

CUTTING THROUGH HEXAGRAM 23

(The following article mainly serves as an exercise in showing the importance of the variant texts of the Yijing, loan characters and homonyms.)

There are several stories about the etymology of *bo* 剝, the name of hexagram 23.

[Han Boering](#) says:

Left: a tree (lower part) cut down by an axe (upper part, left). Right: a knife.
Derivation: peel a cut-down tree.
(*De I Tjing voor de 21ste Eeuw*, p. 175)



[Alfred Huang](#) says:

The ideograph of *bo* consists of two parts. The main part, on the right, is a picture of an ancient weapon, *dao*, a knife. The left part was originally the character *bo*, providing the sound. Later this character was replaced by *lü*, the name of King Wen's famous sword. *Lü* also means a piece of carved wood. These two images represent an act of carving and engraving. During carving and engraving, pieces of wood or stone fall away.
(*The Complete I Ching*, p. 206)

These explanations are based on the form as found in the [Shuowen](#), which is written in small seal script. The Shuo Wen itself says:

裂也。从刀从泉。泉，刻割也。泉亦聲。

Split/crack. From 刀 ('knife') and 泉. 泉 means 'carve' and 'cut'. 泉 also indicates the sound.

When it comes to meanings of characters the Shuowen can be considered reasonably reliable, but for etymological information you should not turn to this book, the given explanations are often wrong or incomplete. But in the case of *bo* the Shuo Wen is right when it says that the 泉 part represents the pronunciation. We will talk about this later in this article.

The character *bo* in its complete form does not appear on bone inscriptions, but the component 泉 does. On bones it looks a bit like the small seal form. The [新編甲骨文字典](#) dictionary says about the form of this character:

象汲水之輶輪形，𠄎象桔槔，○象汲水之具，丶象水滴。卜辭泉借用作麓，泉、禁、麓混用。
Picture of a winch for lifting water (from a well), 𠄎 is the handle, ○ is the means which carries the water, 丶 are drops of water. In bone inscriptions 泉 is used as loan for 麓; 泉, 禁 and 麓 are used mixed.
([新編甲骨文字典](#), p. 418)

The last three characters from this quote, 泉, 禁 and 麓 are variant characters from each other, and all three mean '(a place at) the foot of a hill or mountain'. This is the meaning that is most used in bone inscriptions. All three characters are pronounced *lu*, and this is probably the reason why they are used as loans for each other. In later periods we find the component 泉 on bronzes in almost the same form as on bones, but then the most used meanings are *lu* 祿, 'good luck' and *lu* 麓, 'a name for an official position regarding mountains and forests' ([金文常用字典](#), p. 712-713).

But is the component 𠂔 important for the meaning of the character 剝, the name of hexagram 23? We have seen the the description of the form, the shape of this character, does not have any connection to the meanings for which the component was used. This is a strong clue that this component (as the Shuowen indicates) has a phonetic function: it is a pointer to the pronunciation. Not that it ends here, in the case of 剝 it makes things more complicated. Most characters which have 𠂔 as (main) component are pronounced *lu*, but 剝 is pronounced *bo* or *bao*. This is probably a clue that 剝, or its component 𠂔, should be considered a loan for another character which has the sound *bo*, *bao*, or something close to that.

There are other facts which point to this. The Shuowen gives a variant of 剝 which contains the component *bu* 卜 (see the long image right to the quote from the Shuowen above, click to enlarge). Where the Shuowen gets this from is not known, there are no known texts in which this character is used. But there is one (yes, one) fragment of a bone inscription in which this character is used.

[Ma Rusen 馬如森](#) says of this character:

字象刀刻卜字之形，卜標聲，本義應是刻裂。 (...) 卜辭義：待考。 "...剝...七月..."。現只見此一條。

The picture of this character has the appearance of 'carving bone characters', *bu* 卜 marks the sound, the original meaning might be 'carve and split'. (...) Meaning on oracle bones: has yet to be researched. "...carve...seventh month..." This is the only line of text that we have.

(殷墟甲骨學-帶你走進甲骨文的世界, p. 304)



This little information would be hardly useful if we didn't have some other texts which, in combination with this variant 𠂔, put the meaning of 剝 and hexagram 23 in a different light. For this we have to look into a few Yijing texts which have been excavated during archaeological digs in the last 30 years. The [Fuyang Yijing](#) which has been excavated in 1977 in the vicinity of Fuyang 阜陽 gives a different name for hexagram 23. In this variant text it is called *pu* 僕. The most significant meanings of this character are:

- 侍從，供役使的人
a servant, a person who does labour
- 古代把人分為十等，僕為第九等
with people one of ten ranks (between employer and employee; starting with the king and ending with the cheapest slave HM), *pu* 僕 is the ninth rank.
- 駕車的人
driver
- 謙詞。用於第一人稱
humiliating title. Used in first person.
- 古代官名
in antiquity the title of a government position (like driver, servant or slave; Hucker, *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, p. 394 HM)
([漢語大字典](#), p. 218)

These meanings show that a *pu* did not have a high position. But more important is the pronunciation of this character, *pu*, and the fact that it is another name for hexagram 23. The Fuyang Yijing is not the only source in which 剝 is replaced by 僕. The version of the [Guizang 歸藏](#) which was excavated in 1993 does not contain hexagram 23, but there are sources which quote hexagram 23 from the Guizang - and mention that this hexagram is called *pu* 僕 (Han Ziqiang 韓自強, [阜陽漢簡《周易》研究](#), p. 121; Zhu Xingguo 朱兴国, [三易通義](#), p. 341).

The two characters are also exchanged in another excavated text. At the second line of hexagram 56 the text mentions 僕:

得童僕
Gets a young servant.

But the [Mawangdui 馬王堆](#) version mentions 剝 instead of 僕 (Deng Qiubai 邓球柏, [帛书周易校释](#), p. 375).

[Lu Deming 陸德明](#) (556-627) read 剝 as 撲, a variant of 僕, in [Song M154](#) of the Shijing 詩經:

八月剝棗.....
In the eighth month we beat the jujube....

Lu translates 剝 as *pu* 撲, meaning 'to beat' (Karlgren, *Loan Characters in Pre-Han texts*, entry 1264. Karlgren does not agree with Lu's reading). 撲 is a variant of 僕 (阜陽漢簡《周易》研究, p. 121. In his translation of the Fuyang Yijing (forthcoming) Edward Shaughnessy translates 僕 also as 'to beat'). We also know that 剝 is used in the meaning of *pu* 支, which means 'to beat' (漢語大字典, p. 346; Wang Li 王力, *王力古漢語字典*, p. 73).

剝 and 僕 are exchangeable, which brings us to the earlier mentioned variant character from the Shuowen and the bone fragment, the character 𠂔: the assumed pronunciation of this character, *bu*, is almost the same as the pronunciation of 僕, *pu*, which strengthens the link between the characters. But reading *bo* 剝 as *pu* 僕 has consequences for the translation of the text of hexagram 23. The character *bo* 剝 appears in five of the six line texts, and these texts will get another reading.

<i>Received text</i>	<i>MWD text</i>	<i>Fuyang text</i>
1. 剝牀以足.蔑貞.凶.	剝臧以足.藏貞.兇.	僕.....足.藏貞兇.卜...
2. 剝床以辨.蔑貞.凶.	剝臧以辯.a貞.兇.	僕牀以辨.藏貞...
3. 剝之.無咎.	剝.無咎.	
4. 剝床以膚.凶.	剝臧以膚.兇.	僕牀以父.兇...
6. 碩果不食.君子得輿.小人剝廬.	石果不食.君子得車.小人剝蘆.	碩果不食.君子...

We have seen that 剝/僕 has the meaning of 'servant (of low rank)', and that would make 剝 a noun. But that gives a problem with certain line texts, because the context of these texts show that it is a verb:

(3) 剝之.無咎.
剝 it. No mistake.

The character *zhi* 之 can have the meaning of 'it' as personal pronoun ('he makes it') at the end of a sentence, and in that case it comes after a verb.

(6) 小人剝廬.
The little man 剝 the hut.

Xiaoren 小人 is a noun, just like *lu* 廬. Because if this the sentence gets the standard subject-verb-object pattern.

This shows that 剝 is a verb in the Yijing. The most used meanings of this character are 'peel/cut (fruit and vegetables), remove the outside, cut in halves', but a hut is not easily peeled or cut in halves. The Mawangdui text doesn't talk about a *lu*, 廬, a hut, but about a *lu* 蘆. The characters look almost the same, but the latter has the 艹 component instead of the 宀 component. The component 艹 is

the 'abbreviation' of the full form character 艸, and characters with this component often have to do with vegetation and crops, while 宀 has to do with housing. According to the 漢語大字典 some of the meanings of 蘆 are:

- [蘆菔]菜名. 即蘿蔔
lufu 蘆菔, the name of a vegetable, namely luobo 蘿蔔 (radish)
- 薺根
the root of several kinds of plants
- 漏蘆
the same as loulu 漏蘆 (a plant with long stems and small flowers. Used for medical purposes)
(漢語大字典, p. 3325)

The most plausible meaning might be the first one, 'radish'. Probably it refers to the white radish with large roots, which is quite common in China. In [Song M210](#) from the Shijing 蘆 can also be read as 'radish', where the traditional rendering is 'hut':

中田有蘆(蘆), 疆場有瓜.....

In the centre of the field is the radish, at the borders the melons.....



The complete text of line six will then be translated as

(6) 碩果不食. 君子得輿. 小人剝蘆.

A large fruit is not eaten. The junzi obtains a carriage. The xiaoren cuts the radish.

Here we translate 剝 as 'to cut'. Let's see if this also holds for the other lines which have 剝:

(1), (2), (4) 剝牀.....

cut - bed

Chuang 牀 means 'bed', which would turn the translation of these three lines start with 'cut - bed', 'cut the bed' or something like that. That sounds a bit strange, 'bed' doesn't really fit 'to cut'. The MWD version doesn't talk about a bed but about *zang* 臧, a character with almost the same pronunciation. The Fuyang Yijing does mention a bed, but in his book 阜陽漢簡《周易》研究 Han Ziqiang 韓自強 gives a detailed exposé about homonyms and he concludes that characters like *chuang* 牀, *zang* 臧 and *zhuang* 壯 can all be read as *qiang* 戕, 'to kill' or 'to wound'. The composition 僕牀 in the Fuyang Yijing is read by Han as 'wounding the servant' or 'the wounded servant', and the harm to the servant is inflicted by beating him (as we have seen 剝/僕 is also used in the meaning of 撲 or 支, 'to beat'). Han then subtly remarks that earlier many people arrived at statements that were not convincing, but because of the Fuyang and Mawangdui Yijings it suddenly is all so obvious. That is somewhat exaggerated, because the grammar of the line texts show that 剝/僕 should be translated as a verb and not as a noun, like Han does. If we sustain that for 剝/僕, but accept his assumption that 牀 should be read as 戕, 'to wound' (and Han knows to substantiate this quite well; it should also be noted that the component 爿 is a picture of a bed, and it is related to 𠂔, which on oracle bones depicted a person lying in bed; characters with this component often have to do with illnesses or other inflictions to the body), then the remaining lines are translated as follows:

(1) 剝牀以足. 蔑貞. 凶.

By cutting wounded at the foot. Insignificant, contemptuous divination. Misfortune.

(2) 剝牀以辨. 蔑貞. 凶.

By cutting wounded at the kneecap.

(Following Han, who says that *bian* 辨 and MWD *bian* 辯 have to be read as loan for *bin* 贛)

(3) 剝之.無咎.

Cutting it. No mistake.

(4) 剝牀以膚.凶.

By cutting wounded at the jaws. Misfortune.

(Following Han, who dictates that *fu* 膚 should be read as loan for *fu* 輔, 'jaw'. It can also mean 'the back of the knee'; 漢語大字典, p. 3533)

Conclusion

The contexts for which these line texts are meant are not explicitly indicated, as is so often the case with the Yijing. But there is a practice which is often mentioned in the Yijing and which could have a connection with hexagram 23: the practice of ancestor worship. We know that the ancestors often received copious offerings with all kinds of food - meat, fish, vegetables, fruit. The preparation of the food was also part of the ritual. Imagine that during the cutting of the food you would wound yourself: a bad omen: misfortune! At the third line it is going okay, so 'no mistake'. At the sixth line the meaning of the text is also symbolic: a large fruit will have to be cut before it can be eaten. In the same text, as well as in other instances in the Yijing, the *junzi* is mentioned against the *xiaoren*. The *junzi* has transport and does not have to work, the hard labour passes him by. The *xiaoren*, the common people have to do the hard work. Both have their function and use, and for the right execution of the ritual both will have to take their proper position. That is how the high is connected with the low.