

# The Theory of Chinese Medicine

## The Linking Thread

The five therapies of Chinese medicine are acupuncture, herbs, tui na massage, diet and Qigong. Each therapy is practised in its own special way. Acupuncturists use needles to balance energy. Herbalists prescribe raw herbs, powders or tinctures. Qigong practitioners use movement and exercise. Tui na practitioners use direct physical contact. Dietary therapists advise on eating habits. Although these therapies are completely different they are also all connected. So what is it that links them?

The linking thread is the theory of Chinese medicine.

It doesn't matter which of these treatments a person chooses to have, the underlying theory comes from the same root. This forms the foundation for a unique diagnosis for every patient. Over the next few chapters we will look at these treatments and the theory that links them so that we can understand the basis of Chinese medicine.

### **What is the theory of Chinese medicine?**

There are three main components that enable a Chinese medicine practitioner to form a diagnosis. Together they

allow the practitioner to find the underlying cause of a patient's complaint. They are:

- yin and yang
- the 12 Organs and their associated Five Elements
- the Vital Substances

We will explore each of these in turn.

### **What is meant by yin and yang?**

In order to diagnose the nature of their patients' conditions practitioners need to understand and judge the relative balance of their yin and yang *Qi*. One of the oldest classics of Chinese medicine, the *Huang Ti Nei Jing* or *The Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine* states:

To live in harmony with yin and yang means life.

To live against yin and yang means death.

To live in harmony with yin and yang will bring peace.

To live against yin and yang will bring chaos.

Yin and yang are now such commonly used terms that we could almost forget that they stem from the Chinese language. Used colloquially in English they describe opposite qualities. For example, light and dark, up and down, outside and inside and expansion and contraction are all qualities of yin and yang. However, opposite qualities are only a partial description of how yin and yang are used in the Chinese language.

### **What are the four aspects of yin and yang?**

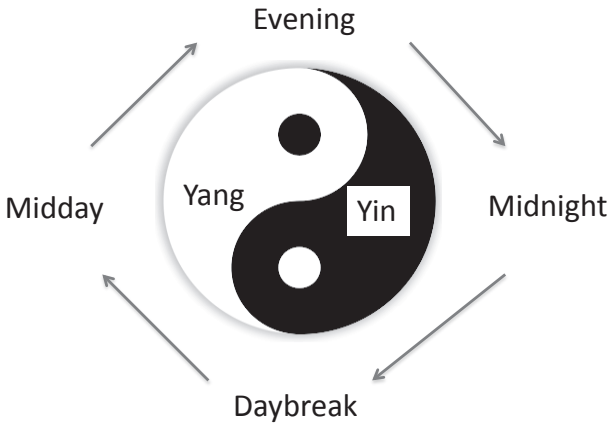
Chinese medicine describes four main aspects of yin and yang.

Yin and yang are:

1. opposite to each other (as we described above)
2. dependent on each other
3. able to absorb or consume each other
4. able to transform into each other.

Everything in the universe can be described as a combination of these two fundamental forces and they are in a constant state of flux. Yin and yang gives recognition to the duality, interaction, interdependence and transformation of life.

Light and darkness are good examples to illustrate this. Light and darkness are opposite terms but they are also dependent on each other – without darkness there would be no light; without light there would be no darkness.



Yin/yang symbol and the cycle of day and night

At the height of midday there is maximum light, which is yang. At around midnight the opposite is true – there is maximum darkness, which is yin. As the day changes, the amounts of light and darkness vary – they consume each other.

As dawn breaks, the darkness begins to transform into light. We could also say that the light is ‘absorbing’ the darkness. The day gradually becomes brighter and more yang as it progresses. Later, as the evening draws in, the day becomes darker and more yin. Daytime begins to transform into night or we could say that the nighttime is ‘consuming’ or absorbing the daylight.

Although everything in the universe can be described in terms of yin and yang, they are also relative terms. For example, we just saw how day and night can be described in terms of yin and yang, but a year is made up of many days and nights and it also has yin and yang qualities. For instance, the summer, which is the brighter and hotter part of the year, is more yang and the winter, which is colder and darker, is more yin. The yin of winter transforms into the spring and in the autumn the yin reappears as the yang of the summer recedes.

## **How are yin and yang useful for Chinese medical practitioners?**

We all have a different balance of yin and yang. Another way of understanding what these terms mean is to think of yang as *fire*; in other words, it is dry, bright, hot, active and moving upwards and outwards. Yin, on the other hand, is *water* as in a deep lake; it is wet, deep, dark, cold and still. Here are some other yin and yang characteristics that are used by Chinese medicine practitioners.

SOME YIN AND YANG CHARACTERISTICS USEFUL  
TO CHINESE MEDICINE PRACTITIONERS

In relation to	Yin	Yang
Temperature	Cold	Hot
Moisture	Wet	Dry
Location	Inside	Outside
Direction	Downwards	Upwards
Speed of onset	Slow	Fast
Energy	Lethargy	Over-activity
Area of symptoms	Below	Above
Body area affected	Lower body	Upper body
Surface affected	Anterior	Posterior

## How can Chinese medicine be used to balance yin and yang?

Just as the universe has its own dynamic balance of yin and yang, so, correspondingly, does each individual. Chinese medicine tells us that in order to remain healthy we need to live in harmony with yin and yang in our daily lives.

During the day, which is more yang, we are naturally more active. At night, our *Qi* (pronounced 'chee') (see page 29) withdraws inside us and becomes more yin so that we can close down and sleep. If we wish to remain active when we should be sleeping it might indicate that our yin is depleted. When our yin is strengthened with treatment we become more settled.

On the other hand, if we continually sleep and feel lethargic during the day, this might indicate that our yang is

deficient. There is not enough expansive and active energy to get us moving. Strengthening our yang in this case can restore our health.

A recent patient who had lower backache is an example. She often felt very cold and lethargic and found it hard to get up in the mornings. She described waking up as 'like swimming to the surface of a sea of treacle'. Her lethargy indicated that her yang *Qi* was deficient. Treatment strengthened her yang *Qi* allowing her backache to improve. At the same time she felt brighter and more lively in the mornings.

### How do yin and yang affect our life cycles?

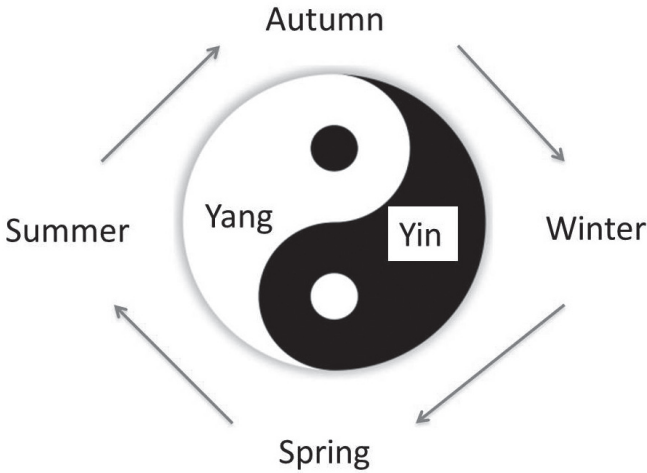
Yin and yang are reflected in the way we live during the seasons and even the cycle of our life. For instance, we are naturally more active and outgoing when it is hot and sunny in the summer, whilst it is normal to withdraw and conserve ourselves in the winter.

Children are naturally very energetic and yang – as adults we can find it difficult to keep up with them! Childhood is the 'springtime' of our life. As we age, our energy decreases until when we are older we become more yin and may wish to slow down. We often refer to old age as the 'autumn' of our life. If we fight nature rather than work with it we may become deficient in yin *Qi* later in life.

For example, many women have hot flushes during the menopause. They can also become drier and sometimes more restless – all signs of the yin *Qi* becoming depleted. Hot flushes are less common in China where women are more aware of their yin nature and consequently ensure that they conserve their *Qi* in the latter part of their life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although this may be changing as Chinese women adopt a more Western lifestyle.



Yin/yang and the cycle of the seasons

When acupuncturists examine a patient they will look at how the qualities of yin and yang interact and how treatment can improve their balance. Practitioners might consider the patient's general condition and ask themselves, 'Is this patient lethargic or restless, cool or hot, or wet or dry?'

The practitioner can also consider yin and yang in terms of where the disease is situated and ask, 'Is this condition deep inside the body or more on the surface?' Or in relation to which Organs are most involved in the illness, 'Does this patient's condition involve more of the yin Organs or the yang Organs or maybe even both?'

Practitioners assess the relative balance between our yin and yang *Qi*. Once this is ascertained, they can prescribe treatment to restore equilibrium and thus restore their patient's health.

## What are yin and yang Organs?

Earlier in this chapter I explained that a second aspect of Chinese medicine theory is the functioning of the 12 Organs. When Chinese medicine talks about the Organs it is describing not only physical organs but many wider functions as well.

### THE YIN AND YANG ORGANS

<b>Yin Organ</b>	<b>Yang Organ</b>
Lung	Large Intestine
Spleen	Stomach
Heart	Small Intestine
Kidney	Bladder
Pericardium	Triple Burner
Liver	Gall Bladder

Yin Organs are more solid in nature and lie deeper inside the body. Chinese medicine describes them as being responsible for regulating and storing all the body's Vital Substances before they are used. The yang Organs are hollow – in fact most of them are shaped as tubes or bags, lie nearer to the surface of the body and are responsible for receiving, separating, distributing and excreting all the Vital Substances (I will discuss the Vital Substances in more detail below).

Yin and yang Organs work together. If the yang Organs don't transform the Vital Substances there is nothing for the yin Organs to store. On the other hand if the yin Organs can't store these Substances then there is no point in the yang Organs transforming them.



## What are the Vital Substances?

Chinese medicine states that our body functions are determined by the interaction of certain ‘Vital’ Substances, which are:

- *Qi*
- Blood
- *Jing*-essence
- Body Fluids
- *Shen* or Mind-spirit.

These Vital Substances are the basic constituents of a human being. Some, such as *Qi*, are very refined. Others, such as Body Fluids, are very dense. The balanced functioning of these Substances allows us to remain healthy. If this balance breaks down we become unhealthy.

## How do the Vital Substances and the Organs interact?

Earlier I said that the main Organs all have wider functions than the ones described in Western medicine. One major function of all yin Organs is to store the Vital Substances. The connection between each Organ and Substance is shown in the table below and in the next part of this chapter I will explain more about how they interact.

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE YIN  
ORGANS AND THE VITAL SUSTANCES

Organ	Function in relation to a Substance
Heart	Governs Blood Houses <i>Shen</i> or Mind-spirit
Liver	Ensures the smooth flow of <i>Qi</i> Stores Blood
Lung	Governs <i>Qi</i> and breathing
Spleen	Transforms and transports <i>Qi</i> and Body Fluids Controls Blood
Kidney	Stores <i>Jing</i>

### What is *Qi*?

*Qi* is a difficult term to translate. It can be translated as 'energy', 'vital force', 'prana' or 'life force'. Modern physicists now understand that there is a continuum between matter and energy and that energy permeates the whole of the universe. Chinese medicine understands this continuum and says that when *Qi* becomes condensed it forms material substances, whilst more refined *Qi* becomes immaterial and rarified.

Although Chinese medicine explains things somewhat differently from modern physicists, the word 'energy' is probably one of the best translations for the word *Qi*. As Western scientists recognise more about energy, they may one day give recognition to what has been understood over many thousands of years of Chinese culture.