

Teaching the BOOK OF CHANGES

By Tze-ki Hon

Change is very much part of our lives, but there seem to be more abrupt and fundamental changes as we approach the new century and the new millennium. One of these changes is perspective. Our “global village” is increasingly complex, pluralistic, and ambiguous. Yet many of us are still captives of a mode of thinking which is derived from a bipolar world order, a gender-divided society, and a Eurocentric classificatory system. How to educate our students to embrace plurality and ambiguity, and how to articulate a philosophy of change which allows our students to see change as an opportunity for growth, are the two most pressing questions for educators today. In this essay, I suggest ways of teaching the *Book of Changes* (the *I Ching* or *Yijing*)¹ that would help to prepare our students for the twenty-first century.



Ideogram 1 meaning “change.”

The first thing we can do in teaching the BOOK OF CHANGES is to use the sixty-four hexagrams to illustrate the co-dependence of freedom and discipline, and creativity and training.

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Ethical-Philosophical Text

The *Book of Changes* consists of sixty-four hexagrams—configurations of six lines either of yang nature (symbolized by a straight line —) or yin nature (symbolized by a broken line - -). It is a popular Chinese classic in the West, along with the *Analects* and the *Dao De Jing*. But, unlike the other two, it is read more as a mysterious text than a book of wisdom. Its popularity is derived largely from its being perceived as a manual of divination, foretelling the future based on a simple method of coin or stick throwing.² Its mysterious aura is further enhanced by its hexagrams being widely used in geomancy (*fengshui*).³

While divination is indeed part of the earlier layer of the text,⁴ what has made the *Book of Changes* a classic canonized in the Confucian and Daoist traditions is that it addresses profound questions concerning human existence. Similar to the Bible, it explains the genesis of the universe, the mission of humankind, and the moral responsibility of each individual. But different from the Bible, it centers not on a monotheistic god, but on human efforts at improving their lives amid change.⁵ In the *Book of Changes*, there is an explicit optimism about human efficacy, which Richard Wilhelm summarizes as follows:

Within set limits [one] is not merely master of his own fate, he is also in a position to intervene in the course of events considerably beyond his own sphere. But, it is his task to recognize these limits and remain within them. And to further this understanding by putting the experience of olden times and its wise men at his disposal, the *Book of Changes* was written.⁶

In teaching the *Book of Changes*, our goal is to educate our students about how one may master one's life within set limits. Assisted by the visual images of the sixty-four hexagrams, we demonstrate how one can turn limits into assets by finding out: (1) the situation one is in, (2) the position one assumes in that situation, and (3) one's room to maneuver and the best time to act.

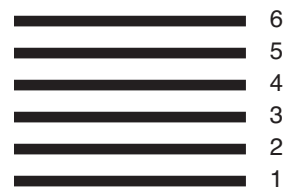
Hexagram as Situation

Many of our students have erroneous notions about freedom and creativity. They take freedom to mean freedom from discipline, and creativity to mean discovery made in a void. The first thing we can do in teaching the *Book of Changes* is to use the sixty-four hexagrams to illustrate the co-dependence of freedom and discipline, and creativity and training.

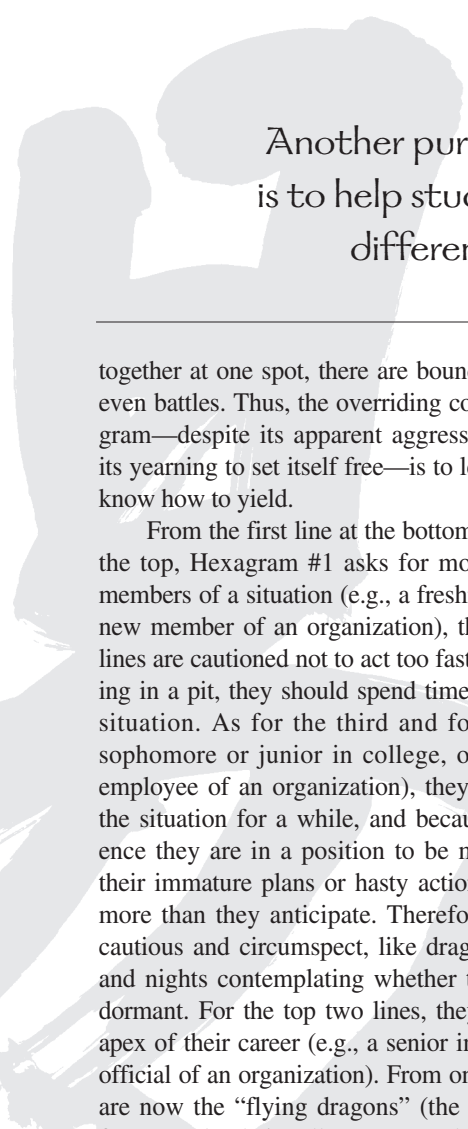
Each of the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Book of Changes* is a configuration of forces. Reading from the bottom to the top, the first two lines (lines one and two) represent the earth, the middle two lines (lines three and four) humankind, and the top two lines (lines five and six) heaven. This trinity of heaven, earth, and humankind (or *san cai*, the three potencies) is to remind us that humankind is constantly interacting with the sky above and the earth below.

Besides reaffirming the interrelationship between nature and humankind—a characteristic of Chinese philosophy—each hexagram represents a field of action consisting of six actors or factors. Offering a picture of relationships, each hexagram is a situation with multiple components locked into a complex network of correspondences. Thus, reading a hexagram is a mental exercise of surveying the general configuration of forces. It is, on the one hand, a humbling experience of knowing how greatly each actor or factor is conditioned by the external environment. It is, on the other hand, reassuring, because equipped with a knowledge of the broad picture of a situation, we are empowered to assert ourselves.

A good example of illustrating the importance of knowing the field of action is Hexagram #1 (*Qian*, the Creative).



Consisting of six yang lines, Hexagram #1 is a hexagram of dragons. All of its six members are aggressive, assertive, adventurous, and temperamental. With six ambitious and egocentric persons grouped



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together at one spot, there are bound to be conflicts or even battles. Thus, the overriding concern of this hexagram—despite its apparent aggressive propensity and its yearning to set itself free—is to learn to yield and to know how to yield.

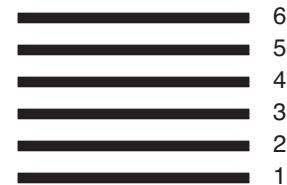
From the first line at the bottom to the sixth line at the top, Hexagram #1 asks for moderation.⁷ As new members of a situation (e.g., a freshman in college or a new member of an organization), the first and second lines are cautioned not to act too fast. Like dragons hiding in a pit, they should spend time learning about the situation. As for the third and fourth lines (e.g., a sophomore or junior in college, or a middle-ranked employee of an organization), they have been part of the situation for a while, and because of their experience they are in a position to be more assertive. But their immature plans or hasty actions may harm them more than they anticipate. Therefore they need to be cautious and circumspect, like dragons spending days and nights contemplating whether to fly or to remain dormant. For the top two lines, they have reached the apex of their career (e.g., a senior in college or the top official of an organization). From one perspective, they are now the “flying dragons” (the fifth line) who are free to make their calls. From another perspective, they are more prone to committing disastrous mistakes because of their high position. Any bad decision will cost them their career and bring the “flying dragons” into the “arrogant dragons” (the sixth line).

Thus, by training students to read hexagrams as fields of action, we help them realize that one’s performance depends as much on one’s talents as on preparation. We assist them in appreciating the importance of developing a congenial environment for success—e.g., mastering the basic skills of writing and computing, establishing priorities, and cultivating a sensitivity to the changing needs of their lives.

Position in the Field of Action

Many of our students are anxious about impending changes. Their lives seem to be dictated by many contingent factors beyond their control, e.g., the global economy, job market, government policies, and fashionable trends. Another goal in teaching the *Book of Changes* is to offer them guidance for being at ease with the uncertainty of the future.

According to the *Book of Changes*, the key to having control over one’s future is to find out one’s position in a field of action. There are two kinds of position in the *Book of Changes*. The first is position based on line correspondence. Again, let us look at Hexagram #1 as an example.

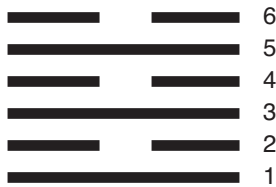


Reading from the bottom to the top, the first line is the beginning of the hexagram as well as the beginning of the lower trigram—lines one, two, and three. The first line has an affinity with the fourth line which is the beginning of the upper trigram—lines four, five, and six. Both the first line and the fourth line easily develop a friendship because they share the same concern with finding one’s way into a new situation. Similarly, the second line and the fifth line tend to ally with each other because they are the leaders of the lower and upper trigrams respectively. Conventionally, the second line is called the minister line and the fifth the ruler line. As one of the five cardinal relationships,⁸ the minister and the ruler are eager to form a working relationship to manage the state. As for the third line and the sixth line, they share the plight of being at the end of a trigram, outliving their usefulness. The two lines are eager to lend each other help, for their options are limited: either they are in transition in search of a new role, or they have to accept a lesser role as a retiree. With these line correspondences in mind, one can forge alliances and locate resources accordingly.

Besides the position in terms of line correspondence, there is also the position in terms of yin-yang correspondence.⁹ As a pair of opposites, the yin and the yang not only complement each other, but also seek each other in a field of action. Due to the compatibility of opposites, a yin and a yang form a better pair than two yangs or two yins. So the natural affinity between the first line and the fourth line, the second line and the fifth line, the third and the sixth line, will be even more productive if one of the pair is yin and the other is yang.

A good example of demonstrating the importance

of yin-yang correspondence is Hexagram #63 (*Jiji*, After Completion).



First of all, the line configuration of Hexagram #63 is such that the yin force and the yang force are in perfect position to respond to the changing needs of an evolving situation. Take a look at the lower trigram: a yang in the first line to break open the deadlock, a yin in the second line ready to work with the fifth line, and a yang in the third line to commit oneself in transition. Likewise, a perfect match is found in the upper trigram: a yin in the fourth line to ease oneself into a new role, a yang in the fifth line to take charge of business, and a yin in the sixth line willing to yield when circumstances require. Secondly, not only are the yin and yang forces well located, they correspond with each other as well. Divided into three pairs, the yang first line corresponds with the yin fourth line, the yin second line corresponds with the yang fifth line, and the yang third line corresponds with the yin sixth line. For its double perfection—line correspondence and yin-yang correspondence—Hexagram #63 is called “After Completion,” meaning that all conditions are ready for great success.¹⁰

In sum, we are not Robinson Crusoe. None of us act on our own, but as members of a team. As players in a field of action, the more we realize where we stand and from where to seek assistance, the better our chances of success. In this regard, the degree to which we are capable of controlling our future depends on how well we know our field of action, and how effectively we interact with it.

Multiple Identities

As life has become increasingly complex and pluralistic, many of our students (like ourselves) have multiple identities. They are students in school, colleagues at work, friends in social gatherings, teammates in sports events, and stepchildren in different households. Sometimes their multiple identities are harmonious, but sometimes conflictual. How to reconcile competing identities and how to find one’s true self are the major concerns of many of our students.

Another purpose of teaching the *Book of Changes* is to help students understand that a person can have different identities in different situations. For example, let us compare Hexagram #23 (*Bo*, Splitting Apart) and Hexagram #24 (*Fu*, Return).

In terms of the distribution of force, the two hexagrams are similar. Both of them have one yang line and five yin lines. The yang force is not only outnumbered but also located at the periphery. What is striking is that despite their similarities, the two hexagrams evoke different meanings, and the yang line in each hexagram plays a different role.



In Hexagram #23, the yang line is at the end of the hexagram. It is in a precarious situation where it has been pushed by the five yin lines to the outer limit of the hexagram. Far from the center of action with no assistance in sight, there is not much the yang line can do to counter the dominance of the yin. Given this situation, the best strategy for the yang line of Hexagram #23 is to yield to the yin and patiently wait for better times to come.¹¹

In sharp contrast to the miserable condition of the yang line in Hexagram #23, the yang line in Hexagram #24 is full of vitality and hope. The yang is located at the beginning of the hexagram, which gives it plenty of time and opportunity to counter the yin. More importantly, from a broader perspective, the yin force is in a process of retreating—losing ground from all six yin lines in Hexagram #2 (*Kun*, the Receptive) to now five yin lines and one yang line in Hexagram #24. Although in Hexagram #24 the yang force is far outnumbered by the yin force, the trend has been set for the return of the yang vis-a-vis the yin.¹²

This comparison of Hexagrams #23 and #24 shows that individual identity is dependent on the circumstances. Despite their common commitment to overcoming perversity, the yang in Hexagram #23 and the yang in Hexagram #24 are not exactly the same because they are in different situations. Responding to their respective environment, the yang in Hexagram #23 has to express its strength inwardly by patiently waiting for the better days to come, while the yang in Hexagram #24 can afford to express its strength outwardly in leading the way to counter yin. Knowing

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one's external environment is more than finding out where the resources are, it is in essence a discovery of oneself.

End without an Ending

As the universe is changing and moving ceaselessly (as the *Dao De Jing* suggests), so is the *Book of Changes*. It is therefore not surprising to find that the *Book of Changes* ends without an ending. Instead of giving closure to the classic or celebrating the reader's hard labor of working through the entire text, the last hexagram, Hexagram #64, reminds the reader of what lies ahead. Let us look at the hexagram image.



On the surface, Hexagram #64 seems to enjoy harmonious yin-yang pairing. Similar to Hexagram #63, its line configuration is such that a yin line corresponds with a yang line, and vice versa. For instance, the yin first line corresponds with the yang fourth line, the yang second line corresponds with the yin fifth line, and the yin fourth line corresponds with the yang sixth line.

However, upon a closer look, problems are detected. The first yin line of Hexagram #64 is too soft in fighting its way into a new situation, and the yang fourth line does not lend any help to the first line because it is absorbed in its own advancement in the upper trigram. Similarly, the second line and the fifth line are not in congenial working relationship. The yang second line as a minister is too aggressive, posing a threat to the yin fifth line, the indecisive but suspicious ruler. In the same vein, the two outer lines of the lower and upper trigrams are not well coordinated either. While the third yin line is indecisive in making the transition from the lower trigram to the upper trigram, the sixth yang line is too strong-willed to let go. Because of the undesirable position of the yin and yang forces, Hexagram #64 is called “Before Completion,” meaning that despite the potential for great success, the task at hand remains incomplete because of the poor line order.¹³

Life as a Process of Constant Renewal

Since many of our students assume life to be a linear progression, they would find the ending of the *Book of Changes* unusual. They would rather see the *Book of Changes* end with Hexagram #63—a hexagram having the perfect yin-yang pairing and the perfect line order. If indeed that is the case, their long journey of reading the book to locate the right mix of the yin force and the yang force will come to an end. Their cherished dream of finding a system wherein all participants work together like a team will be fulfilled. Yet, by ending with Hexagram #64—a hexagram with an apparent flaw—the *Book of Changes* raises a profound question, namely: should achieving perfection be our goal in life?

Hexagram #64 suggests “the drinking of wine” and “genuine confidence” in its sixth line, indicating the potential for great success.¹⁴ But along with its call for celebration, Hexagram #64 also issues stern warning against complacency. It especially cautions its reader (again in its sixth line) not to “wet one’s head” by taking too much pride in what has been accomplished. Rather, in order not to “lose the truth,” the reader needs to anticipate what is yet to be done in the future.¹⁵

Like the yin-yang circle which begins anew as it ends, hexagram #64 suggests that we better start the process of self-reflection again when things seem to be going well. Instead of setting our goal on achieving perfection and hoping that one day there will be no more work, we may be closer to truth by engaging ourselves in constant self-renewal. By remaining open-ended, the *Book of Changes* reminds us that the goal of learning is not to possess knowledge, but to participate in the continuity of change.

As many of our students are anxious about imminent changes, it is time for us to seriously consider incorporating the *Book of Changes* into our curriculum—not as an exotic text of East Asian mysticism, but as an ethical-philosophical work that wrestles with the complexity, plurality, and ambiguity of change. ■

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NOTES

1. The *Book of Changes* is also known as the *Classic of Changes*. Among its many English translations, the most reliable one is by Richard Wilhelm (rendered from German into English by Cary Baynes), *The I Ching or the Book of Changes*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950. Except for a few occasions, throughout this article I use Wilhelm's translation as the basis for my analysis.
2. For a description of how to cast a hexagram by throwing the yarrow stalks and coins, see Richard John Lynn (trans.), *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 19–22.
3. The *Book of Changes* has been widely cited as the textual basis of geomancy for many reasons. One is that the yin-yang complementarity and the position of the eight trigrams and the sixty-four hexagrams provide the theoretical explanation for harmonizing architecture with the natural surroundings. The other reason is that many cosmic diagrams related to the *Book of Changes*—e.g., the Yellow River Map (*Hetu*) and the Writing from the River Lo (*Luoshu*)—offer practical guidance for integrating man-made structure with the universe.
4. On the early layer of the *Book of Changes*, see Richard Kunst, *The Original "Yijing": A Text, Phonetic Transcription, Translation, and Indexes, with Sample Glosses*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International, 1985; and Edward Shaughnessy, *The Composition of the Zhouyi*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilm International, 1983.
5. The ethical-philosophical reading of the *Book of Changes* is one of the many ways to read the classic. Besides being read as an oracle and an ethical-philosophical text, the *Book of Changes* is also read as a series of diagrams and a mathematical treatise about the functioning of the universe. Among the four ways of reading the classic, the divinational reading is definitely the earliest, dated as early as the mid-seventh century B.C.E. (see Shaughnessy, *The Composition of the Zhouyi*). The other three readings are believed to have flourished five centuries later. As a later interpretative structure of the *Book of Changes*, the ethical-philosophical reading is legitimized by two texts. The first is the "Great Treatise" (*Xici*) which became a part of the classic around second century B.C.E. It attributes Confucius as one of the authors of the *Book of Changes* and renders the classic primarily from an ethical-philosophical perspective. The second is the commentary by Wang Bi (226–249), which transforms the classic into a work on human efforts at improving their lives amid change. This ethical-philosophical reading of the *Book of Changes* is well represented in the West. For works in English that treat the *Book of Changes* as an ethical-philosophical text, see Tze-ki Hon, *Northern Song "Yijing" and the Formation of Neo-Confucianism*. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1992; Richard John Lynn (trans.), *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; Kidder Smith et al., *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990; Hellmut Wilhelm and Richard Wilhelm, *Understanding the I Ching: The Wilhelm Lectures on the Book of Changes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
6. Hellmut Wilhelm and Richard Wilhelm, *Understanding the I Ching*, 32.
7. Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching*, 3–10.
8. The five cardinal relationships (*wu lun*) are the ruler-minister, father-son, husband-wife, elder brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. These five relationships are part of the Confucian process of learning to be human by enlarging oneself in an expanding network of human relationships. Each of the five relationships is hierarchical and yet co-dependent. Each side of a relationship must take the other side seriously in fulfilling his/her role. For a detailed discussion of the co-dependence of the five

relationships, see Tu Wei-ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985, 51–65.

9. Contrary to our conventional perception, the yin and the yang are not gender categories. The yin does not refer to female, nor the yang to male. Instead, they symbolize two cosmic forces—one yielding and the other aggressive—which keep the world constantly changing. As two cosmic forces, the yin and the yang exist in every thing (e.g., food, wind, water, and plant) and every person. A person can be yin or yang depending on his/her personality and mood. In general, a person is more yang in the daytime and more yin at night, more yang at work and more yin at rest. The key to the yin-yang correspondence is to keep the two forces in balance, rather than to allow one force to overpower the other. The reason is that, like two dancers or two players of a chess game, the yin and the yang need each other in order to manifest their full potential. For an insightful discussion of the yin and the yang, see Hellmut Wilhelm and Richard Wilhelm, 33–46.
10. Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching*, 244–48.
11. Richard Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, 280–85.
12. *Ibid.*, 285–92.
13. Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching*, 248–52.
14. *Ibid.*, 252.
15. *Ibid.*

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