Arga-Bilig theory in traditional Mongolian medicine: a theoretical and practical perspective

Tegele Si*, Xue-Mei Bao**, Ming-Hai Fu¹, Xiu-Mei Wang¹*, Laxinamujiila Bai**

¹NMFA Key Laboratory for Quality Control of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Mongolian Medicine), School of Mongolian Medicine, Inner Mongolia Minzu University, Tongliao 028000, China.

*These authors contributed equally to this work and are co-first authors for this paper.

¹Correspondence to: Xiu-Mei Wang, Laxinamujiila Bai. NMFA Key Laboratory for Quality Control of Traditional Chinese Medicine (Mongolian Medicine), School of Mongolian Medicine, Inner Mongolia Minzu University, No. 996, Xilamulun Street, Keerqin District, Tongliao 028000, China. E-mail: wangxiumei1980@126.com; namuji@126.com.

Abstract

The concept of Arga and Bilig serves as a foundational principle in both ancient Mongolian philosophy and traditional Mongolian medicine (TMM). Arga, symbolized by brightness and associated with qualities of fire and activity, complements Bilig, symbolized by darkness and representing attributes of water and stillness. Together, these opposing forces permeate all aspects of existence, from the genesis of parenthood to the interplay of day and night. Understanding Arga-Bilig is crucial for diagnosing and treating diseases, as it illuminates the source of imbalance within the body. This review provides an overview of the significance of Arga-Bilig in Mongolian philosophy and its application in TMM, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of these opposing forces and their role in maintaining balance and harmony within the body.

Keywords: traditional Mongolian medicine; Arga and Bilig theory; holistic; dynamic interplay

Author contributions

Wang XM and Bai L conceived and designed the manuscript. Si T, Bao XM and Fu MH collected the data. Si T and Bao XM wrote the original draft. Wang XM and Bai L reviewed the manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

This study was supported by Science and Technology Young Talents Development Project of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (NYT20248), Inner Mongolia Natural Science Foundation (2023LHS08002) and NMFA Key Laboratory Open Fund Project (MDK2023025).

Peer review information

History and Philosophy of Medicine thanks Gholam Reza Bateni, Abbas Bakshshandeh Bai and other reviewers for their contribution to the peer review of this paper.

Abbreviations

TMM, traditional Mongolian medicine; TCM, traditional Chinese medicine; MMIB, Mongolian Mind-Body Interactive Psychotherapy.

Citation


Executive editor: Jing Yin.

Received: 16 May 2024; Accepted: 22 July 2024; Available online: 24 July 2024.

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Background

Rooted in the ancient philosophy of Mongolia, the concept of Arga and Bilig, akin to the Yin-Yang principle, serves as a foundational principle that permeates various aspects of Mongolian life and medicine, dating back to the Stone Age [1]. Derived from meticulous observations of nature and environment, Arga-Bilig embodies the delicate balance between opposing forces, encapsulating notions of good and evil, movement and stillness [1, 2].

This philosophical framework, deeply ingrained in Mongolian culture, extends beyond mere observation, offering a holistic logic that views entities in relation to their entirety. Arga-Bilig serves as a methodological tool for elucidating the intricate relationships between objects and phenomena, paving the way for its application across various domains. Notably, traditional Mongolian medicine (TMM) stands as a testament to the practical implementation of the Arga-Bilig theory in understanding the complexities of the human body [3, 4]. In the realm of TMM, this paradigm extends its influence over the understanding of bodily tissues, organs, and ailments. Gender attributes, organ systems, pulse diagnostics, and therapeutic interventions are all intricately linked to the dynamic interplay of Arga-Bilig. Within this framework, diseases are categorized as either heat or cold, with nuanced variations manifesting as peaks of heat or depths of cold. Diagnostic methodologies, ranging from pulse examinations to symptomatology, are finely attuned to discerning the subtle fluctuations of Arga-Bilig [5]. Central to this doctrine is the concept of equilibrium, wherein Arga-Bilig engage in perpetual dance, each augmenting or diminishing in response to the other. The cyclical rhythms of the seasons (spring's warmth, summer’s heat, autumn’s coolness, winter’s coldness) serve as poignant reflections of this dynamic equilibrium [5]. In practical application, the theory of Arga-Bilig informs therapeutic strategies, guiding the selection of treatments and medicinal compounds. By recognizing the inherent balance of Arga-Bilig within the body, practitioners can tailor interventions to restore harmony and promote healing. This holistic approach encompasses not only the physical manifestations of disease but also the underlying energetic imbalances.

Throughout history, the Arga-Bilig theory has undergone enrichment, particularly during the sixteenth century, with the integration of the Five Elements theory from Indian and Chinese astrology into TMM. TMM and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) share similarities in their philosophical foundations but also exhibit distinct differences. Both systems emphasize a holistic approach to health, considering the balance between mind, body, and environment. Mongolian medicine is deeply rooted in the concepts of Arga-Bilig and the theory of three roots, emphasizing harmony with nature and bodily functions. It integrates shamanistic practices and Mongolian triple thinking, reflecting a unique cultural heritage. TCM, on the other hand, also relies on the Yin-Yang theory and Five Elements but places a stronger emphasis on the flow of Qi (vital energy) through meridians in the body. TCM practices such as acupuncture, herbal medicine, and Tai Chi focus on maintaining the smooth flow of Qi to prevent and treat illnesses. While both medical systems aim for balance and holistic well-being, Mongolian medicine incorporates a distinctive spiritual and cultural dimension, whereas TCM has developed a more structured approach to diagnosing and treating health conditions through its detailed theoretical framework [6]. In Ayurveda, however, there is not a direct equivalent concept to Arga-Bilig or Yin-Yang theories, there are philosophical and theoretical parallels that reflect similar principles of balance and harmony in nature and the human body. For example, Tridoshic theory states that all physiological and psychological functions are governed by three fundamental energies or doshas: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha [7]. These doshas correspond to specific qualities and elements, and their balance is crucial for health and well-being. Similar to Arga and Bilig, the doshas are dynamic forces that interact and influence each other, and their imbalance can lead to disease [8]. Thus, Arga-Bilig theory in TMM demonstrates a synthesis of influences from TCM and Ayurveda, adapted to meet the specific cultural, environmental, and spiritual needs of Mongolia’s nomadic society. This fusion allowed for a deeper understanding of the interrelation between the organs of the body and other natural phenomena. In addition, Shamanism, as practiced in Mongolia, involves spiritual rituals and practices where shamans communicate with spirits to heal ailments and restore balance [9]. Shamanic healing often includes ceremonies, chants, and the use of specific objects or substances believed to have spiritual power [10]. The theory of Arga-Bilig acknowledges the role of spiritual forces and energies in health and illness. Shamans play a crucial role in diagnosing illnesses that are believed to have spiritual origins or components. They may perform rituals or ceremonies to address spiritual causes alongside practical treatments like herbal remedies or dietary adjustments. To this end, illness is perceived as a disruption in the balance of Arga and Bilig, triggered by emotional, thermal, or other influences, with therapy focusing on accurately diagnosing these imbalances to restore harmony within the body. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of the Arga-Bilig theory, tracing its historical evolution, delving into its philosophical underpinnings, and examining its practical applications in TMM (Figure 1). By unraveling the intricacies of Arga-Bilig, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of its enduring relevance in both traditional and modern contexts, shedding light on its role as a guiding principle in Mongolian philosophy and medicine.

The essence of Arga-Bilig in Mongolian philosophy

In ancient Mongolian philosophy, the principle of Arga and Bilig serves as the cornerstone of the universe, underlying all aspects of creation. It encompasses the genesis of parenthood, the essence of life and death, and is revered within the temples of the gods. Understanding and applying the concept of Arga-Bilig is essential in diagnosing and treating diseases, as it illuminates the source of imbalance within the body [1–3]. Originally symbolized by brightness, embodied by the sun, and darkness, represented by the moon, Arga and Bilig permeate every facet of existence. All phenomena in the world can be classified and explained through the lens of Arga-Bilig. Arga embodies qualities of fire, heat, brightness, day, activity, outwardness, upwardness, and hyperfunction, while Bilig encompasses attributes of water, coldness, darkness, night, stillness, inwardness, downwardness, and hypofunction. Despite their opposing nature, Arga and Bilig maintain an interdependent relationship, essential for the sustenance of life. Just as male complements female and vice versa, the unity of Arga-Bilig is indispensable for existence [11–13]. Illustrative examples further elucidate the concept of Arga-Bilig. For instance, the traditional Mongolian tent, used by the Hunnu peoples 2,500 years ago, embodies both Arga and Bilig elements. The smoke-hole atop the tent, supported by central columns, symbolizes the interplay of stability and cultural significance. The walls, made of interlocking wooden sections and insulated with felt, exemplify the balance between lightness and shade, warmth and coolness [1, 14].

Furthermore, the division of the tent into Arga and Bilig sections reflects the gender roles and societal norms inherent in Mongolian culture. The western half, designated as Arga (male), houses masculine accoutrements, while the eastern half, regarded as Bilig (female), accommodates feminine belongings and activities. The harmonious interaction between these two halves mirrors the harmony between man and woman, the fundamental pillars of life. The dynamic interplay of Arga-Bilig extends beyond physical structures to encompass everyday activities and emotions. The extremes of Arga and Bilig are interconnected, with one transitioning into the other seamlessly. Rest becomes necessary after exertion, reflecting the perpetual cycle of activity and rest inherent in Arga-Bilig dynamics [15]. In essence, the concept of Arga-Bilig embodies the harmonious balance and interdependence inherent in the universe. By embracing this principle, one gains insight into the interconnectedness of all phenomena, paving the way for a deeper understanding of life, health, and happiness.
The ancient concept of Arga-Bilig, deeply rooted in Mongolian culture, serves as a foundational principle in TMM. This concept represents the balance between opposing forces such as light and dark, movement and stillness, and heat and cold. Arga, associated with the active and mobile aspects, contrasts with Bilig, which embodies the passive and immobile qualities [3]. This dynamic interplay is central to understanding the complexities of the human body and its ailments in TMM. In TMM, the human body is viewed as an integrated whole, with all organs and tissues interconnected and classified according to Arga-Bilig principles. The body is divided into two opposite aspects: Arga and Bilig. The upper and right parts of the body, the exterior part, and the back are associated with Arga, while the lower and left parts, the interior, and the abdomen are linked to Bilig. The five vital organs (heart, liver, spleen, lungs, and kidneys) are considered Arga, while the six hollow organs (gallbladder, stomach, large intestine, small intestine, bladder, and triple burner) are viewed as Bilig [4]. Arga represents the functional aspects of the body, driving activities and processes, whereas Bilig represents the substance aspects, providing the necessary nutrients and structure. This mutual dependence ensures that the body functions harmoniously, with Arga activities generating and maintaining Bilig substances and vice versa.

The theory of Arga-Bilig is instrumental in diagnosing and treating diseases in TMM. Pathological changes are viewed through the lens of Arga-Bilig imbalance. External factors such as diet, behavior, seasonal changes, and unexpected conditions are categorized into Arga (heat) and Bilig (cold) pathogenic factors [15, 16]. Diseases caused by Arga pathogens present with heat symptoms, such as fever and inflammation, while those caused by Bilig pathogens exhibit cold symptoms, like chills and sluggishness. For instance, an excess of Arga leads to warm disorders characterized by high temperatures, thirst, and restlessness. Conversely, an excess of Bilig results in cold disorders marked by cold extremities, digestive issues, and lethargy. Therapeutic interventions such as venesection (bloodletting), acupuncture, and moxibustion are employed to adjust the Arga-Bilig balance [17]. Medicines in TMM are also classified according to Arga-Bilig properties. Arga medicines, which are hot, light, and sharp, are used to treat wind and phlegm diseases, while Bilig medicines, characterized by cool, heavy, and blunt qualities, are employed to address bile-related conditions [18]. This classification ensures that treatments are tailored to the specific imbalances within the body, promoting healing by restoring equilibrium. The Arga-Bilig theory remains a cornerstone of TMM, offering a comprehensive framework for understanding the human body and its ailments. By maintaining the balance between Arga and Bilig, TMM practitioners can diagnose and treat diseases effectively, ensuring the well-being of their patients. This holistic approach underscores the enduring relevance of Arga-Bilig in both traditional and modern medical practices, highlighting its role as a guiding principle in Mongolian medicine.

**Unity in duality of the Arga-Bilig theory**

The essence of the Arga-Bilig theory lies in its recognition of the duality inherent in all aspects of the universe, characterized by the opposing forces of Arga and Bilig. These forces, while in constant conflict, are also interdependent, driving change and development within the cosmos. This fundamental principle, known as the unity of opposites, underpins the dynamics of birth, life, accident, and death, influencing all beings and phenomena [19]. Crucially, Arga and Bilig are not separate entities but rather complementary aspects of a unified whole. They not only oppose each other but also contain elements of one another; without one, the other cannot exist. This symbiotic relationship is akin to the two sides of a coin or the concept of inside and outside, illustrating the interconnectedness of seemingly disparate elements. The interplay between Arga and Bilig generates a continual process of development, wherein each aspect begets and sustains the other. Opposites maintain balance and exert mutual control, ensuring the stability and functionality of the universe. In the context of medical theory, this principle finds expression in the subjective and objective aspects of the body. Wind, bile, and phlegm, representing dynamic elements, are attributed to Arga, as they drive the functional system of the body. Conversely, the seven constituents, representing static components, are ascribed to Bilig. Any imbalance in the dynamic elements adversely affects the static constituents, highlighting their interdependence and mutual influence [20].

Furthermore, even within wind, bile, and phlegm, and the seven constituents, there exists a subdivision into Arga and Bilig. Wind is considered neutral, bile falls under Arga, while phlegm belongs to Bilig. Similarly, within the seven constituents, nutrients, fat, and bone are categorized under Bilig, while blood, marrow, and flesh belong to Arga. From this holistic perspective, body balance is perpetually maintained through the dynamic interplay of Arga and Bilig [21]. This intricate balance ensures the harmonious functioning of the body and underscores the profound implications of the unity of opposites within the framework of Arga-Bilig theory.

**Application of Arga-Bilig theory in health**

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When applying the theory of Arga-Bilig to elucidate the organic structure of the human body, a fundamental premise emerges: the human body functions as an integrated whole, with all organs and tissues intricately connected and divisible into two opposing aspects, termed Arga and Bilig. Arga encompasses the upper and right parts of the body, the exterior, and the back, while Bilig comprises the lower and left parts, the interior, and the abdomen [4]. Furthermore, the five vital organs are categorized under Arga, whereas the six hollow organs fall under Bilig. Arga is associated with functional aspects, while Bilig pertains to substance. The functionality of the body relies on the support of nutrients, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between Arga and Bilig. Functional activities of the organs drive the production of nutrient substances, while nutrients sustain functional activities. Together, Arga and Bilig work synergistically to safeguard the body against pathogenic factors and maintain internal equilibrium [22]. In the realm of pathology, Arga-Bilig theory offers insights into disease causation and symptomatology. Factors such as diet, behavior, season, and unforeseen circumstances are classified into two pathogenic categories. Diseases stemming from Arga pathogen typically manifest with heat symptoms, whereas those induced by Bilig pathogen exhibit cold symptoms. Excess Arga may lead to warm symptoms, while excess Bilig may result in cold symptoms [23]. This classification facilitates a nuanced understanding of pathological changes, enabling practitioners to tailor treatments accordingly. Furthermore, medicinal substances are classified according to their taste, power, and quality, with each category subdivided into Arga and Bilig. Medicines with heavy, oily, cool, and blunt qualities are associated with Bilig, while those with light, coarse, hot, and sharp qualities align with Arga. Arga medicines are utilized to treat wind and phlegm diseases, whereas Bilig medicines address bile-related ailments. Additionally, treatments are tailored based on the principle of opposing forces: Arga or hot-powered medicines are employed to counter Bilig or cold diseases, while Bilig or cool-powered medicines are used to mitigate Arga or hot states. The application of Arga-Bilig theory in physiology, pathology, and medicine provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the intricacies of the human body, disease processes, and therapeutic interventions, grounded in the principles of balance and interdependence [22, 23].

A recent report demonstrates how the Arga-Bilig theory and Mongolian medicine philosophy can be applied to treat esophageal cancer, drawing from the pilot study on Mongolian Mind-Body Interactive Psychotherapy (MMIP). The patient’s condition is evaluated based on TMM principles, focusing on the balance of wind, bile, and phlegm influenced by Arga and Bilig. The assessment identifies imbalances contributing to his symptoms. The patient participates in group therapy sessions incorporating narrative methods and hypnosis. These sessions include presentations by other patients who have successfully managed their symptoms through MMIP, fostering a supportive community. Elements of traditional Mongolian culture, such as music and storytelling, are integrated to create a familiar and comforting environment. The application of MMIP shows promising results in improving the index quality of life of esophageal cancer patients. This integrative approach addresses not only the physical symptoms but also the psychological and social aspects of health, demonstrating the holistic nature of TMM [24].

**Restoration of Arga-Bilig balance**

The fundamental principle of TMM lies in addressing the root cause of ill health, which often stems from an imbalance between Arga and Bilig. Central to TMM’s approach is restoring this balance, with the theory of Arga-Bilig serving as a guiding framework for diagnosis and treatment. In diagnosing illnesses, determining whether the condition is Arga or Bilig-related takes precedence. A bright complexion and superficial, numerous pulse beats indicate a warm disorder, or Arga character, characterized by an excess of heat in the body [25, 26]. Conversely, a dark complexion and sluggish, deep pulse rhythm signify a cold disorder, or Bilig state, characterized by an excess of coldness. The theory of Arga and Bilig informs the treatment approach in TMM. An excess of Arga leads to hyperfunction and overheating, resulting in a warm (acute) syndrome. Treatment involves using drugs with cooling properties, such as camphor, white sandalwood, and solidified cow bile, along with therapies like venesection (bloodletting) and acupuncture to decrease Arga’s supremacy and restore balance [27].

Conversely, an excess of Bilig leads to hyperfunction and coldness, resulting in a cold (chronic) syndrome. Treatment for this condition necessitates drugs with warming properties, such as zingiber officinalis and black salt, along with therapies like moxibustion and acupuncture with heat, to counteract Bilig’s dominance and restore equilibrium. The theory of Arga-Bilig serves as a fundamental principle in diagnosing and treating diseases in TMM, guiding practitioners in restoring balance and harmony within the body to promote health and well-being [28, 29]. Moreover, philosophers and traditional Mongolian doctors alike have expounded upon Arga-Bilig, viewing it as a manifestation of the dynamic interplay between opposing yet complementary forces. According to Ixibalajar, Arga-Bilig encapsulates the harmonious balance essential for health, mirroring the natural cycles observed in seasons and celestial movements [30]. Traditional Mongolian doctors, such as Jigmed-Danjinzhamsu, further elaborate on how Arga-Bilig governs the understanding of bodily tissues, organs, and the diagnosis and treatment of diseases [31]. They emphasize that Arga-Bilig guides not only the physical manifestations of health but also the spiritual and environmental factors crucial to well-being. This holistic approach, rooted in ancient philosophical insights and practical medical applications, underscores the enduring relevance of Arga-Bilig in Mongolian medical traditions.

Arga-bilig theory emphasizes the balance of the body’s internal energies and the three roots. In treating osteoarthritis, the application of Mongolian medicine adheres to these principles to restore Arga-bilig balance within the body. For instance, Mongolian medicine’s effectiveness in treating osteoarthritis was demonstrated through a study involving 123 patients, which showed significant improvements in pain, swelling, and joint function. By utilizing external applications such as the Touguiling rubber ointment, which is rooted in Mongolian therapeutic practices, the treatment inhibited inflammatory markers like Matrix Metalloproteinase-3 (MMP-3), Tumor Necrosis Factor-alpha (TNF-α), Vascular Endothelial Growth Factor (VEGF), and Calcitonin Gene-Related Peptide (CGRP) while increasing anti-inflammatory Interleukin-10 (IL-10). This holistic approach not only alleviates physical symptoms but also enhances overall quality of life, proving more effective than conventional treatments in reducing pain and improving joint function [32].

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the concept of Arga and Bilig represents the unity of opposites in Mongolian philosophy, influencing all aspects of existence from cosmology to societal norms. In TMM, Arga-Bilig serves as a guiding principle for diagnosing and treating diseases, emphasizing the restoration of balance between these opposing forces to promote health and well-being. By understanding the dynamic interplay of Arga and Bilig, practitioners can tailor treatments to address the root cause of illness and restore harmony within the body. In a global context, the Arga-Bilig framework encourages the incorporation of holistic practices into modern healthcare, potentially leading to more comprehensive treatment strategies that address both physical and emotional aspects of well-being. Additionally, the universal application of Arga-Bilig principles can foster greater appreciation for traditional medical systems, promoting cultural exchange and mutual understanding. As we continue to explore the complexities of Arga-Bilig theory, we gain deeper insights into the interconnectedness of all phenomena, paving the way for a more holistic understanding of life, health, and happiness.

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