



**Turtle bones in the flux**



**English  
podcast transcript**

# Turtle bones in the flux

## *Yijing: The Book of Changes Pt. 1*

### English transcript

Zürich: METIS Podcast Transcriptions 2024

*ES: Eliane Schmid*

KM: Kai Marchal

*ES: Hello, and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS Project. METIS is an internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature, and wisdom practices, which can be accessed via [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch).*

*In today's Wisdom Talk, we will turn our attention to Yi Jing, or the Book of Changes in English. Here to explain about this ancient Chinese divination text is Kai Marchal, associate professor at the Department of Philosophy at National Cheng Chi University, Taipei, Taiwan.*

*Kai specializes in Chinese philosophy, political philosophy, and ethics. My name is Eliane Schmid, and I'm delighted to welcome our listeners, and of course, Kai Marchal, who is here in the studio with me today.*

KM: Hello, Eliane. I'm happy to be here.

*ES: This is great fun. Just to start with, what is exactly the book that we're talking about, what is this Book of Changes?*

KM: The *Book of Changes* is really a mysterious text. I think many of our listeners... well, the first association is mystery or ancient oriental wisdom. So, it's something very alien to us. But then, if we look closer, we realize that the *Yi Jing* is a cultural phenomenon. It is already deeply embodied in our own western modernity.

So, if you think of the *Yi Jing*, you might think of the '60s, where the hippie generation were the first to discover this sacred book from the East. There were reading this famous Richard Wilhelm translation, and then, when they're doing...they were engaging oriental wisdom, and it became really a pop phenomenon.

So, you find the book *Yi Jing* in Bob Dylan, in John Cage, or even C.G. Jung, because we are here in Zurich, but also, in the architecture of I.M.Pei. So, it's somehow everywhere, and it's even, of course, part of esoterics as we know it today, and some very famous mainstream philosophers, for example, Leibniz, have also written about the *Yi Jing*. So, it's really a very mysterious text.

*ES: A very mysterious text, and it seems like a cultural phenomenon as well, like you just described, and could one then talk as...a bit as being like a pillar or foundation of Chinese philosophy and/or culture? How would you describe this?*

KM: Yeah. Somehow, I think it is the most important text, and without this text, we wouldn't have Chinese philosophy. Even in Daoism and in Buddhism, it has become a very essential part of the philosophical discourse. So, what is the *Yi Jing*? The "Yi", this very first word, it's a character, a Chinese character, and normally, it is translated into as "change". So, it's a book about change. So, what kind of change?

So, the idea is that everything is really not static, but in the flux. So, I identify myself as the same person today, and even tomorrow, and I see a table, and I somehow think that the table today, it's the same table as tomorrow. But for the authors of the *Yi Jing*, it's not true.

So, they were convinced that everything is in flux. So this concept of Dao is crucial here in Chinese philosophy. And somehow the idea is that by reading the *Book of Changes* and by engaging with this text, we will be able to achieve a sort of a resonance which will attune

ourself to change. It's kind of still a little bit difficult to understand, but the idea is that human beings, by engaging with this text, can achieve a sort of cosmic resonance.

So, it's not me against the world, but it's really the strong idea of unity, me and the universe are just the same thing.

*ES: Now, how you explain it and how you translate the word to change, this seems like it's relatable to other languages as well. But do you think that the book in itself, is it translatable in its entirety into, for example, English, or are there things that do not really transcend into other languages? I mean, are we able to really capture the essence of the book if you read it in English, for example? Or do you need to know Chinese?*

KM: Yeah, that's a great question. I think these worries have been constantly accompanying the reception of... the western reception of the *Book of Changes*. So, as I already mentioned, Richard Wilhelm is a very famous translator of the *Book of Changes*. He translated it into German, and his German translation has been retranslated into English. And somehow, he was able to make sense of it.

So, to make this text into a meaningful text, so he had a great appeal. Even today, I just mentioned pop culture, for example, I was recently watching this Amazon series, 'The Man in the High Castle', and there, you see the main figure, Juliana Crain having a sort of out of body experience. She's meditating, and then, in this out of body experience, sees a hexagram. So, this wisdom comes up everywhere. So, you ask me, is it possible to translate the *Book of Changes*? I would say of course it is.

So, it has already been incorporated into our western culture, modern culture. But then, of course, there are certain elements which are really difficult to express in language, and the first Chinese commentators and readers of this book have often emphasized that there's something which is beyond language. And if we have a closer look at the structure of this books, and of course, first and foremost, this is a text, so this text can be dated to around 800 BC. So, it's

really an old text, and probably one of the oldest Chinese classics. And then, there are characters, Chinese characters, texts. But there's also kind of a graphic structure.

And many of our listeners will know this, that there are these famous hexagrams. So, famous hexagrams, what is this? If you sit in front of an empty sheet of paper and you draw six lines, like six parallel lines... this is very simple, this basic structure or the basic graphic element in the book of change. So, there are unbroken lines and broken lines. The unbroken line represents the yang, and the broken line represents yin.

You have these two forces directly related to this graphic structure there. The very first character, six yang lines is the first character, they're the famous hexagram of "Tian", which also represents change, but also, represents heaven. And then, the second hexagram is just the opposite. So you don't have six unbroken lines, but you have six broken lines. And these six broken lines represents pure "Yin".

So, yin and yang, these kind of two cosmic forces. And so, the first hexagram is associated with heaven and the second hexagram is associated with the earth. Heaven and earth is, again, kind of a cosmic pattern somehow.

*ES: So now that you explained what exactly the hexagrams are, and before, you gave me a concrete example of how the hexagrams were kind of used today or contemporarily, could you bring this a bit together to explain how we can use these hexagrams? What do they actually mean? I mean now we have the understanding and how it was applied, but how could I do something with these hexagrams?*

KM: Yeah, that's a very interesting question. And maybe I should say a little bit more about the text first. So, the text, as I already said, is very old. So, in the present state, has been composed around the year 800 BC by certain sages, there are a lot of these Chinese sages like Fuxi in Chinese culture, and they supposedly created this text by directly observing natural phenomena. The idea is that, as I already said, there's a constellation, a configuration in heaven, and by observing them closely, we can understand them better.

This connection to natural phenomena, to the natural world is very important. And later on, you have Confucius. He is more kind of a later guy, more or less, in the same timeframe, like Socrates, or a little bit earlier than Socrates, might be like Plato, the 5<sup>th</sup> century...so 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. So, this text was often ascribed to Confucius. Confucius actually hadn't much to do with the text.

In the analects, there is one famous saying where he said that, "If I have more time, then, I would study the *Book of Changes*," but actually, he probably never really seriously studied the *Book of Changes*. But somehow, in traditional China, people were convinced that Confucius was maybe not the author of the *Book of Changes*, but the first commentator.

This was very important to establish the authority of the text. Somehow, as you all know, and in traditional Chinese culture, Confucius was very important. Every text, each text associated with his name was also very important. So, people had to study these texts...

*ES: But we don't know who wrote the Book of Changes, actually?*

KM: Yeah, that is more or less, the case. Fuxi, or these sages supposedly created the text. But yeah, this is not historical truth. It's just a myth. Somehow this book has this mythical origin there. But what is important...

*ES: Which creates more mysticism around it, like you described before...*

KM: Yeah, so, people love this, or certain people love this sort of mysticism. But in traditional China, this had a really direct impact on people, because people were Confucians, the education system was Confucian. So, every child had to memorize it, at least, children from rich families, or who had the means to study. They had to memorize this text, because it was the most important classic. They learned Chinese by memorizing the *Book of Changes*. So it was somehow everywhere.

Everybody, not only in China, in East Asia, knew these 64 hexagrams. Each hexagram represents a particular constellation. This is also important to mention. Because I said this book is about achieving cosmic resonance and understanding change, so, but how actually can we describe change? The authors of the *Book of Changes* maintain that we can identify certain constellations. So, each hexagram, and this is a very simple mathematical system, so you have two possibilities on each line. You have six lines in total. So, you have 64 possibilities, and each of these 64 hexagrams represent one constellation, which we can encounter in real life.

For example, there's this famous third hexagram which represents the difficulty at the beginning. This doesn't sound so abstract any longer, this is relative concrete. The difficulty in the beginning means that, as soon as you enter a new stage in your life, or as soon as you take on a new job, you might encounter certain difficulties. This third hexagram, difficulty at the beginning, will tell you first what kind of constellation you are located in now. In your life, in the process of your aging, what is this particular constellation, and then, how can you cope with this constellation.

It will give you certain advices. Because you have this graphic structure, which I was describing a few minutes ago, but you have also the text. Each of these six lines of each hexagram have certain statements. These normally are very simple statements. "If you do this, then, that might happen." Or "If you continue in this action, then, this might be dangerous". So, very simple basic advice. And often, this is kind of a warning. "You should not continue in this course of action. You should be more careful."

*ES: Before, when you described it with the mathematics and seeing things and stuff, it sounded super complex. But you said that, actually, children, that they learn it. Do they really also understand it? Is it an easy text in a way? Are there several levels of understanding that make it more difficult or easy, or how do you think that it's approachable, this text actually?*

KM: Yeah, that's a great question. I think, indeed, there are many different layers. This basic idea of yin and yang, I think even a three-year old child will grasp easily, and I'm sure, in

traditional China, they were doing this, because when they were learning Chinese, they also often were taught the *Yi Jing*. So, they learned this idea of the yin and yang and this basic hexagram structure.

But then, if you go into the text, immerse yourself more deeply, and then, you realize that the language is actually very, very complicated. Most of the text is not philosophical, or conceptual, it's rather literary. You have all kinds of descriptions, literary descriptions of simple situations which might happen in traditional societies.

I already mentioned this problem, if you encounter a difficulty. Sometimes, it's also about the king, the king and his ministers. This kind of simple situation which were happening, or which people were encountering in many traditional societies are also thematized in the *Book of Changes* because this was an agrarian society. So they often talk about the harvest. They often talk about certain plants and growths on the fields and so on, and certain meteorological phenomena are mentioned as well.

*ES: So, if we look at the text today, we kind of need to adapt it to our times. It's not completely relatable to how we're functioning in society today.*

KM: Yeah. And in a way, already, in traditional China, people had to adapt this text to their own needs. This is actually very interesting, and you have what I was just describing, these more concrete parts. These more concrete descriptions of certain phenomena, which we all encounter in life, mostly, of course, in agrarian societies. But later on, of course, in China, beginning in the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century, you also had really big cities.

In these big cities, people were also confronted with problems in their life, in their marriage, and they had to confront death and certain challenges, political struggles. They were also already, at that time, translating this very old text to their own language in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, so were doing this already.

*ES: So, the Book of Changes is undergoing changes itself.*



KM: It has been constantly undergoing change, and what is really interesting is it's not just kind of life or concrete advice, or this kind of concrete wisdom, but it's also much more. There's also a part, the great commentary, which is directly about developing a cosmology or a philosophy. Many cosmological ideas in traditional China were directly extracted from the *Book of Changes*. You might have heard of this famous notion of 'Tai Chi', for example. 'Tai Chi', we all know this. Some people are doing 'Tai Chi Chuan'. This notion has also entered our language. What is 'Tai Chi'? 'Tai Chi' is kind of a point of beginning. Very early on, in the emergence of the universe, 'Tai Chi' had some effect.

If you think of the Bible, you also have a narrative about the creation of the world by God. But in the *Book of Changes*, you have something similar or comparable, but there's no God, and there's even no law. So, this whole idea of the law-like kind of a framework which we have at the basis of western philosophy, European philosophy, is very much centered around this idea of a law which is God-given, and we don't have this in the *Book of Changes*.

It's all about this process, about the idea of the process constantly changing, which, behind the randomness, if we only watch closely enough, we will also realize, order, or even harmony.

*ES: How does this, then, go with Buddhism? I was just wondering, because you made a comparison to the Bible, but are there any overlaps or interactions with Buddhist ideas as well? You also already mentioned Confucius, but I was wondering about this kind of...*

KM: Yeah. This is a wonderful question. The text itself is associated with Confucianism, and also, Daoism. In traditional China, but then, with Buddhism entering China around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, you, of course, also have these new developments. And the *Book of Changes*, to some extent, you can say is, of course, much earlier than Buddhism. It has been written down very early and much earlier than the first Buddhist sutra.

But what is really interesting is that the Buddhist people, monks or philosophers, when they tried to understand Buddhism there, in later stages, in later dynasties, they often refer to the

*Book of Changes*, because there was kind of a common discourse. So, Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, these different discourses, they all merged into one.

Of course, it makes sense to some extent, because the *Book of Changes* is about change, nothing stays the same. We never can enter the same river second time, only once, and then, everything goes away. And Buddhism has a very similar understanding of the world: the change is everywhere, it's universal. But then, Buddhism adds a very important philosophical idea, it's the idea of emptiness. Whereas, as the readers of the *Book of Changes*, you could say still cling to the phenomena, or the changing world. For the Buddhist, you have to really transcend the phenomena. You have to break through and realize universal emptiness.

There's a certain tension between the *Book of Changes* and Buddhism. But, for example, in the Ming Dynasty, you have Ouyi Zhixu, a very famous Buddhist monk who wrote a commentary, a Buddhist commentary to the *Book of Changes*. You see that the Buddhists were also really deeply fascinated by this text.

*ES: But I'm wondering, then, because change is always something very dynamic, we would think, or something very unsettled, and Buddhism is more something calm, one might say, very simply put...do these things then clash, or does a Buddhist perspective on the text kind of calm it down a bit? I was just wondering how this goes together.*

KM: Yeah. That is a very good point. We are talking today about the *Book of Changes*. I would really love to show you these hexagrams, but I'm not able to do this, because we just... Yeah, we are having our podcast here. But it's important to understand that the *Book of Changes* is, first and foremost, about visualization. You have to visualize these hexagrams.

So yin and yang...I haven't said much about yin and yang. So, yang is this male force, it's activity, it's kind of dynamism, and it's going upwards. Whereas, yin is associated with the female part, and it's kind of passive, it's dark. Yang is really bright, and yin is dark and yin is cold and yang is warm. And of course, there is this aspect...kind of a hierarchy between the genders. For us

today, it doesn't make much sense. But in traditional China, this was one way of understanding gender relations.

But it's important to emphasize that this hierarchy between yin and yang is never static. It's always in the flux. Yin and yang are also complementary forces. You cannot just live from yang. This male power itself, the male force needs to be complementary with yin force. This is, I think, important. And because you mentioned this idea of peace of mind and being calm, which is very important in Buddhism, you can say that they are also important in the *Book of Changes*, because whereas yang represents movement, yin represents tranquility and this kind of a peace of mind.

You have certain hexagrams where you really almost see this idea. If you are willing to really visualize the hexagram, and you see this peace of mind. People were doing this in traditional China when they were reading the *Book of Changes*, it was not just about understanding it but about meditating through it.

*ES: So, we get both things. We learn how to cope with many different states of mind in that case. But then, also, just the last question, because I see that we're progressed in time, unfortunately. So, for me, as a beginner in this whole story, how would I go about reading the book? How would I start? Can I just delve into it, read the text, and look at the pictures, as you said, at the hexagrams? Or should I learn more about the historical context, or what would you recommend?*

KM: I think keeping a diary while reading the *Book of Changes* is a great idea. Reading the book in itself can be a very meaningful experience, a very beautiful experience, because it's a literary text. You have all these wonderful metaphors, and you have to think about them, you can even experience them. And if you try to somehow engage with the *Book of Changes* in more depth, then, you should write down your experience.

Some people recommend that you...because you have to throw the coins. There's this idea of the oracle, and we haven't said much about it yet. So, there is, on the one hand, all this abstract

cosmological speculations there, but there's also this very practical aspect that you need to use it as an oracle. And there has always been a tension between these two dimensions.

But you can use it today, for example, you use a coin oracle, and you ask the *Book of Changes* a question, for example: "What should I do tomorrow?", the more concrete, the better. "Shall I buy this new Apple computer, or not?" and then, the *Book of Changes* will somehow start talking to you. Maybe you should not really...because for us, as modern people, it's difficult to really believe that this all makes sense, and the traditional Chinese people were often convinced that, behind this process of change, there are spiritual agencies, so-called 'Shenming' in Chinese. And Dao, it's not just a force, it's not just a naturalistic force, but it's more, it's spiritual.

So, we might have difficulties in believing this, but if you just engage with the text and write a diary and do it on a daily basis for maybe one year or two years, I think you will be transformed, and you will understand much better how the Book of Changes can make sense to us today.

*ES: So, I will learn more about the book itself, but when I...*

KM: And about yourself!

*ES: About myself. That's what I wanted to ask.*

KM: That's the idea.

*ES: Ultimately, I will learn more about myself when I try to engage with this text.*

KM: That is, I think, the idea. And many of these hippies in the '60s, in '70s, they have done this. And if you think, for example, composers like John Cage, why were they all so fascinated by the

*Book of Changes?* I think there is this randomness there that you...it's a freshness, and I think in the '70s, people were, of course... for them, the *Book of Changes* was something really new.

This aleatoriness of something can just happen, it pops out, and you have to react to it. I think people like John Cage were really fascinated by this, and they have transformed the *Book of Changes* into their own creative visions. Today, we are living in a age of contingency. With the internet, we have a much bigger aleatory machine. Anything can happen randomly if we go into Twitter.

The *Book of Changes* is kind of a slower system. Whereas, the internet is really fast, the *Book of Changes* might teach you another way of relating to yourself in a slower pace.

*ES: And it also seems to make you a bit more hopeful, it seems.*

KM: Yeah, absolutely. The book is very positive. So, the *Book of Changes* often speaks about regret and remorse and distress and threatening. But actually, if you count then, there are many more instances which are really positive meaning, 430 to 130, I think. They are 430 instances of auspiciousness, favorableness and advantage, even success. In a way, it's a very positive book, optimistic.

*ES: I like that ending. I will go with the optimism. Thank you very much for being here. This was really very interesting, and I'm looking forward to delving into the book. Thank you so much for joining me on this talk today.*

KM: Thank you, Eliane. It was a great discussion.

*ES: Wonderful. So, at this point, I would also like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks, as well as to curiously plunge into the multitude of texts and further podcasts that can be*

*found on our website, metis.ethz.ch, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature, and wisdom practices.*

*You can also find more information in the show notes. Thank you very much for listening, and goodbye.*

*This METIS Wisdom Talk was produced by Martin Münnich and supported by ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum in Hamburg.*