

I N T E R V I E W

with Bruce Bentley

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*How did life begin according to Chinese Philosophy?*

First up, Chinese philosophy through the ages has not been the homogeneous entity that people tend to suspect. There's always been lively debates between differing individuals and schools of thought. There's been mystics, skeptics and a host of others. However, the dominant and popularized view has it that in the 'beginning' there was a primordial chaos which divided into two. These were Yin and Yang. From that creative combination, night and day, solid and liquid, the natural and supernatural, above and below came into mutual play.

*Can you give an easy example of an interplay of Yin Yang?*

Take the action of standing up. It only makes sense if you were sitting down - otherwise it simply has no meaning, nothing to relate to. Because the Tai Ji (Yin Yang symbol) contains an essence of the other and vice

versa, that's those two dots of opposite colour in each half of the emblem, the dynamism of action is always in keeping with the future participation of coming events. The phenomenal world would be locked otherwise. When you stand up, that becomes an easy decision knowing that full well at your moment of choice you can sit down and on it goes.

Looking at the Tai Ji symbol two dimensionally we've got two fishes, a little part of the yin in the yang and the yang in the yin. It would be really interesting to put it on a 3Dimensional or 4Dimensional plane. This thing would be writhing and moving all the time - it would be ever changing. This was the Chinese notion of nature and the universe - always changing, as there is two opposites working as a dynamic, working in a kind of flux between one and the other - each pursuing the other, each creating the other.

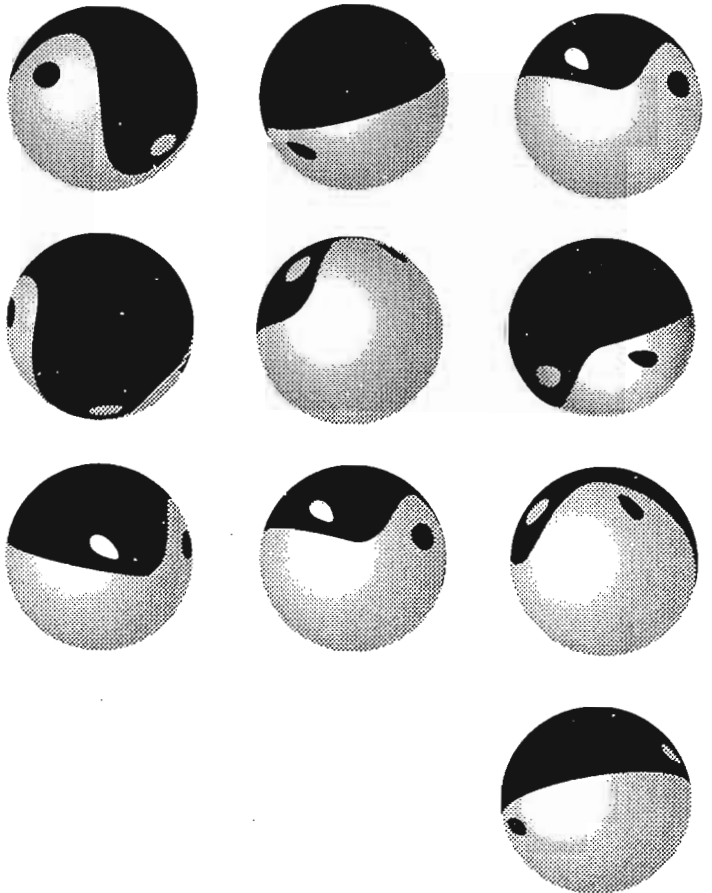


illustration by Robyn Spear

*How does the combination of Yin Yang translate to Chinese medicine?*

The Chinese have utilised the principle of Yin Yang to observe nature for thousands of years. This feeling for being participants in nature rather than in conflict with it, which is so much part of the Judaic Christian tradition, saw the body also made up of Yin Yang. This held notions of supporting the livelihood of the body by sustaining its essence. It didn't make too much sense to the Chinese to investigate a corpse to try to find out what makes us tick. And if per chance there was something to gain, it begs the question, what is now missing that made that pretty important difference between life and death? The Chinese call it Qi. Chinese medicine in all its forms we are acquainted with - acupuncture, herbs, cupping, tuina and the rest, is all about the balance of Yin Yang, the promotion of Qi.



Illustration by Robyn Spear

*Who do the Chinese credit these traditional Chinese medicine therapies to?*

There's two explanations about the first practitioners. The first is based on popular belief while the other is established by historical and archeological scholarship. Most Chinese believe in what's known as the popular tradition while others are concerned with historical data.

*Postures of the Zhongli gymnasts*

The Yellow Emperor  
Huang Di

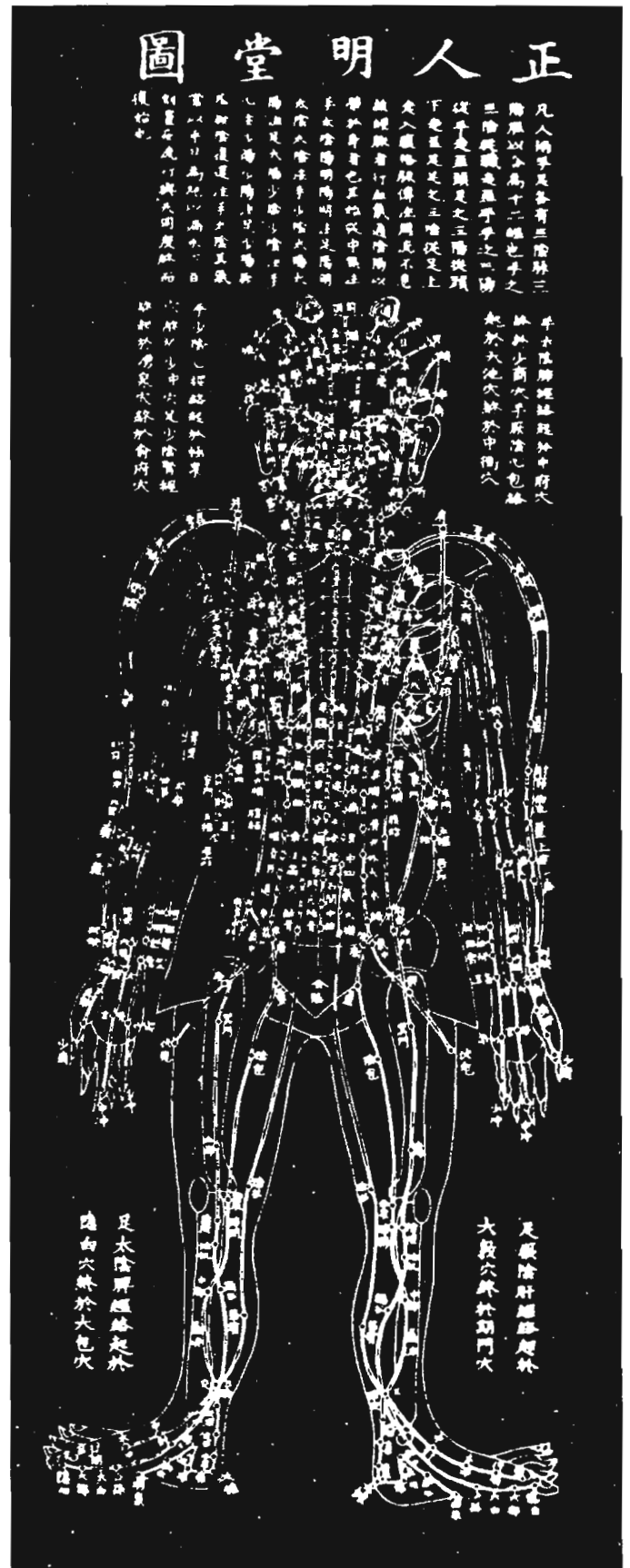


Usually the Chinese accept that Traditional Chinese medicine is around 5000 years old and believe its primary philosophical and

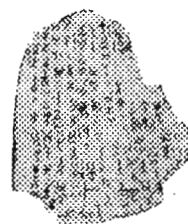
practical foundations began during a period of time known as the Legendary Period. The three Emperors, Fu-Hsi, Shen Nung and Huang Di all left their mark. Fu-Hsi is believed to have advanced the principle of Yin yang and guided the development of the I Ching or Book of Changes. Following him, Shen Nung is known as the founder of herb medicine, having tasted and experimented with hundreds on himself to see what they did. Alas, he is believed to have tried one too many and he died of poisoning. The third emperor was the illustrious Huang Di or Yellow Emperor. Amongst a long list of cultivated discoveries, he, together with a Taoist healer known as Chi Po laid the basis of acupuncture. All this is well before 'harder' evidence is supplied by scientific research.

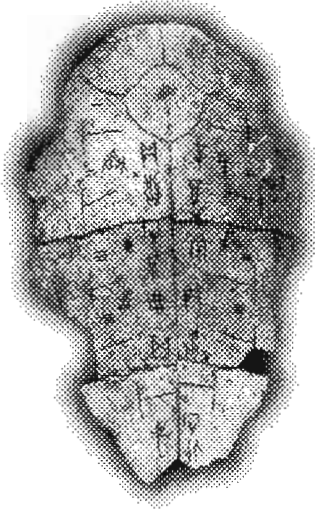
*And what of this scientific research?*

The first evidence of medical practice was in the period of time known as the Shang Dynasty around 3 and a half thousand years ago. There's evidence of forms of divination that were used for medical purposes. There was one form where there were different characters written on the segments of a tortoise shell. (Archeologically they have found these as evidence.) They would have thrown these



Traditional acupuncture diagram





on the fire and depending on how the fire made the tortoise shell split, you could divine certain things, prophesise certain things for the future. And that included some aspects of health divination.

*So the legendary period was like a golden period?*

Yeah, it appears all, maybe all, cultures have a golden period somewhere in the hazy past. Anglo Saxons have King Arthur and the Round Table, the Indians have theirs. For the Chinese, the Legendary period was the epoch which brought to light, many things that establish the Chinese as unique. In many ways the Legendary Period is the grounded soul of the Chinese. They take great solice in the emotional recognition of Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor. He is a

quintessential hero. The three emperors are thought of as originators of the essential bedrock of Chinese cultural understanding and social and moral codes. They were emperors but were in constant communication and harmony with the rest of the populace. Although these social and ethical aspects were later developed by Confucius, really the bedrock of most Chinese social and moral codes pretty much came from how these emperors conducted themselves and went about their business of taking care of their subjects and initiating and developing these skills like medicine that have fully benefited the people.

*Is there a supernaturalistic tradition of medicine practiced in China?*

Not these days - the party has seen to that. The government pretty much pervades all life in China and they don't permit the practice of anything weird. In old China, a large slice of medical practice leaned towards magic and the spirit world. When some cracks appear in the tight grip that holds social life in China, I'm sure the old beliefs will again start to flourish. A lot of Asia is up to the eyeballs in supernatural healing traditions.

*What have these supernatural traditions got to offer?*

Well they move towards explaining 'why' illness occurs. Naturalistic traditions based on natural phenomena like weather conditions or viruses or diet account for 'how' someone gets sick. The supernaturalistic traditions are fascinating for lots of reasons, not least they aim in part to reintegrate the person back into the community by social means. A style of supernaturalistic healing involves the work of a medium. A medium is someone who has contact with the spirit world. They are called upon to give reasons 'why'. For example a spirit, talking through a medium may say, so and so is unwell because she didn't dust her grandfather's grave or because he pissed on a tree where a spirit lives. These are transgressions of the social norm and set the person apart from the outgoing interests of the group. When the sick person performs, lets say the dusting down of the grave she is no longer at odds with her social world. And I've heard of many cases where gravely ill people who do these actions get immediately well. They get better by becoming part of the community. Illness is treated in social terms.