Definition: **Yin and Yang** from *Collins English Dictionary*

1 two complementary principles of Chinese philosophy: Yin is negative, dark, and feminine, Yang positive, bright, and masculine. Their interaction is thought to maintain the harmony of the universe and to influence everything within it.

*from Chinese (Peking) yin dark + yang bright*

Summary Article: **Yin-Yang**
from *Encyclopedia of Gender and Society*

Yin and Yang are the two complementary universal principles in Eastern metaphysics. Yin is the feminine, dark, passive aspect, while Yang is the masculine, light, active aspect. However, Yin and Yang are not true opposites, but rather interdependent principles that complement, define, and give rise to one another. All beings, male and female, contain both Yin and Yang in varying proportions. An imbalance of Yin and Yang is thought to lead to misfortune, including ill health, and balancing the principles is the aim of Chinese medicine, tai chi, feng shui, and other traditional practices.

**History**
The idea of Yin-Yang is central to several schools of Eastern philosophy and cosmology. Though often associated with Taoism, the concept is older, originating in prehistoric times. Yin and Yang are explicated in the ancient Chinese classics, the *I Ching* (Book of Changes), thought to date from the second or third millennium BC, and the later *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu.

During the Chinese Zhou Dynasty (around 480–720 BC), the Yin-Yang school was one of six primary schools of philosophy. During the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD), scholars led by Dong Zhongshu sought to syncretize the various schools, including Taoism and Confucianism, and Yin-Yang was applied to diverse realms, including medicine. Taoism and Buddhism mutually influenced one another during the early Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), but Taoism ultimately became the official religion.

Yin-Yang is also a key concept in the metaphysical systems of other East Asian countries, including Japan (where it is called *in-yo*), Vietnam, and Korea (as evidenced by the Yin-Yang symbol on the South Korean flag).

**Basic Philosophy**
In traditional philosophy, the Tao (usually translated as “the way”) comprises two primary principles, Yin and Yang, which in turn give rise to the five basic elements: earth, water, air, fire, and wood.

Originating in a prehistoric, nature-based belief system, Yin initially referred to the shaded north side of a mountain or south bank of a river, while Yang denoted the sunny south side of a mountain or north bank of a river. Over time, Yin came to be associated with a range of characteristics and concepts generally described as “feminine,” including darkness, cold, night, the moon, the earth, passivity,

[Image from: *yin and yang in The Macmillan Encyclopedia*]

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yin_and_yang](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/yin_and_yang)
submission, absorption, emptiness, and descending energy. Conversely, yang was associated with “masculine” concepts, including light, heat, day, the sun, the heavens, activity, dominance, penetration, fullness, and ascending energy.

Yin and yang are equally important, with neither being “higher” or “lower.” In fact, they are not considered separate, but rather essential parts of the whole, neither of which can exist without the other. Looked at another way, yin and yang give rise to and consume one another, as night leads to day and day to night, in a continuous cycle. Further, yin and yang define each other; for example, as dark is the absence of light, and cold has meaning only relative to heat.

These concepts are represented graphically in the familiar taijitu, or yin-yang symbol (see Figure 1). The complete circle represents the Tao, or universal whole. The dark half represents the descending yin, while the light half represents the ascending yang. The smaller spots indicate that yin contains the seed of yang, and vice versa.

Practical Applications
The concepts of yin and yang may be applied to all aspects of life, from politics to the arts and sciences. The central idea is the importance of achieving equilibrium between the two complementary principles. Feng shui, for example, uses the arrangement of objects, such as furniture in a house or features in a landscape, to balance yin and yang energies.

In traditional Chinese medicine, disease results from an imbalance of yin and yang. An excess of yin leads to cold conditions, characterized by chills and weakness, while excess yang leads to heat conditions, characterized by fever and hyperactivity. Healing involves balancing yin and yang energies through various methods, such as warming or cooling herbs and foods or tai chi exercises. The same principle also applies on a larger scale. For example, Dong Zhongshu once advised that since a spring drought indicated deficient yin, the affected city should close its southern gate and its men should go into hiding.

Cross-Cultural Parallels
The concept of yin-yang has parallels in other metaphysical systems. Tantra, which has its roots in India, emphasizes the creative interplay of feminine and masculine energies. The complementary and mutually generative Buddhist concepts of emptiness and form are often conceived of as feminine and...
Early European pagan traditions, or at least their contemporary reinterpretation in Wicca and similar nature-based religions, feature a feminine principle (often personified as a goddess) associated with earth, the moon, and darkness, while the masculine principle is associated with the sky, the sun, and light.

Western philosophy has also featured opposing principles similar to yin and yang. In Metaphysics, the Greek philosopher Aristotle described the Pythagorean table of opposites that grouped together male, light, right, odd, resting, and good on one side and female, dark, left, even, moving, and evil on the other. Some have suggested that this cross-cultural similarity indicates the existence of universal human archetypes, as theorized by psychologist Carl Jung, but some key differences, such as activity/motion being considered masculine in the Chinese system but feminine in the Greek, call this hypothesis into question.

**Sexism Argument**

Though yin and yang are said to be equally important and nonhierarchical, the association of the feminine principle with negative or lower-prestige attributes, such as submission and emptiness, has led to the charge that the concept is inherently sexist. Indeed, within Confucianism, yin-yang has been used to justify the dominion of husbands over wives and rulers over subjects. In addition, the emphasis on the complementary aspect of masculinity and femininity may be seen as heterosexist.

However, yin and yang are not really opposites, but rather principles that contain and give rise to one another. Further, yin and yang are not equivalent to female or male, since all beings contain a mixture of the feminine and masculine principles in varying proportions; thus, some women may have a stronger yang aspect, while some men have more yin.

The Taoist worldview generally does not regard yin characteristics as negative. Passivity, for example, is considered a desirable attribute, as exemplified by the concept of *wu wei*, or “doing without action,” illustrated by the way a martial artist may withstand an opponent’s blow not by countering force with force, but by absorbing and deflecting the energy.

While Western dualism emphasizes value judgments such as good and evil, yin-yang is more relative, fluid, and interdependent and does not inherently privilege one sex over the other.

**See also**

Religion, Gender Roles in; Traditional Healing; Wicca

**Further Readings**
