

YIN AND YANG, LI AND QI

The Four Chinese Principles and Their Place in the Architecture of the Corpus

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Abstract

The Catharturgy Corpus has made the Taiji its supreme glyph and has drawn repeatedly on the polarity of yin and yang and, more glancingly, on the Neo-Confucian principles of li and qi. It has not yet treated these four concepts in depth or on their own terms. This paper supplies that treatment and then maps the concepts onto the architecture of the Corpus, carefully, marking honestly the points where they corroborate the structure and the points where they resist or complicate it. Yin and yang are set out as a relational, non-substantial, and non-moral polarity — complementary, mutually rooted, waxing and waning into one another, the seed of each contained in the other — the dynamic patterning of a single reality rather than two things. Li and qi are set out through the central Neo-Confucian debate: li as principle or pattern, the formal and ordering reality; qi as the vital matter-energy that li configures; and the unsettled question of their priority, on which the Cheng-Zhu school of principle affirmed the priority of li (form over matter) while the school of vital-energy — Zhang Zai, Wang Fuzhi, Dai Zhen — reversed it, taking pattern to be the a posteriori realization of qi's interactions. The mapping that follows aligns yin and yang with the supernal polarity and the brightening-and-darkening axis, and the Taiji with the Kether glyph and its zero-and-one. The li-qi mapping is offered with deliberate care, because here the concepts both help and complicate the Corpus: li, as principle ordering matter, is a genuine ally of the Corpus's vertical and formal ontology; but li is pattern, not an efflux, so the Corpus's effluence maps more naturally onto qi, the generative and self-moving substance — with the consequence that the Corpus may require both, mapped to different aspects, and may have to take a considered side in the Chinese priority debate. The aim is to ground concepts the Corpus has used without grounding, and to let their friction with the system be instructive.

I. Why This Treatment Is Owed

A system that places the Taiji at the summit of its central glyph, and that draws the supernal polarity from the oscillation of light and dark, has taken on an obligation it has not yet discharged: to say, in depth and on their own terms, what yin and yang actually are, and what the Neo-Confucian principles of li and qi actually are. The Corpus has used these concepts instrumentally — the Wuji and the Taiji at the center of the Kether glyph, the yin-yang character of the supernal poles, a passing citation of the formula that the Taiji is li and yin-yang is qi — but it has not unfolded them. This paper discharges the obligation. It treats the four concepts first as they are understood within Chinese thought, without reference to the Corpus, so that the genuine content of each is on the table; and only then does it map them onto the architecture of the system, marking carefully where they corroborate and where they resist. The friction is as valuable as the fit, for a concept that complicates the structure tells one something true about the structure.

II. Yin and Yang on Their Own Terms

Yin and yang are the most familiar and the most misunderstood of Chinese concepts, and the first task is to clear away the misreadings. They are not two substances, not two forces in the Western sense, and not a moral pair of good and evil. They are the two complementary aspects under which any process or thing may be regarded — yin the receptive, dark, yielding, cool, inward, and condensing; yang the active, bright, firm, warm, outward, and expanding — and they are fundamentally relational: a thing is yin or yang only with respect to something else, as the shaded north face of a hill is yin to the sunlit south face that is yang, the very etymology of the terms. Nothing is yin or yang in itself; the same thing is yin in one relation and yang in another.

Four features define their relationship, and each matters for what follows. The first is complementarity: yin and yang are not opposites that exclude one another but counterparts that complete one another, each requiring the other to be what it is, neither intelligible alone. The second is mutual rooting: each contains the seed of the other and arises from the other, so that the deepest yin holds the germ of yang and the height of yang holds the germ of yin — figured in the diagram by the dot of each color within the field of its opposite. The third is waxing and waning: yin and yang are not static but continually transform into one another, yang reaching its maximum and giving way to yin, yin reaching its maximum and giving way to yang, in a ceaseless oscillation, so that the relationship is a dynamic process and not a fixed balance. The fourth is that they are the patterning of one reality, not a duality of two: the emergence and disappearance of things, in the classic understanding, are the transformations of the single underlying medium, and yin and yang are the two-poled rhythm of that one thing — which is why the yin-yang theory is, at bottom, a monism that uses a polarity to describe the movements of a unity, not a dualism of two ultimate principles.

This non-moral, relational, dynamic, and finally monistic character is the genuine content of yin and yang, and it must be held in view, because the Corpus's use of the polarity will be both

illuminated and constrained by it.

III. Li and Qi on Their Own Terms

The principles of li and qi are the central categories of Neo-Confucian metaphysics, the framework by which the Song and later thinkers rebuilt Confucian ethics on a cosmological foundation able to answer Buddhism and Daoism. Li is principle, or pattern, or coherence: the underlying, ordering, intelligible structure of things, that by which a thing is what it is and behaves as it does, the standing pattern that governs the regularities of the world. Qi is vital force, or material energy, or psycho-physical stuff: the dynamic, concrete medium that constitutes actual things, that condenses into forms and disperses from them, the substance whose configurations are the ten thousand things. In the standard formulation, qi is the matter-energy that is given shape by the patterning and differentiating activity of li; li without qi would be an abstract pattern with nothing to pattern, and qi without li would be a formless flux without order. Every actual thing is a union of the two: its pattern and its substance, its principle and its stuff.

The decisive and contested question is that of priority, and the Corpus must understand that this question was never settled within the tradition itself. The Cheng-Zhu school of principle, the *lixue*, affirmed the priority of li. Zhu Xi held that li and qi are inseparable in any actual thing and cannot in general be spoken of as prior or posterior; and yet, he wrote, if we must trace their origin, we are obliged to say that li is prior. In his mature articulation, li is identified with the Taiji itself, the Supreme Polarity, the singular principle that generates qi and explains whence the cosmos ultimately comes. This is a priority of pattern over substance, of form over matter, in which the normative structure of the world is the more fundamental reality and the material medium is its expression. Against this, the school of vital-energy — Zhang Zai before the Cheng-Zhu synthesis, and Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen after it — affirmed the priority of qi. For Zhang Zai the Taiji itself is qi, the vital force is the source of all existence, and it is a self-moving force that depends on nothing outside itself for its motion, the changes of qi resulting from the perpetual activity of its own yin and yang. For Wang Fuzhi and Dai Zhen, following him, the patterns are the a posteriori realizations of the interactions of qi — li is simply the principle of qi, the order that qi exhibits in its self-organization, not a prior reality that imposes order from above. They held that this dissolved any hint of dualism and grounded a more naturalistic account of the world and of human desire.

Two visions, then, stand within the tradition: a li-realism in which pattern is prior and matter expresses it, and a qi-monism in which the vital substance is prior and pattern is its self-realization. Zhu Xi's own considered reply to the qi-monists is worth marking, for it is subtle: pattern, he held, is implicated in the very make-up and possible configurations of qi, which is precisely why the regular patterns can and do emerge from qi's interactions — so that li is not an external imposition but the inherent orderability of the substance. The debate is not idle for the Corpus, because the Corpus, in mapping li and qi onto its own structure, will find itself obliged to lean one way or the other, and ought to do so knowingly.

IV. The Mapping: Yin, Yang, and the Taiji

The first mapping is the most straightforward and the most secure. The yin-yang polarity answers to the supernal polarity of the Corpus — the brightening and darkening, the active and receptive, the white Chokmah and black Binah — and answers to it well, because the four features of yin and yang are features the Corpus already affirms of its supernal poles. The poles are complementary, each completing the other; they are mutually rooted, the active holding the seed of the receptive and conversely, as the banded glyph shows each color within the other; they are dynamic rather than static; and they are the two-poled rhythm of a single reality, the one consciousness or one divine life under its two aspects, not two ultimate things. The Corpus's supernal polarity is, in its formal structure, a yin-yang polarity, and the correspondence is exact at the level of structure.

The Taiji answers to the Kether glyph and to the zero-and-one at its center, as the Corpus has already established: the Wuji as the limitless ground, the zero; the Taiji as the first determination, the one; the supreme glyph showing the limitless receiving its first point. Here a clarification from the Chinese debate is useful. When Zhu Xi identifies the Taiji with li, the singular principle that generates qi, he gives the Corpus a precise way to read its own glyph: the first point, the Taiji, the one, is principle — the formal determination by which the limitless becomes orderable and from which the patterned world proceeds. The Corpus need not adopt Zhu Xi's metaphysic to take the clarification: that the first determination is of the nature of principle, of pattern, of formal order, rather than of substance, fits the Corpus's placement of the Monad as the formal origin-point rather than as a quantity of stuff. The one mild constraint the yin-yang material imposes is the reminder that yin and yang are non-moral; the Corpus, which reads its poles within a moral and theological frame, must therefore be careful to say that the yin-yang correspondence is structural, and that the moral valence of its poles comes from the theological content the Corpus adds, not from the yin-yang polarity itself, which is morally neutral.

V. The Mapping: Li, Qi, and the Vertical Ontology

The second mapping is where the Corpus has the most to gain and the most to be careful about, and it must be made slowly. The Corpus's ontology is vertical and formal: it holds that the rarefied grounds the dense, that a higher formal reality is prior to and gives rise to the lower material one, and that qualitative properties descend by effluence rather than arising by emergence from below. The question is how li and qi map onto this, and the answer is not simple, because the two Chinese concepts fall on different sides of the Corpus's own structure.

Consider first what corroborates the Corpus. The Cheng-Zhu priority of li is, in the words of its own expositors, the priority of pattern over qi, roughly the priority of form over matter — the doctrine that the normative, ordering structure is the more fundamental reality and the material medium is its expression. This is, in its structure, the Corpus's vertical ontology stated in Chinese terms: a formal principle prior to and governing the material, the pattern that provides the standing orders from which the world of things proceeds. The Cheng-Zhu li-realism is therefore a genuine ally of the Corpus's perpendicular structure, an independent arrival, within Chinese

metaphysics, at the priority of the formal-vertical over the material. To the extent that the Corpus wishes to claim that pattern is prior to stuff, it has in the *lixue* a sophisticated and fully-developed precedent.

Now consider what complicates the Corpus, for this is the part that must not be glossed. *Li* is principle, pattern, coherence — and principle is not an efflux. It does not flow, emanate, or pour forth; it is the static, intelligible structure that the flowing stuff exhibits. The Corpus's central generative mechanism, however, is effluence: the descent of qualitative reality as an outflowing from above, a pouring-forth that the Corpus expressly prefers to emergence. And effluence, as a generative and self-moving outflow, maps far more naturally onto *qi* than onto *li*. For *qi* is exactly a generative, self-moving substance: its very nature, in Zhang Zai's account, is *sheng*, vitality or generation; it is a self-moving force that depends on nothing outside itself for its motion; it condenses into forms and disperses from them in a ceaseless generative flow. If anything in the Chinese scheme is an effluence, it is *qi*, not *li*. The Corpus thus finds its two commitments falling on opposite sides of the *li*-*qi* distinction: its commitment to the priority of the formal-vertical aligns with *li*, the principle; but its commitment to effluence as the generative mechanism aligns with *qi*, the substance. The formal priority is *li*-like; the generative outflow is *qi*-like.

This is not a contradiction in the Corpus, but it is a needed clarification, and it has two consequences worth stating plainly. The first is that the Corpus, if it adopts the *li*-*qi* vocabulary, will require both terms, mapped to different aspects of its own structure: *li* for the formal, vertical, ordering priority — the pattern that the higher reality is and imposes; and *qi* for the generative, effluent medium — the outflowing substance by which the qualitative descends. The Corpus's effluence is then best understood not as the flowing of *li*, which does not flow, but as the patterned flowing of a *qi*-like substance under the governance of an *li*-like principle: form determining the channels, substance doing the flowing. The second consequence is that the Corpus must take a considered position in the Chinese priority debate. Its vertical ontology commits it, in Chinese terms, to a priority of *li* over *qi* — to pattern as prior to and governing substance — and therefore aligns it with the Cheng-Zhu school of principle against the *qi*-monism of Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi. This is a real choice, and the Corpus should make it knowingly: it is, in the Chinese landscape, a *li*-realist and not a *qi*-monist, holding that the formal-vertical principle is prior to the material medium it configures, even while it borrows from the *qi* tradition the generative, effluent character of the medium itself. Zhu Xi's own subtle reconciliation — that pattern is implicated in the very make-up and possible configurations of the substance, which is why the patterns can emerge — offers the Corpus a model for holding both: the effluent substance is inherently orderable by the formal principle, so that the outflow is never formless but always already patterned by the *li*-like reality that is prior to it.

VI. What the Friction Teaches

The points at which *li* and *qi* resist a clean mapping are precisely the points at which they teach the Corpus something about itself. The resistance shows that the Corpus's vertical ontology and its effluence mechanism are not the same claim, though they are easily run together. The vertical ontology is a claim about priority — that the formal and rarefied is prior to the material and dense

— and it is an li-claim. The effluence mechanism is a claim about generation — that the qualitative descends by an outflowing rather than arising by emergence — and it is a qi-claim. By forcing these apart, the li-qi distinction clarifies that the Corpus holds two distinct commitments that must be articulated separately and then related: a formal priority and a generative outflow, principle and substance, the channel and the flowing. A system that conflated them would be unable to say what it is that flows, or what governs the flowing; the Chinese distinction supplies exactly those two roles and shows that the Corpus needs both filled. The friction, in other words, does not weaken the Corpus; it refines it, by lending it a vocabulary in which the formal and the generative aspects of its own descent can at last be named apart and then rejoined.

VII. Conclusion

Yin and yang, li and qi, are concepts the Corpus had used without grounding, and grounding them yields both corroboration and refinement. Yin and yang — relational, non-substantial, non-moral, mutually rooted, waxing and waning, the two-poled rhythm of one reality — answer with structural exactness to the supernal polarity, with the one reminder that their moral neutrality requires the Corpus to locate the moral valence of its poles in the theological content it adds. The Taiji answers to the Kether glyph and its zero-and-one, with Zhu Xi's identification of the Taiji as the generating principle clarifying that the first determination is of the nature of formal pattern rather than of substance. And li and qi, mapped with care, reveal that the Corpus holds two distinct commitments: a priority of the formal-vertical, which aligns it with the Cheng-Zhu li-realism and which it should own as a considered position against qi-monism; and a generative effluence, which aligns not with li but with qi, the self-moving substance whose nature is generation. The Corpus therefore needs both terms — li for the ordering, vertical principle and qi for the effluent, generative medium — and is best understood as holding that the qualitative descends as a qi-like outflow channeled by an li-like form. What began as a debt owed to four unexamined concepts ends as a sharpening of the Corpus's own account of its descent: not the flowing of principle, which does not flow, but the patterned flowing of substance under principle, form and outflow together, named at last in the oldest vocabulary for pattern and stuff.

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