

ONE OR THE UNITY – YI

Since the origins of writing, the number One has been written with one line; a single, horizontal stroke 一. It indicates the number one, alone or added to others, for example, to ten to make 11. But, over a thousand years before our era, One is already being used to mean other things besides solely its quantitative value. It thus designates that which comes first or that which is one of a kind: the singular man (yi ren 一人), the sovereign, without equal, alone, solitary, and who reigns over the multitude of subjects in the Empire. The sovereign is not only sole, since there cannot be two masters, but he is One, the union and unity of all the beings living in the territory. The One is tied to absolute power, which contains and embraces everything. Containing everything, One is at the origin of every being. Embracing everything, he brings them together. His presence gives to each a fundamental meaning, a *raison d'être*.

The character's common meanings reflect its richness: One, one alone, unique, but once, first, first of all, reaching out to a singular goal; to be a thing's whole being. To join forces, bring together, conjoin; unify. The same, equal; always the same, constant, invariable. Pure, unmixed, unaltered, and thus perfect. Complete. Each. Every.

In a more complex written form, which is used in order to prevent against confusion or fraud, One is written 壹, which means: to apply uniquely to, to unite; identical, truthful.

THE TWO OR THE COUPLE 二 ER

Two horizontal strokes together make up the character for two: 二. There is neither variation nor evolution in the way it is written. Its sense also does not change : two, second, secondly.

Fairly early on however, we also see the idea that two is no longer One, that a disparity has been introduced; this may be difference or divergence. It may also become duplicity or inconstancy.

This is where we get the common sense of the word: Two, secondary. Second, assisting. Twice, doubled. Pair, couple. Same, equal to. Double; to make two. Divided; to differ; divergence. Mixed, mitigated, impure. Inconstant, duplicitous.

Although one and one make two in mathematics, and it looks like one written twice, the character for two, 二, does not in any way symbolize two times One, since One is

everything and can absolutely not be doubled or duplicated. The two strokes should thus be considered, symbolically, as the opening of the One, as distinction within unity. They represent a necessary parting, but do not break the common belonging of the two elements.

A specific character exists to designate the couple: liang 兩, two that make a pair. Formerly, it represents a harness for two horses, a carriage yoked to two animals. The character is used for things that come in pairs, like shoes, or for two partners, two people in close relationship, working in intimate collaboration.

Like the Two, the character liang 兩 may be harmony or scission: rupture. Thus a double heart (liang xin 兩心) may be two brothers, to people connected through a strong and affectionate emotional bond and deep affinity; or it may be a heart filled with duplicity.

Two, in complex written form, is 貳 help, second, to assist. To doubt, to dither.

THE TWO OR THE TRAD 三 SAN

The three horizontal strokes 三 that form the character are a simple representation of three as a number or as three as a place in a series.

However, since the oracular inscriptions (circa 1400 BC), this character has designated a group of three, people or spirits, for example, three ancestral spirits or three important dignitaries near the king.

The character evokes a triad. Symbolically in the character three, 三, the two open to allow the product of the couple to appear in the middle. This is the image of their union. Three 三 is not three times one, but Three that make One, or the way of considering unity in its trifold aspect.

This is where we get the common sense of the word: Three, third, triple, triad. Many.

Three expresses the product of the couple and shows its co-penetration. It represents all the possible combinations of yin and yang, and as such it is the number of qi 氣 from which emerge the Dix thousand beings. Three is the

manifestation of One in the multiple.

Three, in complex written form, it is 參 : the triad, a character which signifies to participate, to mix, to form a three part harmony.

FOUR OR THE PARTITION 四 SI

In the oracular inscriptions, the number Four, beyond its quantitative value (four, fourth), is associated from the start, with a fundamental division: that of space under the authority of the King. On Earth, the monarch reigns from the center over the Four great territories which spread out in the Four directions and make up his Kingdom—just as in Heaven, the Great ancestor, supreme power, rules over the Four spirits protecting life on the earth in each of the Four great territories. These spirits are expressed in the Four winds.

Although, for centuries, Four was written with 4 strokes stacked atop one another, according to the model of 2 and 3, the classical writing of Four 四 includes the division 八, within a circle which becomes a square □. This opens the possibility of all subdivisions, like in the eight of the compass rose. From there we get the symbolic value of Four, as the prototype of all distinctions, which leads to the apparition of particular moments in time or specific sectors in space. From this we also get the potentiality of particular moments in time or specific sectors in space.

The Four territories (si fang 四方) are all the directions of space, like the Four seasons (si shi 四時) are the model for all the moments of time. The same character is used for season, hour, and every moment qualified by time (shi 時). In the same way, the same character is used for square, territory, place, placement (*fang* 方).

In complex written form, Four is 肆 : spread out, arrange, exhibit.

FIVE OR CENTRALISATION 五 WU

From the beginning until the 3rd century BC, the writing of the number Five is a cross, a crossing, X, most often framed at top and bottom, 二. The classical writing settled upon the form 五.

From the oracular inscriptions, groups of five are attested to as a sacrifice to a group of Five ancestral spirits or (other interpretation) Five rituals spread out over the course of the year. Groupings by Five continue to serve as a principle in important

series: flavors, sounds, colors, planets..., before becoming, a little before the Christian era, the base for universal correspondences which found Five Element cosmology (wu xing 五行).

Five is thus the number of the centered organization of life, the "repartition" (division and distribution) and the harmonious relationships among the Five qi movements that make up every living being and every phenomenon. It is the number of all series composed upon the model of the Five elements, and of the center. Five regulates the permutations and associations of all qi, organized according to their Five remarkable characteristics.

In complex written form, Five is 伍 : squadron of five men, group of five homes.

SIX OR ORGANIZED FLUX 六 LIU

The archaic writings of Six suggest closure: the roof, the cover, the interior, the residence. It is later understood as entry, penetration, which are qualities specific to yin.

Six serves to put into action the organization initiated by Five. It is the number *par excellence* of that which administers by "repartition" (division and distribution) : the repartition of the yin yang qi into three pairs, whose exchanges form the known universe, at the juncture of heavenly dynamism and of earthly submission. The division of the services of government and administration is based on the model of the Six ministries. The six continuous or broken lines of the hexagrams represent the intertwining of the yin yang qi which make concrete situations of life appear.

Six, is the flux and reflux of animating qi, whose exchanges construct and maintain every space where life is carried out.

Six is thus the base number for the organization of the great animating currents. For natural phenomena, it is to the six kinds of spirits that we sacrifice upon the six ancestral altars. On earth, it is the rivers and waterways. Analogically, in the human body, there are Twelve meridians regulating vital circulation. In the year, there is the cycle of 60 days or of 60 years.

In complex written form, Six is 陸 : dry land, continent, terrestrial pathway (like a road)

SEVEN OR EMERGENCE 七 QI

In the archaic writings, the number Seven resembles a cross upon which the horizontal branch is sometimes quite reduced. We thus find a vertical stroke, an ascent, which crosses or cuts a horizontal stroke of lesser importance. This is where we may see emergence, the yang appearing, the young shoot coming up into the world.

Towards the end of the 3rd century BC, the vertical stroke, from its straight position, bends in its lower part, which gives us the classical character for Seven, 七.

Seven symbolizes the concrete appearance of life force, the vital impulse with its dangers and excesses. All growth contains a potential failure. It is necessary to master this force pushing to emerge so that it doesn't become uncontrolled violence. Seven, qi, is the only number (besides a thousand, qian), that has an aspirated pronunciation.

Seven is thrust, a gushing forth. It is the emergence of a secret inspiration. Yin yang and the Five elements constitute its power, and must maintain an interior order to avoid disorder and disaster. There are Seven superior orifices (of clear yang), Seven emotions, Seven Po souls representing the mental as well as corporeal surging up of life.

In complex written form, Seven is 柒: lacquer tree.

EIGHT OR REPARTITION 八 BA

The separation into two parts, origin of multiple "repartition" (division and distribution) is, for all of time, the sign of eight. Its classical writing, 八 shares much with two 二, insofar as we see, and have always seen, a division of what was One. Eight is division, repartition, and divisibility.

Eight manifests and spreads out the qi and the vital spirits; that which arises from Seven is everywhere, occupies the totality of space and time.

Eight separates and distinguishes the qi. It sets out and fixes a limit on their expansion. Since it is the double of four, Eight affirms the specificity of vital qi. It sets fundamental rules in place. Some examples of the variation of vital qi with Eight are: Eight trigrams, eight winds, eight extraordinary meridians.

In complex written form, Eight is 捌 : tear, split, divide.

NINE OR ACCOMPLISHMENT 九 JIU

Nine is the arrival of completion. Everything has been set out, organized, achieved. In Nine months, the seed planted in the earth has grown into a plant ready to be harvested. It has matured using all the resources its roots have to offer, and nothing can make it grow more or lighten the weight of its wealth. Nine is the number that expresses total unfolding, the greatest expression of yang, but also exhaustion, growing old.

The interpretations of its writing vary in function to with the meaning we wish to retain. We may see here the wilting or unfurling of the plant. The oldest writings display a hook, a curve.

Besides its numerical meaning, the character for Nine, jiu 九, is also used to mean a large number forming a complete whole, lots of things assembled together. Its homophony with the character jiu 久 : “that which lasted a long time”, “old”, sometimes makes it seem to say “old”. Its presence in several characters gives them a sense of gathering together. This is also true for jiu 鳩, the turtle dove, a character formed from bird (鳥) and Nine (九), and which also means to unite, assemble, gather. Or also the character kui 榑 which means, junction where the Nine roads come together.

In complex written form, Nine is 玖 : black quartz.

TEN OR THE RECOMPOSED UNITY 十 SHI

The primitive writing for the number Ten is a vertical stroke. Later, a bulge or a small horizontal stroke is added, probably to avoid any possible confusion from a simple slip of the writing utensil.

The quantitative value appears to dominate for centuries. Even if the vertical trait may evoke Heaven, or the movement between Heaven and Earth, only progressively do the symbolic content of these notions become enriched.

The cross, designated by the classical character for Ten 十 may be understood as the intersection of a North-West line with an East-West one. The Four directions and the center are thus represented. It is the totality of that which is expressed on Earth, the perfect arrangement.

However, verticality ties easily to Heaven, as horizontality ties to Earth. If we consider the crossing of the vertical line with the horizontal one, the classical writing of Ten **十**, may easily be interpreted as the totality of what comes and descend from Heaven and the totality of what is received and spreads out across the Earth, as the totality of Heaven-Earth. Ten thus takes the meaning of whole, of a complete and perfect whole, in the image of Heaven-Earth.

Ten thus also puts all the distinguished elements of the composition of life into unity. It is likewise the number of man, one of a kind and expressing the unity of cosmic life.

In complex written form, Ten is **拾** : to gather, assemble, arrange.