

21

噬嗑 ䷔

(shì kè) Taking a Bite

Biting until your teeth touch. Success. It is effective to apply punishments.

- Nine in the first place: Crooked fetters, a severed foot. [Yet] no blame.
- Six in the second place: Biting into tender meat; a severed nose. No blame.
- Six in the third place: Biting into dried meat; encountering poison. A few dangers but no blame.
- Nine in the fourth place: Biting into dried meat, getting a metal arrowhead. Persisting during difficulties is effective. Good fortune.
- Six in the fifth place: Biting into dried meat, getting poison. Persistence brings danger but no blame.

- **Nine at the top:** Wearing the wooden yoke of a criminal; losing an ear. Misfortune.

Image

Thunder and lightning, the image of biting until the teeth touch. In this way the rulers of the past clarified punishments and adjust the laws.

Thunder and lightning startle us and get the attention of many people in a large area. Biting off a piece of meat is also a visible, decisive act much briefer than the rest of the digestive process, especially in a society where meat was rarely eaten. For these reasons, both are used here as images of the punishments which must occasionally be inflicted by the state in order to deter others from the destructive behaviors that bring destruction to the body of anyone who commits them.

In early China, meat was primarily consumed at the feasts of the elite after the hunting, which was the prerogative of the ruler and his honored guests, and after the sacrifice of animals in religious rituals, where the meat was then shared by the ruler with his highest vassals as an emblem of his entrusting portions of his food-producing lands to them. Preserved meat was highly prized; Confucius accepted it as tuition. Being able to bite into meat can also be seen as a measure of one's good health, strength, and, implicitly, competence.

Similarly, criminal punishments in early China were brief, shocking, and widely visible. Instead of imprisoning criminals for long periods with the hope that they would become penitent, the Chinese usually disfigured and released them. Some of these punishments are mentioned here: cutting off a nose, foot, or ear,

or being forced to wear wrist or ankle irons or a heavy wooden yoke around the neck, burdening the shoulders and making lying down difficult or impossible.

These images are hardly reassuring or encouraging, but they probably refer to occasions when an official was forced to mete out punishments, not to having them inflicted on oneself, since this was rarely done to members of the elite. So, although only one line of the hexagram is actually favorable, only one is completely unfavorable. Maintaining the analogy with the act of taking a bite of meat, the situation described here is one in which you are forced to deal decisively with others' acts of cruelty to others.

Shaughnessy, 146–147, 317–318.

Lynn, 266–272.

Wilhelm/Baynes, 86–89.