

Fire On The Mountain



Secret code

Fire travelled over the mountain. Within the fire moved wind that held a secret joy, longing to be expressed. Then the top changed and thunder crackled upon the peak. The bottom changed and suddenly fire was everywhere, above and below, surrounding wood and the youngest daughter. She was speaking in tongues.

// Whacha doin, mate?"

I looked at the character who'd plonked himself down across the table from me. The Hong Kong pub was dark, but I could see a punk-type haircut and an earring. He pushed a dripping schooner across the table.

"I saw yer beer was almost gone, so I brought ya another. Come on, bottoms up!"

Out of politeness I lifted the cold glass and took a sip.

"There's me mate. So tell me, what's with all the squiggly lines? You a spy? That a code?"

How could I tell him that yes, it was a code, probably the oldest in the world. Some said it was a legacy, the final remnants of wisdom held by a high civilisation preceding ours, now lost except for these "squiggly lines," a few medical formulae, and legends.

I'd been following the advice of Confucius and playing with the hexagrams of the *Yi Jing*, sketching the lines, some broken and some solid, on a scrap of paper. In this case, I had begun with a single hexagram, looking at the trigrams that made it up, top and bottom,



but also the inner trigrams as well. Then I would change a line to its opposite. The rich imagery was intoxicating.

Much more than this beer.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, and started to rise. A conversation with this lout would be fruitless.

He caught my arm. "Hold on," he said. "Don't rush off."

His accent had changed. I gave him a closer look. His eyes held a clear intelligence. I settled back onto my seat.

"You started with the hexagram *Lu* 'Travelling' and changed it first to *Xiao Guo*, then to *Li* 'Illumination,'" he said.

"How... how... how did you know that?"

The week before, at the monastery

Cook had promised me an *Yi Jing* reading using his set of miraculous yarrow stalks. At first I had been enthusiastic, but now, on the way to his rooms with the fat monk, I was nervous.

Cook's dwelling was not far from the kitchens. It was larger than the usual room of a monk, which was tiny, but nowhere near as large as the acting Abbot's new rooms. He lit a lamp and bade us sit. The fat monk found a stool and I sat on the edge of his low bed which was covered with a thick quilt. A fragrance filled the room: incense, but of an unusual pungency.

"Tibetan," Cook said, when I asked. "From the Samye monastery. Helps clear the mind. A friend gave it to me."

He was laying out a large cloth on the floor, upon which he placed a meditation cushion at one end. On the other side, but not touching the cloth, he placed another cushion. Then he left the circle of lamplight briefly, returning with a carved box, long and shallow. He placed this carefully on the cloth.

Cook turned to me and said "Think of a question. Not a 'yes' or 'no' question, but something like 'How should I proceed with ...' or 'what would be the best course of action in ...' or 'how can I best achieve ...' something or other."

He glanced at the fat monk, then back to me. "You need not tell me what it is, although you can if you wish. What is important is that you concentrate on the question while I am manipulating the stalks."

He smiled apologetically. "It's best if the

questioner is doing the manipulation. The movement of the fingers and the hands, together with the focus on the question, create a peculiar concentration. But in this case it would be too distracting."

He pointed at the meditation cushion on the other side of the cloth. "Sit there."

I did, and Cook descended cross-legged onto the cushion facing the carved box. He removed the lid and took out a cloth-rolled bundle. Setting it in front of him, he gently unrolled it, exposing a bundle of long thin stalks. They were not perfectly straight, like chopsticks would be, but subtly twisted and bent in their straightness.

He saw me staring. "No need to be silent yet," he said. "Only later, during the manipulation. Have you ever seen a set of yarrow stalks like this?"

"No."

"I gathered them myself, once upon a time, on the northern edge of the Himalayas. They are from the slopes of Tianshan, the Mountains of Heaven. Since then, they have never touched the ground. Twenty years ago, that was."

"You must have been bad," the fat monk said, "to be that far west."

"No, it was my family," Cook said. "They were criminals even before I was born, and unforgiven for years."

They looked at me and laughed. I must have shown my incomprehension.

"My father and mother were university professors," Cook explained. "We were exiled by the Communist Party to Chinese Turkestan, to help open the area for Han settlers. My father taught me secretly by lamplight in the cold hut we had been given. Otherwise I would never have known of the *Yi Jing* or the Four Books."

After a moment of silence I said, "I have my question."

Back in the pub

The lout with the punk haircut and earring said "How'd I know which hexagrams you were playing with? 'Cause I've studied the *Yi Jing*, just like you."

"Don't tell me. You





wanted to tell fortunes, right?”

“No. Never had no interest in that, even when my friends at home played around with it. It was Professor Ma in Taiwan who showed me how deep the rabbit’s burrow actually went.”

My interlocutor, over a couple more beers, told me his history. He was a poet, but while still an undergraduate at Oxford had been the instigator of a literary hoax that embarrassed a prominent don. Unfortunately the same don also had extensive contacts throughout the publishing world.

“Up the Khyber. Had to run away,” he said. “Just a joke, at first. But, couldn’t get published, couldn’t continue at University. Left for the Far East.”

I admired how he could add capital letters with just his voice.

“What happened then?”

“Ended up in Taiwan. It would be years before I could return, so decided to learn Chinese. Study the poetry of the High Tang. Met Professor Ma. Hit it off. Name’s Owen, by the way.”

“Xiaoyao.”

Owen grunted. “Zhuangzi. Yes, did all that with Prof Ma. She’s a deep one, that lady.” He sipped his beer, then looked up at me. “Ever been to Taiwan?”

Cook reads the stalks

I had been thinking all day about the topic of my reading, and finally had decided on: “What can I do to best align with the Dao?”

“A worthy question,” Cook said. “Fine. Let’s start.”

Just then there was a bustle at the door, and a head poked into the room. It was the young monk from the library, the one I had forced to take me to the Abbot’s rooms.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Cook said, “but I have asked little Fang to be here. He said he was interested in *Yi Jing* and I thought it would be instructive.”

Little Fang glared at me, then gave a fearful glance at the fat monk as he sidled over to a place in the corner, where he stood awkwardly. He seemed to be trying to put as much space as possible between himself and the acting Abbot.

I felt a tinge of annoyance, but then became absorbed in watching the movements of Cook. He spoke as he moved.

“First, I am counting the stalks for accuracy. There should be 50 ... yes, that’s right.” He extracted a long stalk and placed it at the top of the cloth. “The manipulation is done with 49 stalks. I will explain how it works for the first manipulation, but after that I will be silent. The concentration can be difficult, especially when you are using these twisted yarrow stalks.” He shrugged. “Some people use chopsticks or other straight sticks, but I think the ancients chose yarrow precisely because of the focus they demand.”

Then he pointed to the stalk he had removed. “That single stalk stands for the totality, the One from which yin and yang separate, which they will now do.” He split the bundle of stalks into two groups. Then he removed a single stalk from the right hand group and put it between the ring and little finger of his left hand. “This stands for the *San Cai*: Heaven, Earth and Man. Now I will divide the right hand group of stalks by four, representing the four seasons.”

There were a few stalks left over, which he put in between the middle and ring finger of his left hand. Then he counted the left hand pile of stalks out by four in the same way.

“Now,” he said holding up the left-over stalks and placing them between his middle and forefinger, “after counting out both left and right groups, you should have either five or nine stalks in between the fingers of your left hand. If it is some other number, you have made a mistake. If correct, you set the five or nine stalks aside, gather the rest, and start again. You do that twice more, the only difference being that after the second and third times the left-over stalks will be either four or eight.”

My head was already spinning. I just nodded.

After a while of splitting groups and moving the stalks between his hands, Cook said “Ok, now I’ve finished with the first line. I am going to put all the leftover stalks on the side here, and then count the remaining groups of four. There will be either six, seven, eight, or nine groups left.”

He was counting as he spoke. “In this case there are nine.”

He leaned over and made a mark on the paper, a solid line with a circle next to it.

“What’s that mean?” Little Fang asked.

■ Author Xiaoyao Xingzhe, the self-styled carefree pilgrim, has lived and worked all over the world, having crossed the Gobi in a decrepit jeep, lived with a solitary monk in the mountains of Korea, dined with the family of the last emperor of China, and helped police with their inquiries in Amarillo, Texas.

■ His entire Fat Monk series is available to download for free at: thefatmonk.wordpress.com.

9 = ———— ○

6 = ———— X ————

Cook looked up. “You arrived after I had told Xiaoyao that he should be silent, so I will allow this single question, but then no more.” He pointed to the pad. “Nine means a changing yang line. Yang is solid. The circle shows it will change.”

“What do you mean change?” Little Fang asked, then squeaked when the fat monk growled at him.

“As you should know, when something reaches an extreme, it changes to its opposite. Nine is the extreme of yang, so the solid yang line will change to a yin line which is broken. You mark that with a circle next to the line. On the other side, six is the extreme of yin, so the yin line will change to a yang line. You mark that with an ‘x’. Now be silent. I need to concentrate on Xiaoyao’s question while I am doing the rest of the manipulation.”

It took almost 20 minutes for Cook to finish. I did a quick count. He had performed the basic manipulation 18 times. No wonder people liked the coin method!

Before he spoke, Cook gathered the yarrow stalks together respectfully and wound them in their cloth, taking care that they did not touch the ground. He then placed the bundle in the long shallow box, stood up, and put this on a shelf.

Picking up the pad, he turned to me with a peculiar look.

“Do you want to see the answer to ‘How can you best align with the Dao?’”

Back in the pub

“You been to Taiwan?”

“No.”

I told him how I was stuck in Hong Kong for the next few days, marking time while the wheels of bureaucracy spun uselessly in the mud of red tape.

He gave me a sympathetic grin, then went on with his story. Ma Jiaoshou had been one of the few women at Peking University. As a girl, her father had excluded her from all but the most rudimentary education, yet while her brothers had dawdled their way through the boring afternoons with their

private teacher, she had crouched outside the window of their classroom, absorbing everything.

Her talent had been revealed the day the brothers had been called forth in front of visitors, as the practice was, to create extemporaneous poetry. They had been tongue-tied. With extraordinary daring, she, a girl, had stood up and declaimed. The guests applauded. The father was outraged. But the grandfather saw her ability and prevailed on her father to allow her to pursue scholarly subjects all the way into university. After graduating, she felt it was her duty to take teaching to the outer provinces, and so found herself in Taiwan.

“... where she was trapped when war broke out. Then Chiang Kai-Shek retreated to the island, and there was no way back. When I met her she was an old woman. She’d never seen her family again.”

Opposition and Deliverance



Cook pointed at the piece of paper while he explained the result of my query. “Almost every single line is out of place, not where it should be. And the inner trigrams are all about war and killing. Even in the primary trigrams, it is fire above and lake below,” Cook said, his finger moving up and down. “Fire flames upward, but water seeps downward, so they separate.” He saw the puzzled look on my face. “I am talking about the trigrams that make up your first hexagram, which is *Kui* – *Opposition* or *Disharmony*.”

Little Fang gave a sniggering laugh. “You asked how you can align with the Dao, but it looks like the Dao has other ideas.”

I blushed. Was it true?

“On the contrary,” Cook said. “Confucius pointed out that opposition is a natural prerequisite for union. And the second hexagram, the one that arises from the changing lines here in the first and last places, is, in fact *Jie* – *Deliverance*.”

“I’ll tell you who needs deliverance,” Little Fang said in his squeaky voice. “We need deliverance from this guy who stops by

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Some people use chopsticks or other straight sticks, but I think the ancients chose yarrow precisely because of the focus they demand.

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Dissolving, breaking up the hard rind of self, giving the Dao a chance to seep into the cracks and reach that inner core which is ... the Dao itself.

whenever he feels like it and is treated like a king. What about those of us who slave around here day and night only to be treated like dirt?”

“Out!” Cook ordered. Little Fang cringed, but didn’t move. The acting abbot shifted his weight slightly and Little Fang broke for the door. His running footsteps receded in the distance. The door swung on its hinges.

The fat monk crossed over, closed it, then turned to me and said “He is just jealous. After you came, he asked and found out you had been given far more time and instruction than he has had so far. What he does not realise is that his behaviour *now* is the reason he was not instructed *then*. Only when he has worked these issues out for himself will he be open to the teaching. You at least have always been honest and sincere.”

“But it hasn’t worked!” I cried. “Look at these hexagrams. A hopeless case, just like Little Fang said.”

“Not at all. The first hexagram describes all of us, most of the time. The second hexagram illustrates the solution.”

“Which is?”

“Dissolving, breaking up the hard rind of self, giving the Dao a chance to seep into the cracks and reach that inner core which is ... the Dao itself.”

“But there is one thing,” Cook said.

“What?” I said.

“The final hexagram *Deliverance* has a judgement which says *danger produces movement; through movement one escapes danger ... the southwest furthers*,” Cook quoted.

They looked at me.

“Didn’t you say you had something to do in Hong Kong?” the fat monk asked.
Bone spirit jar

I was sitting at a bus stop in the mountains after a 45 minute ride on the Blue 2 bus from downtown Taipei. Except for an occasional small-bore motorcycle and the even rarer car, the road was quiet. I turned around. The valley behind me was idyllic. Terraced fields crossed the valley and extended up the opposite mountain side. A farmer and a water buffalo worked in the distance. Just below me, at the foot of the slope, a small stream burred cheerfully.

I sighed. How peaceful it was! One’s mind could settle so easily into deep contemplation here. All you had to do was sink into the

quietude.

But I felt my eyes wandering restlessly over the external surroundings. What time was it? It must be late. Dusk was approaching. Owen had said wait, and he’d meet me. “Too hard to give directions,” he’d said. Maybe it was the wrong stop? The bus driver’s mandarin had been atrocious.

Fidgeting, my gaze fixed on a small container, a lidded porcelain vase, sitting on the ground in the corner of the bus stop. I frowned. It was covered with dust. Finally curiosity got the better of me and I scooted over on the seat and lifted the lid.

Inside was a human skull atop other bones.

“I’d replace that lid very carefully,” a voice said.

I turned around. The speaker was a tall man with a long distinguished face, but wore the clothing of a farmer.

He gave me a half-smile and said “The *fengshui* of this place is outstanding. You can feel it, I’m sure.” He seemed to be waiting for a response.

“Ye... yes.”

“That is why that container is here. It is a bone spirit jar. Its placement and orientation have been precisely determined by a master of geomancy.”

“But ... it’s a bus stop.”

“Only in this world. In the spirit world, this place is the locus of incredible powers, beneficial influences that can be channelled to ... the family of the interred.”

I heard a distant shout and looked. It was Owen, approaching from the upper hillside across the road. I waved, and turned back to the farmer.

He was gone.

The stone path

Owen scrambled down the slope on the other side of the road and strode across with his hand out. “You made it! Good. Been waiting here for long?”

“A while, but I was having an interesting chat, so no problem.”

“A chat? With who?” Owen looked around.

“Some farmer guy. He was just here.”

“That’s strange, the only houses are back up that path I just came down. And this mountain road is too narrow to walk along.” He looked over the edge toward the valley. “River’s down there.” He shrugged. “Anyway,

let's go meet Professor Ma. It's a bit of a hike."

He led me across the road and up a steep bank. Steps had been cut into the earth, and the path soon levelled out to a gentle slope leading through thick undergrowth. After a few hundred metres I found we were walking under towering bamboo, a forest of stout stalks which spread out to either side as far as I could see. Even though the air felt still, green leaves susurrated around and above us, while a layer of yellowed and dead leaves coated the floor of the forest.

"Watch the branches," Owen said, pointing upward. "Little green snake. Hangs over the path and drops on you. Same colour as..." He indicated the bamboo leaves.

"Poisonous?"

"Well, venomous, to be pedantic. Green tree viper. Bite hurts like hell."

I kept my eyes glancing upward, but before long, the narrow dirt track became a winding pathway laid with irregular but flat stones. Not far ahead I could see curved roofs behind stone walls. The bamboo thinned out and the pathway ended at a paved road.

"You can drive here," Owen said, "but the road is pretty steep to walk up. The bamboo path is nicer, so I had you get off the bus there. Prof Ma's house is just over here."

He indicated a gate in a wall, and led me through into a yard filled with fruit trees, in the middle of which stood an old Japanese-style house. At the door he rang a bell. An old woman opened it.

"Ma Jiao Shou," I said, giving a small bow. She looked startled.

Owen laughed. "No, this is Old Su, Prof Ma's long-time servant."

"*Dui bu qi*," I said to her. She giggled and indicated a short hallway.

I started to walk in, but Old Su exclaimed, grabbed my arm and pointed with her nose at the rows of shoes by the door. I bent over to take mine off, and she handed me a pair of slippers.

"Sorry, should have warned you," Owen said. "It's all tatami inside." We entered a room filled with light and birdsong.

"*Ahwen, shi ni de pengyou ma?*"

I had not seen the old woman until she stood up from behind a low table. She approached us with a big smile and a slight limp. I bowed again and said "*Ma Jiaoshou*."

"*Bu yao keqi*," she said, giving me a shrewd

assessing look up and down. Her face was round and lined, but her eyes were bright. When she smiled I could see a gap where a molar was missing.

"*Qing zuo*, have a seat," she said, and turned toward the low table.

I looked around the sunlit room. Tatami covered the floor in a pleasing pale yellow. Books from floor to ceiling filled two of the walls, the other was hung with a huge Chinese landscape painting. A songbird in a round bamboo cage stood in front of the open window. Just outside the window I could see the large leaves of a banana plant.

We sat and Old Su brought in a tray with tea and some small snacks and set them down on the table next to a small bonsai.

Professor Ma poured some tea for me and handed me the cup. She said "Owen tells me you are here because of an *Yi Jing* reading. What hexagrams did you get, and what was the question?"

I told her.

"Hmm," she said. "If you had *Kui* '*Disharmony*' first then *Jie* '*Resolution*' it means the first and last lines changed."

She sketched the two hexagrams on a piece of paper.



"*Kui* is an interesting hexagram. Looks really bad on the surface."

She wasn't wrong. I had read all the available translations. I had also looked at the original but found the ancient Chinese hard going.

"... but in fact," she said, "there are some more subtle relevancies to your question, when you look deeper."

"Like what?" Owen said.

"Well," she said, "you've got 'eyes' and 'ears' both present in the inner trigrams *Li* and *Kan*, and the name of the hexagram, *Kui* is written with an eye radical. Another text, though..." she got up and rustled around among some books, then pulled an old volume out, "...if I recall, states that the name should be written with an ear radical. The pronunciation is the same... ah! Here it is." She held out the book triumphantly. "Yes... '*the name should be Kui*'... with an ear radical the character

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That place preceding the emergence of joy, anger, sorrow and happiness is what we call the centre, whereas harmony is when balance is maintained even after these emotions appear. The place of centered harmony is the locus of Heaven and Earth; all things grow from there.

– Confucius

means ‘deaf and dumb,’ but also has another meaning, which is ‘to inform by whisper’. Both very relevant to your question.”

Owen nodded, but I was confused. How were those meanings relevant to *How can I best align with the Dao?*

“Why, they give you the method,” she said when I voiced my confusion. “*Deaf and dumb* tells you to cut off the exterior senses, while *inform by whisper* points to that deep subtle instructor within us that is present and speaks, if only we allow ourselves to settle and listen.”

“A still, small voice,” Owen said in English, quoting the old testament.

“But be careful,” Ma Jiaoshou said. “This subtle instructor is subtle. It appears only in the midst of true quiet, when all the disturbances of self have been eliminated.” She sighed and plucked at a leaf of the bonsai. “So many people hear about listening within and think ‘I have to follow my bliss!’ No. This is not an emotional thing. We need to take that quiet right back to where ‘we’ are not.”

Owen looked thoughtful, nodding to himself.

“Confucius” she went on, “made this the centre of one of his core texts, the *Zhong Yong*, where it says, ‘That place preceding the emergence of joy, anger, sorrow and happiness is what we call the centre, whereas harmony is when balance is maintained even after these emotions appear. The place of centered harmony is the locus of Heaven and Earth; all things grow from there.’ So you can see you have to go right back to the source, the central stillness.”

There was a moment of silence.

“What about the second hexagram? Owen asked.

“*Jie*,” Professor Ma said. “First let’s look at the character *jie*: it is a horn, a knife and a cow.”

She looked significantly at Owen. He stared back at her, uncomprehending. Then suddenly his eyes lit up and he smiled.

“Cook Ding!”

“Yes,” she said, “from *Zhuangzi*.”

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I remembered the story—who didn’t?—from chapter three, of the cook with the marvelous skill in cutting up oxen.^a

“So how does that relate?” I asked.

“In two ways,” she said. “First there is the direct connection to the ‘method’ we talked about above. Once I’d thought of this story, the line jumped out at me: *when sensory knowledge stops, the spirit will desire to move according to the design of Heaven*.^b” She turned to Owen, and said as an aside, “This is one of the first places to see the phrase *design of Heaven*, the catchphrase adopted by the neo-Confucian School of Design that we have spoken about.” He nodded. She turned back to me.

“The second way it relates to your question *How can I best align with the Dao?* also has two parts. First is learning from Cook Ding, learning the Dao through making your life as efficient as possible, ‘graceful’ in all senses of the word.”

“And the next way?”

“The side of the story that very few people notice,” she said, and paused.

I waited.

She waited. There was the tiniest of upward curl to her lip.

Owen looked back and forth at us, then finally at the ceiling.

Suddenly we all burst out laughing.

“OK, what side of the story does no one notice?” I asked when we’d stopped.

“Why, that the ‘Dao’ Cook Ding is following might not be the Dao of Lao Zi—it could be the Dao of what we now call *logic* and *science*: cutting something whole into little pieces, and doing it so easily that he hardly notices that he no longer has a whole living ox. The whole is riven into its parts. Dead parts.” She looked thoughtful. “I am sure Zhuang Zi intended this as a lesson just as much as the explicit surface meaning. Some tea?”

Professor Ma poured for Owen and me with a twinkle in her eye. I smiled back. My spirits had lifted. I could feel it: my next step was here.

“Welcome to Taiwan,” Owen said, lifting his teacup.

a. For the whole story, the reader can go here:

www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/chuang-tzu.htm

b. 官知止而神欲行依乎天理。