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.
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...
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
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 艮, 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
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.

“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 震, 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 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
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) 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...
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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
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
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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