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THE EIGHT TRIGRAMS: VARIANTS AND THEIR USES

The trigrams were traditional East Asian symbols, each composed of three straight lines, either solid or broken in the center. Known in China as the *pa kua,* these played a prominent part in Chinese religion, philosophy, and proto-science for more than two thousand years. Taoist priests, sages, and scholars used them extensively in astrology, geomancy, and other forms of divination, as well as in medicine and alchemy, and the trigrams provided motifs for artists and artisans in various media. Taken in pairs, they also composed the hexagrams that formed the basis for divination in the *I-ching.*

VARIOUS TRIGRAM CIRCLES IN OLD CHINA

Usually the trigrams have been presented in either of two circles. One of these the Chinese ascribed to the ancient sage Fu Hsi, and the other to Wen Wang, king of Chou, so the circles are traditionally identified by their names (see fig. 1). Each of these trigram circles developed in an independent evolution, eventually completed sometime before the beginning of the Han dynasty (202 B.C.–A.D. 220).

After the two traditional trigram circles had finally attained their standard forms, both of them were further manipulated in different

This article was written in memory of Daniel S. Dye, who aroused my interest in the trigrams fifty-two years ago in Chengtu. Like other missionaries of that time, he had deep curiosity about them, but little solid information. He also was interested in cross-cultural symbols. I am grateful to Michael Hrynio for computer aid and to Roland David Schaaff for the illustrations.

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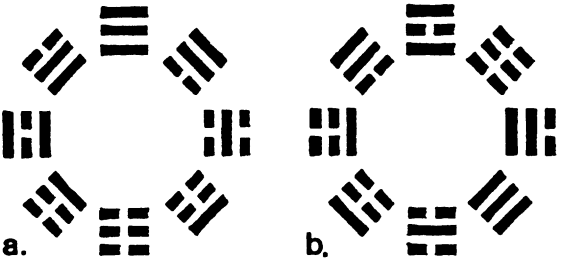

FIG. 1.—The two familiar trigram circles, in their standard forms (type A). *a,* Attributed to Fu Hsi. *b,* Ascribed to Wen Wang.

ways, to produce several different variants. For many centuries the Chinese and their neighbors—in books and charts, patterns on mirrors and protective amulets, and for architectural decorations, etc.—have been using at least three other separate and distinct versions of each of the standard circles. Yet these others have never been mentioned by either Asian or Occidental writers. The Chinese themselves would have taken the variations for granted.

The Wen Wang circle seems to have developed in two different ways, resulting in two separate circles. Actually, each of these was the inverted form of the other, as though it were merely the other one turned inside out. But it appears that this relationship was not immediately noticed, so at first people considered them as independent circles.

Sometime before the beginning of the Han dynasty, the later of these two replaced its predecessor for use in rites and divinations. It thus became the standard one, and the first was relegated to ordinary uses. Therefore we may call the standard one type A; while the earlier one, having lost its status, can be called type B (see figs. 1*b* and 2*b*).

This Wen Wang type B was the earliest openly used trigram circle, displayed on artifacts dating before the Sung (A.D. 960–1279). Until that dynasty, the two now-familiar, standard trigram circles formed part of the long-hidden esoteric lore of Ancient China; they only began to be shown publicly in Sung times. Then they were revealed as "celestial plans," *t'ien-t'u:* being called *hsien t'ien-t'u* and *hou t'ien-t'u,* respectively. For each had been serving as a counterpart or complement to a terrestrial diagram: the Fu Hsi circle with the *Lo-shu,* and the Wen Wang circle with the *Ho-t'u.*[1]

[1] The ancient connection of the *Lo-shu* and the *Ho-t'u* with the two standard trigram circles was described in my article, "Some Early Chinese Symbols of Duality," *History of Religions* 24, no. 3 (1985): 215–54. Further research has shown that, in that,

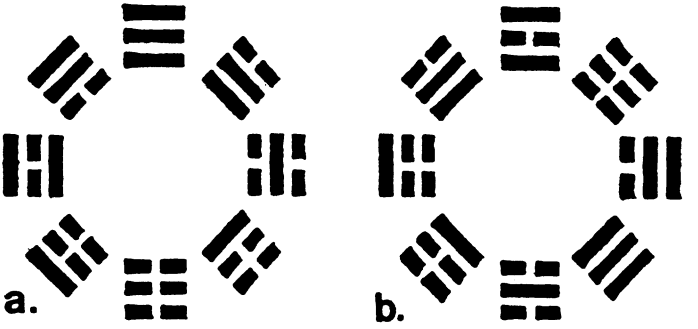

FIG. 2.—Everted forms of the familiar trigram circles (type B). *a*, Fu Hsi. *b*, Wen Wang.

Although people had apparently long considered the Wen Wang type B circle as independent, when they saw the two Wen Wang circles together it became obvious that this type B circle was actually an inverted variant of the standard one. Comparing figures 1 and 2, one can easily see that it is indeed equivalent to the standard circle (type A) turned inside out. For on the latter (fig. 1*b*) the middle trigram on either side of the circle has a broken outer line and a solid inner one; whereas on the second, variant circle (fig. 2*b*) each of these same trigrams has a solid outer line and a broken inner one.

At least by the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644), the Chinese were also using an everted variant of the Fu Hsi circle, too (see fig. 2*a*). By that time, they clearly regarded both type B circles as being primarily just the familiar ones with their trigrams rotated. They frequently used them when they wanted to ensure that the trigrams could easily be recognized from outside their respective circles.

This motive for using type B trigram circles is clearly demonstrated in a book by the Ming scholar Lai Chih-te (1523–1608). Published in 1599 to present his comments about the *I-ching,* this has numerous illustrations showing possible arrangements of the trigrams and hexagrams. Several pictures, intended to explain different meanings for the trigrams in the standard Fu Hsi and Wen Wang circles, show these circles everted, so the reader could more easily see their individual trigrams while reading the comments about them written outside the circle.[2]

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my attempt to describe the development of the trigrams themselves was premature. A more definitive study on their evolution is now in preparation.

[2] Lai Chih-te, *I-ching Lai-chu t'u-chieh* (original title, in 1599, *Chou-i chi-chu*) (Taipei: Sung-li Press, 1971), pp. 553 and 558, for the Fu Hsi type B circles; and pp. 545 and 582 for the Wen Wang type B circles.

Some old Chinese charts prepared for medieval doctors or alchemists showed the Wen Wang type B circle used for this purpose.[3] But this particular circle had many other uses in Old China. From the late T'ang down to the twentieth century, people also decorated the backs of bronze mirrors with it,[4] and they utilized it ornamentally on various kinds of circular objects, such as lids of boxes and the tops of incense burners, as well as on various kinds of charms and amulets.[5] Since the Han dynasty, they employed it especially for the notations on various practical instruments.

The earliest surviving examples of the Wen Wang type B order for the trigrams have been found on a Han divination device called *shih*.[6] A *shih* consisted of a flat disk rotating over a square board—representing the sky above the Earth. Recently, a number of these have been rediscovered, but only a few of them actually bear trigrams. Japanese archaeologists in Korea found one in a Chinese tomb dating from the Han dynasty, and they attempted to restore it.[7]

On their restoration, the upper disk symbolizing the sky or Heaven had at its center a conventionalized picture of the Little Dipper (Ursa Minor).[8] This was encircled by the names of twelve celestial deities, surrounded in turn by a ring of twenty-four characters to indicate directions.

The latter set consisted of twelve characters from the zodiac cycle called the Twelve Branches (*shih-erh chih*)—also known as the Earthly Emblems (*ti-wen*)—alternating with twelve characters taken from a denary cycle called the Ten Stems (*shih kan*)—which was also

[3] For an early example of the Wen Wang circle type B on a Chinese alchemist's chart, said to date from A.D. 947, see Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), vol. 5, pt. 5, p. 56.

[4] Two Sung mirrors with Wen Wang type B trigram circles (pre-dated as T'ang) are pictured in E. Loubo-Lesnichenko, "Imported Mirrors in the Minusinsk Basin," *Artibus Asiae* 35, no. 1 (1973), fig. 7 on p. 35, and fig. 8 on p. 36. A late T'ang mirror with a Wen Wang type B circle is shown in Needham, vol. 3 (1979), pl. 22, facing p. 248.

[5] Chinese coin-amulets, usually called *ya-sheng-ch'ien,* often pictured a circle of trigrams. Some of these are described below in connection with Korean amulets.

[6] See Donald J. Harper, "The Han Cosmic Board (*shih*)," *Early China* 4 (1978–79): 1–10; Christopher Cullen, "Some Further Points on the *Shih*," ibid., 5 (1980–81): 31–46; and D. J. Harper, "The Han Cosmic Board, a Response to Christopher Cullen," ibid., pp. 47–56. See also Michael Loewe, *Ways to Paradise* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), pp. 75–80, and app. 3, pp. 204–6.

[7] This Han *shih* is described—and the restoration of it depicted—in Harada Yoshito, *Lo Lang* (Tokyo: Tokō Shoin, 1930), p. 39 of the resume, and pl. 123. See also Needham, vol. 3, pl. 890, facing p. 542. Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1 (1962), pp. 229–30 and 249–50, discusses how the *shih* was probably used; but this topic is more fully discussed in the articles cited in n. 6 above.

[8] The Little Dipper was probably an error by the restorers. The Chinese did not view this star group as a constellation, but they put great reliance on the Big Dipper; so the latter must have been figured on the original disk. See Edward Schafer, *Pacing the Void* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 47–48.

known as the Heavenly Emblems (*t'ien-wen*). Two characters in the latter group were used twice, in order to provide a full complement of signs for Heaven to match those for Earth. This balance of Earth and Heaven was considered not only necessary but also auspicious.

Meanwhile the square wooden panel representing Earth, on which the disk revolved, had eight broad paths extending out over it in the eight directions as though they were emanating from the sky panel above. Each path was marked with a trigram, the whole set being arranged in the order of the Wen Wang type B circle.

Another Han implement, also called *shih,* was basically a square metal plate with a shallow circular recess at its center. From the latter eight channels ran out to the edges, as on the wooden *shih,* and each of these also held a trigram, all of them being arranged in the Wen Wang type B order.[9] Joseph Needham has stated that the metal plate must have served as a tray for a lodestone scoop (representing the Big Dipper), which would have revolved within the inner recess. He also thought this had been the ancestor of the compass.[10] Whether it was or not, the same arrangement of the trigrams (Wen Wang type B) eventually appeared on the Chinese mariner's compass, used down into the Ming dynasty.[11]

Before the Ming ended in 1644, Chinese sailors changed their compass. Finding that the Japanese pirates, who were then raiding the southern coast of China, used a superior type of compass, they copied a captured example.[12] The old Chinese compass had a needle floating on water in a central well, but the new kind was a dry compass with its needle turning on a pivot. Its notation differed too. Instead of the Wen Wang type B trigrams, the new compass had the Twelve Branches, which served as signs for the East Asian zodiac as well as indicating the hours on the dials of old Japanese clocks.[13] The Chinese began to use these signs, too, though not exclusively.

[9] For a reconstructed metal divination board, see Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1, pl. 114, facing p. 266. A more elaborate one, lacking the trigrams, is pictured in Harada, fig. 2, where it is miscalled a mirror.

[10] Harper, "Han Cosmic Board," p. 6, n. 4, objects to the idea of evolution from the *shih* to a ladle compass, to the more sophisticated forms of magnetic compass, as suggested by Wang Chu-to and Needham; he wants more evidence.

[11] Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1, pl. 116, facing p. 286, pictures a Ming mariner's compass-plate in bronze. Its shallow, central well for a floating needle is framed by a Wen Wang type B trigram circle, surrounded by another circle with the twenty-four directional signs.

[12] See J. Edkins, "A Sketch of the Growth of Science and Art in China to the Ming Dynasty," *Journal of the Peking Oriental Society* 2, no. 2 (1888): 132. See also Rudolf P. Hommel, *China at Work* (New York: John Day, 1937), pp. 342–44.

[13] A Japanese mariner's compass is shown in Hommel, fig. 507 on p. 336. Another is pictured in M. V. Brewington, *The Peabody Museum Collection of Navigation Instruments* (Salem, Mass.: Peabody Museum, 1963), pl. 27, no. 83. On the latter, the

Larger Chinese and Korean ships carried a much bigger compass, with a dial that had twenty-four characters to mark directions.[14] This group was essentially the old Chinese divination set that had been used on the Han wooden *shih*—the Twelve Branches and the Ten Stems—however, it omitted four characters from the latter set. Those discarded were the two that had formerly been confusingly repeated.[15]

These were replaced by four other characters: the names of the trigrams from the Wen Wang circle that had previously indicated the four intermediate directions. Since these new signs also came from a circle with celestial connotations, they joined with the remaining signs from the Ten Stems to maintain a proper balance of heavenly signs and earthly ones. A harmonious balance was important to superstitious sailors who wanted the forces of nature to remain in harmony, free from adverse winds, towering waves, or the dreaded typhoons.

Smaller Chinese coastal ships carried a more modest compass, with a dial having only eight signs. These were the four principal characters from the Twelve Branches, to mark the cardinal points, and the names of the four subordinate trigrams from the Wen Wang set, to denote the secondary directions.[16] Although the Chinese mariners no longer wanted the complete Wen Wang circle on their later compasses, the fact that the latter's dials still contained the names for four of its trigrams shows that the earlier use of that circle on the compass had not been totally forgotten.

While the Wen Wang type B circle was being used for the compasses at sea, the Fu Hsi circle, type B, appeared on another kind of compass: the one used on land by geomancers, called a *lo-p'an.*[17] The geomancers practiced a pseudo-science called *Feng-shui,* which involved establishing auspicious sites for houses, public buildings, tombs, etc. Many people on Taiwan and in the Hong Kong Terri-

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signs proceed around the rim in the opposite direction. The dial was probably inverted to be seen from below—as on the compasses hung over the berths of the captain and the first mate on whaling ships. Examples are shown aboard the *Charles W. Morgan,* an American whaling ship preserved at the Maritime Museum in Mystic, Connecticut.

[14] Brewington, pl. 27, nos. 180, 181 (Chinese examples), and 82 (Korean).

[15] The characters *wu* 戊 and *chi* 己 from the denary set were discarded because they were repeated in the same group, and too easily confused with *hsu* 戌 and *ssu* 巳 in the other set.

[16] An eight-character mariner's compass is illustrated in Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1, p. 288.

[17] For various examples of the Chinese geomancer's compass, see ibid., pl. 119, facing p. 289, and pl. 120, facing p. 294; Paul Carus, "Chinese Occultism," *Monist* 15, no. 4 (1904): 533; and Robert Temple, *The Genius of China* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), p. 19. J. J. M. de Groot, *Religious System of China* (Leiden: Brill, 1897), vol. 3, pl. 26, facing p. 959, shows one that has characters naming the trigrams in the Fu Hsi order, instead of actual trigrams.

tories still consult geomancers before they undertake any substantial construction.

The compass that determined geomantic decisions consisted of a circular plaque, usually made of lacquered wood. Its center had a small sunken reserve containing the magnetized needle. Around this was a trigram circle, marked with either the trigrams themselves in the Fu Hsi order or the Chinese characters for their names arranged in the same way.[18] Surrounding these were further rings, sometimes as many as eighteen of them. These were inscribed with other characters or calendrical signs also used in geomantic reckoning.[19] Among them were the twenty-four directional signs that had appeared on the mariner's compass—shown on three of the rings in slightly different ways. For each of the eight directions indicated by the trigrams, all these auxiliary signs were intended to foretell any possible contingencies, noting anything that might occur to encourage or deter an auspicious location.

Since all the outer rings were written to be read from outside the dial, the circle of trigrams—or the ring of characters that stood for them—were everted too. They were turned outward so they could easily be read together with all the associated data.

Many geomantic compass dials have—above each trigram in the Fu Hsi circle, or its equivalent character—a small arrangement of dots to represent the corresponding number on the *Lo-shu*.[20] These numbers expressed in dots are highly significant, for they demonstrate a close and continuing connection between the Fu Hsi trigram circle and the ancient *Lo-shu* diagram, a relationship that began more than two thousand years ago and lasted into the twentieth century.

Many Chinese still believe that bad *Feng-shui* can be corrected by taking a round glass mirror in a frame figured with the Eight Trigrams and placing this on a building to face the dangerous direction.[21] Usually the trigrams on it are arranged in an everted Fu Hsi circle. I recently saw one of these on the outside of a Chinese restaurant in New York City; it was not shown there merely as an ornament.

[18] Every geomancer's compass that I have personally examined was recent, from the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Earlier ones may possibly have used the Wen Wang circle. But, since the Fu Hsi set emphasizes the cardinal points by using the principal trigrams, it is far more practical for quick sightings and rapid calculation.

[19] For descriptions of the signs on the successive rings of a geomancer's compass, see Carus, pp. 533–38; or Samuel Couling, *Encyclopaedia Sinica* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), under *Lo-pan,* pp. 315–16.

[20] For examples of the geomancer's compass with dots to indicate the numbers from the *Lo-shu*—relating the latter to individual trigrams in the Fu Hsi circle—see Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1, pl. 119, facing p. 289; and Carus, p. 533.

[21] See Martin Palmer, ed., *T'ung Shu: The Ancient Chinese Almanac* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), p. 47.

FIG. 3.—A familiar protective charm. An everted Fu Hsi circle, framing a yin-yang symbol (*t'ai-chi t'u*).

Both the Fu Hsi and the Wen Wang trigram circles have commonly been used in recent times for the pattern on a certain charm or talisman, which is also often used for the same geomantic purpose. The Chinese, and other peoples in East Asia, have valued this pattern highly, believing that it could protect them from evil spirits and would attract good fortune.[22]

This carried the yin-yang symbol formed by interlocking comma shapes done in separate colors—called *t'ai-chi t'u*—surrounded by the Eight Trigrams, usually in a Fu Hsi circle. Generally this circle was everted, giving the impression that the trigrams were being projected out from the central motif (see fig. 3).

People drew or printed this device on paper; carved and painted it on round or octagonal wooden panels; and cast or engraved it on metal amulets. On the latter, it was often shown in miniature above the head of the Star god, as well as appearing independently.[23]

[22] An everted Fu Hsi circle (rotated ninety degrees), encircling a yin-yang symbol, is pictured in C. A. S. Williams, *Outline of Chinese Symbolism* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1932), p. 148. Contrast that with the disorganized circle on a Taoist charm in Williams, p. 186, which is a good example of the confusion regarding old traditions in modern times.

[23] Amulets with these specific motifs are preserved in the Mather collection at the American Numismatic Society.

Traveling around Hunan and Szechuan in the 1930s, I used to see this composite symbol displayed over the main entrance of houses and shops. The Hunanese people commonly painted it on a flat wooden panel, but they also carved it on the forehead of a wooden demon-mask, or painted it on a similar mask portrayed on half a gourd. These masks are thought to be survivals of the ancient *T'ao-t'ieh* faces that decorated the ancient bronzes, where they probably also had an apotropaic function.

In western Szechuan, I used to see this device carved or painted on the underside of the exposed ridgepole in the principal room of the large manor-like farmhouses or painted at the center of the ceiling in Taoist temple halls.[24] In either case, it marked the central axis of the building, symbolically regarded as a universe in microcosm. When the device was displayed overhead in this way, the trigram circle—whether standard or everted—was inverted, as though it had been flipped over to make it appropriate as a sky-symbol.[25]

Whether or not they deliberately intended an inverted trigram circle for a sky symbol—perhaps forgetting that the circle had already been a celestial plan—the painters' principal objective was to have each trigram maintain its proper symbolic direction. Therefore, if a trigram circle was to be displayed overhead, they would carefully invert it.

Inverting the trigram circles created two more types. By far the most common were the ones made by inverting the everted circles (type B), hence we shall call them type C. Much rarer were the ones formed by inverting the standard circles (type A), so we shall call those type D.

Figure 4 shows two inverted trigram circles of type C. Both have been rotated 180 degrees, so they can be more easily compared with their prototypes pictured in figure 2.

At first glance, it might be difficult to see whether a certain trigram circle is actually inverted or was merely rotated. The best way to settle this question is to turn the circle to bring to the top its chief yang trigram. (This was done in fig. 4.) When the Wen Wang inverted

[24] An inverted Fu Hsi circle from a pattern on the ceiling of a Taoist temple in Chengtu, Szechuan, is depicted in Daniel S. Dye, *A Grammar of Chinese Lattice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), 2:335, but it is badly garbled. In the 1930s, recent Taoist temples—built or remodeled since 1900—often showed carved or painted trigram circles with individual trigrams misplaced. The trigram circles on charm papers dispensed in the local Taoist shrines were also usually miswritten.

[25] The "sky shift" that alters directions overhead is easy to demonstrate. If one holds a mirror face down above a compass dial pointing north, in the reflection north and south will have changed places, while east and west keep their original positions. But if the compass dial points to east, the reflection will show that east and west have changed places, while north and south remain the same.

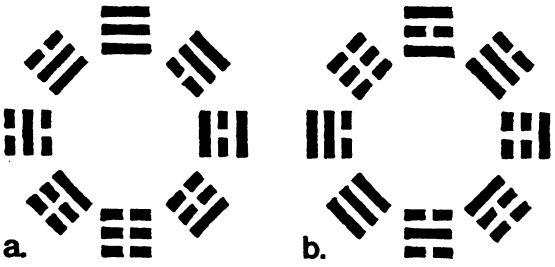

FIG. 4.—Inverted trigram circles (type C). *a,* Fu Hsi. *b,* Wen Wang. Type B circles turned over horizontally, then rotated 180 degrees for comparison with the originals in fig. 2.

circles (types C and D) are turned in this way, they are easily recognized because the chief yang and yin trigrams, formerly on the right, then appear at the left.

In contrast to those, when the highly symmetric Fu Hsi circles are turned to bring the chief yang trigram back to the top, the inverted circles (types C and D) are difficult to recognize. This is because inverted Fu Hsi circles of type C resemble the standard one of type A, except that the trigrams at the center of each side (*li* and *k'an*), appear to have changed places. Actually, these were the only ones that kept their original positions, as both stood on the median line over which the circle was flipped.[26] Similarly, Fu Hsi circles of type D look like those of type B, except that again it looks as though someone had merely exchanged the same two trigrams (the ones that had actually kept their places). Those relatively minor differences can be easily overlooked.

A fine example of a deliberately inverted Wen Wang circle (type C) appears on a jade panel in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. This serves as the central element on an imperial desk calendar, said to have belonged to the Ch'ien-lung Emperor in the eighteenth century.[27]

The panel must have been intended to represent the sky, for it is circular, has a border of stylized cloud forms, and also has a hole at

[26] See n. 25 above. If a trigram circle is flipped horizontally the trigrams at the center of each side remain unchanged; but if it is turned over sideways (flipped vertically) only the trigrams at top and bottom will retain their former places. In fig. 4 this situation may seem somewhat confused, because both circles have been rotated to demonstrate their relationship to other trigram circles.

[27] The jade panel is pictured in Arthur Wright, ed., *Studies in Chinese Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), frontispiece. This book was also issued separately as *Memoir of the American Anthropological Association,* no. 75 (1953).

its center. Through the hole, one sees a sunken disk carved as the yin-yang symbol.[28] One surface of the panel shows this central motif encircled by the Wen Wang trigrams. The opposite side (currently on view in the museum) shows the *t'ai-chi t'u* again, this time surrounded by the Ten Celestial Stems. Around the panel are six movable plaques of jade, each carved on either side to depict one of the Twelve animals of the Chinese Zodiac. Every day when the calendar was in use, a palace attendant would have had to set out one of the animal plaques beside one of the Ten Stems, for together they announced the date in Chinese reckoning.

As the second side was the actual working part of the calendar, it had to be kept face up on the emperor's desk or table. That put the trigram circle on the underside of the panel. Therefore the circle had to be inverted, so that each trigram could keep its own appropriate direction underneath.

Inverted Wen Wang circles are also found on the reverse of amulets, where they would again be underneath when the amulet was set down on anything. Thus the trigrams could still maintain their proper directions.

One could also expect to find an inverted trigram circle on the back of certain bronze "magic mirrors," called *tou-kuang chien.* These were cleverly constructed so that light reflected from the polished surface would cast upon a wall or screen an image of the pattern on the decorated back.[29] On these, the pattern would have to be inverted so it would come out right in the reflection.

A strange, shovel-shaped bronze mirror, formerly in a private collection in China, may have been one of these, as its back had an inverted Wen Wang trigram circle, type D.[30] On the other hand, this may have been a special kind of Chinese mirror called a *fang chu*[31] intended to be held upside down in certain rites.

For example, the Taoists had a special ritual in which a celebrant would stand outdoors on a summer night, holding a bronze mirror

[28] The hole must represent the traditional gate at the center of the sky, known in Chinese as *Ch'ang-ho.* For the ancient, almost universal, concept of the "Sky Door," as the entrance to Heaven, at the place marked by the Pole Star, see A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Svayamātṛṇnā: Janua Coeli" (in English), reprinted in *Coomaraswamy I, Selected Papers,* ed. Roger Lipsey, Bollingen Series, vol. 89 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 465–520, esp. pp. 474–76. The Ch'ang-ho gate is briefly mentioned in the *Huai-nan-tzu* 11.3.

[29] For Chinese magic mirrors, see Needham, vol. 4, pt. 1, pp. 94–97.

[30] This strange mirror is shown in Hsu Nai-ch'ang, *Hsiao-t'an luan-shih ching-ying* (a privately printed photolithograph book illustrating that author's collection, place not given, 1921), 4.17b. (Columbia University Library has a copy.)

[31] For the *fang-chu* mirror, see Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy,* trans. Derk Bodde, 2d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), 1:397. This type of mirror is also mentioned in the *Huai-nan-tzu* 3.3.

face up, so dew could condense on its smooth surface, to obtain a kind of holy water for other rites. If the back of such a mirror were to be decorated with a trigram circle, which would be upside down when the mirror was in use, the circle would have to be inverted, so each trigram could keep its proper direction underneath.

This concludes a review of the four legitimate types of trigram circles: standard, everted, and the inverted examples of each. One might possibly add—as type E—the many garbled circles found on twentieth-century paper charms, though these are too inconsistent to be classed as a definite type. They are usually based on the standard Fu Hsi circle, but often their only consistency lies in the placing of complementary trigrams opposite each other across the circle. Because of the decline or disruption of old tradition since 1900, many recent trigram circles show individual trigrams repeated or misplaced.

Most of the Taoist priests have become careless about their rich heritage of traditional symbols. For example, on their very costly, ceremonial copes, large trigrams were generally woven or embroidered on wide ornamental borders at each side: yang trigrams on the left side, front and back, and yin trigrams on the right at front and back. They valued them highly. Yet, even on these, one trigram may be missing, replaced by the repetition of another.[32]

Sets of eight trigrams not shown in a circle also adorned the purple robe worn by actors playing the part of the wizard-statesman Chu-ko Liang. He was a semi-legendary historical figure in the period of the Three Kingdoms, who has been the subject of many popular folktales and legends. Here the trigrams were doubtless used merely to suggest that he had possessed magical powers and wisdom. If one or two trigrams happened to be wrongly presented, that did not matter. Chinese theatrical costumes did not have to be strictly accurate, and they seldom were.

In China proper, in the tragic years of the "Cultural Revolution," books or charts containing trigrams, and almost anything figured with trigrams in private hands, were destroyed by the Red Guards, as being "old-fashioned." But this did not wipe out the tradition completely. In more remote areas, the everted Fu Hsi circle, surrounding the *t'ai-chi-t'u,* is still used as a protective symbol.

In Kunming in 1985 a modern store sold bed-covers in indigo blue with this device, accompanied by stylized wave and flame symbols (for yin and yang) in white, recently made in a wax-resist technique.

[32] See S. Cammann, "Costume in China: 1644 to 1912," *Bulletin of the Philadelphia Museum of Art* 75, no. 326 (Fall 1979): figs. 17 and 18, pp. 112–13. Even on this costly Taoist priest's robe, one trigram is wrongly repeated.

This symbolism seemed to have been intended for something more than mere decoration. In the same city, I also saw pamphlets about fortune-telling with trigrams being sold in street booths in the public market. Though the trigrams themselves are rarely seen at present in other parts of Mainland China, outside of Taoist temples, they apparently still persist there.

THE TRIGRAMS IN OTHER CULTURES

The trigrams were not confined to China. They were also adopted by other nations under Chinese cultural influence, such as the Japanese and Koreans, the Mongols and Tibetans, as well as various peoples in Indochina and Malaya. Yet, in spite of the historical and cultural importance of the trigrams along with their immense popularity, this broad cultural spread has not previously been investigated.

Although the Koreans have always been a highly inventive and creative people, they were frequently exposed to cultural influence from China. Hence they adopted a considerable number of Old Chinese symbols and motifs, including the Eight Trigrams.

Their present national flag displays four trigrams in its corners: the two principal ones and the two secondaries (*li* and *k'an*). These frame the Korean version of the yin-yang symbol at the flag's center. The latter resembles China's *t'ai-chi t'u* except for its coloring, being scarlet and blue instead of red and black.

The Old Koreans used many kinds of charms and amulets. One typical form, popular both in China and in Korea, was a flat bronze disk. It resembles an old Chinese coin, though the hole through its center was round instead of square. A common decoration on this kind of amulet was a Wen Wang trigram circle, generally an everted one (type B), each trigram having the character for its name written beneath it. The other side displayed the Twelve Animals of the East Asian Zodiac, each having the equivalent zodiac character—from the Twelve Branches—written below it. Due to the latter, the Chinese called them "branch money" (*chih ch'ien*).[33]

The American Numismatic Society, in New York, has a remarkable collection of Korean metal amulets. Among them is an especially ornate example.[34] A broad flat disk of bronze, this has at the middle of its upper surface the yin-yang symbol, pierced through the center. That is framed by the Eight Trigrams in an everted Wen Wang circle.

[33] The American Numismatic Society has many of these.

[34] This elaborate Korean amulet is illustrated in Edgar Mandel, *Korean Charms and Amulets: Trial Listing* (New York: American Numismatic Society, n.d. [1968]), p. 46. An octagonal amulet with the same decoration is pictured in Mandel, p. 39.

Then around this circle are the ancient Chinese Creatures of the Four Directions, with a pine tree to symbolize the traditional fifth direction.

The other side of the amulet is even more complex. This also has the pierced yin-yang symbol framed by a Wen Wang trigram circle. But here the circle is type C, deliberately inverted to make it the exact opposite of the one on top. Around it stand the Twelve Marshals in ancient armor (Buddhist zodiac symbols), and they in turn are encircled by the signs for the Twenty-eight Constellations.

As a result of using the two complementary trigram circles, one on either side of the disk, each trigram on the underside lies directly beneath its counterpart on the top. Therefore, when anyone held the amulet flat, or laid it down on a table, the equivalent trigrams in the two circles would both keep the same relative position. It was this amulet that first made me aware of the inverted trigram circles, and it also showed me a principal reason why people used them.

Among the other neighboring countries under strong cultural influence from China, Japan was foremost, although Chinese ideas, traits, and customs often reached there via Korea, undergoing changes in the course of transmission. None of the Japanese coin-amulets (*e-sen*) that I have seen have had the Eight Trigrams on them, but the latter did appear at least once on actual currency.

In 1863, the Daimyo of Akita ordered the minting of a large copper coin, to be modeled after his favorite sword guard (*tsuba*). (It was almost an exact copy, except that the coin lacked a hole in the center to receive the tang of the blade.) The upper surface on these coins showed the standard Wen Wang circle in relief, while the reverse had a repoussé line drawing of a pair of mythical phoenixes (*hō-ō*).[35]

Other Japanese sword guards from the feudal period (which ended in 1867) were decorated with the standard Fu Hsi circle. Often its trigrams were rendered by perforations through the steel, which also served to lighten the weight of the guard.[36]

Trigrams, or circles of them, have also appeared on other metal objects, as well as on fine Japanese lacquerware. Even at the present time, in the towns and villages of Japan one can still find fortune-tellers using trigrams for divination.

Although Tibet was long culturally and politically independent from China,[37] its people took over a number of Old Chinese symbols,

[35] See Neil Gordon Munro, *Coins of Japan* (Yokohama: Box of Curios Publishing, 1904), pp. 180–83 and figs. 26 and 27; or Toyojiro Tsukemoto, *The Old and New Coins of Japan* (in English) (Tokyo: Tōyō Kahei Kyo-hai, 1930), p. 179, fig. 136.

[36] See Victor-Fréderic Weber, *Ko-ji Hō-ten* (Paris, 1923; reprint, New York: Hacker, 1975), 2:160, and pl. 5, no. 8, facing p. 152.

[37] See S. Cammann, *Trade through the Himalayas* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 5–16.

among which were the trigrams. Tibetans still use these extensively in divination, and a circle of trigrams shown together with the Twelve Animals of the Zodiac still serves as a common motif on the familiar Tibetan Buddhist protective amulets. While visiting Lhasa in 1985, I found many of these still being sold in the markets near the Jo-khang, which is sometimes described as "the cathedral of Lhasa."

The most common type had the form of a small, convex, copper or brass mirror, with a ring at the top to hang it from a belt or necklace. The design on the concave, reverse side of the mirror featured a giant tortoise. At its center was the Tibetan magic square of three, equivalent to the *Lo-shu* (called *me-wa*), its nine numbers being given in Tibetan numerals inside a circle, instead of a rectangle.[38] This was surrounded by the Eight Trigrams (*par-kha*) in the standard Wen Wang order, and that in turn was circled by a ring of zodiac animals.[39]

This same cluster of symbols usually stands at the center of Lama divination and horoscope charts,[40] and the Tibetans also printed it with wooden blocks on long, narrow pieces of cloth, to use for prayer flags. These last, in particular, are still being sold in the open-air markets of Lhasa.

In short, patterns containing trigram circles are still revered by the Tibetans, who have long considered them auspicious as well as protective. Yet individual trigrams in them are often repeated or misplaced, due to carelessness or a fading of the old traditions.

The outward spread of Tibetan Buddhism also carried the trigrams to other lands, especially those on either side of India's northern frontier. I have personally seen circles of trigrams, used in various ways, in old Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, and Ladakh, as well as in Inner Mongolia.

Various people in Northern Indochina—now known as Vietnam—have long used trigram circles for divination. One especially odd method involved writing the Eight Trigrams on the phalanges of the fingers on the left hand, to use them for determining what parts of a

[38] For the Tibetan *me-wa,* see S. Cammann, "The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion," *History of Religions* 1, no. 1 (1961): 74–75, and n. 131 on p. 75.

[39] The same pattern is worked in relief on a Tibetan charm box pictured in Antoinette Gordon, *The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism* (Rutland, Vt., and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1959), on the third plate following p. 10.

[40] For a Tibetan horoscope chart with the Eight Trigrams (in a squared format, rather than the usual circle), see Eleanor Olson, *Catalogue of the Tibetan Collection and Other Lamaist Articles in the Newark Museum* (Newark, N.J.: Newark Museum, 1971), vol. 3, pl. 37 on p. 84. This is wrongly described as a divination chart; an actual Tibetan divination chart (miscalled an "astrological figure") is pictured in L. Austine Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism,* 2d ed. (Cambridge: Heffer, 1939), p. 453. The use of trigrams in Tibetan horoscopes is described in Waddell, pp. 458–64.

house might be unlucky for a pregnant housewife.[41] Also, paintings or carvings of trigram circles, as well as incense burners decorated with them, used to be common in Annamese temples.[42]

In Taiwan and the Hong Kong Territories, trigrams still play their part in local traditions. For example, the Wen Wang circle appears there on coin-amulets. The same circle, having each trigram represented by the character for its name, together with the twenty-four directional characters (which include four of these names),[43] also appear in the horoscope charts for the present year and the year to come, on the first and last pages of the popular family almanacs (*t'ung shu*), published annually in Taiwan and Hong Kong.[44]

In fact, these little charts are so conservative and traditional that they also have a ring of numbers from the *Lo-shu* with the names of associated colors, representing a very old form of divination that dates back to T'ang and Sung dynasties.[45] They also contain the names for the twenty-four *ch'i:* two-week solar periods, which have come down from ancient times.

The Chinese almanacs, with their prophesies and warnings, and a whole compendium of traditional historical and religious lore, still exert a wide influence. Not only do people in the areas mentioned earnestly consult them, the overseas Chinese in other countries consider them a link to their ancestral heritage. They purchase them annually and treat them with great respect. In some households the almanac may be the only Chinese book, and people treat it as a charm or talisman in itself.

41 See Commandant Bonifacy, "De certaines croyances relative à la grossaire chez les divers groupes ethniques du Tonkin," *BEFEO* 7 (1907): 107–10. Granet discussed this in *Pensée chinoise* (Paris: Renaissance du Livre, 1934), p. 187, n. 2.

42 For a picture of an Annamese bronze incense burner with its lid pierced to show the Eight Trigrams, see E. R. Moore, "Along the Old Mandarin Road of Indo-China," *National Geographic Magazine* 60, no. 2 (August 1931): 190, bottom, left.

43 Apart from Taoist priests and professional soothsayers, even highly literate Chinese may not be able to recognize the names of most of the trigrams; although they may know the characters in other contexts, with different meanings. Therefore, to most modern readers of the Chinese almanacs these names may seem as mysterious and incomprehensible as the trigrams themselves.

44 Palmer, ed. (n. 21 above), p. 48, shows the second page of an almanac for 1985 with a horoscope chart for that year, and p. 216 shows its last page with a similar chart for 1986. Palmer, pp. 49 and 214, miscalls each of these charts a "feng-shui compass." They are not compasses, and they were intended for wider applications regarding people and their destiny.

45 See Cammann, "Magic Square of Three," pp. 764–75. When the T'ang Court established altars for this form of divination in A.D. 774, that may merely have been imperial recognition of an already existing custom. In Tibet this combination of nine numbers and colors—and trigrams with colors—still forms the basis for reckoning horoscopes. This is illustrated on the horoscope chart in the Newark Museum (see Olson [n. 40 above]).

By means of these books, and through local Chinese temples, the trigrams still play their part in the lives of the older generations of Chinese people in Thailand and Indonesia, Singapore and Malaya,[46] as well as in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and even in Chinese settlements in the major cities of the Western World.

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[46] See W. G. Stirling, "Chinese Divining Blocks and the Pat Kwa," *Journal of the Malay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 2, no. 1 (1924): 72–73.