

Chu Hsi's Ideas about *Yin* and *Yang*

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Among the many dualistic concepts in traditional Chinese thought, the *yin* and *yang* are perhaps the most important and the most fundamental. They are among the basic concepts that were used almost constantly in the discussions of traditional Chinese science and natural philosophy. This paper studies the ideas about the *yin* and *yang* in the thought of one of the most important Chinese thinker, Chu Hsi (1130—1200).

Originally standing for the shadowy and the sunny sides of the hills, the *yin* and the *yang* have subsequently come to be associated with various dual and polar aspects in the world, by no means limited to the natural world. Almost any aspects and concepts that come in pairs are connected with the *yin* and *yang*. For Chu Hsi, this was natural because in his view everything of the world has its opposite (*tui*).

As the *yin-yang* is thus associated with all the dual aspects, it is difficult to provide a clear-cut delineation of the *yin* and *yang* characteristics. Chu Hsi himself notes that the simple division of every thing and every aspect of the world into either *yin* or *yang* would not work. Thus *yin* and *yang* have to be subdivided further: *yin* is divided into *yin* and *yang*; in *yang* there also are both *yin* and *yang*. In addition, Chu Hsi notes exceptions to the simple *yin-yang* divisions; for example, inconsistencies between different ways of associating *yin* and *yang* with other things.

Of course it is not altogether impossible to find some characteristics of the *yin* and the *yang* aspects. The *yang* stands for what are bright, strong, warm, expanding, and male, whereas the *yin* is for what are dark, weak, cold, contracting, and female. Manfred Porkert, for example, has performed quite an elaborate analysis and has come up with an analytical list of the *yin* and *yang* characteristics. In this paper, however, I do not attempt such an analysis, not just because it is available in Porkert, but also, and mainly, because such a listing would not enhance our understanding of the *yin* and *yang* very much. It may even be misleading if it gives the impression that the various shades and facets of the *yin* and *yang* can be analyzed in exact terms, and exhaustively at that: there are many examples of the *yin* and *yang* assignments that are impossible to predict by means of any such list of the *yin* and *yang* characteristics.

To Chu Hsi, however, assigning the *yin* and *yang* to various aspects were simple matters; nowhere in his discussions can one find evidence for any confusion or controversy concerning these assignments. Although for us many *yin* and *yang* assignments appear quite arbitrary and unpredictable, for those who constantly used the *yin-yang* framework these assignments were

simple and easy, almost as simple and easy as the assignment of gender to nouns is so to a native speaker. In Chu Hsi's own words, "the *li* of *yin-yang* and the five phases, if we constantly look at it before our eyes, will naturally become obvious [to us]."

The *yin* and the *yang* are attributes—qualities or aspects—of objects and phenomena: the *yin* and the *yang* are never themselves separate substances. Thus, even when *yin-ch'i* or *yang-ch'i* is mentioned this does not mean that there exist different kinds of *ch'i* that are called *yin-ch'i* or *yang-ch'i*: rather, the *yin-ch'i* and *yang-ch'i* refer to the *yin* and *yang* characteristics of the same *ch'i*.

The *yin* and *yang* follow each other and repeat constantly. This is congruent with the above point, for, if one considers the *yin* and *yang* to be attributes of objects and phenomena, often two opposite or complementary ones of a single object or phenomenon, it is easy to imagine the repetitive alternation of *yin* and *yang*. At the extreme of the *yin* emerges the *yang*: as the *yang* grows and reaches its extreme the *yin* reemerges: and this process repeats all the time.

Since the *yin* and *yang* thus keep following each other, there is no distinction of being earlier or later between the two: the *yin-yang* has no beginning or end. From this idea of *yin-yang* cyclical repetition Chu infers that *yang* has to contain the roots of *yin* and vice versa. There can be no *yang* completely devoid of *yin* characteristic: *yang* has at least a trace of *yin* characteristic mixed with it. And consequently, *yang* cannot appear suddenly from a complete absence. Of course the same thing is true of *yin*.

The *yin* and *yang* characteristics are connected among themselves: a *yin* characteristic responds to, interacts with, or accompanies, other *yin* characteristics, and the same thing is true for the *yang* characteristics. When an object or a phenomenon is seen to have a *yang* characteristic, it is generally supposed that its other characteristics are also the *yang* ones. It is also supposed that the *yang* characteristic can be counteracted and held in check by its opposite *yin* characteristic.

Such interrelationship between the different characteristics of *yin* or *yang* is what makes the *yin-yang* category a useful conceptual tool in understanding and explaining many phenomena. For such interrelationship makes it possible for one to transfer a relation that exists between a particular pair of the *yin-yang* characteristics to the other pairs of them, or to see connections within the various characteristics which otherwise would not be obvious. And it is by using such transfer of the relations and connections among the various characteristics that Chu Hsi was able to make reasoned explanations in their terms.

In many cases, however, the phenomena explained by Chu Hsi through the *yin-yang* relations are not natural phenomena, but rather metaphysical or ethical problems. A typical example is based on the association of "will(*chih*)" with *yang* and "intention(*i*)" with *yin*. Chu routinely takes the basic *yang* characteristics, clearness and hardness for example, and attributes them to "will", and the *yin* characteristics, turbidness and softness, to "intention."

In fact, the main use of the *yin-yang* scheme in Chu's discussions seems to be of this type, not the explanations of natural phenomena. Porkert's elaborate analysis of the *yin* and *yang* characteristics throws some light on this point through the distinction of the primary and secondary "correspondences":

We call those correspondences primary that result from a sensuous experience of values and consequently concern natural phenomena; and we qualify as secondary those that are evidently derived from the primary experiences by a speculative process.

The *yin* and *yang* associations that concern natural phenomena are usually the ones resulting rather directly from experiences, and these “primary correspondences” are thus readily accepted. The secondary correspondences, on the other hand, are derived from the primary experiences by speculative processes. They are based less directly on the experiences, and thus are accepted not so readily. Among the two, what attracts more attention and interest, therefore, are the secondary correspondences resulting from indirect and nontrivial derivations from the experiences; the primary correspondences drawn directly and trivially from the experiences do not command such interest. In this sense, it can be construed that the primary correspondences play the role of rationalizing the use of the *yin-yang* scheme by showing its close connection with experience, and that the natural phenomena serve really as illustrations of the *yin-yang* scheme.