Tradition and Innovation in Taiji Philosophy

Yong Duan

College of Engineering, China Agricultural University, Beijing 100083, China

Abstract

Scholars throughout history have offered differing interpretations of Taiji. We should respect ancient interpretations while continuing to innovate. The relationship between Taiji and the Taiji diagram needs to be redefined. Logically confused, ambiguous, and forced interpretations should be clarified and transformed into explanations that are logically clear, plainly expressed, systematic, and profound. Taiji should also be applied to new fields. Taiji should be defined as evolution in the broad sense, the overall tendency of movement and change in the world, represented by the positive direction of a coordinate axis perpendicular to the plane of yin and yang. Their cyclical interaction can vividly represent feedback, which can unravel the mysteries of life and of human origins and evolution. The Taiji yin–yang diagram can represent the dialectical unity of the objective and subjective worlds. In this sense, the fundamental principle of the world may be said to be Taiji.

Keywords

Chinese Philosophy, Taiji, Feedback, Unity of Opposites, Balance.

1. Guiding Principles for Research into Taiji Philosophy

Taiji is an important concept and theory in Chinese culture. The term first appears in the "Appended Statements" of the Commentaries on the Changes: "The Changes has Taiji, which generates the two modes." [1] It also appears in "The Great and Venerable Teacher" in the Zhuangzi: "The Dao … is above Taiji yet is not high; it is below the six limits yet is not deep." [2] Because these statements are unclear, scholars throughout history have offered divergent interpretations and numerous ambiguities have arisen. Particularly after the Song dynasty, Taiji became a focal point in studying the Zhouyi. The Examination of the Meaning of the Classics, compiled by Zhu Yizun in the Qing dynasty, records specialized discussions and works concerning Taiji by more than sixty authors since the Song dynasty. [3]

There are two accounts of the Taiji diagram's origin. One holds that Fuxi drew it after being inspired by the whirlpool formed at the confluence of the He and Luo rivers. [4] The other holds that Fuxi erected a pole and continuously recorded and traced its solar shadow. After years of recording and tracing, he eventually produced the trigrams and the Taiji diagram. On the principles of this Taiji great spiral diagram, Fuxi established the lunisolar calendar and solar terms, initially addressing people's need for food and greatly promoting ancient agricultural culture. The "Appended Statements" of the Commentaries on the Changes, in the Western Han manuscript excavated at Mawangdui, states: "In ancient times, when Fuxi ruled the world, he looked upward to observe the images in heaven and downward to observe the patterns on earth; he observed the markings of birds and beasts and the suitability of the land, taking examples nearby from his own body and farther away from other things, and thus first created the eight trigrams." [1] Researcher Zhang Shubin of the Taijicheng Institute for Philosophical Innovation maintains that Fuxi was a clan leader in his time. Measuring the sun's and moon's movements could not be undertaken by him alone but required a group. He therefore appointed a solar observation official, namely Kuafu. Kuafu was conscientious and responsible. Following Fuxi's method, he traveled daily between solar observation sites until he died of thirst and

exhaustion, giving rise to the story of Kuafu chasing the sun. Thus, Taiji originally referred to the sun and the earth's north and south poles. [5]

As modern people studying Taiji, our guiding principle should be to respect ancient interpretations while continuing to innovate, making our understanding more logical and richer and deeper in meaning, so that ancient Chinese civilization can be revitalized, transformed, and reinterpreted to shine anew.

First, we must recognize that ancient Chinese culture contains both valuable elements and dross. The eight trigrams of the Book of Changes were originally used for divination and fortune-telling. In inheriting and developing Taiji culture today, we should explicitly exclude such doctrines and ideas that clearly contradict modern rationality, and subject them to systematic criticism when necessary. Second, Taiji's meaning and its relationship with the Taiji diagram need redefining. Third, existing interpretations require deeper and more detailed explanation, transforming logically confused, ambiguous, and forced interpretations into logically clear, plainly expressed, systematic, and profound explanations. Fourth, Taiji should be applied to new fields. As a philosophical concept and theory, it can be applied to many different fields, simultaneously bearing different meanings and representing different things.

2. The Relationship between Taiji and Yin and Yang

From ancient times to the present, Chinese people have liked to speak of Taiji, yet there is no consensus about what it actually means. Most believe Taiji is yin and yang because the diagram depicts yin and yang; in other words, Taiji is the two modes. This contradicts the Commentaries on the Changes, which says Taiji "generates the two modes," rather than that it is the two modes.

In terms of the characters, tai is formed by adding a dot beneath da, meaning great, and signifies the greatest. Ji, traditionally written 極, is a phonosemantic character. Explaining Graphs and Analyzing Characters states: "Ji means the ridgepole; it has wood as its semantic component and ji as its phonetic component." [6] Ji originally referred to a house's ridgepole and was extended to mean the summit or limit. Both tai and ji concern a single direction, in contrast to bidirectional opposition, and convey extremity or the ultimate. Some therefore hold that Taiji is not yin and yang. What, then, is it? Gao You of the Han dynasty considered it the undifferentiated entity existing when heaven and earth first took shape: "Taiji is the time when heaven and earth began to take form." [7] If so, Taiji has no direct relationship with yin and yang. Can the yin–yang diagram still represent it? Zhu Xi of the Song dynasty explained Taiji through principle: "Ji is the utmost of principle; the totality of the principles of heaven, earth, and all things is Taiji." [8] His account is reasonable, but he too failed to clarify Taiji's relationship with yin and yang. No one has yet provided a satisfactory answer to these questions.

I offer an interpretation that may better resolve these problems. I believe Taiji can be understood as evolution in the broad sense. Why? The yin–yang diagram represents their interaction. Yin acts upon yang, and yang in turn acts upon yin. After one cycle, do they return to their starting point? Not necessarily. They may return, but more probably spiral upward or downward. This upward direction is Taiji: the positive direction of a coordinate axis perpendicular to the plane of yin and yang. Its projection onto that plane is a point that is difficult to see, giving the impression that the diagram contains only yin and yang, without Taiji.

In human evolution, the more intelligent humans become, the more tools they create; the more tools they create and use, the more intelligent they become. Positive feedback between tools and the human brain leads to the continuous evolution of humans and society. Yin and yang can represent the interaction between tools and the brain, while Taiji can represent the resulting human evolution. Many other movements of contradictions also advance the evolution of

humanity and the world, and all these contradictions can be represented by the interaction of yin and yang.

Philosophy's value lies in representing various things and their movements and changes abstractly and concisely. Interpreting Taiji as evolution better serves this purpose. Taiji is not yin and yang; its movement results from their interaction. Yin and yang can represent all contradictions in the world, and the unity of opposites within contradictions drives the world's evolution. Interactions among contradictions in various forms produce complex movements and changes. Some are evolutionary, others regressive, but the overall tendency over more than ten billion years has been evolution. Taiji is not the universe's original condition; it is the direction, process, and tendency by which the universe has developed from that condition. This process is the interaction of yin and yang. Interpreting Taiji as evolution therefore both closely connects it with yin and yang and allows it to represent the overall tendencies and laws of the world's movement and change over more than ten billion years. Understanding the diagram as three-dimensional accords with ancient expressions while embodying modern science's new ideas, combining inheritance with development.

Interpreting Taiji as the universe's initial state or galactic movement has some value, but only limited value. Explaining the universe's origin and galactic movement is scientists' task, rather than philosophers' principal task. Philosophers' principal task is explaining the entire world's history, present, and future, including not only interstellar movements and changes but also the increasing complexity of particles and compounds; not only physical changes in all matter but also chemical changes, biological evolution, psychological changes, and social changes. Taiji should represent what all these movements and changes have in common. If it represents only the universe's initial state, or only the movements of galaxies, the sun, and the earth, its value is far too limited. [9]

Researcher Lu Qiwang of the Taijicheng Institute for Philosophical Innovation holds that Taiji refers to the greatest standard. The Book of Documents states: “The sovereign alone establishes the ultimate standard.” Here ji refers to standards and norms. Feng Youlan also understood it this way. [10] This is quite reasonable. Standards and directions are related: if someone specifies a direction and everyone follows it, that direction becomes a standard or rule. Thus we often call standards and rules guides. When leaders establish a rule or standard, people frequently feel they have found a direction, even though the rule or standard itself may have nothing to do with direction, consisting instead of numerical values, a procedure, or an idea. Direction can therefore stand for rules and standards, and a direction or arrow can express them more vividly and intuitively. Standards and rules have no direct connection with the yin–yang diagram. Moreover, if Taiji is the greatest standard and rule, what is its content? It can only be evolution. Evolution is the overall tendency of everything's movement and change in the universe over billions of years, and the ultimate standard for value judgments concerning right and wrong or good and evil and for judgments of truth. The metaethical component of Taiji evolutionism treats evolutionism as an ultimate standard of value alongside individualism and humanism. Evolution means increasing complexity and order, manifested socially as development, self-strengthening, justice, civilization, harmony, and so forth. [11]

3. Yin and Yang Represent Feedback

We commonly encounter symbols such as five-pointed stars, six-pointed stars, and five interlocking rings. Most represent stationary things, whereas Taiji yin and yang immediately suggest movement, specifically cyclical movement. The world is in motion, and movement follows laws. To survive, humans must understand the laws of the world's movement and pursue their interests through continuous, dynamic practice.

Movement includes both an individual thing's movement and the joint movement of two or more things. Analyzing the movement of two or more things requires analyzing their interactions. Taiji can represent a single thing's movement as well as that of two or more things and their interactions. Interaction takes many forms, one of which is particularly important: feedback.

Systems theory, cybernetics, and information theory are called the old three theories; dissipative structure theory, catastrophe theory, and synergetics are called the new three theories. These are important foundational scientific theories developed in the twentieth century, also possessing important philosophical value. Feedback is one of their core concepts. It includes negative and positive feedback. Negative feedback is central to cybernetics, while positive feedback is central to dissipative structure theory and catastrophe theory. The cyclical interaction of yin and yang in Taiji can vividly represent feedback.

However, neither the old nor the new three theories adequately explains feedback's role. Taiji evolutionism explicitly treats feedback as a core concept of systems theory and derives a series of important conclusions centered upon it. The self-replication of biological genetic material is positive feedback. Taiji evolutionism regards this as the key to unraveling the worldwide mystery of life. Human origins constitute another worldwide mystery, and replication is also its key: the replication of written signs, humanity's cultural genes. Cultural genes' replication and selection have played a crucial role in human civilization's evolution. [11]

Taiji yin and yang possess rich meanings. Ancient Chinese philosophers offered many interpretations, and they have diverse theoretical and practical values in Chinese philosophy. Since yin and yang can represent feedback, which can unravel the mysteries of life and of human origins and evolution, Taiji theory has assumed a new mission in modern science and philosophy's development.

4. The Real and the Imagined

Truth, goodness, and beauty are not the only good things in the world. Many false, ugly, and cruel things can also be good. Artificial rockeries and flowers, for example, are good things; most film plots are fictional, and the immortals, spirits, and demons promoted by religions are fictitious. Scientific theories, too, are actually false: they are human-made models rather than the objective world as it really is. The world's fundamental principle is not its origin. Its origin is a question of physics, whereas its fundamental principle is a philosophical question. Physics seeks to present a worldview as objectively true as possible, but philosophy's mission should be to provide a false yet more valuable worldview. Such a worldview must be subjectively constructed; it cannot exactly describe the objective world. Thus, throughout Eastern and Western philosophical history, idealism has consistently occupied the mainstream of philosophical thought. Materialism appears correct but is actually specious and has never defeated idealism.

The earliest philosophers sought the world's fundamental principle in the objective world, but later independently turned toward the subjective world. In both East and West, early thinkers regarded objective things such as water, fire, and qi as fundamental. Later, Pythagoras held that number was fundamental. Number is more abstract than concrete things such as water, fire, and qi, but its abstraction remains insufficient. Subsequently, Parmenides proposed a subjectively constructed concept of the highest abstraction: being. Plato treated Ideas, things that might exist in heaven, as fundamental. An Idea can be only slightly more abstract than an ordinary concrete thing, or an abstraction of everything. Eastern philosophers' fundamental principles likewise shifted from metal, wood, water, fire, earth, and qi to subjectively constructed abstract concepts such as Taiji, Wuji, nonbeing, and the Dao. The earliest interpretations approached Taiji from an objective, material perspective, including the

northern celestial pole, qi, and heaven and earth's initial state. Later interpretations used subjective abstract concepts, including nonbeing, the Dao, mind, and the unity of opposites, thereby increasing the degree of abstraction.

Taiji evolutionism holds that the objective and subjective worlds form a unity of opposites. Both materialism and idealism are mistaken; we need to attend to both the world's subjectivity and its objectivity. Interpretations of Taiji therefore necessarily include abstract understandings and concrete, material understandings. Both recur in scholarly writings on Taiji throughout successive dynasties.

The Han scholar Ma Rong identified Taiji with the northern celestial pole: "The Changes has Taiji, referring to the northern celestial pole" (Correct Meaning of the Zhouyi, volume 7). Liu Xin identified it with primordial qi. The "Treatise on Pitch Pipes and the Calendar" in the Book of Han reports his view: "Taiji is the primordial qi at the center." Identifying Taiji with the Pole Star or primordial qi is mistaken. First, no one can clearly explain primordial qi. Second, is the primordial qi of different things the same? That driving interactions between heaven and earth is plainly not the same as that driving interactions between men and women. If they differ, their common features must be sought. Taiji is not primordial qi; it is what its different forms have in common. Similarly, water and fire both exist, but being is neither water nor fire; it is what water, fire, and all other things have in common.

Zhu Xi of the Song dynasty explained Taiji through principle: "Ji is the utmost of principle; the totality of the principles of heaven, earth, and all things is Taiji." "Taiji is its principle" (The Original Meaning of the Zhouyi, "Appended Statements," Part One). As a representative of the image-and-number school of Northern Song Neo-Confucianism, Shao Yong integrated Confucian and Daoist thought, regarding Taiji as the universe's fundamental principle and the interaction and transformation of the two qi of yin and yang as generating heaven, earth, and all things. At the opening of Questions and Answers between a Fisherman and a Woodcutter, he reveals yin and yang's core through the fisherman's words: "Of heaven, earth, and all things, none fails to take yin and yang as its principle."

In understanding the world, we must analyze many contradictions. The most important is that between the subjective and objective worlds, common to all contradictions. Taiji evolutionism holds that the world's fundamental principle is their dialectical unity. The Taiji yin–yang diagram can represent this unity. In this sense, the world's fundamental principle may be said to be Taiji: the fundamental principle of the world is originally a circle.

Ancient Chinese philosophers regarded Taiji yin and yang as the world's fundamental principle and the principle of heaven, earth, and all things. Although their understanding of this fundamental principle was problematic, we can still say Chinese philosophers were farsighted and may have the last laugh. Ancient Western philosophers were also eager to seek the world's fundamental principle, but all regarded it as something singular. Only the Chinese treated something nonsingular as fundamental, specifically two things' dialectical movement. The West also had dialectics, but it was not explicitly treated as an explanation of the world's fundamental principle. If dialectical dualism eventually replaces materialism and idealism as ontology's final answer, ancient Chinese Taiji thought's brilliance will become even more apparent.

5. Dividing One into Two and Dividing One into Three

The objective world is too complex and human cognitive capacities are limited, so people always hope to simplify it. Abstraction is a method of thought seeking simplification: the complex is abstracted into the simple, movement into stillness, the many into the few, and two into one. Combining two into one refers to abstraction and synthesis. All scientific theories are built upon abstraction, and abstract thought provides humanity with its most powerful intellectual weapon.

The objective world itself, however, is not abstract, and humans must confront a concrete, complex world when transforming it. Combining two into one is therefore insufficient; one must also divide one into two. Scientific understanding requires synthesis as well as analysis and deduction. Analysis means separating and examining; examination becomes possible after separation. Dividing one into two is therefore an indispensable intellectual weapon. Taiji yin and yang represent both dividing one into two and combining two into one. Yang within yin and yin within yang represent continually repeated analysis and deduction. As Laozi said: “One generates two, two generate three, and three generate all things.” Here “generate” can refer to producing new things in the real world, but more importantly refers to continuous analysis and deduction as a thought process.

Taiji yin and yang can represent abstraction as well as analysis and deduction, these most powerful intellectual weapons. Taiji theory is a founding precursor of philosophical epistemology, expressing its most important concepts and methods in the most straightforward imagery.

Dividing one into two has three main meanings. The first is decomposing something into two or more parts for separate study: dividing people by country, religion, gender, or class; decomposing biological tissues into cells, cells into molecules, molecules into atoms, and so forth. The second is seeking contradictions within things, analyzing their unity of opposites and their effects on things' properties, movements, and changes. The third is generating new things from old ones, including new structures, properties, individuals, life, consciousness, theories, conclusions, and so forth.

Abstraction and theoretical research are not ends in themselves; they serve to guide practice. Guiding practice requires concrete conclusions. These have various sources: analogy, imagination, conjecture, and deduction from abstract conclusions. In most cases, deductive conclusions are most reliable and produce the best practical results. Combining abstraction and deduction has therefore become humanity's principal method for transforming the world.

Deriving concrete conclusions from ontology to guide practice was ancient philosophers' great ideal. Deriving the sixty-four hexagrams from Taiji concretely realized this ideal. Ancient Western philosophers had this ideal but almost no corresponding practice; such practice did not appear until Hegel in the modern era. Ancient Chinese philosophers possessed both the ideal and the practice. Nevertheless, Taiji and the eight trigrams are distinct, just as a mother and child are two different people. The eight trigrams can therefore be treated as part of Taiji theory or discussed separately.

Dividing one into two names a method of thought; it does not mean dividing only into two. Sometimes division into three, four, or more is needed. The number depends on the need, and the purpose is to reach valuable conclusions. Analyzing a particular thing often requires attention to conditions' influence. Analyzing conditions can be viewed as another division into two within the initial division; two such divisions constitute dividing one into three. All movement and change are conditioned, so dividing one into three is an important method of thought. If the diagram's yin fish and yang fish are regarded as the result of dividing one into two, the S-shaped curve between them can be regarded as the “third.” Thus the diagram contains the methods of dividing one into two and dividing one into three.

6. The Unity of Opposites

Dividing one into two can be applied to analyzing everything, including production, everyday life, politics, economics, military affairs, education, culture, sports, and so forth. Everything contains contradictions, and solving any problem requires identifying and analyzing contradictions' unity of opposites and dialectical movement. In Chinese culture, the

development of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, and other fields is deeply connected with Taiji.

It must be noted that yin and yang or contradictions do not create objective things. Objective things are concrete and complex; what we call yin and yang or contradictions are products of human abstraction and simplification of concrete, complex objective things within the subjective world. Within that world, yin and yang and contradictions' movement can then create other things, but this so-called "creation" is actually reasoning rather than objectively real creation. In the objective world, every concrete thing is created by other concrete things. Hydrogen and oxygen, for example, are concrete things, and the water produced by their chemical reaction is also concrete. Parents and children are likewise concrete things. Traditional Taiji theory describes objective things as yin and yang's manifestation or generation in the objective world. This conception is a mistaken form of objective idealism.

The unity of opposites includes various meanings and forms, such as opposition, coexistence, balance, and dynamic transformation. Different things may stand in sharp opposition. People may confront one another intensely, coexist harmoniously and achieve balance, or mutually promote and transform one another.

Laozi said: "Reversal is the movement of the Dao." When things develop to an extreme, they often transform into their opposites. This law is amply manifested in order and disorder, life and death, and changing circumstances and expedients. In chapter 58 of the Daodejing, Laozi states: "Misfortune is what fortune rests upon; fortune is where misfortune lies hidden." Benefits often conceal dangers, while difficulties may harbor opportunities. In Questions and Answers between a Fisherman and a Woodcutter, Shao Yong speaks through the fisherman: "Order arises from disorder, and disorder arises from order; order and disorder follow one another, like the alternation of yin and yang."

Philosophical theories are abstractions of everything and can be applied to everything, including the human body and everyday life. Marx said: "Past philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to change it." Ancient Chinese philosophers consistently maintained the nonduality of substance and function, meaning theory and practice should be connected and theories applied and tested in practice. "Substance" means theory, understanding the world's essence and laws. "Function" means using theory to guide practice and a worldview to guide one's outlook on life, values, ethics, and methodology. Substance and function constitute yin and yang, that is, a pair of opposites within a contradiction.

The expression "the nonduality of substance and function" is certainly inaccurate. Theory and practice are distinct, and however closely related, they cannot be completely identical. Yet this expressive defect is not the most important issue. Theory and practice form one of philosophy's most important contradictions; giving them sufficient attention and discussion matters most. Ancient Chinese philosophers' discussions of theory and practice are a major strength of Chinese philosophy.

Zhu Xi held that Taiji's principle exists in concrete things. Thus he said: "Every person has a Taiji; every thing has a Taiji" (Classified Conversations of Master Zhu). Shao Yong held that humans, heaven, earth, and all things are products of yin and yang's transformations: "The Dao of all things is fully present in the body." Heaven and earth's laws are concealed within the human body. In different personal circumstances, one should adjust flexibly, combining yin and yang, firmness and gentleness, and find the best solutions through their balance. One should follow the great Dao, the highest virtue, and natural laws, remain unconfined by external things, and "act through nonaction, leaving nothing undone," ultimately reaching an all-embracing spiritual realm of tranquility and harmony.

The yin–yang diagram can symbolize harmony and balance. Balance can be applied to traditional Chinese medicine, such as regulating qi and blood, and ecology, such as following

nature. Balance means being impartial, avoiding attachment to one extreme, seeking unity within opposition, and attaining fulfillment through balance, while advocating “acting through nonaction, leaving nothing undone.” In today's fast-paced, highly anxious society, we often fall into either-or thinking: either compete to the utmost or withdraw into complete apathy; either pursue maximal material possession or deny every material need; either care excessively about others' judgments or shut ourselves off completely. Such extreme choices can all be called imbalances of yin and yang.

In Questions and Answers between a Fisherman and a Woodcutter, the fisherman follows the currents when fishing, violating neither seasonal timing nor water's nature. The woodcutter follows the mountain's terrain when gathering firewood, taking and using it in moderation. Their conduct “accords with” yin and yang's laws and achieves balance between humans, heaven, and earth. In modern society, by contrast, we often fall into anthropocentrism, demanding excessively from nature and neglecting harmonious coexistence with it, ultimately suffering nature's backlash. [12]

7. Conclusions

1. Taiji should be defined as evolution in the broad sense, the overall tendency of the world's movement and change. As yin and yang interact and complete a cycle, they may spiral upward or downward. This upward direction is Taiji, the positive direction of a coordinate axis perpendicular to the plane of yin and yang. Taiji is not the universe's initial state; it should represent all movement and change's common features, tendencies, and directions.

2. Negative feedback is central to cybernetics, while positive feedback is central to dissipative structure theory and catastrophe theory. Yin and yang's cyclical interaction in Taiji can vividly represent feedback. Feedback can unravel the mysteries of life and of human origins and evolution.

3. The Taiji yin–yang diagram can represent the objective and subjective worlds' dialectical unity. In this sense, the world's fundamental principle may be said to be Taiji.

4. Taiji yin and yang represent dividing one into two and combining two into one; in other words, they can represent analysis and abstraction, these most powerful intellectual weapons. Everything contains contradictions, and solving any problem requires identifying and analyzing contradictions' unity of opposites and dialectical movement. In Chinese culture, the development of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism, traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, and other fields is deeply connected with Taiji.

5. The unity of opposites includes various meanings and forms, such as opposition, coexistence, balance, and dynamic transformation. Substance and function constitute yin and yang, that is, a pair of opposites within a contradiction. The yin–yang diagram can symbolize harmony and balance. Balance can be applied to every aspect of life, guiding us to seek unity within opposition and achieve fulfillment through balance.

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