Unearthing the Changes

Last month (March 2014) an important book was published on the *Yijing*. As with most of the best academic books in the field, its main concern is philological rather than philosophical, which is to say it is more focused on the most accurate transcription (modern character edition) and translation of this ancient text.

The book is: *Unearthing the Changes: Recently Discovered Manuscripts of the Yijing* (*I Ching*) *and Related Texts* by E. L. Shaughnessy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). It is significant because it is the first study of its kind, in any language, of the earliest known text of the *Yijing* (known as the *Shanghai Museum Zhou Yi manuscript*). It is an excellent study, if not particularly light reading. The differences between this early text and the received version are fascinating, and in some cases most illuminating, but what is more extraordinary is the great similarity between the two. The textual tradition of this ancient work is astoundingly robust and coherent.

Shaughnessy is one of the giants in this field. It has been very useful to read his translations of the two versions. It has made me look again at the text, as all good translations should. One of the details that caught my eye this time around was a line from Hexagram 62 ䷽ *Shao Guo*:

> 上六，弗遇過之，飛鳥離之凶，是謂災眚。

This is an instance where the ancient text and the received text are virtually identical. My translation is:

> Top six: Not meeting (but) going beyond it. The flying bird is netted. Inauspicious.
> This is called a disastrous fault.[1]

'Going beyond' 過 *guò* is the same word used in the phrase 'neither go beyond nor do not arrive' from the *Taiji Classics*.[2] It is the ultimate principle of balance in Chinese philosophy. Here the *Yijing* calls 'going beyond' 災眚 *zāi shěng*. 災 *Zāi*, which literally means 'wildfire', covers the whole range of natural disasters: fire, drought, flood, locusts, eclipse, pestilence etc. This meaning then extends to: injure, damage and destroy. *Zāi* is closely linked to and carries the flavour of words meaning: excessive, heat and illness. The fiery destruction and illness of *zāi* is one of excess. 眚 *shěng* is originally a picture of something growing over a eye and means 'cataract' and 'eclipse' and by extension: calamity, disaster, fault, diminish and restrict. 災眚 together, then, indicate a disaster bought upon oneself by an excess which necessarily leads to one's diminishment if not utter destruction. It is the law of yin and yang that too much will inevitably lead to too little. This dire warning against excess in the *Yijing*, the very bedrock of Chinese philosophy and culture, should alert us to the fundamental nature of this principle.

Considering this passage inevitably draws one to *Laozi* chapter 46. Since we have been looking at ancient editions of the *Yi*, it seems only fitting that we look at the ancient editions of the *Laozi*, the oldest of which, discovered at Guodian in 1993, is contemporary with the *Shanghai Museum Zhou Yi manuscript* c. 300 BC.

In my view, the Guodian version of *Laozi* 46 is the most complete and internally consistent, though it is not as regular as the received version. Here is my translation:

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1 Shaughnessy's translation is:

> Top six: Not meeting it but surpassing it. The flying bird is netted. Ominous.
> This is called disaster and a curse.

2 See my article 'Making Use of the Middle': http://www.taichi.uk.com/artcls.html

> 罪莫厚乎甚欲，
> 咎莫**憯**乎欲得，
> 禍莫大乎不知足。
> 知足之爲足，此恆足矣。

> Wrong: there is none more abundant than excessive desires,
> Cause for blame: there is none more grievous than desiring gain,
> Calamity: there is none greater than not knowing what is enough,
> Knowing enough of what is enough, this is constantly enough.[3]

This passage builds its series of warnings in a way that the later versions do not. The first caution is against the all too common misdeed of having too many desires. The next is against that source of immense suffering: the error[4] of desiring gain. The final warning is against the disaster of not knowing what is enough. The last line of the passage offers the antidote to these closely related ills: know when enough is enough.

Zú 足 'enough' is repeated three times in the last line. Many translate this line in a way similar to Henricks:

> The contentment one has when he knows that he has enough —
> This is abiding contentment indeed.[5]

Zú did come to mean 'content', which is the result of there being enough. However, this sort of translation loses the force of the repetition of the word, the clear intent of which is to hammer home the enoughness of knowing enough; the sufficiency of knowing sufficiency.

Here it is worth remembering that true knowledge in Chinese philosophy is not to do with mental constructs. True knowledge is embodied. To quote Bruce: 'If you can't do it, you don't know it'. To know enough of enough is to practise and enjoy moderation in all things.

These passages are at the root of an enduring theme in Chinese philosophy and our practice: the real danger of going to extremes of any kind. We are in a time and culture of extremes, where everything is done excessively. It is also the age of anxiety, the direct opposite of contentment, for the same reason. The message of the *Yijing* and the *Laozi* are as relevant today as ever.

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3 My translation of the received version is in 'Making Use of the Middle'.

4 *Jiu* 咎 means both fault and blame.

5 Henricks' translation of the whole passage is:

> Of vices - none is more onerous than wanting too much.
> Of defects - none brings more sorrow than the desire to gain.
> Of disasters - none is greater than not knowing when one has enough.
> The contentment one has when he knows that he has enough —
> This is abiding contentment indeed.

> [Henricks, R.G., *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000)].