

Reading: The *I Ching* and the Emergence of Form

Overview

The idea of divination — of perceiving what is going to happen — runs against our modern mathematical conceptions. When I toss a coin into the air, which side it lands on is not something I can determine. The result is governed by chance. A complex statistical system and laws of probability are our contemporary tools for examining events that we cannot determine with certainty.

But our modern notions are based on a very particular view of the universe. Our idea is that the future has yet to take place, that *right now* we are at the forefront of time and events. But there are other conceptions of the universe, time, and probability. One such conception is that of the "block universe", where everything that has and will take place all exists together — we simply experience events in a linear fashion.

We must also consider that our own everyday view of our relationship to the universe as a whole is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, we acknowledge that all events and actions are inter-related. The common adage is that the flap of a butterfly's wings in a Borneo jungle can lead to a thunderstorm in Paris. If we do something, say something to someone, we can trace a series of consequences from that action.

But for the most part, in our modern thinking, we are not *really* related to the universe at large. Our actions are independent, and affect and are affected only by those things in our immediate surroundings.

The ancient Chinese conception was much different, and involved a particular view of the universe. A modern commentator writes:

Everything that happens, happens within time. We like to think that time stretches illimitably forward into the future and illimitably back into the past while we exist on a hairline of time that separates the future from the past, the hairline we call, "now". Quite the reverse is true; all there is and was and ever can be is an endless now, within which change occurs.

Within that endless now, we are eternal, as is everything else, all of us and everything simply going through endless change.

Because we are a part of the universe, and because time is a living, breathing entity that contains consciousness — may indeed be consciousness of the universe, permeating everything, including ourselves — we can know everything the universe knows; all we need is a key to unlock the fount of sublime wisdom and complete information. That there is a key is unquestionable; every time a new idea seems to arise spontaneously, we have used the key. Egotistically, we like to think that we created the idea, but actually what we did was no less noteworthy: we channeled the idea from the source, we used the key.

That the key exists within each of us is the premise of all divination. Divination surmises that there is a part of us that is at one with everything, including time, and therefore knows what everything knows. The English root word of *divination* is *divine*. The Latin root word is *divinus*, meaning a deity...¹

In short, the Chinese philosophy of our relationship to the universe was as follows:

- All events and situations (and permutations) exist simultaneously.
- We are each connected, inextricably, to the universe, in all respects.
- We are not typically conscious of this connection.
- If we become conscious of this connection, we can "foresee what will happen", or, to put it in a way more in line with Chinese thinking, we can perceive the correct path of the many that exist simultaneously.

The classic book for Chinese divination is called the *I Ching*. The title literally means "Changes Book", or, more commonly, "The Book of Changes". Its exact authorship is uncertain; the original

¹ Wu Wei, *The I Ching*, Los Angeles: Power Press, 1995, xiii-xiv.

text is very old, and was added to over time. Roughly speaking, the work is some 3000 years old.

Richard Wilhelm, a renowned translator of Chinese works, including the *I Ching*, describes the development of the form of Chinese divination found in this text:

At the outset, the Book of Changes was a collection of linear signs to be used as oracles. In antiquity, oracles were everywhere in use; the oldest among them confined themselves to the answers yes and no. This type of pronouncement is likewise the basis of the Book of Changes. "Yes" was indicated by a simple unbroken line (—), and "No" by a broken line (— —).²

Wilhelm continues:

However, the need for greater differentiation seems to have been felt at an early date, and the single lines were combined in pairs.

— — — — — —
— — — — — —

To each of these combinations a third line was then added. In this way the eight trigrams came into being. These eight trigrams were conceived as images of all that happens in heaven and on earth. At the same time, they were held to be in a state of continual transition from one phenomenon to another is continually taking place in the physical world. Here we have the fundamental concept of the Book of Changes. The eight trigrams are symbols standing for changing transitional states; they are images that are constantly undergoing change. Attention centers not on things in their state of being — as is chiefly the case in the Occident — but upon their movements in change. The eight trigrams there are not representations of things as such but of their tendencies in movement.³









The eight trigrams were given certain meanings, and came to be associated with various aspects of nature.

² Richard Wilhelm, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977, xlix.

³ *Ibid.*, xlix-l.

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Trigram	Attribute	Image	Material	"Geomantic"	Family Relationship
 1. <i>Ch'ien</i>	the Creative	strong	—	heaven	father
 2. <i>K'un</i>	the Receptive	devoted	earth	—	mother
 3. <i>Chen</i>	the Arising	inciting	wood	thunder	first son
 4. <i>K'an</i>	the Abysmal	danger	water	—	second son
 5. <i>Ken</i>	Keeping Still	resting	—	mountain	third son
 6. <i>Sun</i>	the Gentle	penetrate	—	wind	first daughter
 7. <i>Li</i>	the Clinging	light	fire	—	second daughter
 8. <i>Tui</i>	the joyous	joyful	metal	lake	third daughter

Notice how the trigrams are each related to some characteristic or descriptive quality. So that there might be even greater descriptive power in this system, the eight trigrams were combined with one another. This resulted in what are called in English "hexagrams". There were 64 in total.

Through a somewhat complex system, each hexagram came to signify a combination of forces, situations, changes, etc.

A modern commentator who worked in the field of statistics, Dr. Hsu, has noted that this system is much more mathematical than it appears. When we speak of the *I Ching*, we often look at it simply as "fortune telling"; but Hsu has pointed out that the *I Ching* is in some ways a statistical model of the universe, an aspect even more visible in other forms of Chinese divination. We will examine this again briefly later.

The use of lines as a means of prognostication goes far back in Chinese history: in the Lungshan period, some 4000 years ago, the shoulder-blade bone of cows were used for divination. The bone was held over a fire, while the diviner asked a question; the heat produced cracks in the bone, and a skilled interpreter deduced the answer to the question by examining the position and shape of

the cracks. This practice later became more elaborate and ritualized. The question itself was inscribed on the shoulder-blade bone. A heated bronze poker was applied to a certain area of the bone, and again the cracks were examined. Examples of these "oracle bones" still survive, and can be seen at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan. Another method involved the heating of specially prepared tortoise shells, which were heated to produce cracks. The tortoise was used because it was considered a symbol of stability and longevity. Its shell was considered one of the sacred items ordained by heaven for use in oracles.

Indeed, according to ancient tradition, the eight basic trigrams of the *I Ching* were first discovered on the back of a tortoise. The finding of these trigrams is attributed to a certain Fu His, the first (and probably mythical) emperor of the Chinese, who is reputed to have lived over 4500 years ago. One of the ancient commentaries on the *I Ching* described the discovery:

In ancient times, when Pao Hsi [another name for Fu Hsi] rules all things under Heaven, he looked up and contemplated the bright patterns of the sky, then looked down and considered the shapes of the earth. He noted the decorative markings on birds and beasts, and the appropriate qualities of their territories. Close at hand, he studied his own body, and also observed distant things. From all this, he devised the eight trigrams, in order to unveil the Heavenly processes in nature and to understand the character of everything.

Note here the idea of "as above, so below", the "macrocosm in microcosm" concept so very common to many systems of belief, such as the Jewish Cabbalists.

As noted above, the eight trigrams were used in an early form of divination, and are still today often depicted in Chinese art and design. They are often shown encircling the interlocking *Yin* and *Yang* symbols. The dark area, *Yin*, contains a white dot, and the light area, *Yang*, contains a black dot. This symbolizes the idea that even in the purest state, each side contains the seed of the other, or, *change operates even as this most fundamental level.*

Around 1143 B.C., the last Shang Dynasty emperor, Chou Hsin, imprisoned the feudal lord, Wen, in the province of Chou, in Western China. Wen was very popular with the people, and this incurred the emperor's wrath. While in prison, Wen studied the eight trigrams. Combining them, he arrived at the 64 six-line hexagrams. He then went on to name each, and added an explanatory text for each as well.

The forces of the province of Chou rebelled against the emperor soon after this, and Chou Hsin was overthrown; the Shang dynasty was ended. A series of battles ensued, with the final victory being achieved by Wen's son, Tan, the Duke of Chou, who founded the Chou dynasty. Forty years after Wen had worked out the hexagrams, the Duke expanded on his father's work on them. He added a series of interpretations. This work, with the 64 hexagrams and accompanying text by Wen, plus the added interpretations of the Duke of Chou, became widely known throughout the Chou empire under the title of *Chou I* ("The Changes of Chou").

In the early part of the 5th century B.C., Confucius studied the *Chou I*, and may have written one of the commentaries often attributed to him. Other commentaries were composed by his students and others, until they comprised a work as large as the original text of Wen and his son. The oracle became officially recognized as one of the five Confucian classics, and the named the *I Ching*, or "Book of Changes".

The *I Ching* escaped the fate of the other classic works at the time of the famous burning of books under the Emperor Ch'in Shih Huang Ti, in 213 B.C. — he was also the builder of the Great Wall.

The *I Ching* was also adopted for a time by the school of magicians of the Chin and Han dynasties. These were practioners of a type of Taoist occultism. Later, a scholar named Wang Pi, in the 3rd century A.D., wrote a treatise on the *I Ching*, and this is the version that is essentially the one now used.

As noted above, the *I Ching* reveals a way of looking at events in a very particular way. The famous psychologist Carl Jung wrote:

The Chinese mind, as I see it at work in the *I Ching*, seems to be exclusively preoccupied with the chance aspect of events. What we call coincidence seems to be the chief concern of this peculiar mind, and what we worship as causality passes almost unnoticed...

The manner in which the *I Ching* tends to look upon reality seems to disfavor out causalistic procedures. The moment under actual observation appears to the ancient Chinese view more of a chance hit than a clearly defined result of concurring causal chain processes. The matter of interest seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation, and not at all the hypothetical reasons that seeming account for the coincidence. While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects,

classifies, isolates, the Chinese picture of the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment.

Thus it happens that when one throws the three coins, or counts the forty -nine yarrow stalks [two ways of using the *I Ching*], these chance details enter into the picture of the moment of observation and form a part of it — a part that is insignificant to us, yet most meaningful to the Chinese mind.⁴

Jung goes on to compare the Western, causal, view, and the Chinese "synchronistic" view as follows:

The causal point of view tells us a dramatic story about how *D* came into existence: it took its origin from *C*, which existed before *D*, and *C* in its turn had a father, *B*, etc. The synchronistic view on the other hand tries to produce an equally meaningful picture of coincidence. How does it happen that *A'*, *B'*, *C'*, *D'*, etc., all appear in the same moment and in the same place?⁵

In terms of mathematics, the *I Ching* may be seen to represent some kind of statistical model of the universe. For the Chinese, the moment, the precise time and place and circumstances when the *I Ching* is being consulted represents a given statistical state. It is interesting to note that Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716), the famed philosopher, was familiar with the *I Ching*. Leibniz contemplated the idea that the order of the universe is reflected in its parts — and, as we have already mentioned, this idea is a fairly common one in various systems of beliefs. A Jesuit Father Joachim Bouvet, who had lived in China, wrote Leibniz a letter in which he outlined the structure of the *I Ching*. Leibniz saw in this work a strong connection to his own general idea of dualities, and more particularly, the binary code.

⁴ Ibid., xxii-xxiii.

⁵ Ibid., xxiv-xxv.

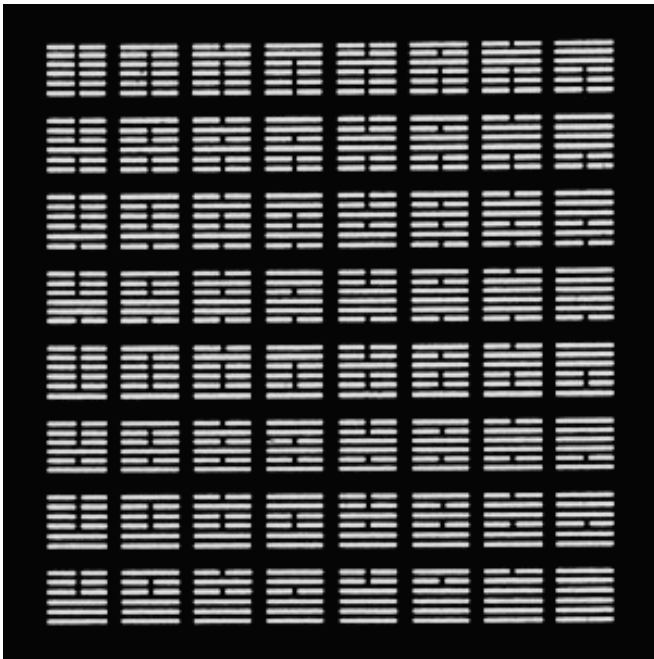


Figure 1. The 64 hexagrams of the *I Ching*.

Procedure

In this session, you will examine the process of the *I Ching*, and speculate yourself on what it says about causality, probability, the (mathematical) structure of the universe, and the emergence of form. Also, you might want to consider what the *I Ching* and its model says about the other “emergence” question in our Evolving Systems Group mandate — that is, the emergence of *meaning*.

1. Once you have completed the reading above, put together three questions to ask in session concerning anything not clear to you in the text; don't be shy.
2. Next, consider the following questions:
 - What is our modern view of chance, probability and the structure of the universe and the events that take place in it?
 - Why is divination so common in many different cultures and societies? In what forms does it exist in our own society?
 - What strikes you about the particular aesthetic of this Chinese *I Ching* system?
3. Now, we will examine the *I Ching* itself, using a much-simplified approach to consulting the text. To consult the text, we will use a coin toss; before tossing the coins however, you must formulate a question. This is your question “to the oracle”, as it were. The questions must be precisely phrased — your instructor will assist you in this process.