



NOTHING QUITE LIKE IT



Ni, 泥, simply means 'mud' – soil, putty, to daub with plaster. It's the clay that was baked into bricks and tiles.

I normally look for how a word is used in the Book of Songs, or the Book of Rites, but *ni* doesn't appear anywhere in either of them. I suppose it's not a very poetic or elevated substance (at least, it wasn't, before Flanders and Swann). But oracles have to be more down to earth, and mud appears three times in the Yi:

*'Waiting in the mud
Invites the arrival of robbers.'*

5.3 to 60

'The well is muddy, no drinking.'



Old well, no birds.'

48.1 to 5

'Shock, and then mud.' 51.4 to 24

51.4 to 24

One noteworthy thing these three lines have in common: none contains an omen, or even any explicit advice. It actually seems less and less clear what – if anything – you should do about the mud. Get out of the bog, surely. Renovate the well... unless you need to dig a new one? And the mud after a shock doesn't even suggest a response – it just is what it is. And as far as I can see, the three lines don't 'bake' together into a tidy structure or coherent message: they just stay muddily indeterminate.

Here they are line by line...

5.3

'Waiting in the mud invites the arrival of robbers.'

As a small child, I once wandered into the middle of a muddy paddock and got stuck. I only managed to escape in the end by leaving my boots behind me. (Dad must have had to retrieve them later.) So I have an idea of the *consistency* of this line – deep and positively gluey, offering no traction. Sitting here is asking for trouble: the commentary on the line (*xiaoxiang*) says we're 'inviting the robbers ourselves.'



In ancient China, war was ritualised, and it was against the chivalric code to attack your opponent while his chariot was stuck in the mud. ([See this story.](#)) So you might be able to wait in the mud quite safely – until robbers arrive, who by definition don't observe the rules. If you stay vulnerable, someone or something will be along sooner or later to take advantage.

Waiting with Measure

This line points to Hexagram 60, Measuring or Limiting, a hexagram of contracts and shared agreements. That can point both to the fact that you need limits – even just a time limit to how long you'll wait in the mud before you leave your chariot and/or wellies behind and start walking – and to the risks of waiting in confidence that agreed measures will keep you safe. Mud has no firm 'limits' – no solid edges, nothing where your spinning wheels can find traction – and nor have robbers. 'Bitter measures do not allow constancy,' and sitting in this vulnerable position isn't sustainable.

In readings

Sitting staring at the computer when I'm tired invites time-thieves; a sedentary lifestyle and a toxic diet invite health problems; waiting for him to decide whether to leave his wife is like putting out a 'Please take advantage!' welcome mat; prolonged hospitalization for the elderly invites opportunistic infections.

In all these 5.3 readings, the mud is clearly an unhealthy place to be stuck, even if it's more often inertia than obstinacy keeping us here. We're in dire need of 'measure' – routine, time limits or personal boundaries – and firm ground to stand on, but from down here, up to our axles in the mire and sinking deeper the longer we wait, it can be hard to get that kind of overview.



48.1

*'The well is muddy, no drinking.
Old well, no birds.'*

To me, this line sounds utterly melancholy. 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful,' said Beckett. 'Old well, no birds,' said Yi. (The 'coming and going' was in 48's Oracle!) The commentary on the line has the same atmosphere:

'One does not drink the mud of the well: it is too far down. No animals come to an old well: time forsakes it.'

Wilhelm/Baynes Book III

[Bradford Hatcher](#), who – unusually among Yijing commentators – also had experience digging wells, said that this indicated drought, and the best time to repair and dig out the well. Or maybe the water table has shifted and we need to dig a new well elsewhere. But in any case, there's no point just waiting for things to change: you will have to do something about it.

The Well Waiting

Of course, this line points – precisely – to Waiting. In a way, its relationship to its *zhi gua* is a bit like that of 5.3. There, you could say waiting in the bog is a sign of over-reliance on Measure (unspoken agreements), but also that it really *needs* Measure (setting boundaries and limits) to get free.

Here, the Well itself is Waiting, as if in suspended animation. Responding with more Waiting,



in the sense of passivity, is not going to help – but the more active sense of Hexagram 5, the positive expectation that inspires you to get digging, is required. The whole complex of possibilities of the *zhi gua* is engaged.

The paired line for this one, 47.6, offers another interesting insight into its mood, and the traps it lays:

*'Confined by trailing creepers,
By unease and discomfort,
Says, "Acting - regret".
With regret, setting forth, good fortune.'*

47.6

If I try anything, says 47.6, it'll go wrong. (Anything I gain, adds 6.6, will soon be lost.) If I dig out this well, it'll only silt up again. Or as the child explains to her mother, there's no point washing because I'll only get dirty again! To which the mother replies, 'Well, then, there's no point giving you any dinner, because you'll only get hungry again!'

In other words, this line is the bottom, the lowest ebb. This stagnant mud might be the end of years of communal effort. And... it's also line 1, the beginning.

In readings

In readings with this line, there's always melancholia and stasis – fundamentally, *nothing doing*, nothing creative happening. I've seen this refer to mental stasis, like writer's block, and the condition of an elderly person feeling that life is passing them by, and also – very often – to a relationship that's dead in the water and going nowhere, but still with that boggy, sticky quality.



The issue of what to do about it – whether to start digging out the mud from this well, or leave it behind and excavate a new one from scratch – is often paramount, so it's frustrating that the line doesn't offer any advice. True, the oracle of 48 insists that the Well isn't moved; then again, experience suggests that you often do need to look for what you need elsewhere. Go and work somewhere new, get the browser to fetch new files from the server instead of the old copies in the cache, or – yes – leave a relationship behind and move on. There's still a well to build.

51.4

'Shock, and then mud.'

This is the shortest and most enigmatic of these 'mud' lines. 震遂泥 : 'Shock, and-then mud.'

The implication is probably that the shock generates the mud. That's quite possible if you think of 51 as a thunderstorm, but I'm starting to think of it as *volcanic* mud – bubbling with noxious, sulphurous gases. Not only can earthquakes trigger mudslides, but there are mud volcanoes which may erupt after an earthquake.

So while the line has no omen or advice, I think this is mud we'd like to avoid or escape – if we can. The *xiaoxiang* seems to agree:

"Quake comes, so this one gets mired," which means that he shall never shine forth.'

[R.J. Lynn, I Ching](#)



Shock Returning

51.4 changes to Hexagram 24, Returning, which is an optimistic hexagram by definition: return means recovery, renewal or revitalisation. Is there any sign of that in the line, or in our experiences of the line?

If there is, I find it's very well-buried, under a whole lot of mud. Mostly, it feels more like 'the Shock Returns': after the earthquake, the mudslides.

However... 51 isn't *just* about shock; it's also about holding to the sacred ladle, finding continuity and managing to process the experience of dramatic change (in 49/50). I think this line also holds the potential to be 'Shock's Turning Point'. Shock is part of the cycle: the wheel turns, recovery begins. There's mud... to make bricks with, maybe?

After the initial trauma, as the shock fades, our energy starts to come back – only this resurgent energy is muddy, sticky: we get bogged down. The point is that shock's turning point is *difficult*. Pulling free of the trauma, recovering inner balance, changing direction, starting to rebuild – all easier said than done. Which might be why Yi says nothing so glib, but only, 'Shock, and then mud.'

In readings

This line does tend to refer to a time after the first shock, at what might be the turning point if we could only get unstuck. This is when the recovering patient feels more anxious and frustrated than they ever did during the acute phase, or when someone who was the hero of the hour during the emergency can only sit and go over and over their experiences.

(As I write this article, I'm using 'Cast history search' in my [journal](#) to review all my experiences with each line. The entries for 51.4 readings tend to be the longest, because I've written out in



great detail all the things I am Not Saying to someone I'm annoyed with! And I seem to have been quite incapable of thinking about the reading, or anything else much at all, until I'd rehearsed all that at some length.)

Wang Bi's commentary on this line grabs my attention:

'Fourth Yang is located in the midst of the yin and, finding itself as it does here at a time fraught with fear, it becomes the ruler of all the yin lines. As such one here should bravely assert himself in order to bring security to all. But if such a one were to suffer Quake himself, he would fall into difficulties. If one were to tread this path of unrighteousness and fail to ward off fear and instead make others provide for his own security, his virtue would "never shine forth".'

[R.J. Lynn, I Ching](#)

So he's saying the issue here, the emotion we might get mired in, is *fear*, and the particular way we get stuck is by looking to outside sources for security instead of finding courage. (A yang line between yin lines is reminiscent of the trigram *kan*, after all.) I don't believe this is *always* the case with this line, but I can think of a few readings where this was spot on: a tennis player paralysed by fright and unable to access her talent; someone incapacitated by chronic anxiety.

More generally, I think the mud here is made of all the emotional reactions to shock – to a reality that's not at all what you anticipated, the ground failing to be underfoot where it should have been. When we say, 'I survived, but I'm still in shock,' this is the line we mean. The mud might contain fear, anger, guilt, resentments... the kind of muck that can keep us bogged down for years.



And finally

If you don't understand the title of this post, you need firstly to think of all the rhymes you can for 'hippopotamus', and then [watch this](#).

