

Cosmological Origins of the Obverse-Reverse Zang Fu Pairing in Chinese Medicine

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Received 26 August 2014; revised 25 November 2014; accepted 15 December 2014

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Abstract

Most of the rich philosophical and scientific concepts which nurtured the Chinese thought we know today, were developed during the troubled final end of the era before ours, from V to II centuries. After reading reputed sinologists' work on the cosmological origin and subsequent evolution of the Chinese concept of parallelism-pairing in poetry, literature, mathematic and other disciplines and since it is a tradition that all branches of knowledge in China are based on the development of those initiatory thoughts, the author asked herself if such knowing on the cosmological genesis of the parallelism concept could also be applied to Chinese medicine, science that describes its coupled structures and functions in pairs, simply based on yinyang, matrix of all pairings. Therefore, this paper proposes to apply those foundations, to explain the pairing of dynamisms in medicine. This work starts out from the oracular inscriptions in ancient times, cosmological basis of these ideas and their applications to Chinese literature and from there translates this approach to the study of the pairings described by Chinese medicine, and thanks to which (qi xue) blood-energy circulation occurs in human beings. Organic and functional pairs described by Chinese medicine are the basic element to understand the concept of health and disease, and this paper is about the cosmological roots of those pairings, the cosmic resonance influence and the numerology influence in them, and the whole is illustrated both through the description of the (obverse-reverse) biao li pair, different from (inside-outside) nei wai, and the functional relationship between these two couples.

Keywords

Chinese Medicine, Cosmology, Oracles, Parallelism, Pairing, Yin Yang, Biao Li, Nei Wai, Zang Fu

1. Introduction

“one **Yin**, one **Yang**, that’s the **Dao**”

Yi Jing Xi Ci

Between the subtle celestial **yang** and the dense earthy **yin**, ten thousand combinations impregnated by all movements of life move, explain *Su Wen* 5 [1] because everything that exists is a particular composition of **yin yang**. And thus, the Chinese civilization tells us once and again that the process of pairing is *natural*; that is to say under the laws of universe from the origin to the end of times and according to expert voices, this immanence is an effective way to ensure the perdurability of all aspects of the authoritarian imperial regime and its consequences [2].

Whichever the reason, from the **yinyang** dynamisms, Chinese medicine pairs up, energetically couples and pairs up organs with bowels (**zangfu**) and the corresponding meridians establish the **biao li** relationship, obverse and reverse each couple, building basis for an important guide theory for clinical practice.

There are classic treatises where parallelism is analyzed as an important rhetoric way of Chinese literature [3] and contemporary studies describing the notion of parallelism in Chinese mathematics too [4]. Thus, knowing about the existence of energetic-organic pairings in Chinese medicine, we hereby shall inquire about the reasoning which led from the cosmological parallelism to the medical organ-function pairs and the coupling of meridians in acupuncture.

2. Chinese Vision of the World

Chinese thought gives us a vision of the world based on the *pairing* among other concepts. And by using this word we want to describe becomingness or a *process* which starts from a duality in permanent interaction: opposition and complementariness as a result of a *parallelism* that in ancient times was already shown by oracular inscriptions from the second BC millennium. These inscriptions, considered the origin of Chinese writing, essentially constitute the embryonic written expression of Eastern thought.

Parallelism (*para* = near, close to, *allos* = other, alien) is not just a simple formal operation to distribute and align without modifying the paired members, procedure which, being concepts threaded in a two-to-two basis without any possibility of change, would reflect a symmetry solely geometrical and therefore static [5].

To the Chinese tradition, the pairing is a basic dynamism, conceptually opposite and complementary which allows existence, subject the author has already considered in one of her previous books [6]. This is not to say that Western culture had not elaborate concepts on antinomic contrapositions, but to point out that it had and has always been done in the West on an excluding basis of rigid and limiting antithesis: either it exists or it does not exist.

Chinese intuition perceives the real as a dynamic process starting from a binomial of phenomena in constant interaction, because opposition and complementarity are presented as a generalized bipolarity and “parallelism” is both initial and dynamic: ever since the originator **yinyang**, Heaven and Earth have been coupled cosmological realities which encourage and regulate each other. As **Wang Fuzhi** says the initial harmony [5] (**Dao**) already contains the opposition-complementarity relationship which is the quintessential pairing of **yinyang** for which the rest-movement alternation within constitutes its own conception and it is not a consequence of the pairing because which would the factor (external) initiating that dynamism be if it were not originated by the original interaction of the pair? The Chinese thinker did not conceive “creation” as a development of *succession*: first the sky, then the earth and after that man or as a *progression* according to which **Tai Yi** as an originator would gradually separate itself and progressively heaven and earth would be born from the original chaos [7]. Instead of that, Chinese philosophy gives us the notion of **Dao**, a word that among other terms, some Western sinologists translate as “process” (immanent laws) in opposition to “creation”.

Then, what was the reflection? Heaven and earth represent the oppositional archetype, and they could not exist as two isolated halves. This interdependency is not only territorial but it is at the basis of all experiences, either because one element conditioned the other (high-low, back-forward) or because both mutually substitute each other: move-be still; be born-die... Each term in the pair depends on the other one and communicates with it, which means that one does not exist except through its relationship with the other.

Consequences arising from this correlation are used to elaborate all knowledge or knowing: no reality can be unilaterally and individually considered because everything that is real is perceived through the understanding of the relationships which bind and make the couples. Nothing exists isolated but by mutual implication; talking

about one is talking simultaneously about the other and thus the parallelism or pairing relationship is neither exterior nor subaltern but rather what intrinsically makes existence. There is nothing existing outside this couple relationship which expresses a duality in unity mode. **Tai Yi**, the unity, is named by two characters.

The omnipresent expressions of parallelism in Chinese culture show a way of reflecting, of reasoning, a way of conceiving the universe according to the intuitive Chinese grasping of reality, a way of nature observation, a way of the real perceived as a becoming which elapses from a duality of elements in constant interaction.

Not surprisingly, physicians, scholars trained in this conception of cosmos and nature reasoned to applying it to the energetic dynamisms they described for the organic functionality in the human being.

3. Divinational Oracles

To show evidence of this, we go back to those oracular inscriptions where a “literary” parallelism of writing can be found in what sinologists call now *symmetrical divinations* in plastronomy (on turtle shells) and scapulomancy (bovine scapula) practiced by the **yin** people and later by the **Shang** centuries BC. As there are no other ancient divination treaties it is not possible to trace the original features of the archaic method.

It is clear that the tortoise shells drawings provided a picture of the cosmos which conditioned the writing on both sides of the midline: parallelism and symmetry **Figure 1**.

I hope this brief historical introduction serves to facilitate the understanding of both the origin and the development of the parallelism-symmetry notion (antinomy-complementarity) in the attempt to explain the origin of the concept of energetic pairing of viscera and their meridians in Chinese medicine.

Parallelism is “literary” in the broadest sense of the adjective, *i.e.* textual, and it is also included in the most disparate extra-literary subjects, in mathematics or medicine because these are texts in which the physician, the mathematician, or... the scholars in general, registered their theoretical and/or practical reasoning. Certainly, the conception of parallelism is primarily manifested in literary creation because the first texts already gave testimony of elementary impressions of parallelism which are considered spontaneous, natural as expressed by **Liu Xie** (465-522) in his presentation of this subject [3].

Moreover, parallelism in China is the representation of a principle derived from its conception of the world, *i.e.* it is a cosmological figure and its production was greatly contributed to by *Yi Jing*, divinatory practice with a specific cosmological basis of its culture which does not constitute a simple technique to just predict but a procedure to decipher the course of things because it seeks to clarify the hidden meaning of the events where the subject of the consultation lies [8].

From the initial parallelism comes the pairing of things which, as F. Jullien says, constitutes the basis which allows the understanding of the chance to exist [5], because nothing takes place in isolation, everything has access to existence through pairs. The turtle shell, rounded on top (heaven) and square at the bottom (earth) resembles the universe, not that it just represents the universe, it is the universe; a reduced model of the universe thanks to its identity in shape and longevity to the animal which embodies a fundamental virtue of cosmos: its duration. That is, making a query to the turtle was making it to the very universe itself, even when it was pre-

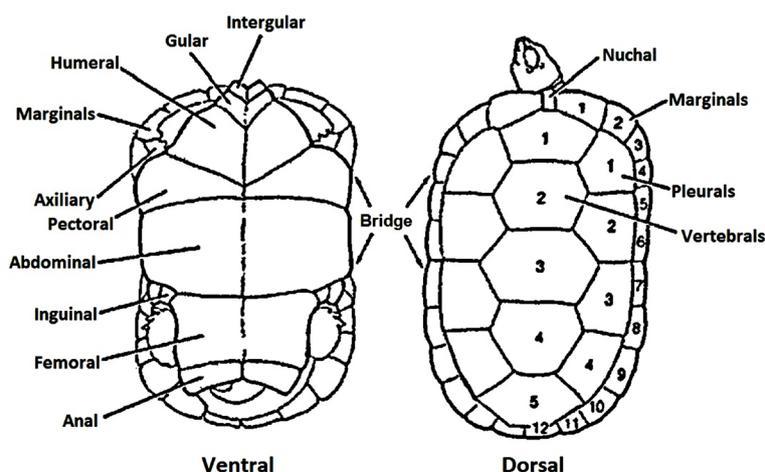


Figure 1. Turtle shell.

ferred to use the plastron (consultation was on earthly matters) rather than the dorsal portion. Both parts have a fixed number of geometrical patterns that favours a parallel evaluation of them. One first consequence seems to have been that both sides of the plastron, external and internal, naturally led to the **yinyang** notion: one turtle, two possibilities, the millenary uniduality of Chinese reflection. The shell drawings allowed the symmetrical distribution of the inscriptions marked by the red-hot awl on the ink smeared shell. It is said without hesitation, that this technique conditioned the ulterior written expression, specially poetry, and canonical literature as well, among the latter *Nei Jing Su Wen Ling Shu*, the great classical medical text.

In Chinese language the interrogative form does not exist, nor does the inversion of subject and verb which specifies an interrogative form: “Are you here?” and the modern question mark does not exist either, nor do the words “yes” and “no” natural consequence of this Chinese form of asking. Simplifying, in Chinese language questions are made by an affirmative double sentence-question: “we do this/we don’t do this” and the answer is made by using the already used verb preceded, or not, by negation according to the chosen option: “we do this/we don’t do this” (Figure 2).

We can see that ever from interrogation there is symmetry, a parallelism which reveals a way of thinking with no absolute rules. And this double, dualistic way of questioning was scrupulously applied from the early divination spellings. The bilateral symmetry of the turtle shell led to consider that a hypothetical event always has two sides and that it is very important to consider them both, there is no **yin** without **yang** or **yang** without **yin**. And the matchable elements are the ten thousand things, everything that exists because everything exists in the very simple one of uniduality.

We said that, etymologically, parallelism comes from the idea of getting closer to the other and in the medical subject at hand, parallelism becomes *pairing*, *i.e.* approaching, and staying together in a complementary and opposite interchange, a bipolarity where the dynamic effect of parallelism is manifested from the very beginning.

Chinese medicine describes the parallel path of the main meridians on the surface, symmetrically mirror-like duplicated on both sides of the two mid lines of the body. Acupuncture maps only show the “visible” obverse which, according to Chinese thought is necessarily paired up with the hidden reverse, that of the nexus between organs and coupled meridians and the **zang fu** between themselves, as well as the relationship between internal and external **nei wai**.

Ling Shu 11 show us the broad meaning of **jingluo**

...through the **jingmai** and the five **zang** and six **fu** the body armonizes itself with the **Dao** in heaven...

which also defines the anatomical three-dimensionality of human being.

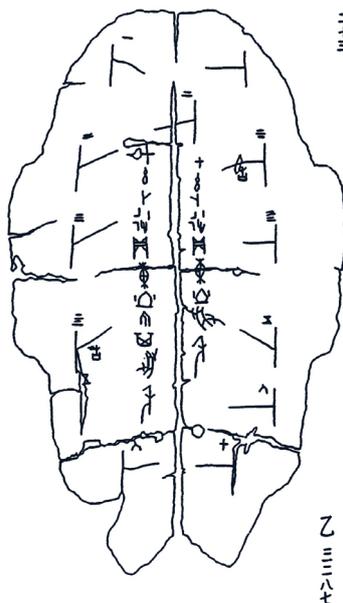


Figure 2. Cracked shell after a double question (Wu Ding period, XV century BC [9]).

Illustrations with meridians do not reveal the total fullness of the network of relationships woven among meridians and with the internal side of the body thus not favouring the understanding of the anatomical and functional vision of the **qi xue** flow (energy blood) basic concept in health and in sickness. So, how are the body components related? How do energy and blood circulate? How does the therapeutic function of Acupuncture take place? The **biao li** pair gives us answers.

As our interest is to look for the conceptual roots of the **biao li** pairing of **zang fu** inside the cosmological notions, we highlight the information provided by the oracle studies on the origins of this way of reflection in China since the mantic practices have influenced the evolution of the Chinese reasoning.

Concepts arisen from the observation of cosmos-nature slowly impose themselves as intellectual movement in IV-III centuries BC and culminate their maturation during the early part of **Han** dynasty in II century BC with the formalization of the basis of what would be the subsequent “nature philosophy”. It is in this time when the **yinyang** school (parallelism paradigm) which specially deals with the relationship Heaven-Man, arises.

In *Zuozhuan*, first year of Duke **Zhao**, the physician **He** lists the six breaths of heaven: **yinyang** (shade-sun) wind, rain, darkness, lights which also inhabit the human body and whose harmonious interrelationship the doctor has to keep [8].

It is precisely at this time (IV-III centuries) when **yinyang** transform themselves, cleaved themselves from the initial group and turn to represent the two primary energies which constitute the uniduality, matrix to all binomials.

Chinese medicine as a discipline emerged during the Warring States (**Zhou** dynasty), period called “*Different Teachers, One Hundred Schools*”, intense and very fertile philosophical and scientific movement in which the “Academy of **Jixia** Gate” that typified the naturalist thought stood out; teachers from all over China went there to teach under imperial patronage. Its most prominent member due to his cosmologic naturalism, **Zou Yan** (305 - 240) was counselor to sovereigns eager to increase their political prestige [10].

And these teachings had a strong influence on the theoretical development of *Neijing Su Wen Ling Shu*.

4. Biao Li Binding

Numerous are the ways of pairing described in Chinese medicine based on the variety of dynamic **yinyang**. In this case we are going to focus on the **biao li** pair.

As *Su Wen* 6 explains in “*Separations and Reunions of Yin and Yang*”, it is through the **biao li** binding that are specified six pairs of meridians whose members resonates each one with the same change phase **wuxing**, five movements: Li-GB wood, H-SI fire, St-Sp earth, Lu-LI metal, and K-B water.

These pairs respond to human influences (**li**) or cosmos ones (**biao**) following the **wuxing** phases, pacing universe and man dynamism. Each movement responds to a coupled **li** meridian and a **biao** meridian. Thus we have two sources of influence, the one from man, and the one from universe: what comes from man resonates on **li** meridians and what comes from the universe does it on **biao** meridians, therefore **biao li** is an interior-exterior notion which expresses the relationships between two coupled meridians and their organs in the *interior of a same element*. *Su Wen* 25 says that man lives in a body that will never leave **yin yang**.

Biao li is an intra-systemic bond in a close system (the human body) because it functions between the two coupled viscera in each pair. In the organism, **li** represents the internal system (**zang**, organs) and **biao**, the external (**fu**, bowels) and they are distinguished because obverse **biao** subordinates to reverse **li**. **Biao** is the outer lining of the body while **li** is the interior of such lining. In **biao** the idea of manifestation is expressed and in **li** the hidden life one, that which from the interior, from the depth, will show up in the surface going up through the organic layers, and through that same path, what is on the surface will go back to the interior [11].

The obverse-reverse **biao li** binding is different from **nei wai** inside-outside pair. The latter describes an inter-systemic bond: human body is a system and the external environment is a different one, and there are ties between them; **nei wai** [6] ties which evoke those nexus in the internal areas of vitality (**zang fu**) with more external areas, the meridians paths. In turn, **nei wai** and **biao li** are related because the **biao li** interchanges arise from the **nei wai** spatial dynamic so allowing to distinguish visible starting from invisible, to perceive what is active in the latent, to get to the structures through the manifestations as *Suwen* 5 says.

Let's make it clear that **biao li** (obverse-reverse) indicates movements of life whereas **nei wai** (inside-outside) is closer to topographic references.

Among the cosmological roots, we cannot ignore the concept of resonance which is at the innermost core of Chinese cosmology and which appears in various texts from the “Warring States” period and the Empire (III and

II centuries): all things and beings pertaining to analog categories vibrate, resonate in unison, correspond.

“*Surveying Obscurities*”, *Huainanzi* [12] chapter 6 deals with the (**ganying**) resonance phenomenon whose existence scholars accept but cannot clearly explain. They describe it as an affinity vibration in the **qi** energy field which goes through the cosmos and it is not just physical resonance but emotional as well as intentional, therefore human actions have clear and predictable effects on the natural world. Hence, observing **Dao** and ruling properly lead to human happiness and celestial harmony. That is to say that not being clear about what **qi** is but its existence confirmed, it claims that each thing is emulated in another one, in that which is analog due to its form or category. Resonances were not and are not abstract, there is always a material substrate for them to happen, and Chinese thinkers attribute field effects (generate energy and drive it) to everything that is alive in nature. This resonance contributes to the visceral functional pairing confirmed by anatomical relationship [13] [14].

These correspondences between macro and micro cosmos, between Heaven and Man realms thanks to *resonance* are not reduced to a simple parallelism, they pose a “vibrational” bond of mutual correspondence whose nature is defined by the **yinyang** relationship and which, according to *Huainanzi* reciprocally activates each other because they share the same breath. **Qi** (vital breath) is a cosmological notion that covers everything and if **yinyang** binomial is vital in its dynamism is because it is ruled by the resonance principle activated by **qi**.

And here we have one of the most endeared themes in the Chinese thought, the numerical game already mentioned by **Lao Zi** 42 [15]

*The way generates the one,
The one generates the two,
The two generates the three,
The three generates all beings...*

The **yinyang** pairing is met not by two elements but by three because the complementary alternation of two energies generates a third one: the moving force encouraged by duality. **Yinyang** parallelism without the three (emblem of motion) would be self enclosed repeating itself, without functionality: railroads gain sense with the presence of a train. With the three an infinitely transformable “parallelism” opens up. Chinese thought whether of Taoist or Confucian nuance, has always crossed Heaven-Earth influxes, and then crossing is the three conceived to go from duality to the ternary relationship that opens the field of the becoming. Thus the **biao li** pair obtains its dynamism, its “three” from **qi**, the cosmic breath thanks to which all circulations in the body operate.

5. Conclusion

Ever since its first manifestations in divinatory oracles, three millennia previous to our era, the Chinese vision of cosmos-nature facilitates the elaboration of the parallelism concept which evolves towards pairing, a notion that together with resonance phenomenon permeates all Chinese culture since literature—initial form and we believe that it also serves medicine whose practice simply confirms the success of this theoretical approach that this medicine adopts recognizing pairs in a sustained and resonant energetic exchange, in health and in sickness. As an example, the **biao li** binomial represents the use in medical practice of the millenarian Chinese conception of pairing as a form of existential dynamism.

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