

A Proposed Alternative to the Current Milfoil Divination Method of the Yijing

**By Luis E. Andrade
05/11/2008**

THE divination PROCEDURES for forming a hexagram and consulting the I Ching were prescribed by Chu Hsi (1130-1200) in Shih I. a part of his I Hsueh Ch'i Meng. Since Chu Hsi's commentaries on the Chinese Classics became the standard texts, Chinese scholars have followed his prescription obediently. The English translation of I Ching by James Legge was based upon Chu Hsi's I Hsueh Ch'i Meng and Chou I Pen I. The German translation by Richard Wilhelm was based upon the Chou I Che Chung, a collection of the Sung commentaries on the I Ching by Ch'ing scholars. Therefore, only the Sung version of the divination procedures is available in the West. Scholars like C. G. Jung, Hellmut Wilhelm' and Wayne McEvilly followed his version to form hexagrams and to consult the I Ching.

It was Jung who first introduced the concept of "synchronicity" in opposition to "causality" as the key to understanding the Chinese psychological

***phenomenology as revealed in the I Ching. McEvilly further suggested that "Not only is it [the I Ching] remarkable because of its antiquity, however, but also because of its persistent appeal to the deeper levels of the psyche, its impressive vitality, and its implications for the future expansion of our ideas concerning the nature of human experience." In recent years more articles and books have been written dealing with different aspects of this most treasured Chinese Classic. However, as in the cases of many other Classics there are still many unanswered problems about its text, its history, and its usefulness. This paper is intended to deal with two basic and yet related problems: how a hexagram is acquired and how the I Ching is consulted. These problems have been discussed among Chinese scholars ever since the T'ang period (618-905). During the nineteen twenties at the monthly meetings of the I Hsüeh Yen Chiu Hui in Nanking several of my friends shed some new light on them. Many original ideas in this article should be attributed to Kao Heng, who contributed a great deal to our discussions.* (underlines are mine)**

This is how the discussion of "How to form a hexagram and consult the I Ching" by Shih-Chuan Chen(*) starts. It should be noted that although Edward Shaughnessy, in his dissertation, accuses him of plagiarizing Gao Heng's ideas, you will notice that some credit was given to him in the article and that Shih-Chuan Chen was a member of the same study group as Gao Heng in the early 20th Century. I will not judge how original are Shih-Chuan's ideas but I will try to synthesize his proposed reconstruction of the original milfoil divination method. This is a method inferred from readings of the [Zuo Zhuang](#), where there are nineteen recorded cases of consulting the Zhouyi and of the [Guo Yu](#) where there are four.

Shih-Chuan contends that Zhu Xi "could not rehabilitate the I Ching as a book of oracles since he failed to explain the twenty-three divination cases recorded in the Tso Chuan and Kuo Yu and that, uncertain about the divination procedures practiced by ancient diviners, he accepted the later version of the Taoists" and thus, the accepted milfoil method, is flawed. He then dates the currently used coin method to the Northern and Southern

Dynasties (420-581 A.C.) when it was borrowed from another oracle book, the Huo Zhu Lin. Notice that in this sense, the method described by Zhu Xi, postdates the received coin method. It is only the knowledge that milfoil had been used in Zhou times, and perhaps even as far back as the Late Shang, that we'd like to accept that milfoil divination should be the preferred method for consulting the Yijing, due to its antiquity. The case is that nobody knows what the original milfoil method looked like. Zhu Xi made an educated guess. Shih-Chuan Chen (and/or perhaps Gao Heng, if we accept Shaughnessy's take on the cited article) is making another educated guess. In this case, it is one based not on largely Daoist traditions but on interpretations of actual ancient texts (Zuo Zhuan and Guo Yu). It should be also mentioned, as Shih-Chuan Chen notes, that Zhu Xi explained to his students and friends the arbitrariness of his divination procedures in a letter to Guo Zhong-hui.

To be honest, I don't feel qualified to positively approve or deny the validity of the proposed method. It would be up to the individual querent to empirically judge the oracular accuracy both methods, side by side. I know of a case where a member of Clarity and Foro Yijing is carrying out such an empirical comparison.

Much of the method is also derived from the numerology presented in the Da Zhuan, that is:

- The number 50 (Great Elucidation or Da yen)
- Used only 49
- The numbers of Heaven (1,3,5,7,9)
- The numbers of Earth (2,4,6,8,10)
- The sum of Heavenly Numbers is 25
- The sum of Earthly Numbers is 30
- The sum of Heavenly Numbers and Earthly Numbers is 55
- The Four Constituents, 6, 7, 8, & 9
- The number of operations to obtain an hexagram, 18
- The numbers of stalks that give the Creative (Qian) total 216
- The numbers of stalks that give the Receptive (Kun) total 144
- The sum of the numbers of the Creative and Receptive is 360, or the days of a year.
- The numbers of the stalks used for the sixty-four hexagrams is 11,520, or the "Ten Thousand Things"

It is mentioned in the Da Zhuan (Ch.IX,2), that *"it is this (fifty-five) which completes the changes and transformations and sets demons and gods in movement."* Thus, it is upon the number 50 that the operations for obtaining an hexagram is based on and it should be upon the number 55 that the moving lines are calculated. Shih-Chuan Chen contends that most Song philosophers, including Zhu Xi, erroneously identified the number 55 in the Da Zhuan as derived from the sum of the numbers of the Ho Tu (Yellow River Diagram) and from there, they merged this concept with the Wu Xing (Five Elements), etc., when the original meaning was another and of a much simpler use: *the calculation of moving lines and, from those, the "related hexagrams"*

In the proposed reconstruction, the calculations for the "Four Constituents", are not based on the numbers of stalks that we separate in our hand, that is, the stalks obtained in the three separations, but on the remaining stalks in the pile. At the end of the three

separations, we should have a remainder of 36, 32, 28 or 24 stalks. By dividing this remainder by 4, we obtain the numbers 9, 8, 7 or 6, respectively.

Shih-Chuan Chen asks the question "how do we know that the ancient chinese selected the constant 9 as *lao yang* (old yang) and 6 as *lao yin* (old yin)?" and explains that this comes from the numbers needed to obtain "pure" Qian and Kun (216 and 144):

- 6 lines X 4 seasons X 9 = 216, thus 9 is the inferred value for Pure Yang.
- 6 lines x 4 seasons X 6 = 144, thus 6 is the inferred value of Pure Yin.

The next question he asks is why, 7 (shao yang) and 8 (shao yin), are not available for change, even when they are called upon for it in divination (i.e. falling in a changing position as explained below). He explains that the ancient Chinese made the "Four Constituents" analogous to the four seasons, thus, lao yang (9) represents the summer, lao yin (6) the winter, shao yang (7) the spring and shao yin (8) the autumn. The ancients also observed that in spring the flow of Yang gets stronger until it reaches its peak in summer and that this change is a matter of degree and not of its nature. Thus, shao yang does not really *change* on the way to a lao yang. The same happens with shao yin, while gradually reaching its peak in winter, or lao yin. However, when lao yang, summer, gradually becomes autumn, shao yin, this becoming is not just a matter of degree but a *change* of the intrinsic nature of Yang. Again, the same applies to lao yin when it gradually becomes shao yang. The observation is that **change** is only considered so when the intrinsic nature of the Yin and Yang is called upon to gradually become its opposite. The best way to picture this is to consider a wave (fig 1) where the peak of the wave is lao yang and the valley is lao yin. Thus, shao yin is the descending slope and shao yang the ascending one. Therefore, the peaks and valleys, as the culmination of the slopes, are the purest form of the energies. From there, they gradually become their opposite.

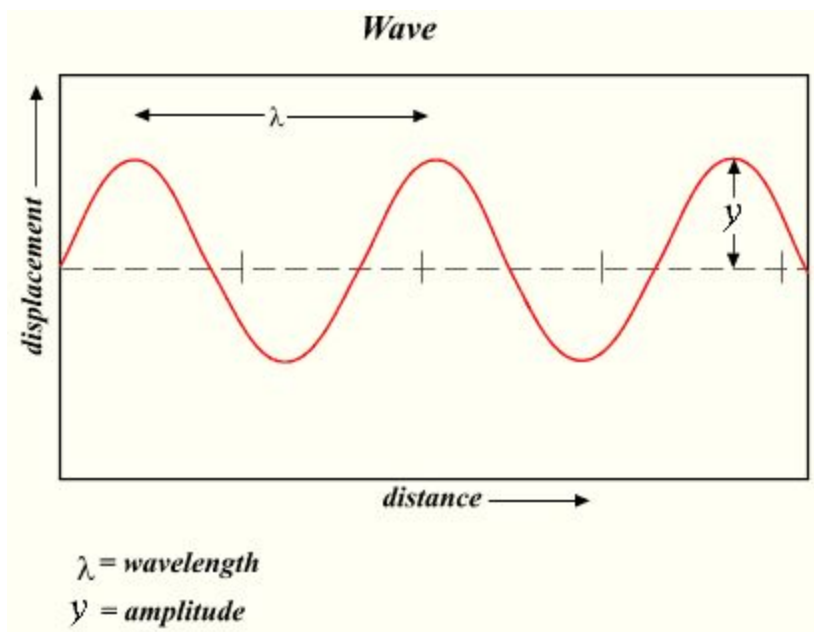


Fig 1

Now, the next thing to figure out is how to produce "Related Hexagrams" from a divination. As he notes, there are no rules given in the Da Zhuan, or anywhere in the other Wings. So, his proposal, if taken at face value, is as good as that of Zhu Xi. He points though to a few hints in the Da Zhuan, namely, "it is this (fifty five) which completes the changes and transformations and sets demons and gods in movement." He finds these statements as very significant as far as divination is concerned. From here, his hypothesis for obtaining a "Related Hexagram" (note that I refer to 'hexagram' and not 'changing lines', i.e. 9 and 6) is as follow and refers to a calculation based on the sum of the values of all six lines according to their "Four Constituents" values (6, 7, 8 or 9), in a given obtained hexagram:

1. Being that the smallest numerical value of a hexagram is 36 (6 X 6)
2. And the largest numerical value of a hexagram is 54 (9 X 6)
3. The hexagram Qian can have the largest (54), which is one less than the total of Heavenly and Earthly Numbers (55)
4. The Hexagram Kun can have the smallest (36), which is 19 less than the total of Heavenly and Earthly Numbers (55)
5. The number value of all the lines are added in divination
6. **This number is subtracted from 55.**
7. **The remainder, anywhere from the largest number (19), to the smallest (1), indicates the position of the line that changes.**
8. **If the remainder is 1, then the first line of the hexagram is available for change; if 2 the second; if 3 the third, and so on, until the sixth line**
9. **If the remainder is larger than 6, then the count reverses.**
10. **Thus, if 7, then the sixth line is available for change; if 8 the fifth line, if 9 the fourth line, and so on.**
11. **The availability of "available changing positions" moves in a wave (see Table 1) all the way to a remainder of 19**
12. We have a changing line **only when both**, the position is available for change and the obtained numbers are either 9 (lao yang) or 6 (lao yin)

Substraction of Remainder from Sum of Heavenly Numbers (25) and Earthly (30) = 55																				
		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	
		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	
		5	5	5	5	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	
		4	3	2	1	0	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0	9	8	7	6
Hexagram Changing Line	6						6	7										18	19	
	5					5			8									17		
	4				4					9								16		
	3			3							10							15		
	2		2									11						14		
	1	1											12	13						

Table 1

The most obvious and immediate advantage of this method is that only one line changes to give us a "Related Hexagram," eliminating the confusion of multiple changing lines, plus real changing lines (9 or 6 in a changing position, as calculated in the above description) are not as common as with the method put forward by Zhu Xi.

The above description is a very similar method as the one discussed in E. Shaughnessy's dissertation, "The Composition of the Zhouyi," in which he calls this article by Shih-Chuan Chen a "plagiarism" of the ideas of Gao Heng. While I certainly have Gao Heng in great esteem, I cast doubt on a real and intentional malfeasance on the part of Shih-Chuan Chen. More so, not only because he was part, together with Gao Heng, of the same society dedicated to the study of the Yijing, but because he gave Gao Heng special credit in his article.

(*) How to Form a Hexagram and Consult the I Ching
Shih-chuan Chen
Journal of the American Oriental Society,
Vol. 92, No. 2. (Apr. - Jun., 1972), pp. 237-249.

August 10th, 2009.

In recent correspondence with Prof. Edward Hacker he shared his probability calculations with me for the proposed method. Here are his findings, which I share with his gracious permission, verbatim (I have only added some formatting and bold/underlines; my comments are below his message):

Your article on the alternative milfoil method of divination got me thinking about the calculating the probabilities of getting getting a moving line. After a few days of writing a program in True Basic I finally got the following:

This is the Final Result. Shows probability for a line to be available for change and the line is a 6 or 9.

Line 1. 252,249/16,777,216 = 1/664

Line 2. 3 34,935/16,777,216 = 1/50

Line 3. 504,115/16,777,216 = 1/33

Line 4. 762,178/16,777,216 = 1/22

Line 5. 1,062,885/16,777,216 = 1/15

Line 6. 1,277,942/16,777,216 = 1/13

Total $4,194,304/16,777,216 = 1/4$

Only one chance out of 4 that one will get a moving line.

Note that the probability is low at line 1 and increases to line 6. The probability of getting a moving line at an available line position is 1/4.

Line 1 is the beginning of the state of change and it is very unlikely that one will get this line as moving. As you can see from the table, line 6 is the most likely line to get as moving.

If anyone is into programming in Basic I can email them the program. It gives a lot more info than just the results above, but most of these details have nothing to do with divination directly

Regards,

Ed, Aug/04/2009.

I find his statement about the probabilities of obtaining a changing line, rising from very low for line 1, to reasonably high for line 6, as very meaningful and true to the spirit of progressive change. None of this, of course, resolves the issue of authenticity for the method. More so because it is a method that saw the light (new light?) only about ninety years ago, at the earliest, or about 40 years ago, at the latest. This is a method that remains speculative. As speculative as the one Zhu Xi reconstructed and shared in his exegesis.

Like many scholarly papers, most are shuffled under the scrap pile and need to be rediscovered, dug out and reminded of their existence to other fellow aficionados. As far as I know, Ed's calculations are completely new for this method, even though it has been available for study and commentary for decades. No other scholar before Ed Hacker has taken the time and effort to find this information. For that, I am most grateful.

Luis Andrade, 08/10/09