

An Introduction to the Yi Jing

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What is the Yi Jing?

The *Yi Jing*, or Book of Change, is an ancient Chinese oracle that has been consulted in times of trouble for thousands of years. It was used as a guide and source of wisdom by the emperors, helping them decide the difficult issues of statecraft; and it was both a source and repository of philosophical insight for the Chinese sages. Both of the major Chinese philosophical traditions, Taoist and Confucianist alike, have contributed to its development and it finds a place in many aspects of Chinese culture including Feng Shui, the martial arts and statecraft.



Figure 1: Yi Jing

That it has survived, indeed flourished, over its 5000 year history is a testament both to its effectiveness as a practical guide in times of doubt and trouble and its role as a source of deep philosophical wisdom. Simply, it can help us live in harmony with the forces that shape life.

The Traditional History

According to most stories, the originator of the Book of Change is Fu Hsi, the legendary semi-human first emperor of China who is also credited with the invention of writing and cooking. He is said to have noticed the trigrams (the basic three lined figures of the *Yi Jing*) on the back of a tortoise emerging from the Yellow River. Thus, through careful observation of the patterns in nature he came to understand the structure of reality. This event is usually placed at around 3000BCE.

Later, around 1150BCE, King Wen was falsely imprisoned by the last tyrannical leader of the Shang dynasty. Whilst in jail he studied the Changes and created the hexagrams (six line figures) by doubling the trigrams of Fu Hsi. He gave each figure a name and a short description. When his son, the Duke of Chou, later added texts for the individual lines, the *Yi Jing* was essentially complete and, by the time of Confucius, around 500BCE, it had become a core classic of Chinese thought.

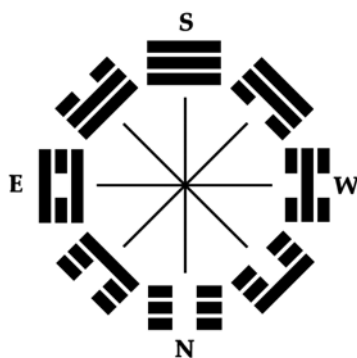


Figure 2: Fu Hsi Trigrams

How much of this traditional account is historical fact is less important than the nature of the tale. Specifically, the *Yi Jing* has no single author, rather it has been pieced together by a number of people over a long period of time. Further, it is the result of careful observation of the patterns in the world and those observations have been organized into a coherent picture using the symbols of the Book of Change.

The Journey West

The initial appearance of the *Yi Jing* in the West can be attributed to a Jesuit agent called Bouvet, working in China in the late 17th century. He brought the book to attention of the famous German mathematician Leibniz, who saw parallels with his own work on binary systems. Both men believed the book encoded a universal doctrine.

However, it was not until Richard Wilhelm published his seminal German version in 1924 that the book started to be understood here. Wilhelm's translation was not the first into a western language, but it was done under the supervision of a traditional Chinese scholar who had taken Wilhelm as his student. The work received a great boost from the psychologist Carl Jung, a student of Freud. 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 Jung finally found a usable version of the text.

Jung's work has been continued into the present day, with the publication of the Eranos edition of the Book of Change. This shows how the oracular aspect of the book can be a powerful psychological tool that fosters a connection to the creative energies that shape life. In this way, the words and images of the *Yi Jing* are like sparks, if you are clear and quick you will see what they illuminate; the less embroiled you are, the deeper you will see. They form links to the unconscious, clarified through interpretation.

Yin and Yang

The principle of yin and yang underlies much of Chinese thought. It begins with Wu Chi, the state of unity, the state without differentiation, without polarization. Here there is only one, and there is no separateness of self from other. Symbolized by an empty circle, this is the Universe before it was born.

As soon as movement occurs, then differentiation arises. This is Tai Chi, where the great axis of yin and yang comes into being. Yin and yang are the two primary forces that act in the Universe. Yang is creative, light and active whilst yin is receptive, dark and passive. But these terms should not be seen judgmentally. There is no implication that yang is good and yin is bad, both forces are necessary. Together they form a complementary pair that naturally seek balance. Further, the division is not hard and fast; just as day becomes night, and then night again becomes day, so Yin contains the seed of Yang, and Yang contains the seed of Yin.

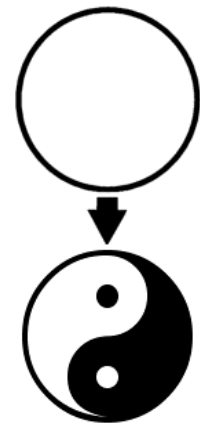


Figure 3: Wu Chi becomes Tai Chi

It is interesting that the original meaning of Yin and Yang connect to the shady and sunny side of a hill respectively. The sunny and shady side are both aspects of the same hill and, obviously, as the sun moves which side is Yin and which is Yang changes.

The *Yi Jing* is, in part, a numerological system. Even numbers are taken to be yin and odd numbers are assigned to yang. In particular, yin is represented by the number 8, and yang by 7. Further, because the Book of Change includes the notion that yin and yang can transform into each other, yin that is changing to yang is assigned the number 6 and yang that is changing to yin is assigned the number 9.

- X ■ 6 Changing yin
- ■ ■ 7 Stable yang
- ■ 8 Stable yin
- ○ ■ 9 Changing yang

Pictorially, yin is represented by an open line and yang is represented by a whole line. The act of yin becoming yang is an open line with a cross in the gap, indicating that the gap is closing. Similarly, yang becoming yin is represented as a whole line with a circle drawn through its center, indicating that the line will open. Thus, the Book of Change can

represent four possible states for the two primary forces.

The Bigrams

Even taking into account the changing nature of yin and yang, a single line cannot convey much information about a situation. To represent more complex states, we must put lines together in combinations. The simplest situation is a pair of lines, called a bigram.

The bigrams can be used to represent the four seasons: when both lines are yin, we have winter, it is cold and the ground is frozen. In spring the ground thaws, and early flowers appear; this is a yang line below a yin line. In the midst of summer the energy of the sun penetrates everything; two yang lines represent this. In autumn, growth dies back, represented by a yin line beneath a yang line. Finally, the seasons come full circle, back to winter.

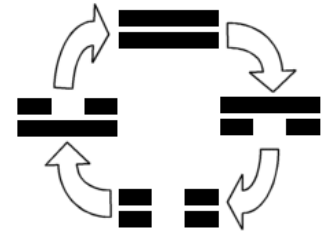


Figure 5: The Bigram Cycle

Although they are not used extensively in the traditional *Yi Jing*, bigrams are a key step in the development of the structure of Change. Any two-dimensional, polar categorization can be represented by the bigrams. For example, there is a popular time management technique that categorizes tasks as either critical or non-critical and either important or unimportant. Clearly critical and important tasks should be given priority. This would be the summer bigram. Critical, but unimportant tasks and important but non-critical tasks would be assigned to the spring and autumn bigrams. Which category is assigned to which bigram should reflect which category of task is being given priority. If critical unimportant tasks were given priority, then these should be spring and important, non-critical tasks would be autumn. Finally, non-critical, unimportant tasks would be assigned to winter. This simple example shows how the *Yi Jing* can be used creatively in a contemporary context.

The Trigrams

A trigram is a group of three lines. Traditionally, the bottom line represents the earthly, material realm; the upper line represents the heavenly, spiritual realm; and the middle line represents man, the bridge between them. Each of the three lines may be either yin or yang and this gives eight possible figures. There is a finely articulated collection of images and ideas associated with each trigram, the following descriptions give some of the main attributions.



Receptiveness – this is pure yin, the mother earth, receptive and supporting everything. It is yielding.



Arousing – this is the first manifestation of yang, the eldest son. It is thunder, a sudden shock of energy. It is rousing.



Water – this is fast flowing water, the second son. It is also called the Abyss and it can represent danger. Unstoppable, it is continually flowing.



Openness – this is joyousness, the tranquility of a lake, it is the youngest daughter. It can also mean mist. It stimulates.



Stillness – this is the mountain, the highest ascent of yang on earth and the youngest son. It also symbolizes a turning point, bringing things to completion.



Fire – not just the flame, but the way the flame depends on the fuel. It is the middle daughter. It also stands for brightness and clarity.



Penetrating – this is the wind, and also growing wood. It is the eldest daughter. It is gentle.



Creativeness – this is pure yang energy, force and fullness. This is the father. It is persistent.

As can be seen, each symbol has a wide range of images associated with it. Which particular image is relevant in any given situation depends on the surrounding context. This is the art of interpretation.

There are many ways of arranging the trigrams. Many readers will be familiar with the circular arrangements that appear as Feng Shui charms over doorways. This is usually a variation of the Fu Hsi, or “Primal” arrangement where each trigram is paired with its opposite and those pairs are arranged on the two cardinal and the two diagonal axes (see Figure 2 above).

The trigrams are used as the theoretical foundation of the Chinese martial art Baguazhang. In this art, each trigram gives its spirit to a particular sequence of moves of defence and counter attack. Also, a number of styles of Tai Chi Chuan use the trigrams to represent the eight primary energies (called “jing”) which used in various combinations in the moves of the form and in self-defence applications.

The Hexagrams

To extend the capacity of the Book of Change, six line symbols are used to represent the complexity of the situations we encounter in our lives. This gives rise to 64 possible figures and the symbolic possibilities expand dramatically.

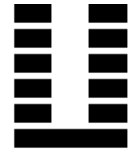
The hexagram as a whole has a meaning, but it also derives some meaning from its two constituent trigrams, the lower trigram representing the inner, subjective aspects of the situation, and the upper representing the outer, objective aspects. It can also be seen as representing the stages of a situation, sometimes expressed in terms of the six layers of hierarchy found in Chinese feudal society. Then, the bottom line represents the peasants, and stands for the beginning of the situation described by the figure. The middle four lines represent the heart of the situation, with the second line representing the artisans, the third line representing the local lord, the fourth line representing the prime minister, and the fifth line representing the emperor. The top line then represents the sage, and stands for the end of the situation described by the figure. In addition, sometimes the actual shape of the hexagram, its visual appearance, will suggest elements of the meaning.



An example of a hexagram that derives its primary image from the constituent trigrams is Hexagram 48, The Well. Here we have Water above and Wood below. This can be seen as the bucket from a well being lowered beneath the water, leading to the name of the figure. The Well represents a vital source for a community, it is a shared resource that everyone depends on. What ever happens in the community around a well, the well itself must remain clear and clean for the community to flourish.

**Figure 6:
The Well**

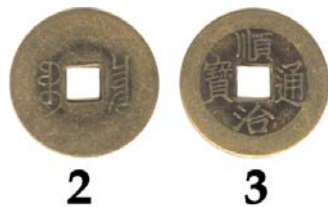
An example of a hexagram that derives its meaning more from the relation of the individual lines is Hexagram 24, Returning. Here, the key aspect is the single yang line that has appeared at the beginning of the figure. This is the return of energy after a time of difficulties, and it represents a time of renewal and an upturn in fortune.



**Figure 7:
Returning**

Divination

People usually come to the *Yi Jing* because they have a question, because there is some aspect of their situation that they do not understand and which their normal problem solving strategies cannot resolve. Divination uses an act of chance to obtain an image for interpretation. This use of Chance to consult Change takes you beyond conscious control. It serves to sidestep your usual barriers and helps to open up the channels to your own hidden resources. These resources are not bounded by rationality, they can connect you directly to the source energies of the situation that has brought you to your question.



**Figure 8: Coins for
Divination**

In its oldest surviving form divination uses the numerical result of throwing coins to yield a line.¹ One side of a coin is designated as 2 (yin) and the other side is designated as 3 (yang). Three coins thrown together therefore yield a 6, 7, 8 or 9. As described above, these are the numbers of the types of line. Throwing three coins six times gives a hexagram from the bottom line to the top line.

Once you have obtained a hexagram by casting the coins, you turn to the book itself and look up the symbol. The texts associated with the hexagram provide you with a rich source of images and metaphor that should be interpreted in the context of your question.

How you approach your question is a key aspect of the act of divination. The question provides the focus for the enquiry and the process of formulating the question is part of the process of looking in to the problem.

The *Yi Jing* provides its answers in terms of rich images and metaphors, so avoid questions that have simple yes/no answers. Do not ask ‘closed’ questions, but instead represent your problem with an ‘open’ question. Open questions present the best opportunity for the Book of Change to give you the most information about your situation. For example, do not ask “Should I look for a new job?” This clearly expects a yes/no answer. Instead ask “What might be the effects of looking for a new job?” – here you are not asking the Book of Change what to do, instead you are asking it about the possible ramifications of actions you are considering. The responsibility to act in a situation always rests with the person asking the question.

¹ It would seem that the popular belief that the oldest surviving form of divination is the yarrow stalk is misplaced. Certainly, a yarrow stalk method existed before the coin method. However, Moore 1999, cites Shih-chuan Chen as showing that the current yarrow stalk method dates from the 12th century. Moore’s article appears as “Stick Dice for the I Ching – A Review” in *The Oracle: The Journal of Yijing Studies*, Vol 2, No 9, pp43-45. Shih-chuan Chen’s article is given as “How to Form a Hexagram and Consult the *I Ching*” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, April-June 1972 issue, pp80-96.

Understanding the answers given by the Book of Change is a creative, imaginative act. Like a dream, the language used by the ancient Chinese sages is metaphorical and imagistic, and those images must be interpreted relative to your question and your situation.

The *Yi Jing* has been described as “the dark mirror that gives true answers”. The answers given will contain many facets of meaning. Sometimes these facets will all align together, suggesting a strongly focussed resolution to the problem. Sometimes different aspects of the answer will appear contradictory and confusing. This will often relate to contradictions or confusions in your perception of the actual situation, showing where you need to focus your attention. The art of divination involves an act of interpretation.

Conclusion

The *Yi Jing* is a divination system with a long and rich history. Curiously, for such an ancient text, its binary representation finds many resonances in the world of today’s digital information. Its message is much needed in this society. One of the key things that it shows is that a binary system does not have to collapse down to yes/no, either/or, and that there are rich, inclusive ways of being that can accommodate a wide variety of views.

In my experience, the *Yi Jing* is a valuable guide. Its world-view, its philosophy, can provide a much needed antidote to the stress of our modern culture and, when used for divination, it is an invaluable source of advice for staying on the right track. It can help one understand the flow of energies that shape life and, from that understanding, it becomes possible to act with nature, rather than struggling against her.

Further Reading

The literature on the *Yi Jing* is vast. The following suggestions are merely starting points for the reader who would like to explore this subject further.

How to Use the I Ching by Stephen Karcher. Published by Element, 1998. One of the most accessible versions of the text for beginners.

I Ching or Book of Changes by Richard Wilhelm. Published by Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. Still the most comprehensive single volume edition of the *Yi Jing* including the vital “Great Treatise” explaining the cosmology of Change.

I Ching – The Classic Chinese Oracle of Change by Rudolf Ritsema and Stephen Karcher. Published by Element, 1995. Not a “translation” in the usual sense of the word, I’d call it a “rendering” into English. But a good presentation of the book intended to emphasize the psychological aspects of its use.

I Ching Mandalas by Thomas Cleary. Published by Shambala, 1989. A programme of study for the *Yi Jing* based on Cleary’s translations of the literature.

Understanding the I Ching by Cyrille Javary. Published by Shambala, 1997. An excellent overview of the philosophy and metaphysics that underlies the *Yi Jing*.

Warp and Weft: In Search of the I-Ching by William de Fancourt. Published by Capall Bann, 1997. An extensive analysis of the history of the *Yi Jing*.