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China Culture Guide

Yin & Yang and the Eight Trigrams

阴阳 · 五行 · 八卦

China's ancient philosophy of balance — and how it shapes everyday life today

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Introduction — Why Does Any of This Matter?

You've seen the symbol everywhere. On temples, tattoos, T-shirts, martial arts dojos, and phone cases. The ☯ circle — half black, half white, each side with a dot of the other — is one of the most recognized symbols in the world.

But in China, Yin-Yang and the Eight Trigrams (Ba Gua) are far more than a logo. They are the philosophical foundation of Chinese medicine, architecture (feng shui), martial arts, astrology, cooking, and daily decision-making. Understanding even the basics will help you decode countless things you'll encounter in China.

Part 1 — Yin and Yang (阴阳 Yīn Yáng)

Yin-Yang is not a religion or superstition. It is a philosophical framework — a way of understanding that everything in the universe exists in dynamic pairs of opposing but complementary forces. Neither side is good or evil. Both are necessary. Both define each other.

Yin vs Yang — At a Glance

☾ YIN 阴	☀ YANG 阳
Dark · Night · Moon	Light · Day · Sun
Cold · Winter · Stillness	Hot · Summer · Activity
Feminine · Receptive · Soft	Masculine · Active · Hard
Earth · Below · Dense	Heaven · Above · Expansive
Water · Flowing Downward	Fire · Rising Upward
Passive · Rest · Sleep	Active · Motion · Growth

The Key Idea: Balance, Not Battle

The most common Western misunderstanding is seeing Yin-Yang as a conflict — light vs. dark, good vs. evil. That is NOT the concept. Yin and Yang are interdependent partners in constant transformation. Too much of either creates imbalance — and imbalance is what causes problems.

In Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM): a fever is too much Yang — excessive heat. Fatigue and cold limbs indicate too much Yin — insufficient Yang energy. The goal is always to restore balance.

 **Fun Fact:** The circular Yin-Yang symbol (called the Taijitu, 太极图) was formalized during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), but the underlying philosophy is over 3,000 years old, first appearing in texts from around 700 BC.

Where You Will See Yin-Yang in China

- Chinese medicine clinics: doctors discuss Yin-Yang constitution and prescribe herbs accordingly
- Tai Chi (太极拳): the slow circular movements embody Yin-Yang — hard and soft, movement and stillness
- Feng Shui: interior design and architecture arranged to balance Yin-Yang energy flow
- Chinese cooking: foods classified as Yin (cooling: watermelon, cucumber, green tea) or Yang (warming: ginger, garlic, lamb, chilli)
- Temple architecture: oriented to balance Yin (north, shadow, water) and Yang (south, sun, fire)
- Martial arts: kung fu and tai chi cultivate and direct Qi (life energy) through Yin-Yang balance

 **China App Connection:** Several popular Chinese wellness apps are built on Yin-Yang principles: 平安好医生 (Ping An Good Doctor) — China's largest online TCM consultation platform. Book consultations with Chinese medicine doctors who diagnose Yin-Yang imbalances. Available in Chinese; works with foreign phone numbers.

薄荷健康 (Boohee Health) — Nutrition app that classifies foods as Yin/Yang cooling or warming, not just calories. Popular with Chinese health-conscious users.

Find guides for setting up Chinese health apps at ichingo.app

Part 2 — The Five Elements (五行 Wǔ Xíng)

Yin-Yang describes the two fundamental forces. The Five Elements describes how these forces express themselves through five dynamic states: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. This framework is central to Chinese medicine, astrology, and fortune-telling.

	Element	Chinese	Season	Direction	Organ (TCM)	Personality Trait	Emotion
	Wood	木 Mù	Spring	East	Liver	Ambitious, decisive, creative	Anger
	Fire	火 Huǒ	Summer	South	Heart	Charismatic, joyful, communicative	Joy
	Earth	土 Tǔ	Late Summer	Center	Spleen	Nurturing, practical, stable	Worry
	Metal	金 Jīn	Autumn	West	Lungs	Precise, organized, principled	Grief
	Water	水 Shuǐ	Winter	North	Kidneys	Wise, intuitive, philosophical	Fear

Tip: Your Five Elements constitution shapes your personality and health tendencies. A 'Wood type' tends to be ambitious but prone to frustration. A 'Fire type' is charismatic but can burn out. This is why two people born in the same year can have very different Chinese horoscope readings.

Part 3 — The Eight Trigrams (八卦 Bā Guà)

The Eight Trigrams (Ba Gua) is the architecture built upon Yin-Yang. Each trigram is a stack of three lines, where each line is either solid (Yang) or broken (Yin). Three lines with two possible states = 8 combinations = Eight Trigrams. These symbols — first described in the I Ching around 800 BC — represent eight fundamental states of reality.

The Eight Trigrams — Quick Reference

							
Qian 乾 <i>Heaven</i> Creative Force	Kun 坤 <i>Earth</i> Receptive	Kan 坎 <i>Water</i> Danger / Flow	Li 离 <i>Fire</i> Clarity / Light	Zhen 震 <i>Thunder</i> Arousing	Xun 巽 <i>Wind</i> Gentle	Gen 艮 <i>Mountain</i> Keeping Still	Dui 兑 <i>Lake</i> Joyful

The Bagua Map — Eight Life Areas

In feng shui, the eight trigrams are arranged in an octagon (the Bagua Map), each assigned to a compass direction and a life area. This map is used to analyze homes, offices, and cities to optimize the flow of Qi (life energy).

	Trigram	Direction	Life Area	What It Governs
	Qian (Heaven)	Northwest	Helpful People	Mentors, benefactors, travel, blessings from others
	Kun (Earth)	Southwest	Relationships	Love, marriage, partnership, mother energy
	Kan (Water)	North	Career & Path	Life journey, career flow, opportunities
	Li (Fire)	South	Fame & Reputation	Recognition, achievement, how others see you
	Zhen (Thunder)	East	Family & Health	Ancestors, family bonds, health, new beginnings
	Xun (Wind)	Southeast	Wealth & Abundance	Financial prosperity, gratitude, fortunate blessings

	Gen (Mountain)	Northeast	Knowledge & Wisdom	Self-cultivation, meditation, inner knowing
	Dui (Lake)	West	Creativity & Joy	Creative expression, children, joy, communication

The I Ching — The Book of Changes (易经)

The I Ching is the ancient text from which the Ba Gua comes, written approximately 3,000 years ago. The 64 hexagrams (every pair combination of the 8 trigrams) are used for divination — understanding a situation and the most aligned way to navigate change. It is used today by philosophers, business strategists, and millions of ordinary Chinese people facing decisions.

 **Fun Fact:** Carl Jung, the Swiss psychologist, was deeply influenced by the I Ching. He wrote the foreword to the first major English translation (1950) and called it a profound system of psychology. His concept of 'synchronicity' — meaningful coincidence — was partly inspired by studying it.

 **China App Connection:** Want to explore Ba Gua and I Ching digitally?

易经 (I Ching apps) — Search 'Yi Jing' on the App Store or Google Play for well-rated divination apps in both Chinese and English

万年历 (Chinese Calendar App) — China's most popular lunar calendar app, shows auspicious and inauspicious days based on Ba Gua principles. Over 100 million users.

周易占卜 (Zhou Yi Divination) — Digital I Ching consultation app, available in English and Chinese
For guides to finding and using these apps in China, visit ichingo.app

Part 4 — How Yin-Yang & Ba Gua Shape Modern Chinese Life

These concepts are not museum pieces. They are embedded in how hundreds of millions of Chinese people make everyday decisions — from healthcare to wedding dates to office layouts.

4A. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

TCM — still practiced by hundreds of millions and covered by China's national health insurance — is entirely built on Yin-Yang and Five Elements theory. When a TCM doctor takes your pulse with three fingers on each wrist, they are reading six organ systems and their Yin-Yang balance.

- Yang excess: inflammation, fever, red face — treated with cooling Yin-tonifying herbs
- Yin deficiency: night sweats, dry mouth, restlessness — treated with Yin-nourishing foods
- Yang deficiency: cold limbs, fatigue, pale face — treated with warming foods (ginger, cinnamon, lamb)

- Qi stagnation: stress, bloating, emotional tension — treated with Qi-moving herbs and acupuncture

China App Connection: Useful apps for TCM in China:

平安好医生 (Ping An Good Doctor) — Book TCM doctors online; available nationwide with English interface option

好大夫在线 (Hao Da Fu) — China's largest doctor-booking platform with TCM specialists. Foreigners can register with a non-Chinese phone number.

Find full registration guides for these apps at ichingo.app

4B. Feng Shui — Ba Gua in Architecture

Feng Shui (wind-water) is the practice of arranging spaces to optimize Qi flow using Bagua principles. Many Chinese businesses and families seriously consult feng shui masters when choosing offices and homes.

- The HSBC Tower in Hong Kong: famously designed with feng shui consultation — two escalators angle toward the harbor to channel wealth energy
- Many Shenzhen and Beijing office buildings: front door direction and lobby layout determined by feng shui masters
- Red decorations at Chinese New Year: Red is Yang color — active, auspicious, fire energy — chosen deliberately
- Mirror placement: mirrors redirect or amplify Qi — never place one directly facing the front door

4C. Chinese Astrology — 12 Animals + 5 Elements

The Chinese Zodiac assigns an animal to each year in a 12-year cycle. But the full system layers Five Elements on top — each year is also one of the five elements, creating a 60-year cycle. Your full Chinese astrological profile requires knowing your animal, element, and Yin-Yang polarity.

For example: 2024 was the Year of the Wood Dragon — Wood element, Yang polarity. 2025 is the Year of the Wood Snake — Wood element, Yin polarity.

 **Tip:** If a Chinese person asks what year you were born, they may be calculating your zodiac animal AND your elemental constitution. This is as common in China as asking someone's star sign in the West.

4D. Choosing Auspicious Dates (择日)

Selecting a lucky date for weddings, business launches, and major decisions is extremely common in China. The process uses Ba Gua, Five Elements, and the lunar calendar to identify dates that align favorable energy with the individuals involved.

- Wedding dates cluster heavily around numerologically favored dates: 6/6, 9/9, 8/8, dates with lucky sounds in Chinese
- Business contracts are often signed on dates chosen for their elemental and Bagua alignment
- Moving house is almost always done on an auspicious date — moving on a 'wrong' day is genuinely believed to bring bad luck

 **China App Connection:** 万年历 (Wan Nian Li, Chinese Calendar) — China's most popular auspicious date selection app. Shows lucky/unlucky days for weddings, moving, business, travel. Over 100 million users. Available on all Chinese app stores.

Search 万年历 on any Chinese app platform. Color-coded red (auspicious) and black (avoid) — intuitive even without Chinese reading ability.

ichingo.app has guides for downloading and navigating Chinese app stores as a foreigner

Part 5 — Visitor's Practical Guide

Where You'll Encounter These Symbols in China

Where	What It Means
Temple entrance gates	The octagonal Ba Gua mirror above temple doors is a feng shui protection device — it deflects negative energy
Taoist temple floors	Many temples have a Bagua pattern inlaid in the floor — visitors walk over it to absorb balanced energy
Martial arts schools	Bagua Zhang (八卦掌) kung fu uses circular walking patterns based directly on the Eight Trigrams
TCM clinics	Doctors use Yin-Yang terminology in every consultation — 'your liver Yang is excess' is a medical diagnosis
New Year decorations	Circular red-and-gold decorations reference Taiji (Yin-Yang) symbolism and fire Yang energy
Feng shui compass (luopan)	Sold as souvenirs in Xi'an and Beijing — these special compasses have Ba Gua markings for energy mapping
Clothing and jewelry	Ba Gua pendants and Yin-Yang jewelry are worn for protection and balance, not just as fashion

Three Things That Will Change How You See China

1

When a Chinese person says 'I need to find balance' or 'this food is too cooling for me', they are describing Yin-Yang literally — not as a metaphor. The philosophy is embedded in

everyday language.

2

The number 8 is extremely lucky in China because it sounds like 发 (prosperity) — this is Yang energy sound symbolism. The number 4 is unlucky because it sounds like 死 (death) — Yin energy at its most extreme.

3

When a Chinese building has mirrors, plants, water features, or specific colors in specific locations — these are almost always intentional feng shui choices, not random decoration.

✓ **Good to Know:** You do not need to believe in Yin-Yang or Ba Gua to benefit from understanding it. Even as a visitor, knowing the framework helps you:

Understand why a TCM doctor asks about sleeping patterns, diet, and emotions all at once

Make sense of why Chinese people choose specific dates for weddings and business launches

Appreciate the intentional design of Chinese temples, gardens, and public spaces

Connect more meaningfully with Chinese friends who take these concepts seriously

Final Thoughts

Yin-Yang and Ba Gua are 3,000 years old — and still very much alive. In China's hospitals, homes, boardrooms, and temples, these ideas shape real decisions every day. Understanding them is not about accepting ancient superstition; it is about understanding one of humanity's most sophisticated frameworks for making sense of a complex world.

The next time you see a ☯ symbol — on a temple gate, a medicine bottle, or a kung fu poster — you'll know you're looking at something that has shaped the most populous civilization in human history for three millennia.

For more China culture guides, practical app recommendations, and travel tips, visit ichingo.app — your complete toolkit for understanding and traveling China.

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