

# I CHING

## The Oracle

### Hexagram 30: Li. The Spark



離  
*Li*  
Fire



離  
*Li*  
Fire



火  
*Huo*  
Fire

火  
*Huo*  
Fire

離 離 離  
上 為 火  
離 下

第三十卦：

吉 畜 亨 利 離  
牝 牛 貞

象曰：明兩作離，大人以繼明照于四方。

#### *The Oracle*

One who seeks enlightenment and then in turn enlightens others. Your luminosity comes from a fire within. Be the spark that animates the world around you. Nurture your gift of charisma. Hold tight to your community and burn bright. Clinging is the key to cultivating charisma. When you can relate and empathize with others, you appeal to their affections. Cling to show vulnerability; when you show vulnerability, you in turn attract empathy. The spark induces euphoria to become the prophet. Cultivation of charisma.





離 離 離 第三十卦  
上 為 火  
離 下  
吉 畜 亨 利 貞  
牝 牛  
象曰：明兩作離，大人以繼明照于四方。

**One light after another—succession of sovereigns. The sun and moon coalescing.**

**The Eminent One illuminates far and wide in the four directions, lighting up the four corners of the world. The luminous fire burns twice bright, in twin flames. Clarity and virtue.**

Prayers are answered.

**Raising heifers to be cows.**

**An auspicious omen.**

Fire over Fire: a yin line clings to two yang lines, one above and one below, a darkness at the center hollow of two pairs of light. What is in darkness clings to the light.

A flame has no solid form, but rather it clings to the object it burns.

*First Line*

**Footprints show a trail faltering between right and wrong, a confused path.**

**Honor with offerings. There will be no blame.**

無 敬 履 初  
咎 之 錯 九  
然 ：



Changing directions many times over.

Walking without thought, just to be in movement. Excitable and temperamental, but merely naïve.

“敬” (jìng) means to honor, but can also mean to present offerings.<sup>1</sup> Common offerings inferred by 敬 are tea, alcohol, offerings of food, or tobacco. The full implication of “honor with offerings” is to show reverence to gods and ancestors.

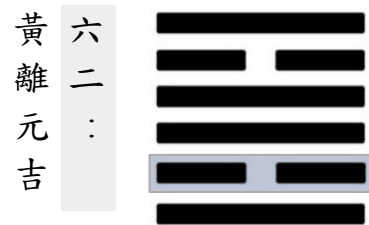
Thus, when the divinatory message is the first line, find solace in this: when you are faltering in your Path, show reverence and you will find your Way again. Endeavor with rites and rituals to rekindle a feeling of awe, spiritual transcendence, and harmony with the Tao.

The Oracle’s counsel: be more orderly and methodical.

### *Second Line*

**A curious imperial creature.**

**Sublime good fortune.**



Follow the signs that the spirit world are leaving you and you shall achieve great success.

“離” (lí) can mean light, brightness, or luminosity, associations with the Fire trigram, but in this context, it can also be a reference to a rare, mythical beast. The ideogram consists of the radical “隹” (zhuī) meaning a short-tailed bird, likened to a sparrow and “离” (modern: lí, archaic: chí), the image of an animal standing upright with the top “亠” indicating its head. In its modern usage, the word means to leave, depart, separate, or put distance between. I’ve opted to interpret it as a mythic creature, and envision it as a sacred sparrow.

While “黃” (huáng) is more literally translated to the color yellow, as in Huang Di (黃帝), the Yellow Emperor, in antiquity, the color was reserved for emperors only, and was a symbol of ascension to the throne. Here, to better convey the meaning, I’ve interpreted the “yellow” as symbolic of “imperial.”

In the matter inquired about, the second line bodes positively. A strong omen of great auspices. The appearance of the animal spirit, if one envisions a mythic sparrow, symbolizes happiness and fertility. That it’s an imperial color signifies an event of great importance.

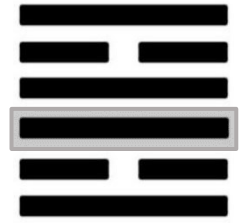
Sparrows are also an omen of ancestors. The souls of ancestors can occupy a sparrow and return to earth to visit us.

<sup>1</sup> The character 敬 (jìng), meaning reverence and implying a transcendent experience, appeared often in Zhou dynasty texts. The original meaning of the word 敬 was “shamanistic ritual ceremony.” Li Zehou, *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humaneness*, Robert A. Carleo III, trans. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 33.

*Third Line*

- <sup>1</sup> In the last light of a setting sun, beat the pot like a drum, sing the songs of lament, expressing the advancing age.**
- <sup>2</sup> As the final light of the sun clings to the western sky, if you do not drum and sing, the great elders will lament.**

凶則不日九  
大鼓昃三  
耄岳之：  
之而離  
嗟歌



**A waning period.**

In a reading, this line foretells the ending of one chapter and the promise of a new chapter ascending. But at this time, one is stuck in a waning period.

You intuit an imminent ending, and that is causing you anxiety. A fear of change is causing unforced errors. Your own emotions are creating the detriment.

Release your fears. Instead of clinging, let go, and be at peace with letting go.

A shamanic reading of the line would call for a drum and song ritual of soul retrieval to ensure the health, longevity, and well-being of the clan's elders.

The third line consists of two variations of interpretation. The original text for the third yang line is vague, and therefore left open to either approach.

In both variations, the third line is expressing the dichotomy of song and lament, youth and old age, life and death, rising and setting, happiness and sorrow.

The setting sun in the west brings a decline. The lament signifies fear and anxiety of what is to come.

The third line is about legacies and remembrance. The observer sees the sun setting in the west and perceives the lingering light along the horizon as the sun's rays clinging, unwilling to set. That perception is a projection of the observer's own feelings about life and aging. This is about life review and in that life review, settling upon a deepened sense of meaning and purpose.

Asking the youth to drum and sing, a ritual of veneration, the great elders are sharing the stories of their lives with the younger generations, passing on their wisdom, affirming their unbroken connection.

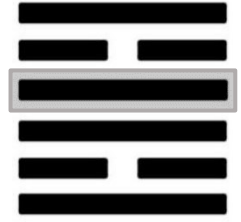
The concluding prognostication is ominous because of the observer's projections. The fear and anxiety around the setting sun, of waning life, rather than embracing the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, is why the ambiance is ominous.



*Fourth Line*

**Sudden and swift, bursting forth  
unexpectedly—  
As it burns,  
As it dies,  
Forsaken and left behind.**

棄死焚突九  
如如如如四  
其：  
來  
如



Unexpected, unavoidable events.

Although traditionally, this line is often interpreted as prognosticating a natural disaster, the text itself is vague on that front.

The structure and tone convey a lament. The vision conjured is that of fires burning villages, villagers dying, villagers abandoning it all and fleeing.

However, note that the Oracle does not explicitly state that the matter is ominous, nor are there mentions of misfortune.

At the fourth line, the lower Fire trigram has been consumed entirely by the upper Fire, resulting in a formidable blaze at this juncture point.

The line points to a moment of escalation. It is intense, rapidly expanding power, but this is both a power of destruction and a power of creation.

This stage of life is one of trial by fire, where Divinity is testing the limits and heights of your abilities. A trial by fire is one of character refinement.

When you have passed this stage of your life, you will be purified. And as it burns, as it dies, as it is forsaken, at every turn the gods and your ancestors are watching over you. No one will let you fall.

*Fifth Line*

**Tearing, wailing such— tears streaming like  
rivers.**

**Sorrow and grief, alas! Take a breath. Exhale.**

**All will end favorably.**

吉戚出六  
嗟涕五  
若沱：  
若



After enduring great difficulties and adversity, you have truly grown from your experiences, gaining wisdom and inner strength. Crying brings a needed sense of release. You shed your ego. You shed your pride. You have nothing to lose now.

The wisdom of knowing that sends you on the path toward good fortune and success.

“若” (ruò), appearing twice, could also be interpreted as an implied reference to “海若” (Hǎi Ruò), god of the northern sea, most likely in reference to the Yellow Sea, which flows into the Yellow River.

There's also a narrative flow here from the second line, with the earlier reference of the “curious imperial creature,” a yellow mythic beast, and the omen of the Yellow Sea in this fifth line.

The fifth line, the sovereign line of hexagram 30, can be summed up with the following popular idiom: 吃得苦中苦、方為人上人 (chī dé kǔ zhōng kǔ, fāng wéi rén shàng rén). It means if you can eat the most bitter of all bitterness, then you can become the greatest above all others, peerless.

### The Legend of Goujian, King of Yue

The historical account of Goujian, King of Yue (reigning 496 – 465 BC) is used as a parable for explaining the fifth line. War had broken out between the kingdoms of Yue and Wu. King Goujian's sister, a princess of Yue, was married to a prince of Wu in an effort to broker peace, but she left her husband and fled back home to Yue.

The King of Wu defeated the Yue in battle. Forced into servitude, Goujian and his wife ingratiate themselves to the enemy king and with charm and cunning, Goujian eventually convinces the King of Wu to pardon and release them.

The image in the fifth line of grieving and eating bitterness is exemplified by Goujian's initial defeat, capture by his enemy, and enslavement.

Goujian returns to his kingdom, plots his revenge for ten years, and after ten years of stealth preparation, finally launches an attack and overwhelmingly dominates over the enemy kingdom.<sup>3</sup> Goujian shows no mercy to the enemy kingdom, executing everyone, even those who had been kind to him. This retribution is reflected in the subsequent sixth line.

History meets myth in an account of Jiǔ Tiān Xuán Nǚ, the Lady of the Nine Heavens incarnating in the form of Yuenü, a formidable swordswoman. Goujian has heard stories and



Figure 8.6 Script for “Yue” in bird script 鳥書 as Inscribed on the Sword of Goujian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Bird script 鳥書 (niǎo shū) was an ornamental calligraphic script used in the southern regions of mainland Asia, as would be found in the Kingdom of Yue. Bird script is found primarily among the Chu, the Wu, and the Yue south of the Shang and Zhou dynasties.

<sup>3</sup> The legend of one of the Four Beauties of ancient China intersects with the legend of Goujian. In his plot for revenge against the King of Wu, his ministers find one of the most beautiful women of Yue, Xi Shi 西施 and sends her as a tribute to the King of Wu. The legend went that Xi Shi was so beautiful that when she gazed into a pond, the fish would be so enchanted by her beauty they'd forget how to swim. Xi Shi was in fact acting as a spy for Yue. As the King of Wu's concubine, she succeeded at distracting him to such an extent that he neglected the affairs of state. Xi Shi also managed to convince the King of Wu to execute his best and most loyal military generals. Having weakened the state of Wu, King Goujian of Yue was able to invade and defeat the Wu.

high praise of this mysterious Yuenü's skills. He calls her to his court and questions her: Who trained you? Who is your master? From what lineage of martial arts do you descend?<sup>4</sup>

Yuenü has no satisfactory answers. She tells the king that she lives in the forest alone and trained herself. She is of no lineage and has no master. Nevertheless, Goujian invites her to train his army. She teaches him thaumaturgical skills to use against the enemy and teaches his army the art of war. After Goujian's victory, Yuenü's body turns into six black stones and Jiǔ Tiān Xuán Nǚ ascends back to Heaven.

After his enslavement, Goujian never forgets the trials and humiliation he endured. Even as king, he continued to live humbly, dress simply, eat simply, was extremely frugal, making it a point to eat bitter foods everyday as a reminder of what he went through, of having to eat bitterness (吃苦, chīkǔ) when he was a captive ingratiating himself to his enemy. (The trigram Fire corresponds with the taste of bitterness.)

### *Sixth Line*

**The king levies his army forward for the attack and the chieftains of the opposition are struck down.**

**Take the rebels as prisoners.**

**There is no blame.**

無 獲 有 王 上  
咎 匪 嘉 用 九  
其 折 出 :  
醜 首 征



You are the great sage whose brightness can illuminate the four corners of the world—you are the rightful king. Thus, you are in the right for quashing your opposition.

To prevail across the four corners of your endeavor, start at the head and strike down the leaders of the revolt.

There is a time to be merciful, and there is a time to show strength. The sixth line of hexagram 30 indicates a time to show strength. Set an example.

Execute a harsh punishment to fit the transgression. You will not be faulted for showing your strength and standing your ground.

It is the sage's strong inner fire, clarity of vision, strategy for expansion, and wisdom that validates a sage as the rightful king. Thus, what action the rightful king takes is blameless in the matter at hand.

The sixth line forecasts penultimate victory over the opposition, validating one sage as the rightful, most meritorious sovereign.

<sup>4</sup> A full recounting of both history and legend can be found in Paul A. Cohen's *Speaking to History: The Story of King Goujian in Twentieth-Century China*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 1 – 35.