

# THE CONFUCIAN CLASSICS: THE *YI JING*, OR *BOOK OF CHANGES*

There is no doubt that the *Yi jing* (sometimes called the *Zhou yi*, or just the *Yi*) is the product of a long tradition of divination lore; there is doubt about most everything else.

We have seen that the Shang Dynasty royal house, which was overthrown in 1045 B.C., relied heavily on divination practices to reinforce systems of ritual practice, and to some degree also to reach decisions concerning war, hunting, illness, etc. Typically, divination was done by putting hot pokers to ox bones and tortoise shells, and then reading the resulting cracks. The *Yi*'s system of divination relies on the use of milfoil stalks, a kind of jointed grass. These were "thrown" in various sequences to determine numerical results, and these allowed the diviner to construct a "hexagram" (a term explained below).

If the Shang practiced milfoil divination, it would not be surprising that we would not know about it. We know about other types of divination because they were done on bones and we dug up the bones. It is harder to dig up and identify three thousand year old stalks of grass. The Chinese, in any event, were convinced from the earliest times of which we have record that the *Yi* and its milfoil-generated hexagrams were exceedingly ancient.

The *Yi* is a layered text: it integrates numerous easily distinguished strata, each of which is likely the creation of a different author. There are the hexagrams themselves, the names of the hexagrams, the words immediately appended after the names, and then a set of commentaries on the hexagram as a whole.

What is a hexagram?

A hexagram consists of six (thus *hexa-*) lines, arranged one upon another to form a single symbolic written unit (*-gram*). The lines may be solid or broken. If the milfoil casting yields an "odd" numerical result, the line is solid; if "even," broken. The only actual numbers which milfoil casting can yield are 6, 7, 8, and 9. If the number is 6 or 9, the line is a "moving" or "active" line, and worth divining further about.

Here are some hexagrams: 

|       |     |       |
|-------|-----|-------|
| _____ | — — | _____ |
| _____ | — — | — —   |
| _____ | — — | — —   |
| _____ | — — | — —   |
| _____ | — — | _____ |
| _____ | — — | — —   |

There have been found, on a few ancient Shang and Zhou bronze vessels, tiny inscriptions which seem to record the casting of hexagrams at an early date. These inscriptions are no more than "stacked numbers" in sets of six, like this:

8  
9  
7  
8  
6  
7

If we conclude from this that people were generating hexagrams to do divination in the second millennium B.C., at last we have an ancestry for the *Yi*, but we do not presently have other supporting evidence.

Each of the remaining strata of the book generates a different level of unanswerable (but frequently answered) questions. For example, all the hexagrams have names: who gave them names, and do the names have anything to do with the original meaning of the various hexagrams? (It is doubtful.) Each of the hexagrams has a description of its basic meaning. Is it accurate? (Who knows!) Commentaries in the *Yi* as it now exists clearly state that the 64 hexagrams (which represent all possible combinations of six lines either solid or broken [ $2^6$ ]) were originally meant to be an exhaustive symbolic account of the universe. Were they? (Perhaps not.) Solid lines are supposed to represent the force of yang, broken lines yin. Do they? This is certainly fundamental to *all* interpretations of the *Yi*, but was that a part of the original hexagrams--*yin* and *yang* seem to have been new concepts in the fourth century B.C., so again, perhaps not.

Still, even if we cannot decisively answer questions about the *Yi*'s origins, we can know a great deal about the way it was used in Classical times and during the Han. The *Zuo-zhuan* gives many instances of divination by the *Yi*, and the historical texts discuss many interpretive schemes that were applied during the Han (such as Jing Fang's, briefly described earlier). In addition, we have Han Dynasty commentaries to the *Yi jing* and even more important, a number of the later strata of the *Yi* are very likely Han period additions.

The Han understanding of the *Yi jing* probably did not differ qualitatively from the modern view of the structural qualities of the text. That is, the Han masters saw in the text the same strata that we see today, and perhaps in the same arrangement. Let's survey them.

Most basic are the hexagrams. By the Han, these had come to be conceived as composed of two sets of three lines, or two "trigrams," the bottom half preceding the top. Altogether there were eight trigrams ( $2^3$ ) which were believed to represent eight primordial forces of nature:

|                   |             |             |                 |             |              |                |                    |
|-------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------|
| — — —             | — — —       | — — —       | — — —           | — — —       | — — —        | — — —          | — — —              |
| — — —             | — — —       | — — —       | — — —           | — — —       | — — —        | — — —          | — — —              |
| — — —             | — — —       | — — —       | — — —           | — — —       | — — —        | — — —          | — — —              |
| <b>creativity</b> | <b>wind</b> | <b>fire</b> | <b>mountain</b> | <b>lake</b> | <b>water</b> | <b>thunder</b> | <b>receptivity</b> |

Later editions of the *Yi* generally print the hexagram with a notation of the component trigrams directly below. The trigrams and their symbolic correlations clearly influence the content of many of the commentary levels. Also, the eight hexagrams that are composed of two identical trigrams bear that trigram name, and the contents of the divinations for that hexagram came to be associated with the meanings of the corresponding trigram, as it appeared in other hexagrams.

Each hexagram and its name are followed by an unprefaced string of isolated characters or phrases. These are the principal divination of the hexagram considered as a whole. These phrases are followed by an independently generated commentary called the *Judgment*. The *Judgment* generally quotes from and explains the principal divination text.

Following the divination and commentary on the hexagram as a whole, there are a set of divinations that apply to each line, starting from the bottom (“Initial”) line and proceeding upwards. These divinations were relevant only if, in the process of generating the hexagram, a 6 (for *yin*) or a 9 (for *yang*) was encountered. Those lines were considered to be “moving,” and so changing into their opposites. It was necessary to consult the divination for that line. (It would also be appropriate to consult the divinations for the hexagram and corresponding line that would be generated if the line had “changed” into its opposite. This would be the first step in an exhaustive process, that would also invert the hexagram, turn it into its polar opposite, and extract mediate trigrams in order to make a full divination. We will not explore these complexities, but we will mention their rationale below.)

Another level of commentary usually integrated into the text is called the *Image* commentary. It is structured as a commentary on both the hexagram (in all cases except the first two of these, this portion analyzes the hexagram as a combination of trigrams) and on the individual lines. The *Image* commentary is generally distributed through each hexagram, the “Greater” portion (on the entire hexagram) appears after the *Judgment*; the “Lesser” line-by-line comments are located after each individual line divination.

These are the commentaries that appear below in translations of three hexagram texts. Traditions concerning their authorship were already current during the Han, and the array of authors was a sagely group indeed (specific attributions vary). The hexagrams themselves were said to have been the creation of the sage ruler Fu Xi, who preceded the Yellow Emperor by many generations, and who invented writing. The divinations were ascribed to King Wen of the Zhou, and the *Image* commentary to Confucius, along with a number of the other commentary sections that we will not explore here (sometimes, the Duke of Zhou is given credit for the line divinations and/or the *Image* commentary, and Confucius becomes the author of the *Judgment*).

There is a great deal about the structure of *Yi* interpretation that is incoherent, but there are some basic coherent aspects that we can summarize. The *Yi* is intended to give the reader or user a portrait of a spectrum of ceaselessly emergent human situations, symbolized through the images of nature. Each of the 64 hexagrams represents one paradigmatic type of situation, or array of phenomena. Flexibly interpreted, they are conceived as exhausting all aspects of human life – they are the “times” that may constrain us as we act. Each of the six lines

represents a possible position that one may occupy within a situational paradigm. The bottom line represents the position of least prestige or influence, and the top the greatest. The six positions break into two sets of three: lower, balanced middle, and upper. The balanced middle position of the lower trigram (the second line) symbolized a position comparable to that of a minister at court; the mid-position of the upper trigram is the ruler position. The interactions between positions (complementary, antagonistic, proximate, and distant) are a key factor in divination.

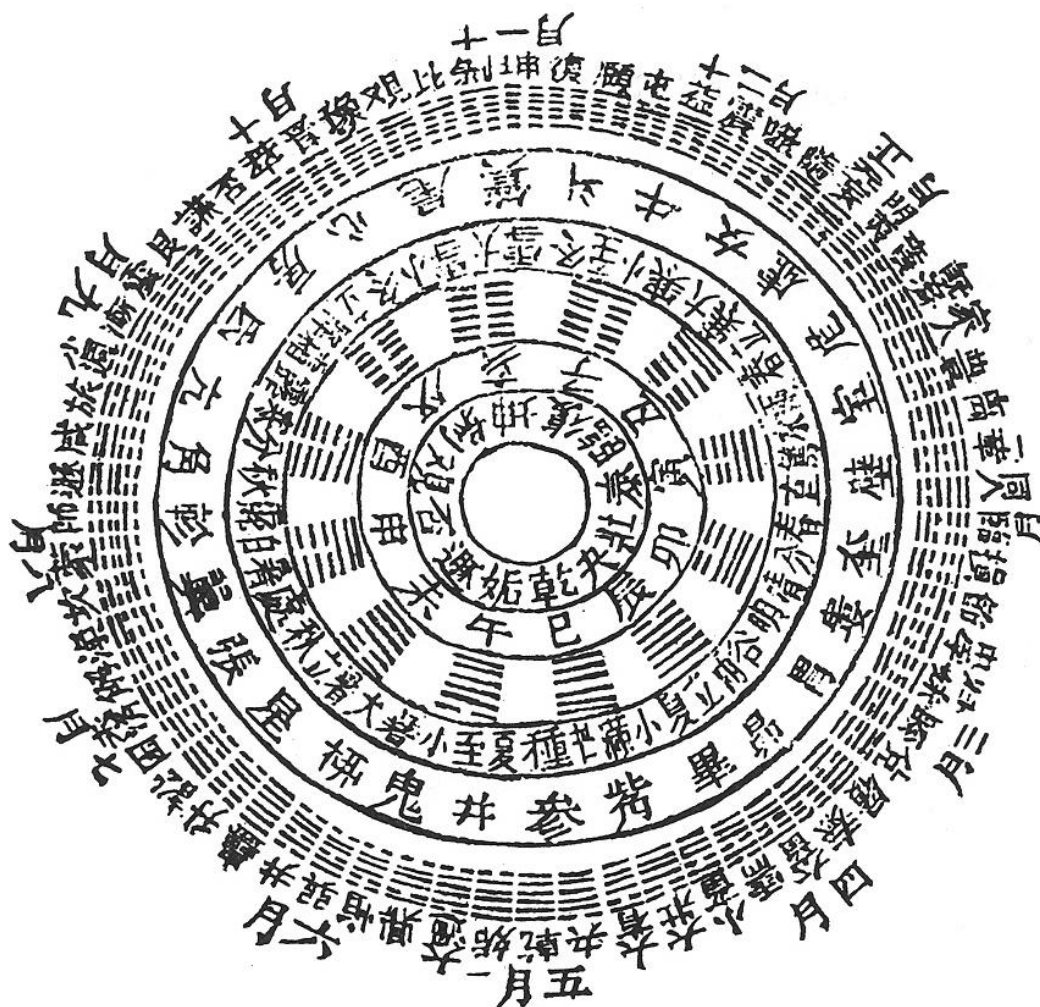
If the hexagrams are paradigm situations and the lines positions within them, then the *Yi* offers the diviner 384 possible perspectives through which to look at his or her own life situation. When one encounters or contemplates any hexagram/line, one is expected to ponder how one's current situation is expressed through the symbol of the hexagram, and how one's action alternatives may be understood through the divinatory symbols of the appropriate line.

Moreover, the *Yi* is a book of *change*. Situations and positions are not static, they are in a dynamic flow. The compilers of the *Yi* were believed to have created a moving map of the way in which situational arrays emerge from one another with certain regularities. Thus the fact that two hexagrams are related through an operation of inversion or that a line change will lead you from one particular hexagram-position to the same position in a different particular hexagram is not accidental. The *Yi* was believed to express regularities of the dynamics of human relational contexts. To understand the full implications of one's action choices, one must pursue the divination further and further into the future, through subsequent hexagrams and lines, each multiplying the alternative possible outcomes.

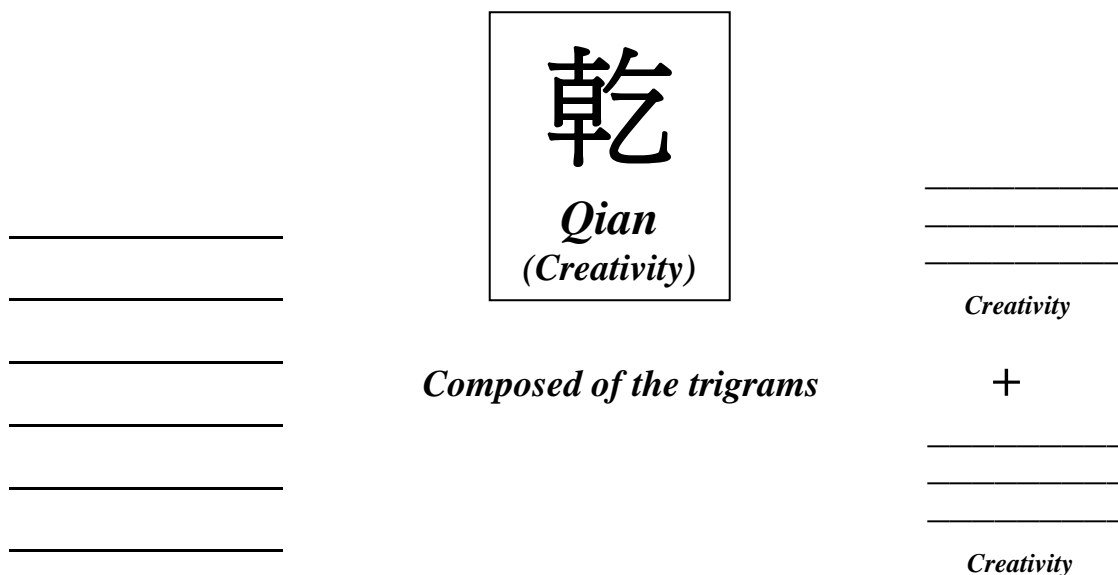
The *Yi jing* was created as a manual for diviners: it was employed that way in the Han and diviners use it to this day. But there also developed a school of *Yi* interpretation that approached the text as a coherent statement, and believed that the text's purpose was not to be used, but rather to be studied and mastered. Confucius is reported as having said, "The *jun-zi* does not divine," and proponents of this position cite this as evidence for their viewpoint (though whether Confucius was referring to the *Yi* is not clear). This perspective tells us that the *jun-zi* who has, through patient study, mastered the entire system of the *Yi*, could thenceforward look upon the world of ordinary life through the lens of the *Yi*'s situational archetypes. (A very similar understanding informed the study of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*.)

Regardless of whether a person belonged to the "divining school" or the "study school," everyone who dealt with the text agreed that it could not be used fruitfully without training. Nothing could be more dangerous than to allow people to interpret the oracular and obscure divinations of the *Yi* an undisciplined manner (the text was always stored on shelves above the reach of children under 12). Just as prescription requirements keep your doctor supplied with necessities such as golf clubs, this understanding of the powerful possibilities for misuse of the *Yi* kept centuries of experts, both Confucians and Daoists, well supplied with basics such as liquor.

On the following pages you will find a translation of the basic components of divination and commentary for the first two or the hexagrams: *Qian* (Creativity; the force of unalloyed yang) and *Kun* (Receptivity; the force of unalloyed yin). A third hexagram, *Meng* (Darkness, the fourth in the traditional sequence of 64), is also translated to give you an example of a more typical portion of the *Yi* text.



The diagram above correlates the 64 hexagrams with the 12 months of the year, the 28 lunar lodges, the 24 seasonal intervals, and the 12 earthly branches.



**Creativity:** Primal; penetrating; beneficial; steadfast.

The *Judgment* commentary says: How great the primal quality of Creativity! The things of the world find their sources therein, and it forms the bonds of Heaven. The clouds proceed and the rain is spread; each type of thing flows into its form. The great brilliance shines eternal, the six positions each take their place at the proper time, and so at the proper time one mounts these six dragons to ride the heavens.

The Dao of Creativity is change and transformation, each according to its proper nature and destiny; embracing the great harmony it is in this way beneficial to be steadfast. When it rises foremost above the multitude of things, the states are all at peace.

The *Greater Image* commentary says: The action of Heaven is vigor; the *jun-zi* unceasingly strengthens himself thereby.

**Initial Nine:** A submerged dragon. Do not act.

*Lesser Image:* “A submerged dragon. Do not act.” The yang is below.

**Nine in Second Position:** There appears a dragon in the field. It will be beneficial to meet the great man.

*Lesser Image:* “There appears a dragon in the field.” His grace and virtue have been widely spread.

**Nine in Third Position:** The *jun-zi* is filled with creative attention the entire day and alert in the evening. There is danger. No blame.

*Lesser Image:* “Creative attention the entire day.” Pacing the Dao.

**Nine in the Fourth Position:** Perhaps leaping from the abyss. No blame.

*Lesser Image:* “Perhaps leaping from the abyss.” Advancing will bring no blame.

**Nine in the Fifth Position:** A flying dragon in the heavens. It will be beneficial to meet the great man.

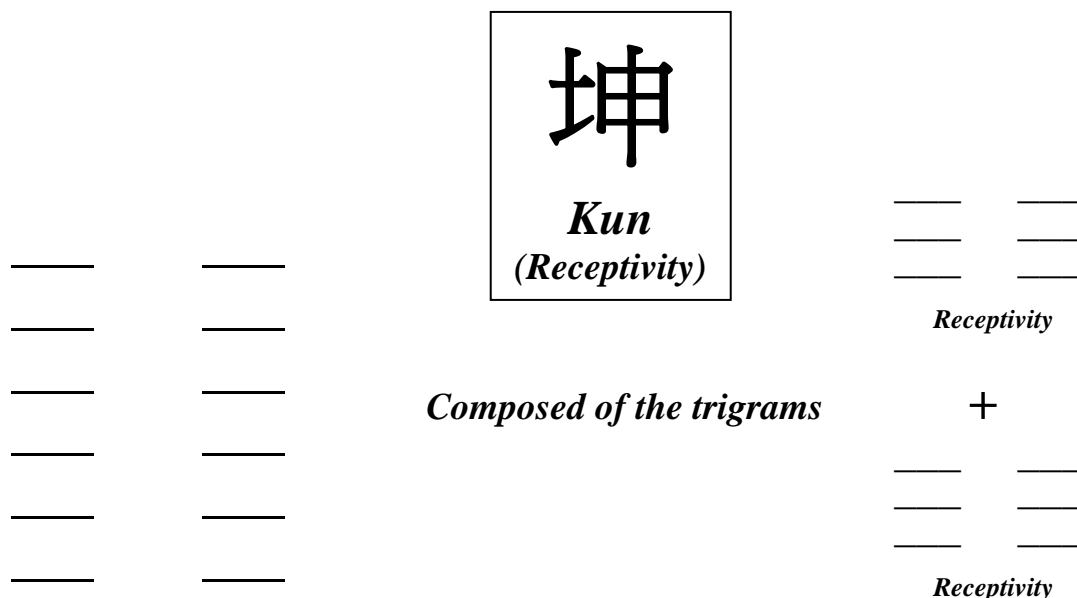
*Lesser Image:* “A flying dragon in the heavens.” The great man has arisen.

**Topmost Nine:** A dragon, neck stretched too high. There will be regret.

*Lesser Image:* “A dragon, neck stretched too high. There will be regret.” Fullness cannot last.

**Action by Nine:** A herd of dragons has no head.

*Lesser Image:* Action by Nine: The virtue of Heaven is never being head.



**Receptivity:** Primal; penetrating; beneficial; the steadfastness of the mare. The *jun-zi* undertakes action; he is first lost and later gains his end. He takes benefit as foremost. West and south he gains his friend; east and north he loses his friend. To be at ease with steadfastness is auspicious.

The *Judgment* says: Ultimate is the primal quality of Receptivity. The things of the world find their sources therein, and it receives Heaven compliantly. Receptivity is deep and bears all things. Its grace is embracing without limits. It holds vastness and its brilliance is great. All types of things penetrate through.

- “The mare” is of the category of earth; it travels the earth without limits. It is flexible in its compliance, and in this way benefits through steadfastness.
- “The *jun-zi* undertakes action; he is first lost”: straying from the Dao; later he is compliant and gains the eternal.
- “West and south he gains his friend”: he travels with his type. “East and north he loses his friend”: yet in the end he will have blessings.
- The auspiciousness of “at ease with steadfastness”: responding to the earth without limits.

The *Greater Image* says: The disposition of earth is Receptivity. The *jun-zi* thereby deepens his virtue and bears things.

**Initial Six:** Treading frost; the solid ice will come.

*Lesser Image:* “Treading frost.” The yin is first congealing. Following forward on this Dao, reaching the solid ice.

**Six in the Second Position:** Straight; square; great; without practice, nothing without benefit.

*Lesser Image:* The motion of Six in the Second Position is straight by means of the square. “Without practice, nothing without benefit”: the Tao of the earth is brilliant.

**Six in the Third Position:** Withholding the emblem; able to be steadfast. Perhaps following after the king’s affairs. Without completion yet with an end.

*Lesser Image:* “Withholding the emblem; able to be steadfast.” Emerging with timeliness. “Perhaps following after the king’s affairs.” Wisdom bright and great.

**Six in the Fourth Position:** Tie the sack. No blame; no praise.

*Lesser Image:* “Tie the sack. No blame.” Careful not to do harm.

**Six in the Fifth Position:** Yellow skirts. Primally auspicious.

*Lesser Image:* “Yellow skirts. Primally auspicious.” The pattern is within.

**Topmost Six:** Dragons war on the plains; their blood is black and yellow.

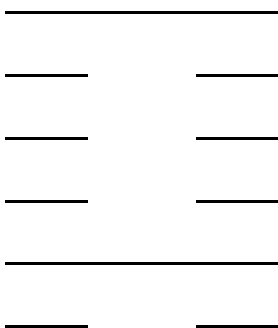
*Lesser Image:* “Dragons war on the plains.” Their Dao is exhausted.

**Action by Six:** Beneficial to be ever steadfast.

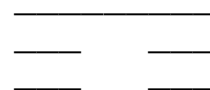
*Lesser Image:* Action by Six: “Beneficial to be ever steadfast.” End by means of greatness.



*Meng*  
(Darkness)

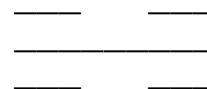


*Composed of the trigrams*



*Mountain*

+



*Water*

**Darkness:** Penetrating. It is not I who seeks out darkened (*meng*) youth; it is darkened youth that seeks out me. The answer is given at first divination. Repetition is impertinence; the impertinent receive no answer. Beneficial; steadfast.

The *Judgment* says: In darkness there is precipitous danger below the mountain. To halt because of it is to be darkened.

- “Darkness: Penetrating.” Acting with penetration means the time is right.
- “It is not I who seeks out darkened youth; it is darkened youth that seeks out me.” Intentions are mutually responding.
- “The answer is given at first divination.” The hard is at the center.
- “Repetition is impertinence; the impertinent receive no answer.” This is the impertinence of the darkened. Out of darkness to nurture rectitude, such is the achievement of the sage.

The *Greater Image* says: A spring issues forth beneath the mountain: the hexagram Darkness. My means of this, the *jun-zi* fosters virtue through resolute action.

**Initial Six:** Issuing forth from darkness. Beneficial to punish people by means of this; to gain freedom from fetters by means of this. If you advance by means of this, there will be regret.

*Lesser Image:* “Beneficial to punish people by means of this; to gain freedom from fetters by means of this.” Thereby rectify law.

**Nine in the Second Position:** Embracing darkness. Auspicious. Taking a wife will be auspicious. The child may marry.

*Lesser Image:* “The child may marry.” The hard and the soft meet.

**Six in the Third Position:** Do not wed a woman by means of this. Seeing a man of gold, to have no stature, there will be no benefit.

*Lesser Image:* “Do not wed a woman by means of this.” Conduct uncompliant.

**Six in the Fourth Position:** Hemmed in by darkness. Regret.

*Lesser Image:* The “regret” of “hemmed in by darkness.” Alone distant from what is full.

**Six in the Fifth Position:** Darkened youth. Auspicious.

*Lesser Image:* The “auspiciousness” of “darkened youth.” Compliance with acquiescence.

**Topmost Nine:** Striking darkness. It is not beneficial to act as a bandit; it is beneficial to ward off bandits.

*Lesser Image:* “It is beneficial to ward off bandits” by means of this. Those above and below are compliant.