


dinsdag, 20 juni 2006

THE MOLE CRICKET

 The *shishu* 鼯鼠 animal in the fourth line of hexagram 35 is most often recognized as some sort of rat, mouse or hamster. Even in old China there was speculation about the true meaning of this word: what animal did the author(s) of the Zhouyi refer to? The word 鼯鼠 is quite rare, we hardly find it in other old books. But the Mawangdui Yijing might help us to find the meaning that the authors intended.

The first character 鼯 is very often substituted by 碩, and the word 碩鼠 is much more common. In fact, in the [Harvard-Yenching edition](#) of the Yijing we find 碩鼠 instead of 鼯鼠. [Update 25-6: [Steve Marshall](#) informed me that the original 1935 printed edition of the Harvard-Yenching edition (which I do not have) does not use 碩, just as most - if not all - Yijing editions it uses 鼯. However, it does contain a footnote which says "鼯一作碩", "鼯 is also written as 碩". It seems they applied this footnote in their electronic version of the text.]

In the Shijing 詩經 there is a poem (M113) in which the animal plays an important role:

碩鼠碩鼠、無食我黍。

Most [translations](#) of the Shijing translate 碩鼠 as 'large rat': "Large rats, large rats, do not eat our millet".

Another character which is often used for 鼯 is 梧. On [this website](#) Tang dynasty scholar Yang Liang 楊倞 is quoted, saying "梧鼠當為鼯鼠", "梧鼠 should be 鼯鼠", as commentary to the sentence "梧鼠五技而窮", "The flying squirrel has five talents, but it is reduced to extremity" (tr. [John Knoblock](#), p. 139), in the Quan Xue 勸學 Chapter of the Xunzi.

Knoblock translates 梧鼠 as 'flying squirrel'. The oldest description of 梧鼠 as a flying squirrel comes from the Erya 爾雅 dictionary, in which the animal is described as

形似松鼠，尾長，腹旁有飛膜，目前肢之腕起，至後肢跗部而達尾根，能在樹上飛躍。

Similar in shape to a squirrel, with a long tail. On the sides of the belly there are membranes for flying, which run from the wrist of the front legs to the end of the hind legs. They enable the animal to leap (litt. 'fly-leap' HM) from the top of trees.

(source) [Update 22-06: I do not find this sentence in my electronic copy of the Erya, I suspect it comes from [Guo Pu](#) 郭璞's commentary to the Erya. The phrase 鼯鼠 does occur in the Erya but is described as *yiyou* 夷由, 'move unhurriedly, hesitated, and/or with self-contentment' (漢語大詞典 Vol. 2.1496-A). A meaning which would also fit the context of the sentence in 35-4.]



But if the 鼯鼠/碩鼠/梧鼠 refers to a 'flying squirrel', then the translation of the poem from the Shijing becomes a little awkward: "Flying squirrel, flying squirrel, do not eat our millet". I would not expect a flying squirrel to eat millet, because it is an animal which lives in the forest. In the Shijing, and most likely also in the Yijing, another animal must be intended.

According to the Shuowen a 鼯鼠 is a 五技鼠, a 'Five Skills Rat'. In a small rhyming verse the abilities of the Five Skills Rat are mentioned:

能飛不能過屋， Néng fēi bùnéng guò wū,
 能緣不能窮木， néng yuán bùnéng qióng mù,
 能游不能渡谷， néng yóu bùnéng dù gǔ,
 能穴不能掩身， néng xué bùnéng yǎn shēn,
 能走不能先人。 néng zǒu bùnéng xiān rén.

*It can fly, but it cannot pass the roof,
 It can climb, but it cannot reach the top of a tree,
 It can swim, but it cannot cross a gorge,
 It can dig, but not (deep enough to) shelter its body,
 It can run, but never outrun a man.*
 (see also [Knoblock](#), p. 270 n. 33)

It is often thought that the Five Skills Rat is the same as the flying squirrel, because the description of the poem describes this animal quite well. But the word 鼯鼠 has one other meaning, a meaning we never read about in Western translations of the Yijing.

The Shuowen gives an additional meaning of 鼯鼠, it describes it as a *lougu* 螻蛄, which is in the West known as a mole cricket.

The mole crickets comprise a family (Gryllotalpidae) of thick-bodied insects about 3-5 cm (1-2 inches) long, with large beady eyes and shovel-like forelimbs highly developed for burrowing and swimming. They are also equipped with wings, and the ability to fly. (...) Mole crickets are omnivores, feeding on grubs, worms, roots, and grasses. (...) Mole crickets are relatively common, but because they are nocturnal and spend nearly all their lives underground in extensive tunnel systems, they are rarely seen. They inhabit agricultural fields, rice paddies, lawns, and golf courses. Five out of the seven species present in North America are immigrants from Europe, Asia, and South America, and are commonly considered pests. In Asia, however, they are sometimes used as food (fried), and are considered quite delicious.



([Wikipedia](#))

The mole cricket is considered a pest because it eats the roots of crops. Considering this, the poem of the Shijing might refer to a mole cricket. But since the word 鼯鼠 contains the character shu 鼠 for 'rat', it is equally possible that the poem refers to some sort of rat. The same goes for the Yijing; the complete sentence in which the word occurs does not give a clue about the intended meaning. Surprisingly the Hanyu Da Cidian 漢語大詞典 refers to hexagram 35 as a source for the meaning of 'mole cricket'. It quotes the Zhouyi commentary of [Kong Yingda](#) 孔穎達 (574-648), which says

鼯鼠有五能而不成伎之蟲也。

The 鼯鼠 is an insect which has five abilities but can not accomplish a talent.
 (漢語大詞典, Vol. 12.1412A)

[Update 25-6: The 周易大辭典 dictionary attributes this exact phrase to [Wang Bi](#) (p. 113), but I can't find anything

that relates to it in [Richard Lynn's translation](#) of Wang Bi's Yijing commentary, nor do I find it in an [electronic version](#) of Wang's commentary.]

Although Kong Yingda is sure about the meaning of 'mole cricket' we must acknowledge the fact that the meaning of 'rat, mouse' etc. is still equally valid. Fortunately the Mawangdui version of the Yijing helps us to decide. The MWD does not talk of a 鼯鼠, but of a *zhishu* 炙鼠. According to the HYDCD this can be a roasted rat, but it is also another name for..... 螻蛄, the mole cricket (漢語大詞典, Vol 7.39-B). The HYDCD quotes the [Guang Ya 廣雅](#), a dictionary from the San Guo 三國 period (220-265).

The fact that both 鼯鼠 and 炙鼠 are different names for the mole cricket convinces me that line 4 of hexagram 35 also refers to the mole cricket, and that this is the meaning the author(s) of the Zhouyi intended. What this means for the complete sentence "晉如鼯鼠" is something I will try to address in my upcoming article about hexagram 35.