

The Enlightenment of *Yin-Yang* Dialectics on International Relations

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This paper explores the methodological aspect of the harmonious philosophy—the *yin-yang* dialectics—by elaborating on its core concepts, eight fundamental laws, and the theoretical model of the mutual generation and overcoming among the Five Phases (*Wuxing*). Using the *yin-yang* dialectics to analyze international relations, the paper proposes pathways and insights to address global challenges, and offers a methodological framework to reduce wars in the international community and guide the world toward peace and harmony.

Keywords: Chinese traditional culture, harmonious thoughts, yin-yang dialectics, international relations, enlightenment

Introduction

The world today is far from peaceful. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine continues to escalate, warfare in the Middle East has expanded, tensions on the Korean Peninsula are at a boiling point, and the South China Sea remains fraught with instability. Some have even warned of the imminent arrival of a “Third World War”. In an era of advanced technology, digital networks, and artificial intelligence, why do conflicts and wars persist across nations and regions? Why are there always those who fan the flames of discord in the international community, stirring up trouble, interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, and orchestrating regime changes? Why do proxy wars erupt in some areas, while nations elsewhere engage in mutual destruction? Some attribute these issues to the darker aspects of human nature, arguing that selfishness and greed are the fundamental causes of destructive struggles between individuals and nations. Others point to the dominance of monopoly capital groups, suggesting that certain major powers provoke conflicts and foment wars in hotspot regions to safeguard their own rule and global hegemony, thereby maximizing the interests of their monopoly capital groups, especially the military-industrial complex and financial conglomerates. While these perspectives sharply capture the essence of the problem, the author believes that we must delve deeper into its ideological roots. The foreign policies of nations are determined by their leaders and ruling elites, whose decisions are shaped by their ideological outlooks. Those rulers who frequently create conflicts, provoke disputes, and instigate wars on the international stage adhere to a philosophy of “power politics” and “hegemonism”. In their views, competition and confrontation between major powers are inevitable, leaving no room for cooperation or mutual benefit. They regard newly rising powers or nations that resist their hegemony as adversaries to be suppressed. This philosophy of relentless enemy-seeking and the mentality of “Letting those who comply with me thrive and those who resist me perish” constitute the ideological foundation of today’s global instability. If the philosophy of hegemonistic struggle continues to dominate international relations in the context of nuclear weapons, artificial intelligence,

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and advanced technological weaponry, the world will remain mired in turmoil, and humanity will head toward self-destruction. To reduce wars and strive for peace and harmony on this planet, it is imperative to fundamentally critique and reject the philosophy of “power politics” and “hegemonism”, and instead, promote ideas that support world peace and harmony. The harmonious philosophy inherent in traditional Chinese culture represents precisely such a mindset—one that advocates for peace and global concord.

The harmonious philosophy of traditional Chinese culture encompasses three key components: the *Taiji* philosophical worldview, the *yin-yang* dialectical methodology, and the core values of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. This article focuses on the methodological aspect of the harmonious philosophy—the *yin-yang* dialectics—by elaborating on its core concepts, eight fundamental laws, and the theoretical model of the mutual generation and overcoming among the Five Phases (*Wuxing* 五行). Using the *yin-yang* dialectics to analyze international relations, the article proposes pathways and insights to address global challenges, and offers a methodological framework to guide the world toward peace and harmony.

The Core Concepts of *Yin-Yang* Dialectics

What Are *Yin* and *Yang*?

The ancient sages of China placed great emphasis on studying the relationships between *yin* and *yang*, considering their dynamic interplay as the origin of all things in the universe and the foundation of all phenomena. According to *Tao Te Ching* by *Laozi*, the universe originates from the *Tao*—the fundamental principle or natural law governing the cosmos. By adhering to this principle, the universe came into being and evolved into myriad forms. From an undifferentiated state of primordial chaos, the universe underwent intense movement, leading to the formation of *yin-yang*-integrated matter. This matter, through its perpetual motion and transformation across time and space, gave rise to all things. Thus, every entity in the world embodies a *yin-yang* relationship, both externally in relation to other entities and internally within itself. Furthermore, within each aspect of *yin* or *yang* lie further divisions of *yin and yang*, making it infinitely divisible. For instance, *yin-yang* relationships are evident in the sun and moon, day and night, heaven and earth, motion and stillness, cold and heat, emptiness and fullness, dispersal and convergence, masculinity and femininity, as well as in the roles of father and mother. When *yin* and *yang* are in harmony, they promote the growth and flourishing of things. Conversely, disharmony between them hinders development and can even lead to decay or destruction.

The ancient Chinese classic, the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching* 易经), is built upon two fundamental elements: *yin* (“-”) and *yang* (“—”). From the arrangements and transformations of these two elements arise the eight trigrams (Bagua 八卦) and the sixty-four hexagrams (64gua 64卦), representing the dynamic interplay of all universal phenomena. In the Song Dynasty, Zhou Dunyi’s treatise *Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate* (*Taijitu Shuo* 太极图说) explored the ultimate questions of existence, specifically the concepts of Limitless (*Wuji* 无极) and *Taiji* Supreme Ultimate. He posited that *Wuji* represents an undifferentiated state of chaos, while *Taiji* embodies the interaction of *yin* and *yang*. Zhou illustrated this philosophy with the *Taiji* (太极) Diagram, often referred to as the *yin-yang* fish symbol. The diagram depicts two interlocking fish, their heads and tails connected in a swirling motion. The black fish contains a white dot, and the white one contains a black dot, “symbolizing the coexistence of *yin* and *yang* within a unified entity: *yin* contains *yang*, and *yang* contains *yin*. The swirling motion” (Yang, 2003, p. 55). The *yin-yang* fish represents the perpetual transformation and cyclical nature of all things in the universe. This iconic diagram vividly captures the fundamental principles of the universe’s origin and the dynamics of its continual evolution.

The classic work of traditional Chinese medicine, the *Huangdi Neijing* (*The Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* 黄帝内经), categorizes the vast and complex phenomena of nature into two fundamental types: *yin* and *yang*, viewing them as the most universal and essential aspects of existence. According to the text, *yin* and *yang* are the fundamental attributes of all things, and their presence permeates everything in the universe. The doctrine of *yin-yang* represents an understanding of the origins, formation, development, and orderly nature of the world. It emphasizes that the dynamic interplay and transformation of *yin* and *yang* constitute the overarching law governing the operation of all things in the cosmos.

What Is *Yin-Yang* Dialectics?

Yin-yang dialectics refers to the principles governing the dynamic interplay and transformations of *yin* and *yang* within all things. It serves as both a methodology for analyzing and understanding problems and a framework for resolving them. The origins of *yin-yang* dialectical thinking can be traced back to China's Shang Dynasty and saw significant development during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. As stated in *Xici* (系辞) part of the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), "The alternation of *yin* and *yang* constitutes the *Tao*" (Xu & Zhang, 1992, p. 363). *Yin* and *yang* universally exist in the development and transformation of all phenomena. Throughout the lifecycle of any entity, there is a constant interaction between its *yin* and *yang* components. The nature and manifestations of *yin* and *yang* differ depending on the specific entity or phenomenon. When the *yin-yang* relationship of a system is balanced, harmony ensues. However, when this balance is disrupted—especially in cases of severe imbalance—it results in opposition, conflict, or struggle.

"The alternation of *yin* and *yang* constitutes the *Tao*" is a core principle of *yin-yang* dialectics. It emphasizes that every entity and phenomenon has two aspects—*yin* and *yang*. To observe and analyze issues effectively, one must consider both sides, as well as the complex interactions and transformations between them. In analyzing international relations, this principle encourages a balanced perspective: One must recognize both the positive and negative aspects, consider both advantages and disadvantages, and weigh both favorable and unfavorable conditions. In matters of interest, it is essential to account for both national and foreign interests, integrating a spirit of benevolence and morality with the commitment to justice and self-defense. When a nation faces aggression from another, it must have the courage to defend itself, resolutely safeguarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In the process of self-defense, a balanced approach is crucial—combining strong military capability with flexible and adaptive strategies, as well as harnessing both the assertive power of *yang* and the adaptive resilience of *yin*.

Eight Fundamental Laws of *Yin-Yang* Dialectics

Through an in-depth study of ancient Chinese classics such as the *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*), *Tao Te Ching*, and *Huangdi Neijing*, along with related literature, eight fundamental laws of *yin-yang* dialectics have been outlined by me: opposition of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Duili* 阴阳对立), waxing and waning of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Xiaozhang* 阴阳消长), interdependence of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Hugen* 阴阳互根), complementarity of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Hubu* 阴阳互补), mutual penetration of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Hushen* 阴阳互渗), inter-transformation of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Huzhuan* 阴阳互转), integration of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Hurong* 阴阳互融), balance of *yin-yang* (*Yinyang Pingheng* 阴阳平衡): These laws reflect both natural and social principles, offering profound insights for analyzing issues in international relations.

Opposition of *yin-yang*: It refers to the relative positioning of *yin* and *yang* within a unified entity, where under certain conditions, they oppose each other. *Yin* and *yang* differ in nature—*yang* is masculine, while *yin* is feminine; *yang* represents strength, while *yin* denotes weakness; powerful nations are considered *yang*, while weaker nations are considered *yin*. In the context of international relations, a balanced *yin-yang* relationship between nations fosters harmony. However, when this balance is disrupted, it leads to opposition, conflict, and struggle. For example, prior to World War I (1914), the rise of Germany and its ambition for world dominance caused great unease among older colonial powers like Britain and France, leading to a significant imbalance in the relationships between the old and new colonial powers. This imbalance sparked the first global conflict, as the Central Powers and Allied Powers fought over spheres of influence. Similarly, during World War II (1939-1945), the fascist ambitions of Germany, Italy, and Japan clashed with the interests of major powers like Britain, France, and the United States, causing a serious imbalance in their relations. This imbalance led to the conflict between the Axis Powers and the Allied Powers.

Waxing and waning of *yin-yang*: It means the continuous fluctuation between the growth and decline of *yin* and *yang*. A simple example is the daily cycle of *yang* (daylight) and *yin* (night) as they alternate. There are phases such as “less *yang*”, “the ultimate of *yang*”, “less *yin*”, and “the ultimate of *yin*”, which represent the dynamic changes in *yin* and *yang* throughout the day. The change between *yin* and *yang* is absolute, while dynamic balance is relative. If the balance tips too far in one direction, it results in either excessive *yin* or excessive *yang*. For example, if the force of *yang* becomes too dominant, it leads to the decline of *yin* (the weakening of the softer or passive forces), and vice versa. Extreme imbalances in *yin-yang* waxing and waning inevitably lead to conflict or contradictions, as forces that have exceeded their limits tend to create tensions.

In the late 1980s, China, which had just begun its reform and opening-up policies, was significantly weaker than the United States in terms of comprehensive national strength, with the U.S. considered a global superpower. In 1989, China’s GDP was \$347.76 billion, accounting for 1.73% of the world’s total GDP, while the U.S. GDP stood at \$5.64 trillion, comprising 28.08% of the global GDP. Over the next 30 years, China’s GDP grew substantially, reaching \$14.34 trillion by 2019, which represented 16.34% of global GDP, while the U.S. GDP grew to \$21.43 trillion, accounting for 24.41% of global GDP (Doc88.com, 2021). China’s GDP had become the second-largest in the world, surpassing all countries except the United States. This shift in economic power reflects a clear trend of *yin-yang* waxing and waning, where China’s strength grew while that of the United States relatively declined. This shift in global power dynamics has been difficult for the U.S. to accept. Starting in 2018, the U.S. initiated a trade war, technology war, and financial war against China in an effort to suppress its rise. China, in turn, implemented countermeasures, leading to a rapid deterioration in Sino-American relations.

Inter-transformation of *yin-yang*: It refers to the phenomenon where *yin* and *yang* transform into each other under certain conditions. As *yin* reaches its extreme, it becomes *yang*, and as *yang* reaches its extreme, it becomes *yin*. In other words, when *yin* reaches its limit, it turns into *yang*, and when *yang* reaches its limit, it turns into *yin*. While *yin-yang* waxing and waning represents a process of quantitative change, *yin-yang* transformation signifies a qualitative change. The fluctuation of *yin* and *yang* is a precondition for their transformation, and this transformation is the result of the development of *yin-yang* waxing and waning.

In the second half of the 16th century, the Netherlands experienced a bourgeois revolution, leading to the establishment of the Dutch Republic. With its advanced shipbuilding industry and rapidly expanding maritime trade, the Netherlands became a dominant naval power, often referred to as the “Sea Coachman”. At that time, England was still in the early stages of capitalist accumulation. However, following the outbreak of the English

Bourgeois Revolution in 1640, the power of the bourgeoisie and the new nobility grew significantly, leading to the formation of the English Commonwealth. During the Commonwealth period and the subsequent restoration of the Stuart monarchy, England waged three wars against the Netherlands, ultimately defeating it and becoming the global maritime superpower. The Netherlands, on the other hand, lost its position as the dominant naval power. This shift in power reflects the principle of *yin-yang* transformation, where the rise of one power (England) led to the fall of another (the Netherlands).

The principle of *yin-yang* transformation is also evident in the cyclical nature of fortune and misfortune. As *Laozi* says in the *Tao Te Ching*, “Good fortune follows upon disaster; disaster lurks within good fortune” (Xu & Liu, 1990, p. 160). This means that under certain conditions, fortune and misfortune can transform into each other. What may initially appear as misfortune can eventually lead to fortune, and what seems like fortune can turn into misfortune.

On August 9, 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden signed the *CHIPS and Science Act*. On March 21, 2023, the U.S. Department of Commerce issued an *U.S. Chip Act*, imposing strict restrictions on U.S. companies’ export of chips to China, which initially seemed to be a misfortune (“祸”) for China. However, companies like Huawei and SMIC (Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation) in China, after several years of intense research and development, were able to independently develop and manufacture their own chips, thus breaking free from dependence on American and Taiwan-based chipmakers, turning misfortune into fortune.

Interdependence of yin-yang: It refers to the idea that *yin* and *yang* are interdependent, serving as the foundation and source of each other, complementing one another. This is reflected in many dualities found in nature and human experience, such as heaven and earth, up and down, left and right, front and back, inside and outside, cold and hot, day and night, and even the sun-facing and shaded sides of mountains, as well as the front and back of the human body. If one side were to disappear, the other would lose its meaning and existence. The concept of *yin* and *yang* interdependence also signifies that *yin* and *yang* are mutually interdependent, serving as the source of each other, much like the alternation of the four seasons—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—on Earth. For example, summer originates from spring, autumn from summer, and winter from autumn, with the cycle continuing. Spring nurtures growth, summer fosters expansion, autumn brings harvest, and winter stores, reflecting the cyclical interplay of *yin* and *yang*.

The concept of *yin-yang* interdependence reminds us that, in international relations, countries are interdependent and complement each other, forming a mutually supportive foundation. Cooperation between nations benefits both, while conflict tends to harm both parties. After World War II, France reconciled with West Germany. In July 1952, the six countries—Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Italy—formed the European Coal and Steel Community. In April 1965, the European Coal and Steel Community merged with the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community through the Merger Treaty, creating the European Community. In 1992, it became the European Union. The formation of the European Community and later the European Union greatly promoted economic development and technological progress in Europe.

Complementarity of yin-yang: It means the mutual dependence and support between *yin* and *yang*. This principle can be clearly observed in the economic relations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In 1991, China formally established ties with ASEAN, marking the beginning of a significant regional partnership. On November 4, 2002, China and the 10 ASEAN member states signed the *China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement*, officially initiating the process of establishing

the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area. By 2009, China had become ASEAN's largest trading partner, surpassing the EU, the U.S., and Japan, with China accounting for 11.6% of ASEAN's total trade. By 2010, the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area was fully established, with both sides gradually eliminating tariffs on trade products (excluding sensitive products). By 2011, China became ASEAN's largest trading partner and its primary export destination. In 2023, ASEAN emerged as China's largest trade partner. The complementary nature of the economic relationship between China and ASEAN has been a significant driver of their long-term bilateral trade growth.

Currently, both sides have established a comprehensive cooperation framework, which includes a highest-level mechanism—the “Leaders’ Meeting”—along with five working cooperation mechanisms: the “China-ASEAN Senior Officials Consultations,” the “China-ASEAN Joint Cooperation Committee,” the “China-ASEAN Joint Committee on Economic and Trade Cooperation,” the “China-ASEAN Joint Committee on Science and Technology Cooperation,” the “ASEAN Beijing Committee,” and a semi-official business cooperation mechanism, the “China-ASEAN Business Council.” These mechanisms work in coordination, jointly advancing the further development of bilateral cooperation. (Li & Han, 2015, pp. 56-60)

Mutual penetration of *yin-yang*: It refers to the phenomenon where two opposing entities, *yin* and *yang*, permeate and coexist within each other. This is symbolized in the *yin-yang* fish diagram, where the white fish contains a small black dot, and the black one contains a small white dot, signifying that within *yin* there is *yang*, and within *yang* there is *yin*. Dialectical materialism of *yin* and *yang* asserts that there is a pervasive phenomenon of mutual infiltration between opposites. For example, in 1978, China began its domestic reforms and opening-up to the outside world, learning advanced management practices, science and technology from the United States and other developed Western countries, while also absorbing ideas on liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. These efforts led to reforms in China's economic, political, and administrative systems. At the same time, traditional Chinese culture, including its harmonious philosophy, art painting, garden design, Tai Chi, Kung Fu, and traditional medicine such as acupuncture and massage, gradually found their way to the West. Chinese cuisine also spread across Western countries. This mutual infiltration of Chinese and Western thought and culture has greatly facilitated the exchange and mutual learning between civilizations.

Integration of *yin-yang*: It refers to the fusion of two opposite elements, where each integrates a part of the other. The *Kazan Declaration*, issued at the 16th BRICS Summit held in October 2024, reflects the spirit of mutual benefit and cultural integration among BRICS countries. The Declaration

reaffirms the BRICS spirit of mutual respect and understanding, sovereignty equality, unity and democracy, openness and inclusiveness, deepening cooperation, and consensus-building. It further strengthens the “three-pillar” cooperation in political security, economic and financial trade, and cultural exchanges, aiming to build a more representative and equitable international order, promote sustainable development and inclusive growth, and deepen the BRICS strategic partnership for the benefit of all nations. It also reaffirms the importance of cultural exchanges in enhancing mutual understanding, friendship, and cooperation, and calls for respect for the diversity of world civilizations, the preservation and innovation of cultural heritage, and the strengthening of international cultural exchanges and cooperation. (Legal Daily, 2024)

Over the years, while BRICS countries have actively engaged in economic and trade exchanges, they have also made significant strides in promoting cultural exchanges, facilitating the integration of their diverse cultures.

Balance of *yin-yang*: It refers to the state in which *yin* and *yang* achieve balance as they move and interact, resulting in a harmonious manifestation. This balance reflects the “harmonious unity between the individual and the whole; between differences and commonality; between diversity and unity; and between competition and

win-win outcomes” (Yang, 2013, p. 23). Dialectical materialism of *yin* and *yang* asserts that “harmony is the fundamental nature of all things in the universe, and the most important and basic principle for the generation, existence, change, and development of all things” (Yang, 2013, p. 47).

According to the law of *yin-yang* balance, the long-term development of economic and trade relations between countries requires a balance in trade between the parties involved. If one side has a large trade surplus while the other side has a large trade deficit, it will be detrimental to the healthy development of their economic and trade relations. Since 2010, ASEAN has experienced a persistent and expanding trade deficit with China, and the trade imbalance has gradually intensified, which, if continued, will hinder the healthy development of bilateral economic and trade relations. China should work with ASEAN countries to gradually reduce ASEAN’s trade deficit with China. China should increase its investment in ASEAN countries, assist them in building transportation infrastructure such as high-speed railways and ports, and expand imports of distinctive products from Southeast Asia. Following the construction of high-speed rail in countries like Malaysia and Laos, China Road & Bridge Corporation will build a high-speed rail in Cambodia and upgrade its railway system. The development of transportation infrastructure will help ASEAN countries in exporting products to China, promoting more balanced trade between China and ASEAN.

***Yin-Yang* and Five Phases Generation and Overcoming Theory Model**

The theory of the mutual generation and mutual overcoming of *yin* and *yang*, combined with the Five Phases (*Wuxing*), serves as the theoretical model of dialectical materialism in *yin* and *yang*. It reveals the structural and dynamic relationships between things and phenomena. When *yin*, *yang*, and the Five Phases reach a dynamic balance during their movement, harmony is achieved. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) applies the *yin-yang* and the theory of the Five Phases to prevent, diagnose, and treat diseases. Starting from the dynamic changes in the mutual generation and restraint of *yin*, *yang*, and the Five Phases, TCM observes changes in the human body and treats diseases by enhancing the body’s immune system and self-repair abilities. The treatment approach in TCM focuses on unblocking the internal organs, smoothing the meridians, expelling toxins, and activating the immune system, ultimately achieving a state of *yin-yang* balance in the body’s internal organs, thus maintaining overall health.

The mutual generation of the Five Phases refers to the interdependent and nurturing relationships among five natural substances: Earth bears metal, metal collects water, water nourishes wood, wood feeds fire, and fire produces Earth. “Earth bears metal” refers to the process in which substances in the soil, through the movement and transformation of the Earth’s crust, give rise to metal ores. “Metal collects water” refers to the process where metallic minerals in the soil, especially those found in high mountain regions, use condensation mechanisms to transform moisture in the air into water. The higher the mountain, the more it resembles a condensation tower, absorbing moisture from the air as it passes, creating continuous mountain streams. “Water nourishes wood” refers to the growth of plants under the nourishment of water and sunlight, leading to the formation of trees. “Wood feeds fire” refers to trees that, when reaching their ignition point, catch fire and burn. “Fire produces Earth” refers to the process in which trees, after burning, turn to ash and eventually become soil.

The mutual overcoming of the Five Phases refers to the state where the Five Phases overcome each other, that is, Earth contains water, water dampens fire, fire melts metal, metal chops wood, and wood grasps (or stabilizes) Earth. As the saying goes, “One object overcomes another”. “Earth contains water” means the use of Earth to build dikes to overcome floods; “Water dampens fire” refers to the ability of water to extinguish fire;

“Fire melts metal” refers to the ability of high-temperature fire to melt metal; “Metal chops wood” refers to the use of metal tools to cut, drill, saw, or carve wood; “Wood grasps Earth” refers to the ability of plants to break through the soil’s resistance when they sprout and grow.

The theory of mutual generation and overcoming of the Five Phases offer profound insights for analyzing international relations. Taking China-EU relations as an example, the author applies the theory of mutual generation and mutual overcoming of the Five Phases to analyze the dynamics of their relationship.

In recent years, tensions have emerged in China-EU relations, with the European Parliament continuously passing resolutions criticizing China on issues such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong (China), and Taiwan (China). On May 20, 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution freezing the approval process for the *China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment*. In October 2021, the European Parliament, in its report on “EU-Taiwan (China) Political Relations and Cooperation”, stated its intention to enhance EU-Taiwan (China) relations. In December 2023, the European Parliament passed a report on EU-China relations and a resolution on EU-Taiwan (China) trade and investment relations, emphasizing that both sides are systemic rivals (Zhao, 2024). After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, the EU imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia and fully supported Ukraine in its fight against Russia, while China’s position differed significantly from that of the EU. China insisted on staying neutral, maintaining trade relations with both Russia and Ukraine, providing humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and calling for negotiations to resolve the issue. This stance was strongly criticized by the EU, highlighting the growing contradictions between China and the EU.

How should the China-EU conflicts and tensions be addressed? The author applies the theory of mutual generation and overcoming of the Five Phases model to analyze the situation, proposing potential strategies and approaches for managing these contradictions.

***Yin-Yang* and Five Phases Mutual Generation**

It means Earth bears metal, metal collects water, water nourishes wood, wood feeds fire, and fire produces Earth.

Earth bears metal. In this context, Earth can metaphorically represent China-EU economic and trade relations, while metal symbolizes social products and wealth. For China-EU relations, economic and trade relations are the foundation. Since 1992, China-EU economic and trade relations have developed over more than 30 years, establishing a solid foundation.

By 2019, the EU had maintained its position as China’s largest trading partner for 15 consecutive years, and it was also a major supplier of technology to China. In 2020, China overtook the United States to become the EU’s largest trading partner, with bilateral trade reaching 586 billion euros, and EU imports from and exports to China increased by 5.6% and 2.2%, respectively. (Kou, 2022, p. 86)

However, since 2022, the EU has been increasingly using new policy tools, raising market access barriers, and creating dual challenges for companies in terms of market access and localization. The EU has used administrative measures to restrict market behaviors, discriminating against companies and products from China’s Xinjiang region, showing a tendency to politicize economic issues. The EU’s excessive regulation has continuously intensified, significantly raising compliance costs for companies. Moreover, the EU’s discriminatory enforcement against Chinese-invested enterprises has led to a pessimistic outlook among Chinese companies regarding the EU’s future business environment (China Council for the Promotion of International Trade, 2023).

However, despite the increasing political tensions between China and the EU, their trade volume has not decreased but rather increased, with the EU's trade deficit with China showing a decline.

In 2023, the EU's goods trade deficit with China was 291 billion euros, a decrease of 106 billion euros (-27%) compared to 2022. In 2023, China became the EU's largest goods import partner and the EU's third-largest goods export partner. (Eurostat, 2024)

The strengthening of China-EU economic and trade relations has, to some extent, alleviated the political tensions between the two sides, preventing the EU from completely severing ties with China.

Metal collects water. Metal symbolizes social products and wealth, while water symbolizes flow. The growth of social products and wealth can promote the economic and trade relations between China and the EU. After the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022, political differences between China and the EU reached unprecedented levels. However, the growth of social products in both China and the EU facilitated the increase in bilateral trade and personnel exchanges, allowing China-EU economic and trade interactions to continue to develop despite the complex and challenging situation.

Water nourishes wood. Water symbolizes flow, and wood symbolizes the densely populated civil society. "Water nourishes wood" illustrates how economic and trade exchanges promote interactions within civil society. Since the 1990s, China-EU economic and trade relations have become increasingly close, and cultural exchanges have also intensified. A large number of Chinese students have studied in EU countries, while the number of EU students studying in China has gradually increased. On November 27, 2023, the Chinese government announced a unilateral visa exemption policy for citizens holding ordinary passports from six countries: France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Malaysia. From December 1, 2023, to November 30, 2024, citizens from these countries holding ordinary passports can enter China without a visa for business, tourism, family visits, or transit for up to 15 days (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of The People's Republic of China, 2023). Additionally, National Immigration Administration, P.R.C. announced that starting from November 17, 2023, the scope of China's 72/144-hour transit visa exemption policy expanded to 54 countries, including 40 European countries (2023). These policy measures have greatly facilitated the travel of European citizens to China, allowing them to experience the current situation of the country firsthand. Therefore, expanding civil society exchanges helps to increase mutual understanding among the people, reduce extreme or one-sided perceptions, and plays a positive role in the continued development of China-EU relations.

Wood feeds fire. Wood symbolizes civil society, and Fire here is used to symbolize prosperity and vitality. Close exchanges between the civil societies of China and the EU not only enhance mutual understanding among the people and promote the exchange of ideas and culture, but also contribute to gradually improving political relations. If cultural exchanges and civil society interactions between China and the EU continue to expand, the people of EU countries will gain a deeper understanding of China, achieving "people-to-people connectivity". As a result, those extreme anti-China politicians in Europe will lose their voter base. Therefore, the close interactions within civil society are conducive to the thriving development of China-EU relations.

Fire produces earth. Fire symbolizes prosperity and vitality, while Earth represents the economic foundation and trade relations. After fire burns, it transforms into fertile soil. If China-EU relations flourish and prosper, it will promote economic and trade relations. The development of these trade relations, in turn, will broaden civil society exchanges and cultural interactions, creating a virtuous cycle.

***Yin-Yang* and Five Phases Mutual Overcoming**

It refers to the way the Five Phases counteract each other: Earth contains water, water dampens fire, fire melts metal, metal chops wood, and wood grasps (or stabilize) Earth. Applying this theory to analyze the contradictions and conflicts between China and the European Union can provide ideas and insights for resolving issues.

Earth contains water. Earth symbolizes economic and trade relations, while water represents fluidity. When political differences and conflicts between China and the European Union widen and affect their interactions, strengthening economic and trade relations can help ease tensions. In recent years, the European Parliament has passed a series of resolutions condemning China over issues related to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong (China), and Taiwan (China). The EU has even imposed sanctions on Chinese officials in Xinjiang. In response, China has countered EU actions while continuing to promote trade with Europe. Not only has the trade volume between the two sides not decreased, but it has actually grown. Expanding economic and trade relations has also facilitated greater exchanges between businesses, people, and civil society. Therefore, strengthening China-EU trade ties is a long-term strategy for alleviating difficulties in their interactions.

Water dampens fire. Fire here symbolizes friction and fire, meaning contradictions, conflicts, and struggles, while water symbolizes mobility. When the momentum of China-EU relations is hindered, it is important to continue promoting the “flow of water”. On one hand, this involves strengthening official exchanges by continuing dialogue and communication between China and the EU, as well as between Chinese and European government bodies. Efforts should also be made to enhance exchanges between the National People’s Congress (NPC), the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the European Parliament, and national parliaments of EU member states. On the other hand, both China and Europe should foster people-to-people exchanges and encourage interactions between Chinese and European business associations, civil organizations, experts, scholars, and the general public. Through close exchanges at various levels and across different fields, mutual trust can be strengthened and misunderstandings reduced. The implementation of China’s visa-free policy for 54 countries (72/144-hour transit visa exemption) on November 17, 2023, significantly boosted China-EU cultural exchanges.

Fire melts metal. Metal here symbolizes the strength of the confrontation is as hard as metal, while fire fierce flames. When China-EU conflicts intensify and the “metal” of confrontation comes charging in, it should be met with a “fire” that restrains metal. For example, in 2024, when the EU imposed high anti-subsidy tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, China responded by launching anti-dumping investigations into EU products such as dairy, pork, and brandy. China also brought the EU’s final anti-subsidy ruling against Chinese electric vehicles to the World Trade Organization’s dispute resolution mechanism, demonstrating a resolute countermeasure to protect national interests.

Metal chops wood. Metal symbolizes social products and wealth, while wood represents civil society. When interactions between China and the civil society of EU member states face difficulties and obstacles, China should focus on strengthen its economy, increasing social products and wealth. By strengthening its economic power, China can overcome the resistance and barriers to civil society exchanges and promote people-to-people interactions and cultural exchanges.

Wood overcomes Earth. Wood symbolizes the civil society, while Earth represents economic and trade relations. When economic and trade relations between China and the EU face many obstacles, the role of the civil

society should be fully leveraged to promote these relations. For example, when the European Parliament froze the consideration of the *China-EU Comprehensive Agreement on Investment*, and the European Commission imposed anti-dumping and anti-subsidy measures on Chinese photovoltaic products and tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, leading to difficulties in economic and trade relations, China should vigorously promote civil society exchanges. On one hand, this involves fostering closer ties between Chinese and European businesses; on the other hand, it means encouraging interactions between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and elites from various industries in China and the EU. Through close exchanges in civil society, the challenges in economic and trade relations can be overcome.

The theory of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases mutual generation and overcoming offer profound insights into resolving the contradictions and conflicts between China and the European Union. In China-EU relations, economic trade is the foundation, while civil society exchanges and cultural and ideological interactions are the wings, and political dialogue serves as the channel. China should solidify its economic and trade relations, actively promote civil society exchanges and cultural communication, and gradually improve political relations. Therefore, strengthening the foundation, expanding the wings, and broadening the channels are the key to the continued development of China-EU relations.

Conclusion

Traditional Chinese cultural thoughts on harmony are rooted in the principles of *Tian Dao* (the cosmic laws), *Di Dao* (the laws of nature), and *Ren Dao* (the laws of society). The *yin-yang* dialectical philosophy, with its concept of “*yin* and *yang* as Tao”, reflects the developmental laws of the universe. The eight fundamental laws of *yin-yang* dialectics embody natural and social laws, while the theory of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases generation and overcoming theory provides valuable insights into analyzing human society and international relations.

The *yin-yang* dialectics teaches us that all things are unified in *yin* and *yang*, and within *yin* and *yang*, there are further divisions of *yin* and *yang*—endlessly subdivisible. When analyzing issues using this method, we must recognize not only the oppositions between *yin* and *yang* but also their mutual growth, transformation, interdependence, complementarity, permeation, integration, and balance. This approach to understanding problems differs from the “black and white” or “either-or” dialectics. *Yin-yang* dialectics asserts that not only do nations face opposition, contradictions, and conflicts, but there is also mutual growth, transformation, interdependence, supplementation, permeation, integration, and balance between them. The theory of *yin-yang* and the Five Phases generation and overcoming provides a conceptual framework for resolving conflicts between nations, avoiding simplistic or extreme thinking, and revealing the flaws of “power politics”, “hegemonism”, and the “zero-sum” mentality, which contradict the natural laws.

Currently,

international conflicts are ongoing, with one issue following another, and countries are more concerned than ever about the future of humanity. The desire for a return to stability and order in the world is at an all-time high. The international community calls broadly for enhanced unity and cooperation, seeking lasting stability through peaceful coexistence and collective development in an open and inclusive manner. (World Knowledge, October 25, 2024)

Traditional Chinese cultural thoughts on harmony offer abundant intellectual resources for “harmony in diversity”, “harmony brings prosperity”, “peaceful coexistence”, “harmonious coexistence”, and “mutual benefits”. The *yin-*

yang dialectical philosophy offers a methodology for reducing conflicts, avoiding war, and achieving world peace and harmony.

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