

Opposition and Fellowship: *I Ching's* (*Yi Jing*) dialectical views on the functionality of conflict

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Abstract

By examining the text of the Chinese classic, *I Ching* (spelled as *Yi Jing* in Chinese pin yin, and also known as the Chinese *Book of Changes*), this paper attempts to reveal *I Ching's* dialectical views on the functionality of conflict. Through analyses of the concepts of “yin,” “yang,” and “contradiction,” the author explicates, first, the existence of conflicting forces in all things; second, the yin and yang of all things, and the universality and particularity of contradictions; and third, the idea of “unity of opposites” in the universe. From *I Ching's* viewpoint, the writer further demonstrates the functionality of conflict in the process of bringing forth changes to the universe and, finally, he concludes the essay with a discussion on the dialectical relationship between opposition and fellowship via conflict.

All of us are living now in a period of opposition: it is important that we may hope for the transformation of opposition into fellowship. In fact, this is precisely the importance of the world-view described in the *Book of Changes*: there is no situation without a way out. All situations are stages of change (Wilhelm & Wilhelm, 1988, p. 176).

The essential quality of life is living; the essential quality of living is change; change is evolution: and we are part of it (John Wyndham, 1955, p. 196).

The *Book of Changes* referred to in the above quote by Wilhelm and Wilhelm is the Chinese classic, *I Ching* (or *Yi Jing* in Chinese pin yin), which was written by King Wen, the founder of the Zhou Dynasty in ancient China. Before his founding of the Zhou Dynasty, King Wen (the King with the title of Wen) was a noble man whose real name was Zhou Fa, a viceroy from Western China (Wu, 1991). Wu (1991) believes that Zhou Fa was imprisoned in 1143 B. C. by “Zhou the Tyrant,” the last emperor of the Shang Dynasty, (the dynasty immediately before the Zhou Dynasty) in ancient China. During his confinement, King Wen observed the dynamic movements of nature, pondered on all aspects of human affairs, and considered the complexity of all changes in the universe. He then “recreated the eight trigrams of Fu Xi” (a legendary Chinese Emperor who invented Chinese writing and the pictographs, the written characters of the Chinese language). By placing one trigram on top of another,

King Wen made hexagrams, and “He rotated the trigrams with each other in turn, eight times eight, to become the sixty-four hexagrams” (Wu, 1991, pp. 7). After his release from confinement, King Wen compiled the original *Book of Changes*, the *I Ching*.

The original *Book of Changes* had been so successful with the Chinese that generations of well-established scholars tried to add their interpretations to the original core text. These supplements totaled Ten Appendixes known as the Ten Wings of *Yi Jing* (*I Ching*). Although some (e.g., Wilhelm & Wilhelm, 1988; Wu, 1991) in the field believe that the *Ten Wings* were written by Confucius, this view has not been substantiated with reliable historical documents and evidence. Many, like Yang and his associates (1987), consider that the additional texts were written by a number of scholars over quite a few generations, instead of being written by Confucius. However, as for the original purpose of the book, *Yi Jing* scholars (Xu, 1991) tend to hold the consensus that it was created and used for forecasting and predicting future events and changes. Wilhelm & Wilhelm (1988) argue, “...it is certain that it was regarded as an oracle book and used as such at a very early date.” (p. 13) Beyond this starting point, they also felt that the book was intended to have much broader applications for “something can be deduced about the nature of the soil in which the book grew” (Wilhelm & Wilhelm, 1988, p. 13).

In this essay, my fundamental objective is to expose the dialectical views presented in *Yi Jing* concerning the functionality of conflict in bringing forth changes to the universe. I will strive to accomplish this goal by exploring first the meanings of key concepts like “yin,” “yang,” and “contradiction” in *Yi Jing*, and then, explicate the idea of “unity of opposites” and the process of transferring opposites in a given contradiction. I further trace *Yi Jing*’s views on the functionality of conflict and, finally, I conclude this essay with a discussion on the dialectical relationship between opposition and fellowship in the universe. We now turn to the first topic of conflict in all things.

The existence of conflict in all things

One of the unique features characterizing *Yi Jing* as a much-cherished Chinese classic is the conceptualization of “yin” and “yang” in the universe. As a pair of overarching concepts representing the forces in eternal opposition, “yin” and “yang” are not only the binary components of the diagram of Tai Ji, the representation of the supreme ultimate universe, but also the ever-present elements in all things, including animals and people.

The concepts of yin and yang

While the concept of yin denotes the shady dark side, the negative, and the receptive of all things, the concept of yang refers to the sunny bright side, the positive, and the creative of all things. Their representative hexagrams are respectively the Qian (no. one of the sixty-four hexagrams known as the “heaven gua”), and the Kun (number two of the sixty-four hexagrams known as the “earth gua”). What is critical for our understanding of the interplay between yin and yang is precisely the fact that yin contains the seed of yang, and yang contains the seed of yin. This point was clearly illustrated in chapter 42 of *Dao De Jing* when Laozi (Lao Tzu) unequivocally stated that “All things are wrapped by yin and contain yang, and their pulsing chi’s (Qi) marry” (Gibbs, 1981). The “pulsing chi” referred here by Laozi is the interplay between yin and yang in all things. Since all yin contains the seed of yang, and all yang contains the seed of yin, when one component goes to its extreme, it then transforms itself into its opposite. In other words, when yin travels to its extreme, the yang seed

contained in yin gains momentum and converts yin to yang. The reverse is also true; that is, when yang goes to the extreme, the yin seed contained in yang gains momentum and pushes yang to become yin. The question now seems to be: where does Qi come from and how does it work to create the necessary momentum needed for changes to occur. The answer may lie in our understanding of the concept of “contradiction.”

The concept of contradiction

When *Yi Jing*'s author conceptualized the notions of yin and yang, he suggested, at the same time, the existence of contradiction in all things, as yin and yang are complete opposites interacting within all things in the universe. Because of the permanency and constancy of the movement of all things, the interactivity between yin and yang is therefore constant and endless. With constant and endless movements between the opposite forces of yin and yang, the occurrence of conflict is thus ever lasting and frequent. Dialectically, nothing, even the dead, exists in the universe that does not engage in movements. Dead things, for instance, incur changes when they decay and vanish into another form of existence. The only possible circumstance of non-movement seems to be the impossible situation in which yin and yang do not exist. This is exactly the reason for us to claim the universality of contradiction because yin and yang as opposite forces exist universally in all things. Mao (1965a) succinctly summarized the universality of contradiction in all things when he stated that “There is nothing that does not contain contradiction; without contradiction nothing would exist” (p.316).

In addition to its universality, every contradiction is unique in respect to its situational or circumstantial characteristics. These situational distinctions of each contradiction characterize the particularity of a given contradiction. From *Yi Jing*'s point of view, all things are in constant movement and, therefore, a given status of any thing at any moment in time and space represents solely and only a transitory form of the thing itself. Mao (1965a), commenting on the dialectics of a given contradiction, proposed that “All these forms are interdependent, but in its essence each is different from the others. The particular essence of each form of motion is determined by its own particular contradiction” (p. 320). Further, Mao (1965b) suggested that the universality of contradiction be viewed as “the general character” of contradiction and the particularity of contradiction be regarded as the “individual character” of a contradiction.

The idea of “unity of opposites”.

The changes, however, are produced as consequences of the interactive activities between the yin and yang as Wilhelm and Wilhelm (1988) pointed out “In the *Book of Changes*, T'ai Chi—is represented as the basis of all existence. T'ai Chi is the supreme Ultimate, the entrance into the phenomenon, the One, or, in other words, that something from which, as in the West as well, everything else is assumed to proceed” (p. 157). It is worth noting though that the “Oneness” of the universe is made possible with the “two-ness” of the opposites, namely, yin and yang. Not only do yin and yang coexist in the Oneness of the universe, they are also transformable opposites interacting for changes and developments in all things, thus the evolution of the universe. While discussing the identity and struggle of the elements contained in a given contradiction, Mao (1965b) purported:

It is so with all opposites; in given conditions, on the one hand they are opposed to each other, and on the other they are interconnected, interpenetrating, inter-permeating, and interdependent, and this character is described as identity. ... How then can they be identical? Because each is the condition for the other's existence (p.338).

The transferability as well as the unification of the opposites within the Oneness of the universe is an important point to grasp in understanding the idea of the unity of opposites in all things. Clearly, the assumption is not that opposites are polarities; instead, they are elements on a continuum as suggested by the inherent transferability of opposites within the oneness of all things existing in the universe.

The constant interactive motion of yin and yang creates seemingly incompatible conflicts that are nonetheless contained in the Oneness of the universe. The contradictory opposites are in a continuous process of rejecting and uniting each other because within yin there is the seed of yang and within yang there is the seed of yin. "Therefore, the *Yi* incorporates the Great Axis (*Tai Ji*) which produces the two primal forces. The two primal forces produce four images (*xiang*). The four images produce the eight trigrams" (Wu, 1991, p. 271). Here, the Chinese word "*Yi*" means change. Changes, as outcome of the interaction between yin and yang, take place within the oneness of the universe. Thus, the statement, "*Yi* incorporates the Great Axis," reveals to us that the oneness of *Tai Ji* (the Supreme Ultimate) encompasses the unity of the opposing forces of yin and yang. This viewpoint of *Yi Jing* clearly suggests that all changes under heaven are attributable to the continuous unification of the opposites made possible by the interaction of yin and yang. Hence, conflicts do not only exist in all things, but are also indispensable to the development of all in the universe since conflict is perpetuated in both the existence and interaction of yin and yang. If conflicts are necessary in facilitating the transformation of opposites, then what are the specific functions of conflict in the interactive process of yin and yang?

The functionality of conflict

In *Yi Jing*'s view, with yin and yang as interrelated opposites generating conflict while in constant motion, the necessity of conflict in the development of all things is apparent. Without conflict, the dynamic interaction between yin and yang would come to a halt, and the transformation of yin and yang in all things would not be possible. Without conflict, the coexistence of yin and yang within the oneness of the universe will be a stagnant, rather than a dynamic, one. As concomitant factors accompanying the dynamic interplay between yin and yang, the functions of conflict are first seen as a facilitating agent for the engagement of the opposites, yin and yang, in the universe; conflict is then seen as a catalyst for bringing forth all changes; and, finally, conflict plays the role of a regulating monitor on the dialectical balance between yin and yang.

First, conflict is seen in *Yi Jing* as an engagement agent for the opposites of yin and yang. It is through conflict that yin and yang productively engage each other as *Yi Jing* considers conflict essential and indispensable for the initiation of interactions between yin and yang. In fact, all changes in all things, positive or negative, depend on conflict because, without conflict, the interactions between yin and yang come to an end. Not only does *Yi Jing* regard conflict as indispensable in bringing forth changes to the universe, it also takes conflict as the essence of the natural and human world represented by *Yi Jing*'s eight basic trigrams.

Specifically, conflicts are inherent and explicit in the pairing of these eight basic trigrams: *Qian* (heaven) and *Kun* (earth), *Zhen* (thunder) and *Sun* (wind), *Kan* (water) and *Li* (fire), and *Gen* (mountain) and *Dui* (marsh). This pairing of opposites is continued and consistent in *Yi Jing*'s hexagrams as well. The conflicts between *Tai* (prosperous, extensive) and *Pi* (to close, to stop), and *Ji Ji* (already completed) and *Wei Ji* (not yet completed) are illustrative examples to demonstrate the perception of the essentiality of conflicts in the book, *Yi Jing*.

Second, in addition to viewing conflicts as the essence of the universe and an engaging agent for the interplay of yin and yang, conflict is also taken as a catalyst for changes in all things. In *Yi Jing*'s view, transformation of yin and yang is made possible only via the interaction between yin and yang. Yin and yang must engage in interplay before this transformation can take place. Since the interplay of yin and yang is initiated by conflict between and within themselves, then, conflict is the necessary medium for the process of yin-yang transformation to accomplish. Because the process of yin-yang transformation is responsible for all subsequent changes in all things, conflict is thus viewed as catalyst for all changes due to the role played by conflict in bringing forth changes.

Coming together with its role as the engaging agent, conflicts further function as monitors for maintaining the balance of the dialectics between yin and yang. *Yi Jing*'s author believed that conflict occurs whenever yin and yang interacts within the oneness of the universe. In the interplay of yin and yang, conflicts help establish the direction for change in time and space while yin and yang are in motion. Typically, in the view of *Yi Jing*, within the oneness of the universe, when yin goes to the extreme, conflict emerges to regulate the yin-yang balance by directing changes in favor of the yang. Reversely, when yang goes to the extreme, conflict appears to balance the yin and yang by encouraging changes toward the yin. However, one must understand that the regulatory function of conflicts does not mean the maintenance of equilibrium of yin and yang in the universe as the constant motion of yin and yang makes static equilibrium out of the question. According to *Yi Jing*, the regulatory function of conflict is necessitated as well as utilized when either yin or yang goes to its extreme. Although knowledge of the primary functions of conflict in bringing forth changes in all things is necessary and important for us to comprehend the dynamic interplay between yin and yang, our understanding is not complete if we fail to gain appreciation of the dialectics of changes as presented in *Yi Jing*.

The dialectics of opposition and fellowship

Throughout the book of *Yi Jing*, the dialectics of change is an important girdle that securely ties together such key concepts as "yin," "yang," and "contradiction," and the idea of "unity of opposites." The forever Dao (Tao) of the universe is captured in the ever-lasting opposition of yin and yang, which entails a process of infinite change. In this endless process of change lies the eternal competition between yin and yang. Chapter two of *Xi Ci* in *Yi Jing* claims, "The strong and weak displace each other and produce change and transformation. Therefore, good fortune and misfortune are images of loss or gain. ... Change and transformation are the images of advance or retreat" (Wu, 1991, p. 264). While the strong here represents the yang, the weak refers to the yin. In the words of *Yi Jing*, changes, as the manifestations of the eternal competition between yin and yang, are the only constants in this universe.

All things change; all changes are the concomitant consequences of the competition between yin and yang. The natural world moves like this, and the human society advances in

this way. In *Yi Jing*'s view, because of the "loss and gain" of yin and yang in competition, all things, therefore, appear either yin or yang at a particular time in space with yin containing the seed of yang, and yang, the seed of yin. The existence of opposition and fellowship in humans is perhaps a good example for illustrating that permanency in either opposition or fellowship is virtually non-existent in human history. What seems to be the opposition at present may be transformed into fellowship in the not too distant future since opposition carries within it the seed of fellowship. The reverse is also quite true for today's fellowship may one day be transformed into opposition as fellowship contains within the seed of opposition. Such can be conceived as the dialectics between opposition and fellowship from the perspective of *Yi Jing*. Fortune and misfortune, in given time and space, are transferable; so are other seemingly conflicting things. From the viewpoint of *Yi Jing*, the simultaneous appearance of the sun and the moon or day and night is not a possibility under normal circumstances, but they are all certain to alternate in regularity. In fact, to contend that the emergence of the sun only necessitates the appearance of the moon and the coming of the day only indicates the arrival of the night is to argue precisely for the dialectics presented in *Yi Jing*. Hence, dialectically, although all matters have their opposites, at a particular time in a given space, only one aspect of a matter is shown with the other hidden or being latent. Opposition becomes visible at a particular time and space only because fellowship is hidden and latent.

Viewing the world in such a way at least informs us of the interconnectedness of all things. Winning and losing, success and failure, birth and death, order and chaos, new and old, positive and negative, for instance, are all interconnected due to the forever competition of yin and yang in all things. Thus, in *Yi Jing*'s view, the only absolute in the universe is change because the two opposites in any given matter develop in competition and transform into each other via the function of conflict. Only by taking this dialectical viewpoint, can a person observe both the positive and negative sides, the apparent and latent, the visible and invisible aspects of a matter in a given space and time. Only by viewing the world dialectically, as the author of *Yi Jing* asserted, can it be possible for individuals to understand the transformation of opposites in all things, and the functionality of conflict in such a continuous process of transformation in the universe.

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