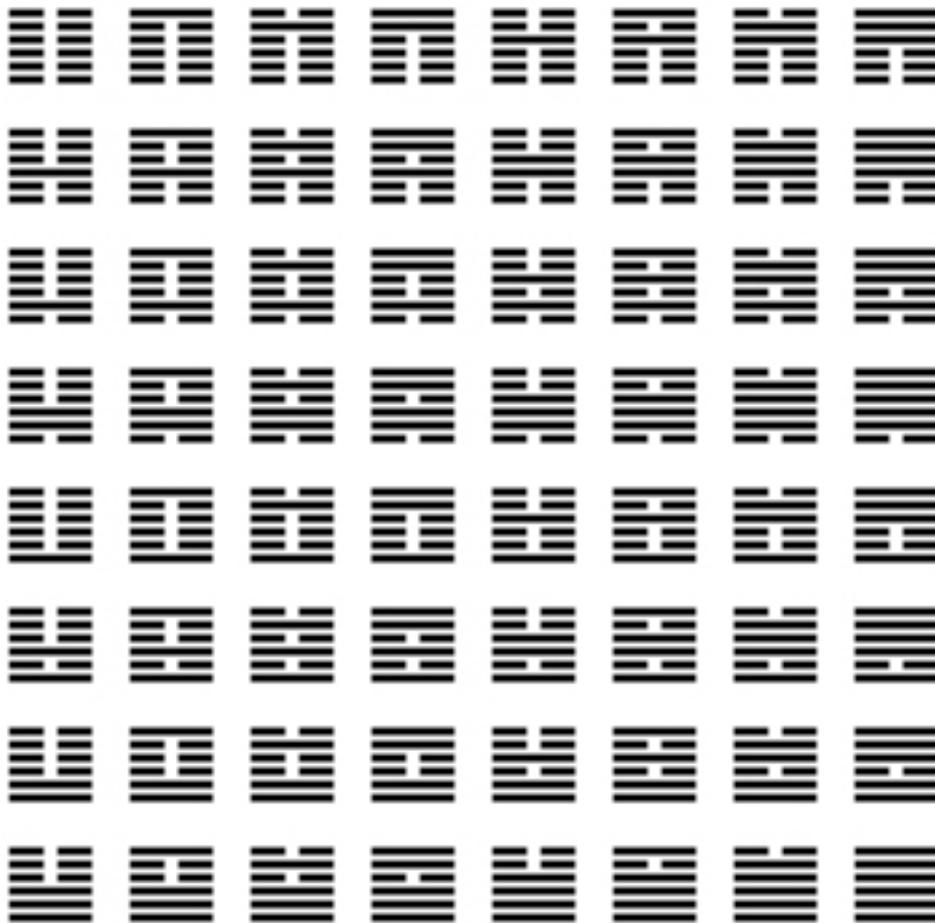


Divination in China: Patterns of Time.

Preliminaries



As everybody knows, Chinese (that is: the Chinese language and script) possesses very little of what is traditionally known as inflectional morphology. Affixes and suffixes play only a minor role in the expression of grammatical relationships, Chinese verbs do not employ any kind of conjugation, and their characters do not get changed in order to express past, present or future. So, on the face of it, Chinese seems to be a timeless language and script. This notion has given rise to the idea that Chinese thinking wouldn't care too much about abstract concepts of time and that Chinese philosophy, therefore, was never quite able to leave some stage of prehistory (as Hegel put it).

But in all their wisdom, the Chinese of course devised other means to position themselves in time and space. Prepositions, particles and word-order are used to indicate spatial and temporal relations. Word-order predominantly serves to clarify what inflectional languages like to call 'word-classes': due to its lack of morphology, Chinese is extremely resistant to formal word-class analysis. Chinese words enjoy an extraordinary freedom and can very often

function as verbs and nouns and adverbs alike. These functional shifts are not indicated by any phonetic or graphic alteration, they remain an inaudible, invisible, purely positional play. Temporal (and spatial) relations are indicated mainly by particles. Particles are employed adhering to the principle of optional determination, which means: if you don't absolutely have to, you'd rather not use any of them. Grammar borders very much on style here, and you would normally rely on semantic, syntactic and social context to get your message across. This reliance on the addressee's intelligence might make Chinese at times seem pretty vague, or, rather, allusive, but if necessary, these particles can be extremely precise.

In talking about oracles, divination and mantic techniques in China, the most interesting particle might well be the particle 未 *wèi*: "not yet". The *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar* by Edwin Pulleyblank says:

Wèi 未 is an aspectual negative. It is probably derived from the existential negative root *m- + the perfective particle 既 *jì* 'already,' and thus means 'not already' = 'not yet' or 'never.' It is incompatible with the final particle 矣 *yǐ* 矣, which implies change of state, that is, the close of one situation and the beginning of another. On the other hand, 也 *yě* 也, which seems to imply a continuing state when it occurs after verbal predicates, is very common with *wèi* 未.

未 *wei*(4) – "No; not yet; there is not; there has not yet been, there has never been" – marks an action as not yet completed, it implies a continuing situation. So if I would say "*wei*(4) *lai*(2)" 未來, it would mean "(something or somebody) has not arrived yet". Incidentally, the expression *wei*(4)*lai*(2) is exactly the expression Chinese now uses when denoting the 'future' (as a concept, an idea), and the constant deferral hinted at by *wei*(4) 未 in this context seems to be only appropriate: indeed, the future is and will be what "has not yet come".

The word, the set phrase *wei*(4)*lai*(2) 未來 has entered the Chinese language at a relatively late stage, apparently in translations of Buddhist texts from India sometime after the second or third century AD. And only very much later, at about the beginning of the twentieth century, we find for the first time the word now used to denote "time": *shi*(2)*jian*(1) 時間. So, the words for "time" and "future", two concepts one would think so central to the oracle, were until quite recently completely absent in Chinese: whole new terms translated from whole new traditions of thought (Buddhist and European, respectively). Then again, the Chinese showed a very marked interest in oracles and mantic techniques from a very early age – in fact, the earliest remains of what we now call the Chinese civilisation are artefacts of the extremely elaborate oracles conducted by the Shang dynasty, about 1500 BC. What, if not the future, were these people interested in?

Certainly not "the Future" or "Time" in any sense the European tradition would vouch for. When enterprising at all to discuss anything remotely equivalent, the ancient Chinese texts elaborate on *zhou*(4) 宙: the "duration", or rather, verbally, "durating". The canonical definition for *zhou*(4) 宙 is given in the *Huainanzi* (before 139 BC):

往古來今謂之宙。Past and present, going and coming: this is called durating. (*Huainanzi* 11)

Noticeably missing in that definition is, once again, the future. "Durating" is defined as an incessant passage between present and past: no future is mentioned here. The definition given here is in itself an explanation or a commentary on an even earlier attempt to hint at "durating". A sophistic text from the fourth century BC makes the following, quite peculiar point:

宙，彌異時也。Durating: this is: pervading different moments (*Mozi* 經上40)

Shi(2) 時, the "moment": we have now come full circle, coming back to *shi*(2)*jian*(1) 時間 "time": for "time" is not a concept, a line extending from past to future, but really just an interval, the interval between moments: *shi*(2)*jian*(1): 時間.

The Chinese (Marcel Granet said this first) did not develop any abstract concepts of space and time, but instead correlations of positions and moments. The "moment" *shi*(2) 時 is not a neutral point or stretch of time: the earliest and most common meaning is "season", as in: the four seasons (*si*(4)*shi*(2) 四時): spring, summer, fall and winter. As such, the seasons differ from one another, each season having its own duties, its own course of action: sowing, harvesting and everything in between. Seasonal knowledge means: to know when to do what, to time yours actions, to avoid haste and delay. If you manage to do this, you will succeed without effort (like the sage):

動善時。The efficacy of (the initiation of) movement is in its timeliness (*Laozi* 8)

In a brave and astonishing move, the Chinese tradition has preferred to concentrate on this moment: time is the going and coming of these qualitatively different moments, of ever changing conjunctions of supporting and obstructing factors, of shifting propensities (*shi*(4) 勢 : aspect, circumstance, situation, conditions, (strategic) position, (geographical) configuration). So *shi*(2) 時 came to mean not only "season" and "moment", but more specifically "opportunity" and "occasion". It is this "moment", this "occasion", the Chinese

divination is interested in: the oracle is a technique to determine the propensities of the moment it is conducted. It does not elaborate on the future, but on the present.

Unlike the Near East and the Mediterranean, China never checked the intestines of sacrificed animals for indications of future events. The Chinese developed other techniques, two of which are, for all their peculiarity, their importance to the Chinese tradition and to our understanding of Early China, to be introduced in some detail.

At around 1900, two Chinese literati made an astonishing discovery: the "dragonbones" sold in Beijing's pharmacies (to be ground and drunk against all sorts of maladies) actually bore inscriptions, inscriptions done in a somewhat strange style, but nevertheless clearly decipherable. Thus Wang Yirong and Liu E discovered the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang dynasty.¹ Now we know about 100.000 of such oracle inscriptions, basically all of them unearthed at the ancient Shang temple/palace-complex at Anyang. The Shang divination inscriptions form the earliest body of Chinese writing yet known.

These oracles were of extreme importance to the state of Shang; the oracle covering every aspect of the king's function: schedule of sacrifices, military campaigns, promotion of office-holders, settlement building, hunts – just about everything. A whole class of specialists was engaged in conducting the oracle, this being in itself a pretty complex procedure: the scapula of a sacrificed oxen or the plastron of a turtle (apparently imported from the South) had to be cleaned and prepared by drilling orderly series of hollows or depressions into the bone. Then heat would be applied to one or more of the hollows, thus producing omen-cracks that were not free-form, but structured, assuming specific shapes in specific places. These cracks, T-shaped for the most, would then be read and interpreted. (Indeed, the character bu(3) 卜 "to perform divination by heating tortoise shells; assign, match to" is said to be a pictographic

¹ The Shang dynasty (商: ca. 1500 – 1000 BC) is the first tangible state-like organization of China and was, up to this discovery, considered half legendary. We don't know much about the Early Shang. At around 1300, the Shang experienced a rapid succession of new inventions: metallurgy, the chariot, architectural techniques, divinatory practices, writing.

Shang society consisted of peasants and the nobility, in some aspects it prefigured the feudal structures of later dynasties. The king and the king's family stood at the top of a clan organization, where the head of the family was at the same time in charge of the ancestral rites and sacrifices. Tang, the founder of the Shang dynasty, was considered the father of all Shang, and in this function he'd be called *tian*(1) 天, which later came to mean "heaven".

representation of these cracks.) Only later, the engravers would take over and inscribe the record: the date, the name of the diviner in charge, the question, very rarely the answer. The engravers would also clearly mark the cracks; finally, the plastrons would be bound together and stored away in giant archives.

Unfortunately, we have no clue in which way these omen-cracks were actually interpreted. These diviners were by no means prophets: they were sober professionals, trying to decipher the mechanisms of society as much as those of the weather and the stars. Not one of the related artefacts indicates the diviners' interest or understanding of the future was something else than the meteorologist's or astronomer's: you would want to know exactly when the next eclipse or winter solstice will occur – but you would need no concept of 'future' for doing so. As could be expected of a medium designed for supporting the ruling class, the oracle bone inscriptions never once hint at the possibility of a real change of the system: the future will unfurl only within the given parameters of 'now', according to the possibilities and tendencies of this moment.

Whereas the future was of no concern to the diviners of the Shang court, the past was indeed: The giant archives amassed by them very quickly amounted to something we could call a material (if not yet conceptual) past: a body of documents available for comparison, scrutiny and research: a science of precedents. In a way, these records and their terse diction really do prefigure the early historical writings like the *Chunqiu* (春秋, covering the period from 722 to 481 BC). These early records, arranged in chronological order and composed in very terse style, appear entirely impersonal and chronicle internal affairs, diplomatic conferences, feudal wars and occasional records of eclipses, earthquakes and prodigies of nature: just like the oracle bone inscriptions. In fact, the ancient title *Astrologer* (Shi(3): 史) later came to mean "Historian". To put it boldly: These ancient diviners were not futurologists, but should become the first institutional historians.

About 1000 BC the Shang were overthrown by the Zhou 周. The Zhou did maintain a massive interest in divinations, the *Zhouli* (*Rites of the Zhou* 周禮, originally known as *Zhouguan: Offices of the Zhou* 周官) includes among the imperial offices a plethora of divinatory and magical offices such as the *Grand Augur* (卜師), the *Interpreter of Dreams* (占夢), the *Grand Intercessor* (大祝), the *Imprecator* (詛祝), the *Chief of the Shamans* (司巫) and the *Hereditary Magical Chancellor* (方象師). Nevertheless, the Zhou discontinued the tradition

of the oracle bone inscriptions. Instead, they installed the divination by milfoil stalks. Why milfoil, we don't really know, but this is what we today still call the *Yijing* (易經).

The *Yijing* is a text, a permutation and a technique at the same time. As a technique, it constitutes a clean break with the interpretational challenges posed by the oracle bones of the Shang: no more cracks to decipher, no more readings of pre-script patterns. Instead, the Zhou introduced an objectified calculus into the realm of divination. For performing a divination, the Zhou diviner would start with 50 stalks of milfoil in his hands:

大衍之數五十，其用四十有九。分而為二以象兩，掛一以象三，揲之以四以象四時，歸奇於扚以象閏。五歲再閏，故再扚而後掛。

The numbers of the Great Expansion, (multiplied together), make 50, of which (only) 49 are used (in divination). (The stalks representing these) are divided into two heaps to represent the two (emblematic lines, or heaven and earth). One is then taken (from the heap on the right), and placed (between the little finger of the left hand and the next), that there may thus be symbolised the three (powers of heaven, earth, and man). (The heaps on both sides) are manipulated by fours to represent the four seasons; and then the remainders are returned, and placed (between) the two middle fingers of the left hand, to represent the intercalary month. In five years there are two intercalations, and therefore there are two operations; and afterwards the whole process is repeated. (*Yijing, Xici shang*, 9)

The oracle's answer is in the first step not so much interpreted or read or deciphered, but calculated: the divination's outcome is arrived at by dividing a heap of counting rods and manipulating them in a predefined calculus. These same counting rods and their manipulation also take an important part in the ancient board game *liubo* (六博: *Six Sticks*), known since the Shang dynasty. Although we don't know the exact rules and proceedings of this game, the participants obviously had to manipulate six sticks and move their pieces according to the figures obtained. The *liubo*-game and especially the *liubo*-board are deeply related to the divination boards of the geomancers and the astrologers' tables. The milfoil stalks of the *Zhouyi* and their manipulation (counting through by four; checking of remainders) also seem to be deeply related to the use of counting rods in the beginnings of Chinese arithmetic, and to prefigure the earliest extant arithmetic textbook, the *Jiuzhang suanshu* (九章算術: *Nine Treatises on the Art of Calculation*), in which methods of solution are given rhetorically, in the form of instructions to perform a series of arithmetical operations very similar to the above quoted phrasing of the *Zhouyi*. The amount of mathematical knowledge build into the divination technique becomes evident when scrutinizing the arithmetical operations in the manipulation of the stalks: this method is a biased random number generator, the possible outcomes thus not being equally probable. In fact, this method ensures results with maximum momentum.

As a text, it is called *The Book of Changes* and constitutes perhaps the single most important text in China's intellectual history. However, the *Yijing* is not so much one text as rather a

complex of texts: having undergone a long process of interpretation and re-interpretation, the *Yijing* came to incorporate a massive body of commentary (known as the *Ten Wings* 十翼). What we are interested in here is the earliest stratum of the *Yijing*: the *Zhouyi*, the *Changes of the Zhou*, which attained its final form (probably) towards the end of the ninth century BC and represents the accumulated experiences of divination by the Zhou court astrologers (Shi(3)史). The *Zhouyi* is organized around 64 permutations of six 'broken' and 'solid' lines, usually referred to as hexagrams. So, it is not so much a text comprised by letters or characters, but rather by patterns and their permutations.

The front cover shows one alignment of the 64 hexagrams, developed by Shao Yong (邵雍: 1011-1077) and later transmitted by the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who used this alignment to establish his system of binary notation and calculation. As you can see, each hexagram can be derived from the previous one by changing one or more of its lines. Indeed, these transitions from one hexagram to the next are exactly what the *Zhouyi* is all about. Each hexagram is thought to depict in some way a specific cosmic or human situation, but understood not as static, but as constantly moving and changing: situations, discernible as such only in the process of change. Each hexagram contains in itself, by virtue of potentiality and change, every other hexagram, and exactly in the same way, every cosmic or social situation is thought to contain potentially every other situation.

The *Zhouyi* thus enlists 64 hexagrams, each of those in the process of interpretation changing into another one of the 64 hexagrams, resulting in 4096 different mutations. The numerological rigidity of the *Zhouyi* places "every" conceivable development in this tightly knit network, "every" development is thought to take place within this closed up framework.

觸類而長之，天下之能事畢矣。

If we prolonged each [hexagram] by the addition of the proper lines, then all events possible under the sky would be complete. (*Yijing, Xici shang*, 9)

Development, in the context of the *Zhouyi*, is transformation (變化) and continuation (變通):

變通配四時In its *continuous changes*, it corresponds to the four seasons (*Yijing, Xici shang*, 6)

or:

變通者，趣時者也。Their *continuous changes*, however varied, are according to the moments (when they take place). (*Yijing, Xici xia*, 1)

and:

變化者，進退之象也。The *transformations* (of the lines of the hexagrams) are the emblems of the advance and retrogression (of the vital force in nature). (*Yijing, Xici shang*, 2)

Development thus is thought of as transformation and continuation, but not as a qualitative difference that would one day explode the framework itself. Since every hexagram contains in

itself every other hexagram, since every situation contains in itself every other possible situation, the present contains in itself every possible future.

The *Zhouyi*, as a diviner's handbook, enables, supports and informs a bibliomantic practice, and as such, it does indeed show a trait peculiar to language and script: circularity. Just remember the *Shuowen jiezi*, the first Chinese dictionary (說文解字, 121 AD), trying to define a couple of technical terms:

卦	gua(4)	Divination using the <i>Yijing</i> ; diviner; hexagram. 〈筮也〉 "Divination by milfoil stalks"
筮	shi(4)	Divination by milfoil stalks. 〈易卦用蓍也〉 "Changing hexagrams by using milfoil"

And just as dictionaries necessarily have to go in circles, the interpretation of a given hexagram relies on the understanding of other hexagrams, as in the following case: The *Wenyan*-commentary (文言) on the second hexagram *Kun* 坤 struggles to explain just how change comes about and what causes things to change:

臣弑其君，子弑其父，	The minister kills his ruler, the son kills his father:
非一朝一夕之故，	This is not the result of one morning or one evening
其所由來者漸矣，	The causes come <i>gradually</i> :
由辯之不早辯也。	through the absence of early discrimination. (<i>Yijing, Wenyan, Kun</i>)

As we can see here, the commentary shows us just how these causes come about – they evolve *gradually* (jian(1) 漸). And in inquiring further, you'll very soon remark 漸 does not only designate "to moisten; to reach the point of saturation; gradually" but is the title of another hexagram, the hexagram *Jian* 漸 *Gradual Progress*. So, in order to understand the hexagram *Kun* 坤, you'll have to understand the hexagram *Jian* 漸, and in order to understand *Jian* 漸 – this is not going to end anywhere.

The change, the incessant passage from one hexagram to the next, indicates the direction the current situation is likely to take, it shows the seeds of things to come, not their final shape. This incessant change from one hexagram to the next is not only discernable on the level of the hexagrams, but also on the level of the explanation and the commentary. There is constant deferral not only on the level of the 'figures', but also on the level of the characters; constant deferral not only on the graphical, but also on the semantic plane: Meaning, in the *Zhouyi*, is constantly deferred. Meaning, just as the 'future', has *not yet* been arrived at, and this evasion, in some way, is not only appropriate for a text that is a diviner's handbook, but also a very remarkable achievement indeed.