

Great Polar Fist and the Book of Change*

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Introduction

The question of the connection between Taijiquan and the Yijing is something that seems to crop up regularly in both communities.¹ For example, this journal recently had an article on the subject by Graham Horwood, and *Answers*, a Yijing newsletter published by Hilary Barrett of Clarity, also recently published some thoughts on the connections (Issue 40 of the newsletter).

As a practitioner and teacher in both systems, it is certainly a question that I have considered from time to time. On the one hand, it seems obvious that there must be a connection: after all, both are concerned with the systematic exploration of the interaction of yin and yang. However, Taijiquan is a physical art, exploring the balance of these fundamental powers in the realms of movement and self-defence, whilst the Yijing is a philosophical system, exploring how these powers act and interact through situational archetypes. Where, then, is the connection?

Layers

To begin with, it is important to realize that connections between systems can exist at any of the various levels that the two systems possess. Identifying these layers could itself be the subject of a lengthy article. However, for the sake of this discussion, I shall assume the following set of divisions in these arts. In actuality, it is good to remember that the separation between these layers, in both arts, is not hard and fast; there is a degree of blending between the layers.

I shall say that the surface of Taijiquan is found in its forms, the specific movements that are used by any given style of the art. As a layer beneath the specific movements you will find the idea of a set of fundamental powers, or *jin*. Any particular movement can be seen as a combination of these basic powers. Then, at the heart of the art, there are a simple set of principles that describe how yin and yang interact in the physical realm of interacting bodies. These principles are the subject of the literary classics. All of these layers are then wrapped up in the actual practice of the art, for without the practice there is no art. The different styles of Taijiquan really only differ at the top layer, in their forms. In terms of the fundamental powers and the underlying principles, all styles should be the same.

Similarly, I shall describe the surface layer of the Yijing as being composed of the different aspects of the divinatory texts that have evolved over the centuries. These texts were, quite literally, set in stone in 1794. However, beneath these texts you find the symbols of the book, the trigrams and hexagrams, which are presented as actual pictures of the configurations of yin and yang in a situation. Then, at the heart of the system, again you will find basic principles regarding the nature of yin and yang. The articulation of these principles is largely located in the ancillary texts of the Yijing such









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¹ Taijiquan is also sometimes spelt “Tai Chi Chuan” and Yijing is sometimes spelt “I Ching”. In this article I shall generally use the modern Pinyin spellings for Chinese words, rather than the older Wade-Giles system. However, I shall continue to write the names of people in the way that they are traditionally spelt. Similarly, I will spell the titles of books using the same spelling as the original author.

as the *Shuo Gua* (the “Discussion of the Trigrams”) and the *Da Zhuan* (the “Great Treatise”). Finally, all of these layers are brought together in the act of divination; the application of the Yijing in helping to clarify the issues that you face in dealing with a particular problem.

Eight Powers and the Trigrams

The most traditional connection between Taijiquan and the Yijing actually occurs in the middle of the three layers discussed above. That is, it connects the fundamental powers of the art with some of the symbols of the book, specifically the trigrams (the three lined figures).² The following set of associations should be familiar, in some form, to most practitioners of Taijiquan.

Jin	Posture	Trigram	Force	Description
Peng	Ward-off		Heaven	An upward force to divert or strike.
Lu	Roll-back		Earth	Leading and diverting attack to the side.
Ji	Press		Water	A forward thrust or push.
An	Push		Fire	A downward force, smothering.
Cai	Pluck		Wind	Uprooting, disrupt the centre of gravity.
Lie	Split		Thunder	Spiralling back an incoming force.
Zhou	Elbow		Valley ³	Using the joint to divert or to strike.
Kao	Bump		Mountain	Use of the shoulder or torso to strike.

The first column shows the Romanised version of the Chinese name for the fundamental power, whilst the second column, Posture, gives the name of the posture or technique usually associated with the power. The third column shows the trigram associated with the power, and the fourth column gives the natural, elemental force associated with the trigram. Finally, the fifth column gives a brief description of the nature of the power. The reader should note that the posture name is taken from Yang’s translation of the Wu family classics, whilst the brief description of the power is derived from the Wudang tradition of Cheng Tin Hung (see the bibliography).

In Yang’s translation of the Wu family literature, he makes the assignment of Heaven to Ward Off and of Earth to Roll Back based on the idea that Ward Off is a

² Baguazhang (literally meaning “Eight Trigram Palm”), of course, is a complete martial art based on the trigrams. That system typically involves the practice of circle walking and then changing the direction of the circle. There are different ways of changing the direction, and different postures to hold whilst walking the circle. The different styles of direction change and the different postures held are directly related to the trigrams. I shall not consider Baguazhang here.

³ The natural element for this trigram is usually translated as Lake. Olsen makes an interesting observation about this, saying that the meaning of the name has more to do with the hollow that allows a lake to form, than with the lake itself. I shall follow Olsen’s lead, firstly because the Valley makes a better opposition for the Mountain, and secondly, because it avoids repeating the element of Water.

fundamentally yang power and the Heaven trigram is pure yang, and that Roll Back is a fundamentally yin power and the Earth trigram is pure yin. He does not discuss the other powers in terms of trigrams assignments.

The connection of the eight powers to the eight trigrams is sometimes taken to come from the Pre-Heaven arrangement of the trigrams shown in Figure 1. Pairs of trigrams make obvious opposites, such as Heaven and Earth, or Fire and Water, and these pairs are depicted in the diagram. The relative orientation of these pairs, and their resulting direction on the circle, is then related to the fundamental power.

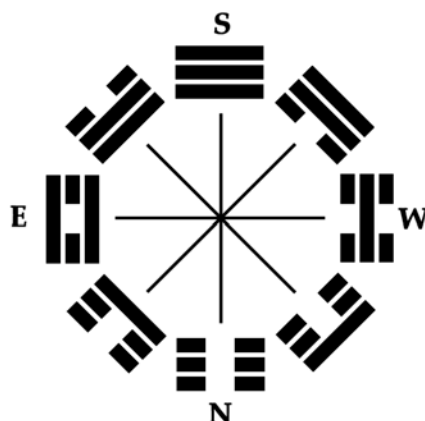


Figure 1: The Pre-Heaven Arrangement of Trigrams

Sifu Cheng makes the general observation that if we consider ourselves standing in the centre of the circle, then an opponent's attack will manifest as one of the eight powers. By applying another of the eight powers to counter the attack, we effectively redirect the opponent's force in a given direction. However, he is clearly sceptical about specific correlations between trigrams and powers. He says: "Those who have studied Chinese philosophy may care to consider why and how each particular tactic is related to the relevant trigram, or element, but this question is largely irrelevant for our purpose. Suffice to say that Wang Chung Yueh set out the above relationship, but we have no record of how he arrived at it." This seems to me, on one level, to be very much to the point: what light does the philosophical structure developed in the Yijing shed on the practice of Taijiquan as either a martial art, or a physical practice for health?

The Form and Hexagrams

When you look at the available literature on the subject, the main focus seems to be on finding, or creating, a particular correlation between the symbols and texts of the Yijing, and the moves and techniques of some version of Taijiquan's hand form. Both Da Lui's book *T'ai Chi Ch'uan and I Ching*, and Stuart Olsen's work *T'ai Chi According to the I Ching*, fall into this category. In terms of the levels outlined above, this is a connection between the surface layer of Taijiquan (form) and the surface (text) and middle (symbol) layers of the Yijing.

When I consider the kinds of direct correlations between Taijiquan and the Yijing offered by either Olsen or Da Lui, one question repeatedly bothers me: if there is to be an association between postures in a Taijiquan form and the symbols from the Yijing, how do we account for the fact that some of the hexagrams represent disadvantageous, or downright unpleasant, situations?

Note that this is distinct from connecting trigrams to powers, as discussed above. Each trigram represents one of the fundamental, natural forces acting in the Universe

and, as such, refers to a single force. We might, therefore, legitimately connect them with the individual jins expressed in Taijiquan. However, a hexagram represents a combination of forces which are interacting to produce a given situation. Obviously, the postures in the form should all be well rooted with good structure in the body, but as already noted, some such combinations of forces are not auspicious. For example, consider hexagram 39 (see Figure 2) whose name is translated as *Limping*. It refers to a situation where you are weak and feeble, and any progress comes unsteadily.



Figure 2: Hexagram 39, Limping

Olsen associates this hexagram with the posture Single Whip, and does so based on a systematic analysis of the characteristics of the energies of the two component trigrams, Mountain beneath and Water above. However, his analysis makes no reference to the actual traditional meaning of the hexagram; like all the postures in the form, Single Whip is strong and integrated, with no suggestion of weakness, so Olsen is forced to change the meaning of the hexagram to make it fit his analysis.⁴

For Da Lui, Single Whip is represented by hexagram 49, *Skinning* (see Figure 3). He does reference the traditional text for the hexagram, but without actually relating it directly to the posture. Instead, he bases his correlation on the meaning of the *nuclear trigrams* of the figure, in this case Wind and Heaven.⁵



Figure 3: Hexagram 49, Skinning

Olsen, then, is using the symbols of the Yijing, but is not paying attention to the traditional meanings of the symbols. Da Lui, on the other hand, tries to connect the postures to the traditional meanings, but is not systematic in his approach, sometimes using the nuclear trigrams, sometimes the primary trigrams.

Without wanting to detract from the work of these two authors, I think these kinds of connections between the Yijing and Taijiquan are ultimately superficial. Whilst surface correlations between the symbols of the Yijing and the postures and energies of Taiji may well be real, they are actually the result of a much deeper connection between the two systems.

Fundamental Connections

So, what are the real connections between Taijiquan and the Yijing? What common threads can we draw out that will give the practitioner of one art insight from the other? I contend that the real connections exist at the deepest layers of both systems.

⁴ Please note that I am certainly not against exploring alternative meanings for the hexagrams. However, any systematic reanalysis of meaning that gives every hexagram a positive and auspicious interpretation misses the core nature of combining yin and yang and has to be taken with a large pinch of salt.

⁵ Finding the nuclear trigrams of a hexagram is a technical operation that involves taking the middle four lines of the figure and expanding them out into two overlapping trigrams. It is an operation usually taken to reveal the core meaning of a situation.

Most obviously, both systems are fundamentally interested in the patterns of interaction of yin and yang as forces in the world. The symbols of the Yijing, the trigrams and hexagrams, depict these patterns of interaction directly. The associated texts for each hexagram then provide detailed descriptions of how the patterns manifest, and give advice on what might be appropriate action in the face of such forces. In Taijiquan, the very name of the art comes from the name given to the initial polarization of the Universe into yin and yang. This is depicted in the well known diagram, shown in Figure 4.

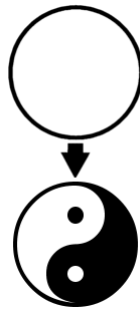


Figure 4: Taiji emerging from Wuji

Here, the polarization into yin and yang, shown by the Taiji diagram, is shown emerging from Wuji, the state before any distinction or movement arises, shown by the empty circle. The relationship between stillness and movement to which this diagram refers, lies at the heart of the form of Taijiquan.

Further, both the Yijing and Taijiquan are practical skills. In Taijiquan there is a direct opportunity to experience the interplay of yin and yang in physical terms. When doing the forms, as you move through the various postures, the flow of yin and yang within the body becomes apparent: weighted and empty legs in a stance, rotating in the waist, hips and spine, warding and striking with the arms are some of the more obvious manifestations.

Once you start doing partner work, this moves to a whole new level of expression. Now the ebb and flow of your yin and yang must harmonise with the flow of your partner. This is very difficult to learn and it requires that the conscious mind let go, stop trying to control, and get out of the way. A good system will have a graded set of partner work exercises that will let you learn the basics with very simple movements. It begins with learning to harmonise with your partner's flow of yin and yang and, eventually, proceeds to a deep enough understanding to enable you to disrupt your partner's flow without undue effort and without disturbing your own root. This level is the height of free-style pushing hands, and it is this skill that high-level Taijiquan is justly famous for.

To even get sight of this level of skill requires deep personal work. You must let go of anxiety, because anxiety breeds tension and tension blocks sensitivity. You must cultivate intent, but leave behind the desire to win, because desire leads to goal direction, and goals often prevent full engagement with the present moment. And you must be honest with yourself about your practice. Did I overcome my opponent then because I was genuinely sensitive to their energy, or did I just push harder than they could handle? What is the repeating tension that means I always get caught out by that technique? Is it a lack of awareness somewhere? To really progress in Taijiquan requires constant, honest analysis of your practice.

And what about the Yijing? People often start working with the Yijing because they want to clarify the relationships and events in their life, and it can certainly help to do

this. However, the main barrier to seeing the world clearly is personal: it is the anxiety and desire that we all carry which distorts our view. Perhaps I interpreted those actions as a betrayal because I carried expectations about their eventual outcome? Perhaps I keep repeating the same patterns of behaviour because of unresolved personal attachments?

So, the attempt to clarify our view of the world very quickly becomes the attempt to clarify our selves. Honest use of the Yijing is beautifully appropriate for this task. If you can approach it openly, it is both a mirror and a lens. It reflects what you present, to let you look again, and it magnifies the obscure so you can see the hidden influences in your psyche. When you ask a question, reaching a deep understanding of what the Yijing gives back in answer requires you to be acutely sensitive to your feelings and thoughts as you explore the indicated texts and symbols. You must enter into the process of performing a divination with a clear mind; you must endeavour to put aside the emotional attachments that have lead you into the situation. Only by approaching the reading with clarity can you be open to the quiet, subtle reactions that are triggered in you by the symbols and images the Yijing. It is this inner response to the symbols of the Yijing that is your real answer.

This is the first part of the discipline of working with the Book of Change: developing the sensitivity to your own inner responses. The second part of the discipline is developing the will and intent to actually work through the course of action that is indicated in your answer. Understanding what you need to do, and taking the necessary action are two quite separate things. To borrow Ritsema and Karcher's quaint translation, the Yijing refers to this second part as "possessing directed going", that is, knowing what you need to do, and doing it.

Conclusion

So, where is the connection between the Yijing and Taijiquan? It is not, I think, in any particular association of hexagrams or trigrams to moves and techniques, although that can, on occasion, be insightful. Both Taijiquan and the Yijing are sophisticated explorations of the patterns of interaction of yin and yang, and the connections between them are found deep in their respective foundations.

On the one hand, practicing Taijiquan will deepen your understanding of yin and yang and give you a direct experiential insight into their nature. The hand form will show you their flow in your own body, and the partner work will teach you firstly to sense their flow in others, and then to understand how your flow interacts with that of your partner. Conversely, the Yijing provides an abstract enumeration of all of the possible patterns of interaction of yin and yang in the world and provides a symbolic language for describing their changes. It expresses, more completely than any other work, how these fundamental powers act in the world. This is coupled with a textual tradition rich with images and advice.

At their heart, both the Yijing and Taijiquan form a personal practice. They provide a path of development with well articulated stages. In the Yijing, the archetypal powers are expressed in terms of symbolic images. In turn those symbols are given a descriptive text. At the beginning, your understanding comes from the texts, and those texts give you a handle to the images. With time, you should see through the texts and come to understand the images directly. Once you understand the images themselves, the texts are no longer necessary. Once you understand the images, you have a handle to the archetypes. With further time and practice, you should see through the images and come to understand the archetypes directly. At that stage, the unfolding of the

patterns of life will be as clear as the words written on the page; once you understand the archetypes, even the images are no longer necessary.

In Taijiquan, when you start, you have no understanding of form, and no understanding of the intent within the form. With practice, you first come to understand the shape of the form, but you still do not grasp its intent. With further practice, you grasp the intent; then you understand both the form and the intent within the form. Once there, with further practice, you can leave the form behind and eventually you are working with pure intent. From here, practice takes you further and you return to the start, with neither form nor intent, simply movement.

This cyclic development is perfectly described in a diagram from the Yijing. Figure 5 shows the cycle of bigrams (two lined figures). Starting at the bottom of the cycle, both lines are open and yin, there is no yang energy, indicating that there is neither form nor intent. One step around the cycle introduces a single yang line, indicating that now form has been grasped, but there is as yet no intent. The next step takes you to two yang lines, now there is intent within the form. With the third step, one of the yang lines empties, form drops away and only intent is left. Finally, intent too drops away, and the student returns to the original state of emptiness.

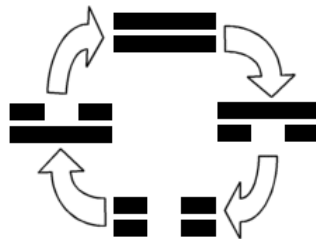


Figure 5: The Bigram Cycle

So, both arts draw their underlying principles from the theory of yin and yang. Both arts provide a deep personal practice. Both require personal honesty and, practiced properly, both help develop inner clarity. Both arts offer a path to an understanding of the forces that shape our lives. This, I suggest, is the real root of the connection between Taijiquan and the Yijing.

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About the Author

Andreas Schöter has been working with the Yijing since 1983. In that time it has both enlightened him with its insight and startled him with its accuracy. He has had a number of articles published pioneering the application of logical techniques to the images of the Yijing and continues to actively research the structural properties of the symbols of Change and their applications in situational analysis and interpretation. For more details on his work with the Book of Change, please refer to his web site at <http://www.yijing.co.uk>

He has been studying Chinese internal arts since 1986. In particular, he has been a student of Wudang Taijiquan under Sifu Ian Cameron since 1992, becoming an instructor in that system in 1996. In October of 2002 he competed in the 2nd European Tai Chi Championships, winning a gold medal for the spear form and a silver in the restricted step pushing hands in his weight category. For more details on his Taijiquan please refer to his instructor's page on Sifu Cameron's Five Winds web site at <http://www.five-winds.co.uk/instructors/aschoter.html>