

*Seeking the Spirit of the Book of Change: 8 Days to Mastering a Shamanic Yijing (I Ching) Prediction System.* By Master Zhongxian Wu. Published by Singing Dragon Books, London and Philadelphia, 2009. Forward by Daniel Reid. Hardback, 232 pages, ISBN 978-1-84819-020-7.

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## **Introduction**

The second thing that struck me about this book, once I had the review copy, apart from the obviously high production values, was the high praise from some high profile figures that adorns its jacket: Kenneth Cohen describes it as “unique and refreshing” and for Chungliang Al Huang it is “a special treat”. Such acclaim raises high expectations which, I have to say, the book mostly lives up to.

However, the first thing to strike me, before I even had a copy of the book, was the subtitle: “8 Days to Mastering a Shamanic Yijing...” Perhaps I'm being overly sensitive? You certainly could read it in eight days, but let's be honest – you're not going to *master* anything in that time! Mastering something as rich as the *Yijing* 易經 is an ongoing process of personal evolution, a lifetime's work for most of us. Such hyperbole did not endear the book to me at the outset. However, that said, in its chapters the book does manage to lay a firm and realistic foundation for developing a practice, and the reader certainly should come away with a clear view of how to take their personal relationship with the Book of Change in new and challenging directions. I think this is true whether you are new to the *Yijing* or a long term practitioner, and that is one of the strengths of this book.

Before getting into details about the contents I also want to say something about the format and presentation of the material. This really is very well done. First, the book feels spacious in the arrangement of the text, which helps with the readability. To this end, running headers on the pages help the reader keep track of the organization and, in the main portion of the book, the use of trigram symbols in the margins of the pages act as additional reminders of the theme *gua* 卦 of each chapter. The reproduction of images, both of the author's calligraphy and of photographs, is very clear, as I would expect from a modern book.

Also, the book does not shy away from the use of footnotes where appropriate, and Chinese characters are included in-line throughout. The publishers, Singing Dragon, are to be commended on this. Although it is becoming more common, I feel that Chinese characters and footnotes are sometimes avoided because it is felt that they make a book “too academic” or “more difficult” for readers. This is a nonsense. The inclusion of the Chinese characters for key terms, titles of books, and the names of Chinese authors and teachers, is vital if a reader is to gain a deeper appreciation of the subject. Given the easy availability of Unicode Chinese fonts, there are no technical reasons not to include this information in a production. Further, the use of footnotes gives an author a valuable way of including additional information without overloading the flow of the main text. Avoiding these features, whether for commercial reasons or otherwise, short changes the dedicated student.

Finally, the quality of the paper is good, which always makes me well disposed to a book.

## **The Structure of the Book**

The structure of the book feels very well thought out, which is no doubt due to Master Wu's experience of teaching this material in workshops. There is a steady progression through the key aspects of the practice, with interesting and useful background material introduced as appropriate.

The text begins with a brief forward titled *One Taste* by Daniel Reid. This serves to set the scene for the book and introduces the reader to the Chinese saying *cha chan yi wei* 茶禪一味, meaning “tea and zen are one taste”. This is an apt entrée into Master Wu's work: each of the eight main chapters of the book is written as if you are visiting for a personal lesson: it begins with Master Wu serving some Chinese tea, a different variety for each chapter, with the first chapter setting the scene by discussing the tea ceremony itself. After tea comes the lesson, each chapter focussing on a particular aspect of the practice, gradually developing the reader's knowledge as the book progresses. Finally, at the end of each chapter is a simple *Qigong* 氣功 exercise, with all the exercises linking together to form a sequence.

Master Wu's own introduction to the book is also interesting. The material presented in this volume is part of an oral Daoist lineage that is being committed to paper for the first time. As such, this book is a potential treasure trove for those of us who do not have direct access to those oral traditions. Also, it is in this introduction that Wu makes the initial connection between the *Yijing* 易經 and Chinese shamanism (*wu* 巫). He sites some archaeological evidence which suggests that *wu* were highly esteemed during the early dynasties of China and, in particular, that the king of the *Shang* 商 dynasty was himself a shaman. He also makes a connection between shamanic practice and Chinese medicine, saying that they come from the same source. As such, the *wu* are to be seen as “the source of all classical Chinese traditions.”

### *The Individual Chapters*

Taken overall Wu's book provides a course in divination that uses an intuitive approach, drawing on the practitioner's imagination, rather than the typical technique of using some external source to generate a random number. Each of the eight chapters is prefixed by a trigram. However, as Wu points out, this is just using the trigrams as numbers, and does not imply any particular theme for the contents of chapter.

The first chapter is called “*Dao* 道: The Way of *Yi* 易 and Tea”. This sets the scene for the overall structure of each of the other chapters. He begins by introducing the Celestial Tea House, where the reader is invited to come to meet Master Wu for the lessons on the *Yijing*. This is an opportunity to explore *Pinming Lundao* 品茗論道, savouring tea and discussing the *Dao*, which Wu describes as the “classical Chinese learning style”. The tea ceremony, taking time to savour and enjoy the tea, is a form of personal cultivation that helps open your mind to the profound philosophy of the *Dao*, and Wu tries to make this accessible to the reader by proxy. The chapter concludes with a look at some Chinese terms, including an analysis of the meaning of the term *gua* 卦. As I mentioned above, this is one of the real strong points of this book – the close attention to the Chinese language, exploring the internal structure of the characters, gives the reader useful insight into some of the key ideas from the *Yijing*.

Chapter two is “*Yi* 易: The Change and Myths”. After the cup of tea, the talk turns to the Chinese shamanic creation story and the origins of the *gua* themselves. The importance of the number 3 is explored, introducing the traditional realms of *Tian* 天 (Heaven), *Di* 地 (Earth) and *Ren* 人 (Humanity). The key role of numerology, both in terms of divination and in terms of systematic classification, is laid out and the chapter concludes with a brief introduction to the *Xiantian* 先天 (Preceding Heaven) and *Houtian* 後天 (Succeeding Heaven) arrangements of the trigrams.

The next chapter is “Shu 數: Numerology”. Wu notes that the divination techniques employed in the *Yijing* today are *Shushu* 數術, meaning “number skill” rather than the ancient technique of cracking bones! He explores the *Hetu* 河圖 (River Diagram) and *Luoshu* 洛書 (*Luo* Pattern) diagrams, discussing their origins and structure. He also considers some recent archaeological findings supporting the antiquity of the magic square arrangements, thereby confirming that these kinds of structures really would have been part of the divinatory toolbox of ancient Chinese shamanic culture. This chapter also revisits the *Xiantian* diagram, as this forms part of the initial stage of Wu's divination technique.

Chapter 4 is called “Xiang 象: Symbolism”. Having some understanding of the symbolic meaning of the *gua* is a necessary prerequisite for being able to interpret the results of any divination and, in this chapter, Wu looks at each of the *bagua* 八卦 in turn. For each trigram he gives a general discussion of its meaning, including some notes on the meanings of the Chinese character, and then provides a table of associations which include its element, the weather it represents, location, its characteristic person and personality, and range of other properties. As these categories are the same for each trigram the reader can build up a sense of comparative meanings for the *gua* as a whole system. He also makes the important point that successful divination depends on the inner cultivation of the individual.

In chapter 5, “Zhan 占: The Divination” Wu introduces his technique for divination. As mentioned above, this is an intuitive method which does not use external tools such as coins or yarrow stalks. The technique is very simple, and I shall not spoil things for the reader by revealing the details of it here. The first stage is called *Qi Gua* 起卦 – Wu translates this as “making” a trigram, but the meaning of *qi* 起 includes the idea of something appearing or happening, and this is indicative of the nature of the process. The result of a divination using Wu's method is always a trigram, not a hexagram and whilst this reduces the symbolic scope for interpretation, Wu introduces a range of techniques for expanding the available meaning. This part of the process is called *Jie Gua* 解卦 “decoding the trigram” and it involves using both the *Xiantian* and *Houtian* diagrams to find other trigrams that correspond with the initial trigram in terms of position, as well as exploring the five element relationships for the initial trigram. Although the initial technique for arriving at the trigram is quite simple, the resulting methods for exploring its meaning are quite involved and require some serious study and application on the part of the practitioner.

Fortunately, chapter 6 is “Li 例: Case Analysis”. In this chapter, Wu gives a wide range of practical examples of the system in use. These examples are largely drawn from various workshops that Wu has run in recent years and cover a range of divinations around such issues as moving a child from one school to another, or hiring companies to do repair work. However, the bulk of the examples revolve around health matters, either informal questions about back pain, or contributing to more formal diagnosis in Chinese medicine. As I have no expertise in this area I cannot really comment on most of these case studies. However, Wu Jing-Nian (1991 p1) says that an understanding of the *Yijing* is essential to being a Chinese doctor,<sup>1</sup> so the connection is certainly a significant one.

For myself, I see the symbols that emerge in a divination as indicative of the general trends of the ongoing unfolding of the universe in the present moment, but the cases presented here are significantly more specific and detailed. Perhaps this represents the cultural confidence that Wu

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1 Wu, Jing-Nuan. 1991. *Yi Jing*. Published by The Taoist Center, Washington D.C.

has. However, Wu is also honest about the fact that his divination is not always correct, and that the art of interpretation requires practice and the cultivation of an open and receptive mind. In a number of places in the book Wu highlights the fact that interpretation of the symbols cannot be a mechanical process, and that the meaning of a symbol depends strongly on the context in which it appears. In that light, what would have been very instructive would have been a discussion of a few cases of incorrect divinations, including reflection on what was wrong with the initial prognosis and how the actual outcome could be found in the meanings of the symbols.

Chapter 7 is “Chuan 傳: The Hidden Immortal Lineage”. In this chapter we are introduced to the various lines of teaching of which Master Wu is part. These include a number of different *Daoist* lineages, a *Yijing* lineage, and a *Taiji Quan* lineage. The names of the masters on these trees are introduced as chanting exercises. Traditionally, there is a strong oral component to all Chinese learning, material that is not written down, but passed on directly from Master to student, and chanting forms part of the method of ensuring that the information is remembered correctly. In addition, Wu discusses the history of some of the names on the lists, in particular the history of his own teacher Yang Yongji 楊永積.

The final chapter is “Yao 要: The Essence of the Prediction”. Here the relationship between having a formal model, or method, and working without a model is explored. Wu makes the connection between the practice of *Yijing* predication and the martial arts. The movements of a great martial artist appear fluid and formless and yet are rooted and effective. However, to have any chance of getting to that stage a student must put in a lot of work on the repetitive practice of forms, integrating the movements into the body's natural vocabulary. This is the nature of *Gongfu* 功夫, the time and effort that needs to be put into any art to achieve the natural and effortless application of a master. The same is true for becoming an effective exponent of the *Yijing*.

Overall, the book gives a very detailed presentation of an intuitive divination technique. Wu says that this is only 5% of his knowledge of *Yijing* prediction and perhaps we can look forward to further volumes exploring the remaining 95%.

### ***The Rest of the Book***

The remainder of the book consists of a brief Afterword, an Appendix, an About the Author section, a Glossary and an Index.

The afterword, titled “Life is the Treasure”, wraps things up, telling the brief story of the writing of the book and setting the scene for the appendix. This is titled “A Miracle Story of Inner Cultivation”, and is written by Cheryl Sly, one of Master Wu's students. This is a personal description of how the student successfully dealt with a benign pituitary tumour using Master Wu's *Qigong* teaching. Ms Sly is sufficiently convinced of the causal efficacy of these techniques in her recovery and I am happy to take her at her word.

I find I must make a complaint about the Glossary. There are no Chinese characters included here and I feel, after their extensive use in the main text, that this is a real oversight. In order to find the Chinese characters for a glossary entry, you have to go to the index, look up the item from the glossary and then find where in the main text that item appears with the characters. This makes it significantly less useful than it could be, particularly as there is at least one entry in the glossary that

does not appear in the index. If there is a second edition ever published for this book, then I would strongly suggest including the Chinese characters in the glossary.

### *The Qigong Exercises*

As a long term practitioner and teacher of traditional *Taiji Quan* 太極拳 with a strong interest in the philosophical and metaphysical connections between the physical art and the symbolic language of the *Yijing* 易經 I was extremely interested in seeing the inclusion of *Qigong* 氣功 exercises for each *gua*. However, for me this is the most disappointing aspect of the book.

Firstly, there is no attempt to connect the energetic nature of the exercise to the energy of the *gua* that it is associated with. Is the association merely conventional, like using the *gua* to count? Emerging from my own practice, I have some strong feelings and ideas about how particular exercises can connect with the symbolic energies of the *gua* and I was hoping for some in depth exploration of this from an author who is well versed in both. Perhaps these are aspects that would be brought out in personal study with Master Wu but, given the nature of the book as a whole, I feel something more should have been said here.

Secondly, I think there is a serious misrepresentation of the internal dynamics of one of the exercises that Wu presents. The first exercise is a standing posture that I would call *Wuji Zhan* 無極站. This certainly is the place to start, although I associate it with the trigram *Kun* 坤 ☷ rather than *Qian* 乾 ☰, as Wu does. However, that is not my real complaint. As part of the description of the visualization for the exercise Wu says “feel your body split from your waist” – no! This will cultivate completely the wrong internal dynamic around the *dan tian* 丹田. Yes, it is the case that the lower body roots into the ground, this is *pan jin* 盤勁, rooting energy; and yes, the upper body should feel as if suspended from above, this is *ding jin* 頂勁, top energy. But this must not result in the body feeling “split” – quite the opposite, the whole body should feel connected and integrated through the *dan tian*. I can only hope that this is really just linguistic issue.

Finally, it would have been useful at the end to bring all the exercises together in a single sequence. This would have only added a few pages to the book, but would greatly help appreciate the flow through the movements.

### Conclusions

Although I have some serious reservations around the description of one of the *Qigong* exercises and a general disappointment about the lack of integration of this material into the rest of the book, overall I have to say that this is a very interesting work containing a lot of useful information. In particular, the use of Chinese throughout and the inclusion of footnotes greatly adds to the worth of the book as a object of study for the serious student of the *Yijing*.

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