

THE I CHING, YIN-YANG, AND THE "FIVE FORCES"

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Modern scholarship (both Chinese and Western) has confirmed that the *I ching* (*Book of Change*) originated during the early Chou dynasty, i.e., about 1000 BCE. It is essentially a **textual oracle** -- a system that allows people to tap into the fundamental realities of life. One of the text's early commentaries (the *Shuo-kua*) states that the *I ching* was created by ancient sages: they observed the processes that operate in the world and discovered underlying principles, by which one can understand why certain activities lead to success and others lead to failure. Those principles were said to be unvarying, because they are inherent within the nature of things, but everything else in the world changes. According to this understanding, the *I ching* allows people to peer into the processes that operate in the changing world, and to discover how to bring their activities into alignment with those processes.

Chinese thinkers of the classical period and later ages developed the **philosophical implications** of the *I ching*, and built the system of oracles into a storehouse of human wisdom. At first, that development was very slow. Until around the fifth century BCE, the *I ching* generally remained the province of diviners -- people who worked in the service of rulers and noblemen, and used the oracle to answer their questions (as the diviners of the Shang dynasty had done with their "oracle bones"). During the Eastern Chou dynasty, anonymous commentaries to the *I ching* began to appear. Though in Han times they were all incorporated into the text as the *I ching's* "wings," historical research has revealed that the commentaries were the product not of one continuous tradition, but rather of different traditions:

1. The *Shuo-kua* and possibly the *Wen-yen* ("Wings" 7 and 8), both of which consist of narrow technical interpretations, can be called the product of a "technical school," possibly confined to the diviners at the Chou court. These materials date from no later than the 5th century BCE, and might be as early as the 7th century.

2. The *T'uan-chuan* and *Hsiao-hsiang-chuan* ("Wings" 1, 2, and 4) can be interpreted as the product of a "commentary school"; they date no later than the 5th century BCE.

3. The *Ta-chuan* ("Wing" 6) seems to derive from a "philosophical school" of the 6th-3rd centuries: it combines the moral idealism of Confucianism with the naturalistic idealism of Taoism.

4. Han dynasty interpreters added other materials, such as the *Tsa-kua*.

It is thus clear that **the text of the *I ching* that we possess today was not completed until the Han period, after nearly a thousand years of evolution.** It has been understood ever since (by Chinese and Westerners alike) as a profound system of universal wisdom. But we should bear in mind that **the "universal wisdom" often perceived in the *I ching* was actually the product of philosophers of Han and Sung times:** the earliest strata of the text -- the early Chou material -- was **not** a philosophical explanation of the world, but merely an oracle.

There was another school that became important in the attempt of Han thinkers to understand the *I ching*. That was **the School of Yin and Yang.**

Often, the concept of *yin* and *yang* is said to be fundamental to the Chinese view of the world. That is very much an exaggeration. At other times, the concept of *yin* and *yang* is said to be an element of Taoism. That is also very inaccurate. The concept of *yin* and *yang* actually evolved within **a distinct school of thought in ancient China.** No one knows any historical details about the school: we do not know the names of any ancient teachers of *yin* and *yang*, and we do not have any ancient texts setting forth the philosophy of *yin* and *yang*. It is conceivable that the idea of *yin* and *yang* developed among students of the *I ching*, but that is merely a conjecture.

The fundamental concept of *yin* and *yang* is really quite simple. The idea is that there are two basic aspects of reality within the world of nature and human activity. Originally, the term *yin* referred to the shady side of a natural landscape, and the term *yang* referred to the sunny side. At some point, someone decided to extend the meaning of those terms so that they became shorthand for everything in life that is comprised of natural counterparts. Such counterparts as wetness and dryness, passivity and activity, femininity and masculinity, can be called **"complementary opposites."** That is, they are things that are totally different, and yet naturally complete each other: neither could exist by itself, because each gives existence and meaning to the other. As the *Tao te ching* points out (chap. 2), "highness" is meaningless unless it stands in contrast to "lowness." Similarly, shadiness is meaningless except in contrast with sunniness, wetness is meaningless except in contrast to dryness, and femininity is meaningless except in contrast with masculinity. It is essential to understand that the nature of such forces in *yin-yang* thought is **not** an **antagonistic** relationship. It is **not** a "dualism," an assertion that the world is

comprised of forces that are intrinsically separate and hostile, like "truth and falsehood," or "good and evil." Such dualistic ideas did develop in ancient Iran ("Persia"), and were passed down to us in some streams of Western religious thought. But there is nothing comparable in Chinese thought. In ancient China, *yin* and *yang* were always understood as existing in **harmonious balance**.

The *yin-yang* school did not remain an isolated school for very long. At some point in ancient China, it blended with another school, a school which interpreted the world in terms of **five** distinct aspects of reality rather than two. Those aspects of reality were called the "**Five Forces**" (*wu hsing*). You will see that term translated differently, sometimes as "the Five Phases" (which is good) or as "the Five Elements" (which is misleading). *Hsing* means literally "to go," so ultimately the term *wu hsing* means something like the five "processes" or "operations." But it is often difficult to understand *wu hsing* with those verbal connotations, because the Five Forces were always identified by the very concrete terms FIRE, WATER, EARTH, METAL, and WOOD. Perhaps it is best to think of those concrete elements as metaphors: each of the Five Forces is a natural force that was identified with a common natural substance in order to convey its properties more clearly. For a while in ancient China, there was a school of thought that developed the concept of the Five Forces into a philosophical scheme for making sense of the natural world. That school has traditionally been associated with the name of a thinker named Tsou Yen, but his writings were lost in ancient times, and there is no way to form a reliable judgment of his thought. The school itself died out by the time the Ch'in dynasty had ransacked Chinese society, but its ideas endured, and became very influential during the Han period. Han thinkers developed a system of correspondences in which everything that exists was correlated to one of the five fundamental forces: there were five colors, five tastes, five musical notes, five directions, and so on. These ideas provided a system of categorization, through which everything in the universe could be shown to be related to everything else in an orderly and comprehensible manner. These ideas have often been associated with the name of the Han dynasty philosopher Tung Chung-shu (ca. 195-115 BCE). But recent research has revealed that while Tung did employ the categories of *yin* and *yang*, he probably had no interest in "Five Forces" theory. The complex system of correspondences that is usually remembered as the truest expression of Han thought actually developed in the 1st century BCE.