



Recovering the Lost Meaning of the *Yijing* **BA GUA**

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Introduction

¹

Toward the end of the Warring States period and the beginning of the Former Han dynasty (3rd-2nd century BCE), ten commentaries were appended to the *Zhouyi* to form the *Yijing* as we now know it. The most important of these "wings" was the *Xici zhuan*, a theoretical treatise that established the *Yijing* once and for all as philosophy and diminished its role forever as a religious artifact. Another wing, the *Shuogua zhuan*, similar to the *Xici* in philosophical depth, also attempted to explain the significance of the names of the trigrams and hexagrams.

² Trigram names and their emblems are as follows: *qian* "heaven," *kun* "earth," *zhen* "thunder," *dui* "lake," *xun* "wood/wind," *li* "fire," and *kan* "water"

³ The five phases (or elements) in the mutual production order are as follows: earth, metal, water, wood, and fire.

Speculations on the origin of the *bagua* line graphs fall into three categories. In the *Xici (Great Commentary)* two interpretations are given: either the trigrams appeared miraculously on the back of a mythical creature emerging from a river, or they were created by the legendary emperor, Fuxi, based upon his observation of the world. But the *Shuogua (Trigram Explanation)* chapter of the *Ten Wings*¹ comes closest to the truth when it claims the trigrams developed in the practice of divination, for new research has determined that the solid and broken lines originated from bone and bronze records of the odd and even numbers of numerology.

While much effort has gone into seeking the origin of the line graphs, surprisingly little work has been done on the origin of the trigram names. The *Shuogua* commentary codified for posterity the emblematic images of the trigrams,² and since then scholars have ignored the religious significance of the names. I suspect that these emblems were appended to the trigram names during the middle of the Zhou dynasty as a result of the nascent development of *wuxing* "five phase" theories of the cosmos.³ Furthermore, it is my contention that the trigram names preserve a great deal of information regarding the ancient Chinese world view. And that view is an ominous one.

The Textual Record

The greatest aid to establishing the original meaning for trigram names will be the oldest layers of the *Yijing*--the judgment texts (*guaci*) and line texts (*yaoci*). Eight hexagrams appearing in the *Yijing* are doubles of the trigrams in question, and the text of these hexagrams should preserve some of the original meaning of the trigram names. Excerpts from the eight hexagram texts corresponding to the eight trigram names are as follows (translations of *gua* names appearing in the texts are in green):



Hexagram 51. ZHEN Earthquake

When the tremor comes "creak-creak," afterwards there is laughter and talking "he-he." The quake⁴ alarmed hundreds of villages. Not a ladle was spilled of sacrificial wine. [judgment text]



Hexagram 57. XUN Kneel

He knelt⁵ at the bed, and used a combination of diviners and sorcerors. Auspicious. No misfortune. [line 2]



Hexagram 30. LI Bird of Omen

⁴ *Zhen* can mean "thunder" or "tremor," depending on context (in modern Chinese, "earthquake" is *dizhen*, "earth thunder"). A clap of thunder can only be heard for a few miles, not hundreds, so this text probably describes an earthquake rather than a thunderstorm.

⁵ In ancient China people slept on mats, and beds were only used for convalescence. In this text a healing ceremony is being conducted. The character *xun* depicts two people kneeling, perhaps before an altar. By extension it means "humble, yielding."

⁶ The character *li* is composed of the "bird" classifier (on the right) and a "demon" on the left, meaning an ominous bird--perhaps an owl. Some scholars believe it is an eclipse that is being described here.

The Li-bird⁶ at sunset. Unless you beat an earthen pot and sing, your elders' sighs will be substantial. Ominous. [line 3]

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Kun is problematic because in the *Zhouyi* the character occurs only as the name of a hexagram. We are thus limited to the ideograph itself without further context. It is composed of the "earth" classifier and another component that can mean "spirit" or "basket."



Hexagram 2. KUN Earth⁷

[No instance of the word *kun* occurs in the judgment or line texts]

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In both the *Shuowen* (a Han dynasty dictionary) and the *Shuogua* commentary, the character *dui* is defined as *shuo*, "to explain" or "to persuade." From the full text of hexagram 58, *dui* has the extended meaning of "mediation."



Hexagram 58. DUI Mediate⁸

Peace talks. Auspicious. [line 1]
Deliberation and discussion. No peace as yet. Great urgency. There will be joy. [line 4]

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Line 3 is the only line text of hexagram 1 that appears not to describe the seasonal migration of the Cerulean Dragon across the southern sky. But in fact the Confucian "gentleman" (deleted here) has crept into the text from the commentary tradition (by which time the astronomical significance of the dragon had been forgotten), and this line does indeed describe the dragon. The character *qian* is composed of "dawn" and "emerge" and originally meant "to ascend." All day long the dragon has been rising in the heavens, but at dusk when it is finally visible, it still is hindered from full flight. The rising dragon in the southeastern sky was the harbinger of spring, and full flight in the south was the height of summer. The "rising" of the dragon was what concerned the ancient diviners--the growth of yang energy to full strength. Eventually, to both the trigram and the hexagram of total yang, they appended the name, "rising in the heavens," and by extension, "Heaven."



Hexagram 1. QIAN Heaven⁹

All day rising in the heavens; at night obstructed. [excerpt from line 3]



Hexagram 29. KAN Pit

Coming to the pit, the pit was steep and deep. Enter the pitfall. Do not act. [line 3]

Flasks of wine, tureens in twos of earthenware, presented together following the lead. No misfortune in the end. [line 4]

The pit is not full, but the Earth Spirit is placated. No misfortune. [line 5]

Hexagram 52. GEN Oppose¹⁰

Injure the back, and not get the body. Walk in the yard, and not see the man. No misfortune. [judgment text]

Injure the calves, and not gain submission. His heart is unsatisfied. [line 2]

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The character *gen* is the mirror image of the pictograph *jian*, "to look at," and means "to turn the back on" or "to turn against." The *Shuowen* dictionary defines *gen* as "to oppose, disobey." By extension it means "to malign, injure."

Recovered Meanings

Under closer scrutiny the recovered meanings derived above can be organized in the following manner.

- Three of the *bagua* images are ominous situations encountered by the people in their lives. (1) An earthquake occurs, but no ritual wine is lost. (2) An ominous bird appears, but the villagers ensure the safety of their elders by engaging in ritual drumming. (3) At a pitfall, a ritual of propitiation pacifies an earth spirit. In each case after the sighting of an omen a ceremony is held to ward off the possibility of misfortune.
- Three of the *bagua* images are the seemingly unrelated human actions of kneeling (yielding), injuring (opposing), and persuading (mediating). However, if visualized as actors rather than actions, these images become the important

human archetypes of the **Yielder**, the **Resister**, and between them, the **Mediator**.

- The last two images, **Heaven** and **Earth**, are philosophical abstractions in the *Ten Wings*. But in hexagram 1 the Cerulean Dragon¹¹ ascending the summer sky is the concrete image of pure *yang* energy. In the period preceding the tradition that spawned the *Yijing*, it is likely that the Dragon--if not Heaven itself-- was worshipped. Unfortunately, in hexagram 2 there is no equivalent image of of the pure *yin* element, although we may speculate that *kun* represents the altar of the Earth God or a clod of that sacred earth.

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For an illustration of *Cang Long*, the Cerulean Dragon, see my essay, "[The Cosmological Origins of Fengshui](#)."

Viewed in their totality, these three categories of images paint a very interesting picture of ancient Chinese religious beliefs.

Quakes occur on the **Earth**, and the people encounter **Pitfalls** there. In the **Heavens** appear **Birds of Omen**. These phenomena represent divine communication from gods to humans. Between the gods and humans stands the shaman,¹² or **Mediator**. Not only do the shamans communicate between heaven and earth, but they also mediate between the **Yielders**--those who fear the gods, and the **Resisters**--the arrogant or ignorant ones who do not.

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In the *Shuogua* commentary is an essay that lists for each trigram as many as twenty-five different associations with various animals, articles, and phenomena. For the trigram, *dui*, which I have translated "the mediator," the *Shuogua* gives the association, "the shaman."



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Here is a case in point. The first character in the passage above is *Di*, or *Deus*. The

The Later Heaven Narrative

The only missing item from the scenario presented above is the actual appearance of the gods. There is one important text from the *bagua* tradition that preserves exactly that.

On the left is the passage from the *Shuogua zhuan* on which is based the configuration of trigrams known as the *houtian*, or Later Heaven sequence. To most readers of the *Shuogua* the content of the passage was incidental to the order of the trigrams as they appeared in the narrative. This sequence presumably added the dimension of time (from "emergence" to "completion") to the space of heaven and earth and the other six elemental emblems of the cosmos. While it is certainly possible that the sequence of *bagua* in this passage has temporal or other significance, what is missing here or elsewhere is

commentary interprets *di* as *wanwu*, the "myriad things," or the phenomenal world. The traditional understanding of the passage is as follows:

The myriad things emerge in Zhen,
 Are brought to completion in Xun,
 Are made manifest in Li,
 Serve one another in Kun,
 Rejoice in Dui,
 Struggle in Qian,
 Toil in Kan,
 And are accomplished in Gen.

¹⁴ While Di is clearly not the Hebrew God, in this passage, contrary to most of the ancient Chinese record, Di is a personal God that imposes His will on the world.

¹⁵ The character *zhan*, usually meaning "war," as used here and in other ancient texts (such as the *Book of Odes*), is a borrowing for a homophone meaning "to tremble."

¹⁶ The pit may also represent the grave.

any connection between the sequence as expressed and the actual meanings of the trigrams.

Richard Wilhelm, the German translator of the *Yijing*, believed it highly probable that this passage represented a cryptic saying of great antiquity. I concur. Immediately following the passage in the *Shuogua* is an interpretative commentary, which itself attests to the antiquity of the original passage and suggests that the meaning was not self-evident and the authors themselves had already forgotten the reasoning behind the ostensible sequence. But the commentary does not succeed in elucidating the sequence, because the original passage was religious in meaning, while the *Shuogua* sought to find ontological and cosmological import.¹³

The subject is Di, or *Deus* (God),¹⁴ and the passage appears to be some kind of liturgy. Incorporating the recovered meanings of the *bagua*, the *houtian* passage reads as follows:

Deus, manifest in quake and thunder,
 Receives those who kneel to Him,
 Reveals Himself as a bird of omen,
 Is offered service on Earth,
 Speaks words to the shaman,
 Is feared in Heaven,¹⁵
 Rewards those suffering in the pit,
 And fulfills his words to the doubters.

The liturgy opens with a testimony to the power of *Deus* whose might can shake the world. Each sentence then describes in narrative fashion the means by which the deity interacts with humans. He communicates His power indirectly through ominous signs, and directly to the shaman who interprets the omens and oracles. Those who tremble at the flight of the Dragon and kneel to *Deus* are rewarded when they suffer the pitfalls of mortality.¹⁶ Those who oppose Him see His oracles fulfilled.

These oracles in turn formed the basis of the oral tradition that was eventually recorded as the divinatory text of the *Yijing*.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in the foregoing analysis that enough of the ancient significance of the trigram names can still be recovered to make meaningful suppositions about them. So what is the value of these speculations?

The *Houtian* Sequence

XUN ☱ 4	LI ☲ 9	KUN ☷ 2
ZHEN ☵ 3	5	DUI ☱ 7
GEN ☶ 8	KAN ☵ 1	QUAN ☱ 6

with *Luoshu* Numbers

My initial purpose in much of my sinological research is to seek the origins of specific modes of thought, and this essay is no exception. I am convinced that the art of Fengshui, which is based to a large extent on the *houtian* sequence of trigrams, is much older than the cosmological theories of the late Zhou and early Han dynasties. If the text that established the *houtian* sequence of *bagua* can be shown to have primitive origins, it increases the possibility that Fengshui itself is equally ancient.

Numerology is one of the most ancient of the divinatory arts, and it is my contention that the manipulation of numbers alone is all that is needed to produce Fengshui readings as sophisticated as those that make use of cosmological correlations. If it can be shown that such constructs as the *houtian bagua* and the *luoshu*, or magic square of three, are genuinely ancient, then it will be equally plausible that Fengshui existed before the advent of *wuxing*, or five phase, theories of the cosmos.

This essay is excerpted from my article of the same name published by Steve Moore, ed., *The Oracle*, vol. 2, no. 9, pp. 20-27.

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