

Janus-Like Concepts in the Li2 and Kun1 Trigrams

1. Potencies of the Li2 Trigram

Each trigram has a potency (de2) and a natural image (xiang2) which are used fairly consistently in the “Image Treatise” and the “Judgment Treatise.” The treatises use two natural images for xun4---wind and wood. For other trigrams the norm is to have one each. For li2 it is “fire,” for qian2 it is “sky,” for kun1 it is “earth,” for dui4 it is “marsh,” for gen4 it is “mountain,” etc. Sometimes a figurative variant is used, for instance “rain” instead of “water” in the “Image Treatise” of #3. An exception occurs in the “Image Treatise” at #21 and #55, where “lightning” is used instead of “fire”. Strictly speaking, “lightning” is an association, not the main natural image of the li2 trigram.

Potencies stand for the trigrams’ functional properties, and they are used fairly consistently in the “Judgment Treatise”:

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|-------|-----|-------------------|
| zhen4 | --- | moving (dong4) |
| xun4 | --- | penetrating (ru4) |
| li2 | --- | bright (ming2) |
| kun1 | --- | devoted (shun4) |
| dui4 | --- | joyful (yue4) |
| qian2 | --- | strong (jian4) |
| kan3 | --- | dangerous (xian3) |
| gen4 | --- | unmoving (zhi3) |

The potency of qian2, namely “jian4”, was used as the hexagram name in the Mawangdui silk manuscript. The old character *jian4* is thought to depict a male fertility object.

In #53 “Judgment Treatise” the potency given for xun4 is the trigram name itself, *xun4*, rather than *ru4* (“penetrating”). *Xun4* is used frequently in the treatises to mean “gentle,” but this is an exception. If R. Wilhelm had been consistent in his translation, instead of saying “Xun, the Gentle,” he would have used “Xun, the Penetrating,” by analogy with

Dui, the Joyful. Although it is the norm to have one potency for each trigram, both qian² and kun¹ have second potencies, firm and soft (gang¹, rou²), but these often refer to single unbroken or broken lines more often than to whole trigrams.

Trigram names are normally not used to express descriptive meanings in traditional commentary. They are treated as gnomic names, almost like magical formulae. Commentators like Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi use compound words like “li²-huo³” (the fire of li²) or “kan³-xian³” (the danger of kan³) or “dui⁴-kou³” (the mouth of dui⁴). This tells me that they viewed the trigram names as proper nouns. “Li²-huo³” is not a description of a kind of fire, but rather, it uses fire as a way to visualize li².

Among all 64 hexagram names, only the 8 pure hexagrams (i.e., doubled trigrams) have non-situational names. Trigram names are supposed to be at the edge of definability, which is why they must be linked with potencies and natural images, plus associations in the “Treatise on Trigrams.” Trigrams combine to make the hexagrams, and since they are constitutive of situations, their names have an order of meaning beyond situational names. Li² is one of those special hexagram/trigram names.

The trigrams represent whole idea-complexes, yet we have seen above that they are linked to single potencies. Why would that be? The reason for sticking to one potency and one natural image is to respect the combinatorial discreteness of the idea-complexes behind the trigrams.

The big exception to this one-to-one norm is the li² trigram: aside from “bright,” it has two additional potencies (used in the “Judgment Treatise,” TZ), namely li⁴ (“clinging/connecting”) and wen² (“patterned/cultured/refined”). The relation between li² and li⁴ makes me think of the old lexicographer’s habit of giving one-word definitions with near-homonyms. Strangely enough, the three potencies of li² are often used together. For instance, the TZ of #38 says “joyful and clinging to brightness.” The TZ of #30 says “brightness doubled so that it clings to what is right.” The TZ of #13 says “brightly refined so as to be strong.” The TZ of #22 speaks of the “patterns of heaven,” the “patterns of humankind,” and “bright refinement coming to a rest.”

It is intriguing that li² has this meaning of “clinging” clinging to it, and one wonders how that is supposed to fit together with the other potencies of “bright” and “refined.” I think that li² is an especially hard-to-get-at idea, and the writers of the TZ were trying to triangulate it.

The TZ speaks of the sun and moon “clinging” or “being connected” to the sky. It speaks of crops and trees and plants “clinging” to the soil. We have to go down to a pretty basic meaning of “clinging” before this will make any sense.

After looking closely at all the hexagrams where the Li2 trigram appears, I am getting an inkling. I think li4 means “caught in a web of connections with,” so in #30 the sun and moon are not “clinging” to heaven, they are in a net of relations with other heavenly bodies. The crops and trees are in a web of connections with the land.

The picture becomes more complicated when we consider the name li2 as a descriptive word means “departure/separation.” I am usually reluctant to draw on descriptive meanings of the trigram names, and it seems hard to square the meaning of “departure” with the potency of “clinging/connection.” Nevertheless, Brad Hatcher and Scott Davis (members of the Yahoo Yixue forum) have argued sensibly that “separation” is the other side of the coin from “connecting” and “patterning.” To make a pattern, some things are left out; when some things cling together, other things will be excluded.

I think that li2 is about putting something in a web of connections, particularly at the focal point around which connections are constellated. That is where the pattern comes in: by making something the focal point we highlight the relations around it. Since the relations around things cannot be exhausted by one particular pattern, the recognition tends to shift. Trying to get to the bottom of one thing, we may end up following the relational thread to another focal point. This kind of movement is suggested in #56, where the “fire” of momentary consciousness exhausts the object of attention and moves onward.

In #55 the “connections” of li2 may even go a step further, and we could be talking about “connectivity”---the cybernetic net where information from distant sources appears before the user instantly, though we may not know where the user is coming from. “Net” is one of the associations mentioned for li2 in the “Treatise on Trigrams.”

2. The Cow in Hexagram #30

Another question is how “care of the cow” in the judgment of #30 fits with li2 as the trigram of highlighted relations. I think that the cow in #30 clearly harks back to #2 Kun,

which has the association of “cow” in the Treatise on Trigrams. The fact that the hexagram judgment of #30 mentions “cow” tells me that the two central broken lines bring important qualities of #2 with them.

The li2 trigram has a broken line at the center, so #30 has two central broken lines. Thus li2 is likely to have properties that relate to kun1. The “Great Treatise” tells us that li2 is a daughter, a yin trigram. If you add up the numbers used to divine the lines, $7 + 8 + 7$, you get an even number, so in the matter of even-oddness, the minority line rules. In terms of symbolism, li2 brings some qualities derived from her “mother.” As the *Yijing* scholar Steven Karcher might say, there is a secret cowpath leading from #2 to #30!

As I mentioned above, the shifting movement of #56 reminds me of momentary consciousness which highlights a pattern in one place and then goes elsewhere. It also reminds me of care of the cow, with ruminants being driven to where pasturage is available. Sure enough, the cow is also mentioned in hexagram #56.

In the final chapter of *The Zhuangzi*, we see how much that Daoist philosopher admired the ancient sages who took time to figure out the meta-patterns of reality, even though they left no record of achievements. Such legendary sages had something cow-like about them: being absorbed in simple things, staying detached and humble, being placid and satisfied with the plain flavors of what they were ruminating.

There is a plausible tie between the li2 hexagram’s potencies and “care of the cow”: to recognize the really big patterns takes time, and in the meantime, one has to take care of the capacity for vision in oneself. One has to “herd the cow” in the Zen Buddhist sense.

Connections radiate out from here. Why is the cow so important in a hexagram whose natural image is fire? Is the cow being thought of as destined for sacrifice? Fourth Yang in this hexagram seems to allude to sacrifice and offering before a fire, then throwing the offering aside. Also, there is a communal celebration in Third Yang.

In a book on Ayurvedic medicine, I once saw a picture of a yoni used in Vedic rituals, and on it was inscribed a fire trigram---a broken line between two unbroken lines! Evidently this symbol of illumination has been distributed widely.

3. Janus-Like Concepts

Having made this detour into the bovine associations on #30, we are now better equipped to examine certain properties of the li2 trigram that are related to kun1. I think it is safe to say that all the components of the *Yijing* are related to the other components. I believe we can identify the kun1 trigram as a source of certain properties which feed into li2 and give it its problematic character.

The "Image Treatise" recognizes li2's trade-off between cohering and separation. In #13 it says, "The noble young one, according to kind and family, distinguishes the beings." (Brad Hatcher's translation. See www.hermetica.info) In #38 it says, "The noble young one, accordingly, associates, and yet is unique." (ibid.) The li2 trigram in #36 carries a strong theme of exclusion, and in #35 it offers a chance for inclusion among the elite.

This makes me think of the "Great Treatise," where it says that being incorporated into one group or another decides one's good or bad fortune: "Events follow definite trends, each according to its nature. Things are distinguished from one another in definite classes. In this way good fortune and misfortune come about." (One, I.1) The "Image Treatise" of #2, line 1, tells us that "yin is just beginning to coalesce." Evidently coalescence is something that yin does. And when that happens, you get an assemblage that is disposed toward good or bad fortune. The coalescence in #12 is not very good: it is the unleavened grouping of small people who are not uplifted or animated by the presence of spirit-yang. Here the great clod clumps together in its material way, and heaven is not involved. On the other hand, in #11, where the inner trigram is all yang, synergy happens because yang is included in the clumping. Interplay makes for a good grouping, and the outcome is good.

The "Great Treatise" also tells us that when yin acts it opens, and when it is still, it closes. Coalescence happens during this alternation of opening and closing. A lot depends on what gets included. Some seemingly contradictory aspects of yin have to do with the type of inclusion. Yin as #2 Kun is portrayed as nurturing, but yin can also be small-minded or even treacherous. It can be the obstacle that wounds the light in #36.

I think that when yin clumps together without a spiritualizing principle being included, it can be treacherous and obstructing. When such a principle is brought in, then yin does positive things. The pure Kun of #2, despite her foreboding start at line 1, exemplifies

nurturance. Being lined up next to Qian, she is still open and full of potential for interplay with Qian, so we do not think of Kun as small-minded.

The problematic side of yin appears when it closes itself around a limited purpose. It is not that yin itself is small-minded. It is that certain ways of coalescing are more limited than others. The kun1 in #23 would probably wish to have more interplay, but the hardened formation of the *ancien regime* above makes that unlikely. When a limited aspect of qian2 gets caught up in such a grouping we see that qian2 has its problematic side too. In the *Zhouyi Chanjie* (the *Buddhist I Ching*), Ou-yi talks punningly about the arid wisdom of the overreaching dragon. He uses the same graph for dry [gan1] as he does for Qian2!

The li2 trigram is not really about clumping together. Its coherence is subtler, based on mutual recognition or mutual illumination. But there is something yin about the way li2 makes things gravitate together. At the same time, there is a problematic side, whereby some things are brought into the highlighted circle, and some things aren't. There are certain groupings that don't come together fully---the mutual recognition or enkindling doesn't happen.

This is like an echoing of how kun1 acts. The potency of kun1---shun4, "devotion/acceptance"---brings about a union of purposes. The things with which kun1 clumps together make a world of difference.

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