

A commentary on 归妹 [Guī mèi] divination

Ryszard P. R. Kostecki[#]

International Centre for Theory of Quantum Technologies, University of Gdańsk, Poland

June 26, 2022*

dedicated to the memory of Professor Krzysztof M. Gawlikowski (1940–2021)

The hexagram ䷵ of 易經 [Yì jīng] ('Book of changes') is known as 歸妹 (simplified: 归妹) [Guī mèi] ('Returning/Converting/Marrying maiden'), and as such it is contained in 歸藏 [Guī cáng] ('Returning to be stored'), which is one of the three more ancient divination texts from which Yì jīng has been compiled (other two texts are 連山 [Lián shān] ('Linked mountains') and 周易 [Zhōu yì] ('Changes of Zhōu'), the latter also based on Guī cáng). The discovery of ancient tombs containing bamboo-strip manuscripts in 1993, in 王家台 [Wángjiātái] village in 湖北 [Húběi] province, has led to dating and deciphering of the ~250 B.C. (the oldest currently known) versions of parts of Guī cáng. It included two fragments of Guī mèi divination: №307 «归妹曰昔者恒我窃毋死之[药]» ('Guī mèi says: In the past Héng ǚ stole the [medicine] of immortality') and №201 «奔月而支占» ('and fled to the moon and had the stalks prognosticated').

According to Shaughnessy [1; p.155],

«It is clear that the Heng E 恒我 of Wangjiatai fragment no. 307 is identical with the mythological figure more commonly (though not invariably) known from the Han dynasty on as Chang E 嫦娥 (the “Heng,” 恒 or 姮, having been changed to “Chang,” 常 or 嫦, to avoid a taboo on the name of Liu Heng 劉恒, Han Wendi 漢文帝 [r. 179–157 B.C.]».

This type of change is featured in the fragment from 搜神記 [Sōu shén jì] ('Records of searching for the spirits') by 干寶 [Gàn Bǎo], written ≈336 A.D.:

«羿請无死之藥于西王母嫦娥窃之以奔月將往枚筮之于有黄有黄占之曰吉

翩翩歸妹

獨將西行

逢天晦芒

毋恐毋惊

後且大昌

嫦娥遂托身于月是為蟾蜍» [1; p.156]

(Engl. transl.: «Yi requested the medicine of immortality from the Western Queen Mother. Chang E stole it to flee to the moon. When she was about to go, she had the stalks divined by milfoil by You Huang. You Huang prognosticated them and said: Auspicious.

So soaring the returning maiden,

alone about to travel westward.

Meeting heaven's dark void;

[#] E-mail: kostecki@fuw.edu.pl.

* Corrected and extended version. Early version of this text was written and shared on January 5, 2021.

do not fear, do not tremble.

Afterwards there will be great prosperity.

Chang E subsequently consigned her body to the moon, and this became the frog» [1; p.156].)

However, as noted by Shaughnessy to be a strange fact, a fragment found in earlier text of Han dynasty's period, 靈憲 [Líng xiàn] ('Sublime/Spiritual/Mystical model/constitution/laws') by 張衡 [Zhāng Héng] (who lived between 78 and 139 A.D.), while almost identical with Gàn Bǎo's version, does not respect this taboo, writing 恆娥 [Héng É]. (In what follows, two versions of héng, 恒 and 恆, will be used interchangeably.)

There are two important additional pieces of information, which are not discussed by Shaughnessy: 1) the difference between 恆我 (~250 B.C.) and 恆娥 (~120 A.D.) is that the former does not contain a female radical (女); 2) as opposed to both 恆娥 and 嫦娥 (which act as a name of a female), the oldest version, 恆我, has its own meaning: 我 [wǒ/ě] means 'I/me/my', while 恆 [héng] is usually considered to mean 'constant/persistent/perserverant/lasting/eternal'. Taken together, this gives a tentative interpretation of the original meaning of 恆我 as a (gender neutral) 'eternal me/'eternal self', which got lost over the course of 600 years, due to sequential transition 恆我 —> 恆娥 —> 嫦娥 (the final version has two female radicals, while the original one has none). Combining this with the rest of Guī mèi fragment, we obtain the preamble of divination: 'In the past, the eternal self has stolen the medicine of immortality and fled to the moon', which can be interpreted as a diagnosis (frame of reference, course of events) to which the central five lines of divination refer to.

However, this tentative interpretation has to be subjected to a further scrutiny, since the meaning of 恆 [héng] is a complex historical and philosophical issue, which includes the tension between confucian and dàoist perspectives on this term. On one side,

«Early Confucian texts expanded the meaning of constancy, gave prominence to permanent [常] and “long-duration,” [久] and furthermore produced the idea of constancy in relation to substances. This provided another step towards the metaphysical change of constancy that included more possibilities. The permanence [常] of constancy [恆] corresponds to the idea of time. After the xin [心] radical was added to the pictograph of crescent moon [亘]; it expressed the willpower of people and their action to be concentrated into the meaning of “long duration” and “unchanging.” As a result, the ideas of perseverance [恆心] and “preserving” [有恆] emerged» [2; p.24].

On the other side, another archeological discovery made in Húběi province in 1993, of a tomb in 郭店 [Guōdiàn] village, has unearthed the bamboo strips, dated by most of authors between 323 and 278 B.C. (see [3] for a dissenting view), and containing, among other texts, the fragments of the oldest known version of 道德經 [Dàodéjīng] (called also 老子 [Lǎozǐ]), the central text of dàoism. As compared with the later versions, this version features only one instance of 常 [cháng] and several occurrences of 恆 [héng]. There are known two more versions of Lǎozǐ from the period predating the taboo on héng, and dated (on the base of respecting specific taboos) before 206 B.C. and before 194 B.C., respectively. Both were unearthed in 1973 from the tomb sealed at 168 B.C. at 馬王堆 [Mǎwángduī], Húběi province, among a large body of writings on silk. These two texts have more occurrences of cháng, yet, they still feature héng in a multitude of locations (see [4] for a more detailed comparison). These discoveries have lead to a noticeable revision of the dàoist perspective:

«in the book of the *Laozi* [老子], the word “*heng*” 恒, a key word in understanding Laozi's concept of temporality of *dao* 道, was missing during the past 2000 years. In most editions of the text, a synonym, “*chang*” 常, was substituted, which may refer to a totally different understanding of the temporality of *dao*. Second, based on an etymological study of the origins of the Chinese word “*heng*” and its philosophical use in the *Laozi*, I shall claim that *heng* explores the temporality of Laozi's *dao* as *heng dao*. Unlike *chang*, which asks more for constant extension, and invariable and non-changeable movement, *heng* in Laozi's *heng dao* focuses more on “living longer” 長生 of the myriad creatures, and on the concept of “never dying” 不死 of *dao* as the natural force of giving birth. (...) In the ordinary Chinese language the word *heng* and the word *chang* are always treated as synonyms. However, when we study the origins of these two words, we find that they are different. Etymologically speaking, the original meaning of “*heng*” may be traced to two other ancient Chinese characters: *geng* 恆 and *gen* 恆. *Geng* means “to wax flail” and “to navigate.” (...) The primordial image evoked by these variant characters may be the moving of the moon across the sky, or the path of a boat on a river. *Gen* means “to flow through” and “to spread everywhere.” (...) These two meanings of the ancient word *heng* are dearly related, directly or indirectly, to the movement of water: a boat moves on an earthly river or the moon moves across the celestial “river.” Thus understood, the original meaning of *heng* does not seem to have much to do with *chang* [常], if *chang* means only “constancy.” *Heng* as movement on water suggests a range of differentiated and even conflicting elements such as a new moon and a full moon, or fast eddies and tranquil pools, shallow and deep water, movement forward and backward, up and down, slow and rapid, and so on. Given this original meaning of *heng* and the complicity of the world that the *Laozi* seeks to characterize, it is not surprising to see why Laozi favors *heng* over *chang* in expressing *dao*» [5; pp.55, 60].

Focusing on the presence of *héng* in the chapter 2 of the *Mǎwángduī* versions of *Lǎozǐ*, 王庆节 [Wáng Qìng Jié] writes:

«On the first level, *heng* refers to the process of mutually oppositional and complementary interactions between ‘being-a-thing’ (*you* 有) and ‘not-being-the-thing’ (*wu* 無), ‘difficult’ (*nan* 難) and ‘easy’ (*yi* 易), as well as between *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 (chapter 42), ‘male’ (*xiong* 雄) and ‘female’ (*ci* 雌) (chapter 28), ‘good fortune’ (*fu* 福) and ‘bad luck’ (*huo* 禍) (chapter 58), etc. in all things of the world. (...) For the *Laozi*, that these mutually oppositional and mutually complementary interactions are possible only because of a deeper level of ‘interaction’ between the two opposite aspects on one side and their ‘gushing forth’ (冲 *chong*) on the other. ‘Interaction’ at this deeper level may not be ‘interaction’ in the ordinary sense of the word because it is a primordial pre- or non-substantive relation. That is to say, when we use the word ‘interaction’ or ‘relation’, we often presuppose the existence of two separated entities or qualities that participate in the interaction, but if we reverse our usual way of thinking and take the ‘interaction’ as pre-substantive rather than substantive, we discover that those supposedly substantive entities or qualities should be understood not as the causes of the ‘substantive interactions’ but the result of the ‘pre-substantive interactions’, which the *Laozi* calls ‘gushing forth’. Thus understood, the ‘pre-substantive interaction’ or the primordial ‘gushing forth’ is the existential condition of both the existence of the opposite aspects and the ‘substantive interaction’ between them» [6, p.155].

Taking into account this dialectics between confucian 'constancy'/'permanence' of *cháng* and *dàoist* 'flow'/'gushing forth' of *héng*, more exact re-reading of the preamble of the divination would be: 'In

the past, the everlastingly-changing self has stolen the medicine of immortality and fled to the moon'.

Zhāng Héng's *Líng xiàn*, known only in fragments, is an interesting text on its own. Apart from disrespecting the taboo on héng, and being said to provide a calculation of a value of π as $730/232 = 3.146552\dots$ (as attributed by 開元占經 [Kāiyuán Zhānjīng] treatise on astrology, compiled from 714 to 724 A.D. [7]), it also contains a fragment «月者陰精之宗積而成獸象蝮兔» [8] ('The moon has the fundamental essence of yīn type. It accumulates into an animal that looks like a toad, or a hare', c.f. also [9]). This gives a consistent semiotic context for the Guī mèi divination: moon is an object with 陰 [yīn] type of essence (精 [jīng]), the accumulative form/body of this type of essence is a toad, the self became immortal (due to the act of stealing, and apparently intaking, of medicine), however at the price of consigning its own form/body to the moon's type of essence, i.e., bounding its (formerly) everlastingly flowing dynamics to receptiveness of yīn, and obtaining the fixed form/body of a toad.

Hence, in principle (resp., only counterfactually – if considered within the frames of divination being actually performed), the self does not have to be immortal (resp., could have been nonimmortal), and thus can be (resp., could have been) nonsubordinated to moon. This leads to an interesting conclusion, that the default state of self is a conjunction of everlasting flow *and* mortality. This state can be changed by means of an immoral act (stealing), which has its necessary price/payoff (falling under the spell/control of the moon). The difference between dàoist 'everlasting flow' of 恆 [héng] and confucian 'constancy' of 常 [cháng] makes a substantial change in the above interpretation: shifting from héng to cháng would amount to allowing the conjunction of constancy/eternality/permanence and mortality, instead of the conjunction of everlasting flow and mortality. In both cases, the resolution of the moon-bound state amounts to remortalisation via the complementary essence of the 陽 [yáng] type. It is quite interesting to see that, while the tension between héng and cháng modes of temporality can be seen as reflecting the duality between lunar and solar temporalities (with 恆 traced back to combination of 'heart-mind' 心 [xīn] (transforming into a radical 忄) and 恆 [gèn/gèng], the latter arising from 'moon' 月 [yuè]), in both cases the consignment of temporal self to moon's yīn immortality is independent from the (interpretational choice of the) mode of temporality. In dàoist view, which is a preferred reading due to the results of archeological findings, the immortalisation via bounding to yīn can be seen as conflicting with the everlasting changeability of self. So, while the dàoist temporality can be seen as having somewhat lunar flavour at the meta-level (as opposed to the confucian constancy), at the elementary level it recognises the permanent subordination to moon's yīn as an abnormal mode of self. In particular, the restoration of 'everlasting flow' of self (return of a maiden) can happen due to the increase of yáng.

It is interesting to see that the sequential transition 恆我 —> 恆娥 —> 嫦娥 reflects, on its own, the process of transition of a neutral self into the female (hence, moon-obeying) character, combined with replacement of everlasting flow with an eternal constancy, which (*nomen est omen*) obscures the fine-grained meaning behind the divination (turning its form into a frog), while immortalising it in the easily comprehensible tale. From this perspective, the archeological and semiotic research, reconstructing the most probable original text and its meanings, amounts to return from moon's bonding (together with a deconstruction/remortalisation of a fixed myth into a discourse/flow of ideas) by means of increasing the yáng type of essence. The returning maiden travels westward.

References

- [1] Edward Louis Shaughnessy, 2014, *Unearthing the Changes: recently discovered manuscripts of the Yi Jing (I Ching) and related texts*, Columbia University Press, New York.
- [2] 王中江 [Wáng Zhōng Jiāng], 2016, 终极根源概念及其谱系:上博简《恒先》的“恒”探微 [Zhōngjí gēnyuán gàiniàn jí qí pǔxì: Shàng bó jiǎn 《héng xiān》 de “héng” tàn wēi], 哲学研究 [Zhéxué yánjiū] **1**, 35–44 (Engl. transl.: 2019, *The concept and genealogy of the ultimate origin: an exploration of constancy in the hengxian 《恒先》 text of the Shanghai museum collection*, Journal of Chinese Philosophy **46**, 3–32).
- [3] 王葆炫 [Wáng Bǎo Xuàn], 2000, *A discussion of the composition dates of the various Guodian Chu slip texts and their background*, Contemporary Chinese Thought **32**, 18–42.
- [4] Daniel Anthony Murphy, 2006, *A comparison of the Guodian and Mawangui Laozi texts*, M.Sc. thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst.
- [5] 王庆节 [Wáng Qìng Jié], 2001, *Heng 恒 and Temporality of Dao: Laozi 老子 and Heidegger*, Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy **1**, 55–71.
- [6] 王庆节 [Wáng Qìng Jié], 2000, *Heng Dao and appropriation of nature—a hermeneutical interpretation of Laozi*, Asian Philosophy **10**, 149–163.
- [7] 蓝丽蓉 [Lán Lì Róng], 2016, *Pi in Chinese mathematics*, in: Selin E. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the history of science, technology, and medicine in non-western cultures* (3rd ed.), Springer, Berlin, pp.3533–3534.
- [8] 劉昭 [Liú zhāo], 1965, 後漢書: 天文志 [Hòu hànshū: Tiānwén zhì], 中华书局 [Zhōnghuá shūjú], 北京 [Běijīng] (as quoted in: 赵晋超 [Zhào Jìn Chāo], 2019, *Integration and transformation: a study of the sun and the moon depicted in the imagery of Fuxi and Nüwa*, Asian Studies **7**, 13–45).
- [9] Nataša Vampelj Suhadolnik, 2011, *Han mural tombs: reflection of correlative cosmology through mural paintings*, Asian and African Studies **15**, 19–48.