

# *Zhouyi*:

## The Starting Point of Chinese Philosophy

*The Book of Changes* (*Zhouyi* 周易) is the fundamental resource of Chinese philosophy. All sub-divisions of Chinese philosophy, such as political philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, even ethics and aesthetics are rooted in the philosophy of *The Book of Changes*. It is *Zhouyi* that shapes the unique Chinese philosophical awareness. In other words, the ultimate origin of Chinese philosophical awareness is rooted in the exclusive thinking paradigm involved in the *Zhouyi* philosophical system.

## CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

## A Mystical and Profound Classic

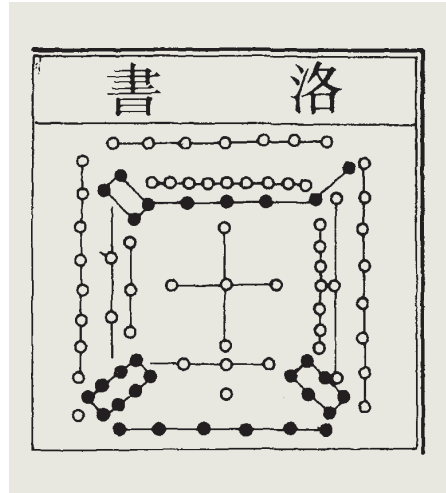
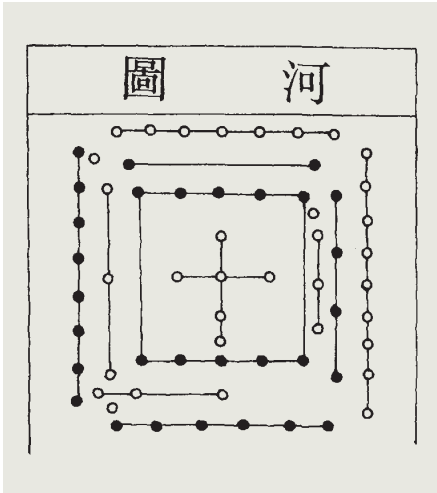
*Zhouyi* is a book written to reveal the *dao* of things changing between heavens and earth, which in ancient Chinese refers to the world as a whole. It aims to help things flourish and facilitate human affairs. The authors of the *Zhouyi* imitate the changing myriad things in the cosmos by applying a structure of hexagrams and images based on their observation of natural changes over a period of 1,500 years, from 2000 BC to 500 BC.

*Yi* in the *Zhouyi* has three meanings: (1) mutability; (2) immutability; (3) ease and simplicity. Mutability or transforming indicates that everything is forever changing and the *Zhouyi* is a book about the philosophy of change. Immutability accounts for the relatively unchanged *dao* that exists though things are always flowing. Both the *dao* of nature and human affairs might have a character of immutability, just like the patterns in handling things and the principle of moving things. The third connotation of *yi* is ease and simplicity because the *dao* of *yi* is easy to understand, and simple to be put into practice even if things constantly change, making the *Zhouyi* complicated in nature.

The *Zhouyi* is composed of the following elements: numbers, images, trigrams, hexagrams and words.

The basis of the *Zhouyi* is its unique philosophy of numbers. It is said in the *Great Appendix* (*dazhuan* 大传): “The Yellow River brought forth the *He-tu*, and Luo River brought forth the *Luo-shu*, and sages imitated them to create *The Book of Changes*.” In the ancient legend, the dragon-horse jumped out of Yellow River with *He-tu* on its back, and the divine tortoise floated on the Luo River with *Luo-shu* on its back. When Fu Xi saw them, he created the eight trigrams according to its philosophy of numbers. The *He-tu* and *Luo-shu* were formed through the inter-changing of the natural numbers of heaven and earth. Odd (*yang*) numbers move and even (*yin*) numbers remain stable. *He-tu* is formed by





*He-tu and Luo-shu*

numbers one to ten, and *Luo-shu* is formed by numbers one to nine.

*He-tu* and *Luo-shu* inform people to separate *yin* from *yang* based on the odd and even nature of numbers. The system of numbers and tri/hexagrams is balanced in the *Zhouyi* and its philosophy of numbering can be explained through *Luo-shu*, which discloses the relationship between numbers and tri/hexagrams. This philosophy of numbering displays the rigor and efficiency of the philosophical reasoning of ancient Chinese people, though it lacks the structure of Western analytical philosophizing.

The appliance of numbers in the *Zhouyi* system is involved in its method of divination, calculating a tri/hexagram over intricate steps.

This image is the basis for constructing the *Zhouyi* into a book. *Xiang* 象 (image) means to imitate and represent. Each trigram represents a kind of thing or event in the heavens-and-earth. The ancient people considered there to be eight kinds of



## CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

basic things in the world, and characterized them to be heavens, earth, thunder, wind, water, fire, mountains and lakes. Each is symbolized by a trigram: Qian 乾, Kun 坤, Zhen 震, Xun 巽, Kan 坎, Li 离, Gen 艮, Dui 兑.

If one wants to comprehend the tangible image of the eight trigrams, one needs to clarify the image indications via *Explaining Trigrams* (*shuogua* 说卦) of the *Great Appendix*, an article that explicates images. It discusses images and directions of the pre-heavens and post-heavens trigrams, and explains how each symbolizes a series of objects or events.

*Zhouyi* was created by people who lived in the central area around the Yellow River for many generations. The basic component of the trigrams is the undivided line “-,” i.e., *yang*/strong line, or broken line “- -,” i.e., *yin*/soft line. The *yang* line represents *yangqi*, and the *yin* line represents *yinqi*. The communication of *yinqi* and *yangqi* produce myriad things. The crossing of three lines constitutes one of eight trigrams, and the duplication of one trigram with another forms one of the sixty-four hexagrams. The first of the sixty-four hexagrams is Hexagram Qian, which is composed of six yang lines; and the second hexagram is Hexagram Kun, which is made up of six yin lines.

The words of the *Zhouyi* have two sections: one is the *Classic* (*jing* 经) and the other is the *Commentaries* (*zhuan* 传). It is said that the *Classic* was created by both Fu Xi and King Wen of Zhou. The *Classic* is less than 5,000 words, and it is ancient, obscure, succinct and profound. It explains each line in each hexagram. Over time, numerous commentaries have been developed for the *Classic* alone. *Zhouyi* is a book made through the process of observing images and attaching words. In ancient times, philosophers hung woodcuts representing hexagrams, and read images through the trigrams and changing lines. The trigram *Qian*, for example, symbolizes *tian*, ruler and father, and its crossing



line movements intrigue more moving images. Hexagrams and lines are thus produced via the transcription of these ancient observations.

The *Great Appendix* elucidates the *Classic*, so it is alleged to be its supplement. To understand the *Zhouyi* today, we must rely on the *Great Appendix*. According to the traditional view, the author of the *Great Appendix* was Confucius, who read *Zhouyi* so diligently in his later years that the leather bond of his bamboo slips broke several times. Confucius was afraid that people after him might not be able to understand the meaning of the *Zhouyi*, so he compiled the ten articles of the *Great Appendix*, which is called “Ten Wings,” in the light of their accompaniment to the *Classic*. The *Attaching Statements* are a philosophical elucidation of the *Classic* with profound philosophical meanings. *Explaining Trigrams* (*Shuogua* 说卦) explains the symbolism of the eight trigrams and their characteristics.

## From *Taiji* to Eight Trigrams

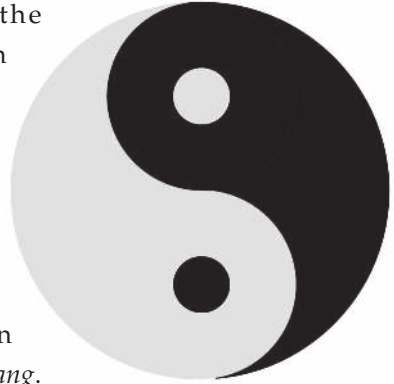
From the perspective of existence, *Zhouyi* considers everything in the world as having a *taiji*, and purports the universe as a whole to be a *taiji* also. From the perspective of evolution, the *taiji* is the starting point of the universe. It is said in the *Attaching Statements*: “In the Yi there is the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) which produces the Two Forms. The Two Forms generate the Four Images, and these Four Images give birth to the eight trigrams.” This alludes to the evolution of cosmological process, and it also suggests that things or events can be divided into different parts, but are continuous through parts and a whole.

The diagram to represent the Great Ultimate is the *Taiji* Diagram, which is composed of a white half circle and black half circle, with a moving line splitting them apart in between. Both half circles look like fishes, so the *Taiji* Diagram is also



CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

called “yin-yang fishes.” It assumes the universe starts with an original *qi*, which is malleable to transform into *yinqi* and *yangqi*. *Yangqi* is light and clear, so it rises to be *tian* (heavens), while *yinqi* is heavy and dirty, falling down to be earth. This is the cosmological starting process of the heavens and earth. In other words, everything is a *taiji* (great ultimate) when whole, and can be divided into *yin* and *yang*.



Taiji Diagram

“The Two Forms generate the Four Images” means that both *yin* and the *yang* forms generate one *yin* and one *yang* independently, and the Four Images come into being: *taiyang*, *shaoyin*, *shaoyang*, *taiyin*. Each of these Four Images gives birth to one *yin* and one *yang*, thus shaping the eight trigrams.

There are two groups of the Eight Trigrams: the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams and the Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams. The sequence of the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams is: *Qian* 乾, *Dui* 兑, *Li* 离, *Zhen* 震, *Xun* 巽, *Kan* 坎, *Gen* 艮, *Kun* 坤, and each of them resonates with a fundamental thing-image in the universe: *tian* (heavens), lakes, fire, thunder, wind, water, mountains and earth.



The Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams (*xiantian bagua*).

The Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams represent the initial circumstances of nature. It is said in *Explaining Trigrams* (*Shuogua* 说卦), “Heavens and earth determine the direction. The forces of mountains



ZHOUYI:  
 THE STARTING POINT OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

and lakes are continuous. Thunder and wind arise from one another. Water and fire do not combat each other. Thus are the eight trigrams intermingled.” This represents the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams. For the ancients, the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams symbolized the original proto-types of the world. However, after the original *qi* was divided, its nature remained the same, and the Great Ultimate evolved into Two Forms, Four Images, and Eight Trigrams. It is an example of the continuity of the one and the many that nature persists through various modes.

The Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams (*houtian bagua* 后天八卦) is the rearrangement of the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams. Sima Qian, the Han Dynasty historian, writes that “King Wen of Zhou performed *Zhouyi* when he was in prison.” Ji Chang, the King of Zhou was the leader of the Zhou State at the end of the Shang Dynasty. He was imprisoned by King Zhou of Yin in the City of Youli for seven years merely on account of his “frankness.” King Zhou of Yin murdered Ji Kao, the elder son of King Wen, chopped his corpse, made bread with it and forced King Wen to eat it. The old King Wen, at the age of eighty-two, was forced to eat his son’s flesh while weeping. He devoted the remainder of his life to the trigrams, and rearranged the Pre-Heavens Eight Trigrams of Fu Xi to be the Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams, later named after him.

The Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams start from the East, and are arranged clockwise. The Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams



The Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams (*houtian bagua*).



## CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

correspond with the directions and seasons, as well as the movement of the Big Dipper. Therefore, the appliance of the *Zhouyi* is based on the Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams and extends to ancient knowledge of astrology, geography, music, military strategy, mathematics, medicine, *feng shui* and even pills of immortality. The Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams created by King Wen of Zhou are said to be the theoretical foundation of the ancient Chinese pragmatic culture.

*Zhouyi* was created in the area of the Yellow River. Ancients observed the changing phenomena in the sky and on the earth over thousands of years, and developed a theory of Five Processes (*wuxing*) in which one produces and conquers another based on living experience. Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water correspond with the four directions and the center. In the sequence of wood-fire-earth-metal-water, each is the cause of its successor, and each destroys its successor's successor. In other words, the sequence of generating is wood-fire-earth-metal-water-wood; whereas the sequence of destruction is: wood-earth-water-fire-metal-wood. These patterns help to explain the Post-Heavens Eight Trigrams.

## The Philosophy of *Zhouyi*

For *Zhouyi* philosophy, *dao* is moving between the heavens and the earth. *Zhouyi's dao* of *tian* is embodied in human social



To aid memory, Zhu Xi wrote a song of corresponding images of the eight trigrams in his *Original Meaning of Zhouyi*.





relationships, and penetrates to the *dao* of ordinary things that are engaged with human beings.

The *dao* of *Zhouyi* holds, “the movement of one yin and one yang is the *dao*.” One starts from *dao* to fulfill one’s nature and thoroughly understand one’s destiny. The *Zhouyi* stresses penetration into the minute changes of things, and reveals the continuity between mind and events. The *Zhouyi* clarifies human affairs through the understanding of the *dao* of *tian*. It encourages people to illuminate the *dao* of *tian*, and thoroughly disclose the magically transforming patterns of complex human affairs. In this way, people may come to understand the time and space in which they are located, and enhance their power to manipulate the changing world.

*Zhouyi* philosophy maintains that everything in the world has both *yin* and *yang*. The movement of *yin* and *yang* forms the *dao*. The *yin* and *yang* are the basic symbol of the *Zhouyi*, and can be illustrated by the *yin-yang* fishes in the *Taiji* Diagram. The *yin* and *yang* mutually contain one another, and transform to be the other. The ancients tried to tell us that all things and events contain both *yin* and *yang*, which are forever transforming.

Everything is a continuity of *yin* and *yang*, which cannot be viewed as separate oppositions. *Yin* and *yang* stand relative to one another. For example, if the front is *yang*, then the back is *yin*; if the up is *yang*, then the down is *yin*; if the left is *yang*, then the right is *yin*. *Zhouyi* puts forth a *yin-yang* contextualizing paradigm quite different from Western models of separate opposing parts.

According to *Zhouyi*, what follows the development of a moving *dao* is the good, and what this *dao* fulfills is natural. Good is the original character of the heavenly moving *dao*, and nature is the concrete beings that *dao* has concretized to be particular individuals. Thus, nature is the root within which every being in reality exists. The *Zhouyi*’s structure linking *dao* to nature to



## CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

destiny provides an explanation for the concrete existence of the whole world. Its theory in itself presents a dynamic metaphysical system full of creativity.

In understanding the continuity of mind and events, most Chinese philosophers do not apply analytical methodology in solving epistemological problems like their Western counterparts. Most Chinese philosophers seem to feel that logical deduction does not help in understanding the epistemological object. Many Chinese philosophers opted to face things or events directly. They felt that the world could only be understood in totality by intuitive thought.

Generally speaking, people have difficulty fathoming their own time and existence, and can only conceive of them through philosophical speculation. *Zhouyi* is a book that assists people in realizing their own time and position. The lines in a hexagram illustrate time and space so as to aid people in understanding their own context. The time and space in which people live are changing, as are their propensities and social status. It is useful for one to understand the proper strategies with regard to these variables. People cannot transcend the time and space in which they are situated, and they need to pay attention to them when acting. In everyone's living environment, the outer conditions create an irreversible effect. A person as an acting agent should be habituated to his or her environment. *Zhouyi* informs people that one should comprehend the time and space he or she is situated in, remain aware of possible outcomes, and lead the development of habitual events. Exercising a free will, the human mind will make more appropriate choices in a situated context. In this way, the *Zhouyi* illuminates the *dao* of *tian*, and thus helps people to live a better life.

The *Zhouyi* takes human beings to be a part of natural process. Human beings have been correlative to natural changes since the dawn of time. Living in the world lets one's thinking and

