

MASTERY OF LIFE AT ELEUSIS AND IN THE I CHING: A PARALLEL ACROSS CULTURES

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When men and women emerged from the darkness of death and fear, the most ancient books and rites of spiritual alchemy were present, waiting for them in each human culture. This is a brief meditation on two such sources, the Eleusinian Mysteries in Greece and the I Ching in China, whose similarities are notable.

The Eleusinian Mysteries began in the Mycenaean period of ancient Greece (ca.1600 BCE) and lasted about two thousand years. Throughout the Hellenic period the mysteries took place during a major Greek festival, and later these rites also spread to the Roman Empire. The Eleusinian Mysteries are related to the rites of fertility and to the mysteries of death and resurrection, as represented by the natural rotation of the seasons. The cultural importance of these mysteries was to educate the people. They offered a new vision that illuminated the age-old anxiety that is related to death and changes during one's lifetime.

As the famous Roman orator, Cicero, said:

For among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which your Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than those mysteries. For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called "initiations," so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained

the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.¹

As thoroughly detailed elsewhere in this *Rosicrucian Digest* issue, the Eleusinian Mysteries completely transformed those who (1) experienced the initiations, and (2) continued to allow the power of the mysteries to inspire their lives and work. Freedom from fear and mastery of life were truly achieved by those who followed the path of Eleusis.



Remains from the Telesterion of Eleusis. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

A Chinese Parallel

In distant China a similar cultural evolution occurred under the guidance of the mythological hero Fu-Xi around 2800 BCE. Fu-Xi was the first of the legendary Three Sovereigns of ancient China. He is a culture hero reputed to be the inventor of writing, fishing, and trapping.²

In the beginning there was as yet no moral or social order. Men knew their mothers only, not their fathers.

When hungry, they searched for food; when satisfied, they threw away the remnants. They devoured their food hide and hair, drank the blood, and clad themselves in skins and rushes. Then came Fu Xi and looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens, and looked downward and contemplated the occurrences on earth. He united man and wife, regulated the five stages of change, and laid down the laws of humanity. He devised the eight trigrams, in order to gain mastery over the world.

—Ban Gu, *Baihu tongyi*³

The image elicited by Fu-Xi looking “upward” and then looking “downward” strikes a parallel with the anxious search of the goddess Demeter for her lost daughter. She also searched upward imploring Zeus and downward imploring Pluto. Today, in moments of great anxiety we still act in the same way; we ask heaven and earth to help us find a solution.

Further still, it is strongly reminiscent of the adage “As Above, So Below,” immortalized in the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus: “Tis true without lying, certain most true: That which is below is like that which is above, and that which is above is like that which is below to do the miracles of one only thing.”⁴



Heinrich Kunrath, *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, from *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae*, 1606.

Even though the earliest extant copies of this document are from the seventh to ninth centuries CE, this maxim and the other elements of the text reflect the traditions of the most ancient mystery schools, including Eleusis. The natural connection between all levels of being is an essential element of all philosophies and mystical practices from the Hermetic line, including the Egyptian and Greek mystery schools, Neoplatonism, Kabala, many forms of Christian and Islamic mysticism, and so on.

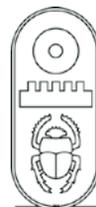
The Eternal Question

“Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is an image of heaven, or, to speak more exactly, in Egypt all the operations of the powers which rule and work in heaven have been transferred to earth below? Nay, it should rather be said that the whole Kosmos dwells in this our land as in its Sanctuary.”⁵

With this searching and asking, human evolution began and still continues today. The goal is always the same: “To gain mastery over one self and over the world.” This is to be understood in the sense of harmonizing with the laws which govern humanity and the universe. When this harmony has been achieved, true mastery is possible without domineering or oppression.

Today, modern Chinese and Western scholars are reassessing the history of the I Ching based on recent archaeological and literary discoveries. It would appear that the origins of this remarkable system may have grown from divinatory systems of the Western Zhou period (ca. twelfth-eighth centuries BCE).⁶ Nevertheless, the traditional histories handed down for millennia and these modern researches may not be mutually exclusive, and can also shed light on how these origins have been experienced and interpreted throughout the ages.

According to received tradition, the initial insight of Fu-Xi about the first eight trigrams—that they depicted a





The Eight Diagrams design of the I Ching. In the middle is “the magical mirror which reveals the true form.” From Zhuji Village. Photo © 2005, Shizhao, Wikimedia Commons.

family composed of Mother, Father, three Daughters, and three Sons, each representing an aspect of nature—was developed by King Wen of Zhou (reigned 1046-1043 BCE). He is said to have deduced the hexagrams from the association of two original trigrams (the possible combinations of six broken and full lines).

“When King Wu of Zhou, son of King Wen, toppled the Shang Dynasty, his brother Gong Dan is said to have clarified the significance of each horizontal line in each hexagram. It was not until then that the whole context of I Ching was understood. Its philosophy heavily influenced the literature and government administration of the Zhou Dynasty (1122 BCE-256 BCE).”⁷

So, what was really the philosophy of this book that aimed at “gaining mastery over one’s self and over the world”?

The I Ching and Spiritual Alchemy

We must recognize today that the I Ching is the most ancient document dedicated to “spiritual alchemy.” At least,

it is the most extensive and ancient text on that topic that has persisted to our day. It is a cornerstone in human evolution in a similar way that mystical initiation contributed to the progress of Greek and Roman cultures.

Spiritual alchemy consists of a clear awareness of human spiritual consciousness and of its relationship with cosmic laws. The result is harmonization of energies, order, serenity, understanding, cooperation, and wisdom.

How does the I Ching attain this purpose?

This is not easy to explain, so I refer to the comments of Carl Jung in his introduction to Richard Wilhelm’s translation of the I Ching:

“The I Ching insists upon self-knowledge throughout. The method by which this is to be achieved is open to every kind of misuse, and is therefore not for the frivolous-minded and immature; nor is it for intellectualists and rationalists. It is appropriate only for thoughtful and reflective people who like to think about what they do and what happens to them—a predilection not to be confused with the morbid brooding of the hypochondriac. As I have indicated above, I have no answer to the multitude of problems that arise when we seek to harmonize the oracle of the I Ching with our accepted scientific canons. But needless to say, nothing ‘occult’ is to be inferred.

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The irrational fullness of life has taught me never to discard anything, even when it goes against all our theories (so short-lived at best) or otherwise admits of no immediate explanation.

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“My position in these matters is pragmatic, and the great disciplines that have taught me the practical usefulness of this viewpoint are psychotherapy and medical psychology. Probably in no other field do we have to reckon with so many unknown quantities, and nowhere else do we become more accustomed to adopting methods that work even though for a long time we may not know why they work. Unexpected cures may arise from questionable therapies and unexpected failures from allegedly reliable methods. In the exploration of the unconscious we come upon very strange things, from which a rationalist turns away with horror, claiming afterward that he did not see anything.

“The irrational fullness of life has taught me never to discard anything, even when it goes against all our theories (so short-lived at best) or otherwise admits of no immediate explanation. It is of course disquieting, and one is not certain whether the compass is pointing true or not; but security, certitude, and peace do not lead to discoveries. It is the same with this Chinese mode of divination. Clearly the method aims at self-knowledge, though at all times it has also been put to superstitious use.”⁸

These brief comments are sufficient to stimulate a healthy curiosity for the initial stages of our evolution as the human race in different parts of the planet and in different cultures. The fulfillment of this desire requires determination and a great joy of learning, for just as Confucius indicated that he wanted to be reborn only to continue to study the I Ching, one might similarly desire to continue to enjoy the celebration of the mysteries again and again.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ Cicero, *Laws II*, xiv, 36 (1), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eleusinian_Mysteries.
- ² *Worshiping the Three Sage Kings and Five Virtuous Emperors—The Imperial Temple of Emperors of Successive Dynasties in Beijing*, (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2007).
- ³ “Fu-Xi” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fuxi>
- ⁴ *The Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus*, sections 1-2. Modernized version of the translation by Sir Isaac Newton, reported by B.J. Dobbs to have been found among his papers. Available at “Emerald Tablet” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_Tablet. See “Newton’s Commentary on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus” in I. Merkel and A.G. Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* (Washington, D.C.: Folger Library, 1988).
- ⁵ “Asclepius, the Perfect Sermon,” 24b (24:1), translated in Walter Scott, *Hermetica*, vol. 1, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1924), 340.
- ⁶ For a discussion of contemporary views on the origin of the I Ching, see S.J. Marshall, *The Mandate of Heaven: Hidden History in the I Ching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); R. Rutt, *Zhouyi: The Book of Changes* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1996); “I Ching: Modernist View” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching#Modernist_view.
- ⁷ “I Ching: Traditional View” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Ching#Traditional_view.
- ⁸ Carl Jung, “Introduction” to Richard Wilhelm, trans., *The I Ching or Book of Changes* (New York: Bollingen Fund, 1975). The full text of the introduction is available at <http://www.iging.com/introl/foreword.htm>.

*Jung suggested that
the Eleusinian Mysteries
were an individuation
machine, which
created individuals, who
like shamans, journey
to another plane.*

