

A Rationale for the Yang Trigrams

Some readers of the I CHING have reservations on attaching the idea of Heaven/creative to three yang lines, or Thunder/movement to one yang under two yins, or Mountain/keeping still to one yang over two yins, etc. The assignment of such meanings to the trigrams strikes them as arbitrary.

I felt the same way at first, but the symbolism made sense to me over time. Qian/heaven is a field of ideal, infinite relations. It is not broken up by obstacles, which is why it's creative. When we are creative, we realize connections we hadn't considered before. These connections enter our thinking and show us a possibility, so we can go out and change something in constructive ways. In heaven there is a free play of energy. The dragon mounts to heaven on six stages: they are different but in constant instantaneous communication with each other---a continuous uninterrupted "spectrum." This is why the Qian hexagram is drawn with continuous yang lines, and that goes for the three lines of the Qian trigram. It is the unity of yang energy across different phases or levels.

Think of person who represses anger or feelings of inferiority. He does not realize that his prejudices are a projection of what he loathes about himself. The mind of such a person has not integrated his various conflicting desires, and instead of examining these conflicts, he acts them out. His motivational structure is pigeonholed; we can almost visualize this person's mind as being broken up by fiefdoms devoted to different desires. This is a person upon whom Qian has not yet worked its spiritualizing effects. The transparency and openness and pure judgment of Qian have not touched him. (We can see the pure judgment of Qian in Fifth Yang of Hexagram #6.)

This explanation of Qian does not seem contrived. It's something that came to me over time while reading the *Yijing*, and I found confirmation in many places. Usually, when I set out to contrive something, I can throw together a ramshackle explanation right away. Not in this case. Commentators like Cheng Yi pointed me in this direction with their long evocative paragraphs about Qian's creative force. What they say (and what I say) about Qian is hard to nail down. We keep talking about it in various contexts, but we can't say exactly what it is. It is not always measurable energy.

The assignment of three broken lines to Kun is the other side of the coin.☺ Everything within Kun is integrated, which is why she makes a good seedbed. But Kun specializes in definite, actual unity (the clumping together of soil)---not directed outside itself, not potential, not ideal. So in Kun it is three yin lines that are continuous.

Over time the commentators have taught me that the Zhen and Kan and Gen trigrams also have logic behind them. When we lay out the trigrams according to a binary

counting rule, Thunder (001) comes before Water (010), which comes before Mountain (100). We know that Thunder represents a triggering impulse of yang, and yang begins in a relatively latent state, at the bottom, before it is manifest. Hexagrams and trigrams are always built from the bottom line up, so Thunder shows yang beginning to work. Then yang becomes more and more manifest, until it takes a place at the top. Once the single yang reaches the top in this progression, there is no other place it can go. In other words, the situation has settled into a certain configuration. Hence the symbolism of Mountain with the single yang on top.

Since yang moves upward in the progression from Zhen to Kan to Gen, it is no stretch to say that Gen/Mountain is the unmoving result of the movement that began with Zhen. Thunder is treated in the “Treatise on Trigrams” as the firstborn, eldest son of Qian and Kun, while Mountain is the youngest son. Why are they called sons when their yin lines are in the majority? Because the single yang line sets the tone for the two yin lines. (We can think of this in terms of numbers---one even number plus two even numbers equals an odd number. Thus “oddness” and “yangness” both dominate when in the minority.)

As for Kan (010), its dangerous, unpredictable quality also makes sense to me now. With yang in the middle, it could go either way---back to the movement at the beginning, or onward toward a fixed result. I guess you could call it an indeterminate state, as opposed to an incipient state or an irreversible state.

Another interesting perspective on Kan comes from the Song Dynasty commentator Cheng Yi. He said that Kan represents mind or spirit fallen into the world of matter. The yang line in the middle is mind, which has fallen into the surroundings of matter (yin). Naturally, how spirit copes and rides out its incarnation is unpredictable. Everything plays itself out according to how the river flows through this turbulent site where spirit interacts with matter. These are the rapids that Confucius watched when he said ‘Look at how life flows away.’” Cheng Yi’s interpretation uncannily hits on a theme similar to gnosticism in the Western tradition. Gnosticism talks about how spirit falls like a spark into the material world, and after getting caught there, it tries to realize itself anew.

Also, we can build all the trigrams from the bottom up by a binary expansion, following the simple rule of putting yang first. The trigrams generated in this order can be treated as binary pattern numbers: (Qian, 111), (Dui, 011), (Li, 101), (Zhen, 001), (Xun, 110), (Kan, 010), (Gen, 100) then (Kun, 000). In this pre-natal order of trigrams, we also see that Zhen (Thunder) precedes Kan (Water), which in turn precedes Gen (Mountain).

As we look for the true rationale of the trigrams, we begin to discover their correct meanings. By arguing with this 3000 year-old text, we can learn about its logic. Being old, its logic seems to be different from ours. The difference raises questions. Is it possible to have alternate logics, or should logic be a unitary, ideal framework?

Zhang Huang said that the *Yijing* is “a study that illuminates symbols.” Certainly, debate over symbols is a way to clarify issues about how symbols work. And these symbols offers plenty of room for argument over the justifiability of attached meanings. Sometimes I think the text was designed to provoke such discussion.

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