

# RESEARCH ON THE SINGLE IDEA (YIN-YANG) IN THE HUANGDI NEIJING COMPILATION

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A translation of the core texts of the Huangdi Neijing 黄帝内经 *The Yellow Emperor's Book of Medicine* was made with commentary, based upon Li Zhongzi's *Neijing Zhiyao* 內經知要 *The Cornerstone of the Neijing* (1642), This seminal work from the Ming Dynasty illustrates an organic logic, rich and imaginative, yet no less vigorous or analytic than that of Western science

## Origins of Five Element Acupuncture

帝曰：人生有形，不離陰陽，天地合氣，別為九野，分為四時，月有大小，日有短長，萬物並至，不可勝量，虛實呿吟，敢問其方。

The Yellow Emperor asks:

The life of the body cannot be divorced from Yin and Yang.

As the skies and earth join up their qi-energies

They break apart into the nine territories of the world, and divide into the four seasons;

The months ebb and flow, the days shorter and longer and all myriad creatures come into being, we cannot count them all.

Yawning and emptying out, filling up, starting to stutter and hum...

Dare I ask, is there any plan to them at all?

岐伯曰：木得金而伐，火得水而滅，土得木而達，金得火而缺，水得土而絕，萬物盡然，不可勝竭。

Qibo replies:

Wood finds metal and is felled, fire meets water and is put out.

Earth finds wood and starts to grow, metal contacts fire and starts to fall apart, water reaches earth and is stopped:

All the myriad creatures work totally in such a manner,

You can do nothing better than trust to them entirely.

Zhang Jiebin comments: *"In applying Yin and Yang to Heaven and earth, the wuxing ('five elements') are exhaustive. In all the myriad things, there are those lesser and those greater, but none escape the workings of 'the five'. So therefore by understanding the way the wuxing control each other, the art of needling can be fixed upon and also understood."*

*The Precious Life-force in the Whole Body (from Suwen 25)*

## The Single Idea

We cannot know properly the natural medicine of the Neijing without first understanding the Confucian age in which it was born. The ancient world of the Zhou dynasty, leading into the Warring States (c.472-221 BCE) formed the background to its compilation and was decidedly aristocratic. But by the time of the Han reunification (221 BCE), Heaven (Yang) had found its partner in Earth (Yin). Thus a more flexible, people-centered philosophy arose; which eventually led to an understanding that there were two main 'metaphysical' agents in the world, 'Yin' and 'Yang', (along with the *wuxing* or 'five elements') the true arbiters of all things, including our medical destiny. Yin and Yang, along with the *wuxing* illustrate, the 'single idea' in action.

LI ZHONGZI'S SELECTION OF TEXTS FROM THE HUANG DI NEI JING, THE ANCIENT AND DEFINITIVE SET OF BOOKS ON CHINESE MEDICINE, REMAINS CENTRAL TO ALL TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO MEDICINE IN CHINA. I HAVE ADAPTED SLIGHTLY LI ZHONGZI'S SELECTION TO INCLUDE ADDITIONAL TEXTS FROM THE WORK ON TOPICS SUCH AS THE SPIRIT IN TREATMENT, A RESONANCE WITH NATURE, THE ART OF NEEDLING, AND FIVE ELEMENT BODY AND PERSONALITY TYPES, THUS ENSURING THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR IDEAS TO STUDENTS AND PRACTITIONERS OF ACUPUNCTURE AND CHINESE MEDICINE ALIKE IN THE PRESENT DAY.

## A Concrete Logic?

Yin and Yang 陰陽 together describe a concrete truth, not a one-to-one correspondence with the world but a gentle meshing together of finger and object in the sense of something 'workable' in the fist-hittable, 'objective' world. In the first chapter of the Neijing *The Natural Behaviour of Those of Ancient Times -Suwen* 1 individuals are described who use their full range of skills and sensitivities - the *zhenren* 真人, or 'truly human', the Confucian or Taoist ideal.

*...and then there were the adepts, their lofty virtue reached its fulfillment in their methods. They lived in peace with Yin and Yang, and were in harmony with the four seasons; they left the common world, away from all custom, building up a purity to fashion their thinking; they wandered 'twixt the skies and earth, they looked and listened at all points of the compass - finally this promoted their destiny and they became strong. This returned them to being as real people of substance (zhenren 真人):*

This passage beautifully expresses four things: 1 **an intimate involvement with Yin and Yang**; 2 **a removal from the 'common world'**; 3 **an ability to store or 'build up' purity which led to clear thinking**; 4 lastly, **after a period of 'wandering' - a return to the world of people.**

Only through aping the bendability of the *yinyang* can we see the transitoriness of thought and reach the stillpoint beyond. An understanding of how Yin and Yang work allows an intuitive grasp of each and every situation. We tap into our self-nature *xing* 性, or inborn wisdom. The reasoning of the school of Yin and Yang forms the rationalist theory for the Neijing. This flexible logic, founded upon a bedrock of 'the equality of all things' (*qiwu* 齊物 the term is Zhuangzi's) is indigenous to the Chinese; it keeps us, better than anything, in touch with the world.

## Yin and Yang describe a Natural Philosophy of Mind

Is this shifting function of identity and difference (Yin and Yang) a true analogue of the way the human mind (or brain) works? Perhaps it represents the on/off firing of the neurons, or nerve-cells in the brain and their changing electrical potential, which we interpretate as Yin and Yang. The American sinologist and teacher H. G. Creel, makes the point:

*"...literary Chinese..is not 'writing' in the sense that written English is 'writing'. That is, it is not a recording of speech. It consists, instead, of a series of suggestive idea-centers (characters) which vary in their content and in their relation to each other, depending upon the total context, as constantly and as unpredictably as light on rippling water...consequently the reading of literary Chinese is a creative, not a passive, task.*

(Literary Chinese by the Inductive Method, II, Creel, Chang, and Rudolph University of Chicago 1939)

## The Doctrine of the Needle (Suwen 25)

...眾脈不見，眾凶弗聞，外肉相得，無以形先，可玩往來，乃施於人。人有虛實，五虛勿近，五實勿遠，至其當發，間不容釐。手動若務，鍼耀而勻，靜意視義，觀適之變，是謂冥冥，莫知其形，見其烏烏，見其稷稷，從見其飛，不知其誰，伏如橫弩，起如發機

When there is no beat seen, when there is no violence heard -

When flesh and insides hold together, nothing takes precedence over form, You can plumb the true depths of profundity, you can benefit the people.

Some have weakness, some have fullness -

If there is great weakness, you cannot go in too slow...

If there is great fullness, you cannot pull away too fast...

As it arrives, you release it in the twinkling of an eye.

Your hand action should be smooth,

The work of the needle positively sparkling...

Your spirit calm, the mind at ease -

You see it, and the transformation happens.

There are the minutest of changes, but they are difficult to describe.

You see it like a dark flock of crows...seen falling through the sky!

You follow and watch their flight but cannot think how they do it.

Just as when picking up a cross-bow you stand by to slip the catch.

## On the Pulse

夫平心脈來，累累如連珠，如循琅玕。

AT THE ARRIVAL OF THE HEALTHY PULSE of the heart,

The beats are continuous, one following another –

Like pearls strung on a string,

Like a necklace made of smooth reddish-jade stones.

病心脈來，喘喘連屬，其中微曲。

死心脈來，前曲後居，如操帶鉤。

The arrival of the sick pulse of the heart is tortuous, each beat joined to the other but slightly kinked in.

The arrival of the fatal pulse of the heart is kinked in front while held back behind,

As if caught by a belt-buckle.

Li Zhongzi comments: *"'smooth, reddish-jade' means full to the brim, smooth and glistening; as if slightly fastened with a buckle, with stomach qi as its root. 'Slightly kinked in' means a rapid, fast beat; the kink more, the stomach energy less. 'Caught by a belt buckle' means lightly pressed on, it grows hard and larger; it feels penned in and solid, as if a buckle were restraining a belt. This means it is wholly out of good order."*

This extract from Suwen 18 shows how the *yinyang* works: to be healthy, natural phenomena need to be soft, but not too soft; hard, but not too hard. This is the Confucian doctrine of the 'Mean' (zhong 中).