

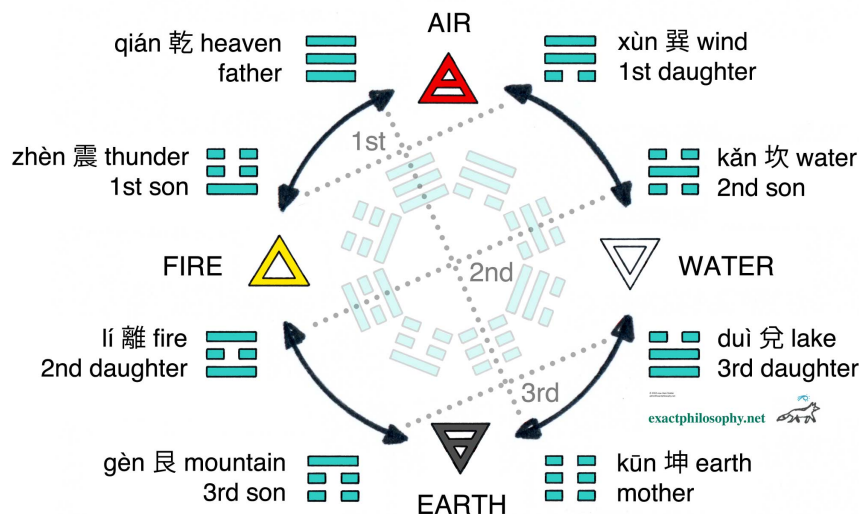


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Elemental changes in the I Ching ?

Abstract

A new way of arranging the trigrams of the I Ching in a circle is presented for consideration and discussion. Here it is in advance:



The eight trigrams are tentatively interpreted as the eight possible transitions between the four “Greek” elements Earth, Water, Air and Fire along Aristotle’s circle of the elements. The new arrangement features also some very interesting structures and symmetries, which will be exposed in detail later on.

However, no common historical roots of the I Ching and the ancient Greek elements are known, and also no roots of the above arrangement in Chinese history, although it is similar to the traditional Earlier Heaven arrangement. So did maybe both cultures mirror nature independently, even unknowingly, or is this maybe just a coincidence, or a bit of both, or... ?

Not being an expert on ancient history (I am a physicist) and considering worldwide interest in the I Ching, I thought it would be best to simply present this structure as carefully and minimally as possible.

In the following, first a quick overview of Aristotle’s circle of elements and the ancient elements as natural phenomena, then to the I Ching and finally to the new arrangement of the trigrams with its symmetries.

Aristotle's circle of the elements

In *On Generation and Corruption* (around 350 BCE) Aristotle defines elements by properties that can be felt by *touching*. He names cold-hot, wet-dry, fine-coarse, soft-hard, brittle-malleable and reduces the last four opposites to wet-dry. Then he defines the four elements as combinations of these two pairs of opposites cold-hot and wet-dry: Earth as dry and cold, Water as cold and wet, Air as wet and hot, Fire as hot and dry.

He arranges the elements in a circle, in which at each transition only one of the properties cold-hot or wet-dry is inverted: Earth gets wet, becomes Water, gets warm, becomes Air, gets dry, becomes Fire, gets cold, becomes Earth again, and also the other way round in the circle:



There are thus 8 possible transitions along this circle, the same number as the number of trigrams in the I Ching.

In the tradition of the Stoics and other schools that emerged in Hellenistic times, Earth and Water were later usually considered passive, heavy and female and Air and Fire active, light and male.

The Greek elements as natural phenomena

According to today's chemistry and physics, considering the material world to be composed of earth, water, air and fire would, of course, be wrong. But if you interpret Earth as *solid*, Water as *liquid*, and Air as *gas*—the most commonly encountered *states* of matter—and interpret Fire as a *chemical reaction or physical phenomenon that creates light and possibly heat*, this makes more sense: Practically everything you could encounter in daily life in antiquity would fit into one of these four categories, would be either solid, liquid, gas or some sort of Fire, or a mixture of these four, like, say, mud a mixture of Earth and Water. Transformations of the elements, like, say, ice melting and then evaporating (Earth-Water-Air) or a fire that transforms wood into smoke and gas (Earth-Fire-Air), would often be part of Aristotle's circle.

The trigrams as transitions between elements

The following three sentences in the introduction of the Wilhelm/Baynes translation of the I Ching had been in the back of my mind for years, but only in August 2016, I found a concrete, specific way of applying them:

The eight trigrams are symbols standing for changing transitional states; they are images that are constantly undergoing change. Attention centers not on things in their state of being—as is chiefly the case in the Occident—but upon their movements in change. The eight trigrams therefore are not representations of things as such but of their tendencies in movement.

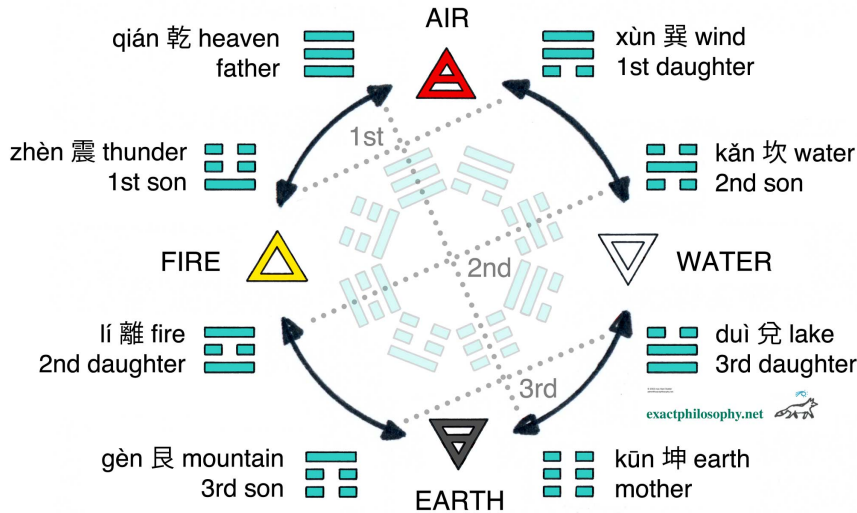
Hence eight trigrams as 8 transitions between 4 elements? In order to approach the specific arrangement step-by-step, let me start with a table of the trigrams, as given by Wilhelm/Baynes:

☰	qián	heaven	strong	creative	father
☷	kūn	earth	devoted/yielding	receptive	mother
☳	zhèn	thunder	inciting movement	arousing	1st son
☵	kǎn	water	dangerous	abysmal	2nd son
☶	gèn	mountain	resting	keeping still	3rd son
☴	xùn	wind/wood	penetrating	gentle	1st daughter
☲	lí	fire	light-giving	clinging	2nd daughter
☱	duì	lake	joyful	joyous	3rd daughter

Now let me tentatively group them into pairs of “Greek” elements:

☰	qián	heaven	Air	(rests)	male
☴	xùn	wind	Air	(moves)	female
☷	gèn	mountain	Earth	(rests)	male
☷	kūn	earth	Earth	(moves)	female
☲	lí	fire	Fire	(rests)	female
☳	zhèn	thunder	Fire	(moves)	male
☱	duì	lake	Water	(rests)	female
☵	kǎn	water	Water	(moves)	male

And finally arrange them in Aristotle’s circle, letting the transition end with the corresponding element in the table above and start with a female element (Water or Earth) for the female trigrams (mother and three daughters) and with a male element (Fire or Air) for the male trigrams (father and three sons):



☰	qián	heaven	Air ← Fire	Air risen from fire
☴	xùn	wind	Air ← Water	Air from evaporated water
☶	gèn	mountain	Earth ← Fire	Earth from solidified lava (Fire)
☷	kūn	earth	Earth ← Water	Earth from sediments deposited by water
☲	lí	fire	Fire ← Earth	Fire from burning matter (Earth)
☳	zhèn	thunder	Fire ← Air	Fire as lightning from the sky (Air)
☱	duì	lake	Water ← Earth	Water sprung from sources (Earth)
☵	kǎn	water	Water ← Air	Water fallen as rain from the sky (Air)

Note that this circle is none of the two traditionally known ones, neither the *Earlier Heaven* nor the *Later Heaven* arrangement of the trigrams:



The trigrams seem to fit closely: Thunder as fire that has suddenly come down as lightning from the sky (Air), in contrast to fire steadily clinging to the matter (Earth) it burns; wind as air that gently evaporated from water, in contrast to gases from a fire risen to heaven; a lake as water sprung from sources (Earth), in contrast to water fallen down as rain from the sky (Air); a mountain as earth solidified from lava (Fire), in contrast to softly yielding earth from sediments deposited by water.

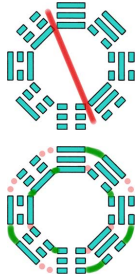
The arrangement has also the following additional symmetries:



Sons and daughters are grouped in order of birth from mother to father (gray dotted lines above).



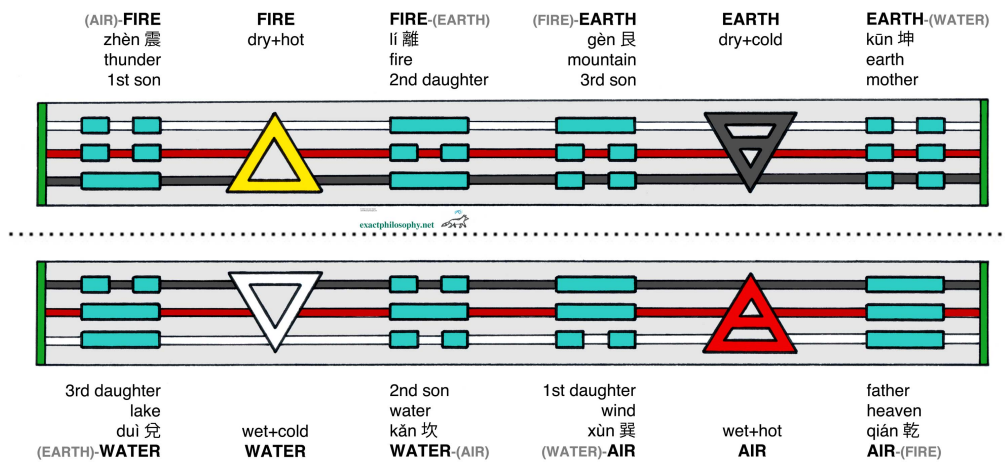
If you mirror the lines of each trigram at their middle line (i.e. swap first and third line) and invert all three lines of the trigram (yin ↔ yang), you get exactly the lines of the trigram opposite in the circle.



The middle line of each trigram that transforms to or from a dry element is a broken line, which would fit with Aristotle's view that dry is brittle, hence can be broken more easily than wet.

Excluding the middle line, between adjacent trigrams in the circle always exactly one line is inverted (yin ↔ yang).

Here is another way of representing the structure, along a Möbius Strip, inspired by the images on Billy Culver's "Energy Language" website. Note that each yin line on one side of the strip touches a yang line on the other side, and vice-versa, and that the symbols for the Greek elements overlap, too.



Conclusion

My conclusion is twofold. As a physicist, I find that the number of symmetries is a bit too high for immediately assuming a pure coincidence. Judging how well the trigrams correlate with elementary transitions in the proposed way, however, is more difficult, first fundamentally, because it is prose and not math and second for me personally, because I am not an expert on ancient Chinese culture, so my overview is limited and based on translations. This is why I wrote this up, as a starting point for anyone interested to take a closer look. . .

This is not to say that I have no further ideas regarding this and the I Ching and the elements, but nothing further that immediately fits the focus here; for more see my website exactphilosophy.net.

PS: Note that you can click on most illustrations in this text for the individual image with higher resolution. Feel free to share these images with whoever you think might be interested, if possible preferably with a link to this article or to work that references it.

Previous related work: I am not aware of previous work that features the same arrangement of trigrams as presented here. Considering the millennia of considerations of the I Ching, it might however be very likely that someone did in the past.

That said, this article features more than “just an arrangement of trigrams in a circle”, namely a *model* in terms of elemental transitions behind it. Quite generally, this article is rather pan-cultural or even non-cultural, relating to the I Ching as well as to ancient Greek and Indian views on the elements, and probably to any other culture and its views on “elements”. And note that the main illustration in this article features 12 not 8 symbols in a circle, hinting thus also at possible relations to various zodiacs, most likely, though, the Chinese one.

Moreover, note that I originally got to this model coming from a definition of “elements” in terms of in/out and rest/move, which you can find in the main part of my website.

What I am aware of is that at least two people attributed trigrams in pairs to elements in the same way as I just presented here (i.e. Fire to fire/thunder, Air to heaven/wind, Water to water/lake and Earth to earth/mountain). These two are **Bradford Hatcher** (hermetica.info) and **Karen Witter** (WheelOfTarot). Bradford Hatcher brought this to my attention in January 2017 and told me he had been using this “since 1976”. References are Bradford Hatcher’s books *Tarot as a Counseling Language* [1] and *The Book of Changes: Word by Word, Vol. 1, Part 2* [2], and Karen Witter in a post to her Yahoo Group of 1999 [3].

- [1] This book is available on his website [here](#) (html). Search the text for “I Ching” to find a subsection where he explains the attribution of trigrams to elements, referring also to Karen Witter and earlier roots by Aleister Crowley. Note that both BH and KW group trigrams also into two sets of four elements, “archetypal” elements (heaven, water, earth, fire) and “attributorial” elements (wind, lake, mountain, thunder). See also [this table](#) in the book for these attributions.
- [2] This book is listed prominently on his website hermetica.info and can also be downloaded as a [pdf](#). See the descriptions of the trigrams in part 2 (vol. 1), or search for “Greater Earth” to find this maybe more easily. In that book he uses “greater” and “lesser” instead of “archetypal” and “attributorial” to distinguish the two sets of trigrams.
- [3] Here is a [link to her post](#) and an excerpt from the post:

1. There are 4 archetypal elements and 4 attributorial elements in the I-Ching. Shown below; 1=line, 0=broken line, left to right=top to bottom:

Archetype Air (Heaven) 111
Attribute Air (Wind) 110

Archetype Water (Water) 010
Attribute Water (Marsh) 011

Archetype Earth (Earth) 000
Attribute Earth (Mountain) 001

Archetype Fire (Fire) 101
Attribute Fire (Thunder) 001