

# Intro to the Yí Jíng

## Part 3

### Background & History

By  
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# One of the World's Oldest Books

- The Yi Jing is arguably the oldest of all Chinese books (along with the Book of Songs/Odes (詩經 Shī Jīng))
- As a written text it is traditionally attributed to 文王 Wén Wáng, **King Wen** around 1150 BCE.
- (modern scholarship suggests 8th to 10th century BCE, with 1045 as an oft cited date)
- It is considered to be the first/earliest and foremost of the “Five Classics” (originally six, the music classic was lost)
- attributed to 孔夫子, Kǒng Fū-zi, **Confucius**, circa 500 BCE & adopted by Han Wudi circa 100 BCE.

- Confucius himself, a paragon of decorum & virtuous behavior, near the end of his life, is reputed to have said “if I had another 50 years, I would devote them all to studying the Yi, and might thereby, avoid falling into error.”  
*Analects: VII.16/17*
- Si Ma Qian’s bio of Confucius in the 史籍 Shǐjì, Historical Records/Registry 47, claims he wore through the binding of his Yijing 3 times, he used it so much [Selections p.22]
- During my years of studying Chinese medicine, I consistently encountered references both historical and contemporary, from doctors to this effect:
- “If you *really* want to understand Chinese medicine,  
you *have to study* the Yi.”

- You might well ask (as I did) Why?  
It is certainly not a book about medicine.
- Its title tells us it is a book about change – sounds like philosophy or cosmology.
- I suppose there are many answers. For me the root of it is this:
- I think medicine is fundamentally about change.
- What we call disease is one kind of change
- Treatment is a stimulus to effect another type of change, which if “successful”, results in a “change for the better”.  
If not “no change”,  
or the worst case scenario a “change for the worse”. (iatrogenesis)

- Change is just Qi moving, which is *its* nature, and the way of the Dao.
- In fact, change is the most fundamental characteristic of the Dao.
- Health & disease stand in a kind of yin-yang relationship
- the Yi precedes the invention of these two terms, but is the prototype for yin-yang logic
- Hence many of those doctors I mentioned said:
  - *“if you want to understand yin-yang, study the Yi”*

- In the Yi-Jing, yin-yang are represented graphically as a divided and an undivided line and numerically as 2 & 3 (1 represents the Dao)
- 2 & 3 in turn stand for all even & odd numbers
- and together total 5, the number that came to symbolize change.
- One of the things about symbols (& numbers are symbols) is they are not tied to just one interpretation or meaning, but imply many meanings, thus their universality, especially true at a time when all inscription was deemed sacred.

- We see again that 1, 2, & 3 stand for principles by which we can come to understand the 10,000 things, i.e. the intricacy of manifestation.
- Thus, these two lines can represent heaven & earth, the sun & moon, light & dark, or health & disease.
- And 易學 Yì Xué (the study of the changes) = 醫學 Yī Xué (the study of medicine).

# The Yí-Jíng – What Is It?

- The Yi-Jing is an ancient Chinese book of wisdom
- Yi-Jing is usually translated as the Book of Change or Book of Changes
- The Yi-Jing was gathered into book form around 1100 BCE (modern scholarship suggests ~800 BCE)
- Prior to that it was an oracle with a several thousand year history of oral transmission
- among the sage–shamans of the Zhou people in northwestern China.



- The contents of the Yi-Jing were collected from the practice of divination.
  - It is a record of conversations with the spirit realm, the divine, or the cosmos itself.
  - Today, we usually think of it as a means of communicating with our “higher self” or a “collective unconscious”.
- 
- In contemporary use, besides being an excellent introduction to Eastern thought and wisdom,
  - it is one of the best personal growth tools that I know of.
  - It is a source of information, insight, and inspiration.

## Some 'myth'-information surrounds the Yí-Jíng

- It does Not 'tell our fortune' nor does it 'predict' the future,
  - rather it suggests tendencies based on present (and past) circumstances.
  - It is a **teacher** that leads us toward greater autonomy in our lives.
  - It neither creates dependence on it, nor ties one to a predetermined fate.
- 
- The Yi can enlighten us to many "truths", and can provide a myriad of insights,
  - but essentially it informs us about the very nature of reality, and the basic fact that it is constantly changing.
  - It thereby helps us reorient and adjust our attitudes and expectations.

# How Do We Use the Yí-Jíng? Consulting the Oracle

- Of course the Yi-Jing can be studied directly,
- but the usual technique employed, is to ask the Yi-Jing a question.
- As if to consult the Yi as an oracle, or as a venerated teacher, counselor, 'priest'.
- A metaphor that works for me is this tantamount to asking the universe 'what time it is'?
- The Yi-Jing responds with more profound information than a clock does,
- though it also uses numbers and symbols to communicate its message.
- In the divination/consulting process we enlist the aid of ritual, intention and chance,
- to connect us with the universal consciousness (Dao),
- whereupon, we receive a response in the form of a symbol called a **Hexagram**.

- The specific hexagram symbol is then interpreted
- to arrive at insights pertinent to our question.
- Parameters for interpretation are provided by traditional experience and commentaries.
- These commentaries were gathered together to create the text we now know as the Yi.
- Because we typically do the interpreting ourselves,
- the text is used as guidance, and the symbols serve as maps
- that lead us back to ourselves, and train our understanding and intuition.
- As we get wiser, we don't have to ask so many questions.

# Who Created the Yí-Jing

- Chinese tradition says the sages of ancient times created the Yi-Jing.
  - These sages observed the heavens above and the earth below
  - and translated nature's patterns into symbols so that people could understand them.
  - They used symbols, because they understood words were inadequate for the task.
- 
- These ancient sages were the magicians, priestesses, and shamans of their tribes.
  - They were seers and visionaries who later in history became diviners.
  - Their job was to peer into the unknown.
  - Their gift was an ability to go into the spirit realm and come back with information.
  - This process was usually very hard on the body.

- Over time they developed easier methods for communicating with deities.

- One such method, is the traditional way of consulting the Yi-Jing;

**“divining with stalks”**

- These symbols may have served as the prototype for China’s written language,
- and the wisdom held in/as an oral tradition for so long, was finally written down as a book.

# What Was Its Purpose? What Was It Used For?

- Consulting the oracle was the key for grappling with, and trying to understand, the very essence of the unknown, which is the phenomenon of change itself.
- Divination became the most important of ancient sciences and every leader employed multiple diviners.
- They used divination to decide things. Everything.
- especially questions about WHEN.
- When to do, or not do;
- when the time was “right” to start, or stop an activity.
- For in the sea of change, which is our reality,
- Timing is the essence of success, and even survival.

# The Yí-Jíng is a Book About *CHANGE*

- CHANGE is the most obvious and observable universal constant.
- CHANGE is the essence of the Dao.
- The Yi Jing is a book about Change and therefore TIME.
- Time is how we measure change.
- Without change, time stands still,
- everything is timeless.



It is about **Specific Times**:

1. A specific Time-period in ancient China  
(and the historical events, known to the people of that era)  
making it somewhat remote in both time & place
  - This helps explain some of its difficulty for modern westerners
  - the terseness of its (poetic) style,
  - the cryptic quality of its language,
  - and the obscurity of its references.
  - In the same way that 'Water-Gate' is an obvious reference for us,  
(as 20<sup>th</sup> century Americans),  
it might be an elusive reference to people a thousand, even a hundred  
years from now, not to mention from another culture.

2. It's also about **Universal Times** we all recognize,  
but may not fully understand.

- Times like Conflict, Resolution, Danger, Preparation,  
Separation and Reunion, Loss and Gain, Beginnings and Endings.
- Even Times of Peace, Prosperity and Joy
- as much as we want, and seek them,
- elude us because we don't understand The Nature of Change.
- One purpose of the Yi-Jing is to elucidate & clarify this complex subject.

# The Art of Timing

- To study the “Yi” is to study (& hopefully learn)  
**‘the Art of Timing’**
- which means to be coordinated with Time  
in harmony with the Times.
- To consciously coordinate ourselves (attitudes & behavior)  
with the cosmic flow of change (i.e. the Time-stream).

- We usually think and talk about coordination as a muscular/physical thing,
- ***but*** to be **in the right place**
  - **at the right time**
  - is a real & powerful thing.
- And its not just a matter of luck!
- It is a **skill** we can learn.
- This is the Eastern insight and gift from the ancient sages.
- This is what Confucius meant when he suggested we could ***learn to*** avoid falling into error.

- To be more “TIMELY” then, is to be more successful
  - in our endeavors, in our relationships, in every aspect of life
  - Life seems to “work” (better).
- 
- As we are more successful, we have the opportunity to help others.
  - To hoard or flaunt success, is the surest way to lose it
  - To share success, is the best way to foster it.
  - And that attitude, can Change the World.

- One of my Yi-Jing teachers defined success this way:
- **Success = Preparation + Opportunity**
- prep. = study & development (i.e. self-cultivation)
- Opportunity = time & space coordinating
- for the person who is prepared

# The Yí-Jíng Delineates Three Types of Change

- The Dao might be defined as the universal **constant**,
- yet paradoxically its primary characteristic is **change**.  
Everything is in **constant flux**.
- The Yi Jing is the Classic that teaches us about the nature of change.
- **It posits 3 types of change.**

## 1. **Polar Change** – the oscillation of opposites

- Derived from the observed daily phenomenon of change from light to dark & dark to light,
- the metamorphosis of one time into its opposite,
- like 2 sides of the same coin
- This is the change from yin to yang and yang back to yin.



## 2. Cyclic Change

the progression & evolution of time  
derived from the again obvious movement of the seasons  
and the “passing” of years.

- Nothing esoteric about these – but it is nonetheless profound.

### 3. “Random” Change – the unknown factors

- derived from universal Mystery
- the metaphysical aspect of time
- sometimes called change of fate
- using change is not an abandonment of self,
- but an Opening to the Unknown.
- This level is only accessible through “divination”
- The YI JING discusses all these changes in a code of picture/symbols called...HEXAGRAMS.

# Traditional 'Schools' of Yí Jīng Study

- The two basic classical approaches to Yi Jing studies since the Han dynasty:
- *and Their Major Proponents or Representatives*
- 義理 Yì Lǐ = the '**Meaning & Principle**' school
- **Yi** = right, just; moral      **Li** = structure, law, principle, doctrine, reason  
Zheng Xuan (127–200),      **Wang Bi** (226–249)
- 像數 Xiàng Shù = the '**Form & Number**' school
- **xiàng** = image, form      **shù** = number / **shǔ** = to count
- Yu Fan (164–233),      **Shao Yung** (1011–1077)

- school = pài 派 or shú 塾
- The great philosopher **Zhu Xi** (1130-1200) espoused an integration of the two schools and maintained that the four components: (理 lǐ) structure, (像 xiàng) images, (數 shù) numbers, and (辭 cí) words, could not, and should not be separated.

# from Oracle to Philosophical Text

- The Yi-Jing is basically a two-fold work:

## **1. AN ORACLE - for divination purposes**

- A. To communicate with the divine, i.e. Heaven
  - to discover & understand “The will of Heaven”
  - i.e. one’s destiny (mìng) 命
- B. **Dealing with difficulty & uncertainty**
  - How to live with the unknown.
  - The unknown is always larger than the known
  - it is never diminished, no matter how much is known.
  - We never know how much is unknown, therefore the unknown is infinite.

## 2. A BOOK of WISDOM and PHILOSOPHY

- A. **DAOISM** – which emphasizes NATURE, natural forces & processes.
- Nature is the model & standard of reference for Action (or non-action).
- These natural images comprise the oldest layers of the text (pre-moral).
  
- B. **CONFUCIANISM** – which emphasizes SOCIETY & human affairs.
- Establishes guidelines for “living together”.
- Codifies attitudes & behavior,  
the conduct appropriate to interactions between people  
(advent of ethics & morality)
- The family unit and norms form the basis of society and culture.

# GUIDE for LIVING

- The Yi Jing may be considered as a guide for living, par excellence.
- It describes attitudes and behaviors for effectively functioning in life.
- i.e. 'Strategies for Living' - Harmoniously – i.e. naturally.
- Harmony in our Relationship to:
  - 1. The Environment/Nature
  - 2. Other People/Society
  - 3. Ourselves (body-mind-spirit) self-cultivation

- Of the three, “self” is the variable we have the most control over and are most able to change.
- others can be influenced, but have to change themselves
- nature is the given (the definition of harmony & change)
- we have little power, and should have little desire, to change nature.
- Rather, It is nature we must attune to.



- The Yi-Jing serves as A BRIDGE - between the inner & the outer worlds.

- Kerson Huang (physicist at MIT, and I-Ching author) says:

***“as Science deals more effectively with the outer world,  
we paradoxically, need more help with the inner world.”***

- The Yi Jing provides exactly those inner guidelines we need.

# Dictionary Definitions of 易 Yì

- Yì has 3 distinct meanings: probably amalgamated from different words that sounded alike, or similarly in the ancient tongue.
  1. **EASY** (\*yig) scholars best guess at the ancient pronunciation
    - a. the easy way, to be at ease (this is the meaning most typical in the Odes / Shi Jing)
    - b. lenient
    - c. to clear land, cultivate fields (easier – compared to hunting & gathering or herding)
    - d. Easy also implies clear & lucid  
easy in the sense of natural  
easy to follow, simple to understand
  - Certainly easier than turtle shell, actually plastrons (plastromancy) and
  - cattle shoulder blades (scapulamancy) methods of divination.

2. A LIZARD (\*yik)

like a chameleon

2a. CHANGE/CHANGING/CHANGEABLE/EXCHANGE (\*yik)

all phenomena change, individuals certainly do not endure.

This is clearly the meaning intended by the Yi in Zhou-Yi or Yi Jing.

**Change/Exchange *in two senses:***

1. The configuration of lines is different in each of the 64 hexagrams, so all possible changes/configurations are represented.
2. The divination process produces lines that are 6 or 9 (vs. 7 & 8), which indicates they are ***changing*** from one polarity to the other (yin/yang exchange).

### 3. CONSTANT/CONSISTENT

This definition probably derives from the more philosophical period of the Da Zhuan)

- as in the rhythms of the sun & moon
- ever changing, but always constant
- cyclic change is enduring & therefore constant
- essence or principles do not change, but remain consistent

- A fourth use is as a place name: Yi,  
or 于易 Yu-Yi literally 'in Yi' (see H: 34.5 & 56.6)
- believed to have been an area in northeastern China
- L & L interpret yu-yi as 'grain ground'  
literally a place designated for drying grain

## *Other Chinese Words for Change*

- Like most languages, there are synonyms, often with distinct connotations.
- 變 biàn = change, alter, vary, transmute  
(everyday change), (*X changes, but stays X*)
- 变 { simplified (person getting older, clothing wearing out)  
(‘negative’ change)
- Swanson: '**alternation**' i.e. ordered change

### Key to Abbreviations:

DDJ = Dao De Jing aka Lao-Zi # = chapter and character  
ZZ = Zhuang Zi  
SW = Su Wen (first book of the Nei Jing = Yellow Emperor's Classic of Medicine)  
Swanson = Gerald Swanson paper in Explorations in Early Chinese Cosmology edited by H. Rosemont 2006

- 化 huà = **transform, melt (al/chemical transformation),** ('positive', creative change)  
metamorphosis, evolution (*X turns into Y*)  
change of form (tadpole into frog, caterpillar into butterfly) appears magical
- ZZ 1: Kun (the great fish) hua/transforms into Peng (the huge bird)
- DDJ 37-19: wan wu = all/10,000 things jiang = will zi **hua** = naturally/self transform
- DDJ 57-67: wu wei = do nothing er min = and people zi **hua** = will spontaneously transform
- Swanson: unexplainable change, random change, chance (Explorations p.73)
- biàn-huà = change & transform-ation
- SW 8: LI } **bian-hua** chu yan = change & transformation come from it  
SI } **hua** wu chu yan = transformation of things/substances issue from it

# More Characters/Words meaning Change

- 換 huàn = exchange, substitute
- 革 gé = renew, reform, renovate; revolt, a revolution (overthrow)
  - this character is the name for Hex. 49 - lit. a hide and by extrapolation leather
- 更 gēng = change (gēngyī = change clothes)
- 成 chéng = become (turn into); to finish, complete, accomplish; to succeed at something
  - this is a very significant word in Chinese philosophy
  - ZZ says: the organs are cheng/complete (2.3), how can there be a ruler among them?
- 通 tōng = go/pass through; penetrate; undergo; 'development' (Swanson)
  - Mote (p.89, note 27) argues for 'process' or 'in process'



# The Underlying Principles of the Yí Jíng

1. **The universe changes** - it is constantly changing, this is its nature (道 Dào)
  - The Dao of change reveals that nothing stands still, that nothing lasts forever, and that for everything there is a proper time. (Chang p. 366)
2. **Change can be understood**
  - it is not as random as it first appears
3. **One can attune to, co-ordinate with, and harmonize with these changes**
4. **The Yi Jing teaches one how to do this:**

# Russian scholar Julian Shchutskii

in his *Researches on the I Ching* itemizes the following on p. 228.

- *a) the world is both changeability and immutability and what is more, the natural unity between them.*
- *b) at the basis of this lies the polarity which runs throughout the world, the antipodes of which are as opposed to each other as they are attracted to each other: in their relationship the world movement appears as a rhythm;*
- *c) thanks to the rhythm, that which has been established and that which has not yet been established unite into one system, according to which the future already exists in the present as a “sprout” of coming events;*
- *d) both the theoretical understanding and the practical realization of this are necessary, and if the activity of a person is thus normal, then he harmoniously takes part in his environment;*

## Shchutskii (*continued*)

- *e) thus is excluded the conflict of internal and external, and they contribute to the development of each other only by [virtue of] the fact that the internal is defined by the external and [the internal] is creative in the external;*
- *f) in this way the personality devotes sufficient attention to itself and to the society around it, and being satisfied with its position, finds the possibility of higher forms of creation: creation of the good and not just the fulfillment of any [some] copybook morality;*
- *g) thus thanks to the sustaining unity of abstraction and concreteness, the full flexibility of the system is achieved.*
- *He concludes: "A passive reading of the Yi Jing ... is an idle waste of time."*

# Hexagrams as Archetypal Times

- Archetypal means universal/general, which is why the Yi-Jing remains relevant for us today
- The Hexagrams (Gua) are 6 line symbolic pictures that represent a fundamental/archetypal life situation or theme which may be referred to as “the TIME”
- The name of the hexagram is the name of the Time
- Each hexagram is a particular time.
- Each hexagram text is a short characterization of this life situation.

- The meaning of the hexagram is extrapolated from an understanding of the essence of the Time/Situation that is symbolically coded in the lines.
- Each life situation develops in time
- The lines of each hexagram are stages in the process of the time unfolding.
- Some Times/Hexagrams bode well, others do not
- knowing this, one can prepare for even the worst of times
- this is part of the teaching the Yi-Jing has to offer.
- Remember, everything changes

# Chinese Proverb

- 否極泰來
- *Pǐ Jí Tài Lái* = *Adversity Extreme, Bliss Coming*
- Pi & Tai are the names of Hexagrams 12 & 11
- On the other side of that coin – In good times be humble and share.

# Important Numbers To Remember

- There are **64** Hexagrams
- 2 types of lines in configurations of 6 lines (2 to the 6th)
- = 64 unique arrangements of lines called hexagrams.
  
- **384** Lines
- 64 hex-a-grams means there are 384 actual lines ( $64 \times 6 = 384$ )
  
- **4,096** Oracle Possibilities
- Because every line has the potential to change,
- there are 4,096 ( $64^2$ ) unique divinatory possibilities.
- 4,096 is sufficiently intricate and detailed to make it specific for individual counsel.



# Important Principle: Any Hexagram Can Turn into Any Other Hexagram

- With the “right” configuration of moving/changing lines any hexagram can “change/turn” into any other hexagram.
- In other words any Time can turn into any other Time.
- If the energy is “correct” or sufficient, anything is possible
- Some paths are more likely, but the possibility is there, according to laws of change
- When the unlikely occurs we call it “magic” or “a miracle”.
- This changing line concept was perhaps the most unique aspect of the oracle
- So important that the oracle came to be known by this feature
- Hence, the Changes of the Zhou.



# Building a Hexagram

- Hexagrams are composed of 2 types of lines (representing Yin & Yang)

- 陽 Yáng

- ————— (+)

- solid/firm

- light, strong

- assoc. with: The Heavens (Tiān) 天  
(Celestial Realm)

- 陰 Yīn

- — — — — — (–)

- divided/yielding

- dark, weak

- The Earth (Dì) 地  
(Terrestrial Realm)

# Heaven and Earth interact to produce 4 pairs of lines (Bí-grams)

- These pairs are called the Four Emblems/Symbols 四像 Sì Xiàng

Heaven }	—————	—————	—— ———	—— ———
Earth }	—————	—— ———	—————	—— ———
•	太 陽	少 陽	少 陰	太 陰
•	<b>Tài Yáng</b>	<b>ShàoYáng</b>	<b>ShàoYīn</b>	<b>Tài Yīn</b>
•	old yang	young yang	young yin	old yin

- *They represent the 4 seasons,  
the four phases of the moon, and  
the four parts of the day:*

- |                     |                    |                    |                   |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| • summer (solstice) | spring (equinox)   | autumn (equinox)   | winter (solstice) |
| • full moon         | half moon (waxing) | half moon (waning) | new moon          |
| • mid-day (noon)    | dawn (sunrise)     | dusk (sunset)      | mid-night         |

The third creative force - People/Human (Ren) 人  
 interacts with Heaven and Earth  
 generating the symbols known as the 八卦 Bā Guà (8 Trigrams)

Heaven	☰	☶	☷	☱	☲	☴	☵	☴
Human	☰	☶	☷	☱	☲	☴	☵	☴
Earth	☰	☶	☷	☱	☲	☴	☵	☴
FH #	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

- The Ba Gua were “discovered”/invented by 伏羲 Fú Xī /Fu Hsi circa 3000 BCE.
- He was presented with the symbols by a spirit animal, emerging from the Yellow River.
- Some accounts say a tortoise, others, a horse.
- This numbering from 1-8 is known as Fu-Xi’s FORMER HEAVEN ARRANGEMENT
- Continuing the addition of a yin and a yang line to each trigram yields
- 16, four line figures
- Adding a fifth line yields 32 figures
- and finally adding a sixth line yields 64 hexagrams.
- A simpler method is to combine two trigrams to obtain a hexagram
- The top three lines are called the **upper trigram**.
- The bottom three lines are called the **lower trigram**.
- Using the upper and lower trigrams, and a key is how we actually look up a hexagram.