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Yijing 易經 *cosmology in* Kuunmong 九雲夢

*The "Buddhist-syncretist" debate on Kuunmong's ideological foundation*

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Kuunmong* 九雲夢 (Nine Cloud Dream) has been hailed as Korea's finest pre-modern novel; but even before it had become an indispensable ingredient of re-construction of a national literature, this work had been regarded with comparative benevolence by Korean literati otherwise rather dismissive of fiction. The fact that it can be attributed with sufficient certainty to a well-known individual (Kim Manjung 金萬重, 1637–1692), while fiction authorship was usually well concealed in pre-modern Korea, certainly has to do with the unusual acclaim this work has found among the educated elite. In accord with this fame, since liberation from colonial rule an overwhelming amount of secondary literature has been written about the novel. Although it has thus turned into a cultural icon, it can hardly be called a beloved one among the items filling the Korean cultural treasure store. No film on *Kuunmong* has been produced so far, in comparison to dozens based on the *p'ansori* story *Ch'unhyangji* or the story of Robin-Hood-like Hong Kiltong. *Kuunmong* is taught in high-school, but teachers have complained about its "lewd" character and suggested to have it removed from the list of compulsory readings. There has even been the attempt to remove it from the canon of Korean literature in general by arguing that the novel, opposed to the moral character of Koreans as it is, must in fact have been written by a Chinese.

This moralizing reading of *Kuunmong* seems to hark back to the perspective of its early Western readers, missionaries in Korea, who have maintained that *Kuunmong* is a "rationalization of polygamy", mistaking what drew their own irritated interest for the novel's thematic preoccupation, and literary subject matter for ideological substance. But even if such outgrowths of Puritanism can be easily dismissed from an academic point of view, the basic thrust of the novel is not easy to grasp. For almost fifty years, a lively debate has raged whether the frame story with its patently Buddhist leaning should be taken at face value, which would make the novel a fictional allegory for the ephemerality of life, or whether it should rather be seen as an excuse for a story of Confucian wish fulfilment, as borne out by Yang Soyu's perfect success in civil, military and love affairs. Those opposed to the facile identification of the novel's basic idea with its obvious Buddhist outlay also point to references

to Taoism scattered throughout the book and usually refer to syncretism as the basic outlook of the novel.

In recent years, both sides of this debate have offered more and more sophisticated arguments. While the "Buddhist" side has been backed up substantially by two full-length studies which present deepened analyses of how the novel as a whole works as a fictional illustration of the teaching expounded by *K?mganggy?ng* 金鋼經 (which figures prominently in the frame story), the "syncretist" side has profited greatly from the forceful arguments assembled in a recent monograph by S?l S?nggy?ng. As far as the latter's arguments relate to the use of the numbers eight and nine in the novel and their relationship with *Yijing* cosmology, they appear to be based on previous studies by Pae Y?ngh?i and Emanuel Pastreich. Otherwise, as far as I know, especially Pae's work has not received the attention it deserves. In this paper, I attempt to refine, and thereby add to the plausibility of, one of her most useful insights. This is not, however, to refute the results of those studies that have interpreted the novel in Buddhist terms, but rather to show that these different perspectives need not contradict each other.

*The Eight Trigrams in Kuunmong: a new interpretation*

My focus here is on the core idea of Pae's 1996 essay: the identification of the novel's eight heroines with the eight trigrams that make up the 64 hexagrams of *Yijing*.

Pae's point of departure is an appreciation of the value of the numbers eight and nine in comparative mythology. Her interest resting with more general numerical symbolism, her identifications of the trigram each of the women is meant to symbolize is not always securely grounded in a close scrutiny of sinic cultural symbolism in general and the subtler ramifications of *Yijing* numerology in particular. Thus, her correlations, as given in the following table, are not always convincing.

heroine \* trigram\*\* corresponding natural phenomenon

Chin Ch'aebong 秦采鳳      *son* 巽      風 "wind"

Kye S?mw?l 桂蟾月 *kon* 坤      地 "earth"

Ch?ng Ky?ngp'ae 鄭瓊貝      *k?n* 乾      天 "sky"

Ka Ch'unun 賈春雲 *kam* 坎 水 ?water“

Ch?k Ky?nghong 狄驚鴻 *kan* 艮 山 ?mountain”

Yi Sohwa 李簫和 *i* 離 火 ?fire“

Sim Yony?n 沈?烟 *chin* 震 雷 ?thunder”

Paek N?ngp'a 白凌波: *t'ae* 兌 澤 ?lake“

\* in the sequence of treatment in Pae's paper, which follows the sequence of their first encounter with Soyu

\*\* added by M.E.; Pae identifies trigrams only by their corresponding “element”

These identifications are open to debate for two reasons. First, while neo-confucian *Yijing* studies have put great weight on the structural relationships between the eight trigrams, no pattern is discernible in their distribution within this table: they seem scattered about without regard to the hierarchies in meaning and importance among the eight women and the corresponding narrative structures. Second, the arguments given for single identifications are for the greatest part interpretations of the meanings of their names, with only sparse references to the text of the novel itself.

These shortcomings are most conspicuous in the case of the two heroines who are to become Soyu's main wives. As such, they obviously constitute a class of their own; being the third and sixth of the reincarnated fairies to meet Soyu, they also clearly occupy mirroring positions within the plot structure. Certainly the trigrams they are identified with should constitute a complementary pair and occupy a special position within their group of eight, as well as these two women do within theirs. Thus, for structural reasons it would be most plausible to identify them with the trigrams *k?n* and *kon* (heaven and earth) which represent the forces of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 and therefore the basis of all other trigrams.

How, then, are “heaven” and “earth” distributed between the two? Pae Y?ngh?i regards Ky?ngp'ae as “heaven”, as she occupies the senior position among the two main wives. According to Pae (p. 234 f.), this is backed up by the meaning of her name, “Jade treasure”, as “jade” can stand for “heavenly virtue” (*ch'?ndo* 天道). However, a quite different reading of her name is possible as well, precious stones being also the most hardened and refined *ki* of the earth. Also, her surname carries the

“land unit” radical (邑). In contradistinction, Yi Sohwa as sister of the emperor (天子) is “heavenly” by birth already. Her given name, “harmony of the flute”, alludes to the realization of her karmic bond with Soyu through their mutual playing of the flute (an aerial instrument). This episode starts as follows:

Yang Soyu, not able to overcome his high-rising feelings, went up a high tower alone, leant on the railing and sat down to recite a poem in the face of the moon, when suddenly the wind carried something to his ears: it was a flute melody that from among a thicket of clouds softly approached...

While music descending from the sky brings about Soyu’s first contact with Sohwa, Ky?ngp’ae is buried behind “five layers of gateways” (ch. 4 p. 349), just as jade is hidden deeply in the earth. That she impersonates the immovable *yin* force (earth) while Sohwa represents dynamic *yang* (heaven/ sky) is shown again when her firm resolve not to step over her doorsill forces princess Sohwa, who wishes to get to know her in order to decide whether she could share a husband with her, to disguise as a commoner and come to her house (ch. 10–11). Rather than proving her correlation to the *k?n* trigram, the superior position that Ky?ngp’ae attains in the domestic area (marriage) counterpoises Sohwa’s dominance in the political sphere (emperor’s court), in perfect analogy to the common allocations of *yin* and *yang* power.

Having thus established the trigram correspondences for the two main wives, those for the remaining six women should be sought for along similar lines. This is facilitated by the fact that they are also easily organised in pairs along social demarcations: two chamber maids, two courtesans and two magic women. Among these, the chamber maids and courtesans are clearly on lower steps of the social ladder; the magic women Yony?n and N?ngp’a, however, being positioned right outside society, can’t be ranked in this way and can therefore function as counterparts to Sohwa and Ky?ngp’ae.

This is achieved in subtle variations of plot elements and motifs. N?ngp’a can be seen as a mirror image of Sohwa: while Sohwa is sister of the ruler of the human world, N?ngp’a is daughter to a king of the underworld; while Sohwa is not easily joined to Soyu as he is betrothed to another woman already, N?ngp’a needs to be freed by Soyu from another man laying claims to her before she can become his. A similar mirror relationship can be observed between Ky?ngp’ae and Yony?n: both attain their exalted

position (as princess/ magic woman) not through birth like their counterpart, but through an education process; and when first meeting Soyu, Ky?ngp'ae is violated in her privacy by Yang Soyu's intrusion into her house as transvestite lute player, whereas Yony?n first descends on Soyu as an intruder ? not disguised as a male, but in the decidedly male role of would-be assassin ? into his tent (and just as Yang Soyu had no intent to defile Ky?ngp'ae, Yony?n has never planned to kill Soyu).

Yony?n and N?ngp'a must, therefore, correspond to the "water" *kam* and "fire" *i* trigrams which, complementary among themselves like *k?n* and *kon*, are combined with the latter to form the four "main" trigrams, occupying the four cardinal directions (*pang* 方, in contradistinction to *u* 隅) and the four "solid sides" (*sil* 實, in contradistinction to *h?* 虛). And indeed, both their telling names and the situations in which they meet Soyu confirm this attribution: "White Rising Wave" Paek N?ngp'a meets Soyu deep in the waters of lake Dongting, while "Heavy Upcurling Smoke" Sim Yony?n descends on Soyu like lightning, and the light of the torch, which is first extinguished by her sudden appearance and then kindled again by herself (ch. 8 p. 386 f.), plays a prominent role in the tent scene.

Among the remaining four women, the only one whose corresponding trigram can be identified quite easily through her name is Ky?nghong, "Startling the Wild Geese", a common attribute of beautiful women but also a most appropriate name for *thunder*. The Phoenix in Ch'aebong's name may be associated with *wind*, not because today's mythologists believe it to have been derived from the god of winds, but because as first among the birds, it is the ruler of the air. The name Ch'unun, Spring Cloud, may be thought of as hinting at water, but the intimate connection between clouds and *mountain* in the Sino-Korean literary tradition should not be forgotten. Kye S?mw?l's name is the most elusive as all three of its parts designate the moon which can't be easily associated with any of the trigrams. But of course the moon is symbolically associated with water and, in the popular cosmology based on the five elements (五行說), it correlates with the west. This is just the direction that the one remaining trigram, *t'ae* (lake), occupies in the more common (後天) distribution of trigrams on the compass.

More elucidating than the names are in all four cases the circumstances of their first meeting with Soyu. As Pae Y?ngh?i has pointed out already, Chin Ch'aebong's first contact with Soyu is brought about by the wind which carries Soyu's poem up to her window and waves her fragrance down to him on the street. As part of Ky?ngp'ae's revenge,

Ch'unun is made to meet her designated husband first as a fairy on a mountain, then as a ghost on a hillside. In the case of Kye S?mw?l, it is the exchange of glances that establishes the relationship; before they have exchanged a word, S?mw?l "repeatedly looked at Soyu, and secretly with autumnal waves expressed her feelings". Taken literally, the waves may evoke the "lake" image while autumn is again correlated to the west, the direction of the *t'ae* trigram. Ky?nghong chases after Soyu on the back of a miraculously swift horse, catching up with his ten days of travel within a single day, thus doing full justice to the main attribute of the "thunder" trigram, movement.

Due to all these considerations, I would suggest following correlations between the eight heroines and the *Yijing* trigrams:

main wives: 鄭瓊貝	heaven 乾	簫和	earth 坤
magic women: 白凌波	fire 離	沈?烟	water 坎
chamber maids:	wind 巽	秦采鳳	mountain 艮 賈春雲
courtesans:	thunder 震	狄驚鴻	lake 兌 桂蟾月

#### *Yijing cosmology and Buddhism*

At this point, however, objections could be raised concerning the "lesser" pairs made up the ladies-in-waiting and courtesans. For if the proposed trigram attributions are correct, they do not constitute a pairing of opposites as given in the first two pairs (trigrams with exactly the opposite position of *yin* and *yang* strokes). This procedure of arranging the trigrams in oppositional pairs has been part of *Yijing* exegesis from the *Shuo gua* onwards and has been visualised in diagrams like the following, based on attaching the numerical values 1 ? 8 to the eight trigrams:

乾 = 天 兌 = 澤 離 = 火 震 = 雷 巽 = 風 坎 = 水 艮 = 山 坤 = 地

1	2	3	4	5	6
	7	8			



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Each of these pairs adds up to the number nine or, in the words of the commentator, “one and eight”, thereby picturing *in nuce* the fullness of the universe which the one and the eight, Yang Soyu and the eight women, together symbolize on a larger scale. To project this harmonious relationship on the figures of our novel would, however, necessitate a special correlation between Ch’unun and S?mw?l on one hand, and between Ch’aebong and Ky?nghong on the other. Another point of discontent that could be raised concerns the intimate relationships between the main wives and their respective chamber maids, which don’t seem to find any expression in their trigram correlations.

We would have to admit then to important deficiencies in our reconstruction of *Yijing* cosmology in *Kuunmong* if it were not for another source that may explain these seeming incongruences. I am speaking of an often-quoted passage found in Kim Manjung's work of "random essays", *S?p'o manp'il*, which treats *Yijing* cosmology in some detail. Kim starts with explaining the stroke sequence of the Eight Trigrams of the *Yijing* in terms of the *yin-yang* qualities of the eight natural phenomena they represent. He continues:

Heaven and wind are of the same material force, wind is just heaven’s material force which comes down and is soft, therefore the lowest stroke of [the heaven trigram] *k?n* is changed to make [the wind trigram] *son*. Earth and mountain are of one body, mountain is among the shapes of the earth that which rises and is hard, therefore changing the upper stroke of [the earth trigram] *kon* makes [the mountain trigram] *kan*. Thunder is fire pressed down by double *yin*, the transformation of the upper stroke of [the fire trigram] *li* pictures this. A lake is water hindered from flowing downward, the transformation of [the water trigram] *kam* pictures this. Heaven, earth, fire and water are transformed into wind, mountain, thunder and lake, and thus the eight trigrams are complete. When I was (in exile) at the Western frontier, I met an old monk who told me this. And he added that the boundless world just consist of the four things heaven, earth, water and fire. What the Buddhist call the Four Great One’s (the four elements) means nothing else, and to have heaven transformed into wind is to speak from the point of view of its actual realization. I could not object to this, but just jotted it down to later ask knowledgeable people about

it. Today I read by chance the *Zhuzi yulei*: his discussion of the “hard wind in the ninth heaven” fits this exactly.

In this rather uncommon though, as Kim stresses, not heretical *Yijing* exegesis, we find a somewhat different pairing of the trigrams that beautifully resolves both problems outlined above if translated into the symbolic vocabulary of *Kuunmong*:

天 李簫和 → 風 秦采鳳

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地 鄭瓊貝 → 山 賈春雲

火 沈?烟 → 雷 狄驚鴻

水 白凌波 → 澤 桂蟾月

Just like “wind” and “mountain” are “transformations” (i.e., more specific and less encompassing manifestations) of “heaven” and “earth”, Ch’aebong (“wind”) and Ch’unun (“mountain”) are worthy but not equally beautiful companions to Sohwa and Ky?ngp’ae. Similarly, swift and nimble Ky?nghong and tranquil, serene S?mw?l are easily recognizable as more commonly human versions of the two magic women. Within this scheme of trigram relations, their pairing makes perfect sense.

Above that, this constellation makes still another grouping of characters discernible which may have some impact on the interpretation of the novel. We have four “basic” and four “transformed” characters, divided by the vertical line in the above table which represents the differentiations made through cosmological speculations. But we can also draw a horizontal line which would represent the differentiations which a socially and ethically oriented outlook would provide: above the line, we find the main wives and chamber maids, who in their fulfilment of social decorum and female role expectations, represent virtue 德; below the line, we find the magic women and courtesans, who actively and with the help of their respective skills seek out their future husband (the only career they can make for themselves) and, therefore, can be said to represent ability 才.

Distributing the trigram qualities among the eight heroines as he did, Kim Manjung thus gave their respective due both to the cosmological and the ethical tradition of *Yijing* exegesis. His nine heroes represent the quintessence of the Chinese interpretation of the universe in both its

"Confucian" and its "Daoist" strand. But what is more, by impersonating the trigrams according to the correlations he learned from the monk rather than along the lines of the honoured *Shuo gua* tradition, a decidedly Buddhist strand of *Yijing* interpretation is woven in as well.

Yang Soyu's meeting and marriage with his eight wives, the union of the one and the eight, symbolizes a complete life cycle, a human experience encompassing the "boundless world" and probably implies as well the realization of the fullness of man's original nature (*s?ng* 性). Only after having traversed the trigram cycle, Yang Soyu awakens to again (or: more truly) be *S?ngjin* 性?, "real human nature". His secular experience is bound into his Buddhist path of enlightenment, and can be explained in Buddhist terms as well as in those of the Confucian and Daoist tradition. Kim Manjung's novel does not eclectically counterpoise different interpretations of the *conditio humana*, but fully exhausts the capacities of fiction to make visible their common source.