinese, yin-yang concepts were able to account for many natural phenomena. Indeed, current scientific thought deeply reinforces the feeling that humans are fundamentally shaped by forces—natural and social—beyond human control, and there is the accompanying belief that those who understand these forces are somehow able to master them in the service of human ends. There is thus a quest to align the human realm with the realm of nature, 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 immeasurably enlarges the ability to control his or her life.

What is little known, however, is that there are significant similarities between this ancient paradigm and the spirit and principles of the Bahá'í Faith, especially regarding the origin of matter, the nature of history, man-woman relationships and health and healing. Bearing in mind the UN Year 2001 for a “Creative Dialogue among Civilizations”, this paper will set out to discuss how these similarities may be helpful in the modern encounter between Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith. Dialogue is important because of the need to prevent ethnocentrism in a rapidly shrinking and inter-connected world. There is a need to be exposed to different traditions and psychological viewpoints. It becomes important to view modern science as just one tradition of science amongst many others.

Before proceeding further with this modern encounter between yin-yang concepts and the Bahá'í Faith, I need to state from the onset that the subsequent references to Taoist influence refer more to Taoist philosophy rather than Taoist religion. The former is represented by the philosophies of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, documented in the texts ascribed to them, namely the *Tao-te Ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* as well as the later materials such as the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. The Taoist religion, on the other hand, can be traced to Chang Tao-ling (c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE), who claimed that he had a vision whereby Lao-tzu gave him the authority to organise

religious communities, forgive faults and sins, and to heal and to exorcise evil spirits. Over the centuries, many different schools of Taoism arose, based on Chang's vision, which drew inspiration, imagery and even gods from the original philosophy of Lao Tzu.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The Theory: Yin and Yang

Before the commencement of our dialogue, the basic features of yin–yang cosmology need to be drawn out. Basically, its essential characteristics may be summarized into four key concepts: relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance.

### Relativity

Yin and yang are, first and foremost, conceptual archetypes rather than actual material entities. They are philosophical constructs of two polar elements and, by themselves, do not mean anything since they are only employed to express a relation: one notion is the opposite of the other; the one is positive, the other negative. The ancient Chinese regard these concepts as balancing powers in the universe for regulating cosmic order, and use them to describe how things function in relation to each other and to the universe.

Yin and yang also contain within themselves the possibility of opposition and change; that is, yin and yang can be further divided into yin and yang. This is an extension of the logic that divides all phenomena into yin and yang aspects, allowing further division within aspects *ad infinitum*. This means that within each yin and yang category, another yin and yang category can be distinguished. For example, the son is both yin and yang; yin because he is believed to be inferior to his father and yang because he is believed to be superior as male. Nothing is neutral, and everything is relative and contains within it a multiplicity of relationships. In other words, nothing is absolutely yin or yang—only more yin compared to something, or more yang compared to something else.

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<sup>3</sup> See P. G. L. Chew, "Death and Immortality: the Taoist Religion in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith."

As relative concepts, yin and yang can be used extensively to explain a host of natural and social phenomena. In an old text of myths, called the *Chang Huang T'u-shu Pien*,<sup>4</sup> the unlimited extension of the yin and yang is further clarified:

“Heaven and the sun, spring and summer, east and south are yang, the earth and the moon, autumn and winter, west and north are yin. But during the day heaven and earth are both yang, and at night they are both yin. In spring and summer, heaven and earth, the sun and the moon are all yang, in autumn and winter they are all yin. In the east and the south the four seasons are always yang, in the west and the north they are always yin. The left hand is yang, the right one 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.”

Therefore, although it is possible to distinguish yin and yang, it is impossible to separate them since they depend on each other for definition. Furthermore, the things in which yin and yang are distinguished could not be defined without the existence of yin and yang dualities; for example, one cannot speak of temperature apart from its yin and yang aspects—hot or cold. It is this notion of relativity as suggested throughout the *Tao-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.”<sup>5</sup>

Su Shih (960–1279 AD), a poet-scholar from the Sung dynasty, indicates the importance of paying attention to perspectives. When there is a shift

<sup>4</sup> A. Forke, *The World Conception of the Chinese*, pp. 214–15.

<sup>5</sup> *Tao-te Ching*, (Maurer) ch. 2.

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. Again, 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.”<sup>6</sup>

### Unity

The second characteristic to note in the discussion of the yin–yang correlates is their essential unity. While one might have expected that the two would result in opposite poles, incompatible and irreconcilable, the opposite is actually the case. The two are, in essence, basically one. Thus, in place of the theories of duality, competition, and opposition so common in Western philosophy, there is instead the theory 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. It is a system of thought whereby all things are seen as parts of a whole. No entity can ever be isolated from its relationship to other entities, and nothing can exist in and of itself.

One factor influencing this implicit unity of polarity is the notion that the correlates originate from and are united in one common principle, i.e., the Tao, the life-giving power or principle. This idea was also evident in the ideas of the Greek philosophers of the Ionian School (c. 585–540 BC) e.g., Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, who argued that orderliness could only be explained through the existence of a single unifying substance which was in control of all the parts. The Eastern traditions constantly refer to this ultimate, indivisible reality which manifests itself in all things and of which all things are parts. It is called Brahman in Hinduism, Dharmakaya in Buddhism, and Tao in Taoism. Because it transcends all concepts and categories, the Buddhist also calls it Tathata or “Suchness”. 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, it is an emanation which is “not limited by

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<sup>6</sup> B. Watson, *Selection from a Sung Dynasty Poet*, p 101.

time or place; it is without beginning or end—beginning and end in relation to God are one.”<sup>7</sup>

On this mystic concept of Tao, Chuang-tzu (370 to 319 BC), a literary genius with profound spiritual insights, has constructed his view of the universe. According to him, the manifestation of this first principle in each individual thing is called “te” (德: “virtue”). Tao and te, thus, are actually of one essence, the former being the universal essence, and the latter the share of the former deposited in every individual being. In short, Taoism is the philosophy of the unity of the universe and the return of all to the “Primeval One,” the “Divine Intelligence,” the “Source” of all things. For the Taoist then, the ideal is, implicitly, to return to Tao. As Chuang-tzu 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 (which gives their individual character). That which is formless is divided into yin and yang and from the beginning going on without interruption is called destiny (ming 命: “fate”). Through movement and rest, it produces all things. When things are produced in accordance with the principle (li 理) there is a physical form. When the activities follow their own specific principles, that is 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.”<sup>8</sup>

In the *Tafsir-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhfiyyan*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that form and substance arise simultaneously and that they are interdependent:

“They have said that the potentialities (qábiliyyát) and the recipients of the potentialities (maqbulát) came into being and were created simultaneously. For example, it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the “Fashioner” (qábil) and the “Fashioned

<sup>7</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 203.

<sup>8</sup> W. T. Chan, *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, p 202.



(maqbul). 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.” (Makátib 2:35)<sup>9</sup>

It must be noted that this belief in unity or the basic oneness of the universe is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics<sup>10</sup>. However, while Chinese philosophers believe in the existence of a common principle or life-giving force<sup>11</sup> which binds both yin and yang, they are silent about whether humanity evolved accidentally or as a result of God's purpose. All that they are committed to saying are that yin and yang are united in the essential unity of the Tao and that all changes in nature are manifestations of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites yin and yang. This stands in strong contrast to prophetic religions, such as the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that humanity's origins can be viewed as the unfolding of God's plan<sup>12</sup> and 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.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Complementarity**

We have already discussed how the yin-yang concepts are a pair of opposites in a dynamic polar relationship with each other. Another distinctive characteristic of yin-yang cosmology is its essential complementarity. It is a view of a wholesome nature made up intricately of halves. In other words, everything that is a half must be completed by another half, for example, spirit and matter, subject and object, inside and outside, above and below, man and woman, light and darkness, etc. .

This relationship may be better understood if we look at the yin-yang symbol. Here, the circle representing the whole is divided into yin (black)

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<sup>9</sup> Provisional translation by Moojan Momen in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 3.4.26–27 and quoted in Brown, “A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter”, p 26.

<sup>10</sup> J. D. Barrow and F. J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*.

<sup>11</sup> “Principle” suggests a more abstract, perhaps “metaphysical” interpretation. In Neo-Confucianism, this marks the divide between “I” (principle) and “Ch'i” (vital energy). Earlier, the idea of a “life-giving force” is used to explain what gives rise to yin and yang.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 196–97.

<sup>13</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 140.

and yang (white). The small circles of opposite shading illustrate that within yang, there is yin and vice versa. In any yin phenomenon there is a little yang; in every yang phenomenon there is a little yin. In other words, the night is never completely dark because there is always some yang light (from the moon, stars, fireflies), and the yang day has some darkness (shadows for instance). The dynamic curve dividing them indicates that yin and yang are continuously merging. Thus, yin and yang create, control and transform each other.<sup>14</sup>



This intricate complementarity is also extended to the relationship between humankind and nature and thus an organic conception of the cosmos is proposed; that is, the view of the human being as a microcosmic image of the macrocosm. This embodies a belief that everything, however small, in some sense reflects this relationship. Just as the cells of the body imply the whole, so every part of creation implies the cosmos. As the work of Chuang-tzu portrays, the Tao is the all-pervading principle that exists prior to the existence of the universe, and it is to be found in every thing, no matter how trivial or base.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Visually, this is best illustrated in classical Chinese art, e.g., landscape paintings where men and women, activity and tranquility, mountain and water, etc., are balanced and harmonized.

<sup>15</sup> *Chuang-tzu*, chapter 2



'Abdu'l-Bahá says something similar which requires further reflection: "... all parts of the creational world are of one whole."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> "All the elements that are combined in man exist also in vegetables."<sup>18</sup> In addition, the following quotation has a broader meaning but is relevant nevertheless. Quoting the Imám 'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form, when within thee the universe is folded?"<sup>19</sup>

The essence of this complementarity reinforces once again the awareness of the mutual interrelation of all objects and events, and the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of the cosmic whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. The "ten thousand things," which the ancient Chinese believed to spin around Tao, are not isolated entities spinning around time and space, but rather spirit and matter, mineral and plant, animal and human, which are all manifestations of the Tao, which is indivisible, transcendent, and immanent all at the same time.<sup>20</sup> To understand any part demands an understanding of the whole.

This idea is implicit in the cosmology of early Chinese texts. The *Shu-ching* (Book of History),<sup>21</sup> for example, contains an early mention of the human and cosmic correspondence. "Heaven," it says, "hears and sees as our people hear and see." The *Li-chi* (Collection of Rituals) describes human beings as "the product of the attributes of Heaven and Earth, by the interaction of the dual force of nature, the union of the animal "kuei" (鬼: "ghost"), and the intelligent "shen" (神: "soul"), and the finest matter of the five elements." This idea of a human being as a miniature heaven

<sup>16</sup> Bahá'í World Faith, p 364.

<sup>17</sup> Abdu'l Bahá, *Selections*, p 153.

<sup>18</sup> Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 258.

<sup>19</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p 34.

<sup>20</sup> Note that the attribution of transcendence to Tao is challenged by those who consider Tao to be a kind of process philosophy. Here, Tao is immanent, the sum total of being and non-being. This view maintains the inter-relatedness of all things. The totality of all the particulars is Tao. See R. P. Peerenboom, *Cosmogony, the Taoist Way*.

<sup>21</sup> This is a book of sayings ascribed to the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun in the third millennium BC.

and earth is also fundamental to the *I Ching* (Book of Changes)<sup>22</sup> which likens heaven to the head and earth to the belly. Macro-micro correspondences constitute a constant theme in many of the hexagrams of the *I Ching*.<sup>23</sup>

A famous poem by Chang Tsai (1020–77 AD), a pioneer of Neo-Confucianism, reads: "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."<sup>24</sup>

The Bahá'í perspective, like yin-yang cosmology, points to the significance of complementarity. Members and elements are interconnected and influence one another spiritually and materially, although this has not yet been conclusively substantiated by present-day science. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, "but I mean that 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."<sup>25</sup>

### Balance

The fourth important characteristic of yin-yang theory is the delicate role of balance, which is needed to promote harmony between the two

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<sup>22</sup> In Chinese literature, four holy men are cited as authors, namely: Fu Hsi, the legendary figure representing the era of hunting and fishing and the invention of cooking; King Wen; the Duke of Chou; and Confucius.

<sup>23</sup> This belief is chiefly responsible for the Chinese art of geomancy, feng shui (literally "wind and water"). Since the cosmos is a unity, no part of which is finally independent from the whole, it follows that events at one level, or in one place, will have their influence at other levels and in other places. Feng shui thus claims to teach people how to rule nature and guide their own destiny by revealing to them the ways of heaven and earth. Knowledge of feng shui, was therefore a means of transforming people from the playthings of nature to co-creators with her; this was not only of benefit to humanity, but also to the natural world, which was seen in a sense as waiting for the helping hand of human understanding and human action for its fulfillment.

<sup>24</sup> W. T. Chan, *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 497.

<sup>25</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 245–46.

polarities. Balance is needed if complementary opposites are to interact to achieve stability for the entire creation.

While most 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 better than intuition—the yin-yang paradigm emphasizes the equality of proportions. A deficiency of one aspect implies an excess of the other. Thus, if yin is excessive, yang will be too weak. For example, summer is considered as yang and isolated as such, it may seem “excessive,” but not so if the whole of the four seasons is taken into account. There is a cosmological balance. 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 yin and yang are unbalanced for long periods of time, the resulting transformation may be drastic.

When Confucius (551–479 BC) wrote *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 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.<sup>26</sup> Thus, there is a saying of Confucius that, “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.”<sup>27</sup>

This traditional notion of balance has significant implications on moral values and has been used to explain the relationship between good and evil. To the Chinese philosophical mind, good and bad are, first and foremost, opposites that are interrelated in the same way as yin and yang. For Chuang-tzu (who believed that the notions of right and wrong do not exist, since right is right only because of the existence of wrong), nothing can be said to be absolutely right.<sup>28</sup> Good and evil are movements along the same spectrum, and for each concept to be meaningful, the other must

<sup>26</sup> *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 27.

<sup>27</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p 69.

<sup>28</sup> Fung, *Chuang Tzu*, p 50. See also Magill, *Masterpieces of World Philosophy*, p 187.

exist.<sup>29</sup> This was a very advanced realization for its day, bearing in mind that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to emphasize with great thoroughness in the twentieth century that just as darkness is but the absence or reduction of light, so evil is but the absence or reduction of good—the undeveloped state. A bad person is one who has not developed the better side of his nature, just as a good person is one who has. Chuang-tzu believes that conflict arises when a person departs from Tao and tries to act contrary to nature.

This concept of balancing both yin and yang forces and of being at one with Tao has been used to teach morality throughout Chinese history. Lao-tzu illustrates this paradox within a set of instructions on the cultivation of values:

“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 Tao, these things are called  
 Tumors and dregs, which all things abhor.  
 Whoever has Tao does not dwell on them.”<sup>30</sup>

This paradox of the variability between two poles foreshadows the words of Jesus five hundred years later: “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5) and “The first shall be last and the last first” (Matt. 19:30).

There is, however, a distinct difference between the concept of balance in the Chinese psyche and in the Bahá'í Faith. While keeping to the mean is imperative for harmony, what exactly the mean is in regard to moral and social behaviour is not known. For the Chinese, it is a theoretical mean, a philosophical concept. For the Bahá'ís, however, the Book itself, the

<sup>29</sup> In contrast, in the Augustinian privation argument, richness would still be meaningful whether there were poverty or not.

<sup>30</sup> *Tao-te Ching*, ch. 24

*Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the "Most Holy Book" is "the unerring Balance established amongst men."<sup>31</sup>

With an understanding of these four essential characteristics of yin-yang cosmology, I will now proceed to a preliminary exploration of four areas; namely, the origin of creation, the nature of history, the relationship of man and woman, and health and healing, and examine these concepts' relationships across time and space to the Bahá'í Faith.

### 3. The Tao of Creation

The idea of causation, central to Western thinking, is almost entirely absent in Chinese thought. Indeed no Chinese thinker who discusses the subject admits the possibility of any initial conscious act of creation. Things influence each another not by mechanical causes but by a kind of induction effect. For the Chinese, things were connected, rather than caused. 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, influenced by the yin and yang paradigm, were most interested in understanding the interrelations of patterns within the cosmos and in becoming attuned to the unseen dynamic. As Ronan and Needham argue:

"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."<sup>32</sup>

One reason for the absence of the issue of cause and effect in three thousand years of Chinese philosophy<sup>33</sup> is that the word "cause" implies a

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<sup>31</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p 22.

<sup>32</sup> Ronan and Needham, *The Shorter Science and Civilization*, p. 163

<sup>33</sup> However, the term "Creator" (造物者 Zhào Wù Zhé, and 造化者 Zhào Hù Zhé) is found in the *Chuang-tzu*.

direct dependency with the effects in much the same way that the attribute 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 *Tao-te Ching* reiterates:

"If Tao can be Taoed, it is not Tao.  
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. There is an implied acceptance that it exists, and no effort is made to postulate the hows or whys of its existence. Only a description of the Tao suffices. The Bahá'í Faith, however, explicitly indicates that while God is the creator of all things, God exists completely outside the order of creation. God is like a Divine Craftsperson:

"Lauded be 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 [the world hereafter and this world] . . ."<sup>34</sup>

According to the Bahá'í scriptures, God is unknowable and is set apart from his creation. God is outside time and space—both of which are His creation. Being outside the time-space parameters, it becomes logical then to assert that "the latter world hath neither beginning nor end,"<sup>35</sup> something not incomparable with the Taoist's (Chuang-tzu's) notion of heaven as "one of ceaseless revolution, without beginning or end."<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, while not concerned in the "whys" of creation, China's greatest thinkers were keen to understand the "hows." Drawing from yin-yang theory, it was postulated that the cosmos is a series of progressions from the One Great Ultimate—the T'ai Ch'i—to the two principles yin

<sup>34</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p 48-49.

<sup>35</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 187.

<sup>36</sup> Y. L. Fung, *Chuang Tzu*, p 133.



and yang; the three sources; heaven, earth and humankind; the four seasons; "wu-hsing" (五行: "five phases")<sup>37</sup> represented symbolically by wood, fire, earth, metal and water; and so forth. According to this system, all things, from the big to the small, whether concrete objects, ideas, situations, etc. are results of the interaction of yin and yang.

Interestingly, Bahá'u'lláh also explains the cause of creation through two poles somewhat similar in spirit to the yin and yang—the active force and its recipient or the even and the odd contained in the One that precedes multiplicity. By their interaction, a "heat" or life-giving energy is generated 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."<sup>38</sup>

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."<sup>39</sup> In other tablets, he identifies them with the four elements,<sup>40</sup> interestingly enough, something not quite unlike the Chinese "five phases."

The Chinese conception of the five phases (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) apparently stabilized as an ordering principle of Chinese organic philosophy during the late Spring and Autumn period, and like yin–yang, derive from more ancient roots.<sup>41</sup> One notes that the ideas which lay behind the five phases may not have been associated with actual material elements, but rather as elements which assume a dynamic "dialectic"

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<sup>37</sup> The term *wu-hsing* is often translated as "five elements" but that term is misleading, implying that wood, fire, earth, metal, and water are constituents of physical matter. The five are not "elements," but paradigms or analogies for specific modes of being or activity.

<sup>38</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 140.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p 140.

<sup>40</sup> That is, "fire," "air," "water," and "earth," the first tokens by which the material creation is generated. See Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter" p 28, pp. 35–36.

<sup>41</sup> The reasons for developing five categories, rather than some other number, are not clearly known. However, they may derive from astrological considerations of the five visible planets.

relation to each other. Similarly, many of the terms used in Bahá'í natural philosophy e.g. earth, water, air, fire, coming from its classical Greek,<sup>42</sup> Indo-European, and Islamic heritage, to describe the metaphysical origin of the universe, cannot always be interpreted in a literary fashion but should be understood in the context of the tradition from which they derive. What is significant is the conceptual similarity of its postulation despite the separation in time and place.

The four elements in the Bahá'í writings which can be held up for structural and conceptual comparison with the Chinese theory of the five phases were expounded in the *Lawh-i-Ayyi-i-Nur* (Tablet of the Verse of Light):

“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.”<sup>43</sup>

The above quotation suggests the gradual development of life on earth, which is also a part of the belief of ancient China.<sup>44</sup> The *I Ching*, for

<sup>42</sup> In the West, the ancient Greeks had elements which did refer to substance, recognizing three as early as seventh century BC and five by 560 BC. Earth, air, fire, water and a fifth essence that acted as a kind of substratum of the others. However, it was not until Aristotle, that the Greek elements became properly associated with qualities (Ronan and Needham, *The Shorter Science*, p 147).

<sup>43</sup> *Ma'idiy-i-Asmani* 4:82. Provisional translation by Brown, “A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter,” pp 35–36.

<sup>44</sup> 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

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 Tao to knowing the Tao. The following is a traditional story accounting for the gradual creation of the universe:

“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. Preceding 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 constellations; and the four lesser 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 production 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 number 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. . . .”<sup>45</sup>

One notes that such stories existed before Darwin's theory of evolution or any hints of current concept of cosmology such as those expounded by Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*) where the universe began as a “big

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consider either the number or the age of the other planets” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 163).

<sup>45</sup> J. Ross, *The Origin of the Chinese*, pp. 1–3. See also N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, and the *Huai-nan Tzu* (180–122 BC).

bang" billions of years ago and the solar system was formed from the dust of space much later.<sup>46</sup> This is not to imply that the Chinese created the theory of evolution; only that their mythological tradition and literature enabled them to fit in more easily with later and modern scientific theories.

With regards to the gradual and systematically progressive nature of creation, Abdu'l-Bahá himself suggests that creation unfolds in a sequential manner. The Bahá'í view is unequivocal and clearer in the assertion that evolution tended to produce higher and more complex forms:

"Then 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."<sup>47</sup>

#### 4. The Tao of Historical Perspective

The way the Chinese viewed their own cultural, social, and religious history was also directly influenced by the yin–yang paradigm. Basically a holistic one, in which parts are viewed as integral to the whole, the yin–yang cosmological perspective endowed the Chinese with the ability to interpret events in a larger historical or geographical perspective than would otherwise have been the case. Two areas will be examined to illustrate this point: comparative religion and world unity.

In a perusal of Chinese history, one notices that religious conflict has been less of an issue than in any other major culture,<sup>48</sup> a situation due in part to the yin–yang cosmological perspective. The presence of great religious teachers at different periods of history among different peoples can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the same

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<sup>46</sup> See S. H. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*.

<sup>47</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 182–83, p 199.

<sup>48</sup> See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*.

river may start off at different points and times and bear different names, but the water which each receives from its source does not vary. To the Chinese, each religion has often been understood as a branch of the educational system, and all founders and sages are but “teachers” of a particular school.<sup>49</sup> Although there have been occasional polemics and religious persecution in China’s long history, the traditional attitude has been generally one of tolerance rather than dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition. As the existence of strong Buddhist and Taoist elements in Neo-Confucianism make plain, a willingness to embrace different ideologies as complementary is characteristic of both Chinese thought and East Asian thought in general. If there was persecution, it was more often the result of struggles for power or recognition that a certain religion was “better,” rather than a denial of essential truths of other religions.<sup>50</sup>

This sense of wholeness has always led the Chinese mind towards the sense of relativity of particulars within the universal totality, and it is not surprising that the Chinese were among the first to envisage a future society of world brotherhood and unity. Arnold Toynbee, a great philosopher of history, included Chinese civilization among the five survivors of a number of ancient and medieval civilizations that once existed.<sup>51</sup> He found that among these, 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

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<sup>49</sup> The Chinese people, after all, called their religion “Chiao” (“Teaching” or “Education”) and the founders of religions “Chiao Tsu” – “Teaching Master.”

<sup>50</sup> There was persecution in 845 AD where more than 4,600 large monasteries and 40,000 smaller ones were destroyed. The issues at work were basically political and economic; e.g., 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 churches 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. So it was never anti-religious. See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*, p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> The other four are the Indian civilization in southern Asia, the Islamic civilization across the Middle East and North Africa, the Greek Orthodox Empire ranging from Greece to Russia, and Western Christianity in Western Europe and America. See A. Toynbee, *A Study of History*.

feature of other civilizations,<sup>52</sup> it was only in China that it formed part of the psyche not just of the scholar class, but also of the common people.

Very early on, the Chinese people entertained the lofty thought of the "pacification of the world" (大同, Ta-t'ung: "Universalism"), bringing to mind 'Abdu'l-Bahá's point that "the most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind."<sup>53</sup> 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" (Ta-t'ung).<sup>54</sup> He urged his disciples to strive to produce a paradise covering the whole world. His ideas have been a motivating force for many Chinese legislators, scholars, and authors, especially reformers and revolutionaries such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic in 1912.<sup>55</sup> Another Chinese philosopher who was fascinated with the utopian idea of the Great Unity was Mo-tzu (479–381 BC), who developed a concept called "all-embracing love" (兼爱, chien-ai), which emphasized a love of all humankind rather than just the love of the family. Then there was Mao Tse-tung, whose aim it was to establish the "Great Harmony," and although Mao was much influenced by Marx and Lenin early in life, much of his philosophy is, interestingly, in tune with the principles and attitudes of traditional Chinese philosophy.

While this kind of ideal, a united world characterized by world solidarity, has not been in total 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 occurred 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.

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<sup>52</sup> Plato's *Republic* is for example, a model for many. A utopian island also occurs in the *Sacred History* of Eluthemerus (c. 300 BC). In addition, there is the story of Atlantis which has inspired many utopian legends.

<sup>53</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 31.

<sup>54</sup> The term "Ta-t'ung" has been interpreted as "The Great Commonwealth," "The Great Harmony," "One World System," etc. "The Great Unity" is another such translation.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Chew, *The Chinese Religion*, p 74.



## 5. The Tao of Man and Woman

Man and woman, like yang and yin, are an example of the creative and complementary forces which when in complete balance result in harmony and prosperity. In the *I Ching*, there are many references to male-female relations in both verbal and nonverbal symbols. The book begins with the two hexagrams "Ch'ien" and "K'un," which stand for heaven and earth, yang and yin, male and female. Part II of the book also begins with reference to male and female. Hexagram 31, "Hsien," depicting a lake above a mountain, refers to the mutual influence and attraction between the two natural forces. One cannot do without the other.<sup>56</sup> Thus, although heaven is spoken of as the powerful male force and earth as the weak female force, the two are actually equal, for one cannot exist without the other. In other words, Heaven can accomplish nothing unless Earth responds. Ontologically, they form a unity and are therefore equal.

Interestingly, in one of his tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the story of Adam and Eve as a metaphor for the active force and 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."<sup>57</sup>

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.<sup>58</sup>

However, while yin has been associated with the feminine and yang with the masculine, this should be interpreted as a means of exemplifying a polarity of abstractions such as that between "night" and "day" and "hot" and "cold." They do not represent the female or male sex in actuality but rather serve to illustrate the notion of polarity. As a case in point, all

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<sup>56</sup> See Rosemont, *Early Chinese Cosmology*, and also the *I Ching*.

<sup>57</sup> Nakhjavani, *Response*, p 72.

<sup>58</sup> See section in this article on "The Tao of Creation."

people, whether male or female, go through yin and yang phases, and the personality of each man and woman is not a static entity but a dynamic phenomenon resulting from the play between masculine and feminine phenomena. This is a theory that also serves to delineate different stages in life, each with its own different needs and tasks, advantages and disadvantages. The first half of life, led by yang, is a time of differentiation, during which we understand ourselves and the world by dividing it into pieces. The second half is characterized by yin or the tendency to make whole, to see and experience the connections between things, to replace separateness with harmony.

However, through the historical passage of time, this concept has been developed to establish a rigid order in which men were supposed to be completely masculine and women completely feminine. The patriarchal bias also saw yin and yang 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 yang, which through the passage of time 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 yin 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 yin (阴) originally 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 for yang (阳) stood for the sunny side of a slope and all that was bright and creative.

Yin–yang cosmology was also utilized to portray prototypes of the human social order, e.g., “The ruler is yang, the subject yin; the father is yang, the son yin; the husband is yang, the wife yin.” Later, writers such as Tung Chung-shu (179–104 BC), a major representative of the New Text School (the Han Dynasty form of Confucianism which was heavily influenced by the five phases and yin–yang theory), taught that “Heaven has trust in the yang but not in the yin.”<sup>59</sup> The patriarchal and patrilineal

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<sup>59</sup> Bodde, “Harmony and Conflict,” p 619.

bias in Chinese culture therefore transformed the original theory by elevating the yang principle at the expense of the yin. Not surprisingly, practices such as female infanticide, footbinding, and the sale of daughters have shown the status of women in traditional Chinese societies to be unenviable. The *I Ching* itself has also contributed to this imbalance.

The patriarchal bias to equate yin with passivity and yang 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. Of course, the understanding of yin as passivity is not itself a problem. What is problematic is when passivity comes to be viewed as undesirable. The whole point of Lao-tzu's teachings, in this respect, is to point out the artificiality of such value distinction.

Interestingly, in Bahá'í scripture, the feminine principle is depicted as 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."<sup>60</sup>

Such 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 this Name."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 142.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

The theme of masculine-feminine complementarity and interaction is manifested in the *Tablet of Carmel*.<sup>62</sup> Drewek 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."

It does appear then that Eve's role as a symbol of the "shadowy" yin is now discarded in the light of the Bahá'í revelation. In a long-awaited reunion, the feminine principle is now ready to shift from a competitive to a complementary opposite. For Bahá'ís then, harmony does not mean a blurring of difference or a merging of the two into one in which both natures are sacrificed. On the contrary, following the original spirit of yin-yang, it signifies the combination of the two different parts to produce an aesthetically satisfying whole.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained the concept of complementarity in a manner reminiscent of the yin-yang 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."<sup>63</sup>

He also compares society to a bird with two wings: "The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly."<sup>64</sup> This is an image which echoes Lao-tzu's teachings 2,500 years ago:

<sup>62</sup> See Drewek, "Feminine Forms of the Divine," p 18.

<sup>63</sup> 'Abdu'l Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 134.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p 375.

“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; [yang]  
Keep to the black [yin].  
Be beneath-heaven’s model.  
To be beneath-heaven’s model  
Is to stay with unerring virtue  
And return to the limitless.”<sup>65</sup>

It is impossible to read the above (and indeed the *Tao-te Ching* in its entirety) without realizing where Lao-tzu, living in a patriarchal age, placed his true priorities. Replete with yin symbols, it teaches that the sage should adopt the yin qualities. Balance is once again stressed as the essential condition for harmony. If so, the equality between men and women is subtly raised.<sup>66</sup> As a modern interpretation of the *Tao-te Ching* puts it: “Full Balance is equal mind and body, equal woman and man. To realize the Tao, both feet must dance.”<sup>67</sup>

## 6. The Tao of Health and Healing

Imbued with the principles of yin–yang cosmology, Chinese medical theory, like its scientific, historical, and social theories, is based on the logic which assumes that a part can be understood only in its relation to the whole. It is a logic that is always organic or synthetic, attempting to

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<sup>65</sup> *Tao-te Ching*, ch. 28

<sup>66</sup> Similarly, while Confucius did not have much to say directly about women–men 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.”

<sup>67</sup> Grigg, *The Tao of Relationships*, p 219.

organize symptoms into understandable configurations. Just as in the question of the creation of the universe, the question of cause and effect is always secondary to the overall pattern, so in Chinese medicine, it is not so much what  $x$  is causing to  $y$ , but rather, what the relationship of  $x$  to  $y$  is. A symptom, therefore is not traced back to a cause but is looked at as part of a totality. If a person displays a certain symptom, Chinese medicine wishes to discover how the symptom fits into that person'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 distressing symptom is only one part of a complete bodily imbalance that can be seen in other aspects of his or her life and behaviour.

In contrast, Western medicine, in keeping with the Western penchant for cause and effect, is concerned with isolatable disease categories or agents of disease, which it isolates and tries to change, control, or destroy. The physician usually starts with a symptom, then searches for an underlying mechanism that may be a possible cause for a disease. Although the disease may affect various parts of the body, it is a relatively well-defined self-contained phenomenon. Precise diagnosis frames an exact, quantifiable description of the illness, and a cause is then isolated.<sup>68</sup>

The basic premise on which Chinese medicine is based and its orientation in finding imbalances and "righting" them, makes it a likely preliminary basis to what Bahá'ís believe will be the healing methods of the future. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

"The outer, physical causal factor in disease, however, is a disturbance in the balance, the proportionate equilibrium 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

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<sup>68</sup> Edward and Bouchier, *Davidson's Principles and Practice of Medicine*.



and balance, no component being augmented or decreased—there will be no physical cause for the incursion of disease.”<sup>69</sup>

According to Chinese medicine, biological rhythms get 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. Imbalance will result in diminishment or cessation of the “ch’i,” 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 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 ineffective.”<sup>70</sup>

In line with the principles of yin–yang, it is believed that 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 (Inner Classic or the Huang-di Neijing)*,<sup>71</sup> the source of all Chinese medical theory, 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. The *Inner Classic* maintained that it was 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 (although less immediately apparent), human beings also respond to a circadian rhythm of sunlight. Humans

<sup>69</sup> *Compilation of Compilations, I*, p 465–67.

<sup>70</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p 48.

<sup>71</sup> Compiled by unknown authors between 300 and 100 BC, it is the oldest of the Chinese medical texts.

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 theory of interrelatedness:

"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."<sup>72</sup>

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.<sup>73</sup> Treatment is tailored to the needs of the individual so as to maximize immunity to diseases and to achieve balance. Here, the Chinese physician directs his or her attention to the complete physiological and psychological individual. This 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."<sup>74</sup>

While the *Yellow Emperor's Classic* dealt with acupuncture, moxibustion, and surgery as 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 according to the yin-yang principle. Classification ranges from cold and cooling, to neutral, to

<sup>72</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 178-79.

<sup>73</sup> Individualized treatment is also a distinctive feature in Ayurvedic medicine.

<sup>74</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 94.

warming and hot.<sup>75</sup> Things are also classified not only directly as yin or yang in nature but also relative to each other. Seaweeds, for example, are yin because they are passive plants that grow in the sea. Fish might also be considered yin because they live in the sea, but compared to seaweed, they are classified as yang because they are active animals.

The importance of food as a means of curing illnesses is referred to often 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.”<sup>76</sup>

Because “medical science appears to be in its infancy,”<sup>77</sup> not least because many major diseases are treated primarily by invasive surgery, Bahá'ís are encouraged to “develop the science of medicine to such a high degree that they will heal illnesses by means of foods.”<sup>78</sup> While it will necessarily take some time before the emergence of such a medical paradigm, in the meantime Bahá'ís are advised to refer to qualified doctors and submit to current medical opinion.

Despite some promising similarities between Chinese and Bahá'í perceptions of 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 is really God.<sup>79</sup> For the Chinese, this is not so much a relevant point in the practice of healing. What the ultimate cause of healing is is not as important as the fact that the patient is healed. In

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<sup>75</sup> 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 warming 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.

<sup>76</sup> *Compilation of Compilations, I*, p 465–67.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p 473–74.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p 468.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

Chinese medicine, there is also less emphasis on the spiritual or prayerful aspect of healing.<sup>80</sup>

## 7. Conclusion

The four principles inherent in yin-yang cosmology—relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance—have gone a long way in influencing Chinese ideas where the origin of creation, the nature of history, the relationship between men and women, and health and healing are concerned. What is of significance to us in this dialogue is the conceptual similarity of these principles in relation to the Bahá'í Faith despite its birth separate 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 gradual development of life on earth is present. In addition, while attempting to explain the process of creation, the Bahá'í Faith postulates two poles and four elements of creation, the former being similar in spirit to the yin and yang, while the latter is not unlike the Chinese “five phases.” Yin-yang 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 and this viewpoint has much in synchrony with the Bahá'í Faith. Again in both worldviews, the relationship between the sexes, yin and yang, are represented symbolically as creative forces which when in complete balance result in harmony and prosperity. Ontologically, both male and female are viewed as forming a unity and are therefore equal and complementary. Last but not least, yin-yang cosmology has left its mark on Chinese medicinal theory which is based on the premise of finding imbalances and “righting” them. In this perspective, it is similar to what Bahá'ís believe will be the healing methods of the future. One can only conclude from this preliminary dialogue that despite the chasm of time and space which separates the origins of the Chinese cosmological worldview and the Bahá'í Faith, the conceptual affiliation of many key principles is striking and merits further investigation.

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<sup>80</sup> On the popular level, however, many believed that diseases were caused by sins or visitations.

Future research is needed to investigate the significant correlation of the principles and spirit of the Bahá'í Faith with traditional paradigms of thinking in Chinese culture. The multifarious theories of causation and evolution and relationships between all created things in the universe in Chinese philosophical thought, the theoretical relationship between man and women and its practical application in Chinese philosophy and literary texts, the principle of unity in ordering political and social life, and last but not least, a more detailed systematic examination of the intricate correlation between Chinese and Bahá'í medical principles are all vital, timely and relevant areas of detailed study for future scholars.

Meanwhile, the yin–yang paradigm remains a useful one to explain cultural imbalance as we stand on the threshold of the millennium. In the past, yang has been favoured over yin, and the present world seems to have reached a point of great imbalance in social, ecological, moral, and spiritual terms. Despite having given birth to the yin–yang theory, a completing rather than a competing theory, present-day China is also not spared from a disjointed view of human life, which attempts to divorce faith from reason and which has departed from the traditional attitude of tolerance to one of dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition, an extremely yang condition.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are witnessing the beginning of a “New Age” seems to illustrate the idea that yang, having reached its peak, is now in retreat. Among the laws governing change and nature for the Chinese, the most fundamental is, after all, that which states, “When a thing reaches one extreme, it reverts from it.”<sup>81</sup> “New age” ideas are gaining popularity, and there is, for instance, a rising concern with ecology, a strong interest in mysticism, a growing feminine awareness, and a rediscovery of holistic approaches to health and healing.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> See Rene Wadlow, “Are we on the threshold of a New Age?” *Light Voices*, 4, 2, 1999, pp. 7-8. In addition, there are common Chinese sayings, which may be derived from Lao-tzu: “Returning is the motion of Tao,” and, “To be far is to return.” The idea is that if anything develops certain extreme qualities, those qualities invariably change into their opposites.

<sup>82</sup> See Rene Wadlow, “Are we on the threshold of a New Age?” *Light Voices*, 4, 2, 1999, pp. 7-8.

'Abdu'l-Bahá elucidated on this phenomenon when he said, at the beginning of this century, that the "new age" will be "an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced." While the world in the past has been ruled by force, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, the balance is already shifting and force appears to be losing its dominance to mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service: "Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced."<sup>83</sup>

A fundamental renewal of society thus appears to be gradually taking place. The pendulum of balance appears to be at work. The Mean is once again seen as an attractive standard. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh affirm that the new world order is being built, one characterized by the unification of the planet into one commonwealth; and by the reunification, we may say, of the yin and yang principles as equal co-partners in the world of existence, united in the principle of the Tao, the life-giving power.

This time in world history appears to be a watershed era, marked by radical shifts in viewpoints. The world is being inexorably transformed into a global society in which many different cultures and peoples are coming together; often for the first time. Little wonder then that the first year of the new millennium has been termed as the year of "Dialogue among Civilizations" by the United Nations. There is a recognition that bridges need to be built between different traditions and that each holds an aspect of truth. Bahá'í revelation is little researched but it is vital to go into depth in such research to get a fuller appreciation of Bahá'í teachings. Likewise, the Chinese contributions to an alternative psychological viewpoint and scientific tradition have been overlooked by Eurocentric scientific views. Once the value of dialogue is widely accepted, it is likely that different psychological and scientific traditions will be able to learn and benefit from each other. No civilization is distinct or self-contained and connections are remarkably plenteous if one looks for them. The Chinese civilization has had its ups and downs, its highs and lows, its yin and yang phases; yet its ancient precepts remain embedded in the psyche

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<sup>83</sup> J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p 149.



of its people and remain relevant for discussion today. While there is no Bahá'í civilization as yet, Bahá'ís themselves believe there will be one in the future and feel that dialogue regarding such a civilization is meaningful. Even at this initial point in time, similarities can be discerned as we take our first steps towards the Chinese-Bahá'í dialogue on the origin of matter, the nature of history, male-female relationships, and health and healing.

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