

Macbeth's and ZHUGE Liang's Fate Explained Through *I Ching*

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ABSTRACT

I Ching, also translated as *Yijing* or *The Changes*, is a work on the "law of change" that is universally applicable to the natural world and human society. It originated from China but belongs to all the human kind. It is a treasure to the world civilization and is still valuable to all walks of life. The philosophy of *I Ching*'s Kun Hexagram is used to analyze the fate of two literary characters: Macbeth and ZHUGE Liang. Macbeth's collapse of nice fame and good fortune lies in his dashing out of the way of a subordinate in his "top-yin" period; by contrast, ZHUGE Liang's integrity and prosperity lies in his humility from his "first-yin" period to the "top-yin" period.

Keywords: *I Ching, Macbeth, ZHUGE Liang, the Kun Hexagram*

1. INTRODUCTION

Can *I Ching* (*The Law of Chang*) be used to predict the fate and fortune of literary figures? Of course not. Literary figures are different from real-life figures in that their fates have already been arranged by their authors and there is no need predict their fates because we can find out their fates by reading through the work. Does that mean *I Ching* has nothing to do with literary works and literary figures? Not either. *I Ching* may be indirectly related to literary works and literary figures by influencing their author's way of looking at the world.

In the article "The 'I Ching': a Biography" (2012), Richard J. Smith says:

Into the twentieth century, the Yijing occupied a central place in Chinese culture, from the realms of philosophy, religion, art, and literature to those of politics and social life. Thinkers of every intellectual persuasion found inspiration in the language, symbolism, and imagery of the Changes. The work also inspired many impressive artistic and literary achievements, and it provided an analytical vocabulary that proved extraordinarily serviceable in virtually every area of elite and popular culture, including science and technology.[3]

In this essay, I try to use the *I Ching* philosophy to analyze literature. To be specific, I will use the Kun Hexagram to analyze the fate of two literary characters, one is Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, and the other is ZHUGE Liang in LUO Guanzhong's *The Three Kingdoms*.

First to be briefed is the Kun Hexagram, which is the 2nd Hexagram of *I Ching*'s 64 Hexagrams.

The symbol of the Kun Hexagram is "☷". In Chinese, "kun" means "female", "feminine". It also refers to the earth. The Kun Hexagram is pure yin¹ in nature, totally

opposite to the Qian Hexagram. Its attribute is "devotion". It signifies receptivity, submission, humility, faithfulness. Contrary to the Qian Hexagram, the Kun Hexagram is made up of six yin lines. From the bottom to the top, they are called: the 1st yin ("yin" is also called "six"), the 2nd yin, the 3rd yin, the 4th yin, the 5th yin, and the top yin. Their meanings are as follows:

The 1st yin: When your foot steps on the hoarfrost, you know the hard ice is coming. The implied meaning is: we should take action in time to stop things from becoming worse. Being cautious in advance is good to us.

The 2nd yin: "Straight, square, great. Without purpose, yet nothing remains unfurthered." [1]² The implied meaning: "The superior man is serious in order to make his inner life straight; he does his duty in order to make his outer life square."³

The 3rd yin: "Dark force possesses beauty but veils it."⁴ The implied meaning: "...when serving a king, avoid laying claim to the completed work. It is the way of the earth, of the wife, and of the one who serves."⁵ So one should subordinate oneself and conceal one's honour.

The 4th yin: "A tied-up sack. No blame, no praise."⁶ The implied meaning is: "When you are near the ruler but do not receive recognition from him, the only right thing is to shut oneself from the world."⁷ "The time is dangerous...any degree of prominence leads either to the enmity of irresistible antagonists if one challenges them or to misconceived recognition if one is complaisant. Therefore a man ought to remain reserve, be it in solitude

or in the turmoil of the world.”⁸

The 5th yin: “Yellow garment is very auspicious.”[4]⁹ The implied meaning: “Flexible receptivity open and balanced, one’s virtue is sufficient to make people obey; one is trusted without speaking, one educates without teaching. The refinement and virtue within naturally show outwardly. It is the great auspicious manifestation of the path of submission.”

The top yin: “Dragons battle in the field; the blood is dark yellow.”¹⁰ “When the dark seeks to equal the light principle, there is certain to be a struggle.”[1]¹¹ The implied meaning is: “In the top place the dark element should yield to the light. If it attempts to maintain a position to which it is not entitled and to rule instead of serving, it draws down upon itself the anger of the strong. A struggle ensues in which it is overthrown, with injury, however, to both sides.”[1]¹²

2. THE KUN HEXAGRAM AND MACBETH’S TRAGEDY

Charles W. French (2013) holds that the ethical aspect of Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* is most noteworthy. “The one absorbing subject for study and meditation in *Macbeth* is to be found in its ethical content. Other plays may be studied from literary or critical standpoints, but here the **moral lesson** is of such surpassing importance that all other considerations sink into comparative insignificance.”¹³ Ethical aspect is closely related with philosophical aspect. We may use the philosophy in *I Ching* to analyze the fate of *Macbeth*. Among the 64 Hexagrams, the Kun Hexagram is one which is closely linked with “moral aspect”. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze the tragedy of *Macbeth* using the theory of the Kun Hexagram, as listed above.

What does “moral” mean? According to Collins online dictionary, “moral” as a noun means “principles and beliefs concerning right and wrong behaviour.” As an adjective, “moral” means “courage or duty based on what you believe is right or acceptable, rather than on what the law says should be done.” In *I Ching*’s Kun Hexagram, **correctness** is another name of “moral”, which requires that one should fulfill the duty of one’s position and take it for granted to perform duty and remain in one’s own track without seeking unnatural ambitions which may form threat to one’s superiors. From the six yin lines’ explanations we can see that “**correctness**” is emphasized repeatedly in Kun Hexagram. Since “moral” and “correctness” are so near to each other, we may approach Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from the moral of “the Kun Hexagram”.

Before we approach Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* from the perspective of “the Kun Hexagram”, it is necessary for us to be aware that *Macbeth* is a worthy tragedy and that *Macbeth* is a hero worthy of people’s sympathy. Otherwise, the analysis will be pointless. According to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy: “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; ... through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions...”¹⁴, we can regard *Macbeth* as a typical tragedy, since in every aspect, be it in subject, completeness, or magnitude, it accords with Aristotle’s definition of tragedy. One point is that **this play, while blaming Macbeth for his crimes, arouses people’s sympathy towards Macbeth, because a majority of readers believe that Macbeth is by nature not a bad man**, but an honorable warrior who has merits for his country. As Aristotle says, the character of a tragedy must be good in nature, honorable in status, and lovable to people, otherwise their misfortune can not arouse people’s pity or fear. There have been some disputes over *Macbeth*’s tragedy. Most people believe *Macbeth*’s doom is caused by his flaw in nature: ambition. That is to say *Macbeth* is an Aristotelian tragic hero. However, Langis (2012) attributes *Macbeth*’s crime to his “akrasia”, or weakness of will. Langis employs Aristotle’s prudential psychology to prove that *Macbeth* is not a man without rational will, but his “appetitive will”[2] is too strong. J. R. Wilson (2019) holds that *Macbeth*’s bold behavior stems from “the social construct of “male aggressivity, bravery, and brutality”, which is born of social convention.”[5] Be it hamartia of ambition, appetitive will, or social convention, which promotes *Macbeth* to commit the crime, his behavior is subject to the law of change, specifically, the Kun Hexagram.

In which way does *Macbeth*’s flaw in nature drive him step by step to despair and doom? The answer is that **his ambition or appetitive will leads him slowly off the right track of a subordinate and consequently destroys the harmony between a ruler and a subject**. His tragedy can be explained by the Kun Hexagram, which teaches people who are subordinates how to wisely serve or deal with their superiors so as to remain in a favorable state or minimize misfortune. Actually, **it advocates the “golden mean” or “course of the middle”, which means keeping yourself in the middle way**. If you keep the golden mean, you are on the path of correctness, and if you divert from the middle, you may be off the path of correctness and get further and further away from it. **The Kun Hexagram requires that one should abide by the golden mean from the beginning to the end and only in this way can one ensure safety in the end**. In the case of *Macbeth*, he behaves himself well in his early 5 yin periods: he is a near relative of the king, but he is not proud. When the nation is in crisis, he fights bravely for the king. **He maintains his “correctness” all through the first 5 periods. As a result, he enjoys lightness of heart, clear conscience and harmonious filiation with the king**. All these he deserves

because the Kun Hexagram holds that “correctness” leads to safety. **However, he does not let this “correctness” continue into his 6th yin period. His yin energy** (here referring to his desire for crown) **is so powerful that it gets beyond his control and competes with the yang energy** (here referring to the royal powers), **the result being that both suffer fatal wounds.** Duncan the king of Scotland is killed while Macbeth’s glory and reputation is also jeopardized. Macbeth has been on the right track and maintained a harmonious relationship with the King of Scotland till he commits murder, which not only destroys the long-cherished honour, but also **drives him onto the track of war against all the righteous forces.** He is no longer able to enjoy a sound sleep because once the murder becomes a reality, he begins to live in “fear”, and this “fear” will propel him to commit chain crimes to defend his throne. As Macbeth says, “Blood will have blood”(Act 3, Scene 3), “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (Act 3 Scene 2), he has no choice but to murder Banquo and Macduff’s families. He has lost his sense of guilt and become numb. “Macbeth advances boldly in open defiance of the higher powers, having entirely lost his early true-heartedness, appears almost devilish.”¹⁵ In other words, he is farther and farther away from the “middle way” or “correctness” and hastens his fall into disaster. **The same is true of Macbeth’s wife. When on the “middle way” (the correct track), she is able to lead a quiet and peaceful life, when on the wrong track (becoming a queen), she suffers from sleep-walking and falls into a habit of repeated handwash and she has actually become a live corpse, devoid of any human pleasure.**

The tragedy of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is caused by their ignorance of the wisdom of “using yin”, which is indicated by the Kun Hexagram: **“It is beneficial to be always correct.”**¹⁶ It means that it is beneficial to **“use the path of submission and receptivity”**. “Using submission and receptivity is the way to seek fulfillment by means of emptiness, to seek truth by openness, to seek being by nonbeing.”¹⁷ A paradox is hidden here: **If you want to be somebody, you should be nobody. If you want to ensure your advantage, you should hide your advantage.** Macbeth and Lady Macbeth do not know this philosophy. Their uncontrolled fire of desire burns them both into ashes.

3. THE KUN HEXGRAM AND ZHUGE LIANG’S INTEGRITY

ZHUGE Liang is a perfect example of using the Kun Hexagram philosophy to the full and consequently achieves his integrity in character. One of the key element of his character is “prudence”, which can be seen from his whole-life career. As discussed above, “prudence” is

another name for “correctness”. All his life, ZHUGE Liang tries to make each of his decisions conform to the norm of “correctness”. To him, the norm is to **abide by “time” and abide by “position”**. In his early years, ZHUGE Liang lives as a hermit in a country village in Hubei Province. When one friend after another voluntarily leaves the village to seek fame and fortune, ZHUGE Liang remains unaffected by their restless moves. Not that he has no desire to move, but that the “right” time has not come. He is actually waiting for a worthy lord. He is clear that a worthy lord is not easy to meet. However, it is his discipline that he would rather stay as hermit in the remote village all his life than leave here and serve a stupid lord. This coincides with the Kun Hexagram’s 2nd yin principle of “zhi” (upright), “fang” (proper), “da” (great): even if the environment and you are strange to each other, there is no harm to you. During this early period, he continues with his life of farming and reading to enrich his inner-self with work and knowledge. During his middle career period (3rd and 4th yin of Hexagram), ZHUGE Liang meets the right lord, LIU Bei, and goes all out to serve him, establishing a new kingdom for LIU Bei. ZHUGE Liang’s achievements depend on his “prudence”. Before making a decision, he puts all factors into consideration so as to make his calculation “correct”. To calculate has become his second nature. His prudence and correctness has won him the trust of LIU Bei as well as all the other subordinates. During his late career period (the 5th yin of the Hexagram), LIU Bei and ZHUGE Liang are at odds due to the disagreement over the launch of war against East Wu Kingdom. On such an occasion, ZHUGE Liang is quite clear of his subordinate status and lets his lord make his decision. When LIU Bei finally is defeated by East Wu Kingdom, he is regretful and his appreciation of ZHUGE Liang’s talent grows. During ZHUGE Liang’s last career period (the 6th yin of the Hexagram), LIU Bei has died and his son LIU Shan succeeds the throne. LIU Shan is a weak ruler and ZHUGE Liang has the power to ascend the throne in place of LIU Shan, but ZHUGE Liang will not do that. He put his heart and soul into serving LIU Shan until his death. **His norm of “position” is at work here.** In his heart, he regards himself as a faithful subordinate. **He believes that it is “correct” to keep himself on the right track: the track of a subordinate.** He believes that once he deviates from the right track and takes the throne, his virtue or moral will be stained. **In his heart, a perfect virtue is more important than the throne.**

4. DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MACBETH AND ZHUGE LIANG

Although Macbeth and ZHUGE Liang both have great merits for their nations, they have two differences. First, they have different career pursuits. We can say both of them have ambitions, but their ambitions differ. Macbeth’s ambition is to taste the throne even if the throne may jeopardize his conscience; ZHUGE Liang’s ambition is to help his lord LIU Bei to unite the whole nation and restore

the Han Dynasty. **ZHUGE Liang aims to make the whole nation strong and prosperous and he never thinks about taking the throne. He values loyalty and moral more than social status.** In this sense, we can say ZHUGE Liang has no ambition, but has beautiful dreams. Because of this, ZHUGE Liang is regarded as a perfect role model for the Chinese people. By contrast, **Macbeth is regarded by most readers as a pitiful tragedy due to his unlimited and unjust ambition,** which turns him into a heartless, blood-thirsty tyrant. Second, they are not at the same level in wisdom. ZHUGE Liang is a hero with great wisdom, who knows not only human nature but also the law of the universe. He himself is a master of *I Ching*, as indicated in *The Three Kingdoms*. By contrast, **Macbeth is but a warrior who is strong in arms but weak in brains.** It is very easy to predict that if he robs the throne, his long-established fame and fortune will turn into ashes, and the throne will not last long. But he cannot see that. A throne obtained with unjust means will not thrive. Macbeth's failure to realize this proves him to be a warrior who lacks great wisdom.

5. CONCLUSION

We have analyzed through the perspective of *I Ching* philosophy two heroes in Shakespeare's and LUO Guanzhong's works: Macbeth and ZHUGE Liang. This analysis aims to show that *I Ching* is universally applicable in the human society. LUO Guanzhong was familiar with *I Ching* while Shakespeare might not have read *I Ching*. However, the fates or fortunes of both LUO Guanzhong's and Shakespeare's characters can be analyzed by using the theory of *I Ching*. Macbeth's collapse of nice fame and good fortune lies in his dashing out of the way of a subordinate in his "top-yin" period; By contrast, ZHUGE Liang's integrity and prosperity lies in his humility from his "first-yin" period to the "top-yin" period. ZHUGE Liang can remain on the right track because there lies the seed of golden-mean and loyalty in his heart; Macbeth finally moves out of the right track because there grows the desire of being a monarch in his heart.

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