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, ehm, 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 说文 dictionary, which says:

易.蜥蜴,蝘蜓,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,象隂陽也.
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 参同契, 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 五 of the Chinese calendar, and to the moon; in the second line the trigram Li, Fire, is linked to the sixth Heavenly Stem ji 己 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* 在 oracle bones

When you look in *jiaguwen* 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 *殷墟甲骨文研究* 甲骨文的世界 by Ma Rusen 马如森, 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 孙常馥, 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 赵, *甲骨文字典* 甲骨文简明词典, p. 996; Liu Xinglong 刘兴隆, *新编甲骨文字典* 新编甲骨文字典, p. 996). 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 杨树达 (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 赵 talks in length about the combination 易日: 易日的天氣顯然... 簡單地看成是陰天, 也不能說沒有道理... 但不能完全合乎實際.

*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* 赐日. In bone inscriptions 易日 often appears in combination with *wu* 雾, 'fog', for instance: '(day) renynin - give, sun, (day) renynin - 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 '云中丁易日 - 用廿牢向大戊進行歲祭以求賜日.' 易日的天氣顯然... 簡單地看成是陰天, 也不能說沒有道理... 但不能完全合乎實際.

*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* 雲, 'fog', for instance: '(day) renynin - give, sun, (day) renynin - 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 '雲中丁易日 - 用廿牢向大戊進行歲祭以求賜日.' 易日的天氣顯然... 簡單地看成是陰天, 也不能說沒有道理... 但不能完全合乎實際.

*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* 雲, 'fog', for instance: '(day) renynin - give, sun, (day) renynin - 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 '雲中丁易日 - 用廿牢向大戊進行歲祭以求賜日.' 易日的天氣顯然... 簡單地看成是陰天, 也不能說沒有道理... 但不能完全合乎實際.

This explanation agrees with the picture that Marshall gives about the shape of the character. On oracle bones *yi* 易 often has the meaning of 'to give, to grant', with or without *ri* 日, and it alway 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; 新编甲骨文字典, 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, \( \end{equation} \), is harder to interpret because during Shang times it had two meanings: it is the old character for \( \text{yue} \) 月, 'moon', but it as also used for \( \text{xi} \) 夕, 'evening, sunset'. Liu however says that on oracle bones \( \text{yue} \) 月 was written as \( \end{equation} \), while \( \text{xi} \) 夕 was mostly written as \( \end{equation} \), with an extra dot in the center (see also Yu Shengwu 于省吾, 甲骨文字释林, p. 449).

If we combine this with what we know of the component \( \end{equation} \), then it is possible that \( \end{equation} \) refers to an offering to the moon, or at least in the dark, to get the sun back. \( \text{yi} \) 易 could have been a sacrifice to the ancestors or spirits (indicated by \( \end{equation} \)) during the evening or in the night (indicated by \( \end{equation} \)) 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 瘊癒 - recover from an illness. (...) Some people think that yi in this usage can be read as the yi 萬 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).

(新编甲骨文字典, 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 \( \end{equation} \). If \( \end{equation} \) really was a precursor of yi 易 you would expect that the modern form still contains the \( \end{equation} \) component. The fact that this is not the case might be a clue that \( \end{equation} \) 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 魯恩博 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 易 version was used before the Yi 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).

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

During the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600 BC - ca. 1046 BC) 易, probably had the meaning of 'give, grant' without religious connotations, while Yi was used with a religious meaning, and emphasizing positive change. The religious meaning of 易 disappeared when the Shang dynasty was thrown over and the 易 sacrifice became disused. Both forms 易 and Yi 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 易匜, 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匜 (p. 351 entry 5421), but I have not found other sources which motivate that 易 is the old form of匜.

**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 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.