

HEAVEN IS ROUND

New Perspectives on Wuxing 五行



ISSUE ONE

RULES OF CONDUCT AT A CROSSROADS

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Alice Kemp-Welch

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Preface

The best-known translation of *wuxing* 五行 is the Five Elements. Chosen by missionaries four centuries ago it is regarded as inaccurate nowadays. Modern alternatives include the Five Processes, Agents, and Phases but there is no one-size-fits-all translation that suits every stage of the theory's development. *Wu* 五 means five, no problems there, but what does the character, *xing* 行 actually mean?

As with other Chinese characters it can mean different things in different contexts: to take a step, to go, to proceed, to travel, and how you do things - your conduct. It can also mean a line or row such as a line of characters or row of shops. When these meanings are juxtaposed a picture emerges of how we act within a greater order. A grand dance of cosmic harmony? All human action is gracefully aligned to earthly and heavenly cycles. Or restrictive social conduct? Step out of line and you'll be acting out of order.

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Correspondence to: alice@heavenisround.com

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RULES OF CONDUCT AT A CROSSROADS

Unearthing the Oracle Bones

During the late 19th century, in a region of Henan Province called Anyang, farmers kept finding old bones in their fields. They sold them to pharmacists who ground them into powder to use in remedies. These ‘dragon bones’ were believed to be fossils that had medicinal powers, a long-established tradition in Chinese medicine. I suppose it would be like being prescribed dinosaur bone as a cure for osteoporosis.¹



In 1899, the bones caught the eye of Wang Yirong, a director of the Imperial Academy, the traditional seat of learning for all aspiring young civil servants. The story goes that he needed medicine for a fever. A pharmacy provided a packet of ‘dragon bones’, ready to be ground, when he and a friend noticed there were markings on the bones that looked uncannily like inscriptions on antique bronze vessels.²

Wang Yirong 1845 – 1900

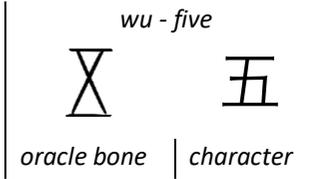
The bones were in fact just over three thousand years old, hardly worthy of the status of a Jurassic fossil. Altogether more potent than a medicinal brew the bones were the first hard evidence of the fabled Shang dynasty which had been relegated to the archaeological league tables of 'mere legend'. Further, the markings on the bones turned out to be the earliest known source of Chinese writing.³

After being intensively studied they were renamed 'oracle bones' because their original purpose had been for divination. Flat wide bones such as the shoulder blade of cattle or plastron (underbelly) of turtles had been used as writing tablets. Hot metal rods were inserted into the bones until they cracked. The piercing sound of the crack was not the squeals of animal spirits decrying endless human exploitation; no, it was a communiqué from the ancestors of the Shang king. Divination was used to ensure that the king's plans to do battle or carry out a sacrifice accorded with the wishes of his deceased superiors, and so the forces of fortune would be with him. The sound of the crack and its resulting pattern was seen as their response. This sacred communion between the living and the dead was duly inscribed onto the bone itself.⁴

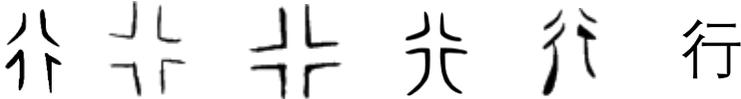
It is a strange twist of fate that one of China's first dynasties, the Shang, was being unearthed while its last, the Qing, was crumbling amid internal political tension that were further exacerbated by the looming presence of foreign powers. The last emperor of China, Puyi, was but six years old when he abdicated in 1912 just when the oracle bones' role in Chinese history was being deciphered. The Imperial Academy closed its doors in 1905 after many centuries of service.

While Puyi was divested of his robes as China's last Son of Heaven, scholars and antique dealers rushed to acquire the souvenirs of ancient China. Would the prescient powers of the bones lend weight to China's determination to remain a sovereign nation? Or would these priceless remains of antiquity be carved up as spoils alongside the country itself? As for Wang Yirong, he found himself caught up on the wrong side of the Boxer Rebellion (an anti-western uprising). When an international force occupied Beijing, he and his family committed suicide.

Both *wu* and *xing* are found on the oracle bones but not together as *wuxing*; that would take another thousand years to unfold. *Wu* was depicted as a diagonal cross and *xing* as a crossroads.



xing – to go, to act, take a step, proceed, travel, line, row



oracle bone | variations c. 1000 – 200 BCE ⁵ | character

The image was probably based on the intersecting thoroughfares of settlements that ran north to south and east to west. People would have proceeded along them with their animals, goods, and carts in tow.



But if a pig escaped its tether and ran off upsetting other people’s apple carts, the trail of trotters that led to the tearaway hog would have been all over the place. In other words, it is all very well to picture an orderly pathway along which to proceed, but complications can set in as soon as you set off.⁶

Divination is used to identify circumstances conducive to proceed. The Shang royal ancestors whose missives resounded from the cracked underbelly of turtles were believed to judge whether the king’s plans should go ahead or not. They had the power to clear a spiritual pathway for his worldly endeavours like the Red Sea being parted for Moses. All thoroughfares were cleared of runaway pigs and rotten fruit before the king and his entourage processed along them.

Ensuring that a course of action proceeds smoothly involves not only deciding when to act but also how to act - your conduct. The *Yijing* (I Ching 易經) offers counsel on attitude as much as on action. How you conduct yourself, your behaviour, is another meaning of *xing*. Conduct can imply how you carry yourself, your gait, as well as how you carry out a set of actions such as conducting a sacrifice. Implicit is the impact of your conduct on others such as people you pass on the street. If the pig owner set off too hastily, and did not secure his boar, perhaps

he was culpable for the chaos. If the fruit cart was heavily laden and a few ripe pickings fell off, inducing the pig to pull away, its owner has to accept some responsibility. Standing at the crossroads of two lines of intent how do both parties proceed? This question is an extrapolation not a direct meaning of the character, *xing* 行, but once you take a step or initiate an action, sooner or later, you are bound to cross paths with a person or a pig doing likewise. Before proceeding further, however, I would like to offer a simple guide to Chinese characters.

A Word on Words

Humans have been busy chatting away to each other since time immemorial, yet the act of writing is a mere five thousand years old. The challenge for all early writing systems was how to convey thousands of spoken words through some form of visual representation. Maybe start with a few and build it up? It is perhaps not surprising that writing was initially used to make brief statements about who owed what to whom or which ancestor received what sacrifice. Epics were a later project.⁷

Writing evolved out of pictographs: if you want to depict a cart draw a box with wheels. Drawing is a time-consuming activity, however, especially carving inscriptions onto a hard surface like bone. As writing slowly adopted a wider remit than documenting ancestral consultations the pictographs morphed into abstract lines that were easier to produce at speed. On the oracle bones a pig resembles an animal but the graphic trail of trotters led to a series of lines that resemble the fat on a streaky bacon rasher.⁸

While pigs and carts are



not too hard to depict, if you were to write in preparation for a court hearing - 'Mr Li's pig upset Mrs Wang's overloaded apple cart at a busy street junction last Thursday afternoon and both parties claim it was not their fault' - other types of words need visual representation (let alone the claimants' need for legal representation). All early writing systems developed similar solutions to limit a potentially burgeoning number of visual mnemonics.

First, pictographs of tangible objects such as plants and animals were used to write words that sounded alike but were harder to depict. For example, wheat and ‘to come’ were pronounced in a similar way, so the wheat pictograph was borrowed to write ‘to come’. In English you might draw a figure on a broomstick between two clauses. Words with a similar meaning could likewise double up: the pictograph for an eye was used to represent the verb, ‘to see’, for example. All very well so long as the context was clear but confusion could arise in phrases such as ‘the wheat has come’, ‘which witch is which’, or ‘I spy with my little eye’. How to distinguish a variety of words while not letting the number of graphs (signs) proliferate? ⁹

One option was for words with a similar meaning to share the

<i>water</i>	<i>ocean</i>	<i>pool</i>	<i>river</i>	<i>excite</i>	same graph. Droplets of water appear in the words for ocean, pool, river, to overflow (see p. 8) and also to excite, arouse, or incite (stir up trouble).
氵	洋	池	河	激	
<i>graph</i>	<i>yáng</i>	<i>chí</i>	<i>hé</i>	<i>jī</i>	

The other option was for words that

sounded similar to use the same graph. The word for a male pig in archaic Chinese sounded like the word for a home or family. Add a roof over the pig to denote a home (not a pigsty unless no one bothered to tidy up recently).

<i>roof</i>	<i>family / home</i>	<i>male pig</i>
宀	家	豕
<i>graph</i>	<i>oracle bone</i>	<i>characters – jiā (arch. kae)</i>

Letters are also graphs (visual signs)

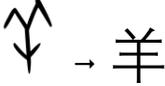
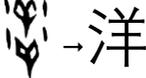
WATER	
<i>archaic character</i>	氵
<i>modern character</i>	水
<i>graph</i>	洋

that represent sounds (ABC) but most have no meaning until they are combined with other letters to form words (abacus). Whereas most graphs of Chinese characters are in fact words (pig + roof = family). I use *character* to denote the word itself and *graph* when that word is a component of another character. Graphs are

compressed or abbreviated forms of their requisite character which can be written snugly next to other graphs.

Simple characters have one graphic component. They are mostly ancient common words that were once pictographs. The sun, moon, fire, water, person, pig are all examples. Their requisite graphs are then used to form compound characters. While some compound characters have four or five graphs the majority have two: the *semantic* graph is the clue for what the word means and the *phonetic* graph is the clue for how to say it. They are the left and right (ocean), top and bottom (family), or inside and outside (see p. 8) parts of a character respectively.

In some cases the phonetic graph also reflects the meaning of a word. While a grunting pig is the phonetic clue for the sound of home (or family meal times?) pigs were part of family life in China long before writing was invented.¹¹ In other cases the phonetic graph is arbitrary. For example, *yáng* 洋 means an ocean, vastness (i.e. beyond a horizon),

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>sheep</i></p> 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>ocean, vast, overseas,¹⁰</i></p> 	<p>a foreign overseas origin, and an archaic meaning is a state of ease akin to the phrase, oceanic bliss. The left graph is water and right graph is a sheep. The sheep does not convey the oceanic bliss of finally getting off to sleep after counting vast flocks stretching over the hills and far away; it is a plain old sheep that is also pronounced <i>yáng</i>.¹²</p>
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This arbitrary borrowing of one word to convey the sound of another dates back to the oracle bones. The process continues today as characters are chosen to convey a vast array of words with overseas origins such as hamburger, New York, and chocolate. The meaning of the character is generally irrelevant; they simply sound close enough to those foreign words to represent them.

A famous phonetic hurdle for the foreigners from overseas is that if you use the wrong tone you might say the wrong word. In Shang times all words were one syllable. From around 800 BCE words of two or more characters appeared over the horizon of antiquity, but each character is still spoken as one syllable.¹³ Unfortunately for the bleating foreigners the tone of a syllable varies. Despite my best efforts to say “every day” (*měi tiān* 每天) my Chinese friend looked concerned and replied, “You have no money?” (*méi qián* 没钱).

In Mandarin, the most widely-spoken variant of Chinese, there are four principal tones:

Tone 1 - a steady high pitch reminiscent of the Sound of Music: ‘Rāy a drop of golden sūn.’

Tone 2 - short rising tone like a question: Húh? Whát?

Tone 3 - a long tone that falls in pitch and rises again. In English this tone sounds doubtful or sardonic: Hǔm, I sée, sǔre.

Tone 4 - a short sharp drop like a warning: Nò, dòn’t, stòp.

Whenever I introduce a new word I’ll add the tone marks and traditional character but not necessarily thereafter.¹⁴

Some writing systems developed a purely phonetic script but Chinese never took that route. However, the Roman alphabet has been adopted to write characters. The first attempt was by Jesuit priests in China four centuries ago. They also bequeathed the Five Elements as a translation of *wuxing*. Wade-Giles, developed in the 19th century, was in standard use but a system called *pinyin* developed in the 1950s is predominant nowadays. I use *pinyin* except for occasional quotes.¹⁵

<i>Wade-Giles</i>	<i>Pinyin</i>	<i>Characters</i>	<i>English</i>
Tao	<i>Dào</i>	道	The Way
I Ching	<i>Yìjīng</i>	易經	Classic of Changes
Tai Chi	<i>Tàiqí</i>	太極	Lit: Great Ultimate

The final word on words is *radical*. English dictionaries list words in alphabetical order from aardvark to zygote. Chinese dictionaries list words under key graphs commonly called radicals. The semantic graph is often (though not always) the radical. For example, family is indexed under ‘roof’ and ocean under ‘water’. This system was first developed two thousand years ago: nearly ten thousand characters were analysed according to their sound, meaning, graphic structure, number of strokes, and duly organised into sections headed by one of these key graphs.¹⁶

Keeping those points in mind let’s return now to *xíng*, 行 pronounced in the 2nd tone - húh? whát? *xíng*?

A phonetic quirk of this character is there are two pronunciations, not only *xíng* but also *háng*, depending on regional variants of Chinese and the context of use. Since the theory of *wuxíng* is rarely referred to as *wuháng*, to keep things simple, I'll use *xíng* throughout.¹⁷

As the crossroads pictograph morphed into abstract strokes the two sides became two graphs that mean to step with each foot. They form a phrase, *chì chù*, which means to walk slowly and unsteadily as if you are recovering from a stroke. *Chi chu* also implies being hesitant or wavering: you proceed falteringly as if the next step is neither easy nor clear. United as one character, as *xíng*, you can proceed apace.

<i>crossroads</i>	<i>take a step with your left foot</i>	<i>take a step with your right foot</i>	<i>walk, go, proceed</i>	<i>walk slowly, hesitate</i>
				
oracle bone → graphs			<i>xíng / háng</i>	<i>chì chù</i>

The two sides of *xíng* are also prised apart when an extra graph is inserted between them. It is the phonetic graph (inside) while *xíng* is the semantic graph (outside). On the oracle bones the graph of person in the middle denoted people moving along thoroughfares as well as to speak or to tell. Written next to the character for a king the phrase meant 'the king says' or 'hail the king'. Let's hope the streets were cleared of upset apple carts before the king made any proclamations.¹⁸

<i>people moving, speak / tell</i>

oracle bone

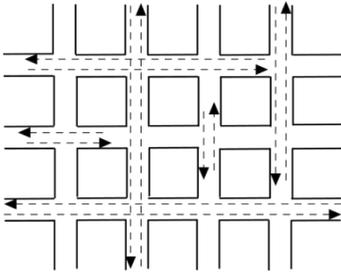
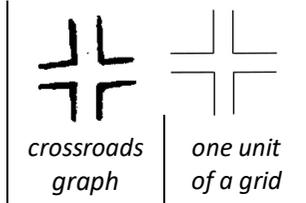
Three radicals fan out from the crossroads: A)

A		the left graph by itself
	<i>get, obtain</i>	
B		a character that combines the left graph with a foot meaning to walk or move (see p. 16);
	<i>walk / move</i>	
C		<i>xíng</i> 行 is the radical for the handful of characters with the 'sandwich structure' above.
	<i>overflow</i>	

The speculative thread begins: *xíng* has a wide range of meanings which must also somehow fan out from the crossroads. Using an ancient pictograph to infer modern meanings is not advisable; nevertheless, I will assume that 'activity on the streets' is a common thread. So let's take to the streets.

Grid Formation

First, picture the crossroads as one unit of a larger grid. Vertical lines run from north to south while horizontal rows run from east to west.

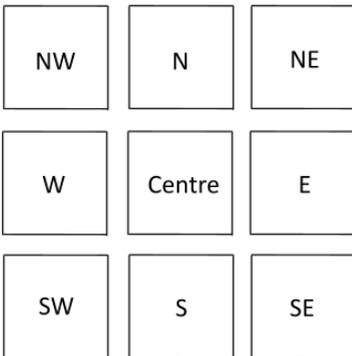


If the grid is made of intersecting thoroughfares, all sorts of people with their animals, goods, and carts would be travelling along them; hence, *xing* as a verb – to take a step, to go, to proceed.

Alternatively the grid may not be filled with people and pigs but characters in a dictionary or data in a spreadsheet; hence, *xing* (or *hang*) as a noun – a line or row. The characters on the right have the ‘sandwich structure’ - *xing* is the semantic graph.

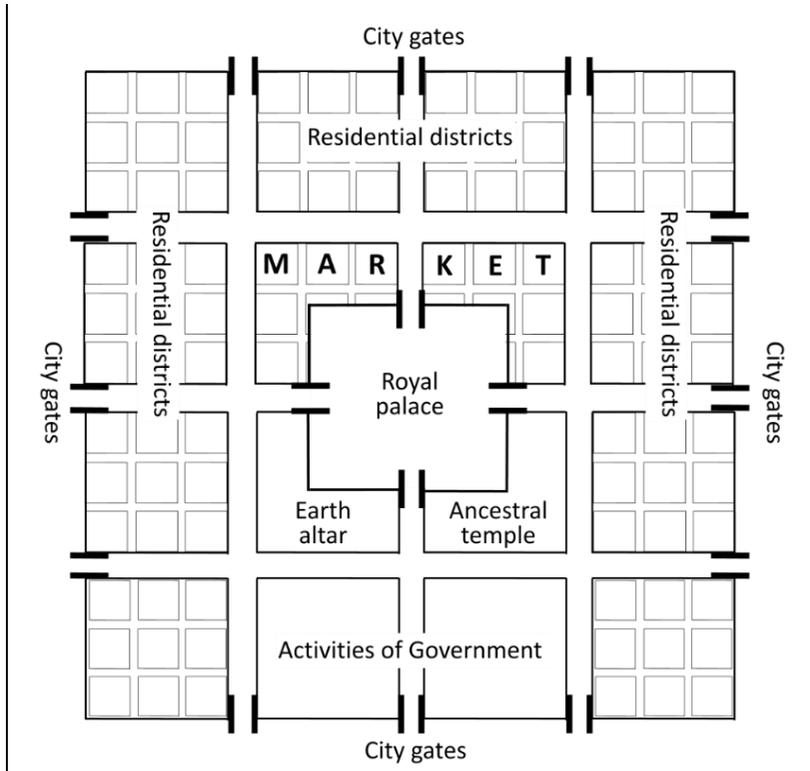


A traditional image of Chinese cosmology is a round heaven and square earth. A planet’s spherical shape may not have been apparent in ancient times, but even modern maps have grid lines. Longitudinal lines



run north to south and latitudinal lines run east to west. A grid of nine squares is a common cosmological motif but a grid structure can grow indefinitely. In early China a super-grid of eighty-one squares was used to convey the size of the earth and its oceanic vistas that would eventually lead to the juncture of heaven and earth where immortals dwelled. Or so it was believed.¹⁹

Closer to home, grids were the basis for urban planning. While a city built in an exact square shape posed topographical challenges, grids suited the layout of districts. Below is an idealised city layout from early China. The ancestral temple and earth altar were urban sacred spaces that linked heaven and earth. Every cell, so to speak, had its place in the grand cosmological scheme of things.²⁰



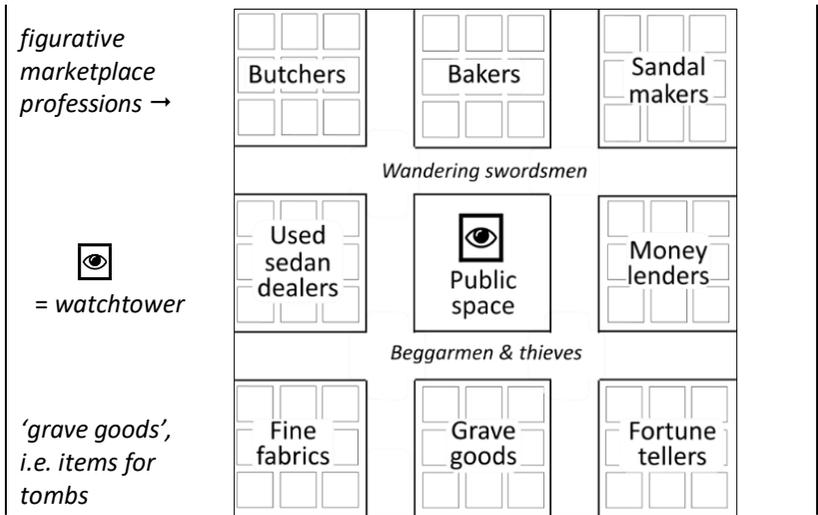
Goings and Doings of the Marketplace

Of these city districts the emblazoned market signage is meant to stand out. The various meanings of *xing* appear to hark back to the hawkers and stall holders of a market flaunting their wares to passers-by with full-throated zeal. Markets had districts for different vendors from fruit sellers to fortune tellers if your financial fortunes were not looking so peachy this year. Their stalls would have been laid out in lines

and rows. Markets also attracted wandering swordsmen adept at cut-throat deals in back alleys looking to earn ready cash as extras in the latest action movie. Following a slight of honour she swings into action swinging into action leaping from roof to roof like an Iron Age practice of parkour. Swiftly slicing a melon into pieces she relishes a juicy bite while idly fending off four foes from four directions.

街 *back alley*
side-street
xiàng

A central square was used for public spectacles, proclamations, rewards, and punishments with live footage of gory dismemberments. A lofty central watchtower was fully stocked with government officials, who ensured that goods were bought and sold on agreed terms and palace coffers benefited while eyeing up a choice cut of their own? The trades below are tongue-in-cheek though not without precedent.²¹



Stall holders not only displayed their wares they also showed off their talents at carving meat, crafting grave goods, and telling fortunes.

街 *peddle your wares, flaunt, dazzle, delude*
xuàn

How much longer do you have to purchase your afterlife tomb ware? Indeed, another meaning of *xing* is to carry out an action but the focus is on skilled execution, not merely marketplace beheadings but any professional or technical skill.

marketplace beheadings but any professional or technical skill.

A skill is a step-by-step series of actions that is learnt in the same tentative manner as taking your first steps. Initial fumbling attempts are slowly honed into a quality of craftsmanship which is so refined that an untrained eye cannot see the discrete steps of a sequence. Even if your craft is to dismember criminals in the public square a certain flair is still on display. A colloquial use of *xing* is to tease a show-off: “Yeh, sŭre, you’re so greät. (see p. 7).”

術	<i>specialist skill</i> <i>craftsmanship</i> <i>technique</i>
shù	

The character also implies circulation and a location of financial transactions – a bank, industry, or trade - where money, goods, and vehicles are moving around. Let’s hope that all financial transactions are accounted for in the orderly lines and rows of a ledger lest shady deals wind up in the back alleys of book-keeping. As a modern counterpart of the crossroads, imagine Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo. Thousands of vehicles and pedestrians traverse it each day, the majority while carrying out their professions. As for IKEA’s marketplace, you are guided through its one-way system but you will brook a great clash of the trolleys if you try to backtrack to find some kitchen gadget that you forgot to pick up.

bank	銀行
	yínháng

As a modern counterpart of the crossroads, imagine Shibuya Crossing in Tokyo. Thousands of vehicles and pedestrians traverse it each day, the majority while carrying out their professions. As for IKEA’s marketplace, you are guided through its one-way system but you will brook a great clash of the trolleys if you try to backtrack to find some kitchen gadget that you forgot to pick up.

industry / trade	行業
	hángyè

industry / trade	行業
	hángyè

In a circular way this brings us back to the pig upsetting the apple cart. The character means a line or row such as lines of text or data, a line of descent or ranks in a family, or a professional line of work. Yet the original depiction has two intersecting lines of activity. If everyone follows standard procedures, rules of the marketplace, ideally there will be no mishaps. Yet the potential for collision reflects a further meaning of the character - your conduct or behaviour. Conduct can just mean how you carry out an action - how you conduct a sacrifice - but the focus on transactions lends itself to a moral dimension of multiple goings and doings. What happens when one line of intent crosses paths with another? Do the parties cross swords? Does one back down and let the other pass? Are they free to go and do as they please? If so, how do interactions operate smoothly?

衝	<i>charge into,</i> <i>butt, collide,</i> <i>run against</i> ²²
chōng	

Moral conduct

A modern use of *xing* is to translate 'OK'. If someone asks how you are doing you might say, "I'm OK"; your life is proceeding well or at least not too badly. Another use is to agree to a plan of action. To say "OK" suggests that you think a plan is workable, you are happy to be involved, or you agree to what someone else intends to do. The phrase has the feel of buying into something: it is not OK to overcharge for shoddy goods or to come home late without texting first.

To go, to proceed, to act, to carry out with an underlying theme of direction and alignment: if your action is along the right lines then it is OK, you can go ahead. Various English idioms make the link between action, direction, and socially appropriate behaviour such as toeing the line, going straight, back on track, on the right lines, or on the straight and narrow. Whereas inappropriate behaviour is described as speaking out of turn, acting out of order, or going off the rails.

In this sense we can bring in other activities of the marketplace: regulations, supervisory bodies, rewards, and punishments. Each family, club, professional body, religious order, or country has a set of rules for how to behave that are explicit and also implicit. Let's say all the artisans working in the same quarters of a market share a code of conduct like a medieval guild. If your actions fall out of alignment with those codes of conduct you could be accused of professional misconduct, anti-social behaviour, disloyalty, letting the side down, or even heresy. Picture a climbing plant tied to a lattice. You can grow in and out of the lattice but if you start growing too many offshoots you are likely to get pruned. Rules are the lattice, the social grid along which we are each expected to move and act. If your actions go out of step with those rules, or you do something out of order in relation to the codes of your club, clan, or country, you could be teased, ostracised, ignored, imprisoned, executed, or greatly revered as an innovative pioneer who forges new pathways.

Criminals have their freedom of movement and social interaction curtailed. They are confined or dismembered. Henceforth they must toe the line and that line can be pretty narrow, especially if their toes have

been removed. Someone has to decide, according to law or established customs, how an offender should be punished. To ensure a fair decision the scruples of those passing judgement is of paramount importance.

Ironically, there was another *wuxing* in circulation in early China which had no ostensible link to its natural counterpart. The Five Conducts were qualities of action

衙 *public office, e.g. magistrate's court*²³
yá

and awareness to be honed by officials such as magistrates. If you are neither too lenient nor too exacting, follow ritual protocol at all times, and your actions are imbued with wisdom you will become a model of sagacity whose judgements accord with Heaven itself.²⁴

Marketplace transactions were no doubt among the cases judged, but our moral heckles are easily raised by any raw deal. Our antennae for fairness affect all social exchanges; transactions in the marketplace simply highlight the constant trade-offs of daily life. Sticking to your side of the bargain is key to your integrity in the eyes

衍 *pleased, satisfied open, upfront, frank, forthright*
kàn

衡 *judge, measure, even, balanced*
héng

of others. If

a balance can be found between what we give and receive, at home or at work, it is mutually satisfying and builds bonds.

Back in Europe, the moral connotation of conduct is dated to the early 18th century. Before then conduct implied safe passage. To arrive in good conduct meant that you had reached your destination without getting lost or being attacked by highwaymen. In Latin *conducere* means to lead or guide. A bus conductor ensures safe passage while watching out for misconduct. Music conductors use highly-skilled arm-waving to guide an orchestra through a passage of music. Air traffic controllers wave their arms when the stress levels become unbearable.

A leader's role is also to ensure safe passage. A master craftsman leads apprentices through a step-by-step sequence of learning a skill. A chief executive leads a business through the ups and downs of economic change. Should they fail to toe the line they set out for others to follow, whether shoddy workmanship or dubious financial transactions, we can lose trust and start to look elsewhere for guidance.

Leading the Way

One of the most evocative words of Chinese philosophy is *dào* - the Way. As in English, the way is a path as well as knowhow – a way of doing something. Both *xing* and *dao* thus mean to proceed along a path and a procedure as skilled action. The Way of Archery, Tea, Calligraphy, or a surgical operation are learned slowly, one step at a time, until the finely-crafted movements meld into a precision performance. If not, the archery class may result in a casualty in the operating theatre. Oops.

There is a good reason why the two words are so closely related.

<p>dào - way</p>  <p>archaic modern</p>	<p>Archaic characters of <i>dao</i> also had the 'sandwich structure': in this case the graph for a head is in the centre. Indeed, <i>dao</i> is likely derived from the person/crossroads character (see p. 8). A hand or foot is sometimes added below the head.²⁵</p>
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The head is the phonetic graph (inside) while *xing* is the semantic graph, but the head likely reflects the meaning of *dao* as well. As in English a head is not only a physical head but also the head of

head (shǒu) is depicted as an eye and eyebrow

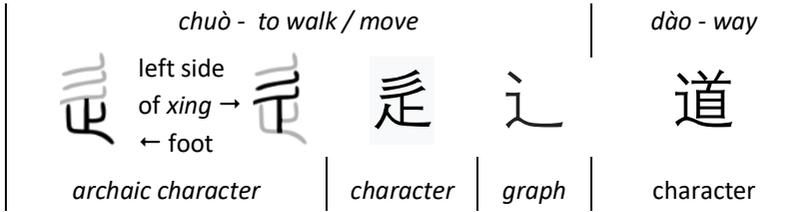


archaic | modern

<p>導</p> <p>lead, guide, conduct</p> <p>dǎo</p>	<p>an organisation. If the graph for a hand is added below <i>dao</i> becomes a verb - to lead or guide. You follow the Way, the example of action and direction set by your head.²⁶</p>
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In Japanese, the graph for a head also means a neck. Your head turns this way and that to decide which way to go. Leaders need the flexibility to adjust direction while still remaining focused on overall objectives. Blinkered leaders with stiff necks can see only one course of action. Dithering leaders look all around but then hesitate to decide which course of action to take. Their leadership style has an indecisive *chi chu* manner. Both would struggle to lead the Way.²⁷

As the character transformed over time the head graph shifted to the right and the left side of *xing* melded with the graph for a foot to become the radical, *chuò* 辵, that means to walk (see also p.8).



In its philosophical guise *dao* became synonymous with the very origins of the cosmos. If all phenomena is borne out of one source, *Dao*, there must be an underlying unity to all activity no matter how diverse its manifestations. Even at a point of exchange like buying and selling in the marketplace there are proper channels, let's call them the 'Way of Transactions', that lubricate the encounter so that one line of intent glides fluidly around another, like fish darting here and there, without brooking great clashes of the trolleys.²⁸

This ideal of harmonious interaction was extended to leadership. People would naturally flow or more precisely gravitate towards a ruler or teacher whose exemplary conduct elicits order without force. If you follow in their footsteps your behaviour will be along the right lines. You will stay on track. Existential dilemmas at the crossroads of life need not happen as these models of sagacity have already provided the signposts. Further, if everyone stays on track there will be no accidents or traffic jams. The grid is set out and it guides activity; you simply follow the Way.

Yet the evocative ideal of a unified *Dao* arose at a time of conflict in early China (c. 480 – 220 BCE). There were not only warring states but also warring ideas and ideals whose proponents naturally believed that their Way was the correct one. They mocked the lesser ways of their intellectual rivals, in part, to gain a hearing with rulers who were usually more interested in expedient ways and means.²⁹

The tension of different ways can lead to heated exchanges but it also stimulates novelty, new courses of action that no one person or

	<i>amplify, develop, overflow</i>
<i>yǎn</i>	

party could have envisaged alone. If the graph for water is in the centre this character means to amplify, develop, evolve, overrun, or overflow. In short, going a step further or a step too far. Of course, the degree of amplification can run away with itself, like positive feedback on a sound system, but it can also result in a more complex level of order.

States adopted the successful methods of allies and enemies, not only military strategies but also new systems of social and economic organisation. Networks of roads and waterways enabled the circulation of commerce, armaments, and emissaries as well as ideas and ideals. It was in this context and along those routes that the theory of *wuxing* and its moral counterpart began to circulate.

Returning to the marketplace the interplay of competition and cooperation can forge new paths. If a stall holder starts selling a popular new product the existing network of transactions may have to adjust to new channels of supply and demand. That is where things are flowing; everyone is heading to one stall not another. This stall holder is leading the way, so to speak. As a result, the footfall of the market can shift its patterns and if the change is enduring the whole market layout may be updated. Hence, action and the pathway along which action takes place can be mutually formative. There is neither wholly order, the grid is not fixed, nor wholly chaos, activity without pathways.

The same is true for regulations that guide the conduct of traders. In the modern-day marketplace some argue that supply and demand is most efficient when left to self-regulate. Too many rules, too rigid a grid, can hinder innovation and props up less viable economic activity. That is until greed gets the better of scruples resulting in such eye-watering bailouts that the creed of minimal state intervention falls flat on its face. The danger of positive feedback is its negative consequences.

If there are no exorbitant profits, production will be well organised, expenditures will be properly controlled. Unless there is negligence there will be no failure. Therefore, it is said that the marketplace may know order or disorder, abundance or scarcity. However, it is incapable of bringing about abundance or scarcity on its own. There is a proper way to manage markets and production.³⁰

Innovation implies risk and experiment while regulations evoke caution and holding back. Of course, rules and laws come out of lessons learnt, risks that backfired, but a far-sighted leader or legislator will promote innovative regulations, especially if it is greed that needs to be checked rather than risk itself.

Crossroads of Heaven

The theory of *wuxing* developed as a framework to align human action within a vast grid of cosmic interaction that included the activity of the natural world, the course of the stars, and the invisible goings and doings of spirits. Harmony will prevail so long as human action toes the line, especially the actions of leaders and people close to them. If not, the equilibrium of cosmic order can go awry. If the palace ladies dressed

天衢

tiān qú

‘Crossroads of Heaven’
- a celestial junction in
Scorpio

out of season all sorts of foreboding weather fronts would begin to loom ominously on the horizon. Following the logic of this venerable theory we can confidently claim that climate change is caused by celebrities’ fashion faux pas on the red carpet.³¹

The fortune-teller sitting in a discreet corner of the marketplace divined how her clients could navigate safe passage through this vast cosmological grid. Avoiding accidents and traffic jams needed a psychic satnav: “In a hundred days turn right at the next crossroads of life to encounter good fortune ... oops... missed the turning ... recalculating.”

In order to weigh up one future probability against another the ancient art of interpreting cracks on dead turtles has waned in favour of interpreting algorithms. Yet the quest to survive and thrive still holds us in thrall to what might happen, all the while keeping an eye out for the sunnier side of life. The path ahead may be just a little too sunny.

Front Cover

Photograph of the sun's corona: [Nasa Image Library](#)

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Unearthing the Oracle Bones

1 - 4

¹ The map is a modification of the following source:

[Dagvadorj](#), "[Atlas Yuan Minimal Edition](#)" (13 Nov 2007) licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

² Wang Yirong was not the only person to recognise the inscriptions but the discovery has come to be associated with him.

Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 177.

³ The earliest oracle bone inscriptions are dated to c. 1200 BCE.

William G. Boltz, "[Early Chinese Writing](#)" *World Archaeology* 17, no. 3 (February 1986): 420.

⁴ Two species of fresh-water turtles were a common source of bones

Adam Craig Schwartz, *The Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Huayang-Zhuang East* (Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton 2019), 9 - 10

⁵ Additional *xing* graphs sourced from [Sinica Database](#).

A Word on Words

4 - 8

⁶ Upsetting the apple cart' is an English idiom but apples have been cultivated in China for 2000 years so an apple cart is not unreasonable.

Luo Gui-Han, "[The Cultivation History of Apple in China](#)", *Journal of Beijing Forestry University* 13, No. 2, (June 2014): 15.

⁷ The oldest known writing is Sumerian Cuneiform dating to c. 3500 BC in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). Clay tablets recorded statements about economic transactions. For an entertaining overview, watch:

[Irving Finkel](#), [Cracking Ancient Codes: Cuneiform writing, 24 July 2019](#), [The Royal Institution](#)

⁸ Aside from the pictographs some graphs were non-representational arbitrary signs from the outset such as number five.

Jerry Norman, *Chinese*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 60.

⁹ For a more detailed account of early writing systems see Boltz:
William G. Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing”, 426 – 429.

¹⁰ Oracle script for ocean: [Chinese Etymology](#)

¹¹ The roof over the pig was indeed a depiction of family life because in ancient times people enclosed pigs in pens and built toilets over them. No wonder the pigs wanted to escape their tethers!

Brian Lander, [The King’s Harvest, A Political Ecology of China from the First Farmers to the First Empire](#), (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 121.

¹² Paul W. Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2017), 532.

¹³ William G. Boltz, *The Origins and Development of the Early Chinese Writing System*, (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1994), 171.

¹⁴ Some characters have a simplified form nowadays. However, since I frequently refer to historical settings I will use traditional characters.

¹⁵ For an exposition as to why the Chinese language did not develop an alphabet or syllabary, see,

William G. Boltz, *The Origins and Development of the Early Chinese Writing System*, 168 – 177.

¹⁶ The choice of *radical* is another Jesuit legacy. In Latin languages radical implies the root of a word before it is modified by inflections (tense, case, gender, etc.). Since Chinese does not have inflections nor does it have radicals in that sense, and the indexing graphs do not always reflect the etymological root of a word. The first Chinese dictionary to develop a system of classifying characters was the *Shuowen Jiezi* compiled by Xu Shen (c. 58 – 148 CE). The indexing graphs were called *bùshǒu* 部首 which means ‘section headers’. Scholars call them *determinatives* or *classifiers*.

William G. Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing”, 428.
Norman, Chinese, 67 – 69.

¹⁷ The exact pronunciations of *xing* and *hang* also vary in regional speech.

¹⁸ When this character meant to speak or tell the graph for a mouth, 口 *kǒu*, was sometimes added below the person.

Jinhua Jia, “[Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the Laozi](#),” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series, 19, No. 4 (October 2009): 475 – 476.

Grid Formation**9 - 10**

¹⁹ For the importance of grids in Chinese cosmology, see:

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 245 – 250.

²⁰ This layout of a capital city is adapted from a diagram by Corradini based on descriptions in the *Kao Gong Ji* (Records of the Scrutiny of Crafts) chapter of the *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou). He notes that it is an idealised layout and ‘archaeological excavations have not revealed the existence of any capital built according to the Zhou Li’.

Piero Corradini, “Ancient China’s “Ming Tang” 明堂 Between Reality and Legend”, *Rivista degli studi orientali*, 69, Fasc. 1/2, (1995): 175 - 176.

Goings and Doings of the Marketplace**10 - 12**

²¹ I have drawn on Lewis’ description of market activities.

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, 160 – 169.

²² This meaning is especially relevant to sieges, see also n. 28

Moral Conduct**13 - 14**

²³ One interpretation of this character 衙 is ‘to arrange in proper order, for audience with a magistrate’.

Paul W. Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 524.

²⁴ I have paraphrased these ‘moral’ *wuxing* which Csikszentmihalyi translates as Five Kinds of Action: benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom, and sagacity.

Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue, Ethics and the Body in Early China*, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 221.

Leading the Way**15 - 17**

²⁵ Evidence for the link between *dao* and the person/crossroads character is found in the earliest known version of the *Laozi* (*Dao De Jing*, the Way and its Power) found in a tomb in 1993. Its occupant died c. 300 BCE and his afterlife library also contained the text on the ‘moral’ *wuxing*. The first series of verses (Guodian *Laozi* A) use the person/crossroads character to mean *dao* but later verses switch to the standard walk/head character 道.

Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (State University of New York Press, 1997), 67 – 70.

Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu's Tao Te Ching, A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 22. Also, pers. com October 2019

Jinhua Jia, "Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the Laozi," 466 – 467.

²⁶ Jinhua Jia (above) notes that in many archaic Chinese characters the phonetic graph has a significant role in their semantic structure. She cites Peter Boodberg who proposes that *dao* can also mean 'to head, 'to lead' and 'headway'.

Peter A. Boodberg, "Philological Notes on Chapter One of The Lao Tzu", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3/4 (Harvard-Yenching Institute, December 1957), 599.

²⁷ Allan notes that the two characters 道 (way) and 導 (lead or guide) were interchangeable in early texts, and in one case *dao* meant 'to dig a water channel' emphasising its use as a verb as well as a noun.

Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, 68

²⁸ Jinhua Jia's article links *dao* to the deification of the Pole Star as the fount of the cosmos.

Jinhua Jia, "Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the Laozi," 459 – 488.

²⁹ Yet another meaning of *xing*, 行 is soldiers marching in order.

Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 509

³⁰ *Guanzi, Vol 1, Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, 119. Translated by W. Allyn Rickett, copyright © 2001 by Cheng & Tsui Company Inc. Used by permission of Cheng & Tsui Company Inc.

Crossroads of Heaven

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³¹ The meteorological consequences of doing the wrong thing at the wrong time of year is taken from the 'Seasonal Rules' chapter of the *Huananzi*, a weighty tome on the art of ruling compiled at the court of Liu An, King of Huainan, c. 130 – 139 BCE.

The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China, translated and edited by John A. Major et.al., (Columbia University Press, 2010), 173 – 206.