

Implications of the Sequence

In the I CHING, hexagrams #1 and #2 are involved in a combinatorial dance of two polarities --- the Creative and the Receptive. The dragon in Hexagram #1 is a very old symbol of creative force. This dragon image implies an "ebb-and-flow" view of creation, because of the way it coils in order to extend, undulates in waves, and keeps either its head or tail unseen.

Consider some of the things that are implied merely in the sequence of the 64 hexagrams:

1. It is a combinatorial assortment with many interwoven symmetries. For instance, there is a wavelike alternation of predominating yin or yang. Hexagrams #1 and #2 have six yang lines and six yin lines respectively; #3 and #4 have a two-yang/four-yin ratio, and then #5 and #6 have a four-yang/two-yin ratio; #7 and #8 have a one-yang/five-yin ratio, and then #9 and #10 have a five-yang/one yin ratio. Any breaks in the alternation are marked by figures having three yin and three yang lines.

Also, if we lay the hexagrams out on a grid and convert them into binary numbers (yang line=1 and yin line=0), there are many ways of dividing the sequence into bilaterally symmetrical areas which yield equal totals on both sides of the dividing line.

Another of many examples: Any hexagram which has yang lines at places 1, 3, and 5 (known as "correct yang lines") will be found at an odd-numbered place in the sequence.

2. The sequence is a fertility dance between the Creative and Receptive, in which they begin with idealized versions of themselves and then generate progeny in the form of life-situations.
3. It is an alchemical process in which the four elements (Heaven, Earth, Fire, Water) meet with natural processes (Mountain, Thunder, Marsh, Wind) and undergo a tempering process which results in the thorough mixing of fire and water.

The Heaven and Earth trigrams (qian and kun) each appear 12 times in the upper half of the sequence and 4 times in the lower half. By contrast, the Wind and Marsh trigrams (xun and dui) each appear 12 times in the lower half of the sequence and 4 times in the upper half. The water trigram (kan) appears 8 times in the upper half and 8 times in the lower half.

4. The sequence of 64 hexagrams is an array of disjunctions like a tree diagram or flow chart, with thematic choices at each node. Each odd-even pair, beginning from hexagrams #1 and #2, represents a thematic contrast. Take for example #49 and #50. Power structures are overturned in #49 (Revolution), and there is consolidation of institutions in #50 (Cauldron).

5. The sequence is a grand narrative beginning with the creation, passing through early chaos amidst a great deal of water, then setting up social structures, then passing through familial and civic relationships, and finally reaching a gradual harmonization of fire and water.

The nodal tree structure (expressed in thematically contrasting pairs) is played off against the narrative in a fertile way.

The logic is strange to us; it has always been strange to everyone who studied it, even to the Confucians. The Confucians were not "wu" (magi or shamans), but they had a nostalgia for the achievements of legendary "wu" culture. The Confucians articulated a lot of their ideas by expounding the I CHING. Confucians practiced a rationality that stays in broad daylight. Perhaps that is why they needed the counterfoil of a text in which the root concepts shade into the unseen. The I CHING is a strange, one-time weaving of fertility magic, combinatorial mathematics, shamanism, myth, contemplation, and a passion for gnomic figural language. It is a flowering of the ceremonial court divination which was turned to contemplative uses. Those things are never going to be mixed into quite that kind of brew again. It repays studying as a classic to see what Confucianism and Daosim tried to make of it. It also repays studying in its own right as a poesis of concepts, and a mode of philosophy not restricted to linear exposition.

The symbols of the I CHING have drawn later commentators into a personally engaged, reflective discussion about life-situations. If nothing else, I have found I CHING commentary to be a repository of interesting ethical observations and sayings that I could not find other places.