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Janus-Like Concepts in the *Li* and *Kun* Trigrams

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Janus-Like Concepts in the *Li* and *Kun* Trigrams

1. Potencies of the *Li*2 Trigram

Each trigram in the *Yijing* has a potency (*de*2) and a natural image (*xiang*2) which are used fairly consistently in the "Image Treatise" and the "Judgment Treatise." The treatises use two natural images for *xun*—wind and wood. For other trigrams the norm is to have one each. For *li* it is "fire," for *qian* it is "sky," for *kun* it is "earth," for *dui* it is "marsh," for *gen* it is "mountain," etc. Sometimes a figurative variant is used, for instance "rain" instead of "water" in the "Image Treatise" of #3. An exception occurs in the "Image Treatise" at #21 and #55, where "lightning" is used instead of "fire." Strictly speaking, "lightning" is an association, not the main natural image of the *li* trigram. Several associations are also given for each trigram in the "Treatise on the Trigrams."

Potencies stand for the trigrams' functional properties, and they are used fairly consistently in the "Judgment Treatise":

	<u>Potency</u>	<u>Natural Image</u>
☳ <i>zhen</i>	moving (<i>dong</i> 4)	thunder
☴ <i>xun</i>	penetrating (<i>ru</i> 4)	wood, wind
☲ <i>li</i>	bright (<i>ming</i> 2)	fire
☷ <i>kun</i>	accepting (<i>shun</i> 4)	earth
☱ <i>dui</i>	joyful (<i>yue</i> 4)	marsh
☰ <i>qian</i>	strong (<i>jian</i> 4)	heaven
☵ <i>kan</i>	dangerous (<i>xian</i> 3)	water
☶ <i>gen</i>	unmoving (<i>zhi</i> 3)	mountain

The potency of *qian*, namely "*jian4*," was used as the hexagram name in the Mawangdui silk manuscript. The old character *jian4* is thought to depict a male fertility object.

In #53 "Judgment Treatise" the potency given for *xun* is the trigram name itself, *xun*, rather than *ru* ("penetrating"). "*Xun*" is used frequently in the treatises to mean "gentle," but such descriptive use of a trigram name is an exception. If Richard Wilhelm had been consistent in his translation, instead of saying "Sun, the Gentle," he would have used "Sun, the Penetrating," by analogy with "Tui, the Joyful." (Note that Wilhelm's "Sun" = *xun* and "Tui" + *dui*.) Although it is the norm to have one potency for each trigram, both *qian* and *kun* have second potencies, firm and soft (*gang1*, *rou2*), but these refer to single unbroken or broken lines more often than to whole trigrams.

Trigram names are normally not used to express descriptive meanings in traditional commentary. They are treated as gnomic names, almost like magical formulae. Commentators like Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi often used compound words like "*li2-huo3*" (the fire of *li*) or "*kan3-xian3*" (the danger of *kan*) or "*dui4-kou3*" (the mouth of *dui*). This tells me that they viewed the trigram names as proper nouns. "*Li2-huo3*" is not a description of a kind of fire, but rather, it uses fire as a way to visualize *li*.

Among all 64 hexagram names, only the 8 pure hexagrams (i.e., doubled trigrams) have non-situational names. Trigram names are supposed to be at the edge of definability, which is why they need to be linked with potencies and natural images, plus associations in the "Treatise on Trigrams." Trigrams combine to make the hexagrams, and since they are constitutive of situations, their names have an order of meaning beyond situational names. *Li* is one of those special hexagram/trigram names.

The trigrams represent whole idea-complexes, yet we have seen above that they are linked to single potencies. Why would that be? The reason for sticking to one potency and one natural image is to respect the combinatorial discreteness of the idea-complexes behind the trigrams.

The big exception to this one-to-one norm is the *li* trigram: aside from "bright," it has two

additional potencies (used in the "Judgment Treatise," TZ), namely *li4* ("clinging/connecting") and *wen2* ("patterned/cultured/refined"). The relation between *li2* and *li4* makes me think of the old lexicographer's habit of giving one-word definitions using near-homonyms. Strangely enough, the three potencies of *li* are often used together. For instance, the TZ of #38 says "joyful and clinging to brightness." The TZ of #30 says "brightness doubled so that it clings to what is right." The TZ of #13 says "brightly refined so as to be strong." The TZ of #22 speaks of the "patterns of heaven," the "patterns of humankind," and "bright refinement coming to a rest."

It is intriguing that *li* has this meaning of "clinging" clinging to it, and one wonders how that is supposed to fit together with the other potencies of "bright" and "patterned." I think that *li* is an especially hard-to-get-at idea, and the writers of the TZ were trying to triangulate it.

The TZ speaks of the sun and moon "clinging" or "being connected" to the sky. It speaks of crops and trees and plants "clinging" to the soil. We have to go down to a pretty basic meaning of "clinging" before this will make any sense. After looking closely at all the hexagrams where the *li* trigram appears, I am beginning to get an inkling. I think *li4* means "caught in a web of connections with," so in #30 the sun and moon are not "clinging" to heaven, they are in a net of relations with other heavenly bodies. The crops and trees are in a web of connections with the land. (One of the associations given for the *li* trigram in the treatise is "net.")

The picture becomes complicated when we consider that the graph for the trigram name, *li2*, is used in other contexts as a descriptive word that means "departure/separation." (There is also a homonym, *li2* with a "net" radical, meaning "to encounter [disaster].") I am usually reluctant to draw on descriptive meanings of the trigram names, and it seems hard to square the meaning of "separation" with the potency of "clinging/connection." Nevertheless, Brad Hatcher, Thomas Hood, and Scott Davis (members of the Yahoo Yixue Forum [1]) have argued sensibly that "separation" is the other side of the coin from "connecting" and "patterning." To make a pattern, some things are left out; when some things cling together, other things will be excluded.

I think that *li* is about putting something in a web of connections, particularly at the focal point around which connections are constellated. That is where the pattern comes in: when

something is made the focal point we highlight the relations around it (with brightness). Since relations around things are not exhausted by one particular pattern, the recognition tends to shift. Trying to get to the bottom of one thing, we may end up following the relational thread to another focal point. This kind of movement is suggested in #56, where the "fire" of momentary consciousness exhausts the object of attention and moves onward.

In #55 the "connections" of *li* may even go a step further and we could be talking about "connectivity" (connections operating upon connections). In our era, this hexagram's symbolism can be extended to the cybernetic net, where information from distant sources appears before the user instantly, and it may be hard to tell where the user is located. Lines two, three and four allude to a kind of tangential vision—a sudden perception of a remote object. Lines two and four allude to a person behind an "elaborate barrier" or "screen," and the top line alludes to a person who cannot be located.

2. The Cow in Hexagram #30

Another question is how "care of the cow," mentioned in the judgment of #30 *Li*, fits with *li* as the trigram of highlighted relations. I think that the cow in #30 clearly harks back to #2 *Kun*, which has the association of "cow" in the "Treatise on Trigrams." The fact that the judgment of #30 mentions "cow" tells me that this hexagram's broken lines bring important qualities of #2 *Kun* with them.

The *li* trigram has a broken line at the center, giving #30 two central broken lines. Thus hexagram #30 is likely to have properties that relate to the pure yin of #2 *Kun*. The "Treatise on Appended Lines" tells us that *li* is a daughter, a yin trigram. If you add up the numbers used to divine the lines, $7 + 8 + 7$, you get an even number, so in the matter of even-oddness the minority line rules. In terms of symbolism, *li* brings some qualities derived from her "mother." As the *Yijing* scholar Steven Karcher might say, there is a secret cowpath leading from #2 to #30!

As I mentioned above, the shifting movement of #56 reminds me of momentary consciousness which highlights a pattern in one place and then goes elsewhere. It also reminds

me of care of the cow, with ruminants being driven to where pasturage is available. Sure enough, the cow is also mentioned in hexagram #56.

In the final chapter of *The Zhuangzi*, we can see how much that Daoist philosopher admired the ancient sages who took time to figure out the meta-patterns of reality, though they left no record of achievements. Such legendary sages had something cow-like about them: being absorbed in simple things, staying detached and humble, being placid and satisfied with the plain flavors of what they were ruminating.

There is a plausible tie between the *li* trigram's potencies and "care of the cow" in #30: to recognize the really big patterns takes time, and in the meantime, one has to take care of the capacity for vision in oneself. One has to "herd the ox" in the Chan Buddhist sense.

Connections radiate out from here. Why is the cow so important in a hexagram whose natural image is fire? Is the cow being thought of as destined for sacrifice? Fourth Yang in this hexagram seems to allude to sacrifice and offering before a fire, then throwing the offering aside. Also, there is a communal celebration in Third Yang.

I remember seeing, in a book on Ayurvedic medicine, a picture of a yoni used in Vedic rituals, and on it was inscribed a fire trigram—a broken line between two unbroken lines!^[2] Evidently this symbol of illumination has been distributed widely.

3. Janus-Like Concepts

Having made this detour into the bovine associations on #30, we are now better equipped to examine certain properties of the *li* trigram that are related to *kun*. I think it is safe to say that all the components of the *Yijing* are related to the other components. I believe we can identify the *kun* trigram as a source of certain properties which feed into *li* and give it its problematic character.

The "Image Treatise" recognizes *li*'s trade-off between cohering and separation. In #13 it says, "The noble young one, according to kind and family, distinguishes the beings."^[3] In #38 it says, "The noble young one, accordingly, associates, and yet is unique."^[4] The *li* trigram in #36

Wounding of the Light is associated with a theme of exclusion, and in #35 it offers a chance for inclusion among the elite. No wonder the "Treatise on Trigrams" gives "category" as one of the associations on *li*.

This makes me think of the "Treatise on the Appended Phrases," where it says that being incorporated into one particular group or another decides one's good or bad fortune: "Events follow definite trends, each according to its nature. Things are distinguished from one another in definite classes. In this way good fortune and misfortune come about." [5] In the "Image Treatise" of #2, line one, the phrase *yin1 shi3 ning2* is used to describe the line. I understand this phrase to mean that "yin is just beginning to coalesce." [6] This meaning of coalescence/accumulation is borne out by what the "Wen Yan Treatise" says on the same line: "A house that heaps good upon good is sure to have an abundance of blessings. A house that heaps evil upon evil is sure to have an abundance of ills." [7] A similar point is made in the "Treatise on Appended Phrases" (describing #21 Biting Through, which contains the *li* trigram): "If good does not accumulate, it is not enough to make a name for a man. If evil does not accumulate, it is not strong enough to destroy a man." [8]

Evidently coalescence or aggregation is an important feature of yin, and when it happens, you get an assemblage that is disposed toward good or bad fortune. The coalescence in #12 Stagnation is not very good: it is the unleavened grouping of small people below, not uplifted or animated by the presence of spirit-yang. That is to say, the great clod clumps together in its lowly material way, and heaven is not involved. On the other hand, in #11, where the inner trigram is all yang, synergy happens because yang is included in the clumping. Interplay makes for a good grouping, and the outcome is good.

The "Treatise on Appended Phrases" tells us that "...the Receptive closes in a state of rest and opens in a state of motion." [9] It also tells us that "*qian* and *kun* are the gates to the Changes," and that the authors of the *Zhouyi* "...called the closing of the gates the Receptive, and the opening of the gates the Creative. The alternation between closing and opening is called change." [10] We can say that the coalescence of yin happens during this alternation of opening

and closing. A lot depends on what gets included. Some seemingly contradictory aspects of yin have to do with the type of inclusion. Yin as #2 Kun is portrayed as nurturing, but yin can also be small-minded or even treacherous. It can be the obstacle that wounds the light in #36.

I think that when yin clumps together without a spiritualizing principle being included, it can be treacherous and obstructing. When such a principle is brought in, then yin does positive things. The pure Kun of #2, despite her foreboding start at line 1, exemplifies nurturance. Being lined up next to #1 Qian, she is still full of potential for interplay with Qian, so we do not think of Kun as small-minded.

The problematic side of yin appears when it closes itself around a limited purpose. It is not that yin itself is small-minded. It is that certain ways of coalescing are more limited than others. The *kun* in #23 would probably wish to have more interplay, but the hardened formation of the *ancien regime* above makes that unlikely. When a limited aspect of *qian* gets caught up in such a grouping, we see that *qian* also has its problematic side. In the *Zhouyi Chanjie* (a Buddhist-inspired commentary of the Ming era), Ou-yi writes punningly about arid wisdom (yang) which is not tempered by yin. He uses the same graph for the word "dry" (*gan1*) as he does for the hexagram name Qian![11]

The *li* trigram is not really about clumping together. Its coherence is subtler, based on mutual recognition or mutual illumination. But there is something yin about the way *li* makes things gravitate together. At the same time, there is a problematic side, whereby some things are brought into the highlighted circle, and some things aren't. There are certain groupings that don't come together fully—the mutual recognition or enkindling doesn't happen.

This is like an echoing of how *kun* acts. The potency of *kun*—"devotion/acceptance"—brings about a union of purposes. The things with which *kun* clumps together make a world of difference.

Notes:

[1] Yahoo Yixue Forum, postings #360, #365, and #366.

[2] See p. 80, *The Path of Practice: A Woman's Book of Ayurvedic Healing*, by Bramacharini Maya Tiwari (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).

[3] Translation by Brad Hatcher, available on his website: www.hermetica.info // Richard Wilhelm translates this sentence a bit differently: "...Thus the superior man organizes the clans and makes distinction among things" (p. 57, *The I Ching*, translated by Richard Wilhelm and Cary Baynes [Princeton University Press, 1977]).

[4] B. Hatcher. // Wilhelm's translation is somewhat different: "...Thus amid all fellowship, the superior man retains his individuality" (p. 148, *The I Ching*).

[5] Wilhelm, p. 280.

[6] Wilhelm translates the word *ning2* here as "becomes rigid." I believe *ning2* touches on a more fundamental property of yin.

[7] Wilhelm, p. 393.

[8] Wilhelm, p. 340.

[9] Wilhelm, p. 318.

[10] Wilhelm, p. 301.

[11] See Ou-yi's comment on Hexagram #1: "...At first the mentality is one of arid wisdom, which needs to be tempered by the waters of absorption [i.e., *samadhi*] and should not be used one-sidedly." (*Zhouyi chanjie*, p. 20. *Ziyou Chubanshe* [Taibei, 1996]). Note that the graph *qian2* (name of hexagram #1) is also pronounced *gan1* (with the meaning "dry").

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