

Bian (Change): A Perpetual Discourse of I Ching

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What is the fundamental principle of the universe? The question has preoccupied the mind of Chinese elites for centuries. The answer can be found in the discourse on the concept of *bian* (change), which is the central theme of *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*. This essay, based on the discourse of *I Ching*, aims to demystify the concept of *bian* from the following aspects: the attributes of change, the principle of change, the forces of change, the forms of change, and the outcome of change. Through the analyses, the author wishes to identify various change-oriented patterns of expressions that contribute to constructing the deeply ingrained change discourses in Chinese intellectual tradition.

As an unalterable rule, change dictates the fundamental principle of the universe. Chinese sages used to say that change itself is the only constant phenomenon of the universe. Like the coming and going of the four seasons, the succession of day and night, the periodical ebb and flow of the tide, the blooming and withering of flowers, and the cycle of birth, aging, sickening, and death, everything is flowing like a running river. While East and West are different in their ways of intellectually approaching the concept of change, they are similar in recognizing the nature of change in the universe.

In Chinese intellectual pursuit, the concept of change was mainly stipulated in the ancient Chinese writing, *I Ching*, or the *Book of Changes*. The concept of change not only gives *I Ching* its name but also formulates its system of thought. Etymologically, before being applied to *I Ching*, the Chinese character *I* (易) had three meanings (Li, 1987; Wilhelm, 1960). First, *I* parallels *lizard* with the top side being likened to the round head of the lizard, and the bottom part similar to a lizard's legs. In addition, both *I* and *lizard* have the same pronunciation. It is said that a lizard changes its skin color several times a day. Thus, *I* receives its semantic meaning of change, from the mobility and changeable nature of a lizard.

Second, structurally, *I* is comprised of *sun* and *moon*. The sun represents the nature of *yang*, and the moon the nature of *yin*. Together, the interaction of sun and moon comes to the emphasis of *yin* and *yang* in *I Ching*. Finally, in Chinese ancient oracle-bone writing the phrases "*I ru*" (alternating sun) and "*bu I ru*" (unalternating sun) were found often. The "*I*" in the phrases means alternation or transformation, which is suitable for being used to explain the changeable nature of trigrams and hexagrams in *I Ching*.

Change as a fundamental principle of the universe forms ontological assumptions of the Chinese philosophy and was further developed into a set of guidelines for Chinese beliefs and behaviors. *Change discourse* naturally became the central focus in early Chinese discursive practices. For example, according to the *Great Treatise* in *I Ching*:

The Changes is a book from which one may not hold aloof. Its *tao* is forever changing. Alteration, movement without rest, flowing through the six empty places; rising and sinking without fixed law, firm and yielding transform each other. They

cannot be confined within a rule; it is only change that is at work here. (Zhu, 1974, p. 112)*

The “six empty places” refer to the six lines (*yao*) of a hexagram, which stipulate the patterns, directions, and principle of change. The movement from the bottom line up to the top line symbolizes the change of a specific situation. *I Ching* proposes 64 hexagrams, in which each contains six lines with a total of 384 representing all the possible situations of the universe. The first or the bottom line indicates the foundation of change; the second line is the sprouting period, which indicates the formation of a change of things; the third line is the embodiment indicating the concretizing stage of change; the fourth line is like the leaves of a tree, indicating the strong growth of change; the fifth line is the blooming period, indicating the flourishing of change; and the sixth or top line is the fruit, indicating the fullness of change, which implies a stage of transformation to another cycle.

The developmental discourse of change was also shown in the *Doctrine of the Mean* (see Zhu, 1978), when explaining the nature of cultivating a particular goodness based on a sincere or honest mind:

As there is sincerity, there will be its expression. As it is expressed, it will become conspicuous. As it becomes conspicuous, it will become clear. As it becomes clear, it will move others. As it moves others, it changes them. As it changes them, it transforms them. (Chan, 1963, p. 108)

In addition, the similar discourse appears in the *Great Learning*, in which the developmental change into the state of highest good is stipulated:

Only after knowing what to abide in can one be calm. Only after having been calm can one be tranquil. Only after having achieved tranquility can one have peaceful repose. Only after having peaceful repose can one begin to deliberate. Only after deliberation, can the end be attained. (Chan, 1963, p. 86)

Although these discourses resemble in its six stages of change, they do not imply a fixed order of transformation. Instead, they indicate that change is an orderly, non-chaotic, but dynamic process of movement. In other words, from the humanistic perspective, the dialectical nature of change always reveals a trace and track, and that can be detected through learning and observation. It is on this basis that a possibility is open for human beings to regulate change so that a proper space for the self can be established, the value of life can be developed, the meaning of living can be unfolded, and therefore a human being can be parallel and integrated with heaven and earth as the three sides of a triangle.

According to *I Ching*, the formation of change relies on the dialectical interaction of *yin* and *yang*, the two opposite but complementary forces of the universe, with *yin* representing the attributes of yieldingness and submissiveness and *yang* representing unyieldingness and dominance. As Chen (2001) indicated, the pushing and pulling of the two forces makes the universe “forever changing—alteration, movement without rest, and flowing, rising, and sinking without fixed law” (p. 56). Thus, in order to bring continuity into the process of change, Chinese philosophers generated three ontological assumptions that were used to

achieve the goal (Chai & Chai, 1969; Chen, 2001): (a) the universe is a great whole in which all is but a transitional process, with no fixed substance of its substratum; (b) the transforming process of the universe does not proceed onward, but revolves in an endless cycle; and (c) there is no ending for the transforming process of the universe. This discourse of endless, cyclic, and transforming movement of change continues to influence the philosophical discourse and its assumptions never cease to affect Chinese behaviors in the contemporary Chinese world.

The purpose of this essay is to continue this line of discourse by attempting to explore the essence of change from five perspectives: the attributes of change, the principle of change, the forces of change, the forms of change, and the outcome of change.

The Attributes of Change

As indicated previously, change is embedded in the dialectical interaction of the two opposite but complementary forces, *yin* and *yang*. Each of the two forces represents a self-changing system which itself develops an internal transforming process, and it is the interaction of the two forces that forms a complete and holistic system of change. Thus, in the *Great Treatise*, it says “The successive movement of *yin* and *yang* constitutes the Way (*Tao*)” (Zhu, 1974, p. 95). Here the *yin* refers to the dark and *yang* the light; they are two primal powers of nature which also include the notion of the two polar forces, positive and negative, of the universe. Since the primal powers of nature never cease to move, the cycle of movement continues uninterruptedly and is constantly regenerated in a state of tension, keeping the powers in motion and causing them to unite into a dynamic system of transformation. Therefore, “changes mean production and reproduction” (p. 96).

As the attributes of change, *yin* and *yang* are also represented by hexagrams *kun* and *qian* separately, “therefore they called the closing of the gates the Receptive (i.e., *kun*), and the opening of the gate the Creative (i.e., *yang*). The alternation between closing and opening they called change” (p. 103). In addition, “when *yin* and *yang* are united in their character, the weak and the strong attain their substance. In this way the products of Heaven and Earth are given substance and the character of spiritual intelligence can be penetrated” (p. 110). In other words, through the interfusion and interpenetration of *yin* and *yang*, changes “disclose things, complete affairs, and encompass all ways on earth” (p. 102).

The union of the opposite forces of *yin* and *yang* genders a holistic harmony that becomes the golden rule of change and the ultimate goal *I Ching* pursues. As specified in *qian* hexagram, the way of *qian* works “through change and transformation, so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and comes into permanent accord with the *Great Harmony*: this is what furthers and what perseveres” (p. 3). The equilibrium of the two opposite forces is named *zhong* (centrality) and has become an everlasting subject of Chinese discourse (Chen, 2006; Wang, 1982; Xiao, 2003; Xu, 1994).

Applied to the human world, a person’s mind is said to be in the state of *zhong* when there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy; when the mind is stirred and one can act in his due degree, it is said to be in the state of *he* (harmony). Hence, the *Doctrine of the Mean* states that:

This *zhong* is the great root from which grows all the human acting in the world, and harmony is the universal path which they should pursue. Let the states of *zhong* and

harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish. (see Legge, 1955, p. 2-3)

Holding the *zhong* or embracing the great harmony not only dictates all schools of Chinese thought, but also is the cardinal criterion of Chinese behaviors (e.g., Chen, 2001, 2002; Chen & Chen, 2002; Huang, 1999-2000; Yang, 1989).

The Principle of Change

The interdependent existence of *yin* and *yang* and their interaction leading to a great whole reveal that change is an occasion for relativism (Cheng, 1987). Independently, *yin* and *yang* are a closed system separately, in which internal change is manifested by its self-absorbed and self-collected nature. However, reality is revealed through the interaction of the two forces, which indicates that everything is “a synthetic unity of *yin* and *yang* in various stages of their functioning” (p. 34). In other words, change is defined by the dialectic transformation of *yin* into *yang* and vice versa. The totality of *yin* and *yang* that forms the reality is symbolized by *Tai Chi* (the Great Ultimate. See Figure 1) in *I Ching*. It is the whole of *Tai Chi* in which the black area represents *yin* and white area *yang*, from which the myriad are originated. Thus, everything must be composed of *yin* and *yang*.



Figure 1. *Tai Chi*

Yin, *yang*, and the interaction of the two forces to complete the reality reflect three principles of change: straight forward, capacious, and cyclic.

First, change is straight forward. This refers to the internal nature of the *qian* hexagram. As described in *Great Treatise*, “In a state of rest the Creative (i.e., *qian*) is one, and in a state of motion it is straight; therefore it creates that which is great” (Zhu, 1974, p. 96). The straight forward movement of *qian* is symbolized by a solid or unbroken line (—), corresponding to Heaven, ceaselessly moving ahead without interruption like the endless extension of time. The creative power of *qian*’s movement in a straight forward direction characterized by dynamic greatness produces the quality of change (Wilhelm, 1990). The movement of *qian* is then “firm and strong, moderate and correct” (Zhu, 1974, p. 6). Only through the nature of being firm and strong can the *qian* continuously move ahead, and through being moderate and correct can the movement be stably forwarded (Wang, 1970).

Second, change is capacious. This refers to the internal nature of the *kun* hexagram. The *Great Treatise* says, “The Receptive (i.e., *kun*) is closed in a state of rest, and in a state of motion it opens; therefore it creates that which is vast” (Zhu, 1974, p. 96). The open and vast movement of *kun* is symbolized by divided lines (— —), corresponding to Earth, ceaselessly moving around without interruption like the endless expansion of space. The producing power of *kun*’s movement in an open manner characterized by dynamic vastness produces the quantity of change (Wilhelm, 1990). The movement of *kun* is then “gentle but firm, still but square” (Zhu, 1974, p.

10). Only through the nature of being gentle and yielding can the *kun* continuously move around, and through its perseverance can the movement be strongly furthered.

Finally, change is cyclic. Because it takes a synthetic unity of *yin* and *yang* to complete the reality of existence, the on-going opposition and cooperation of the two forces leads to a dialectical and cyclic movement of the universe. As the *Great Treatise* indicates:

When the sun goes, the moon comes; when the moon goes, the sun comes. The Sun and moon alternate; thus light comes into existence. When cold goes, heat comes; when heat goes, cold comes. Cold and heat alternate, and thus the year completes itself. The past contracts. The future expands. Contraction and expansion act upon each other; hereby arises that which furthers. (Zhu, 1974, p. 108)

The movement of *Tai Chi* itself is cyclic. Reflected in hexagrams, each of them as well forms an internal small-scale cyclic transformation such as *qian* and *kun*. Expanded to the whole 64 hexagrams in *I Ching*, together they form a large-scale cyclic movement (Liu, 1990; Wang, 1957). Thus, “no plane not followed by a slope. No going not followed by a return” in *tai* hexagram best explains the cyclic nature of change.

Based on *I Ching*’s discourse, all contradictions in the universe should be resolved in the process of this cyclic movement. Any unresolved contradictions will bring about a negative effect. Moreover, the cyclic thinking leads the Chinese to develop a holistic view on the observation of the world (Liu, 1992; Starosta & Chen, 2003). The holistic principle unfolds the developmental feature of the cyclic movement in which individual components are interdependent and interdetermined in a network of relations. In other words, “in unity there is the infinite interfusion of diversities but in each diversity we find the total potentiality of unity” (Chang, 1963). The mutual dependency relationship reflected in the part-whole interdetermination also indicates that all individual components are equally valid outcomes of *Tai Chi* or the dialectic interaction of *yin* and *yang*.

The Forces of Change

Any movement requires a force to keep it going. In *I Ching* the eight trigrams symbolize eight different forces pushing and pulling among one another to form a multidimensional and multidirectional change which is reflected in the 64 hexagrams.

According to Wang (1983), first, *qian*, symbolizing heaven, moves straight forward in an upward direction. The upward force is moving like a “flying dragon in the heavens” (Zhu, 1974, p. 2). It is strong and firm and represents the force of creativity.

Second, *kun*, symbolizing earth, moves in a receptive manner with a direction of square which gently forms a peaceful or calm space. The force of square movement can be described by the following: “the earth’s condition is receptive devotion” (p. 8). Thus, *kun* represents the force of receptivity.

Third, *kan*, symbolizing water, moves in a curving, undulant manner, which represents the revolving curve of downward water to an abyss. The force of curving movement is like “water flow[ing] on uninterruptedly and reach[ing] its goal” (p. 46). *Kan* is then the force of the abysmal.

Fourth, *li*, symbolizing fire, moves in an all-embracing manner with an oblique direction. The force of all-embracing fire “clings on things” (p. 47). It is the force of clinging.

Fifth, *gen*, symbolizing mountain, in a sense is a move to stop an ongoing movement. The force of flattening or delaying movement is described thus: “*Kun* means stopping. When it is time to stop, then stop” (p. 76). *Gen* can be regarded as the force of dilatoriness.

Sixth, *sun*, symbolizing wind, moves in a pointed manner in a specific direction. The entering force is defined by “*sun* is going into” (p. 121). *Sun* is then the force of penetration.

Seventh, *dui*, symbolizing lake, moves in a circulating manner which resembles the function of lake as a circle. The force of circulating movement is like the nature of *kun*, where “The firm is in the center, the yielding on the outer edge... thus does one submit to heaven and accord with men” (p. 83). *Dui* is the force of circulation.

Finally, the eighth is *zhen*, symbolizing thunder. *Zhen* moves in a rolling manner with a direction of forwarding on a plane that arouses people. The rolling forces is described as that “*Zhen* comes – oh, oh!... It terrifies for a hundred miles” (p. 74). *Zhen* is then the force of arousal.

The eight forces of change: creativity, receptivity, abysmal, clinging, dilatoriness, penetration, circulation, and arousal (symbolized by the eight trigrams), systematically construct the laws of change of *I Ching*. In other words, based on the movement of the eight trigrams, the 64 hexagrams were originated. “Therefore the strong and the weak interact and the Eight Trigrams activate each other” (p. 92) explains the cyclic change that reveals the core discourse of *I Ching* dictating that “it is a rotation of phenomena, each succeeding the other until the starting point is reached again” (Wilhelm, 1990, p. 283). It is the interaction of these eight forces that forms the movement of the universe.

The Forms of Change

From the pushing and pulling of the eight forces that induces the process of the cyclic transforming movement, we can identify seven forms of change: quantity change, quality change, gradual change, sudden change, equilibrium, negation, and negation of the negation.

The quantity change refers to the movement of position in each line of the hexagrams, while the overall quality of the hexagrams does not change (Wang, 1970). In other words, although *yin* and *yang* lines switch their position in the hexagram, they still hold the number and ratio between them. Take the transformation from the *dun* hexagram to *da zhuang* as an example. Before the change, *dun* contains two *ying* and four *yang* lines, and it remains the same after it is transformed to *da zhuang*, though the positions of *yin* and *yang* lines have been switched. It is like that a river is running a thousand miles is still the river, even if the different parts of the river show that temporal and spatial contingencies are changing. Moreover, the transformation of human beings from birth, youth, to old age shows the change of a person’s physical and mental state, but no matter how it changes, a human being is still a human being.

The quality change refers to the change from *yin* to *yang*, and visa versa, in each line of the hexagrams. The transformation of *dun* hexagram into *lin* is an example. *Dun* originally contains four *yang* and two *yin* lines, but becomes two *yang* and four *yin* lines after it is changed into *lin*. It is like water being vaporized into steam or frozen into ice. By nature, water, steam, and ice are different in terms of its quality. In addition, a new management

system is adopted to replace the old one to improve a company's performance also shows quality change from the perspective of leadership and management.

The gradual change referring to the coming and going of things is based on an accumulation of step-by-step movement. As indicated in the *kun* hexagram, "Where there is hoarfrost underfoot, solid ice is not far off" and "Where a servant murders his master, where a son murders his father, the causes do not lie between the morning and evening of one day. It took a long time for things to go so far" (Zhu, 1974, p. 8). Before the stark winter or the decay of things is coming, the first sign or warning will be revealed and more appear before final dissolution arrives.

The sudden change refers to the acceleration or violence of movement when the gradual change reaches its saturation level. Thus, the sudden change is considered as the result of the gradual change in which the old system is replaced by a new one in a quick pace. The *ge* hexagram is the image of sudden change which symbolizes revolution. As the hexagram says, *ge* is like "water and fire subdu[ing] each other. Two daughters dwell together, but their views bar mutual understanding. This means revolution" (p. 70). The sudden change therefore provides an opportunity of renewal.

Equilibrium refers to the movement in a state of dialectic balance between the *yang* force to further and the *yin* force to preserve. This coordinating or interdetermining existence between the contradictory *yin* and *yang* forces brings forth two states of change: *bao he* (Great Union) and *tai he* (Great Harmony). As indicated in the *qian* hexagram, "The way of the *Qian* works through change and transformation, so that each thing receives its true nature and destiny and comes into permanent accord with the Great Union and Great Harmony" (p. 3). Great Union represents the state of balance being preserved in a stable condition and Great Harmony is the foundation for the flowing of heaven and earth in the stable state of Great Union. In other words, Great Union provides a constant space where Great Harmony can develop its course in a symmetrical and congruent condition. Wang (1970) pointed out that the state of Great Harmony goes beyond the limitation of the law of contradiction, and which forms the cardinal thought of *zhi zhong/shou zhong* (holding the *zhong*) in Chinese culture.

Negation refers to the movement to break through or resolve a problem. As the *guai* hexagram stipulates, "*Guai*, break-through. It is the same as resoluteness. The firm resolutely dislodges the yielding" (p. 63). According to *I Ching*, negation is a decision itself to move into a positive result. It represents a progressive step in the developmental process of change. In *Great Treatise*, the following is stated: "It is the great virtue of heaven and earth to bestow life" (p. 106). This quote reflects that the negation of death or darkness is to live or to produce.

Finally, negation of the negation refers to the resolution of a positive movement into a negative state. The *Great Treatise*'s assertion that "changes mean production and reproduction" (p. 96) explains the meaning of negation of the negation in which reproduction begets production. It is like "the dark begets the light and the light begets the dark in ceaseless alternation" (Wilhelm, 1990, p. 301). "When one change had run its course, they altered. Through alteration they achieved continuity. Through continuity they achieved duration" (p. 106) also expounds the positive sense of continuous negations that is emphasized in *I Ching*, in contrast to the emphasis of the negative effect of the transformation of negation of the negative, which develops a vicious cycle of movement (Wang, 1970).

The Outcome of Change

Any change will lead to an outcome. According to *I Ching*, from the perspective of human affairs, the outcome of change is located on a continuum woven by *ji* (good fortune) and *xiong* (misfortune). Six consequences array on the continuum between the two polarities of good fortune and misfortune: *l* (*furthering*), *heng* (success), *wu jiu* (no blame), *hui* (remorse), *lin* (humiliation), and *li* (danger). The sequence is as follows:

Good Fortune ← furthering ← success ← no blame ←→remorse →humiliation →danger → **Misfortune**

As indicated in the *Great Treatise*, “Therefore good fortune and misfortune are the images of gain and loss” (Zhu, 1974, p. 93). Good fortune is a state of gaining benefits in which things are moving smoothly without difficulties. *I Ching* emphasizes that when a change is in harmony with the laws of the universe, the desired goal will be attained. This situation is said to be in the state of good fortune. In contrast, misfortune is a state of losing benefits, which brings about undesirable consequences or disasters. It happens when the change is in opposition to the laws of the universe.

Depending on the volume, scope, and intensity of the change, the consequence can either move towards the direction of fortune (no blame, success, or furthering), or move towards the direction of misfortune (remorse, humiliation, or danger). The stage of no blame reflects a state of missing erroneous behaviors. The movement towards no blame is determined by the stage of remorse in which minor faults appear. If one shows repentance or regret and tries to improve the faults, the change will move to the direction of no blame, or will drift into humiliation. As the *Great Treatise* says, “No blame means that one is in position to correct one’s mistakes in the right way” (Zhu, 1974, p. 94). Both remorse and humiliation refer to minor imperfections and “are the images of sorrow and forethought” (p. 93) in which humiliation drives one into a confounding, debased, and dishonored situation.

The lack of repentance and improvement in the stages of remorse and humiliation will eventually drag one into a dangerous position. As described in the *da zhuang* hexagram, “The inferior man works through power, the superior man does not act thus. To continue is dangerous. A goat butts against a hedge and gets its horns entangled” (p. 52). The movement in this situation doubtlessly mirrors the face of misfortune.

The immediate remedy of imperfection in the stage of remorse will have the trend proceed to the stage of no blame, and the successful effort will naturally lead to the stage of success in which, as indicated in the *tai* hexagram, “the small departs, the great approaches... In this way heaven and earth unite, and all beings come into union... The way of the superior man is waxing; the way of the inferior man is waning” (p. 23). In a sense, *heng* (the success) is defined by *tong* (penetration) through which “the going forward and backward without ceasing” (p. 102). The state of success provides a space where things are stimulated and set in motion so that continuity can be reached.

Therefore, nature must be furthered in order to make up for deficiencies and be abundant. The *tai* hexagram says, “He furthers and regulates the gifts of heaven and earth, and so aids the people.” According to R. Wilhelm (1990), “aids” in Chinese word means literally being “at the left and the right,” which denotes the penetration between *yin* and *yang* at the right time and right place provided in the stage of success. The continuous penetration of the two

opposite forces leading to the time of flowering illustrates the stage of furthering. Thus, furthering is a stage of appropriateness and having gains. When it reaches the fullness of possession and the height of change, as indicated in the *da you* hexagram, “He is blessed by heaven. Good fortune. Nothing that does not further” (p. 28). Therefore, to stay in which stage of the outcome of change is based on the ability to regulate change.

Conclusion

This essay, based on the discourse of *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes*, attempts to explicate the key concept of *bian* (change). The concept of change is approached from five perspectives, including the attributes, the principle, the forces, the forms, and the outcome of change. It is clear that the discourse in this essay is limited on the philosophical level, although the explication helps to better understand the concept. For future study, it is important to apply the concept to explain real life situations, such as human interaction in a society. As mentioned in the *Great Treatise*, “What is above the form is called the Way (*tao*); what is within form is called tool (*qi*)” (p. 104). The philosophical *tao* transcends the spatial world, which is the field of living symbolized by tool, but also acts upon it by providing rules and guidelines of movement in the visible world. Thus, how to regulate change based on *I Ching*’s philosophical guidelines deserves scholars’ attention.

The secret of appropriately regulating change is in the ability of holding the *zhong* (centrality) mentioned previously. According to Chen (2001, 2005, 2007) and Wu (1976), *I Ching* points out three possible abilities embedded in *shi* (temporal contingencies), *wei* (spatial contingencies), and *ji* (the first imperceptible beginning of movement) to achieve the goal of holding the *zhong*. The authors’ efforts shed a valuable light on future research. In other words, how to foster the knowledge and skills that originated from the three concepts in order to know and act in the right time at the right place based on the trace of the movement reveals a potential of fusing the *tao* and the tool also opens up a direction of inquiry in this area.

* The translation of *I Ching* adopted in this essay is based on the work of three scholars: W.-T. Chan, R. Wilhelm, and J. Legge, and the version of *I Ching* used in this essay is X. Zhu’s “*A collected interpretations of I Ching*.”

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