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Health and Wholeness: A Chinese Cultural Perspective

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Introduction

The biblical view of a person as a unity with aspects we call body, mind and spirit is similar to the ancient Chinese understanding of a person as a complex of energy systems—physical, mental and spiritual. Modern physics confirms what the Chinese knew thousands of years ago, namely, that everything in the universe is energy, which we sense and observe in various forms. Total health is understood to involve all aspects of a person—physical, mental, psychological and spiritual.

It should be emphasized that the biblical/Hebrew understanding of persons is Eastern in style, not Western. Because of the influence of pagan Greek philosophical thought on Western culture, education and Christianity, we have tended to distort biblical teaching into a rationalistic form which we have labelled “Christian”, but which is, in fact, foreign to the biblical/Hebrew way of thinking. Thus biblical thought has much more in common with the traditional Chinese way of thinking, for example, than it does with the traditional Western way of thinking. The so-called new physics requires a way of thinking which is quite at home in the world of the Bible— and with ancient Chinese thought.

One of the earliest systems of holistic medicine was practiced by the ancient Chinese more than 5,000 years ago. Traditional Chinese medicine did not distinguish between mind and body but viewed physical and mental symptoms as manifestations of a unitary underlying energy imbalance that affected the entire organism. Thousands of years ago, Chinese physicians recognized the critical importance of environmental influences,

diet and exercise, and preventive medicine. An ancient aphorism states: "The superior physician cures before the illness is manifested. The inferior physician can only treat the illness he was unable to prevent."

The Five Levels of the Ancient Chinese Healing Arts

The ancient Chinese distinguished five levels of the healing arts. The lowest was practiced by the veterinarian, or animal doctor. Next came the acupuncturist and herbalist who treated minor symptomatic problems. The third level was the surgeon who treated more serious, life-threatening injuries. Second highest was the nutritionist who taught people what to eat; his was the science of longevity and preventive medicine. But, highest of all was the philosopher-sage who taught the "laws of the universe". He was the only practitioner who could effect a genuine cure, for he went directly to the heart of the problem: the patient's inability to live harmoniously with nature.

In the Western world, it is generally accepted that one can practice medicine without an underlying philosophy or religion; even an atheist can be an accomplished surgeon. But in the medical world of traditional China, this is inconceivable. Without proper knowledge of cosmic relationships and intense study of the weather, seasons, stars and planets, medical treatment is impossible. Anything that affects the planets, seasons and climates is thought also to affect the organs, tissues, and emotions of people. Western scientists are now only beginning to appreciate the powerful influence of climate on disease. For example, it is now known that cases of coronary occlusion occur more often on cold, cloudy days than on warm, sunny days. Chinese observers described this phenomenon nearly 5,000 years ago.

Traditional Chinese health care practitioners considered diet to be one of the most important factors in health and disease. Foods were evaluated in terms of their relative Yin and Yang energy. Certain types of grains and meats were thought to be either harmful or beneficial, depending on the energetic status of a given individual. The flavor, color, and shape of foods were also considered to be extremely important. It is difficult to determine if these complex correspondences have therapeutic validity or are merely superstitious customs handed down across generations. Nevertheless, the underlying

importance of these general principles remains valid. The individual cannot be isolated from the environment in which he or she lives and the food that he or she eats.

The Law of the Tao-Chi

The traditional Chinese concepts of health and disease are intimately tied to the philosophical constructs of classical Chinese thought. The human person is a reflection of the universe, a microcosm in the macrocosm, and both are subject to the same universal, divine law—the Law of the Tao. To live according to the Tao is to follow the “order of nature” and to live in harmony with the “ultimate principle”. If one does not live according to the Tao, the resulting disharmony may be manifested as physical or psychological disease. Therapy must then be directed toward the re-establishment of balance and harmony if it is to have long-term effectiveness.

The primary reality in Taoist thinking is the vital energy of the universe or life energy (Chi). Chi is the environment in which we live. All that exists is a manifestation of that energy. While Chi is one, it polarizes in its movement as Yin and Yang and further evolves in five phases—Fire, Earth, Metal, Water, and Wood. The names of these five phases are not intended to be taken literally, but rather are to be regarded as symbolic of certain qualities of energy.

The five phases or elements are in complex relationships with each other and each of them has a sub-set of related body organs, colors, emotions, and other correspondences. Thus it is necessary for the practitioner to keep in mind a multiple complex of factors when dealing with a client. It should be pointed out, however, that traditional Chinese medicine has been practiced with considerable success for several thousand years in accordance with these understandings.

One of the most troublesome aspects of Taoist thought for Christians is the concept of Chi—universal energy. Yet Christians have always said God is both transcendent and immanent, which is to say that God is both “totally other” and is all around us and within us. Perhaps Christians have relegated the immanence of God to the category of an abstract concept instead of regarding it as a living reality, which we can experience in specific and varied ways.

If we take seriously the biblical witness to the power of God, we can appreciate Martin Luther's words:

It is God who creates, effects and preserves all things through his almighty power and right hand, as our Creed confesses. . . . If he is to create or preserve it, however, he must be present and must make and preserve his creation both in its innermost and outermost aspects.

Therefore, indeed, he himself must be present in every single creature in its innermost and outermost being, on all sides, through and through, below and above, before and behind, so that nothing can be more truly present and within all creatures than God himself with his power.¹

Taoism—Yin and Yang

The terms Yin and Yang in Taoism denote the twin polarities that were thought to regulate both man and the universe (see Table 1). Although Taoist philosophy describes Yin as "negative" and "female" and Yang as "positive" and "male", one should not consider this to be chauvinistic, as the terms "negative" and "positive" are used in the same sense that modern physics describes an electron as "negative" and a proton as "positive". A proton although positive is not superior to an electron! In the same manner, Yin and Yang refer to the opposing polarities, forces, or tendencies contained in all living entities.

Table 1

From: Felix Mann, M.B., *Acupuncture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1973) p. 60

	YIN	YANG
In the Natural world:	Negative	Positive
	Female	Male
	Even	Odd
	Plain	Splendorous
	Night	Day
	Cloudy day	Clear day
	Autumn/Winter	Spring/Summer

	YIN	YANG
	West/North	East/South
	Lower	Upper
	Interior	Exterior
	Cold	Hot
	Water	Fire
	Dark	Light
	Moon	Sun
In the body:	Interior of body	Surfaces of body
	Chest/abdomen	Spine/back
	Feminine	Masculine
	Cloudy or dirty body fluid	Clear or clean body fluid
	Blood	Energy (Chi)
	Nourishing Chi	Protecting Chi
In disease:	Chronic/non-active	Acute/virulent
	Weak/decaying	Powerful/flourishing
	Patient feels cold	Patient feels hot
	Patient cold to touch	Patient hot to touch
	Below normal temperature	high temperature
	Moist	Dry
	Retiring	Advancing
	Lingering	Hasty

The twelve basic organs and meridians are similarly divided into the Yang hollow (Fu) organs, which “transform but do not retain” and the Yin solid (Zang) organs, which “store but do not transmit” (see Table 2).

Table 2

From: Felix Mann, M.B., *Acupuncture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1973) p. 61

YIN	YANG
Liver	Gall bladder
Heart	Small intestine
Spleen (Pancreas)	Stomach
Lung	Large intestine
Kidney	Bladder
Pericardium	Triple warmer

Yin and Yang exist only in relation to each other, for, as the writings of the ancient Chinese state: "Within each Yang there exists Yin, and within each Yin must be Yang." Nothing is pure Yin or pure Yang; there is always some Yin and some Yang in every living object. Thus, for example, no one is completely male or female; rather, masculinity and femininity are both present in each individual in varying degree.

Yin and Yang forces ebb and flow, and this undulatory nature affects not only individual health and character but all events in the universe. Their pulsation is found in the contraction and dilation of the heart (systole and diastole) and in the inhalation and expiration of the lungs.

Many sinologists have noted Yin and Yang relationships in the parasympathetic and sympathetic divisions of the autonomic nervous system. Overactivity of the sympathetic nervous system produces what the Chinese call "excess Yang" ailments, whereas overactivity of the parasympathetic nervous system produces "excess Yin" ailments. Yin and Yang may also be reflected by the manner in which blood sugar is regulated by insulin and glycogen and by the way in which central nervous system activation and sleep are regulated by norepinephrine and serotonin.

The goal of Chinese medicine is to maintain or restore balance between Yin and Yang, thus insuring proper health.

Taoism—The Five Elements

The Chinese divided the world into five elements and everything on the earth was considered to belong, by its nature, to one or several of these five categories. These will recall to mind the four elements which were a familiar part of Western understanding up to recent times. These were: Earth, Water, Air, Fire; nor is it difficult to see (at least for anyone acquainted with this type of thought) that everything in the world belongs of its essence to one or several of these categories. For example, a brick belongs to the element Earth; a glass of wine to the elements Earth (glass) and Water (wine); a barrage balloon to the elements Earth (the balloon) and Air (helium), a coal fire to Earth (coal), Air (carbon dioxide and other gases) and Fire.

The above four elements are common to both the European and the Chinese systems (Air = Metal). The fifth element designated "Wood", is only known to the Chinese and certain other civilizations whose roots extend to prehistoric times.

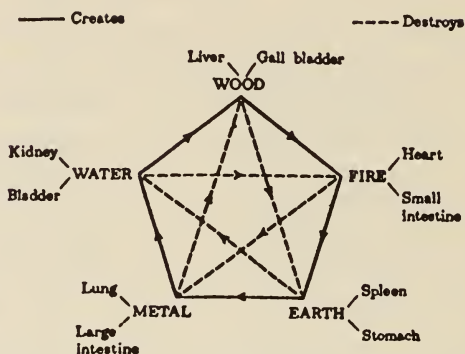
As mentioned, the five elements are:

Wood
Fire
Earth
Metal (Air in the Western tradition)
Water

The macrocosm, of which the human constitutes the microcosm, is considered the resultant of the interplay of these five primeval forces, which are linked in an unvarying pattern, one to another, in the manner illustrated in the chart (Figure 1).

Figure 1

From: Felix Mann, M.B., *Acupuncture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1973) p. 77



The outer lines represent the creative and the inner ones the destructive forces:

Wood will burn to create a Fire, which, when it has finished burning, leaves behind the ashes, Earth; from which may be mined the Metals; which, if heated, become molten like Water; which is necessary for the growth of plants and Wood. This is the creative cycle.

Wood destroys Earth, i.e., plants can crack rocks and break up the soil. Earth destroys Water, i.e., a jug with its earthenware sides prevents Water from following its natural law of spreading out. Water destroys Fire, i.e., Water, poured over a Fire, will extinguish it. Fire destroys Metal, i.e., by melting. Metal destroys Wood, i.e., by cutting.

In medicine the law of the five elements is applied as follows:

	YIN	YANG
Wood: equivalency	the Liver	and Gall bladder
Fire: equivalency	the Heart	and Small Intestine
Earth: equivalency	the Spleen	and Stomach

YIN

Metal: equivalent to the Lung
 Water: equivalent to the Kidney
 Fire: equivalent to the Pericardium

YANG

and large intestine
 and Bladder
 and Triple Warmer

From: Felix Mann, M.B., *Acupuncture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1973) p. 61

It should be understood that the Chinese when they used the terms "Wood", "Fire", etc., did not use the words in the actual restrictive sense of the physical Wood, Fire, etc., but rather as implying an archetypal idea in the sense in which it is used by the psychologist Jung, who studied Chinese philosophy profoundly. For example, the idea of the genus house is opposed to the idea of an actual house. Before it is possible to build a house it is necessary to have conceived the idea of "house", whether this be a bungalow, a skyscraper, a modern glass and concrete affair, or an imitation Tudor perpetration. The general generic idea of "house" is primary and covers a vast number of possibilities; an actual individual physical house made of bricks, etc., is only secondary to the general idea comprising all houses.

Thus what I have expressed above as Metal destroys Wood, i.e., Wood may be cut by a metallic saw; it is really a material vulgarisation of what is essentially an idea, an idea which may manifest itself in various physical guises such as Wood, or the liver.

In the actual practice of Chinese acupuncture this theory of the five elements dictates that when the liver (Wood) is tonified, the heart (Fire) will automatically be also tonified, while the spleen (Earth) is sedated; or, if the kidney (Water) is sedated, the liver (Wood) will also automatically be sedated, while the heart (Fire) will be tonified.²

The effect is similar with the related Yang organs, e.g., tonification of the gall bladder will produce tonification of the small intestine and sedation of the stomach.

This law may seem to Western minds like the fanciful application of a philosophical law. Nevertheless, it operates whether one wishes it or not, provided the conditions of its working are complied with. For example, if the liver and heart are underactive and the spleen is overactive, tonification of only the liver

will produce equilibrium between all three. If the heart were overactive or the spleen underactive the conditions for the operation of the law would not be met and there would be no result except for tonification of the liver.

Certain of these relationships are obvious in the practice of ordinary medicine, i.e., tonification of the kidney (Water) will produce by its increased excretion of water and solids a tonification (decongestion) of the liver (Wood) and also a sedation of the heart (Fire) which no longer has to force too much fluid through the body. A fuller explanation, however, will require much more research from the side of ordinary science.

The interplay of the creative and destructive forces in the five elements is, to the Chinese, another aspect of that delicate balance of all life in the polarity of Yin and Yang, which has been mentioned earlier. Only when this balance is upset and an organ cannot correctly react to a stimulus will disease result.

If, for example, the heart were weak and the blood could not flow, it would be like a traffic jam and would result in the patient becoming seriously ill. To tonify the heart would mean to increase its pumping action and therefore the circulation of the blood. This leads to more vigorous pumping of the heart so that the muscular wall of the heart obtains more oxygen. Breathing then becomes deeper and more rapid. Greater activity of the heart causes the release of more metabolites which (since these are excreted) increases the action of the kidneys. Since the cardiac muscles need more glycogen to fuel their energy, the liver too must be activated. In this way all the actions of the body are interrelated.

In physics, chemistry, mechanics, and all the sciences concerned with the non-living the Western mind is accustomed to express such interactions in terms of exact laws. We accept, for example, unquestioningly the second law of thermodynamics, that every action has an opposite and equal reaction; or the law that the momentum of an object is proportional to its mass and the square of its velocity. But in the biological sciences, among which is that of medicine, exact laws are, to the Western mind, virtually non-existent. The Chinese, however, aimed at introducing into biology the same precision, at least in a qualitative if not a quantitative manner, as we have in mechanics. The paragraph above shows how the tonification of the heart cannot be considered as an act in itself, unrelated to

the many accompanying readjustments it entails. In the West these are seen as physiological events; the Chinese expressed them in laws of almost mathematical precision.

In certain abnormal conditions the balance of the five elements is not maintained. Normally the tonification of the liver sedates the spleen; but sometimes the reverse can happen and the tonification of the spleen will sedate the liver. This process is called "mutual aid" and "mutual antagonist".

If there is a surplus of Chi, then control that which is already winning and antagonise that which is not winning; if there is a deficiency of Chi, then antagonise and regulate that which is not winning, and bring out and antagonise that which is winning.

(Ancient well-known saying)

This shows how an excess or deficiency of the five elements can play havoc with the laws which govern normal conditions. For example, a surplus of water Chi may destroy fire Chi (that which is winning) but may also insult earth (the "not winning"). If water Chi is deficient then earth aids it (the "not winning") and fire insults it (the "winning").

Conclusion: Acupuncture as an Example

The ancient Chinese discovered that certain loci on the skin, when pressed, punctured, or burned, could be used to alleviate pain, affect the course of certain ailments, and influence the functioning of internal organs. Of particular importance was the fact that widely separated loci affected the functioning of the same organ. These loci were connected and given the name "Chin" or "Meridian".

Originally, twelve double meridians were described with each pair placed symmetrically on either side of the body. Each meridian corresponded to one of twelve internal organs conceptualized by traditional Chinese medicine. In addition to these twelve paired meridians, two important nonpaired "control" meridians were postulated: the "Governing Vessel", which follows the spine and runs along the midline on the dorsal surface of the body, and the "Conception Vessel", which runs along the midline on the ventral surface of the body. These two plus six less important lines were called the eight "special" meridians. Later, "extra" meridians and "muscle" meridians were added, but in practice, the most commonly used acupuncture loci lie

on the twelve main meridians and the two control meridians. The Chinese divided the twelve meridians into six Yin-Yang pairs representing the twelve traditional internal bodily functions (see Table 3). Two of these meridians are obscure to Western medicine: the "circulation-sex" (also called the "heart constrictor" or "pericardium") meridian problem relates to the endocrine system, while the "tri-heater" (also called the "triple warmer") meridian relates to the "heat" of respiration, digestion, and reproduction.

Table 3

From: Felix Mann, M.B., *Acupuncture* (Vintage Books: New York, 1973) p. 79

The Acupuncture Meridians

YIN	YANG
Lung	Large Intestine
Spleen	Stomach
Heart	Small Intestine
Kidney	Bladder
Liver	Gall Bladder
Circulation-Sex	Tri-Heater

Unlike Western medicine, the ancient Chinese healing arts were not based on a knowledge of human anatomy. The Chinese worshipped their ancestors, so gross dissection of a cadaver was unthinkable. Instead, the Chinese system of medicine was based on an energetic concept of the body rather than a material one. In a sense, the early Chinese philosophers anticipated Einstein's theory of relativity, for they recognized that matter and energy were just two different manifestations of the same thing. Rather than focusing on the material aspects of the body (muscles, nerves, organs, bones, etc.), they concentrated on the vital life energy that creates and animates the physical body. This life energy, called Chi (best translated as "breath"), is conceptually similar to the "orgone energy" described by

Reich or *prana* in the Hindu theosophical tradition. Thus, all things that respire have Chi, including invertebrates and plants.

According to the classical Chinese theory, Chi circulates through the body along the acupuncture meridians. Chi controls the blood, nerves, and all organs and must flow freely for good health to be maintained. When this energy flow becomes blocked or impaired—because of trauma, poor diet, excessive emotions, cold, stress, or any number of other factors—the individual becomes susceptible to illness. Consistent with this notion, pain is nothing more than an excess accumulation of energy that occurs when the flow of Chi becomes blocked. Likewise, numbness or paralysis develops in areas of the body with insufficient Chi flow. By selectively stimulating the acupuncture points that lie along the meridians, the ancient Chinese believed that the flow of Chi in specific organ systems could be rebalanced, thus alleviating pain and strengthening the body's ability to combat disease. In addition to acupuncture, the Chinese utilized a variety of herbs, which were taken as broths, teas, or applied directly to the skin. Western medicine has not yet recognized the value of herbal therapy, but I believe that someday herbs will become an even more valuable therapeutic tool than acupuncture.

Before treating a patient, the traditional practitioner first attempts to diagnose the nature of the imbalance of energy, utilizing a variety of diagnostic techniques. These techniques include a careful inspection of the general appearance of the patient, skin coloration, texture of the hair, color of the tongue's coating, and a general examination of the mouth, nose, eyes, and teeth. The rate and clarity of breathing, the patient's tone of voice and manner of speaking, and the determination of any foul or characteristic odors also provide important diagnostic information. The balance of the meridians is assessed by careful examination of the radial pulses. By palpation of these pulses, the traditional practitioner is reportedly able to discern which of the meridians is malfunctioning and whether this disturbance is due to increased or decreased Chi flow. The link between philosophy and practice is demonstrated by the use of the Yin-Yang principle for arriving at a diagnosis. Yin is associated with cold, internal, and reduced functioning, while Yang is related to overheating, external, and hyperactive functioning.

After a diagnosis has been made, the acupuncturist prescribes a course of acupuncture therapy. According to traditional Taoist philosophy, stimulation of appropriate acupuncture loci results in a restoration of balanced energy flow, which then permits the affected organ (and eventually the entire organism) to return to its normal homeostatic state. Acupuncture loci may be stimulated by insertion of fine, solid needles, by intense heat (moxibusion), or by massage (acupressure), depending on the problem being treated. Modern technology has made available a variety of new techniques, including electrical stimulation of the needles (electroacupuncture), ultrasound stimulation (sonopuncture), and even laser beam stimulation (lasopuncture).

“Tonification-sedation”, one of the fundamental principles of acupuncture therapy, is derived from the concept of Yin and Yang. In oversimplified terms, “tonification” techniques are utilized to replenish a deficiency of energy and “sedation” techniques are utilized to reduce an excess of energy. Either technique may be appropriate for restoring balance, depending upon the nature of a specific illness. For example, chronic fatigue in a thin, pale, asthenic individual may be related to a deficiency of Yang energy, and tonification would be appropriate. On the other hand, sleep difficulties in a heavy, red-faced, plethoric individual may be related to an excess of Yang energy, and sedation would be indicated.

This type of approach is representative of the holistic nature of acupuncture therapy. Rather than isolating and treating a specific medical symptom, the problem is seen as a single manifestation of the general condition of the individual. Acupuncture therapy involves the whole person, and the skilled acupuncturist treats the patient, not the disease. The rationale underlying the selection of other specific techniques and the loci used for treating a given illness involves a variety of rather complex theoretical relationships that are beyond the scope of my paper.

Notes

¹ *Luther's Works*, Vol. 37, pp. 57-58.

² Tonification is the infusion of energy into the body system and is usually obtained by the eating of appropriate foods.

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