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YINYANG AND MAO'S DIALECTICS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE

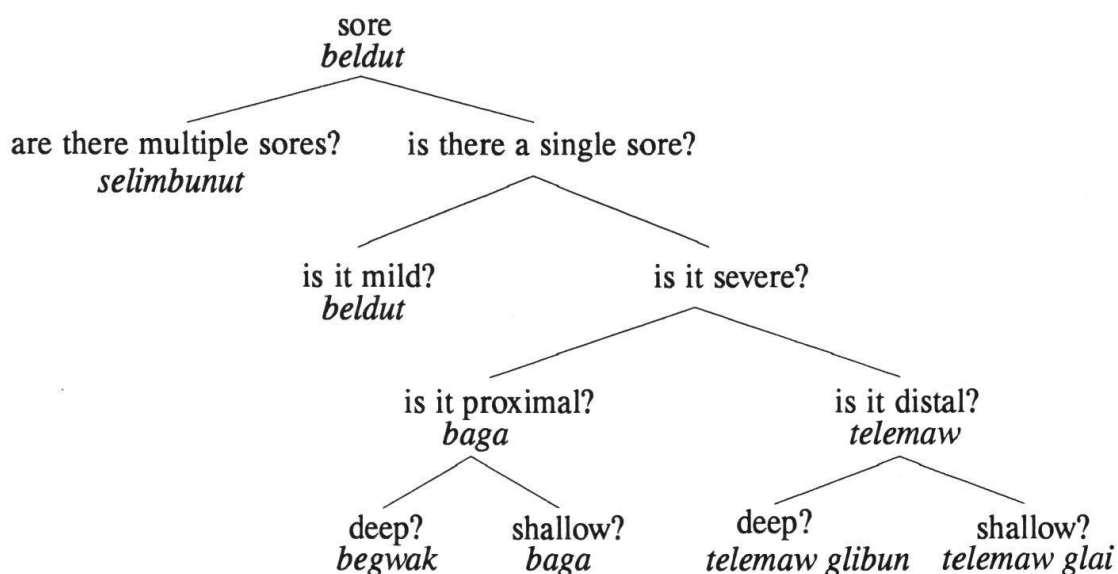
Elisabeth Hsu, University of Cambridge

Fieldwork experiences can lead the ethnographer to decide that certain problems of interpreting social practice are best reformulated by exploring the meaning of culture-specific terms. Anthropologists then become involved in studies for which linguists have developed sophisticated models and methods.¹ One of the path-breaking investigations in this domain between anthropology and linguistics was Frake's "Diagnosis of Disease among the Subanun of Mindanao" (1961). Frake intended to investigate social structure, but in order to participate in ordinary conversation, he found it necessary to understand the meaning of words which anthropologists classify as belonging to the technical terminology of such marginal fields as ethnobotany and medical anthropology.

Frake's study resulted in a taxonomy of the Subanun words for skin "diseases", based on the method of componential analysis. Componential analysis treated word meaning as if it could be assessed by its decomposition into different basic features, just as segments in phonology are identified by being decomposed into distinctive features. Like the phonologist, who focuses on minimal pairs to determine the distinction between two segments, Frake established word meaning chiefly by examining minimal pairs and the contrast in meaning within them. For instance, he would ask: "Is this a mild or severe sore ... is it proximal or distal ... is it deep or shallow?" This allowed him not only to identify the diagnostic criteria according to which the Subanun classified their skin diseases, but also to put them into a hierarchical order (cf. figure 1).

1 This article, which elaborates on chapter 6.2 of my Ph.D. thesis, has been much improved due to the valuable comments by Kasia Jaszczolt, Francis Nolan, and Robert Neather.

Figure 1: A lexical hierarchy (based on Frake 1961:129, fig. 3)

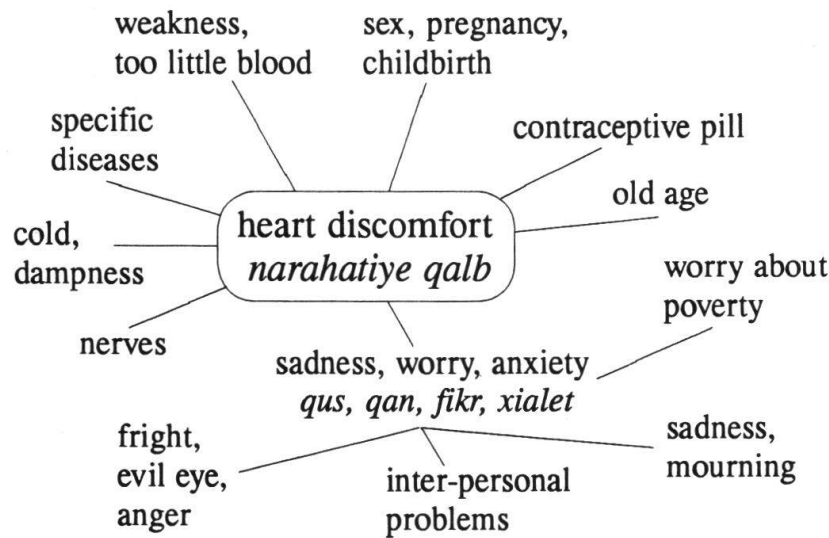


Frake's procedure is today still basic to any inquiry into indigenous knowledge. However, his presentation of the results as a lexical hierarchy perhaps reflects less the conceptualisations of the Subanun than the diligence and systematic procedure of the fieldworker. More importantly, "ethnoscience" inquiries of this kind have been criticised for their simplistic attitude towards word meaning: "Meaning, it is held, is constituted as the relationship between classificatory categories and the diseases which they designate" (Good 1977:26).

Instead of focusing on distinctive features which are useful for setting up boundaries between minimal pairs, Good (1977) emphasized the need to explore experiences and feelings which typically "run together" with a word. Confronted with the finding of an investigation that his wife had carried out, namely, that Iranian women in Maragegh would suffer from "heart distress" (*narahatiye qalb*) after taking the contraceptive pill, he recast the problem, typically arising in the context of family planning, as a study on word meaning and thereby opened up a new level of anthropological inquiry. Good proposed to establish "semantic networks" which highlighted the commonalities between various words, rather than their boundaries. He put *narahatiye qalb* into relation with these women's life experiences and presented his findings in a diagram where this word was

surrounded by “clouds” of others (cf. figure 2). These “clouds” of words can be viewed as indicating the women’s culture-specific “connotations” of the word *narahatiye qalb*, “connotations” in the sense of emotive or affective components (Lyons 1977:176), additional to its central meaning:

Figure 2: “Semantic Networks” (based on Good 1977:40, fig.1)



This article likewise concerns word meaning and its approach broadly correlates with that of Frake and Good, for it seeks to elucidate the meaning of words normally considered by anthropologists as technical terms, in ordinary conversation. However, rather than focusing on illness categories, it explores the meaning of a pair of words denoting an age-old philosophical concept, *yin* and *yang*. The findings are based on ethnographic fieldwork (1988-89) carried out in classrooms and clinics of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), an environment in which the terms *yin* and *yang* were constantly encountered.

The elusiveness of the words *yin* and *yang* made it impossible to proceed in Frake’s manner, which consisted largely of exploring the “referential meaning” of words by relating an utterance to a phenomenon outside the linguistic system (Lyons 1977:177-97). Notably, Frake investigated conditions visible on the skin, to which the researcher could physi-

cally point when asking a question.² This same elusiveness also deterred me from setting up semantic networks and exploring the connotations of *yin* and *yang* among a sample of TCM doctors. Considering the vast range of possibilities for personal interpretation, I anticipated that statements elucidated in interviews, though indicative of some of their connotations, would be highly idiosyncratic.

The following analysis of the word meaning of *yin* and *yang* focuses, to begin with, on the “sense” of a word and the “sense relations” between *yin* and *yang*, an aspect of word meaning that can be determined through linguistic analysis alone (Lyons 1977:197-206), ideally without leaving the linguistic system. If one treats the philosophical concepts *yin* and *yang* as lexical opposites, one can explore their semantics with models linguists set up for investigating lexical opposition. Among those, Cruse’s (1986) classification has the merit of providing a fairly comprehensive and articulate, if externally imposed, analytic grid.

The article continues by showing, in the second part, that a decontextualised exploration of word meaning – even with the most sophisticated method – accounts neither for semantic changes nor the culture-specific nuances of those words (connotations in the philosophical sense, see Lyons 1977:158-9). For exploring those, *yin* and *yang* as referred to in medicine have to be contextualised within the political arena of the PRC. Upon closer investigation, it becomes evident that idioms of political rhetoric have been integrated into medical writings for describing the interrelation between *yin* and *yang*. For as we shall see, at least one aspect of *yin* and *yang* is in TCM defined in a sense that differs from that found in the classical medical literature.

However, the semantics of *yin* and *yang* cannot explain why *yin* and *yang* were constantly mentioned in TCM clinics, and acupuncture and moxibustion wards in particular. The article ends with a suggestion as to how these differing semantics of *yin* and *yang* operate in the realm of prag-

2 According to Lyons (1977:176), “reference” is an utterance-dependent aspect of word meaning. “Denotation” is, by contrast, not utterance-dependent and concerns the relation between what linguists define as lexical items and the whole class of individuals outside the linguistic system that are named by these lexical items; see “extensional definition” (footnote 13).

matic usage: it suggests that the frequent mentioning of these terms in TCM clinics may be explained both on medical and political grounds.

Yinyang in TCM

In Chinese philosophy and cosmology, the meaning of *yin* and *yang* has been exhaustively discussed by, for instance, Granet ([1934] 1988:101-26), Needham (1956:273-8), and Graham (1986). *Yin* and *yang* figured prominently in the “medicine of systematic correspondences” (Unschuld 1985), particularly in acupuncture and moxibustion where the vessels (*mai*) have always been differentiated from each other on grounds of their qualities of *yin* and *yang* (e.g. *Yinyang shiyimai jiujiing jiaben* 1985).³ Since Porkert (1974:9-43) and Sivin (1987:59-70) provide an extensive account on *yin* and *yang* in Chinese medicine, no attempt is made here to approximate their meaning in classical writings.

In TCM courses, *yin* and *yang* are generally presented during the first lectures, as basic notions of medical reasoning. TCM teachers thereby perpetuate the tradition of discussing *yin* and *yang* in the introductory part of medical teachings. They follow the lead of TCM textbook compilers, who by and large have adopted the overall structure of Zhang Jiebin's *Canon of Categories* (*Leijing* 1624) and Li Zhongzi's *Essentials of the Inner Canon* (*Neijing Zhiyao* 1642) for ordering the topics of discussion in their introductory textbooks, which selectively reproduce contents mostly from the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* (*Huangdi Neijing*).⁴

In the late fifties and early sixties when Chinese medicine gained government recognition to the extent that it started to be taught at university level, the introductory course comprised to a large extent the contents of the textbook *Interpretation of the Inner Canon* (*Neijing jiangyi*). During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), however, the government promulgated introductory TCM booklets and books, all written in modern Chinese. At TCM colleges, standardised versions were used for instruction: in the ear-

3 This may explain why *yinyang* were more frequently mentioned in acupuncture and moxibustion wards than elsewhere.

4 For further detail, see Hsu (1992:169; 187-97).

ly eighties the *Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (*Zhongyixue jichu*) and in the late eighties the *TCM Fundamentals* (*Zhongyi jichu lilun*).⁵

In the *Fundamentals* (Yin 1984:12-15), the interrelations of *yin* and *yang* are considered to refer to different “manifestations” or “kinds” of change. Their interrelations are characterised by the following four standard phrases: “control through opposition” (*duili zhiyue*), “mutual reliance and mutual use” (*hugen huyong*), “equilibrium of waxing and waning” (*xiaozhang pingheng*), and “mutual transformation” (*xianghu zhuanhua*). These idiomatic phrases represent the subheadings of the paragraphs in which the interrelation of *yin* and *yang* is explicated in modern Chinese, complemented by citations from the medical classics. However, in contrast to the TCM textbooks like the *Interpretation* (Cheng 1984), which built on careful scholarship, the paragraphs on *yin* and *yang* in the *Fundamentals* do not stand up to analytical scrutiny: it is simply impossible to differentiate between the four types of change ascribed to *yin* and *yang* from their description in the textbook. The citations from the medical classics do not match the idiomatic phrase they are supposed to illustrate,⁶ certain citations are inconsistently interpreted in modern Chinese,⁷ in certain paragraphs citations from the classics are lacking,⁸ sometimes citations from the classics are not indicated as such,⁹ and an example from medical practice is discussed only once.¹⁰

Admittedly, the text reads smoothly. Our teacher recited large sections from it while lecturing, and his students memorised the above four idiomatic phrases to regurgitate them in exams. But when asked what exactly the difference between these four aspects of *yin* and *yang* was, they

5 For an evaluation of some TCM textbooks, see Sivin (1987:30-6).

6 For instance, a citation which clearly describes the “equilibrium of *yin* and *yang*” is cited in the paragraph of “control through opposition” (Yin 1984:12).

7 For instance, another citation which was interpreted to refer to the “equilibrium of *yin* and *yang*” is cited in the paragraph on “control through opposition” (Yin 1984:13).

8 For instance, the only citation mentioned in the paragraph on the “equilibrium of *yin* and *yang*” had already been quoted in the paragraph on “control through opposition” (Yin 1984:13-4).

9 Yin (1984:13).

10 Yin (1984:16).

found it difficult to explain. Their teacher had illustrated his lecture on *yin* and *yang* by mentioning examples of well-known opposites, but even these concrete examples that he wrote on the blackboard could not clarify my question as to the exact difference between the four kinds of interrelation between *yin* and *yang* (cf. figure 3).

Figure 3: Blackboard examples for the Four Interrelations between *yin* and *yang*

1. Control through opposition (<i>duili zhiyue</i>):	<i>fire checks water, water checks fire</i> <i>heaven checks earth, earth checks heaven</i> <i>left checks right, right checks left</i>
2. Mutual reliance and mutual use (<i>hugen huyong</i>):	<i>teacher and student</i> <i>man and woman</i> <i>heaven and earth</i>
3. Equilibrium of waxing and waning (<i>xiaozhang pingheng</i>):	working (<i>gongzuo</i>) ↑ ↓ eating (<i>jinshi</i>)
4. Mutual transformation (<i>xianghu zhuanhua</i>):	function and energy (<i>gongneng</i>) ↑ ↓ nourishment (<i>yingyang</i>)

It made sense that the relation between “nourishment and energy”, and vice versa, was considered a case of “mutual transformation” of *yin* and *yang*, but what exactly was meant by the phrase that *yin* and *yang* described a relation of “control through opposition”? To what extent did the relationship of “mutual reliance and mutual use” differ from that of “control through opposition”? Why was the relation between “working and eating”, when considered a quality of *yin* and *yang*, labelled as “equilibrium of waxing and waning” and not as a case of “mutual transformation”? Questions of this kind abounded during the introductory lesson that I attended, as I copied the teachings on the blackboard into my notebook.

Such questions did not bother my undergraduate colleagues. I watched them memorising phrase after phrase, reciting them loudly in the early mornings on the medical college’s sports ground. “We have just begun our

studies,” some would say, and would express faith that over time, particularly after their training in medical practice, these “empty” notions would be filled with the particular meanings of medical practice. The phrases they learnt by heart were standardised, but their meaning would be determined situationally by the particularities of practical training. A teacher would then comment on a patient suffering from a certain condition with one of these “empty” phrases and this would result in attaching a situation-dependent, “referential meaning” to the phrase. The students were obviously not disturbed by the inconsistencies and contradictions in the text which was supposed to explain the meaning of the above four idiomatic phrases and describe the four different kinds of change that the interrelations between *yin* and *yang* designated.

The process by which the meaning of such vague and polysemous words is constituted is in itself a theme of investigation. Boyer (1986) explored such “empty notions” and how their meaning was established in different “discourse registers”. Toren (1996) investigated “ritualised behaviours”, such as rules of how to behave in accordance with one’s place in the social hierarchy during meals, church services, or village meetings, and noted that they become automatic in children well before their meaning is constituted, the meaning aspect of these behaviours being secondary. She pointed out that the embodiment of a behaviour is crucial to the process by which its meaning is cognitively constituted. The learning process of vague and polysemous notions such as *yin* and *yang* seems in these respects similar to that of learning ritualised behaviour. However, interesting as a study of students’ concept acquisition may be, this article is concerned with the meaning of *yin* and *yang* in our teacher’s and the TCM textbook compilers’ understanding.

The starting point for this analysis is the above diagram which a TCM teacher at the Yunnan TCM College drew on the blackboard during an introductory class (cf. figure 3). Since the teacher condensed his ideas in this diagram in words rather than sentences, this study explores word rather than sentence meaning. The following section centres on the pairs of words with which he illustrated the interrelation between *yin* and *yang*.

Lexical Semantics: a Typology of Opposites

Cruse's (1986) *Lexical Semantics* provides a detailed typology of opposites in three whole chapters. Elaborating on Lyons' (1977) *Semantics*, he differentiates opposites of four different types, the three major ones of which are "complementaries"¹¹ characterised by an either-or relation of opposition, "antonyms"¹² characterised by a gradable relation of opposition, and "directional opposites" characterised by contrary motions (cf. table 1).

- 11 The term "complementary" is from Lyons (1977:271-2). For the student of Chinese medicine, it is confusing that the technical term "complementaries" designates opposites standing in an either-or relation of mutual exclusion in lexical semantics. In Chinese studies, the word "complementary" is generally used to designate a relation of interdependence between opposites that mutually complement each other. By complementing each other, they form the totality of possible options, but they need not stand in an either-or relation to each other (e.g. Sivin 1987:59).
- 12 The term "antonymy" is elsewhere used in a more general sense (e.g. Lloyd 1966), synonymous with Cruse's and Lyons' use of the term "opposition". "Antonyms" are then synonymous with what Cruse and Lyons call "opposites".

Table 1: Opposites in Lexical Semantics (Cruse 1986)

Linguistic Term for the Opposites	Description of the Relation	Examples given by Cruse (only valid in English)
1. Complementaries	either or relation	dead/alive, ...
2. Antonyms	gradable relation	
1. polar antonyms	objectively descriptive	fast/slow, heavy/light, ...
2. overlapping anton.	evaluative	good/bad, polite/rude, ...
3. equipollent anton.	subjective	sweet/sour, nice/nasty, ...
3. Directional Opposites	contrary motion	
1. directions	“potential paths”	up/down, north/south, ...
2. antipodals	extremes	centre/periphery, ...
3. counterparts	balanced irregularities in a uniform shape	convex/concave, male/female, ...
4. reversives	motions in opposite directions	rise/fall, enter/leave, pack/unpack, ...
5. converses	relation in converging direction	before/after, predator/prey, guest/host, teacher/pupil,
4. Pseudo-opposites	opposition of one to several opposites	thin/thick-fat, old/new-young, ...

Naturally, anyone applying a typology of English semantics to Chinese lexical items has to be cautious, for the question of how far such a highly specialised model of one language can provide universally applicable categories is subject to controversy. Indeed, even in respect of English, one may want to question the usefulness of Cruse's categories. For instance, it is not uncontroversial to differentiate between an “objectively descriptive relation”, an “evaluative relation”, and a “subjective relation” (table 1, paragraphs 2.1–2.3). Or, to cite another example, Cruse's category of “directional opposites” is fairly large because it subsumes categories like

“converses” among the “directional opposites”, as a kind of metaphorical extension of directional opposition (table 1, paragraph 3.5). One may furthermore point to the seeming arbitrariness of the definition of semantic categories or point out that certain words fall into several categories of the typology. In spite of these reservations, Cruse’s typology has the strength of presenting each type of opposition in a fairly systematic way and he discusses a wide range of lexical items, often with an eye on alternative possibilities of categorisation.

It immediately became clear that semantic opposition depends on convention. For instance, children having heard of the Creation in Sunday school would oppose “land” to “water” rather than “fire” to “water” (figure 3, point 1). Bureaucrats of the United Nations tend to oppose “working time” to “time at leisure”, and not “working” to “eating” as our Chinese teacher did (figure 3, point 3). Moreover, the “multivocality” of the concepts posed serious problems to any endeavour of trying to pin down their meaning. Water, for instance, may refer to that which flows in rivers and has depth in lakes, as the stuff we drink and urinate, to a quality that is cold or salty, sometimes dark, sometimes clear, to the supple and weak, or to the vigour which makes plants pliant.

Seen in opposition to fire, still another characteristic of water may become apparent: “control through opposition” would probably indicate the use of water for extinguishing a fire and, vice versa, the use of fire can turn the visible water into invisible vapour (figure 3, point 1). In terms of lexical semantics, the use of water to extinguish fire, or vice versa, would be understood to designate an either-or relation between *yin*-water and *yang*-fire. Water and fire would then be classified as opposites that exclude each other (“complementaries” in Cruse’s terminology): if one is alive, the other is killed and made dead (table 1, paragraph 1). On the other hand, if one were to consider them as indicative of the quality “hot” (*re*) as opposed to “cold” (*han*), they would refer to an opposition comparable to *yang*-heat and *yin*-coldness checking and balancing each other on a gradable scale of temperature. In terms of lexical semantics, they would be considered “polar” or “equipollent antonyms” (table 1, paragraphs 2.1 and 2.3).

Finally – and this is indeed the sense of water and fire that prevails in Chinese medical reasoning – one could view their relation as one of contrary motion. In one of the earliest texts on the Five Phases (*wuxing*), the

chapter of the "Great Plan" (*Hong fan*) in the *Book of Documents* (*Shang Shu*), fire and water describe a "course of action" (Graham 1986:76): "Water means soaking downwards; fire means flaming upwards ..." (Karlgren 1950:30). In that context water and fire appear as "directional opposites", and they can be classified as "reversives" (table 1, paragraph 3.4).

Evidently, the two decontextualised words "water" and "fire" on the blackboard of a classroom offer much room for speculation about possible kinds of opposition. Cruse's typology allows for a differentiated analysis of possible interpretations, but it cannot help identify which relationship between *yin*-water and *yang*-fire is delimited by the phrase "control through opposition": is the interrelation one of an either-or opposition, one of a gradable opposition, or one of a directional opposition?

Another problem, intrinsic to applying the framework of a classification of English lexical items to another language and its cultural context, concerns the interrelation between the "connotation" of a word and the "sense" of a word. To what extent is the "sense" of a word which depends on the relation of the word with other words within the linguistic system determined by its "connotation" (in the philosophical sense) which depends on its "intensional definition", whereby the "intensional definition" of a word refers to "the set of essential properties which determine the applicability of the term" (Lyons 1977:158-9)?¹³ For instance, heaven and earth are classified as "counterparts" by Cruse (1986:225), who accounts for their "balanced irregularities in a uniform shape" (table 1, paragraph 3.3), but in classical Chinese medical writings little is said about the shape of heaven and earth. Their shape does not belong among the properties that determine their interrelation. In general, heaven (*tian*) and earth (*di*) tend to be used in the sense of "directional opposites", like above (*shang*) and below (*xia*), whereby it depends on the context whether they are used in the sense of "antipodals" or "converses" (table 1, paragraphs 3.2 or 3.5).

Male and female tend to be classified as "complementaries" in English (table 1, paragraph 1). They complement each other in forming the totality of possible options: normally, a human who is not female, is male

13 The "intensional definition" (connotation in the philosophical sense) is generally contrasted with the "extensional definition" (i.e. the denotation) of a word which refers to the class of things to which they are correctly applied (Lyons 1977:206-15).

(Palmer 1981:96, Lyons 1977:271-2). In consideration of their sexual organs, Cruse (1986:225) classifies male and female as “counterparts” (table 1, paragraph 3.3). Although the shape of the sexual organs was known, it would be counter-intuitive to classify the Chinese words *nan-nü* to refer to an opposition of “counterparts”. One may also be inclined to classify them as complementaries insofar as they are conceived of as forming the totality of possible options,¹⁴ but in Chinese medicine the either-or relation between the male and female is not as pronounced as in English everyday life.¹⁵ Rather, the male and the female primarily had connotations which echoed their social roles of husband and wife, and they seemed to be used in this sense. Since husband and wife belong among the “converses” (Cruse 1986:232), male and female in TCM are most likely to be classified as “converses” too (table 1, paragraph 3.5).

The above two examples show that the “sense relation” between heaven and earth as “converses” goes hand in hand with an absence of an “intensional definition” concerning shape, and that the “sense relation” between male and female as “converses” is established irrespectively of an “intensional definition” with regard to shape. Though one guesses that the “connotations” of a word determine the way it is used in respect to other words and hence its “sense”, the above examples show that the “connotation” and the “sense” of a word concern independently established aspects of word meaning. Since they are language specific, they differ for words which are in translation identical.

Cruse classifies “converses” among the “directonal opposites” (table 1, paragraph 3), which, as mentioned above, can be contested. If one were nevertheless to adhere to Cruse’s classification, the analysis of the sense relations between *yin* and *yang* would yield a very straightforward result: the TCM teacher mostly mentioned examples of opposition that emphasized a mode of perceiving the universe in terms of directionality: “left and right” (figure 3, point 1) indicate “directions” (Cruse 1986:223), “teacher

14 However, many medical treatises list diseases for man in general, women, and children separately which would suggest that, in fact, three different categories form the totality of possible options (e.g. Despeux and Obringer 1997:71).

15 On androgynous males, the male and female in 16th and 17th century China, sex and gender changes, men transforming into women, and vice versa, see Furth (1988).

and pupil" (figure 3, point 2) constitute an example of "converses" (Cruse 1986:232), and "heaven and earth" (figure 3, points 1 and 2), like "man and woman" (figure 3, point 2), are in Chinese most likely to be understood as "converses". "Water and fire" (figure 3, point 1) may, as shown above, also be used in the sense of "reversives". The arrows with which the teacher related "working" to "eating" and "energy" to "nourishment", and vice versa (figure 3, points 3 and 4), also seem to indicate the teacher's preoccupation with directionality.

This finding makes perfect sense in consideration of the ancient conception of the universe as being in constant flow and flux. Flows and changes have an inherent directionality. Someone with a static and materialist view of the world may therefore be inclined to classify certain opposites, like heaven and earth, as "counterparts" while heaven and earth are, according to the ancient Chinese worldview, best conceived of as "directional opposites". Could it be that the examples our teacher raised, which emphasized directional opposition, may be taken as indices for his understanding of *yin* and *yang* within a universe that was in accord with the ancient Chinese one?

The above has shown that Cruse's classification of lexical opposites in English allows for an articulate analysis of the "sense relations" between *yin* and *yang* from an outsider's viewpoint (insiders like our TCM teacher would never have said that *yin* and *yang* were directional opposites). The major problems encountered are that semantic opposition depends on convention, that many lexical items stand out for their multivocality, and that the method of semantic inquiry by introspection does not allow for more than tentative suggestions. Nevertheless, Cruse's model allows us to identify a common feature of all the examples raised in an introductory TCM lecture for illustrating the interrelations between *yin* and *yang*.

However, the analysis cannot explain why TCM textbook compilers characterise the interrelations between *yin* and *yang* in terms of the above four idiomatic phrases and what distinguishes one from the other. The above, decontextualised investigation into word meaning has to be complemented by contextualising these words within the wider social realm in which they are used.

Word Meaning in Context: Resemblances between Political and Medical Rhetoric

When placed in the context of PRC politics, TCM texts reveal a striking overall resemblance between the political and medical rhetoric which has long been noticed: Unschuld (1985: 260, 357-9) has translated a text passage which highlights the resemblance between *yin* and *yang* and Mao's dialectics, and Farquhar (1987) devotes an entire article to this topic. A careful reading of Mao's (1961) essay "On Contradiction" (*Maodun lun*) in Chinese shows that this essay contains variations of two of the above four idiomatic phrases which TCM textbook compilers have used for describing the interrelations between *yin* and *yang*. The following two sections explore the "connotations" (in the philosophical sense) of these two phrases, namely *duili tongyi* (unity of opposites) and *huxiang zhuanhua* (mutual transformation), and their application in TCM textbooks as *duili zhiyue* (control through opposition) and *xianghu zhuanhua* (mutual transformation).

The unity of opposites and the necessity of struggle

"Unity of opposites" (*duili tongyi*) was a favourite phrase which our teacher used during his lecture as a synonym to the textbook wording "control through opposition" (*duili zhiyue*). "Unity of opposites" is also at the core of Mao's essay "On Contradiction".¹⁶ "The principle of contradiction within things, that is the principle of the 'unity of opposites', is the basic principle of materialist dialectics" (Mao 1961:287).

"Unity of opposites" highlights in Mao's writings not only the contradiction within things, but also stresses the necessity of struggle. Mao (1975:341-2) cites Lenin: "The unity ... of opposites is conditional, temporary, transitory, relative. The struggle of mutually exclusive opposites is absolute, just as motion and development are absolute." Mao claims "that the contradictory aspects in every process exclude each other, struggle with each other and are in opposition to each other" (Mao 1975:337).

16 For detailed discussion of Mao's notion of "contradiction" (*maodun*), see Soo (1981:46ff). For a more comprehensive version of this essay, originally entitled "The Law of the Unity of Opposites", and its history, see Knight (1990).

Simultaneously, he maintains that opposites can be one and the same (*tong-yi*) for two reasons: a) because each is a condition for the other's existence: "Without life, there would be no death; without death, no life" (Mao 1961:316), and b) because "in certain conditions, each of the contradictory aspects within a thing transforms itself into the contrary, it changes its position to that of its opposite" (Mao 1961:316-7). He raises the example of the "revolution of the proletariat": "the ruled is transformed into the ruler, while the bourgeoisie, the erstwhile ruler, is transformed into the ruled and changes its position to that originally occupied by its opposite" (Mao 1975:338-9).

This means that in materialist dialectics, opposites not only differ "along only one dimension of meaning" (Cruse 1986:197). They transform themselves into each other. Mao (1975:342) maintains that there are "two states of motion in all things, that of relative rest and that of conspicuous change". The "unity of opposites" refers thus to mutually exclusive opposites ("complementaries" according to Cruse), and to a view of change where struggling results in unity and unity leads, due to the contradiction within things, necessarily to opposition. "Unity of opposites" is an idiom which contains a revolutionary message: struggle!

To my surprise, this message of struggle is also contained in the text passages of the *Fundamentals* which explain *yin* and *yang* to TCM students: "*Yin* and *yang* are opposites, they are also one and the same (*tong-yi*); that they become one is the result of opposition. In other words, opposition (*duili*) is the aspect of the 'contrary' (*xiangfan*) between the two, unity (*tongyi*) is the aspect of the 'complementary' (*xiangcheng*) between the two. If there is no opposition (*duili*), then there is no unity (*tongyi*); if there is no contrary (*xiangfan*), then there is no complementary (*xiangcheng*)" (Yin 1984:12). "Control through opposition" pointed to an understanding of unity that arises after struggle during a previous period of opposition. This is clearly an understanding of *yin* and *yang* that cannot be reconciled with the view of *yin* and *yang* as known from classical writings (Sivin 1987:59-60).

The affinity of the rhetoric in TCM with that in Mao's writings is striking. For instance, the Chinese saying that "opposites are complementary" is a simple statement from the *History of the Former Han* (*Han*

Shu),¹⁷ but here it has been changed into a conditional: "If there is no contrary, then there is no complementary." The use of conditionals is a feature of Mao's writings, and TCM textbook writers would seem to have adopted this technique to such a degree that the results are nonsensical. It certainly is not the case that "if there is no opposition (*duili*), then there is no unity (*tongyi*)", for it seems common sense that unity need not always arise from opposition.¹⁸

The difference between the "unity of opposites" in materialist dialectics and the harmonious complementarity of *yin* and *yang* in ancient Chinese thought was to become the focus of a political debate in China's recent past. The Yang Xianzhen campaign was launched over the interpretation of "one divides into two" (*yi fen wei er*) and "two unites into one" (*er he wei yi*) (Goldman 1981:95-101). In the early 1960s, Mao used the former expression "one divides into two" to emphasize a struggle between two mutually exclusive opposites and insisted on the continuation of class struggle. Yang, by contrast, spoke of a period of Socialist construction and advocated a policy of "two uniting into one".

Yang Xianzhen was a Marxist theoretician whose views were firmly grounded in the Chinese tradition, though he had spent more than twenty years in the Soviet Union. He pointed to Chinese concepts where harmony was found in the opposition of two aspects of one event, like breathing (*huxi*) that is composed of exhaling (*hu*) and inhaling (*xi*) which would always be separated and simultaneously form a union. The example he raised was a "directional opposite". Exhaling and inhaling are mutually edifying and not annihilating of each other or mutually exclusive. This viewpoint made it possible for Yang Xianzhen to tolerate diversity and, applied to Chinese politics, led him to advocate an economy that tolerated both collective and private ownership rather than continued class struggle. Historians have it that Yang was a convenient target for the anti-Soviet

17 In the *History of the Former Han* (Mao 1961:326, n23), this phrase did not have such universal implications (Knight 1990:51).

18 De Saussure (1916:172) has a strikingly similar rhetoric when he discusses language as a system – a unity – being made up of differences ("dans la langue il n'y a que des différences"). The relevance of this resemblance between structuralism and materialist dialectics, paradigms developed in Europe at the turn of the century, is uncertain.

campaigns which diverted the attention from other tensions in the Party, and he was removed from his position in 1964 (Goldman 1981:97-101).

The above anecdote, though historically irrelevant, highlights how different the ancient and the Maoist understanding of *yin* and *yang* are. By emphasizing mutual complementarity, one can advocate simultaneous diversity while the struggle between opposites aims to overcome this diversity.

Mutual transformation: one word for two different notions of change

The interrelation of *yin* and *yang*, labelled as “mutual transformation” (*xianghu zhuanhua*) in the *Fundamentals* (Yin 1984:14-5) designates change into one’s opposite. The idiom *xianghu zhuanhua* resembles a phrase from materialist dialectics: *huxiang zhuanhua* (mutual transformation). There is little doubt that TCM textbook writers have borrowed it from Mao’s phraseology. However, while the idioms in Mao’s political essay and the medical textbook are strikingly similar, it will be shown that *xianghu zhuanhua* in the medical and *huxiang zhuanhua* in the political context refer to different conceptualisations of change.

As a revolutionary, Mao was confronted with problems of changing the social and political conditions in which China found itself at the beginning of the twentieth century. He strongly opposed what he called “metaphysical doctrines” which he characterised as building on the assumption that things were “discrete and static”. Likewise, he opposed the idea that changing the environment can effect change. He considered such change to be quantitative, but not qualitative (Mao 1961:296ff). His idea of qualitative changes resided in the idea of an inherent “contradiction within things”.¹⁹

Mao saw in this “contradiction within things” the trigger of dialectic change. “The old unity with its constituent opposites yields to a new unity with its constituent opposites, whereupon a new process emerges to replace

19 The historical context in which “On Contradiction” was written hints at Mao’s immediate target of emphasizing the recognition of “contradictions within things”. It provided the necessary justification for launching struggles within the party. Wakeman (1973:296) comments: “Mao’s philosophical proof for this was logically vague.”

the old” (Wakeman 1973:298). The struggle between two antitheses leads to a synthesis which gives rise to new antitheses. The “contradiction within things” is not overtly stated in Lenin’s writings, but Mao quoted Lenin such as to hint at it:

“‘Dialectics’ is a teaching which investigates how opposites become one (*tong-yi*) (how they change into one) – in which conditions they ‘transform themselves into one another’ (*huxiang zhuanhua*). ... Why should the human mind take these opposites not as something dead and rigid, but as something living, conditional, and ever changing, things transforming themselves into one another?” (Mao 1961:318).

Mao’s postulate of materialist dialectics due to an inbuilt “contradiction within things” has much in common with *yin* and *yang* reasoning: that things are considered “living” or “ever changing”, that they mutually transform into each other, that this force for change is within the things themselves, and that each thing is special and particular. If compared to a monocausal explanation of change which builds on metaphors derived from mechanics and consists of excluding many factors in favour of one conceivable cause-effect sequence, the resemblances of Mao’s understanding of dialectic change and change due to the constant flux of *yin* and *yang* become even more apparent.

However, the difference between the goals of a twentieth century revolutionary and the ancient Chinese worldview inherent to the concept of *yin* and *yang* is crucial. This can be shown by contrasting the notion of dialectic *zhuanhua*-change in Mao’s text with the interpretation of *zhuanhua*-change in the TCM text. In the *Fundamentals* the interrelation of *yin* and *yang* that is labelled *xianghu zhuanhua* is much more clearly explained than the other three. Several citations in classical Chinese and an example from medical practice in modern Chinese all convey that *xianghu zhuanhua* refers to one distinct notion of change.

One citation from the *Inner Canon* reads: “When things are born, you call it transformation (*hua*). When things reach their extreme, you call it transition (*bian*)” (*Suwen* 66, Ren 1986:182). Another one describes the same type of change: “If the cold reaches its extreme, this gives birth to the hot; if the hot reaches its extreme, this gives birth to the cold” (*Suwen* 5, Ren 1986:18). These quotations in classical Chinese are illustrated with

an example from medical practice. It describes how a *yang* pattern is transformed into a *yin* pattern:

“In certain acute warmth and heat factor disorders ... it is possible that in the condition of high heat (fever), suddenly a rapid falling of the temperature appears, that the complexion becomes pale, the four limbs numb, the pulse feeble (*wei*) and likely to to be severed (*jue*) etc. This dangerous phenomenon in which the *yangqi* suddenly casts off, this kind of change of pattern belongs to those where a *yang* pattern transforms (*zhuanhua*) into a *yin* pattern” (*Fundamentals*, Yin 1984:15).

The citations from the classics as well as the example taken from TCM practice point to a kind of change that occurs when a boundary is reached and transgressed, when an alternation into its opposite takes place. This pattern of change is in many classical texts referred to as *bian* (Sivin 1991, Hsu 1994). In the TCM textbook, it is called *zhuanhua*, a term that refers to dialectic change in Mao’s writings.²⁰ However, *zhuanhua* in the medical context does not refer to dialectic change (*zhuanhua*) that occurs, according to Mao’s (1961:318) above quotation, after a synthesis of two antitheses.²¹ This shows that an idiom borrowed from materialist dialectics is used to designate an age-old conception of change with a different meaning.

The above two sections have shown that the idioms “control through opposition” and “unity of opposites” point to an understanding of unity that arises after a struggle between opposites. It implies a struggle between “antipodals” or sometimes even mutually exclusive opposites (“complementaries” according to Cruse). In this respect, the TCM re-interpretation of *yin* and *yang* change which is derived from materialist dialectics stands

20 The term *zhuanhua* also occurs in the *Inner Canon*, with still another meaning: “Therefore, if a disorder endures, then it is transformed (*zhuanhua*), the upper and lower parts are out of balance and even a good doctor cannot cure it” (*Suwen* 3). *Zhuanhua*, to transform, often refers to processes of digestion (e.g. *Suwen* 11), see Ren (1986:1422; 13, 37).

21 But Mao’s understanding of *huxiang zhuanhua*, denoting the dialectic change of opposites “transforming themselves into one another”, is in fact strikingly close to the concept of transition delimited by the word *bian* in classical Chinese.

in contrast to the conceptualisation of *yin* and *yang* in the medical classics. For, as suggested above, the ancient conception of the universe tends to conceive of *yin* and *yang* as “reversives” or “converses”, which mutually complement each other, rather than struggling with each other.²²

It is difficult to tell to what extent this understanding of *yin* and *yang* – “control through opposition” as an expression of the need for continuous struggle – prevailed in medical practice. Therapeutic maxims like “to supplement *yin*” (*bu yin*) or “to supplement blood” (*bu xue*) in case of a depletion (*xuzheng*) undoubtedly continued to be grounded in a notion of an intrinsic and edifying interdependence of *yin* and *yang* rather than struggle between them. However, remedies that were given against repletive conditions (*shizheng*) or noxious influences (*xieqi*) tended to be conceptualised as inducing struggle. In those cases, the idea that healing consisted in a struggle may not have arisen from the philosophy of materialist dialectics alone, but from the predominant paradigm of germ theory in modern medicine and other ideas developed in the sciences of nineteenth century Europe which enjoy great currency in the PRC at present.²³

The interrelation between *yin* and *yang* labelled as “mutual transformation”, by contrast, refers to a fairly distinct and well-known type of change: a *yang*-pattern swapping over into a *yin*-pattern. In this case, the word *zhuanhua* has been borrowed from the rhetoric of materialist dialectics, but it designates change due to a transition from an extreme *yang* into *yin*, or vice versa, as amply recorded in the medical classics and generally delimited by the word *bian* (transition). The new label, *xianghu zhuanhua*, is used to describe a concept of change that has remained unaltered.

22 There are, of course, also exceptions to this general tendency, even in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*): “When the dark seeks to equal the light principle, there is certain to be a struggle (*yin ni yu yang bi zhan*)” (Wilhelm 1968:398).

23 It would be interesting to investigate to what extent the notions of struggle that are central to Adam Smith’s economics, Malthus’ population studies, Darwinism and Social Darwinism, germ theory, materialist dialectics, and Max Weber’s “protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism” are interrelated, and to what extent they are specific to the sciences of 19th century Europe.

Conclusion

To return to the fieldworker, intrigued by the constant mentioning of a certain idiom, as for instance *yin* and *yang* in TCM clinics, this short article has demonstrated that a word has many different levels, or rather, facets of meaning depending on the method of investigation with which word meaning is explored. One may focus on the “referential meaning” of utterances and establish links between words and the phenomena outside the linguistic system. Or one may be interested in their emotive and affective aspects, and ascertain their “connotations” (in the non-philosophical sense) by establishing “semantic networks”. This article focused, firstly, on the “sense relations” between *yin* and *yang*, by applying a model of semantic theory to decontextualised word pairs that were put forth as typical examples for illustrating the interrelations between *yin* and *yang*. Secondly, it explored their “connotations” (in a philosophical sense) by means of a study which put them into context and showed that the idioms which described the interrelations between *yin* and *yang* in TCM were partly borrowed from political rhetoric. The “intensional definition” of *yin* and *yang* in TCM remained in many respects unaltered, though it has changed insofar as *yin* and *yang* are considered to refer to opposites involved in a struggle.

No study in the meaning of *yin* and *yang* in TCM would be complete without some mention of pragmatic factors. Considering that clinics belong to a fairly public domain, what Jakobson (1960) refers to as the “conative function” may have played a certain role. This concern of the speakers for their addressees, and how they wish their addressees to think about them, might explain the readiness with which doctors would mention the terms *yin* and *yang* in medical reasoning. Without denying that *yin* and *yang* are central to TCM, these terms may have been used, more or less deliberately, for the political implicature with which the Maoist cause endowed them. If one accepts that the question “Do you still adhere to Marxist-Socialist thought”, though unspoken, was ever-present in the late eighties,²⁴ the TCM doctors’ affirmation that all processes in the universe are subject

24 Although a Western visitor may have had a different impression, the forcefulness with which the Party asserted itself on June 4th 1989 seems sufficient evidence to disperse any doubts to the contrary.

to *yin* and *yang* could be viewed as an answer to it.²⁵ With the rhetoric of *yin* and *yang*, TCM doctors not only attested to an age-old Chinese wisdom, they simultaneously confirmed the prerogative of materialist dialectics, and the Party.

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25 It would be a case in which Grice's maxim of relevance was exploited: "Assume B's utterance is relevant; if it's relevant then given that A asked the question, B should be providing an answer" (Levinson 1983:107).

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