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The Names of the Yi Jing Trigrams: An Inquiry Into Their Linguistic Origins

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**The Names of the *Yi Jing* Trigrams:
An Inquiry Into Their Linguistic Origins**

Julie Lee Wei

Abstract

The names of the eight *Yi Jing* 易經 trigrams appear to belong to the deepest layer of this ancient text. Their origins are shrouded in the mists of time and their meanings require exegesis. This paper proposes that much of the mystery can be cleared if we see the names as corresponding to Indo-European words or roots/stems.

Introduction

The *Yi Jing* (*I Ching*, *Book of Changes*) is a difficult text, especially the oldest layer, the line statements, the authorship of which is traditionally attributed to Wen Wang 文王 (King Wen, ca. 1143), the father of the founder of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045-221 BC) (Legge: 6). They are in an archaic language and difficult to interpret. The names of the eight trigrams themselves are mysterious. They seem to be in a language lost to us, quite different from classical Chinese. Why is *qian* 乾 the word for "heaven" when the

classical Chinese word for heaven is *tian* 天, and why is *qian* written with a character that means "dry"? Why is *li* 離 the word for fire when the classical Chinese word for fire is *huo* 火, and why is *li* written with a character that means "to fasten in a net"? And the same goes for the names of the other trigrams. I propose that these mysteries are partially cleared if we understand the characters as merely phonetic signs, merely symbols for sounds, tools for transcription. And the mysteries are further cleared if we go a step further and assume the phonetic signs to be means of transcribing foreign terms. In other words, by themselves the names of the eight trigrams do not make sense in Chinese as we know it. Even if we are told what they mean, they are somehow perplexing. An analogy can be given in English. For instance, the words *tao* and *yinyang* don't make sense in English. After we are told that the one means "the Way" and the other means "the positive principle and the negative principle" they still strike us as not English words. The mystery is cleared when we are told that they are transcriptions of non-English words.

Of course, *tao* and *yinyang* are now in the English dictionary and as such have become English words, just as *qian*, *kun*, *chen*, *li*, and the other names of the trigrams are in the Chinese lexicon and for a long time have been Chinese words.

The *Yi Jing* dates to at least as early as the 8th century BC, when it was mentioned in the *Zuo Zhuan* (Legge: 4). According to tradition, the oldest part of the *Yi Jing* was the work of Wen Wang (King Wen) and his son Zhou Gong (周公, the Duke of Zhou), which dates the *Yi Jing* to the 12th century BC. Zhou Gong is often not mentioned as author because he is subsumed under his father (Nan: 5). In a well-known passage in the *Mencius*, Mencius (371-289 BC) said that King Wen was "a man of the Western Yi

(barbarians)" (*Mencius* 4B.1, cited in Mair 2003), which is to say that King Wen came from a non-Sinitic tribe or nation.

It is my hypothesis that the names of the eight *Yi Jing* trigrams correspond to Indo-European words. The correspondences are discussed below. For many other Chinese words that correspond in sound and meaning to Indo-European words, or root/stems, I refer the reader to several other papers (Wei 2005 b, d, e), as well as to papers by Tsung-tung Chang and Jixu Zhou (Chang 1988; Zhou 2002b, 2003a).

The Eight Trigrams

The *Yi Jing* was a book used for divination, and the foundation of the divination diagrams are the eight trigrams, each composed of three lines, a combination of the broken and the unbroken line. The eight trigrams with their names and traditional meanings are listed below, grouped as contrasting pairs:

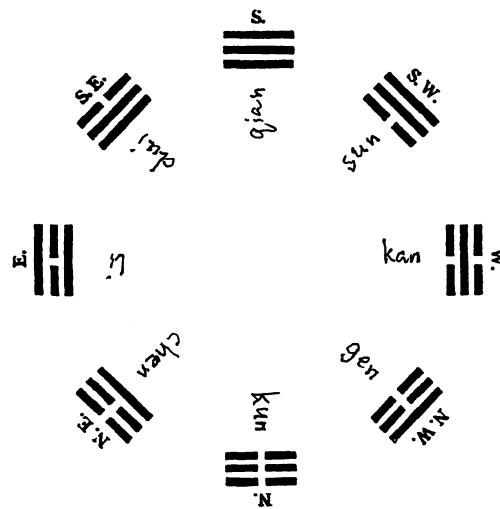
乾	<i>qian</i> "heaven, sky".
坤	<i>kun</i> "the earth".
震	<i>chen</i> "thunder".
巽	<i>sun</i> "wind; wood".
離	<i>li</i> "fire, as in lightning; the sun".
坎	<i>kan</i> "water, as in rain, clouds, springs".
艮	<i>gen</i> "hills, mountains".
兌	<i>dui</i> "water, collected as in marsh or lake".

(Legge: 32)

According to tradition the source of the diagrams was the legendary figure Fuxi (Fuxi). The arrangement of the diagrams according to Fuxi is given below.

Correspondences

The proposed word-and-meaning correspondences between the names of the trigrams and Indo-European words are given below. For a justification for comparing Old Chinese with Celtic words and for a discussion of some patterns in sound correspondence between Old Chinese and Indo-European, I refer the reader to the Introduction to a previous paper, "Counting and Knotting" (Wei 2005b).



The eight trigrams according to Fuxi. *Qian* is in the south, *kun* in the north. (From Legge: Plate III).

(Abbreviations: A. = adjective; adv. = adverb; AS. = Anglo-Saxon; ASD = *Concise Anglo-Saxon*

Dictionary; Av. = Avestan; Bax. = W.H. Baxter; Bret. = Bretonish; Brit. = Brittonic; Cant. = Cantonese;

CH = *CI HAI*; Chin. = Chinese; Clt. = Celtic; COD = *Concise Oxford Dictionary*; col. = column; Crn. =

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Cornish; DAS = *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*; dem.=demonstrative; DGL = *Dictionary of Gaelic*;
DTch = *Dictionary of Tocharian B*; DWL = *Dictionary of the Welsh Language*; Eg. = English; EZ = *A*
Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese; Fr. = French; Ga. = Gaelic; Goid. = Goidelic; Gr. = Greek; GrHom. =
Homeric Greek; HYDCD = *Hanyu Da Cidian*; IE = Indo-European; Ir. = Irish; KD = *Kangxi Zidian*; L. =
Latin; L&P = *A Concise Comparative Celtic Grammar*; Li = LI Fang-kuei (in EZ); M = middle; Math =
Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary; ML. = Middle Latin; MIBret = Middle Bretonish; MlCh. = Middle
Chinese; MlIr. = Middle Irish; MSM. = Modern Standard Mandarin; n.=noun; O = old; OClt. = Old Celtic;
OC = Old Chinese; OInd. = Old Indic; OIr. = Old Irish; OR = *ORIGINS* ; OS. = Old Saxon; OSBI = Oracle
Shell and Bone Inscriptions; OW. = Old Welsh; Pers. = Persian; PIE = Proto Indo-European; pl.=plural;
Pok = Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch; prep. = preposition; pron.= pronoun; Sag = L.
Sagart, *The Roots of Old Chinese*; ScGa. = Scottish Gaelic; Sch = A. Schuessler; Skt. = Sanskrit; Sum. =
Sumerian; Toch = Tocharian; Turk. = Turkish; v. = verb; W. = Welsh; WD = *Welsh Dictionary* by H.
Lewis; ZY= *Zhou Yi*; ZZSF = *Shang Gu Yin Xi [Old Chinese Phonology]*).

(Note: For easier typing, the sound ʃ is written ng.)

In the following sound-and-meaning correspondences between Old Chinese and Indo-European, the Chinese word is in the left column, the proposed corresponding Indo-European word(s) in the right column. The first word in the left column represents the sound in Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM), transcribed in *pinyin* romanization. Then follows the Chinese graph(s). This may be followed by the pronunciation in the Cantonese topolect (regional speech). The reconstruction of the Old Chinese (OC) sound of the word is marked with an asterisk. The meaning of the word then follows within quotation marks. The notes in parentheses are mine. The reconstructions of Old Chinese are those of ZHENGZHANG Shangfang, unless otherwise noted. Occasionally the reconstructions of Axel Schuessler, Li Fang-kuei, or Laurent Sagart are used. I have

also consulted William Baxter's reconstructions, which are quite similar to Zhengzhang's
 For the meanings of Old Chinese words, I am heavily indebted to Axel Schuessler's *A
 Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese* (Early Zhou dynasty understood as 1100-600 BC),
 although I also consult Chinese dictionaries such as the *Ci Hai*, the *Hanyu Da Cidian*, the
Kangxi Zidian, and *Mathews' Chinese-English Dictionary*.

qian 乾 "heaven, sky"

<p>QIAN 乾 *gjian (Li); *kaan (ZZSF) "(Perhaps: associated with the forces of heaven) be creative" (EZ 480) "heaven, sky" (Legge: 32); "heaven, male, father, sovereign" (Math).</p>	<p>W. <i>celi</i>, <i>Celi</i> "heaven, God" (loanword from L. <i>celi</i> [<i>coeli</i>], genitive of L. <i>caelum</i> "sky, heaven") "heaven, Lord, God, the omninipotent" (DWL 459); Fr. <i>ciel</i> "heaven", L. <i>caelum</i> "sky" from *kaid-lo, *kaid, PIE *(s)kai- (Pok 916).</p>
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(Note: QIAN/*gjian/*kaan 乾 corresponds to IE *cel-*, *cael*, *kaid-, where the Sinitic is
 a nasalization of the IE final consonant. Such nasalization occurs frequently in IE
 languages, e.g., L. *sōl*, Eg. *sun* "sun"; OIr. *ar*, W. *an* "our".)

<p>QIAN 乾 *gjian, *kaan "heaven, male, father, the creative force" [These are also traditional meanings of the word QIAN 乾 in the <i>Yi Jing</i>.]</p>	<p>L. <i>genitor</i> "father, creator", Gr. <i>geneter</i> "creator, father", IE base <i>ǵenā-ter-</i> (Pok 374); W. <i>cyndad</i> "ancestor, forefather, progenitor" (DWL 778).</p>
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(Note: the stem *cel-/cael-* of *celi-/caelum* is very similar in sound to the stem *gen-/*
cyn- in *genitor* and *cyndad*. The author of the line statements for QIAN 乾 may have

been playing on the two words as near-homophones.)

***kun* 坤 "the earth"**

KUN 坤 * <i>k-hlun</i> > <i>khwon</i> (Sag),	W. <i>llan</i> (Ir. <i>lann</i> "land, ground" < Clt. * <i>landa</i> ,
* <i>khuun</i> (ZZSF 393) "the earth";	* <i>lendh-</i> "open land, moor, heath, plain, cf.
"the earth; female, feminine" (Math).	Eg. <i>land</i>) "..., churchyard, enclosure,
	yard". (DWL 2094) PIE * <i>lendh-</i> "open,
	empty land, heath, steppe", OIr. <i>land</i> "bare
	land", Crn. <i>lan</i> , Bret. <i>lann</i> "heath, steppe".
	Pok 675, <i>lendh-</i>). [And/or correspond to:]
	W. <i>clun</i> "meadow, moor", O.Ir. <i>clúain</i> "pas-
	ture, prairie" (DWL 510; Vendryes C-126).

(Note: KUN/**k-hlun*/***hlin* is very similar in sound and meaning to Clt. **landa*, PIE **lendh-* "open land, heath,...." It is also close in sound and meaning to W. *clun* "meadow, moor", Ir. *clúain* "prairie", which may be related to Crn. *lan*, Bret. *lann* "heath, steppe" because of close sound and meaning resemblance. All the other Chinese characters with 申 phonophore have initials **l'i-*, **lh-*, or **hl-* in ZZSF (page 458): 電 **l'iins*, 月申 **lhlin*, 伸 **hlin*, 然申 **hlin*, 林申 **hlin*, 言申 **hlin*, 神 **hlin*, etc. This suggests that KUN/**khuun* 坤, originally had an -l-, as in Sagart's reconstruction **k-hlun*, above.)

KUN 坤 * <i>k-hlun</i> (Sag) "female"	Tch. <i>klaiñ</i> "woman" (variant form of <i>kliye</i>
	"woman"), - <i>klaiññe</i> "female, pertaining
	to a woman" (DTch: 224, under <i>kliye</i>) .

(Note: Again, the author of the line statements of KUN 坤 may have been playing on the similarity in sound of *klain* "woman" and IE **landa*, **lendh* or W. *clun*/Ir. *clúain*.)

chen 辰 "thunder"

CHEN 辰 **djiən* (Li), **djən* (Sch), Vedic *tányati* "it thunders", *tanyatús*
**tjʷn/s* (ZZSF) "thunder". "a thundering"; Ga. *tàirneanach* "thunder";
W. *taran* (< Clt. **toran-*, from IE base
**terǵ*); OE *thunor* "thunder", OHG *donar*
"thunder" (DWL 3447; OR: 718).

(Note: The OC for "thunder" is closest in sound to IE base **terǵ*, which suggests a very ancient IE connection.)

sun 巽 "wind, wood"

SUN, XUN 巽 **sqhuuns* (ZZSF 510) TchA. *wǎnt* (~*wǎnt*) "wind"
"wind". (reflects PTch **w'ente* < PIE **h₂weh₁ento-*);
L. *ventus*, Gothic *winds*, Hittite *hwant-*,
"wind") (DTch: 505, *yente*). Eg. *wind*
"wind"; W. *gwynt* (< Clt. *ue-nto-s*) "wind,
blast, gale".

(Note: OC **sqhuuns* 巽 "wind" is closest in sound to PIE **h₂weh₁ento* and Hittite *hwant-*.)

li 離 "fire (lightning); the sun"

LI 離 **ljar* (Li), **rjaj* (Sch), Olce. *leygr* "flame, fire"; W. *lluched* (OBret.
 **rhel* (ZZSF 398) "fire (as in lightning); the sun".
lucet, luhet, OCrn. *luwet*, from base **leuk-*
 "light") "flash of lightning, lightning
 flashes"; OIr *lochet* "lightning"; OIr. *luchair*
 "shine, luster, splendor", *lochairn* "light,
 lantern, lamp" (Pok 688).

(Note: OC **ljar* 離 "fire (as in lightning)" is closest in sound and meaning to
 Olce. *leygr* "fire" and W. *lluched* "flash of lightning". The medial -g- and -ch- are
 elided in OC **ljar*. This has happened in other OC-IE correspondences, such as Chinese
 GUAN/**koon* 罐 "jug, jar, pot" and W. *crochan* "pot, cauldron". Elision is frequent
 in IE languages, e.g., Eg. *bought, knight*. OC -r and Celtic -d, t are homorganic.)

kan 坎 "water (rain, clouds, spring, stream)"

KAN 坎 **khəmx* (Li), **khəm?* (Sch) W. *cwm* (Bret. *comm*. "dish", Ir. *comm*
 **khoom* (ZZSF 441) "water, as in rain, clouds, springs, streams and defiles".
 "vessel"; Gr. *cúmbe* "cup") "deep narrow
 valley, coomb, glen, dale" (DWL 640).
 (Legge: 32). "Pit, hole,
 cave", "a small wine vessel" (*Math*).

(Note: The meaning of "water" is probably through association with meaning of "valley,
 coomb, etc.")

gen 艮 "hills, mountains"

GEN 艮 **kauuns* (ZZSF 331)

"hill(s), mountain(s)".

PIE **kel-*, *keh-* "to tower, rise", whence
 Gr. *kolonos* "hill"; L. *collis* "hill", Gaulish
celicnon "tower; AS. *hyll*, Eg. hill "hill";
 Lithuanian *keliù*, *kélti* "rise up"; Lettish
célt "to raise", Lettish *kalns* "mountain"
 (Pok 544).

(Note: OC *-n is a nasalization of -l in the IE stems.)

tui 兌 "water (marsh, lake)

TUI 兌 **gluats*/**hljats* (Sch),

**duadh* (Li), **l'oods* (ZZSF 307)

"water (marsh, lake)".

W. *llaid* (Brit. **latjo-*, from base **lat-*
 "damp, moist", cf. Ir. *lathach* "damp,
 moist") "mud, mire, dirt,..., slime, ?swamp,
 slough, quagmire,..." (DWL 2090).

(Note: Many other words with the same phonophore 兌 in ZZSF [page 307, 308] have
 initials **lh-*, **hlj-*, and **hl-*: 虫兌 **lhoods*, 女兌 **lhoods*, 禾兌 **hljods*, 言兌 **hljods*, 月兌
 **lhoo*d, 兌 **lhoo*d, 木兌 **lhuud* [page 308], etc. Notice the following correspondence
 between Modern Standard Mandarin and OIr. *lathach*.)

LATA 邋邋 "slovenly, neglected,
 dirty".

OIr. *lathach* "mud"; Ga. *lathach* "mire,
 mud"; W. *llaid* "mud, mire, dirt,...", as
 above.

yi gua (=yigua) 易卦 "the *Yi Jing* diagrams"


The *Yi Jing* diagrams are 64 in number, called hexagrams, each composed of two trigrams. Each of the six-line hexagrams is a different combination of the broken line and the unbroken line. Both trigrams and hexagrams are called *gua* 卦. They are also called *yi gua* 易卦 "Yi Jing diagrams". The compound *yi gua* 易卦 appears in the *Zuo Zhuan* (the *Zuo Commentary* to the *Spring and Autumn Annals*) (HYDCD), the earliest portions of which were composed in the eighth century BC. I propose a sound-and-meaning correspondence for the word *gua* 卦:

GUA 卦 *k ^w rees (ZZSF 341b)	W. RHES, pl. RHESI, "row, rank, series;
"diagram(s) of the <i>Yi Jing</i> ; divination	list, catalogue". (DWL 3058)
line-diagram(s)".	

(Note: GUA/k^wrees 卦 "Yi Jing line-diagram(s)" can mean either one diagram or a series/list/table of diagrams. Each diagram consists of parallel straight lines. I would also like to offer the following correspondence for consideration:)

YI GUA 易卦 *leg*k ^w rees	W. LLECHRES "table, catalogue, list".
(=*legk ^w rees) "Yi Jing diagrams",	(llech + rhes; llech "roofing slate; writing
"table, list of <i>Yi Jing</i> diagrams"	slate,..."). (DWL 2123, 2124).

(Note: for YI 易 ZZSF gives two reconstructions: *leg and leegs [ZZSF 525]. YI 易 is traditionally given the meaning of "sun and moon" (Nan: 4), and "change, changes", hence the *Yi Jing* is the *Classic of Changes* or *Book of Changes*. But if the above disyllabic correspondence is valid, then the character YI 易 would be a phonetic

symbol that was selected in transcription because it had a suitable meaning, for the *Yi Jing* diagrams are about change. In my paper "Shang and Zhou" (Wei 2005d), I have suggested other possibilities for the original meaning of the word YI/*leg , but I think W. LLECHRES is a real possibility, especially as there are several other disyllabic correspondences between OC and Welsh (see Wei 2005b,d, e).

Conclusion

I believe the correspondences presented here do clear up some of the mystery of the names of the trigrams and the line statements. Also, the fact that a number of the names of the eight trigrams correspond with Brittonic, Celtic, or Proto-Indo-European stems or roots rather than with their younger variants is consistent with the antiquity of the *Yi Jing* diagrams. The correspondences, if valid, may help us better understand the names of the eight trigrams. Such understanding does not diminish the achievement of the authors of the line statements or of the philosophers who composed the Ten Appendices of this ancient classic.

If the correspondences presented here are valid, a number of questions is raised, one of which is connected to the several papers (Wei 2005b, c, d, e) in which I have proposed numerous other OC-IE correspondences, most of them realized in Welsh, Gaelic, or Irish. The question is, if so many words in Old Chinese corresponded with Indo-European words, why should the names of the *Yi Jing* diagrams be considered "foreign"? The only answer I can venture at this time is that Indo-European words must have entered the Sinitic language in different stages and different places. Many of the words on my list of correspondences are not in Axel Schuessler's *Dictionary of Early Zhou Chinese*, which

suggests that some of them entered Chinese at a later stage, perhaps Late Old Chinese. Or perhaps different words were introduced by different Indo-European tribes or nations. There can also be dialectal differences and usages, so that the sounds and usages of one Indo-European tribe or nation may not be recognizable to another IE ethnic group. This is the best I can do at this time on this question. Perhaps other researchers will take the research further and give us better answers.

Dedicated to Luke Ying-lu Chen, a young benefactor who gave the Lee children in Taiwan a future when there was none.

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