

ANCIENT CHINESE SECRET: Can the Chinese Theory of Five Elements Help Improve Your Life and Health?

In 1983 the Los Angeles Times published an article about "a nondescript hillside shrub" called *Astragalus membranaceus*. According to the article, traditional Chinese herbalists have used the shrub for centuries to treat "various forms of cancer." It doesn't attack tumors directly, the Chinese say, but "get[s] the body to fight" the disease. 1

This centuries-old information was published as news in 1983 because medical researchers at the University of Texas had essentially confirmed the Chinese claim, in preliminary tests at least. And since then, the researchers have published at least seven technical reports on the shrub, including one in the journal *Cancer* that confirmed a 90 percent success rate in restoring processes that give us natural immunity against cancer. 2 As one of the researchers said, "We have something that works, or at least seems to." 3

According to the article, however, there's a problem with the herb. One of the researchers put it this way: "We do not know why or how it works, and until we do we cannot develop this as a modern medicine. . . 4 So here we are, with cancer still a scourge, knowing about a Chinese herb "that works, or at least seems to," yet unable to use it because we don't know how it works. The Chinese know how the herb works from their perspective, at least. But they explain it in terms of yin and yang, and five elements, or phases, called Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water, which sounds like nonsense to us. We demand technical explanations, not metaphoric speculations, and insist on "very strict scientific procedures-" to prove that they're true. 5 The Chinese don't oblige us, of course, and because we reject their explanation, we reject their herb as well.

Perhaps we are being "scientific," but are we being wise? Let's look at the Chinese explanation and see what we're giving up.

A Focus on Harmony

Traditional Chinese philosophy describes a process for achieving harmony, or (in Chinese terms) *ho*. According to the philosophy, harmony represents a goal, or an ideal, not merely in human affairs, but in all of nature. Harmony is the traditional Chinese "good," disharmony is its "evil." 6

From our western point of view (judging from how we act, at least), harmony means doing away with differences, or eliminating opposition. Not so, the Chinese say. Harmony can't even exist without differences and opposition, for they are simply a part of life. What happens in harmony is that differences and opposition become arranged in such a way that they reconcile, or merge, into a single, integrated whole. Without differences, harmony wouldn't even be possible, for "there is no music in a single note, no decoration in a single item, no relish in a single taste." 7

Harmony from the Inside Out

If we wish to achieve this harmonious arranging for ourselves, we must understand, first of all, that harmony cannot be imposed, and, furthermore, that it has nothing to do with our circumstances. Harmony must develop of its own accord, and it can only grow from the inside out. 8

In warfare, for example, "the exemplary commander. . . stands as the self-organizing center, where the chaos of battle, far from interfering with order, feeds into and stimulates it." Even in chaos, then, order can exist if it exists within the heart. And strength doesn't come from intellect, skill, firepower, and so on, but from that harmony of the heart: "The consummate military commander . . . must [first] be an exemplary person, and must ply his military skills from a foundation of superior character." 9

In human affairs, you see, harmony and character are the same, and "what fills one inside will [ultimately] be given formal expression outside." 10

Harmony as Art and Process

Defined in this fashion, harmony can't be measured, but must instead be discerned. And the arranging that produces harmony isn't guided by reason, but by insight and appreciation: "As Leonardo arranged those specific bits of paint to constitute the one and only Mona Lisa, so one coordinates those particular details that constitute one's own self and context, and in so doing seeks a harmony that maximizes their creative possibilities." 11

Achieving harmony, then, is less a matter of science than of art. This doesn't mean Chinese philosophy has produced no scientific achievements, for it clearly has. 12 But its method is the method of art, with the natural world as its canvas, and harmony its constant theme.

The purpose of this art is to reveal to us—and therefore give us access to—a specific natural process. This process is universal, Chinese scholars say, meaning that it operates in all aspects of nature. It operates within human beings and animals, in other words, but also in more distant spheres—like forests, and rivers, and rocks, and thunderstorms, and systems of orbiting planets. The name of this universal process—this originator and sustainer of harmony that Chinese philosophy seeks to reveal—is communication.

Communication as the Process of Harmony

We see this focus on communication in the philosophy's basic vocabulary:

In contrast with the more static visual language of classical Greek thought . . . , classical Chinese tends to favor a dynamic aural vocabulary, where wisdom is closely linked with communication. . . . Much of the key philosophic vocabulary suggests. . . that the sage orchestrates communal harmony as a virtuoso in communicative action.

The terms yin and yang refer to communication. So do the metaphors Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. Harmony describes the outcome of communication, or its goal. In slightly different terms, "the operational principles of Chinese cosmology. . . are to be found in the interactions of things," 14 for "interacting" and "communicating" mean the very same thing. Both terms describe the universal process through which harmony comes to pass.

This emphasis on communication distinguishes Chinese thought from western thought. From our western perspective, for example, the heart is basically a pump that can be replaced, if necessary, by a mechanical pump. From the Chinese perspective, however, the heart is not merely a pump, but a pump that communicates, for only by communicating can it pump in harmony with the rest of the body. If you ask a Chinese scholar what's wrong with an artificial

heart (as I once did), he'll probably say (as the scholar said to me), "An artificial heart doesn't communicate." It lacks the ability, in other words, to harmonize with the whole.

So while western scientists study the body's parts, traditional Chinese scholars study its communicating. As a consequence, "Chinese medicine is primarily concerned with dynamics, with the flow of energy," for communicating takes place (and interacting occurs) only when energy flows.

Flowing energy reveals itself as movement, which the Chinese call Qi (pronounced chee). By observing movement, or Qi, Chinese scholars hope to discern the global patterns of natural events, and then to interact with those patterns in ways that will sustain the ones that are harmonious and "fine tune" the ones that are not. 15

Yin and Yang: The Elements of Balance

The point, then, is to describe these global patterns. This is the purpose of the terms yin and yang, which stand for the two basic phases of communication, or energy flow. We will call these phases (drawing parallels from our human experience) "speaking" and "listening," with speaking being yang and listening being yin.

As the "speaking phase," yang represents all those movements and qualities whose direction is outward-qualities of giving, expressing, releasing, provoking, demanding. As outward movement, yang is dynamic and energetic, capable of acting, capable of forming, capable of achieving work.

As the "listening phase," yin represents all those movements and qualities whose direction is inward--qualities of receiving, absorbing, restraining, responding, adapting.¹⁶ As inward movement, yin is quiet and still, capable of being acted upon, capable of being formed, capable of receiving work.

It's easy at this point to wrongly assume that yang (the actor) is superior to yin (the acted upon), but that is not the case. Consider, for example, the relationship between the sun, which is yang, and the earth, which is yin.

The sun may appear superior to the earth, yet its main product-sunlight, has no effect until it strikes something. And even when sunlight strikes something, its effect depends as much on the yin qualities of whatever it strikes as on the yang qualities of the sun. When sunlight strikes a plant, for example, it is the plant, not the sun, that "decides" to transform it into stored energy. If the same sunlight had struck something else, it would have had a different effect.

In Phoenix one hot, summer day, the sun so completely heated the upholstery of my rented car that I couldn't get in it to drive. Yet the heat I felt depended as much on the yin qualities of the upholstery as on the yang qualities of the sun: if the upholstery had been cloth rather than vinyl, the heat would have differed as well.

Properly speaking, yin and yang don't refer so much to separate things like sun and earth where one is always yang and the other always yin, but to opposite "operating modes" within a single system. As individual human beings, for example, we speak and we listen, we act and we receive feedback, and we negotiate with the world by switching back and forth from one mode to the other. When we view yin and yang as opposite operating modes within the same system, the fact that they're equal becomes even more obvious. Picture yourself driving at full yang down the highway with all your yin components shut off (steering system, brakes, eyesight, hearing, sense of touch, and so on), and you'll see what I mean.

The virtue of balancing yin and yang even figured in a recent news story. Somali gunmen shot down a military helicopter with U.S. forces on board. The problem wasn't that the helicopter crew lacked firepower, which is yang, but that they lacked military intelligence, which is yin. For lack of yin (and despite their excess of yang), they lost control of the situation, and their helicopter got shot down.

Within a single system, you see, yang expresses power, but yin applies control.¹⁷ And all natural systems—including the human body, absolutely need them both. In a tennis player, for example, the large muscles of the torso provide power (yang), while the small muscles of the arm provide control (yin). All operations of the body combine control and power in this same fashion, and thus show yin and yang. 18

Health exists when yin and yang balance each other, or carry equal weight. Symptoms appear when they don't, in which case the body's communicating becomes imbalanced, its patterns of internal movement lose their harmony, and its operations begin to break down. "A preponderance or deficiency of yin or yang" appears, and "the body is then transformed from its healthy state into a morbid one." 19

The Theory of Five Elements

The theory of five elements elaborates this theory of yin and yang.²⁰ It says, first of all, that the two phases, yin and yang, can be further broken into four phases. The four phases (using human communication as an example) are (1) Preparing, or deciding what to say; (2) Expressing, or saying it; (3) Absorbing, or receiving the response; and (4) Processing, or interpreting the response.

We see these four phases in the relationship between the sun and the earth:

Preparing. Energy is produced within the sun's interior.

Expressing. Sunlight is released to fly through space.

Absorbing. The sunlight strikes and penetrates a plant.

Processing. Chlorophyll within the plant transforms the sunlight into stored energy. And between a hunter and a buck:

Preparing. The hunter stalks the buck and draws his bow.

Expressing. The hunter releases the arrow to fly through the air.

Absorbing. The arrow strikes and penetrates the buck.

Processing. The buck reacts to the arrow and initiates responses that end either in its healing or in its death.

The Chinese give these four phases

metaphoric names.

Preparing is Wood, symbolizing the growth that makes expressing possible.

Expressing is Fire, symbolizing the energy and spontaneity of pure action.

Absorbing is Metal, symbolizing the ease with which metal absorbs the heating properties of the sun.

Processing is Water, symbolizing the flowing and circulating that carries natural processes to their end.

There is also, the Chinese say, a phase of transition, or Opening, that forms a necessary bridge between Fire and Metal, or

Expressing and Absorbing. We see this bridge most clearly in cases where it is missing:

Sunlight approaches a plant (Fire), but a child has covered the plant with a box, so no Absorbing (Metal) can take place. The Opening is lost, the transition blocked.

An arrow flies toward the buck (Fire), but the buck evades it, so no Absorbing (Metal) can take place. The Opening is lost, the transition blocked.

Words fly toward the listener (Fire), but the listener is too busy thinking up what he'll say next to hear, so no Absorbing (Metal)

takes place. The Opening is lost, the transition blocked.

Opening, then, is the fifth element of the Chinese five-element theory. It doesn't express properties of yin or yang by itself, but forms the bridge that allows yin and yang to merge.

The Chinese call this fifth element Earth, symbolizing that which stands at the core, or center'-the point where union occurs.

The Chinese five elements-Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water-arrange themselves in a dynamic cycle as shown in Figure 1 (following page). As this dynamic cycle repeats itself, its Qi, or movement, sustains the natural world.²¹

The Five Elements Applied to the Body

The five elements apply to the human body as follows.

Wood (Preparing) possesses "the potential for initiating any kind of goal-oriented or purposeful activity decisiveness, in a word." ²² Weakness in Wood "may reveal itself. . . through a diminished capacity for action and a lack of motivation, or, in quite the opposite way, in an outburst of uncontrolled, frenetic activity." ²³

Fire (Expressing) is "the seat of consciousness," ²⁴ "responsible for the active expression of the individual personality. . ." ²⁵ Fire "controls mental activities," ²⁶ acts as "the seat of the passions," ²⁷ and "rules the Shen" (or Spirit). ²⁸ In producing these properties, Fire "controls the life processes of the human body, coordinating the activities" of its organs. ²⁹

The Chinese liken Earth (Opening) to digestion, so that Earth "transforms and conveys the essence of food." ³⁰ More broadly, it conveys "all the external influences and activities that an individual is required to assimilate or 'digest.'" ³¹ In doing so, Earth acts as "the 'censor' of the total organism," determining what will and will not be admitted. ³²

The Chinese liken Metal (Absorbing) to processes of respiration, so that Metal "can be seen in a person who is fully absorbed in what he or she is doing; such a person usually breathes evenly and gently and performs his or her work with boldness and resolution." ³³ Through its association with breathing, Metal "governs the flow of Qi," ³⁴ which breath (in a manner somewhat akin to the Hebrew "breath of life") symbolically represents.

The Chinese liken Water (Processing) to our system of circulation, which drives and sustains all of the body's inward processes and operations. Thus weakness in Water "leads to disturbances in water metabolism, accompanied by inability to urinate, edema, and similar symptoms." ³⁵

When Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water interact harmoniously, the body performs as it should. When they interact disharmoniously (by becoming individually too strong or too weak), the body loses its unity and balance, and symptoms begin to appear. If cancer is one of the symptoms, disharmony, the Chinese say, is how it has come about.

Healing by Harmonizing Qi

So they feed the cancer patient the shrub called Astragalus, and claim it "get[s] the body to fight" the disease. ³⁶ It does this, the Dictionary of Chinese Medicines says, by "acting on" (nour-, ishing, we might say) the "channels" (paths of communication) of four of the five elements: Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. ³⁷ The missing element, you'll notice, is Wood.

Yet Wood, while not directly nourished by Astragalus, is greatly enhanced by it, since the four nourished elements act to support Wood, and this supporting, the Chinese say, helps produce the healing effect.

Wood, you'll remember, has to do with Preparing for action, with "initiating any kind of goal-oriented or purposeful activity." ³⁸ And weakness in Wood reveals itself "through a diminished capacity for action and a lack of motivation," or in "uncontrolled, frenetic activity." ³⁹ From the Chinese perspective, then, the herb Astragalus-by drawing strength into Wood-encourages "goal-oriented or purposeful activity," which has the effect of enlarging our capacity for action, increasing our motivation, and bringing activity and movement (which is Qi) under more balanced and harmonious control.

Since "pathogenic factors" can invade the body only "where Qi is deficient," ⁴⁰ this harmonizing and balancing of Qi causes pathogenic factors-tumors, viruses, bacteria, or whatever-to be repelled.

To illustrate the point, a friend of mine who is both a Chinese herbal scholar and a master of kung fu invited me to form my right hand in a fist and place it on his right shoulder, with the arm held straight and the open elbow facing up. He then interlocked the fingers of both of his hands over my open elbow and asked me to resist his efforts to bend my arm, which I found impossible to do. Then he repeated the exercise, asking me to shift my focus from him, and to imagine instead that my arm was a fire hose sending forth a powerful stream of water. As I held this image in my mind, he now tried-and failed-to bend my arm. By giving purpose and focus to my thoughts (which is the essence of Wood), I concentrated movement within me in a way that resisted what he was trying to do.

Making Harmony the Focus of Our Lives

And it seemed so effortless, so . . . harmonious--or, as my Chinese-scholar friend would put it, so smooth. For the overall effect of Wood, the Chinese say, is smooth, subtle movement, or smooth, subtle Qi. "Words such as soft, subtle, light, and gentle begin to characterize the esirable state" of Wood. ⁴¹

It's interesting to note, then, that western scientists have identified a "self-healing personality" that sounds like the essence of Wood. People who possess it are "characterized by enthusiasm," though "not ecstatic, but responsive and content." They have "smooth gestures," and their facial movements "are synchronized and unforced." They "walk smoothly and also talk smoothly, with fewer speech disturbances and more modulated tones. . . . They are people one likes to be around." ⁴²

Is this self-healing personality (which virtually mimics the Chinese concept of Wood) what Astragalus helps to produce?

No one can say, of course. But let's set aside the herb for a moment, and consider the philosophy by itself. How might we affect our odds of getting cancer, do you suppose, if we merely made harmony the philosophic focus of our lives-not seeking to eliminate differences and opposition, but learning to communicate so skillfully that they become reconciled, or united, within a single, harmonious whole? To do this, of course, we would Prepare ourselves by setting goals and purposes to guide the activities of our lives. We would Express our goals and purposes as purely and spontaneously as sunlight. We would Open ourselves to Life's messages, which we would Absorb and Process in order to draw their value into ourselves. And from the richness of this communicating, we would arrange more harmoniously a few details of our lives, and then launch the cycle again.

Western scholars generally reject this Chinese philosophy, claiming that it's unscientific. And for lack of biochemical explanations (as opposed to philosophical explanations), they reject Chinese herbs as well. But suppose we suddenly understood the complete biochemistry of every Chinese herb; would we really know all that is important to know?

The Chinese say there's more to life than biochemistry. Wouldn't we be wise to agree?

Notes and References

1. M. Parks, "Chinese derive cancer treatments from ancient herbal tonics, common plants," Los Angeles Times (Oct. 6, 1983): part I-B, 5. 2. References with abstracts available on request.

3. Parks, 7.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. "There is a peculiarly Chinese model of 'harmony' or achieved order (ho) both fundamental to and pervasive in the classical culture." Sun-Tzu, *The Art of Warfare*, Roger Ames, trans. (New York: BallantineBooks, 1993), 42, hereafter cited as Ames (1993). Regarding the universal nature of this harmony, Rubin speaks of "the assumption that there is a mutual interaction between the way of nature and the affairs of man," which led to "a unified system of cosmology with all sorts of analogies between the natural and human worlds." V. A. Rubin, "The concepts of Wu Hsing and Yin-Yang," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 9 (1982): 131.
7. Ames (1993), 61. "The exemplary person pursues hannony (ho), not sameness." Ibid., 42.
8. It is "a specifically 'center-seeking' or 'centripetal' harmony." Ibid., 62.
9. Ibid., 87, emphasis added. "What it means to be a person of exemplary character is deemed in the text in the standard Confucian 'virtue' vocabulary of 'wisdom, integrity, humanity, courage, and discipline.'" Ibid., 88.
10. Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983),25, hereafter not cited.
11. Ames (1993), 63.
12. See, for example, Robert Temple, *The Genius of China: 3,000 years of Science, Discovery, and Invention* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). "Chinese medicine is no less a full-fledged scientific discipline than its modern Western counterpart." Manfred Porkert, *Chinese Medicine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 47.
13. Ames (1993), 55.
14. John S. Major, "Myth, cosmology, and the origins of Chinese science," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 5 (1978): 10.
15. Liu Yanchi, *The Essential Book of Chinese Medicine, Volume I: Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988),69. Under China's old system of spelling, Qi was spelled Ch'i. To be consistent, I have used the new spelling throughout.
16. "The physical sites of these dynamic events-whether it might be the organs, the nerves, the muscles, the arteries, or the veins-are thought to be of considerably lesser significance than the nature of those events themselves. This is the reason why the traditional Chinese awareness of anatomy has always seemed to Western observers to be remarkably haphazard and sketchy." Porkert, 8485.
17. "The basic meaning of yin is responsiveness to one's context: to adapt oneself to a situation in such a manner as to take full advantage of the defining circumstances, and to avail oneself of the possibilities of the situation in achieving one's own purposes. Yin requires sensitivity and adaptability." Ames (1993), 84.
18. "The active component of every event is designated yang and the constructive component yin." Porkert, 68. This principle of balance also defines for traditional Chinese the relationship between masculinity and femininity: "Yin represents the feminine side of nature, encompassing darkness, tranquility, depth, cold, and wetness; the earth, the moon, and water are all yin elements. Yang represents a masculine principle, encompassing light, activity, height, heat, and dryness; heaven, the sun, and fire are yang elements." Kee Chang Huang, *The Pharmacology of Chinese Herbs* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 1993),3.
19. This is why street drugs fall into two basic categories, for example, with "uppers" expressing power while "downers" express control. 20. Liu, 42.
21. "The theory [of yin and yang] is associated with that of the Five Agents or Elements. . . 'which may be taken as an elaboration of [the] yin and yang idea' ." Rubin, 131.
22. The natural "world is constituted as a sea of [Qi]-psychophysical energy that disposes itself in various concentrations, configurations, and perturbations." Ames (1993),50.
23. Porkert, 88, 97.
24. Ibid., 97.
25. Harriet Beinfield and Efrem Komgold, *Between Heaven and Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 92.
26. Porkert,99.
27. Liu, 75.
28. The Chinese concept of Fire is also called "heart": "The Chinese word xin, which literally means 'heart' . . . conveys the idea of 'midpoint' or 'middle' in such compound words as zhongxin, 'the center.' In ordinary usage, xin is often used to mean simply 'the middle' or 'midsection' (Le., of the body) and by extension 'the inner man' (whatever is really essential to us, both in the sense of what we really need and what we really are), in rough the same sense that we might say 'I know it in my heart of hearts.' The Western idea of the heart as the seat of the passions (at least in literary or colloquial, rather than scientific parlance) is perhaps not very far from the Chinese notion of the function circle of the heart [Le., Wood] as the active, motivating circle." Porkert, 101.
29. Ted J. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1983),54.
30. Liu, 74. Fire is "ultimately responsible for the fact that we can even speak of a unified, fully integrated individual personality." Porkert, 100.
31. Liu,320 58.
32. Porkert, 102, emphasis in original.
33. Ibid. Earth is the source of all that we acquire through experience, as opposed to all that we inherit through our genes-"the primary recipient of all the external stimuli that the individual is exposed to during his entire lifetime, or, as the classical texts have it, ' . . . the seat of one's acquired constitutional energy.' .. Ibid., 103.
34. Liu, 83, emphasis added.
35. Ibid., 82. Metal also governs "the rhythmic organization of the life of the individual and all of life's activities." Porkert, 105.
36. Liu,85.
37. Parks,S.
38. Jiangsu Medical College, *Dictionary of Chinese Medicines [Zhong Yao Da Ci Dian]*, 3 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 1977-79),2:2038, in Chinese.
39. Porkert, 88.
40. Ibid., 97.
41. Liu, 15.
42. "A modern Chinese text uses the word sprinkle to describe [the liver, a Wood organ's] activity. One classic herbal treatment to restore Liver [Le., Wood] harmony is called the Free and Easy Wanderer. Creating this ambience can be thought of as the function of the Liver [and thus of Wood itself]." Kaptchuk, 59.
- 43.H. S. Friedman and G. R. VandenBos, "Disease-prone and self-healing personalities," *Hospital and Community Psychiatry* 43 (1992): 1177.

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