

# How the *I Ching* or Book of Changes can Inform Western Notions of Theory of Change

Craig Russon

*International Labour Organization*

Karen Russon

*Evaluation Capacity Development Group*

**Background:** This article is the third part of a trilogy. The Eastern paradigm article (Russon, 2008) dealt with ontological issues (the nature of reality). The insight evaluation article (Russon & Russon, 2009) dealt with epistemological issues (how we can know reality).

**Purpose:** This article deals with a methodological issue—specifically it explores how ancient Chinese philosophy might influence the way in which modern day evaluators think about theories of change.

**Setting:** Not applicable.

**Subjects:** Not applicable.

**Research Design:** Not applicable.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The paper is the result of a desk review that compared and contrasted modern theory of change literature with the writings contained in the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*.

**Findings:** The authors believe that the theories of change expressed in the systems diagrams of the *I Ching* would be considered to be conducive to recurrent change that occurs due to cycles in the natural world. They further believe that the change which harnesses the power of naturally occurring cycles offers the best hope for long-term sustainability. This is because such change takes advantage of an intuitive cooperation with the natural order.

**Conclusions:** The authors believe that using the diagrams of the *I Ching* as a theory of change template offers modern day evaluators a number of advantages. The advantage of greater sustainability has already mentioned. The authors believe that organic theories of change also encourage evaluators to think about the contribution from many factors instead of attribution of a few factors.

**Keywords:** *program evaluation, theory of change, I Ching, Book of Changes, Tao, yin, yang, systems diagrams*

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In June 2008, Lisa Wyatt Knowlton and Cynthia Phillips asked me to provide feedback in advance of the publication of their excellent book titled *The Logic Model Guidebook: Better Strategies for Great Results* (2009). In their book, they distinguish between two types of logic models: theory of change and programme.

Lisa and Cynthia (2009) describe theory of change logic models as being general representations of how one believes change will occur. As such they are conceptual and so are amenable to graphical representation. They contain few elements, a low level of detail and are not time delimited. The focus is usually generic.

The value of theory of change (ToC) models is that they make explicit the tacit knowledge (Polyani, 1967) upon which projects and programmes are based. This is extremely important because this act makes it possible to test the validity of the assumptions that link the elements together. These assumptions often take the form of “if-then” statements.

The hazard of ToC models is that evaluators sometimes commit a fallacy known as concretism (also known as reification). This logical fallacy occurs when a mental construction, such as a ToC, is treated as if it were real. This idea was most famously expressed by Alfred Korzybski who said, “The map is not the territory.”

At the same time that I was reviewing the pre-publication copy of Lisa and Cynthia’s book, I was reading and experimenting with the *I Ching* (pronounced Yi King) or the Book of Changes (Legge, 1996; Wilhelm, 2003; Melyan & Chu, 1977).

The *I Ching* is one of the most important books in the world’s literature (Wilhelm, 1967). Over the last three thousand years, it has been a source of

inspiration for philosophers, politicians, mystics, alchemists, and sorcerers, as well as scientists and mathematicians. And now, evaluators.

We became interested in how the *I Ching* or the Book of Changes might influence the way in which we evaluators think about Theories of Change. It occurred to us that perhaps, in some small way, this article could help achieve Carl Jung’s desire to harmonize the Oracle of the *I Ching* with accepted scientific cannons (Jung, 2003).

## Law of Change

The *I Ching* defines change as “imperceptible tendencies to divergence that, when they have reached a certain point, become visible and bring about transformations” (Wilhelm, 2003, p. 283). An underlying theme of the *I Ching* is that change is constant and immutable.

The tome asserts that those who have understood the nature of change do not fix their attention on individual, nonrecurrent occurrences of change. Rather, they focus their attention on cycles of change that are governed by eternal laws. The ancient Chinese referred to these eternal laws as the *Tao*.

The *Tao* manifests itself through two primal powers—*Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* is dark, female, receptive, yielding, negative, and nurturing. It is associated with night, valleys, rivers, streams, water, metal, and earth. *Yang* is light, male, active, dominating, positive, and initiating/creating. It is associated with day, mountains, hills, fire, wood, and air.

*Yin* and *Yang* alternately rise and fall in a continuous and uninterrupted cycle of life. The reason is that between the two primal powers there arises again and again a state of tension. This tension

creates a potential that keeps the powers in motion whereby they are constantly regenerated.

This principle of complementary opposites was restated 3000 years later by Georg Wilhelm Hegel, who said: "Contradiction in nature is the root of all motion and of all life." Karl Marx later borrowed the idea and it became one of the three laws of dialectics upon which Marxism is based (Wikipedia, 2009).

## Archetypes of Change as Represented by Eight Trigrams

The various inter-combinations of the *Yin* and *Yang* are represented in the *I Ching* by eight archetypes known as trigrams. The trigrams do not focus on things in their state of being; rather, they focus on their movements in change. Therefore, they are not representations of things as such but of their tendencies in movement. Each of the eight trigrams is described below<sup>1</sup>

### *Chi'en* (Creative)

*Chi'en* symbolizes heaven and thus it is noble and lofty. It also symbolizes the strong, the expansive and the masculine. It is creative and active, perpetually moving, never stopping. Opposites confront each other in *Chi'en* and so under this trigram a point of inflection or a tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) is reached.

### K'un (Receptive)

*K'un* stands for the earth; a great plain able to grow a myriad of things. Hence, it

contains the meaning of mother. It also has the meaning of being gentle and yielding, durable, devoted, and toiling. The earth is formed by fine particles collected together and thus the trigram means mass or the majority. Under this trigram peaceful labour is performed.

### *Chen* (Arousing)

*Chen* symbolizes the launching of energy and movement. It is the arousing, the initiator of life. When the sun rises, a sense of vitality and vigor appears throughout the earth. Thus it is the time of blossoming, of expansion, and of the beginning of new things. New ventures and occupations are suggested.

### *K'an* (Abysmal)

*K'an* symbolizes water that descends from a higher elevation to a lower one. Thus *K'an* suggests the abysmal, lowness, the underground, and the low-lying. In everyday life it means poverty, want, worries, and sickness. It also means to accumulate or gather together, starting from the small and achieving the large. It is the piercing and the penetrating.

### *Ken* (Keeping Still)

*Ken* symbolizes mountains. As mountains do not move and are stationary, *Ken* connotes motionlessness, quietude, stopping, resting, being static, and cessation. As mountains are formed by piling up small particles of earth, *Ken* also means accumulation. The idea of completion has come to be attached to this trigram because *Ken* in plants is the fruit, meaning the completion of the plant.

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<sup>1</sup> The descriptions of the trigrams are based on the descriptions in Melyan and Chu (1977).

### *Sun (Gentle)*

*Sun* symbolizes the wind which blows in from afar. Thus, this trigram connotes distance, remoteness, and distant places. The wind reaches everywhere, hence its attribute is penetration. The wind stirs the air and keeps it flowing; thus *Sun* also means interflow, interaction or an intermediary role.

### *Li (Clinging)*

*Li* symbolizes the sun and fire. From this a host of associations is created—brightness, brilliance, beauty, ferocity, disasters such as fires, dryness, and separation. *Li* means dangerous weapons and fighting. This trigram also means perception.

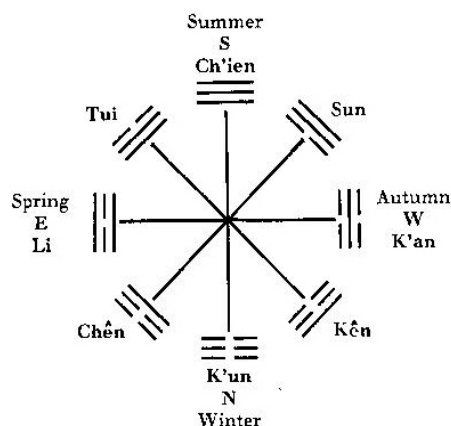
### *Tui (Joyous)*

*Tui* is the symbol of young girls, of joy and delight. It is the marsh, a low-lying place that connotes insufficiency, incompleteness, inadequacy, defectiveness, and things that are concave or indented. As *Tui* means the pleasurable and the happy (food, drink, and money), the opposite idea is suggested. Danger can result from an excess of pleasure.

## Primal Arrangement

The perceptive reader will have noted that the eight trigrams form four pairs of complementary opposites. To illustrate this point, the *I Ching* associates each trigram with a season of the year and arranges them in the diagram found below<sup>2</sup>. When the trigrams in the diagram

are put in motion, a double movement is observed—a concomitant expanding and contracting of *Yin* and *Yang*.



The expanding movement determines how current events take place. Through the contracting movement the seeds of future events are formed. To know the folding up movement is to know the future. In figurative terms, if one understands how a tree contracts into a seed; one can understand the future unfolding of the seed into a tree.

The two starting points of the diagram are *Chên* and *Sun*. Under *Chên*, the projects and programmes that are often the objects of our inquiry are conceptualized. The complementary opposite of conceptualization is implementation which takes place under the *Sun* trigram.

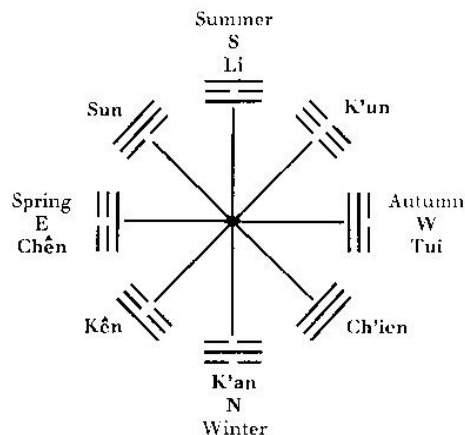
*Chên* shifts to *Li* and *Sun* shifts to *K'an*. Rapid growth takes place and, its opposite, gains are consolidated. Next, *Li* shifts to *Tui* and *K'an* shifts to *Ken*. Results are realized and, its opposite, projects and programmes are phased out.

Finally, the Directive Forces come into play. *Tui* shifts to *Ch'ien*, the great Law of Existence, and *Ken* shifts to *K'un*, the shelter of the womb into which everything returns. This cycle is repeated over and over.

<sup>2&3</sup> Adapted from Wilhelm (1967) *I Ching or Book of Changes*.

## Inner-World Arrangement

The trigrams can be taken out of their grouping in pairs of opposites and rearranged to show their progression through time. Once again, the *I Ching* uses the seasons of the year as a metaphor for the manner in which the eight trigrams manifest themselves in the everyday world (see diagram below).



In the spring (*Chên*), when energy is aroused; projects and programmes are conceptualized. Afterwards, project and programme implementation takes place (*Sun*). The characteristic of this trigram is to make projects take the form in which they were conceptualized in *Chên*.

The high point of the year is summer (*Li*) during which rapid growth takes place. Projects and programmes mature under the trigram *K'un*. During autumn (*Tui*), the results of projects and programmes are harvested. *Ch'ien* is the tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) or the point of inflection because it is when a project is at its strongest that the principle of reversion<sup>3</sup> comes into effect.

Winter ensues in the trigram *K'an* and all of the gains realized by projects and

programmes are consolidated. The *I Ching* says that this is a time of reflection, which we interpret as being a time for evaluation. Finally, under the trigram *Ken*, projects and programmes are phased out and the cycle is closed.

## Information Flows

The *I Ching* states that “To understand fully, one must always visualize the Inner World arrangement as transparent, with the Primal Arrangement shining through it” (Wilhelm, 2003, p. 271). Essentially this is suggesting the superimposition of one systems diagram over another. What would be the benefit of this?

Modern day systems thinkers have identified ways to intervene in a system in increasing order of effectiveness (Meadows 1997). One of the relatively more effective ways to intervene is information flows. According to Meadows (1997), adding or rerouting information can be a powerful intervention that is usually easier and cheaper than rebuilding physical structure.

We believe that ancient writers of the *I Ching* understood the idea of information flows long before modern-day systems thinkers. It appears that the Primal Arrangement indicates the information flows needed to leverage the system that is diagrammed in the Inner World arrangement.

Thus, when one conceptualizes a project (*Chên*), the information flow that is needed is how to quickly take the project to scale (*Li*). During implementation (*Sun*), the information flow that is needed is how to maximize results (*Tui*). As rapid growth is experienced (*Li*), the information flow that is needed is when the tipping point (*Ch'ien*) will occur.

<sup>3</sup> *Tao Te Ching* states “The *yang* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *yin*; the *yin* having reached its climax retreats in favour of the *yang*.”

When a project matures (*K'un*), the information flow that is needed is best practices that occurred during early implementation (*Sun*). As results (*Tui*) are achieved the information flow that is needed is how to ensure sustainability of the changes taking place (*K'an*). When the anticipated tipping point is finally reached (*Ch'ien*), the information flow that is needed is what exit strategy will facilitate phase out (*Ken*).

When gains are consolidated (*K'an*), it is a good time to evaluate the progress that was made as the project matured (*K'un*). Lastly, the lessons learned from a phased-out project (*Ken*) are an information flow that is needed for the conceptualization of new projects (*Chen*).

## Recurrent and Nonrecurrent Change

The ToCs expressed in the systems diagrams of the *I Ching* would be considered to be conducive to recurrent change that occurs due to cycles in the natural world (Wilhelm, 2003, p. 283). In other words, this type of change is not seen as occurring due to the result of some causal chain of events.

Rather, change is seen as a tendency which is innate in all things and all situations (Capra, 2000). This tendency occurs spontaneously and manifests itself in cyclical patterns. In the paragraph below, the *I Ching* suggests that, in order to maximize change, these cycles should take place in successive order:

The secret of *tao* "in this world of the mutable [i.e., changeable] . . . is to keep the changes in motion in such a manner that no stasis occurs and an unbroken coherence is maintained. He who succeeds in endowing his work with this regenerative power creates something

organic, and the thing so created is enduring" (Wilhelm, 2003, p. 300).

The ToC expressed in the logic models about which Lisa and Cynthia wrote in their book, would probably be considered to be conducive to non-recurrent change produced as a result of some causal chain of events. According to the *I Ching*, this is the realm in which causality operates mechanically.

We believe that there is a time and a place for change produced by causality. However, we further believe that the change which harnesses the power of naturally occurring cycles offers the best hope for long-term sustainability. This is because such change takes advantage of an intuitive cooperation with the natural order (Ong, 2005).

## Conclusions

We believe that using the diagrams of the *I Ching* as a ToC template offers modern-day evaluators a number of advantages. We have already mentioned the advantage of greater sustainability. We believe that organic ToC also encourage evaluators to think about the contribution from many factors instead of attribution of a few factors.

In reference to this matter, Carl Jung (1949) wrote:

The manner in which the *I Ching* tends to look upon reality seems to disfavor our causalistic procedures. The moment under actual observation appears to the ancient Chinese view more of a chance hit than a clearly defined result of concurring causal chain processes. The matter of interest seems to be the configuration formed by chance events in the moment of observation, and not at all the hypothetical reasons that seemingly account for the coincidence. While the Western mind carefully sifts, weighs, selects, classifies, isolates, the [ancient] Chinese picture of

the moment encompasses everything down to the minutest nonsensical detail, because all of the ingredients make up the observed moment (p. xxiii).

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