Qian Is a Salamander

by Denis Mair

First Yang: "Hidden dragon. Do not act."

Right at the beginning of this ramshackle diagram, already there's something you can't take seriously. Moist wrigglings of the salamander life--isn't that some kind of travail? We are intelligent beings, so we advise it the time is not right to act. It would probably act if it knew what acting should be. But being it and not knowing how to act, how can it also be an it that knows how to act? It is acting in its own way. If we pin it down with our stages, it is frozen like Zeno's arrow. The mud's viscosity is bad enough, and you expect it to pierce the membrane between this name and that?

Second Yang: "Dragon appears in the fields. It furthers to see the great man."

More confusion right at the beginning. What is the dragon in the field? Perhaps Great Yu the flood-tamer, who was said to have scales on his legs. The myth says that he vanquished some monsters hiding in the swamps, then laid out the land in drained fields.

If there were no fields, you would not see him, and if it weren't for him, there'd be no fields. Somehow, he emerged from his canebrake, and we have to be here too or he doesn't appear. He's supposed to see a great man, or he's the great man we're supposed to see. The great man at court is so far above this, he might as well be in the sky. Down here in the fields, the strong man spends much time in ditches. Our poor ancestors were bedeviled by metaphors that confused heaven with the apex of political power! Isn't the great man at court also mired in his airy intrigues? Truly in his element! Maybe the great man above should pay attention to this swamp tamer’s sturdy strength.

Third Yang: "All day long the superior man is creatively active. In the evening he is vigilant. Hard going, but no blame."

All that work in the field allows a gentleman to emerge. When you play the gentleman's part, you can't drag your tail in the mud any more. You need to have projects with distinguished goals. But the setting here puts you in a tough spot--this is hard country, contested soil. The gentleman beset by cares looks in his mirror in the evening, and he

sees many gentleman somewhat like him. They are all stimulated by their settings, and some are so energized they are ready to jump out of their skins. Face it: this is some kind of cosmic hot spot. The gentleman who is driven to constructive work should be careful. If he stretches his big worm's length too far, he won't know what he's gotten into. No wonder he lies awake at night.

Fourth Yang: "Somehow leaping into the abyss. No blame."

This is the great experiment for Qian the Creative. A leap that changes the upper trigram to Xun is a test of whether the dragon can ride the wind. [Thanks to Brad Hatcher for that image.]

An abyss is a welter of impingements and influences. The first step in orienting ourselves is always a physiological survey. At every step in Qian we find a phase of an erotic experience--especially here. Looking into that same mirror as above, we see this site is richly supplied with blood vessels and nerve endings. The blood-engorged quality of the fourth place can be seen in hexagrams #6 and #9. This is also the site that exposes us to pain and wounding: the emaciated buttocks in #44. 4 and the wound through the left torso in #36. 4. Hence this site is an abyss of possibility for joy and pain in life. Here Fourth Yang is aimed at Fourth Yin, which is the womb of Kun.

Perhaps leaping, or somehow leaping into the abyss. This happens like an approach to a waterfall: one is carried on a gathering tide of motivation or desire; one is pushed from within and pulled from without. There is no moment when you are perfectly free to jump or not. Your emotions have softened you up and made you ready for the decision. If your emotions weren't ready for this, you probably couldn't make it happen by cold logic. The sweep of volition that draws you into this is abysmal.

You leap--that is, give yourself to the womb, enter a process you must feel your way through. It can no longer be your will alone, with an end you determine. You are riding currents now; you are responding to chaotic currents in a system where other agents may be acting. You adjust yourself, and the other forces come into adjustment with you. The depth to which you can adjust is limited at first: there are only a few parameters you can tweak. Later, you adjust in ways that draw you into grander currents: this is the

penetration of Xun that carries your life-force deeper into the spiral harmony. For one who has not entered the current, this abyss threatens to swallow your prefabricated purposes. The theme of the abyss comes from the Xun trigram we are heading toward.

Fifth Yang: "Flying dragon in the heavens. It furthers to see the great man."

Creative strength is in its element. If you were a mud dragon, you could not even imagine flying. It is because you know about this element that you can fly there. You and the element become one. This is where the life-force proves itself by inhabiting a self-defined realm. The songbird proves its claim to a patch of woodland by making it resound with song. A musician like Bach transforms sound into a medium that he inhabits and moves in.

Throughout the *Yijing*, the fifth place, more than any other place, is described as a "position". For instance, Fifth Yang of #45 says, "Gathering will have its [proper] position..." The "Treatise on the Judgment" of #10 says (regarding Fifth Yang), "Owing to his brilliance, he treads the divine position without feeling unworthy." More often than not the fifth place is the line that represents the thrust of a hexagram's meaning. For each situation there is a realm of thought and feeling, and the fifth place surveys that realm. The principle of visualizing a realm in order to traverse it is suggested by the upper trigram changing to Li.

The fifth line in #1 is the masterful expression of creative activity. Thus it shows itself in a medium where it moves freely, worthy of its own status as a wondrous beast. In Second Yang it is fighting or laboring against the backdrop of a field. In Third Yang it is an official under duress. In Fourth Yang, its hesitant plunge may not be graceful at first. But at Fifth Yang, it is the energy coursing through things that can finally show itself as a pure, coherent wave.

If we think of realms of human activity being defined by power relations, then Fifth Yang is where power is exercised in the most unimpeded fashion. So naturally the dragon in heaven is treated by almost every traditional commentator as an image of an emperor.

Top Yang: "The high-flying dragon has regrets."

I agree with Wang Fuzhi that this line has been much maligned. The "overreaching dragon" supposedly will have cause for regret. Why not look on this as a dragon that has tested the limits? With its limitlessly expansive energy that tests all possibilities, it does what Qian's virtue does by nature. That does not necessarily mean it is arrogant. Let us call it an envelope-pushing dragon. And yes, it will have cause for regret. It got too near the edge, but maybe it can still make the transition to #43, Breakthrough. If it gets stuck pushing along an extreme vector, it will be consumed by regret. Feeling a certain amount of regret is inevitable before one can really break through. And breaking through is not Qian's isolated victory. Breakthrough comes because Qian, having come to fullness, enters once again into interchange with Kun.

If Qian is really over-reaching, it will suffer a similar fate to Top Yang in #36. If it hurtles onward, oblivious to regret, we will see it only by the light of its dwindling. A dragon should never streak about the heavens exposed, without hiding part of its length in clouds. If the dragon attempts to refine itself into pure, mono-polar potency, it will lose its power of interchange with supporting forces. It will break the circle that lets the power of heaven operate in the natural world.

The Ming commentator Jiao Hong bravely (and perhaps blasphemously) describes this kind of dragon in his book *Yi quan*: After such a dragon falls to earth, we will find that it is not a dragon after all, but only a shriveled salamander.