

A Glimpse at the I Ching

English Reading Group, Cambridge Chinese Classics
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Introduction

I Ching, or the book of Changes was originally a divination manual, and its origins trace back to the 3rd to the 2nd millennium BC and is said to be based on the Trigrams developed by Fu Xi, one of the legendary sage in China. Some scholars treat this book as the source of Chinese civilisation or philosophy, no matter whether it is true or not, it is one of the oldest existing books in China.

Authors and history of the book

In Chinese literature, four holy men are cited as the authors of the book of changes, namely, Fu Xi, King Wen, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius. FuXi is a legendary culture hero and sage appearing at the era of hunting and fishing about 3000 BC, and is attributed as the inventor of the linear signs of the three-line figure, called Trigram.

Then at around 1100BC, the present collection of 64 six-line figures, called hexagrams, originated with King Wen, progenitor of the Zhou dynasty. He is said to have also added brief judgments (or Guaci) to the hexagrams during his imprisonment of the tyrant Shang Zhou.

The text pertaining to the individual lines originated with his son, the Duke of Zhou, this form of the book, entitled the Changes of Zhou, was in use as an oracle throughout the Zhou period.

This was the status of the book at the time Confucius came upon it. In his old age, he gave it intensive study and it is highly probable that most of the commentaries, such as the Commentaries on the Judgments and Line statements, and the Great Commentary are attributed to him. Then these commentaries were published along the older text and become an integral portion of the book of changes. This is largely the book that is passed on to us today.

Structure of I Ching and the Hexagrams

Briefly, the original I Ching consists of 64 hexagrams (called gua) and related texts. The hexagrams, formed by combinations of two trigrams (also called gua), are composed of six lines called yao, arranged on atop the other in vertical sequence and read from bottom to top.

Each line is either solid which we call it NINE, or broken, for which we call SIX. Sometimes we also refer the solid line as Yang and broken line as Yin. These two complementary concepts are closely related to the culture or values at that period of time, maybe are still deep rooted in modern Chinese society.

Briefly, the universe is dualistic by nature, everything in it has either a Yin or a Yang character and exhibits either Yin or Yang behaviour. And human society, as a natural part of the universe, is also characterised by this Yin-Yang dualism. A simple but accurate explanation is that Superiors are yang and subordinates are yin, Yang is the hard and strong, the assertive, the authority, the initiator, the male. And Yin is the soft and yielding, the submissive, the one subject to authority, the follower and the female. This is not always the case, as this Yin-Yang is not static, but constantly changing.

Reading of Qian

Qian is the first hexagram in I Ching, it is made up of six solid lines, as shown in the figure on the right. Shall we first read the translations ? One sentence each, please.

What do you feel after reading the text? It is quite confusing and difficult to get what these texts actually means. There are a lot of interpretations, some from the aspect of divination, some focus on the philosophical implications. Today I'll try to convey the latter to us and see whether it make sense or not. Please do ask questions when you this confuse you.

The first sentence (without numbers) is called the judgment (or gua ci, or tuan ci) of Qian, it discusses the substance of a hexagram as a whole or generally describes the characteristics of this hexagram.

The sentences numbering 1 to 6 are called the line statements. Each line in a hexagram address a certain state of change. And the corresponding line statement is a description of this state, under the context of the overall hexagram.

The first line:

This refers to one who has a dragon's virtue yet remains hidden. He neither changes to suit the world, or seeks fulfillment in fame. He hides from the world but does not regret it.

The second line

This refers to one who has a dragon's virtue and has achieved rectitude and mean. Hi is trustworthy in ordinary speech and prudent in ordinary conduct. He does good in the world but does not boast of it and His virtue spreads wide.

The third line

The noble man (no longer an ordinary man with a dragon's virtue), fosters his virtue and cultivates his task. At the moment, he reaches the top of the lower trigram yet is still below the upper trigram. He understands what he has achieved but also awares the he has reached a maximum point and fulfilled it and always be alert and fearful, he is not proud and will suffer no blame.

The fourth line

Now the noble man rises to the upper trigram, but the position is interesting, it is neither the sky above (which is the middle of the upper trigram), nor in the fields below. It is the lowest line in the upper trigram. Thus one regards it as a matter of hesitation, or doubts. The noble man still fosters his virtue, cultivates his task, and wishes to be ready when the moment of leaping arrives. Therefore he suffers no blame.

The fifth line:

The noble man reaches the center of the upper trigarm, like a dragon flying in the sky. A Chinese

dragon is supposed to be flying in the sky to show his virtue or brightness. When a dragon's virtue is present in the sky, then the path of the great man will prevail. When this grand and noble position is filled by someone with such paramount virtue, all under heaven will go to him and look up to him, a widespread of the great man's virtue.

The sixth line:

One is located at the top of the upper triagram, he knows how to advance but not how to retreat and thus exceeds a proper limit. Although noble, he is not in the appropriate position, although at a lofty height, he lacks people's following. Thus when he acts, he should have cause for regret.

The seven-th line only appears in the Qian and Kun hexagram. It serves as a conclusion of the hexagram.