

Early Chinese Beliefs

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For

Cal Poly Pomona

Program on India and China 1995-98

Funded by the *National Endowment for the Humanities*

Directed by Tara Sethia

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Topic:

Early beliefs and practices in China

Primary Sources:

Various translations of the I Ching, listed in the bibliography

Framework Connection:

Students are expected to acquire cultural and historical literacy. By developing an appreciation of various religious and philosophical approaches to life in ancient China, medieval and modern China can be better understood.

Activities:

1. Set the stage by building on prior study of early humans who needed to hunt and gather and discuss changes as people began to settle in specific locations. (See Background Notes.)
2. Have students look at physical maps of China to understand why permanent or semipermanent locations would have been desirable.
3. Show visuals (see oraclebones.pdf) of oracle bones and tortoise shell inscriptions during short lecture on these topics and the introduction to the I Ching.
4. Distribute handout "Using Coins to Obtain a Hexagram of the I Ching," various texts providing interpretations of the hexagrams, and duplicates of the shortened form of readings for each hexagram (available in most books on the I Ching, such as those listed in the bibliography). Be sure that each student has three identical coins, designating one side as yin, or tails, and the other side as yang, or heads. Demonstrate several tosses with readings before allowing students to try their own.
5. Once students have arrived at one or more readings, emphasize that reading of the I Ching was often used to provoke thought and to instill calmness and/or motivation, much the same way many Americans read the *Bible*, a book of poetry, or other inspirational writing.

Reflecting on Learning:

1. Have students read a "story" interpretation of readings (similar to that written by Confucius), such as "the geese approach the shore," and then try to create a story for one of their readings.
2. Students could illustrate their stories and present them to the class.

Optional Activities:

Students could research and report on:

1. The extent to which China today is an agrarian society and how rural lifestyles may influence beliefs
2. The extent to which people in China today read the I Ching and have readings done professionally
3. The possible evolution of Chinese calligraphy from original tortoise shell inscriptions, since these inscriptions were believed to be the precursors of Chinese script.

Background Notes: Early Chinese Beliefs

Early Chinese beliefs centered around the earth, nature, localized spirits, and ancestors. Reflecting their agricultural character, the ancient Chinese honored the local gods of the soil to increase ground fertility and promote crop growth. Every village built a mound of earth, called the "she." (Later mounds represented the territory of feudal lords, and a mound at the imperial capital symbolized the soil-spirit of the entire realm.)

With the passage of time, Earth-worship decreased, and worship of Heaven increased. The ruler of Heaven was a kind of ancestral figure whose desires and future actions could be determined only through divination. Because both Heaven and Earth were thought to be inhabited by spirits, the Chinese believed that nature had many spirits, both good (shen) and bad (gui). The bad spirits could be kind if respected and venerated. The sun and the rooster (through announcing sunrise) had power over the bad spirits. The shen were later associated with yin, and the gui with yang.

Belief in family solidarity was related to belief in survival after death. The extended family continued to interact, even if some members were dead. If properly honored, respected, and provided for, ancestors promoted the family's prosperity. A favor or injury to a member of the family was considered a favor or injury to the ancestors; consequently, people were reluctant to insult or harm descendants of a powerful family. An ancestral shrine was an important center of every home.

Oracle bones, unearthed by archaeologists, reveal that Shang kings and their subjects performed various types of divinations. The earliest form of divination appears to have been the use of scrapes and cracks on tortoise shells or pieces of bone. Parts of the shell or bone were scraped thin and held over a flame. The resulting cracks were read and interpreted by diviners (somewhat like fortune-tellers). Records of the questions and answers of readings were engraved on the bone. Questions on these oracle bones included topics of weather, warfare, agriculture, hunting, childbirth, and sacrifice. Inscriptions also communicate respect for ancestors and for various spirits, particularly those of rivers and mountains.

According to legend, inscriptions found on the shell of a magic tortoise revealed the eight trigrams which became the basis of the I Ching. The tortoise crawled out of the Yellow River onto the bank where Fu Hsi, a sage/folk hero, sat in 3322 B.C.E. (Some legends refer to Fu Hsi as Emperor and others to the animal coming out of the river as a dragon.) Fu Hsi assigned the present names and imagery to these eight trigrams. A second sage, called King Wen by some sources, combined each of the eight trigrams with each of the other eight trigrams, resulting in sixty-four hexagrams. King Wen also added interpretations to the hexagrams. Later Confucius and/or his followers wrote additional commentaries on each hexagram.

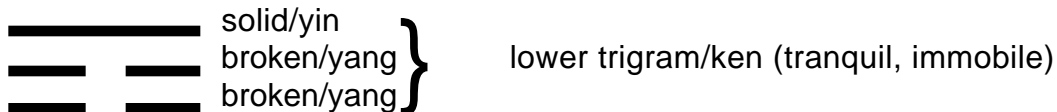
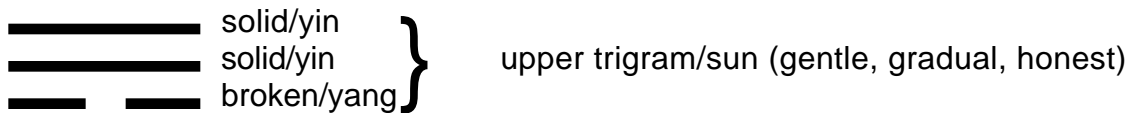
The I Ching is considered by a few scholars to be a series of oracles which tell of the "epic struggle and uprising of the Chou," leading to the overthrow of the Shang dynasty sometime between 1122 and 1027 B.C.E.

In the traditional Chinese triad of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, Heaven created everything, Earth nourished all, and humanity was responsible for balancing everything. These three comprise the three parts of each hexagram, with the bottom two lines representing Earth, the top two lines Heaven, and the middle part man.

Methods of consulting the I Ching vary. The traditional method uses fifty yarrow stalks and incense; arriving at a single hexagram requires at least twenty minutes, not counting the time to read or interpret the hexagram. However, three coins may also be used and are the fastest method.

Using Coins to Obtain a Hexagram of the I Ching

1. Be very calm and think of a question on which you need guidance. Designate one side as yin (usually tails) and one side as yang (usually heads). Hold the three coins loosely, shake, and simultaneously drop them on a flat surface.
2. Record the result (three heads or three tails, two of one and one of the other, etc.) as solid or broken lines. Three heads or two tails with one head = broken line. Three tails or two heads with one tail = solid line.
3. Do this six times and draw lines from the bottom up.
4. Then consult a book with tables of meanings for each of the sixty-four hexagrams.
5. For example:



These two trigrams form hexagram 53. A simplified reading indicates that success will follow persistence; in other words, perseverance in a constant direction despite obstacles will lead to progress or happiness. Other interpretations include: a virtuous (or rule-following) person will be a good influence and will be recognized; favorable marriage for a maiden; good omen. Think of a reading as guidance for the question you had in mind at the time of "throwing" the I Ching.