

ANALOGUES OF KARMA IN THE *ZHOUYI*

By Denis Mair

Basically, I view *yin-yang* in the *Yijing* as an analogue of karma---that is, a way of talking about moral cause and effect. Looking at the overall structure of the *Zhouyi*, I see a framework for describing the consequences brought on by action. I believe that moral cause and effect is a pan-Asian idea: in India, it was articulated as karma; in China, it was articulated through yin-yang philosophy and the symbols of the *Yijing*.

Actually, the words “yin” and “yang” are not found in the original text of the *Zhouyi*. The original text, which dates back to the early Zhou, consists of only 64 hexagram names, 64 hexagram figures, 64 hexagram judgments, and 384 line statements. The “Ten Wings” or “Treatises” (attached later to make the *Yijing*) use “yin” and “yang” to characterize change as an ebb-and-flow process involving complementary polarities.

A good deal of our understanding of the *Zhouyi* is based on a “yin-yang” interpretation of broken and unbroken lines. The *Zhouyi* begins with the seminal Qian and Kun hexagrams, which readers habitually identify with yang and yin. But the concepts of Qian and Kun have a primordial beauty of their own; they are generalized, complementary states of existence or experience, rather than being abstract, ideal polarities. A reader should notice how Qian and Kun function and interact in their own context, without jumping to equate them with yang and yin.

Actually, the core text is rich with symmetries beyond the simple pairing of yin and yang. For instance, there are several instances in the *Zhouyi* where the fire trigram is placed symmetrically with the water trigram. An “ebb-and-flow” philosophy is implicit in the *Zhouyi*, but it includes the interaction of trigrams, at a symbolic level above the interaction of positive and negative lines. If we want to talk about moral cause and effect (i.e., the moral consequences of action), we need a richer descriptive fabric than mere polarity, and this is something the *Zhouyi* offers.

The more I read through the *Zhouyi*, the more I find that its symbols point to the consequences of action. Take for instance *gen*, the mountain trigram. Generalizing its meaning from all the hexagrams it is found in, I have found its central meaning to be “the sedimentation of history” or “the residue of action.” The natural image of “mountain” and its potency of “keeping still” tell us little, until we see how they are applied figuratively in combination with other trigrams. Take for instance #4 Youthful

Folly (Unknowing), with *gen* above and *kan* (water) below. *Gen* is the result of action, and here it forms a circumstance that the learner must deal with. At the same time, *kan* is an unpredictable flow that our actions feed into. Here we have two aspects of causality: the formations that influence all later developments, and the flux that we get swept up in, regardless of our intentions. No wonder that Hexagram #4 is a symbol of a learning situation. Some things won't change even though we want them to, and other things tend to sweep us along, even though we want them to stop. This is a learning situation because we are dealing with a bewildering juxtaposition of two faces of change.

There are certain paths of symbolic association which have broad diffusion among human peoples. It is no accident that water and mountains are associated with aspects of moral causality in Buddhism as well as in the *Zhouyi*. Buddhists speak of delusive mental formations (the five skandhas) as bandits that hide in mountain caves. They also speak of the realm of samsara as a "bitter flood" in which we are swept away, through one incarnation after another.

But *kan* and *gen* are not the only trigrams that bear upon cause and effect in the *Zhouyi*. Being composed completely of symbols, the *Zhouyi* cannot discuss issues discursively, but it makes up for that by giving a fuller account of karma figuratively. The *li* trigram (fire) has to do with highlighted relations---the pattern of finite relations which vision picks out among the sum of possible relations. Such highlighting allows for the shared vision and patterning of culture. But highlighting also implies discrimination, and discriminations end up having a karmic effect: they determine habits of seeing that will influence our judgment, predisposing us to see some things and not others. All the other trigrams have their own special karmic relevance. The reader can explore these for herself.

The concepts of "yin" and "yang" are rationalized, abstracted polarities which can apply to specific relations of balance, complementarity, or dynamic opposition. They are habitually associated with paired attributes such as passive/active, coalescent/expansive, creative/receptive. Many people view yin and yang not just as polar attributes but as actual forces operating through *qi*. *Qi* is thought to be a highly inclusive medium for various energy states.

I do not understand how yin and yang can be an actual, self-consistent forces existing on many levels. In this respect, I feel no need to subscribe to traditional ideas of yin and yang where they conflict with my understanding of living systems. A

tapeworm may have a lot of yang energy, as far as its own physiology goes, but when it parasitizes me, it represents yin. Thus I believe that the “yin” or “yang” quality of a given energy state has to do with the organic framework in which I view it. Actually, clear thinking philosophers of antiquity did not try to literalize or substantialize yang either. The “Great Treatise” of the *Yijing* says that “yin and yang can change into each other.” To me that is evidence that ancient thinkers treated yin-yang as a generalized polarity scheme to be correlated empirically with observed energy fluctuations. If yang is a self-subsistent force, having an independent essence, how can it “ebb” or run down? If yang exists in and of itself, how come it includes a spot of yin? It is only because yang is a product of conditions (including its relations with yin) that it can reach its zenith and then decline. I think we should not suppose that the ancient Chinese lacked the sophistication to contemplate the conditioned causation of natural processes in abstract terms. I believe that the ebb and flow philosophy of yin and yang is another way of talking about conditioned causation, analogous to the Buddhist twelve-step cycle of dependent origination. The Chinese view of yin-yang places conditioned causation against a backdrop of heaven and earth, emphasizing the playing out of energy states. The Buddhist idea of dependent origination emphasizes the mind-ground. But both of them are a way of visualizing how present actions determine future states of being. In other words, yin-yang cosmology, when applied to human affairs by a clear-headed thinker, yields a perspective similar to that of Buddhism: rather than having a permanent, independent essence, living things are produced by a confluence of conditions and processes. It is no accident that early Daoists arrived at the idea of *chongxu* (“unbounded emptiness”) which was analogous to Buddhist ideas of *sunyata* (“void”). The idea of fundamental emptiness fits together with idea of yin-yang as conditioned causation.

In Buddhism, moral causality or karma is explained in several ways, but it always boils down to residues or impurities which clog one’s original Buddha nature and thereby affect our subsequent incarnations. It may be explained in terms of the five skandhas: these are knots (dispositional formations) which result when desire grasps at illusory forms or notions of self. Another way of explaining karma is used by the Conscious Only School, which speaks of *bimas* or seeds which are deposited in one’s *alaya* (storehouse) consciousness every time one grasps at an illusory form. Whatever the nature of the impurities, they will affect our subsequent incarnations. Even in this lifetime, the karma of previous notions will affect what notions we can entertain later.

Buddhist believers try to improve their mind-karma by bowing to the Buddha or chanting his name. But the fundamental way to liberate ourselves from illusory desire is to realize the emptiness of our original nature. Such realization of empty-naturedness is our true path to liberation. [1]

In the *Zhouyi*, the consequences of action are worked out by considering situations. Situations have various stages or approaches (symbolized by the line positions), and they give way to new situations. A situation is a combination of outside circumstances and inward subjective states (often symbolized by the inner and outer trigrams). Any time one hexagram changes into another, there are many factors to consider. Here are some factors which impinge on a line statement's meaning [2]: centrality, position, correctness, resonance, proximity, extremity, inter-trigram dynamic, hexagram situation, and inter-hexagram context. A line-change is thought to be conditioned by all these factors. Therefore, I see the conditions leading to a change as a summation of increments leading to a phase change. These conditions may be operative for some time before they tip the situation into a change. While such a change is incubating, there are also forces at work to keep it where it is. In other words, the paths of transformation among various hexagrams (i.e., line changes that yield new hexagrams) can be interpreted as a variety of stochastic processes. These processes often include mental and psychological variables, but such variables are not seen to differ in essence from outward conditions and natural forces. In other words, moral causality is just like any other causality: it is a natural process that is played out between heaven and earth.

Notes:

[1] I have translated Dharma Master Yin Shun's lectures on the *Ratnakuta (Assembled Jewels) Sutra*. This is an early Mahayana sutra---largely a collection of parables about the emptiness of our fundamental nature. If you would like a look, I can send you the text files.

[2] A line statement's meaning is integrated with its action.