

## Musings on the *Zhouyi*

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\*\* Suppose Socrates and Plato had become fascinated with a small booklet full of cryptic sayings uttered by the Delphic oracle. Suppose that some of their great discussions had been devoted to teasing out what the oracle meant. What would Western philosophy have looked like then? I can imagine Plato arranging the sayings in several series, to see how they might shed light on each other. Imagine a peripatetic discussion---walking from private quarters to the gymnasium to the agora to the amphitheater to the parthenon. The idea of such an ambulatory conversation could have been used as a structuring principle for series of sayings. Various conversations could have been divined by throwing dice and placing the sayings along the 'route'. What would Western philosophy have looked like if Plato had divined some of these 'walks' and discussed their import with friends?

\*\* If we say that symbol-making is an art form, then the ones who conceived the core symbols of the *Changes* were writing mythic poetry. The ones who interpreted hexagrams by trigram interactions were writing symbolist poetry. Wang Bi's view of change on a ground of non-being was mystical poetry. Zhu Xi's expansion of lines into widely applicable metaphors was imagist poetry. Cheng Yi's discovery of moral teachings therein was didactic poetry. Zhang Huang's elevation of the sage to bodhisattva status was devotional poetry.

\*\* The turtle goes deep into the water and retrieves a clump of earth on his back. This is a widely known motif in American Indian creation myths. It also belongs to the archaic Chinese mythos. Confucius pictured the revelation he never received as a world-diagram appearing on the back of a turtle. The turtle appears twice in *Zhouyi* lines as a sacred object---sacred because words were scratched on tortoise for shells divination purposes. Thousands of turtle shells bearing inscriptions have been found in Anyang and other Shang-era sites. In fact, this was the origin of the Chinese writing system. And in palace statuary down through Chinese history, stone turtles were made to bear plaques proclaiming a dynasty's lineage. It seems the turtle was always being asked to carry highly significant, all-inclusive things on its back. Daoists loved the turtle because they believed it did not need air to breathe. They believed that in *guixi* (turtle breathing), the in-out rhythm of normal breathing tapers off to become etheric breathing. The pond in front of the Zhinan Temple in Taipei has plenty of turtles.

\*\* The Lo-shu and He-tu look silly if treated as cosmic diagrams. The silliness arises because we moderns are the literal-minded ones: we know that cosmic diagrams should be more complicated than magic squares of nine or ten numbers. In truth, we have failed to recognize

the distinction between a cosmic diagram and a symbol of cosmic order. Besides, the Lo-shu is not supposed to be a cosmic diagram. It is the formula by which the innate Fu-xi trigram arrangement, with all eight trigrams in synchronic pairings, is related to the empirical time-space sequence of the King Wen arrangement. As such, the Lo-shu symbolizes a formula existing in the mind of the Creator. This is the formula, known only to the Creator, whereby He uses the a-temporal order as a template for the temporal.

\*\* The “Treatise on Trigrams” tells us that God does battle under the sign of Qian, and he undergoes travail in the sign of Kan. The *I Ching* holds forth this image of divine subjectivity acting in the world.

\*\* As I rummage about within this storehouse of changes, trying to grasp what things are heaped along these corridors, I begin to get the feeling that I am in the belly of God.

\*\* The word *zhou* in ‘Zhouyi’ has two commonly recognized meanings: the Zhou ruling house, as in ‘Zhou Dynasty,’ and ‘encompassing’ as in *zhoubian*. But in the *Zuo Chronicles*, the graph for *zhou* was also used to mean *chou*: ‘thick, gelatinous, puddinglike.’ Thus an alternate name for the *Zhouyi* would be ‘Chouyi’---a thick pudding of changes.

\*\* In the *Zhouyi* scheme of moral cause and effect, Gen functions as an analogue to the Buddhist skhandas (dispositional formations which bind us to samsara), and Kan corresponds to the ‘bitter flood.’ But that is not the whole story. All eight trigrams are implicated in cause-and-effect dramas. The homeostatic growth of Xun, or the highlighted attention and patterning of Li, or the submission and nurturance of Kun all get involved with Gen to make composite causes. Meanwhile, trigram potencies also have their pure, non-entangled aspects. Some commentators try to reclaim the karmically neutral aspects of trigrams out of a problematic situation. This is their way of affirming *tianli*, or pure original nature.

\*\* Finding karma in the *I Ching* is not anachronism, or if it is, then anachronism is not always a bad thing. Something was embedded there that partakes of general insights into the human condition. Something embedded there partakes of pan-Asian thought-patterns. It doesn’t matter that the original language did not mention karma. With help from the Buddhist perspective on ‘karma,’ we can tease out something that was embedded there, then read it back in more fully. The text is enriched thereby, but this is not bending the text to fit Buddhism. The *Changes* does not work that way.

\*\* We moderns have brought a new symbolic dimension to the Kan trigram. Now our innocent efforts to earn a living can easily poison the earth or produce ingredients for explosives. The

maelstrom of unintended consequences has higher waves than ever before. The tricky causal flow of Kan-water applies to a whole new order of meaning. The same goes for the inertial formations of Gen. This anachronism can be added on, yet the elemental symbolism of water and mountain is not strained. The *Zhouyi* doesn't mind anachronism.

\*\* How many times has thunder been mired? How many times have dragons followed a leader to do battle in the wilds, until their blood runs dark and yellow? When the band of brothers meets in the wilds, let them remember how heaven first stirred them. Sometimes the center does not hold, and they do little better than Fellowship at Third Yang: 'Hide the weapons and wait on a hilltop for years.' Let their vision be lifted up, till they can possess but not exclude. Second Yang of Great Possession shows us the big wagon, and the yin position is its wagon-bed. Its emptiness moving from moment to moment is like our recurring sense of lack, that over the journey's course proves its capacity.

How can we do justice to the Changes unless we see, like Laozi, that 'in emptiness lies the window's function'?

\*\* The *Zhouyi* is an open hunting ground in which everything is fair game to be treated as a symbol. In some places, the symbols are set up for us, like animals in a hunting park. In some places, we get lost when riding into the forest unguided. For a sense of direction, we have our satisfaction with well-formed images and our displeasure with contrivance.

\*\* Again, everything in the *Yijing* is a symbol. Even the fact that each trigram has three lines is a piece of abstract symbolism, above the level of potencies. Why? Because three is the minimum number that allows a relation of betweenness. Because it has three lines, the trigram can symbolize a cluster of variables which has a focal point. The cluster revolves around the focal point, and the focal point can have a special relation with the focal point of another cluster. Thus the hexagram, even before we talk about any yin-yang content, is already a symbol for two clusters of variables.

\*\* When we speak of **two** clusters of variables, the 'two' is also a symbolic number. It is the minimum number that preserves relationality. The hexagram framework is a construct for discussing relationality.

\*\* Each line can be conceived as a nodal point, representing an area of flux within a chaotic system. The focal center points, in particular, are critical nodes within their own clusters. They represent areas of maximum flux that have the greatest effect on possible outcomes. Here chaos is often used to visualize a social or psychological context. In the *Zhouyi*, human situations are not privileged---they are stochastic processes like everything else in nature. The

word *ji*---incipience---is an important concept in the Ten Wings. It can be thought of as a chaotic attractor.

\*\* The chapter on bibliography in the *History of the Han* says that the “Changes” was one of the six arts taught by Confucius. This must be taken with a grain of salt, because we don’t know much about Confucius’s ideas on the *Changes*. But we know that the *Changes* had early Zhou origins, and it was mentioned 17 times in the *Zuo Chronicles* (covering the period leading up to Confucius). We also know that Confucius’ grandson-disciples were involved with writing the “Xici Treatise.” It would be strange if he were not somehow involved in study of the *Changes*.

\*\* I don’t think the “Changes” was restricted to the group of sayings and figures now found in the *Zhouyi*. We know that there were other books of hexagrams which had some different names and different line statements. The *Guicang Yi* began with doubled Kun, and the *Lianshan Yi* began with doubled Gen. We can get an idea of the word ‘*yi*’ from the “Xici Treatise,” where it does not simply refer to a book. It would be closer to say that the “Treatise” treats *yi* as divine creativity. Through an act of mystical participation, the sage reached into the realm of divine creativity. The sage’s articulation of symbols was a demonstration of that creativity in the human sphere. The symbols are magical, because they are an avenue of participation. Like other kinds of magic, they affirm the individual’s power to construct a world-vision.

\*\* I think the word ‘*yi*’ alludes to a body of knowledge that included: 1) familiarity with oracular sayings and gnomic formulas; 2) use of a counting board; 3) familiarity with calendars; 4) manipulation of number patterns for purposes of divination; 5) acquaintance with arcane ritual practices; 6) facility with antithetical language and binary categories.

I think that what we call the *I Ching* is only a remaining relic of this body of knowledge. This knowledge was developed by people who gave a great deal of thought to patterns and order among concepts. We see hints of the influence of this knowledge in many places in the Chinese tradition. Unfortunately, due to vicissitudes within the tradition, it became jumbled and clogged up in many places. But its core philosophy is still a source of inspiration. Archaic man, medieval man, and modern man can communicate with each other in the philosophical language of the *I Ching*. The concepts of the *I Ching* start from the body and go all the way up.

\*\* Strangely enough, I think the antithetical categories so favored by the creators of the *Changes* were once used to generate novel conceptions. This impetus persisted even into the Tang---we still see antithesis as an engine of novelty in the Tang poets. The balance of paired categories can metaphorically suggest an expanse, an atmosphere, or an emotive field. As the

Chinese language changed, many words that once hovered loosely about each other in antithetical pairings were eventually fused. Just as kennings in Anglo-Saxon opened up associative space in the English language, antithetical pairings have helped to form the Chinese vocabulary. But the path of abstraction has been different. The passion for pairings may relate back to cult beliefs in a mutual attraction drives the ongoing creation of the world. It also relates to an abstract picture of the world as a complex balance of forces.

The pairing of concrete terms points to an abstract relation. The *Changes* *built* upon this, pairing not just objects and object-properties, but also symbols and groups of symbols.

\*\* It is a chicken-or-the-egg question to ask whether the interest in formal binary symmetries started the trend toward verbal antithesis, or whether verbal antithesis developed into abstract binary patterns. Antithetical terms are all over in the *Daode Jing*: their meaning is planted in bodily experience, but it reaches into the most abstract areas. Laozi shows us how paired terms open a space for reflection. Take for instance the terms ‘increase’ and ‘decrease’ in verse 48. Laozi drew these terms from the *Changes* and made them represent two possible directions in life. In studying the *Changes* it is important to read Laozi, because he was the thinker closest to the *Changes* who can still talk to us. He helps us unpack the *Changes* because he did a lot of the unpacking himself.

\*\* If there is any institutional religion present in the *Zhouyi*, it is the dynastic temple which celebrates rites to ancestors and the Lord on High. Symbolism of the bird totem is mostly treated philosophically, ironically, or problematically in the *Changes*. But there is an implied background of devotion to the bird as a symbol of the shaman’s soul and the afterlife. In the top line of Traveler, the bird totem appears as a grotesque tragic figure. In the top line of Great Taming, it nearly vanishes in the freedom of *ekstasis*.

\*\* Richard Rutt in *Zhouyi: The Book of Changes* says the *Changes* is not a spiritual book, yet he spent five years of his life amassing material about it. He says it is not spiritual because whatever the user gets out of it comes from ‘within the users own mind.’ But of course we can’t rule out that some contents of a user’s mind may have a spiritual dimension. And where did this strict inside-outside line come from?

\*\* Richard Rutt also says the *Zhouyi* is not spiritual because it does not come to grip with the deepest human issues of evil and death. Instead, it functions like a self-help manual, giving reassuring predictions for every question. Is he reading the same book I am? I find the *Changes* to be drenched in care and sorrow.

\*\* Richard Rutt notes that a Qing scholar defined *tunyu* in #61 Inmost Sincerity to mean ‘river

dolphins,' rather than 'pigs and fishes.' Rutt continues that even if it does mean 'dolphin,' the hexagram judgment 'still makes no sense.' But the image of a dolphin leaping alongside of a boat is not foreign to our collective memory, and surely it is not absurd in the context of trust between living things.

\*\* The word *fu* is glossed by Zhu Xi as sincerity or trust.. But in the *Zuo Chronicles* (Duke Zhuang, 10th year), we see it used as heart-to-heart resonance which is more difficult to achieve than simple trust. The passage specifically distinguishes *fu* from *xin* [trust]. With such an old usage of *fu* referring to a heart-to-heart understanding between people, why take it to mean 'battle prisoner' in the *Zhouyi*?

\*\* Richard Rutt tells us that the hexagram names are 'only tags' under which the text groups oracular statements. He claims that no thematic content 'that we can know' is carried by these tags. Again, I wonder if he and I are reading the same text. Surely the thematic contrasts allow the paired hexagrams shed to light on each other! Commentators have been building on these thematic meanings since before the Han dynasty. Where there is smoke there's fire! So much interpretive activity would hardly have been invested in the hexagram images had they not been living, functioning emblems.

\*\* Consider the trigram-dynamic of #36 Darkening of the Light. The "Treatise on the Judgment" tells us: "The light has sunk into the earth---Darkening of the Light. Beautiful and clear within, gentle and devoted without, hence exposed to great adversity." Is there something slippery going on here? The trigram interaction is being read two different ways at once. It is the personality of a man going into a situation; it is also the situation his personality gets him into. When we read the symbol different ways, the components of personality may be seen in the light of different functions.

\*\* Imagistic thinking is true to the complexity of what our minds have to process. The printing revolution inculcated a definite kind of logic into us. But imagistic thinking has logic of its own. A symbol works like an icon on a screen: when we go into it, we can move about among the networks of information which that symbol brings together.

\*\* We cannot know what a symbol means unless we flesh it out with the maximum amount of information. The amount of experience a symbol refers far exceeds the referent of a scientific sign. The scope and content of scientific signs are tightly limited. But man is a moral animal, and the most complicated questions man faces are moral. They require the greatest amount of information to grapple with, and they can only be fully posed in symbols.

\*\* The contemplation of symbols is good discipline. Being a good person involves negotiating treacherous psychic and moral currents. People who do it well make it look easy. Some people use their slipperiness to manipulate things out in the world. But contemplating symbols is the slippery side of the simple soul.

\*\* Heaven is spirit because all things come into relation in it. Heaven does battle in the sign of Qian to share its life fully with Kun. And from an earthly viewpoint, there are times when finite beings open themselves and draw down something of that infinite creativity. These events of creative love forever elicit and answer each other like points of light. These linked emissions of light are one way God reaches into this world: they are like cells in the dharma-body of God. The *I Ching* is as good an outline as any to the physiology of those shimmering tissues.

\*\* Feng Youlan's criterion for philosophy was whether or not it lets us 'tread the everyday path while reaching to sublime heights.' In his book *Xinzhidian* he said Chinese philosophy has an ongoing contribution to make, because it has built up a body of ideas that don't just investigate the truth-realm, they lead the way for the heart-mind to go roaming in the truth-realm.

\*\* How fine the *Zhouyi* is for journeying in the truth-realm! Why do I say so? Because the whole King Wen sequence makes a giant hexagram! Seriously. The uppermost six figures of the upper canon (#1 to #9-#10) yield a majority of yang trigrams, so that makes a Top Yang 'line.' The next six figures (#11-#12 to #21-#22) yield a majority of yin trigrams, so that gives us Fifth Yin. The next six figures (#23-#24 to #30) have a majority of yang trigrams, so that gives us Fourth Yang, and our upper trigram is Li. The first six figures of the lower canon have a majority of yang trigrams, so that gives us Third Yang. The middle six figures of the lower canon (#43-#44 to #53-#54) have equal numbers of yang and yin trigrams, but it's not hard to identify this as a yin line: after all the position is yin, and both end-figures of this segment contain two very female hexagrams---Encounter and Marrying Maiden. And of course our last six figures (#55-#56 to #63-#64) yield a majority of yin trigrams, so that gives us First Yin.

In this giant Traveler, fire and mountain stand for something different from before!