

Working with Yi: a change for the better

(I first wrote this article in Dutch for my own Yijing study group, and translated it to English. Because of this the language might sometimes sound a little bit, eh, awkward.)

When you search for information about the etymology of the character *yi* 易 you will find several stories which tell about this character's origin. Are these stories all true? Let's see what a little research will come up with.

First, let's get rid of some wrong information which haunts this character for almost two thousand years. The traditional account of this character's origin is that it is a picture of a lizard, chameleon, or gecko. This comes from the [Shuo Wen 說文 dictionary](#), which says:

易. 蜥易，蠃蜓，守宮也。象形。

易. Lizard, gecko. Pictogram.

(漢語大字典, p. 1494)

And [Duan Yucai](#) 段玉裁 adds in his commentary that it is a picture of a head, and four legs. But this is not the only explanation the Shuo Wen gives. It also says:

祕書說：日月爲易，象陰陽也。

The Secret Books (*mishu* 祕書, according to Duan another name for *weishu* 緯書, the apocryphal books HM) say: sun and moon become *yi*, it is a picture of *yin* and *yang*.

(漢語大字典, p. 1494)

Duan explains that the phrase 日月爲易 comes from the [Can Tong Qi 參同契](#), a cryptic Daoist alchemical text attributed to the Daoist immortal [Wei Boyang](#) 魏伯陽 from the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220). The supposed dates of the Shuo Wen and the Can Tong Qi do not seem to match, however. The Shuo Wen is written in 121 AD, and the Can Tong Qi in [142 AD](#) (although others maintain a much later date; see Roel Jansen's introduction to the Dutch translation of Bertschinger's *Can Tong Qi*, p. 13-14). Nevertheless, the phrase is supposed to describe the composition of the character *yi*: the top part is the sun 日, and the lower part is the moon 月, written in its old form as 勿.

In my [electronic version](#) of the Can Tong Qi there is [one paragraph](#) where I find the sentence 日月爲易, a paragraph which deals with opposites and the harmony between them:

坎戊月精 *Kan wu yue jing*

離己日光 *Li ji ri guang*

日月爲易 *Ri yue wei yi*

剛柔相當 *Gang rou xiang dang*

土旺四季 *Tu wang si ji....*

Kan 坎 and *wu* 戊 are the essence of the moon

Li 離 and *ji* 己 are the radiance of the sun

Sun and moon make *yi* 易

The firm and yielding are balanced

Earth prospers in the four seasons...

In the first line the trigram Kan, Water, is linked to the fifth Heavenly Stem, *wu* of the Chinese calendar, and to the moon; in the second line the trigram Li, Fire, is linked to the sixth Heavenly Stem *ji* and to the sun (see also my [article](#) about the Eight Palaces, p. 13. The paragraph from the Can Tong Qi mentioned here does not appear in Bertschinger's translation). 'Sun and moon make *yi* 易' is the next line, and seen in the light of the foregoing two sentences it is clear that this sentence does not describe the composition of the character *yi* 易 but is a philosophical explanation of the principles of *yin* and *yang*, mainly for the purpose of alchemical practices. If you take the sentence 日月爲易 out of this context you could see it as an explanation of the character *yi* 易 and its components, but I don't think this was the intention in the Can Tong Qi.

The two explanations from the Shuo Wen do not agree with the latest findings about the etymology of the character *yi* and may be regarded as outdated.

The character *yi* 易 on oracle bones



When you look in *jiaquwen* 甲骨文 dictionaries you will notice that most books only mention one version as the precursor of *yi* (see left picture). Even the book [殷墟甲骨學-帶走進甲骨文的世界](#) by Ma Rusen 馬如森, published in 2007, gives this one version, and says that there are several explanations for the shape of this character (p. 413). The most remarkable explanation that is mentioned by Ma is the one given by Sun Changxu 孫常敘, who says that it is a picture of a bird spreading its wings. However, this explanation does not refer to the oracle bone character, but to a later version found in bronze inscriptions (see right picture). With a little bit of fantasy you can see a bird in it, but this explanation is not compatible with the earlier oracle bone version.



Most dictionaries do not dare to give an explanation of the form of the character; stronger put, they say that it is not clear what it depicts (see for instance Zhao Cheng 趙, *甲骨文簡明詞典-卜辭分類讀本*; p. 334). Steve Marshall gives in his book *The Mandate of Heaven* as explanation that the character is a drawing of the sun coming from behind a cloud, with rays of sunlight breaking through; an explanation which according to Marshall is also given by Yang Shuda 楊樹達 (p. 15). This explanation is quite plausible if we look at the context in which this character is used. Later on we will see that another explanation is also possible.

Give us the sun

On oracle bones we often find *yi* 易 combined with *ri* 日, 'sun'. Zhao Cheng 趙 talks in length about the combination 易日:

易即賜。天氣陰沉、晦暗，商代人希望上帝能把太陽賞賜給人間，所以叫作賜日。卜辭中的易日常和霧相對而言，如『壬寅賜日，壬寅霧』。商代人認為，太陽出來與否，一定受某一種神力的支配，所以，爲了使太陽出來，也就是使神賜給人間以太陽，常祈求先祖以賜日，如『酉中丁易日 - 對仲丁進行酉祭以求賜日』，『歲大戊廿牢易日 - 用廿牢向大戊進行歲祭以求賜日』。既然希望賞賜一個太陽，則這種天氣一定是沒有出日：可能是陰沉、晦暗，也可能是烏雲滾滾，也可能是時陰時雨，也可能是多雲蔽日。有人把'易日'簡單地看成是陰天，不能說沒有道理，但不完全合符實際。

Yi 易 means *ci* 賜, 'give, gift'. When there was cloudy and dark weather the Shang people wished that Shangdi would give the sun to humanity, this is *ci ri* 賜日. In bone inscriptions 易日 often appears in combination with *wu* 霧, 'fog', for instance: '(day) *renyin* - give - sun, (day) *renyin* - fog' (see right picture).

The Shang people believed that the appearing of the sun was controlled by supernatural powers, therefore to let the sun appear, to persuade the spirits to give the sun to humanity, they begged the ancestors to '賜日', give the sun. For instance '酉 offering - middle - Ding - give - sun': 'a 酉 offering to middle ancestor Ding to be given the sun'; 'sui offering - Da - Wu - twenty - oxes - give - sun': use twenty oxes during the *sui* offering to persuade ancestor Dapersuade Wu to give the sun'. Because it is hoped that the sun will be given it means that in the weather the sun had not appeared: maybe because it is dark, or because it is twilight, or there are dark clouds in the sky, or maybe it is raining and cloudy, or dark clouds are covering the sun. Some see 易日 simply as 'clouded sky', it cannot be said that this is not plausible, but it does not completely agree with what we know.

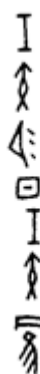
(*甲骨文簡明詞典-卜辭分類讀本*, p. 191. The last sentence could refer to Guo Moruo 郭沫若, who suggested that *yi* 易 can be read as *yi* 賜, 'the sun alternately shining between and behind the clouds'. According to Guo 賜日 would mean 'clouded sky'. See *甲骨文字典*, p. 1064. For information about the 酉 offering, see *甲骨文簡明詞典*, p. 242; Liu Xinglong 劉興隆, *新編甲骨文字典*, p. 996; *甲骨文字典*, p. 986)




This explanation agrees with the picture that Marshall gives about the shape of the character. On oracle bones *yi* often has the meaning of 'to give, to grant', with or without *ri* 日, and it always refers to a high placed person who grants something to a person with a lower status. This specific meaning is still found in the earlier mentioned *ci* 賜, the successor of *yi* (Matthews' Dictionary 6988).





Another explanation

When we divide the old character in two halves we get two parts: left we have and right we have . Both components are separately found on oracle bones, and they can give an explanation for the complete character. As component the left part occurs in several other characters (see right picture); we do not always know what these characters mean -

sometimes it is the name of a person, but more often the meaning is not clear. What we do know is that is the name of a certain sacrifice (*甲骨文字典*, p. 995; *新編甲骨文字典*, p. 528), and it is possible that all the characters with as component have to do with offerings or the rituals that accompany it. We have seen that this applies to the old form of *yi* 易.



The right part of the character, , is harder to interpret because during Shang times it had two meanings: it is the old character for *yue* 月, 'moon', but it was also used for *xi* 夕, 'evening, sunset'. Liu however says that on oracle bones *yue* 月 was written as , while *xi* 夕 was mostly written as , with an extra dot in the center (see also [Yu Shengwu](#) 于省吾, 甲骨文字釋林, p. 449).

If we combine this with what we know of the component , then it is possible that  refers to an offering to the moon, or at least in the dark, to get the sun back. *Yi* 易 could have been a sacrifice to the ancestors or spirits (indicated by ) during the evening or in the night (indicated by ) to make sure that the sun is returning, that it is 'given' by the ancestors or spirits.

Change

The 'giving' in the way it is mentioned in the inscriptions is connected to an action, mostly a sacrifice, which purpose was to change a bad situation to a good one. This comes close to the meaning that is familiar to most Yijing users: 'change'. Zhao Cheng writes in his book:

甲骨文用作動詞，其中的一種意義近以於後代的 "平安"，"痊癒"。 (...) 易的這種用法，有人以為當讀作化險為夷之夷，則為借音字。

In bone inscriptions [is *yi* also] a verb, which comes close to the meaning of the words *ping'an* 平安 - (become) stable and quiet, and *quanyu* 痊癒 - recover from an illness. (...) Some people think that *yi* in this usage can be read as the *yi* 夷 from the saying '化險為夷', 'change danger into safety', in which case it is seen as a phonetic loan character.

(甲骨文簡明詞典, p. 369)

This description tells us what a *yi* change means: a *yi* action or happening should lead to a better situation. You change from something which is (potentially) harmful to something which is favorable, positive. This corresponds with the earlier mentioned offering to the ancestors, with the wish to get the sun back - here we also have an unfavorable situation which by *yi* has to change for the better.

On oracle bones we see this a lot in sessions about diseases, often concerning diseases of the teeth (see right picture):

王疾齒，亡易。





The king has a tooth disease, this will not change (for the better).

(新編甲骨文字典, p. 607. According to Liu *yi* should be explained as getting permanent teeth (see also 甲骨文字典, p. 1064). In that case the translation would be 'the king has a tooth disease, this is not because of getting permanent teeth'.)

In this case the outcome was unfavorable and more sacrifices would be made to the spirits and ancestors, until they were in the proper mood and a hopeful answer would be received.

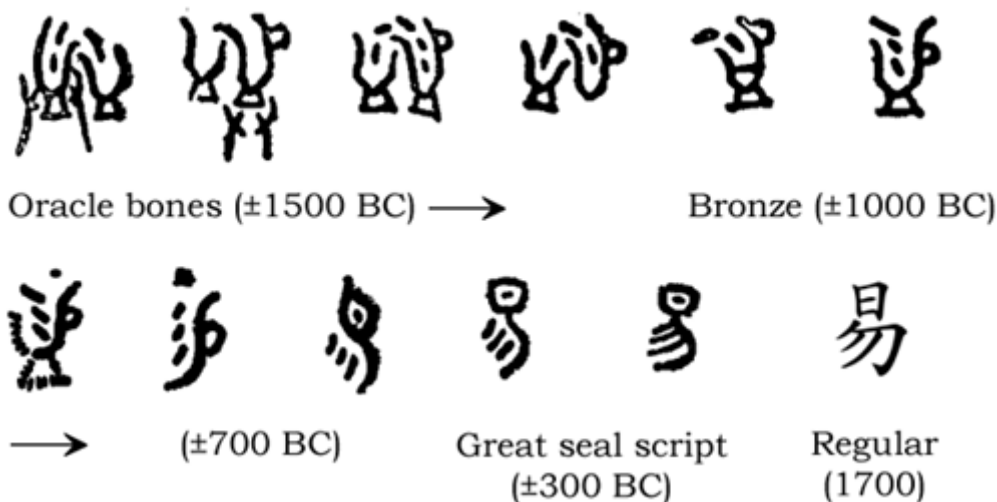
The other variant



The character we explored so far is the one you will see most in the specialized dictionaries. But some dictionaries give an additional form as precursor of *yi*. In this character the meaning of 'to give, giving' is very clear. The main components are two vases; liquid is being poured from one vase into the other. Sometimes there are two hands visible who hold a vase, sometimes there is only one hand, and sometimes the liquid is missing as well. The 甲骨文字典 dictionary says that this is the precursor of *yi*, and that the other form we discussed in length earlier is a simplification of it (p. 1063). The opinions are divided about this, and many dictionaries do not share this variant under *yi* 易 but under *yi* 益. It will be noticed that in current standard Chinese the pronunciation of both these characters is the same; in the early Zhou period the pronunciation wasn't exactly the same, although the endings were the same (GSR 849a and 850a; Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, p. 566 and 569).

Indeed the oracle bone form of *yi* 益 is very similar to this presumed variant form of *yi* (see right picture). However, of many oracle bone characters which have a 'vase' component the modern form has the component . If  really was a precursor of *yi* 易 you would expect that the modern form still contains the  component. The fact that this is not the case might be a clue that  has nothing to do with *yi* 易.






There were times when I said the opposite. The small book 周易：古代中國的世界圖示 by Wu Enbo 烏恩博 mentions oracle bone and bronze forms of *yi* (p. 1-2), and I turned this into the following picture:






This picture seems very plausible, but actually it is not true. It gives the impression that the  version was used before the  form, and that is simply not correct. Both forms were used during Period I according to the system of Dong Zuobin 董作賓 (see table below; based on 甲骨文字典, 凡例 p. 1 ; David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History*, p. 23 table 14 and 228 table 38).

Period	Starts with king		Ends with king	
I	武丁 Wu Ding	1250 - 1181		
II	祖庚 Zu Geng	1180 - 1171	祖甲 Zu Jia	1170 - 1151
III	廩辛 Lin Xin	1150 -	庚丁 Geng Ding	- 1131/1121
IV	武乙 Wu Yi	1130 - 1116/ 1120 - 1106	文丁 Wen Ding	1115 - 1101/ 1105 - 1091
V	帝乙 Di Yi	1100 - 1081/ 1090 - 1071	帝辛 Di Xin	1080 - 1051/ 1070 - 1041

During the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600 BC - ca. 1046 BC)  probably had the meaning of 'give, grant' without religious connotations, while  was used with a religious meaning, and emphasizing positive change. The religious meaning of  disappeared when the Shang dynasty was thrown over and the 易日 sacrifice became disused. Both forms  and  got the meaning of 'give, grant', as can be seen in bronze inscriptions from later periods.

On the site of Donald Sturgeon (www.chineseetymology.org) the 'vase' variant is seen as a precursor of yi 匱, the name of a low type of vessel/basin for pouring out liquid. In the 金文引得 index of bronze inscriptions an inscription is mentioned in which 易 is read as 匱 (p. 351 entry 5421), but I have not found other sources which motivate that  is the old form of 匱.

Conclusion

You might wonder if this is all relevant for the use of the Yi as an oracle. What I personally like about the old meaning of yi 易 is the emphasis that is put on positive change. A situation might be bad or unpleasant, but with yi you have the tool to change that. The old usage of yi makes us aware of our ability to bring positive changes to our lives. Maybe you will have to sacrifice a little bit, but in the end the outcome will be an improvement of the situation you started with. Change is not something which befalls you. Change is a *verb*: you do it, and by doing it, you change your situation for the better.