

# The Nature of Divination\*

**Dr Andreas Schöter**

## **Introduction**

What is divination? In the broadest terms, if we consider oracle systems such as the Yi Jing (sometimes written “I Ching”) or the Tarot, it is the use of chance events to access one or more images from the oracle. Those images are taken to be directly related to the problem or question that is troubling the person and, because of this, they are interpreted in such a way as to shed light on the question being asked. In the Tarot, the mechanism of chance is the shuffling of the cards. In the Yi Jing, the mechanism is traditionally either the fall of coins or the division of a set of yarrow stalks into unpredictable bundles. The use of a chance procedure to consult the oracle sidesteps the rational mind and takes conscious choice out of the equation. Traditionally, it would be described as allowing a spiritual agent to manifest. Today, we might describe it as allowing the unconscious archetypes or sub-personalities of the person asking the question to express themselves.

Whilst this paper cannot hope to be a definitive answer to the workings of this mysterious art, it does represent a useful starting point from a particular perspective. In the following pages I shall put forward a theoretical framework describing the process of divination. This framework is drawn from the metaphysics encoded in one of the most successful divination tools, the Chinese *Book of Change*, the Yi Jing. However, I believe the basic ideas should be applicable to most divination tools.

In the introduction to Blofeld’s translation of the work he says “I am entirely satisfied with the results produced by the *I Ching*, but do not presume to explain the lofty process by which they are achieved.” (Blofeld, 1965, p26). This attitude is not uncommon amongst people involved with the Yi Jing - there is a reluctance to look under the bonnet.<sup>1</sup> However, the Book of Change is directly involved with the nature of reality on many levels and, in the *Da Zhuan*, explores its own metaphysics. Because of this, I believe that a model of how it works can shed light on many aspects of our experience.

The Yi Jing functions in two modes. Firstly, it is a practical oracle, a tool for divination. However, it is also a work of philosophy, a source and repository of wisdom. I shall consider its philosophical aspects first then, via some exploration of the notion of randomness, I shall turn to its role in divination. Finally, I shall suggest that the metaphysical assumptions in the Yi Jing inform the process of divination and thus, these two modes are not really separate.

---

\* A shorter version of this article originally appeared in the Spring/Summer 2004 edition of the journal “Counselling in Scotland”, pp6-8. This is the journal of COSCA, the organization for Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland.

<sup>1</sup> “Under the hood” for my US English readers.

## **History**

Before we start in on the metaphysics, it is worthwhile looking at the history of the Book's relationship with Western thought.

Although missionaries had been interested in the Yi Jing since their arrival in China, it was not until Richard Wilhelm published his seminal German version in 1924 that the book started to be understood in the West. Wilhelm's translation was not the first into a European language, but it was done under the supervision of a traditional Chinese scholar, who had taken Wilhelm as his student. Further, the work received a great boost from the psychologist Carl Jung. Jung was involved with the Yi Jing even before Wilhelm, seeing in it a way to connect to the deep layers of the unconscious mind. In Wilhelm's translation he finally found a usable version of the text. Writing the forward to Wilhelm's translation Jung says (Wilhelm, 1983, p xxii)

*For more than thirty years I have interested myself in this oracle technique, or method of exploring the unconscious, for it has seemed to me of uncommon significance... [Wilhelm] confirmed for me then what I already knew, and taught me many things more.*

Jung's work has been continued into the present day, with the publication of the monumental Eranos edition of the Book of Change, translated by Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher. They say (p15) that their translation

*...is an attempt to go behind historical, philological and philosophical analysis to revive the divinatory core, the psychological root of the book as a living practice.*

Of course, this is something that everyone who uses the book as a practical tool on a regular basis, in what ever translation, strives for. If the Western approach to the Book had become overly academic, concerned largely with textual archaeology, then Ritsema and Karcher seek to show explicitly how the oracular aspect of the book can be a powerful psychological tool, fostering a connection to the creative energies that shape life.

This is an underlying assumption in this paper: the Yi Jing is a practical tool that works. So, now I wish to consider how it works.

## **Metaphysics**

Clarke (2000, p69) describes the Daoist conception of nature as:

*...a series of interlocking correspondences, of different levels of reality brought into symmetry with each other by means of complex and detailed analogical correlations.*

The Yi Jing is a perfect example of this way of seeing the world; the traditional metaphysics described in the classic text gives a vital description of the world view of the people who developed the book. Exploring this view can help us understand the process of divination.

The Da Zhuan is the “Great Treatise”, part of the commentary text associated with the Yi Jing. On some counts this is the metaphysical core of the Book of Change. In this work, the universe is seen as being divided into two primary domains; these are called *heaven* and *earth*. Wilhelm (p280) translates Chapter I, Section 1 as:

*In heaven, phenomena take form;  
on earth, shapes take form.  
In this way change and transformation become manifest.*

Heaven, according to Wilhelm (p281), is “the upper world of light, which, though incorporeal, firmly regulates and determines everything that happens”. This is contrasted with earth, which is “the lower, dark world, corporeal, and dependent in its movements upon the phenomena of heaven”. For comparison, Karcher’s translation renders the same passage as (Karcher 2000, p60):

*The changes and transformations of Heaven are in the symbols of change.  
The changes and transformations of Earth are in the forms of change.  
Everything is seen clearly in change.*

Thus, earth is the material world where form is manifest, whilst heaven, shaping events, is the realm of symbol and pattern. Identifying the primary modes of each of heaven and earth, Wilhelm translates Section 5 of the above source as (p285):

*Creative knows the great beginnings  
Receptive completes the finished things.*

So, the action of heaven is creative, initiating change, and earth is receptive to that action, completing the transformations. In a different jargon, we can say that matter (earth) expresses pattern (heaven). But heaven and earth are not separate domains. They are two aspects of a unified whole, two perspectives on a single cosmos.

In between heaven and earth, and arising out of their interaction, is a third domain, that of *man*. In the Yi Jing, humanity sits on the interface between the spiritual and the material realms; we connect these two domains. Thus, in the trigrams, the bottom line symbolises earth, the top line symbolises heaven, and the middle line symbolises man. These three “fundamental powers” are described in the *Shou Gua*, the “Discussion of the Trigrams”, as follows (Wilhelm, p264):

*[the holy sages] determined the tao of heaven and called it the dark and the light. They determined the tao of the earth and called it the yielding and the firm. They determined the tao of man and called it love and rectitude.*

So, each of the three domains has its own polarity. For heaven, it is the dark and the light. This is the most fundamental of the polarizations; it is, after all, where polarization actually begins. It expresses the pattern that the other domains will follow. Wu (1991, p282) translates the way of heaven simply and directly as yin and yang. For earth, the polarity is concrete. If we consider the extremes of the states of matter, gaseous and solid would be the benchmarks. The former conforms to the shape of its containing space, whilst the latter defines the boundaries of that space. The way of man, the balance of the human condition, is expressed here through the two poles of love and rectitude. A footnote in Wilhelm’s text notes that “love” is

meant in the sense of “humane feeling”. The contrast then, with rectitude, moral and religious correctness, leans the meaning of that term towards a stiff righteousness. We could characterise this as a polarity between a genuine, open response and a hidebound, inflexible reaction.

In modern terminology, we might say that heaven corresponds with Bohm’s idea of the *implicate order* in physics. This is the deep, underlying layer of reality which “unfolds” to give expression to the *explicate order*, which is earth, the manifest world as we perceive it. Events that happen in the world, happen because of the patterns in the implicate order. Thus, physical causality in this world, the explicate order, becomes a secondary phenomenon, subordinate to the unfolding activity of the implicate order. This bears a striking similarity to the relation between heaven and earth in the Yi Jing. Then, to continue with the analogy, between the implicate and the explicate orders, *consciousness* arises; somehow able to apprehend the activity of the unfolding implicate order through psychologically significant events, it offers a possible explanation of Jung’s key notion of synchronicity (Jung, 1985).

From another perspective again, I want to suggest that we can consider heaven as the realm of our *ideals*. It contains those patterns, whether positive or negative, constructive or destructive, that shape our goals and drive our behaviour. Then, earth becomes the realm of actual *circumstance*, the manifest situations that we encounter in our daily lives. Finally, in between our ideals and our circumstances, shaped and influenced by both of them, and shaping and influencing them in turn, lies our *attitude*. These three domains give us the first part of the framework in which to construct a theory on the nature of divination.

## Chance

At the outset, we described divination as a process involving the use of chance events. Specifically, and technically, we might say it involves the interpretation of the symbolic output of an unpredictable process. Along with the act of interpretation, chance is therefore at the heart of divination, and any exploration of divination must look into the nature of chance and predictability. We shall begin by looking at the mathematical consideration of randomness, and then turn to the physical processes involved.

It is significant that modern mathematics has very little to say about the causal source, or lack thereof, of randomness. Instead, it concentrates on determining whether the symbolic output of any given procedure could be described as random, regardless of the nature of the generating procedure. Chaitin’s work on an information theoretic approach to randomness is typical of this.

Imagine I was in the habit of throwing a coin 18 times in succession and recording the result. On one occasion I got:

HTHTHTHTHTHTHTHTHT

And then I did it again and got:

TTHTHHTTTTHTHHHHHTH

Psychologically, it is hard to accept that the first sequence is the result of a random process. This is because we can clearly *see* a pattern, and the likelihood of that pattern emerging by chance seems so remote. But there are 262,144 possible sequences that can be generated by tossing a coin 18 times and each of them is equally likely; the first pattern is no more unlikely to occur than the second.

In fact, the information theoretic analysis of randomness is concerned with just this: detectable patterns in the resulting data. The first sequence shows an obvious pattern which can be expressed succinctly as HT×9. Mathematically then, it is deemed a non-random sequence. However, the second sequence does not show an obvious pattern and, mathematically, it would therefore be taken to be random. And yet both sequences have been generated by the same source. But, as Chaitin says, the “provenance of the series” is not enough to certify that it is random.

Thus, deciding whether a particular sequence is random or not is, in part at least, determined by the ingenuity of the mathematician doing the looking. If they can find an applicable description of the pattern, then they must declare the sequence as non-random. Only if they cannot find a description can they *provisionally* declare the sequence as random. Note that such a declaration can only be provisional because it is always possible that a more insightful analysis might uncover an applicable description of the pattern. So, from a mathematical perspective non-randomness is a property of perception and context. Put it another way: non-randomness is a cognitive phenomenon.

Let us now leave the mathematics of randomness and turn to the physical source of chance, in this case the toss of a coin. The key point here must surely be that it seems to be impossible to predict the result of any particular toss. But now we have to unpick what is meant by “unpredictable”. Does it mean that the result could never be predicted, because the information necessary to make the predication is, in principle, unavailable? Or does it mean something weaker, only that we are not capable of gathering sufficient information to make a timely prediction?

Another way to approach this question, is to ask whether the result of the event is determined or not? By this, I mean is the outcome of the event completely determined by the physical conditions of the event? Suppose, in the case of tossing a coin, we agree that the answer is yes, the complete combination of the set of all the physical conditions of the toss determine its outcome. Consider a machine that always imparts the same impetus to the coin at the same place, and the coin moves through a vacuum so air currents are not an issue. It seems reasonable to assume that the result of this mechanical toss will always be the same. That is, in the case of physical events, the complexity of the ballistics is merely a matter of degree. How a coin lands is not “random”. It is, in fact, determined by the complete set of physical conditions prevailing at the time of the toss.

Now the question of predictability takes on a different significance. A determinate event that is predictable is easy to understand: the conditions that define the outcome can be analysed and the result can be determined. However, a determinate event that is not predictable presents a problem. If such events are not predictable because information necessary to make the predication is missing, then we are dealing with a situation in which there are hidden variables. So, from this perspective on chance events, divination is a process which creates a symbolic manifestation of the hidden

variables in a situation, where the interpretation of those symbols depends on the cognitive abilities of the analyst. We could say that the use of a chance procedure in divination helps make the implicate order manifest. Given our previous association of the implicate order with the domain of heaven, this confirms the idea from a contemporary perspective, that the Yi Jing expresses the “mandate of heaven” (Marshall 2001).

## **Divination**

When consulting the Yi Jing, once the chance procedure is complete, the result is a six lined figure known as a hexagram. The six lines can be apportioned to the different domains in different ways simultaneously. The top three lines are heaven and the bottom three lines are earth. At the same time, the top two lines are heaven, the bottom two lines are earth, and the middle two lines are mankind. In this way, we start to see how the structures of the Yi Jing embody the Daoist conception of nature as a series of interlocking correspondences, as described by Clarke.

Each hexagram has a name, and a number of associated texts. For example, the hexagram shown in Figure 1, is called “Development (Gradual Progress)” by Wilhelm (p204) and “Infiltrating” by Ritsema and Karcher (p567). One of the elemental images associated with the figure is of an old tree growing slowly but steadily on top of a mountain. Ritsema and Karcher characterize its energy as “... gradually achieving a goal ... advancing through diffuse but steady penetration...”. The detailed meaning of the symbol would need to be interpreted relative to a particular question in order to relate the general images to the specific circumstances. When used in this way, the Yi Jing becomes a powerful tool for personal development. Ritsema and Karcher (p11) describe the process of divination as:



**Figure 1:**  
**53, Development**

*...imagination perceiving forces and inventing ways to deal with them.  
This involves a combination of analysis and intuition that normal  
thinking usually keeps apart.*

For an example of the consultation process and a write-up of a complete interpretation, please see the *CONSULT* section of my web site at <http://www.yijing.co.uk>.

We can now explore a basic description of divination in the light of the metaphysics discussed above. Firstly, we have an oracle, the Yi Jing. This is a systematic encoding of the fundamental energies that are active in the universe. The claim is that all possible circumstances are represented, in terms of abstract images, within the symbols. This represents the implicate order, it contains all possible ideals that we, as humans, might embody. Secondly, we have a problem, an issue with some aspect of our current situation, that our normal problem solving strategies cannot handle effectively. This problem, which in turn gives rise to the specific question being brought to the oracle, represents the explicate order, and arises directly from the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Finally, there is the person asking the question of the oracle. This is consciousness, the attitude that arises from the

interaction of the circumstance and the ideal. Clearly, different dynamics around the interaction of the person's driving patterns and their actual circumstances, will tend to create distinct attitudes within the person. The Yi Jing then also becomes a language for describing these relationships.

So, involved in the consultation, we have:

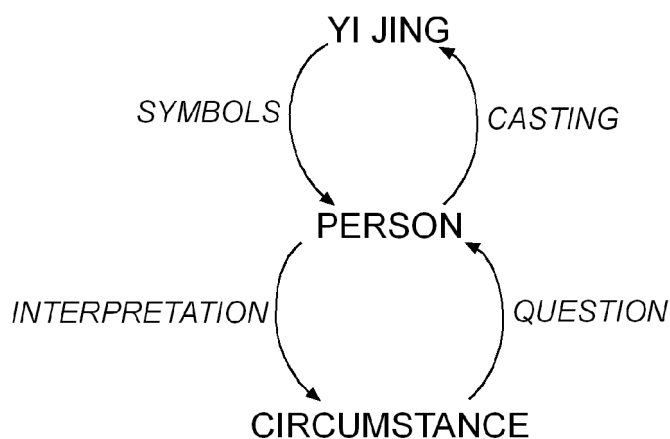
- 1) the circumstances that have given rise to the question,
- 2) the person asking the question, and
- 3) the Book of Change itself.

In addition we also optionally have:

- 4) a mediator who knows the book intimately.

In the case where the questioner is not familiar with the techniques, then the role of the mediator is to help connect the questioner to the book. In that case, they will create an appropriate space for the consultation, guide the questioner in the operation of the chance procedure, and then offer the resulting images, helping to connect them to the questioner's specific circumstances. However, the interpretation of the images relative to the given situation should, indeed ultimately must, be done by the questioner. Further, it should be noted that, if the person with the question understands how to operate the oracle effectively, then (2) and (4) are the same person.

Figure 2 shows a graphical representation of the entities involved in a reading. Essentially, the role of the mediator is to facilitate the elements marked in italics.



**Figure 2: The Entities in a Divination**

The process of divination works most effectively when the questioner understands and internalises the images given by the book, when they are open to letting those images trigger a response in themselves, and when they are prepared to look at what is triggered and work with it. The mediator cannot tell them “the answer”, they can only create a space that is conducive to the process and help them to reach for an appropriate understanding themselves.

Clarke (2000, p10) describes the dynamic relationship that develops between an individual and a text over a period of time as:

*A continuing exchange in which the sense of the text is sought by reiterative interplay or conversation between interpreter and interpreted, and in which meaning is a function of the interaction between the two, not a mystery that lies hidden beneath the text.*

This accurately characterizes the relationship that develops between the Book of Change and any serious student of the work. It becomes a conversation, constantly refining one's understanding of the meaning of the symbols.

What of the other elements in the divination? The circumstances are to be taken as is; although subsequent actions by the questioner may change them, we have to deal with things as they are manifest now. Similarly, the oracle itself is not subject to alteration. The symbolic representation of the Book of Change is, paradoxically, a constant in all consultations. So, what is left as the prime variable in a divination is the attitude of the person. This is what we work with in divination, the conscious appreciation of the situation, the images from the oracle, and an understanding of their relationship.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, it should be understood that, ultimately, the entities involved in a divination are not really separate. They are all part of a larger pattern being generated by the implicate order. The person asking the question, the book itself, and the mediator, are all embedded in the very situation that is raising the question. In fact, this is the deeper purpose of divination. More than answering the specific question, its aim is to answer the underlying meta-question. For, behind any specific problem or question that is brought to the Yi Jing, lies a common concern. That is, how can we live in harmony with the forces that act on us. Ritsema and Karcher (p15) crystallize this in the question "How can I act in creative relation with the spirits or forces shaping this moment of time?" (p15). Using the terminology presented here, we might say that the aim of working with the Book of Change is to bring us into a better understanding of our relationship to the broader implicate picture.

## **References**

Blofeld, J. 1965

*I Ching (The Book of Change)*. Published by Penguin Compass

Bohm, D. 1995

*Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. Published by Routledge.

Chaitin, G. J. 1975

"Randomness and Mathematical Proof" in *Scientific American*, Volume 232, Number 5, May 1975. pp 47-52. This is also available on the web at <http://www.cs.aujland.ac.nz/CDMTCS/chaitin/sciamer.html>

- Clark, J. J. 2000  
*The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought*. Published by Routledge.
- Combs, A. and M. Holland 2001  
*Synchronicity: Through the Eyes of Science, Myth, and the Trickster*. Published by Marlowe & Company.
- Javery, C. 1997  
*Understanding the I Ching*. Published by Shambala. Translated from the French by Kirk McElhearn.
- Jung, C.G. 1985  
*Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle*. Published by Ark Paperbacks. First published in English in 1955.
- Karcher, S. 2000  
*Ta Chuan: The Great Treatise*. Published by Carroll & Brown Publishers Ltd.
- Marshall, S. J. 2001  
*The Mandate of Heaven: Hidden History in the Book of Changes*. Published by Curzon Press.
- Ritsema, R. and S. Karcher, 1994  
*I Ching: The Classic Chinese Oracle of Change*. Published by Element Books Ltd.
- Wilhelm, R. 1983  
*I Ching, or book of changes*. Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wu, Jing-Nuan, 1991  
*Yi Jing*. Published by The Taoist Center, Washington D.C.