

THOUGHTS ON CENTRALITY

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At a “Laozi and Daoist Studies” conference in Zhengzhou, Henan (2009), Brook Ziporyn took an interesting approach to centrality in his presentation on "Body/Embodiment." He talked about Wang Bi's discussion of "master lines"(主爻) in Wang's commentary on the *Zhouyi*. According to Wang, master lines “embody” the overall action of a hexagram. I have found that this is a useful way to look at centrality.

Centrality is quite a rich concept in the *Zhouyi*, probably because it is arrived at inductively out of a broad range of circumstances. Each center line is a point of convergence for the overall action of a hexagram. Thus it resembles the "principle of coherence"理 of which neo-Confucians speak. In Wang Bi's term, the whole action of the hexagram is "embodied"体 there.

Actually there are 128 central lines in the *Zhouyi*, one each in the inner and outer trigrams of all 64 hexagrams. They may not be the "master lines" of the hexagram as a whole, but they can still show qualities of centrality.

Thus there are 128 ways of embodying the quality of centrality in the *Zhouyi*. In each of the hexagram analyses on my site, I have a paragraph on centrality. I think of the central lines in several ways: 1) They have more access to inputs (information) than other lines. 2) Influence radiates out from them, more so than for other lines. They are like the chaotic attractors Brook Ziporyn mentioned in his "body/embodiment" paper---points where initial conditions have the greatest effect. This can especially be seen in #59. 3) Central lines are buffered from extreme circumstances. 4) They have a better chance of achieving some sort of balance. 5) They can resonate with their central counterparts, which share the above advantages. In contrast, transitional lines--at positions Three and Four--can only resonate with counterparts at relatively extreme positions--One and Six. 6) Hence outcomes for central lines are generally better. The word xiong凶 occurs relatively less often in central lines than in bottom, top, and transitional lines. What is more, roughly half of the occurrences of 吉 "good fortune" by my count are found in central lines, though they make up only a third of total lines!

In the paragraphs headed "Centrality" in my hexagram essays, I discuss some situational meanings of centrality. There is such a variety of concrete meanings that I am led to question what kind of conceptual entity "centrality" is. Does it hang together, even if only as a description? I still intend to think through all the central lines and try to arrive at what centrality might mean overall. I think

Ziporyn's discussion of "body/embodiment" helps, because it expands the possibilities for the role of a focal point. No matter what the action of a hexagram, there is a point that embodies it---a point that cannot be understood in itself. This point can only be understood by looking at the action of the whole. (This goes beyond physical states of equilibrium and can be used to look at problems of psychic and conceptual coherence.)

I also like Ziporyn's characterization of hexagrams as "mini-Daos"!

Often the action of the central line in the lower trigram is relatively latent, and that in the upper trigram is relatively manifest.

In my "Musings on the Zhouyi" I talk about the abstract symbolism of threeness. A set of three is the smallest that allows a relation of betweenness: that is, one member of the set can be in the middle, between the two others. We can understand a trigram as standing for any cluster of variables, however great in number, as long as they have a center/focal point. And a hexagram can be taken as the most bare-bones example of any two clusters of variables both of which have focal points. Thus even the formal, numerical structure of the system is shown to function symbolically, in a way that involves betweenness or centrality. And perhaps we can say that at this abstract level, the concept of "centrality" attains its most inclusive meaning. I hope to inquire into what that might be. Perhaps something like "a force acting toward equilibrium" or the "tendency of any coherent system to seek equilibrium."

The brilliant U Penn student Justin Cheng wrote a paper on the I CHING (Spring 2006) in which he characterized centrality in hexagrams (and the force working toward balance in systems they symbolize) as an emanation from the Daoist deity Shangqing Tianzun 上清天尊, who is the middle of the "Three Pure Ones" 三清. Among the Three Pure Ones, Shangqing, also called Lingbao Tianzun 灵宝天尊, occupies the middle palace in Daluo Heaven (see *Yuanshi Shangzhen Zhongxian Ji* 《元始上真众仙记》). Above him is Yuqing Jun 玉清君 (also called Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊) and below him is Taiqing Jun (太清君). All three of the Pure Ones occupy transcendent positions as originators of nature's transformative processes. As the middle deity of the "Three Pure Ones," Shangqing might presumably preside over states of equilibrium. The *Daofa Huiyuan* 《道法会元》 records that Yuqing's incipient energy is blue-green; Shangqing's energy is yellow, and Taiqing's energy is white. According to Chinese color symbolism, yellow is the "central" color, so this reinforces the idea that Shangqing presides over centrality. According to the *Sanjie Hunyuan-tu* 《三界混元图》 of Du Guangting 杜光庭 (Tang), "Of the heavenly sovereigns,...the one who dwells

in the upper realm is at the source of a myriad heavens; the one who dwells in the middle realm is the root of a myriad transformations; the one who dwells in the lower realm provides guidance relating to transformation."

I hope you find these musings on centrality interesting.