



About Yin-Yang

Mircea A. Tamas

“To fix the principles of the tradition, Fu Xi made use of linear symbols that were both simple and at the same time as synthetic as possible, that is, the continuous line and the broken line, respectively signs of *yang* and *yin*, the two principles, active and passive, which, proceeding from a sort of polarization of the supreme metaphysical Unity, give birth to the whole of universal manifestation. From the combinations of these two signs, in all their possible arrangements, are formed the eight *gua* or «trigrams,» which have always remained the fundamental symbols of the Far-Eastern tradition” (Guénon, **Taoïsme**, p. 104).

The Far-Eastern tradition specifies that the world exists due to the indefinite combinations of *yang* and *yin*, each being having in its composition a *yin* component and a *yang* one (the proportions are different for each being, in conformity with the law of uniqueness).¹ In the Hindu tradition, Prakriti, the feminine principle, nurses three tendencies (*gunas*), which are the primordial qualities and attributes of all the beings, existing at different levels of manifestation, tendencies that are in a perfect equilibrium within the fundamental undifferentiated Prakriti. Any manifestation signifies breaking this equilibrium and each being coalesces its nature using an always different and unique combination of the three *gunas*. The three tendencies are: *sattwa*, light thundering upwards (*yang*); *rajas*, breezy expansion (*yang* and *yin*); *tamas*, obscurity falling downwards (*yin*). “Scholars of the highest class, when they hear about the Dao, earnestly carry it into practice. Scholars of the middle class, when they have heard about it, seem now to keep it and now to lose it. Scholars of the lowest class, when they have heard about it, laugh greatly at it. If it were not (thus) laughed at, it would not be fit to be the Dao” (Lao-zi, **Dao De Jing** XLI).

¹ Only the “veritable man”’s nature has *yang* and *yin* in a perfect equilibrium (Guénon, **La Grande Triade**, p. 84). Moreover, even if Fu Xi, as “Lord of the Earth,” used the square, “in himself he is Yin-Yang, being reintegrated in the state and nature of the «primordial man»” (**La Grande Triade**, p. 132). “The gift of Heaven is the nature received at birth” (**Zhuang-zi**, 6, A). Related to this we should mention that, in reality, the nature of each being determines the “astral influences” and not the other way around (**La Grande Triade**, pp. 117-8). “[Yan Hsiung] answered: ‘The astrologer foretells what the effects of the heavenly phenomena will be on man; the Sage foretells what the effect of man’s actions will be on the heavens.’ Or, as Tung Chung-shu puts it: ‘The actions of man, when he reaches the highest level of goodness or evil, will flow into the universal course of heaven and earth, and cause responsive reverberations in their manifestations’” (J. C. Cooper, **Chinese Alchemy**, The Aquarian Press, 1984, p. 87).

About Yin-Yang

Lao Zi's saying illustrates very well the three tendencies. We may add that Purusha, the masculine principle, nurses in a similar way three tendencies, which are the three lights that, with their presence and invisible activity, force the *gunas* to break the equilibrium.¹ The six tendencies can be found in the **Yi Jing**, in *gua* Pi (no. 12),



gua Pi

a hexagram symbolizing the divorce between Heaven and Earth, between Purusha and Prakriti, a favorable situation allowing the ten thousand beings or the universal manifestation to “become.” The manifestation cannot exist without duality, without separation. “Hence the sayings, «Shall we not follow and honour the right, and have nothing to do with the wrong? Shall we not follow and honour those who secure good government, and have nothing to do with those who produce disorder?» show a want of acquaintance with the principles of Heaven and Earth, and with the different qualities of things. It is like following and honouring Heaven and taking no account of Earth; it is like following and honouring the Yin and taking no account of the Yang. It is clear that such a course cannot be pursued. To try to consider these two inseparable correlatives as distinct entities proves a weak judgment; Heaven and Earth are One, Yin and Yang are One; and so are all the contraries” (**Zhuang-zi**, 17, 5/A).

The two poles separated, superior and inferior, determine the whole manifestation, that is, the universal Existence, and therefore, everything belonging to Existence is marked by duality, doubt,² fear, contingency, and is ephemeral³; therefore, everything is relative in manifestation, and there are controversies and contradictions; therefore, it is impossible to transpose the metaphysical truth in the inferior plane of manifestation without

¹ The ideogram for the three lights (as sun, moon, and stars) is (Wieger 312):



² The word “doubt” is etymologically related to “duality.”

³ “The changeable change” characterizes the manifestation, which means that history does not repeat itself, that “the eternal return” is a false label, that all Existence, being an indefinite change, is defined by relativity, perishability and equivocation, that, “depending on time and circumstances, the result of the same actions is not the same” (**Zhuang-zi**). “There is no end or beginning to the Dao. Things indeed change, die and are born, not reaching a perfect state which can be relied on. Now there is Non-Being, and now there is Being; they do not continue in one form. The years cannot be reproduced; time cannot be arrested. Decay and growth, fullness and emptiness, when they end, they begin again. It is thus that we describe the method of great righteousness, and discourse about the principle pervading all things. The life of things is like the hurrying and galloping of a horse. With every movement there is a change; with every moment there is an alteration. What should you be doing? What should you not be doing? You have only to be allowing this course of natural transformation to be going on” (**Zhuang-zi**, 17, 6/A).

About Yin-Yang

alteration and error, the only efficient way being silent transmission (“the man of Dao keeps silent,” Zhuang Zi stressed).¹ In comparison to silence, which is the divine way to reveal metaphysical knowledge, oral transmission seems like an inferior modality,² but it is still superior to “bookish” instruction, since written ideas are less rich in essence than those transmitted orally, which, in their turn, are less rich in essence than thoughts.

The **Yi Jing**’s commentaries affirmed: “The writing cannot exhaust the speech; the speech cannot exhaust the thought; yet, how the sage’s thoughts could be manifested? Confucius said: The sage establishes symbols to exhaust the thoughts; he institutes the hexagrams.” The symbols are the silence expressed beyond the words. “What is transmitted through words,” Zhu Xi said, “is superficial, while what is learned through symbols is profound. Only considering the continuous line as unity and the discontinuous line as duality can we encompass completely the modifications and the transformation, and it is obvious that those have no end and cannot be exhausted.”³

Traditional doctrines, even though dressed in various clothes, have a common speech, that of symbols, which represents the fundamental modality to translate metaphysical truth to the individual world, the science of symbols being at least as rigorous and precise as Mathematics. A symbol, in a traditional sense, is a physical or cosmic “support” that expresses, analogically, a superior truth, usually belonging to a metaphysic or spiritual order. To explain the reality of the symbols, we must remember that all “the ten thousand beings” draw their reality from the Principle (otherwise, there is just vacuity), each thing being an emblem of the Principle, a reflection, a print, or a signature of Dao in the universal manifestation; and therefore, we should not be surprised if, looking around us, we notice that all the world’s components could play the role of a symbol or of a “support,” since the whole world is nothing else than an “image” of the Principle, everything being in conformity with That One. The language of the symbols is the closest to “silent speech,” surpassing all the particular speeches.

¹ “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know. Block the openings; shut the doors” (**Lao-zi, Dao De Jing**, LVI); about blocking the openings see also chap. LII.

² We should mention Pratardana’s doctrine about the inner sacrifice *Agnihotra*, which allowed the melting of words in the meditative breathing: “So long as a man speaks, he cannot breathe [ritually], he offers all the while his prāna (breath) in his speech. And so long as a man breathes, he cannot speak; he offers all the while his speech in his breath. These two endless and immortal oblations he offers always, whether waking or sleeping” (**Kaushitaki Up.**, II, 5).

³ We find in the **Yi Jing**: “In the ancient times, strings with knots were used to transmit the rules; later, the sages replaced them with the writing.” The knots along a string represented a symbolic and “complicated” way to transmit knowledge; we employ the expression “complication” as Nicolaus Cusanus understood it, an equivalence for synthesis. With regard to the written instruction, we signal a frequent error of the modern world, which, ignoring the traditional mentality, wrongly believed that by dating the scriptures or a manuscript they could establish the very date of birth of a doctrine. In fact, oral transmission existed far before written. Hocart rightly said: “the first appearance of a custom in the texts is seldom, if ever, its first appearance in the world. It is often not recorded until it begins to decay” (A. M. Hocart, **Caste**, Methuen & Co, London, 1950, p. 22).

About Yin-Yang

One fundamental symbol of the Far-Eastern tradition is the figure of Yin-Yang.¹ From a cosmic point of view, the pure Being appears as double, as two poles, Heaven and Earth, and Yang, the luminous principle, is the active, masculine and celestial pole, while Ying, the obscure principle, is the passive, feminine and terrestrial pole.² However, we must not forget that, in fact, the two poles are One, therefore the obscure part hosts a luminous point and the luminous part an obscure point. The circular figure of Yin-Yang is symbolically similar to the Cosmic Egg of Greek Leda, Castor and Pollux representing the pair luminous-obscure, immortal-mortal, yin-yang, Pollux being *yang*, divine, that is, pure *sattwa*, essence, light, and Castor being *yin*, terrestrial, that is, pure *tamas*, substance, darkness.³

¹ The ideograms for *yang* and *ying* present the Three Worlds as three bricks and respectively the light and the darkness:



² Heaven is completely *yang*, and Earth is completely *yin*. Between Heaven and Earth, the whole manifestation and the “ten thousand beings” participate in the celestial and terrestrial natures at the same time; therefore, in manifestation, *yang* is never without *yin* and *yin* without *yang* (that is one of the reasons why the figure presents a white point in the dark half and a black point in the luminous one, but, also, it is suggested that duality is rooted in unity); we could say that every being is somehow “androgynous,” and every man, for example, has a masculine and a feminine component that influence his character (At the end of time, there is a flagrant disaccord between the result of the two components and the individual as a psycho-physical “organism.” This disharmony and disorder generate tragedies that the modern science tries to solve in an artificial and materialistic way). “There is no assassin greater than the Yin and Yang, from whom nothing can escape of all between Heaven and Earth. But it is not the Yin and Yang that play the assassin; it is the mind and the appetites that cause them to do so” (**Zhuang-zi**, 23, 4/D). Matgioi indicated another significance for Yin-Yang: the circle is a spire of the vertical helix, representing a state of existence for the being, the helix symbolizing the integral being, as a geometric locus of all the states; on the plane of this particular state are projected the “anterior” (dark) states and the “posterior” (luminous) states, Yin-Yang appearing as a projection on the plane of a cylinder (or a double cone) of infinite length. Yin-Yang is thus “the circle of individual destiny,” “birth” and “death” being two points, which don’t belong to the horizontal circle, but to the vertical helix, obeying the Will of Heaven.

³ In Aristotelian language, Yang is pure activity and Yin pure potentiality. “When the state of Yin was perfect, all was passive and tranquil; when the state of Yang was perfect, all was active and productive. The fecund activity came forth from Heaven; the tranquil passivity issued from Earth. The two states communicating together, a harmony ensued and things were produced. Someone regulated and controlled this, but no one has seen his form. Decay and growth; fullness and emptiness; darkness and light; the changes of the sun and the transformations of the moon: these are brought about from day to day; but no one sees the process of production. Life has its origin from which it springs, and death has its place from which it returns. Beginning and ending go on in mutual contrariety without any determinable commencement, and no one knows how either comes to an end. If we disallow all this, who originates and presides over all these phenomena? The action (*yang*) and reaction (*yin*) of Heaven and Earth are the unique motor of this movement” (**Zhuang-zi**, 21, 4/D).