

ASSOCIATIONS ON THE TRIGRAMS OF THE *I CHING*

by Denis Mair

The *I CHING*, or BOOK OF CHANGES, is an ancient Chinese text that opens avenues of reflection on the eternal flow of change. It is a book of philosophy, a religious scripture, and a collection of poetic imagery. Its path of abstract thinking deals with possibilities of experience rather than substance-based categories; therefore it always arrives with something fresh as we unpack its implications. In this writer's view, the *I CHING* can be better understood when related to the thought-tools of our own era.

Each of the 64 hexagrams of the *I CHING* is composed of two trigrams. Each trigram is composed of three lines, either broken or unbroken. The three lines can be arranged in eight possible combinations, making eight trigrams. The eight trigrams then go together to make 64 possible combinations called hexagrams. In this essay I will discuss the combinatorial meaning of each trigram---that is, what sort of symbolism does each contribute when joined with other trigrams?

Gen, the Unmoving, is the mountain. It is a formation that holds steady in the flow of events. For the person, it is accumulation of knowledge and skill. It is a steady stance; it is sitting with poise, like Mt. Tai; it is consolidating what grows in stillness. It is also the burden of collective memory and experience. It forms the inner landscape that conditions our thoughts. Momentary consciousness is like a traveler that must traverse this long-term landscape. Without a landscape to walk across, momentary thoughts could get no vantage point, no grip on meaning. No wonder the "Treatise on Trigrams" says *gen* is also a "bypath," because one needs to traverse a landscape. This inner landscape was inscribed over time.

Sometimes the burden of experience may get tightly focused on a cluster of events and feelings: from a panorama of mountains we may narrow down to a stone. A writer named Lao Gui told about going to work on a state farm in Inner Mongolia during China's Cultural Revolution. He and his buddies rode on a tide of idealism that swept them to Mongolia. A place was found for them among the "sent-down" youths in a remote production brigade. They wanted to help inhabit the land, learn from peasants, and build a socialist paradise. But what ended up happening was---they were carried along in a human swarm that de-culturated the Mongolians, cut down trees, and ruined the grasslands. They saw how power-hungry Party leaders were, and they saw friends turn into manipulators, clawing at each other to get permits back to the City. The ball of feelings they were left with---disappointment, shame, love, pain from hurting each other---was such a tight, intense thing that Lao Gui said, "It will never go away, even when we die. It will sit like a rock on China's landscape." For every grand tragedy played out across the sky, a rock is deposited below.

The symbolism of mountain and water is seen in # 4 *Meng* ("Youthful Folly"), in which *gen* is over *kan*. The spring flowing at the foot of the mountain is an unpredictable, foolish youth. What does he do in the face of a culture-bearing mountain? What does the mountain do about him? This is like the Fool in the Tarot deck, except that we are

looking at processes move *through* personality, rather than *personae* in themselves. If the young man wants to learn something from the mountain's accumulated experience, he should not simply keep purling, babbling along with his stream of current cultural fragments. If his little stream takes too many turns, and doesn't stop to reflect the mountain, the two halves of the hexagram will go their own ways. That is why the Judgment says, "If the foolish youth asks the same question three times, ignore him." The youth is preoccupied with quicksilver substitutions in his stream of detached references, and can't yet deal with the weight of real mountains. Or else the mountain has thrust up in a way that drives the stream from it immediately.

Kan (Water), the Hazardous, is unpredictable flow that may be dangerous, or an old pool that may be stagnant. I see three associations on water that fit the *I Ching's* symbolism:

- A) Elias Canetti, in his book *Crowds and Power*, uses water as a crowd symbol. Particularly, it is the crowd as multipersonal agency in history. With individual action in a small group, you can always trace a result, but group collective karma can turn many trifling acts upstream into a huge result downstream. In simple times, perhaps one could grasp the proximal consequences of one's actions. But in the social structure of a mass society, people's efforts feed into it in ways they can hardly imagine. When we enter the river of collective action, we can lose ourselves in the 'perplexity of agency'. This is a new dimension in the symbolic range of water. People are continually making their structure and tearing it down. The destructive power of water acting on mountain slopes can be seen in the hexagram #39 *Jian* ("Difficulty"), which is the *kan* trigram over *gen* (Mountain). In the *kan* trigram we see how a timeless symbol can be broadened and informed by new historical realities.
- B) Water in the *I Ching* is also the "water of life" in a Jungian sense. Precisely because it is elemental, it can both erode and irrigate, endanger and bring possibilities.
- C) Water is also the rapid play of substitutions among symbols. This is what happens when symbols are no longer attached firmly to a lived meaning. Confucius said, "A wise man is fond of water; a benevolent man is fond of mountains." Perhaps this is because the benevolent man has feelings for the hard-won collective experience embodied in the mountain (personal, collective, or geological travail). Only the wise man cares to follow the instantaneous changeable stream that substitutes symbols for things. True, symbols which are nailed down to "concrete" things too long begin reeking of stale literalism. To free up thought, the wise man must venture into the stream of symbols and craft them anew. But the stream of symbols also allows shiftiness. It can lead to irresponsible shifts of standards which are forgotten conveniently. For instance, value is attached to a token behind which we find only manipulations of other tokens. Or a "non-violent" religion is shown to have violent adherents.

When the trigram *kan* is doubled in the hexagram *Kan* (#29 The Abyss), we come upon one of the recursive loops that sometimes appear in *I Ching* interpretation. The

commentator Zhang Huang sees the hexagram *Kan* as a symbol of mind which has “fallen into” matter [see *Zhou-yi zhe-zhong*, chapter 4]. But the self which falls into the treacherous abyss of the material world is itself unpredictable. Perhaps this is why the lines of this hexagram point to tricky entrapments. The human mind is given to outfoxing itself and getting caught in its own traps. Thus the mind is itself an abyss within the abyss of the world.

Li, the Clinging, is fire, brilliance. Canetti also uses fire as a crowd-symbol. But it is not the already-concerted group dynamics of water. Instead, it is illumination that leaps over boundaries of individuality. When individuals enkindle each other, they reveal brilliant patterns; their vitality is heightened. By mutual stimulation they gravitate together. Hence the light given off by “*li*” is a culture-building, civilizing influence. But when the mutual enkindling goes too far, there is a conflagration that wants to swallow everyone up--- every corner of a person's mind. So much for social ties and brilliant patterns. Canetti's description of enkindling among persons reminds me of a nuclear reactor core. When the fuel rods are kept just the right distance apart, they emit energy. If too far apart, they grow cold; too close together, they melt down (become a dangerous flowing liquid). Institutions and “rites” are structures that keep individuals apart, but not too far apart. It is hoped that they can go on shedding their brilliance on each other, yet never unleash forces that change history in a directionless, destructive way. All of Canetti's associations on fire fit with how “*li*” is used in the *I Ching*. Judging from his novel *Auto da Fe*, Canetti was an amateur scholar of Chinese thought.

Xun, the Penetrating, is wind and wood. Why does it mean both? Wind moves through Nature the way *ch'i* moves through the human body. It moves in cycles and currents. It sways things to a common force---an all-influencing vitality. It could be subtle bodily energy, or it could be moral influence among people. It is teaching by example, or it is an inner harmonizing of *ch'i* and blood. So the inward aspect of *xun* is self-cultivation. When it circulates fully, moment to moment, it is wind or *ch'i*. When it consolidates the integrity of its flow, turning back to build on itself, it gradually forms an inner grain. Over time this inner grain grows to be like wood. The inner whorl and grain of a cultivated person is tough yet workable, like wood. Thus *Xun* is penetrating yet mild. It asserts itself only by deepening its own coherent processes, accumulating its inner grain.

I relate the *xun* trigram to a few people I know who are talented craftspeople, or adepts at internal exercise. These people toughen themselves as they shape their medium. Thus the objects or movements they fashion become vessels to carry their personal force into a wider sphere. Where the *xun* trigram is put together with other trigrams, I try to imagine what such people would do. I read the lines one by one, to see the development. Such cultivated people with whipcord sinews are the ones I admire most. If I ever wrote a decent poem it's because I resonated for a moment to their work-rhythm. Thus *xun* does not seek to influence others, but its self-improvement gives it a center of coherence---a vantage point. In this context I think of hexagram #20 *Guan* (Contemplation).

The hexagram #18 *Gu* (“Work on What Has Been Spoiled,” “Perplexity”) depicts wood or wind coming up against something solidified (ie, the *Gen* trigram). The

commentator Ou-yi says the solid part is like a ritual container long unused. The rigid container is bad for the moving life which gathering within it. I see this as a hardened structure of knowledge, like the mind's soil turning into hard-pan. When the impulse to stir and grow comes up against this, it may turn wrong or spoil, or become perplexed. When met with at a certain level, the impulse to stir and grow is simply desire. When desire clumps together with hardened knowledge, the structure may be brought alive, but this is in a distorted sense---a tangled emotional-instrumental formation. This is the kind of knowledge that builds thousands of atom bombs. It is no longer the integral movement, or the forming of inner grain that *Xun* could have been.

Dui, the Joyful, is lake or wetland. Its fertility pours forth rank growth, for no purpose of husbandry, but for joy. If this growth happens in a wrong place, where it emerges only to die, or saps something else, it is not always a good thing. #43 *Guai* ("Breakthrough") is the Marsh over Heaven. It can be interpreted as raw vitality sloughing off all control and breaking through into realms of power. Thus it may be an image of a flood, or a peasant rebellion. But this is based on a low, power-oriented view of Heaven. In the eye of an idealistic beholder, Heaven is not on a power-trip, and its creative strength resides as much with peasants as anywhere. So "Breakthrough" can also mean that fertility is raised up to emerge in high realms, to produce subtle creations of a new kind.

The "Treatise on Trigrams" mentions several other associations on *dui*: a shamaness, an outpouring of sound (voice); a dialogue for purpose of learning, and even brokenness, or madness. The trigrams of self-tempering (*xun*) and giving (*dui*) go straight to the trials of human involvement. But due to my abstract bias I have spent more time thinking about Heaven and Earth.

Zhen, the Arousing, is thunder. It is the sudden impulse that rouses and ushers in the storm. It is the triggering movement that dislodges more (and greater) movement. Looking over how *zhen* functions in the *I Ching*, I see a range of meanings for *zhen*: stimulation, excitation, triggering, triggered response, warnings, infectious moods, seismic sensitivity, nudging something into or out of equilibrium, phase changes, edginess, agitation, mania, turbulence, conduction, facilitation of impulse, and promptings of desire or appetite. The "Treatise on Trigrams" says that "*zhen* is a thoroughfare," as opposed to the "bypath" of *gen*. As a thoroughfare, *zhen* is a metaphor for a neural pathway that is strengthened by strong stimulus or trauma. Once a given neural pathway is reinforced, the person's thoughts keep returning to it, and other neural pathways may be excluded.

Thus *zhen* can be seen, broadly, as either stimulus or the susceptibility to stimulus. Such a range of meaning can be seen in hexagram # 16 *Yu* (*zhen* over *kun*). Lines of this hexagram speak of vigilance, of sensing the impact of calamity before it happens, but also of sensory enjoyment and happiness. It is hard to find a unifying theme to this hexagram unless we look at a range of relations between the *zhen* and *kun* trigrams.

The sudden emergence of thunder and lightning out of the atmosphere is an excellent image for events that seem localized, but actually grow out of widely dispersed micro-events. From these micro-events grow large-scale forces that impinge on each other and

produce torsion across the system. At some point the torsion slips to produce a noticeable change at one location.

Because I have written separate pieces on *kun* and *qian*, I will content myself here with a few specific observations.

Kun is Earth, the receptive. It is all things seen in the aspect of their receptivity to creative influence. Based on the two-fold nature of becoming that is found everywhere in the *I Ching*, I ascribe a strong role to *kun*, which I believe is justified by the content of earlier textual layers. *Qian* the Creative never creates in isolation, yet it is usually placed before *Kun* and treated as a prime mover. But I favor placing *Kun* the Receptive at the head of the sixty-four hexagrams. Without the stable, receptive matrix that *Kun* prepares, there would be no context for *Qian*'s creative activity. Also, there is considerable internal evidence showing that *Kun* is foundational:

- 1) The dragon in hexagram #1 (*Qian* the Creative) rises out of the depths. In line One, the Chinese character for "hidden" has a water radical. This hiding place is an interface-realm of yin and yang.
- 2) In line Two, the dragon first shows its abilities in a field, which is also an earthy backdrop.
- 3) In traditional dragon symbolism, dragons are connected with moisture both in the hidden pools where they commonly bide, and in the cloud-mists they surround themselves with when airborne. If we are to accept the dragon as understood in ancient China, we must look for its origin in deep pools. Its appearance in the sky is but one phase of its existence.
- 4) In line Four of hexagram #1, the dragon again leaps into an abyss.
- 5) In line Six of hexagram #2, when *Kun* reaches its furthest point---its apex---it engenders dragons. This is evidence that *Kun* is foundational for *Qian*.
- 6) The dragons in line Six of #2 have a battle, and when they wound each other, their blood comes out in gouts of yellow and dark. Yellow is the color of earth and dark is the color of heaven, so the dragons are revealed to have an inner history of *qian* intertwining with *kun*. *Kun* has been involved in the dragon's existence from the very beginning.
- 7) The dragon at the apex of its own hexagram #1 is described as overreaching: its nakedly creative action is seen as needing to be tempered by other qualities.
- 8) When all six changing lines are thrown in hexagram #1, we hear of dragons gathering with none of them at the head. Up to this point, the dragon's activity represents only a powerful individual. Now this peaceful gathering, which comes just when *Qian* changes into *Kun*, is considered an auspicious thing. A virtue not usually associated with *Qian* is affirmed, to show that *Qian* needs tempering by its opposite.
- 9) When all changing lines are thrown at hexagram #2, the virtue of constancy---which is native to *Kun*---is reaffirmed even as she changes into *Qian*. Clearly it is hoped that her virtues will go forth to temper those of her opposite.

10) To take one of many examples from other parts of the text, we see in hexagram #11 Peace, that *kun* placed over *qian* is a felicitous state, compared to having *qian* over *kun*, which becomes #12 Stagnation.

As a trigram, *kun* represents a receptive matrix which other trigrams can build upon. It weaves a fabric of community, and with its feminine qualities prepares a seedbed to germinate the creative acts of *qian*. But being so focused on internal stability, it also has a negative side---it blocks and closes off the qualities of other trigrams. In its pure form, in hexagram #2, this negative side is likened to the thickening of ice. Here the tendency toward social cohesion goes too far, like a regime that chills independent activity. Although certain lines of the hexagram *Kun* may develop in this direction, its root meaning as a trigram can always provide an alternate possibility.

Qian is the creative. This is Heaven, which can act in an immanent sense (as a lower trigram), or it can work as an external, transcendent influence when placed above. We can see it as a spiritualizing source leading us into the realm of full relationality with all things. Thus the energy it imparts differs from the rousing movement of *zhen*. *Qian* wakens us by disclosing possibilities we had been closed off to. These possibilities are always associated with going beyond our narrow selves. In Heaven, all things come into relation and feel their existence amplified by participation in others' existence. In Heaven we see the creative ideal of life fostering life, and therefore the Heavenly nature which mankind is endowed with, according to Confucians, is the virtue of *ren* (humaneness). Heaven creates by instilling vision and transcendent insight in beings that are bound by narrow perceptions. Thus it can be conceived either as an active agency, or as a realm of openness running ahead of things. The Chinese concept of *Tian* (Heaven) embraces both meanings, and *qian* is the activity of Heaven.

The activity of *qian* is often fraught with tragedy (as we saw with the dragon's ultimate fate in #1), because humans with their finite vision embrace *qian* in lopsided ways, and their creative activity gets shunted into groupings. The forming of social groups as an ambiguous enterprise can be seen in several hexagrams including #13 (Fellowship), in which the *qian* trigram is over "li".

For my understanding of the trigrams, I am indebted to Ou-yi Da-shi's book, *Zhou-yi chan-jie*. By extending and stretching these symbols to convey his experience outside of the Confucian tradition, he succeeds admirably in conveying their active, flexible meanings.