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The Lessons of the *Qian* Hexagram in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* for Leaders

(words: 1852)

A: The topic of our presentation today is The Lessons of the *Qian* Hexagram in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* for Leaders.

B: As we know, *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* is a book about governing the country. It was compiled by the Tang Emperor Taizong (598-649) and his ministers like Wei Zheng and Yu Shinan. The editors selected important sayings and examples from the past books about self-cultivation, family management, and ruling the country. The purpose was to help Emperor Taizong learn and use them. From this point of view, *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* is a guide for emperors on how to rule, and it serves as a reference for future leaders.

A: And the *Qian* hexagram in the *I Ching* (*Zhou Yi*) is known as the most lucky among the sixty-four hexagrams. Mr. Lu Shaogong said in his book, ‘Among the sixty-four hexagrams, many have meanings like regret, stinginess, bad luck, or punishment, but only the *Qian* hexagram has all three lower lines as lucky and all three upper lines as favourable.’ This shows how important *Qian* is in the *I Ching*. Therefore, today’s presentation focuses on how this important hexagram is presented in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*. Which key verses about *Qian* hexagram did Wei Zheng and others select for Emperor Taizong to learn? How did the ideas about humility in these verses influence Emperor Taizong’s actual ruling? Based on this, today’s presentation uses the *Qian* hexagram related texts in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China* as the main material to explore the moral ideas inside, how they shaped Taizong’s style of governance, and what lessons the spirit of humility can offer to leaders today.

B: Before we get into the main topic, I would like to mention that for today’s talk, I am mainly using Richard Wilhelm’s English translation. In places where I felt his translation was not quite accurate, I have adjusted it myself.

The Concept of *Qian* as Presented in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*

A: I made a simple table showing the parts of the *Qian* Hexagram included in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*. It only has three sections: the *Daxiang* 大象 statement, the *Tuan* 彖 statement, and two *Yao* 爻 statements—the Initial Six and the Nine in the Third Place. From the Yao statements, I picked out two key ideas, which I will talk about next.

Books Text	<i>The Governing Principles of Ancient China</i>	<i>I Ching</i>
The Judgment (卦辭)		謙，亨，君子有終。 MODESTY creates success. The superior man carries things through.
The Images (大象辭)	地中有山，謙。君子以裒多益寡， 稱物平施。	地中有山，謙。君子以裒 多益寡，稱物平施。 Within the earth, a mountain: The image of MODESTY. Thus the superior man reduces that which is too much, And arguments that which is too little. He weights things and makes them equal.
The Judgment 彖辭	謙，亨。天道下濟而光明，地道 卑而上行。天道虧盈而益謙，地 道變盈而流謙，鬼神害盈而福 謙，人道惡盈而好謙。謙，尊而 光，卑而不可逾，君子之終也。	謙，亨。天道下濟而光明， 地道卑而上行。天道虧盈 而益謙，地道變盈而流謙， 鬼神害盈而福謙，人道惡 盈而好謙。謙，尊而光， 卑而不可逾，君子之終也。 It is the law of heaven to make fullness empty and to make full what is modest;

		when the sun is at its zenith, it must, according to the law of heaven, turn toward its setting, and at its nadir it rises toward a new dawn. In obedience to the same law, the moon when it is full begins to wane, and when empty of light it waxes again. This heavenly law works itself out in the fates of man also. It is the law of earth to alter the full and to contribute to the modest. High mountains are worn down by the water, and the valleys are filled up. It is the law of fate to undermine what is full and to prosper the modest. And men also hate fullness and love the modest. The destinies of men are subject to immutable laws that must fulfil themselves. But man has it in his power to shape his fate, according as his behaviour exposes him to the influence of benevolent or of destructive forces. When a man holds a high position and is nevertheless modest, he
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		shines with the light of wisdom; if he is in a lowly position and is modest, he cannot be passed by. Thus the superior man can carry out his work to the end without boasting of what he has achieved.
<i>First Yin</i> (爻辭) 初六	謙謙君子，用涉大川，吉。	謙謙君子，用涉大川，吉。 Six at the beginning means: A superior man modest about his modesty. May cross the great water. Good fortune.
Commentary on the images 小象辭	謙謙君子，卑以自牧也。	謙謙君子，卑以自牧也。 A dangerous enterprise, such as the crossing of a great stream, is made much more difficult if many claims and considerations have to be taken into account. On the other hand, the task is easy if it is attended to quickly and simply. Therefore the unassuming attitude of mind that goes with modesty fits a man to accomplish even difficult undertakings: he imposes no demands or stipulations but settles matters easily and quickly. Where no

		claims are put forward, no resistances arise.
<i>Second Yin</i> 六二		鳴謙，貞吉。 Six in the second place means: Modesty that comes to expression. Perseverance brings good fortune.
Commentary on the images 小象辭		鳴謙貞吉，中心得也。
<i>Third Yang</i> 九三	勞謙，君子有終，吉。	Nine in the third place means: A superior man of modesty and merit. Carries things to conclusion. Good fortune. 勞謙，君子有終，吉。
Commentary on the images 小象辭	勞謙君子，萬民服也。	A distinguished name is readily earned by great achievements. If a man allows himself to be dazzled by fame, he will soon be criticized, and difficulties will arise. If, on the contrary, he remains modest despite his merit, he makes himself beloved and wins the support necessary for carrying his through to the end. 勞謙君子，萬民服也。
<i>Fourth Yin</i> 六四		Six in the fourth place means: Nothing that would not further modesty. In

		movement. 无不利撝謙。
小象辭 Commentary on the images		无不利撝謙，不違則也。
<i>Fifth Yin</i> 六五		Six in the fifth place means: No boasting of wealth before one's neighbour. It is favourable to attack with force. Nothing that would not further. 不富以其鄰，利用侵伐，无不利。
Commentary on the images 小象辭		利用侵伐，征不服也。
<i>Top Yin</i> 上六		Six at the top means: Modesty that comes to expression. It is favourable to set armies marching. To chastise one's own city and one's country. 鳴謙，利用行師，征邑國。
Commentary on the images 小象辭		鳴謙，志未得也，可用行師，征邑國也。

1. Humility as A Moral Quality

B: Humility is an inner virtue. But if we are humble, what effect does it have on ourselves and on others? In *Qian* Hexagram – *First Yin*, the *Commentary on the Images* says:

Superior man maintains a lowly stance to nurture his own virtue.

First, let's look at the original Chinese lines. Here, '謙謙' means 'utmost humility.' Later, the Cheng Yi (1033 — 1107) explained, 'To conduct oneself with utmost humility is to be accepted by all.' This emphasize that if a leader maintains an extremely humble attitude, he will win the trust of his subordinates or the public. Even in dangerous situations, he can remain safe because people will come to his aid. Cheng Yi also commented, 'Dwelling in a lowly and gentle position is the norm...' This shows that humility in taking a lower position is seen as the natural state of a leader, and their mistakes will be less noticeable only when they consistently interact with their subordinates in this way, which helps keep errors to a minimum.

B: At this point, we might wonder—how did Emperor Taizong actually put this teaching into practice in his daily life? In the historical record, we catch a few glimpses of the answer.

A: There is a story from *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*: In the early years of the Zhenguan era (627 — 649), Emperor Taizong (598 — 649) of Tang (618 — 907) was concerned that the country might not remain stable and orderly. Therefore, he often encouraged his ministers to offer honest advice without hesitation, and whenever he heard such advice, he would gladly act on it. Wei Zheng (580 — 643) said: 'You, Majesty, once wanted to execute Yuan Lvshi (date unknown). Sun Fujia 孫伏伽 (d. 658) believed that according to the law, he should not be put to death. So, you adapted his suggestion and awarded him the garden of Princess Lanling (a vast amount of riches). At that time, someone who said that your reward was too generous, but you replied, "Since I ascended the throne, there has been no one who came to remonstrate with me, so I am rewarding him." This behavior made ministers feel that the emperor was willing to accept suggestions.' It can be seen that 'being adept at heeding counse' stands as an expression of Emperor Taizong's humbleness.

But, once, Huangfu Decan 皇甫德參 (fl. 626 — 649) advised the emperor do not renovate the Luoyang Palace because it would cost a great deal of money and exhaust the laborers. Weizheng said: 'You felt unhappy and resentful, and you did not reward him for his courage in giving you advice. Only reluctantly did you follow his suggestion.' After hearing Wei Zheng's words, Emperor Taizong of Tang accepted his suggestions and corrected his

own shortcomings.

B: From the story above, it can be seen that Emperor Taizong obviously showed unhappiness at his minister's remonstrances in the middle and late periods of the Zhenguan era. But he was able to adjust his attitude and correct his own faults.

So, for a leader, humility is not just about outward behaviour. It is an inner path of self-cultivation. A leader who practices this over the long term will know his position, his responsibilities, and his limits. From this self-awareness comes a deep sense of reflection. In short, a leader who can do this will be more understanding toward his subordinates. The 'humility' described in this hexagram is not about lowering oneself to please others. It is a quality of character rooted in self-cultivation. A leader who holds to this path of humility will naturally give others more space and dignity. And in turn, he will surely earn the trust and support of his people.

2. Beneficial Effects of Humility

A: Next, we could turn the view to *Qian* Hexagram –*Third Yang*, the *Commentary on the Images* says:

The humble superior man, though accomplished, earns the willing submission of all the people.

B: Here, in *Understanding the Book of Changes*, Fu Lipu explains, 'With extraordinary achievements, who could say it is not deserved? As the saying goes, "One general's fame is built on the bones of ten thousand." If one's glory is founded on the suffering of countless households, how could the people truly submit? The humility superior man, when the court is distributing rewards, attributes all the credit to those who died in service, declines rewards for himself, and takes no personal gain. In doing so, he earns not only the respect of the living but also the gratitude of the dead.'

From this we can see that this submission is not just about physical submission, but rather a heartfelt admiration and respect from those in lower positions. The 'people' here, in a narrower sense, refers to the ministers at court. In a broader sense, it can also refer to leaders of other nations, who, moved by his virtue, willingly acknowledge his authority.

A: According to *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, in the early period of Taizong

reign as emperor, he appointed outstanding minister, such as Fang Xuanling (579—648), Du Ruhui (585—630) and Wei Zheng. These capable men assisted him in governing the country. Emperor Taizong of Tang was able to put talented people in important positions and improved various systems, which made the people lived in peace and contentment. All the Yi and Di tribes witnessed his virtuous governance and willingly submitted to him. Based on statistics, 1.2 million people were willing to follow him.

When a leader consistently follows the way of humility, it naturally shows in his conduct. As a result, both superiors and subordinates admire him greatly. This is also one reason why even foreign tribes were willing to follow Emperor Taizong.

B: So overall, humility in virtue and humility in merit work together as form and function. Without the cultivation of humble virtue, one cannot achieve humble merit; without the influence of humble merit, the effect of humble virtue cannot be seen. For leaders in high positions, humble virtue and humble merit form a positive cycle: through self-cultivation, they win the admiration and trust of others. From this, we can see why Wei Zheng, out of the six line statements in the *Qian* Hexagram, chose these two for Emperor Taizong to study. I believe their aim was to guide Taizong to, through personal cultivation, achieve the ultimate goal of winning the respect of all nations.

In addition, my view of humility here is largely in line with Alexis McLeod's discussion in *Humility in Early Confucianism*. He said, 'Humility has a relational or secondary function linked with other virtues.' While humility is not the most frequently mentioned concept in the Confucian classics, it is directly connected to core Confucian values such as *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (righteousness), *zhong* (loyalty), and *shu* (reciprocity). Through this study of the *Qian* Hexagram, I have come to see even more clearly that while humility is admirable in anyone, it is especially precious in a leader. This is not only because a leader's position makes it difficult for him to maintain humility at all times, but also because, if he can consistently treat others with humility, the impact will be both profound and far-reaching.

3. Conclusion

A: In summary, based on the partial records of the line statements of the Humility Hexagram in *Essential Records from the Books*, we can see compilers, Wei Zheng, intended to encourage Emperor Taizong of Tang to take humility as a moral quality as the foundation of self-cultivation, and to implement the spirit of humility in governance practices. Ultimately,

there aim was to achieve a harmonious society where leaders and subordinates are united. Therefore, based on Emperor Taizong of Tang's conduct and the teachings of the *Qian* Hexagram, we have distilled three recommendations for adoption by today's leaders:

1. Cultivate humility as a core virtue: Make humility the foundation of your self-cultivation. Only when humility is deeply ingrained can it produce lasting beneficial effects in governance or leadership.
2. Listen attentively and care for your people: Value the perspectives of others, especially those of your subordinates, and be open to constructive advice. Show genuine care for their well-being and development. This not only strengthens loyalty and morale but also ensures that decisions are informed by diverse insights.
3. Avoid claiming credit for yourself: When achievements are made, attribute success to your subordinates and superiors rather than taking the glory. Such generosity in sharing credit builds trust, fosters mutual respect, and inspires continued dedication from the team.

The Lessons of the *Qian* Hexagram in The Governing Principles of Ancient China for Leaders

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Date : 13 Aug. 2025



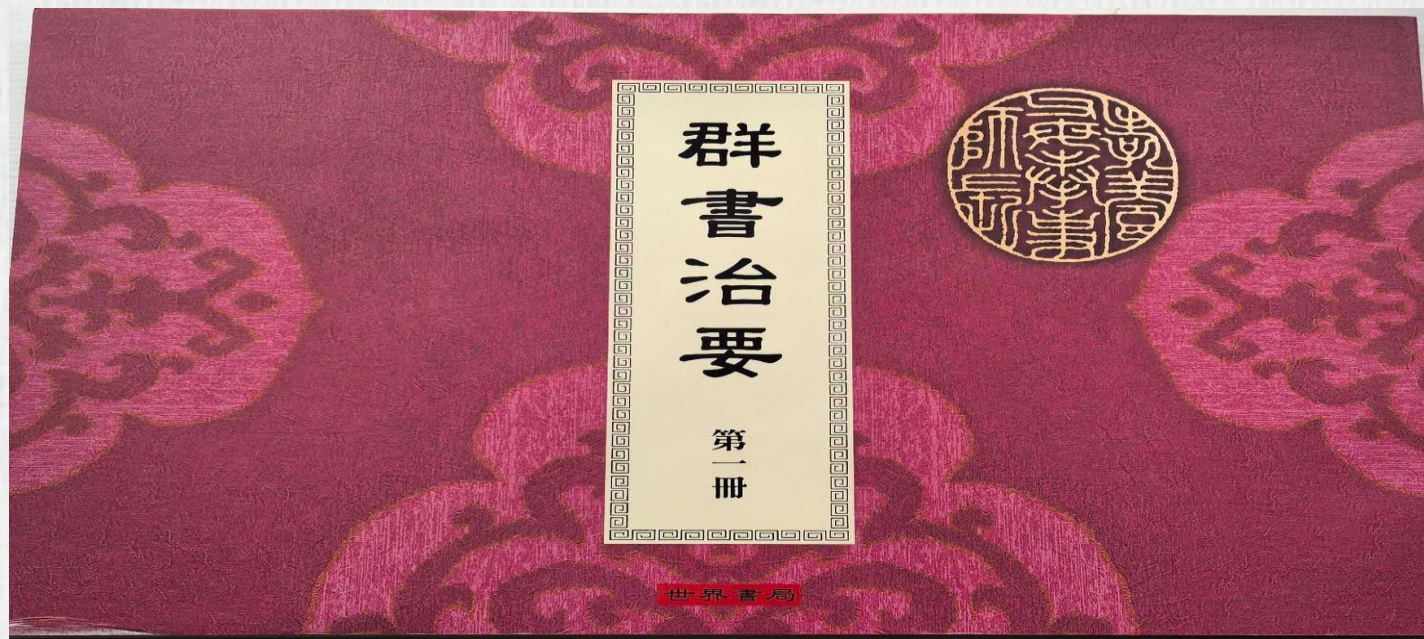


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- II. The Concept of *Qian*
- III. Conclusion

I. Introduction





Tang Emperor Taizong (598–649)

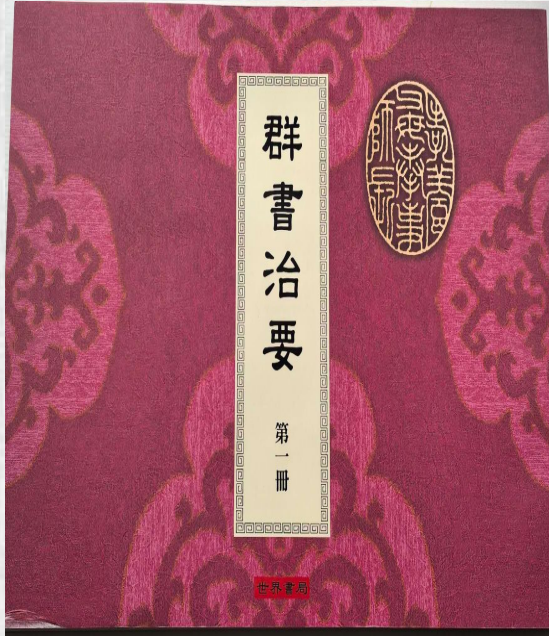


Wei Zheng(580–643)



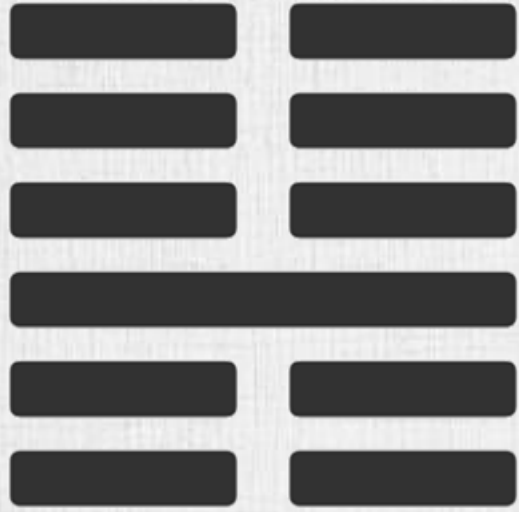
Yu Shinan(558–638)



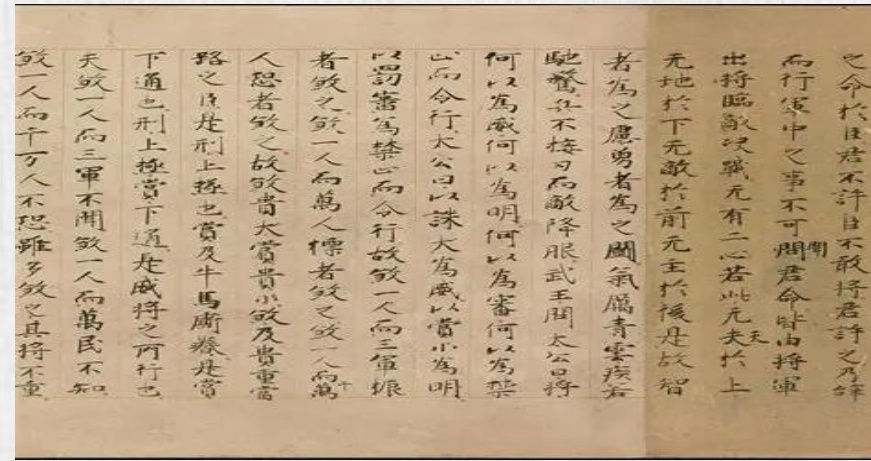
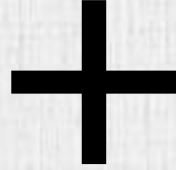
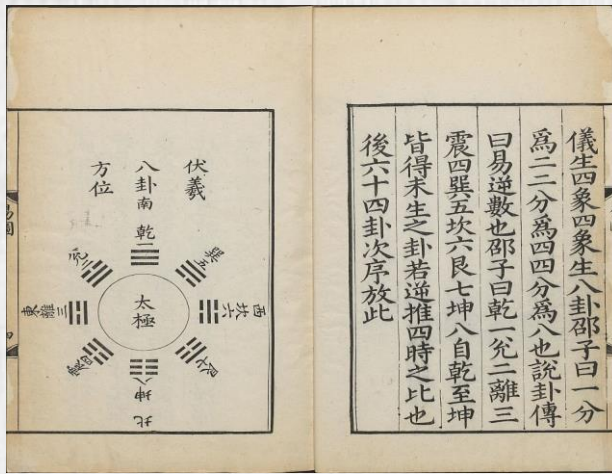


- Self-cultivation
- Family management
- Ruling the country





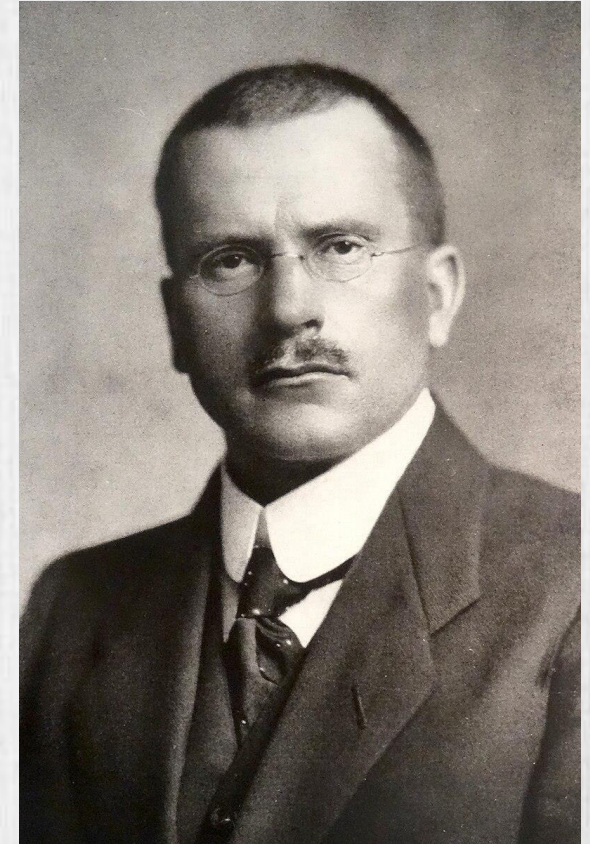
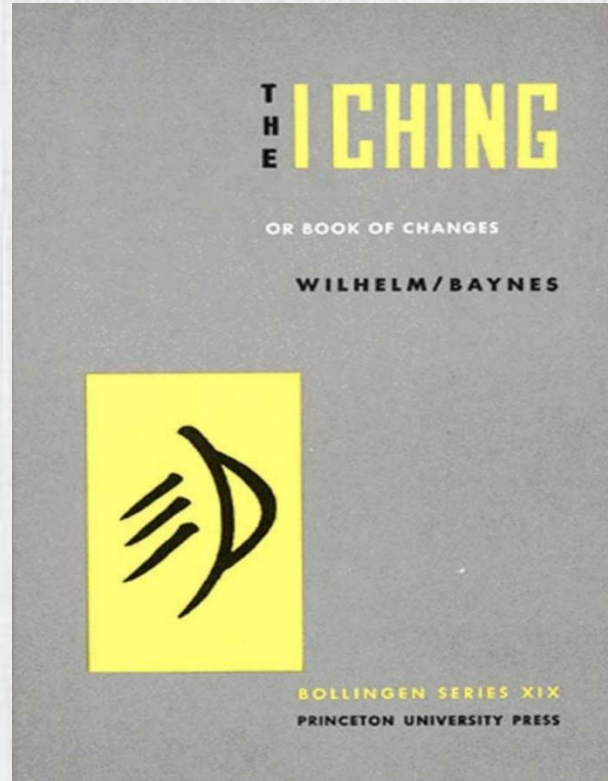
Mr. Lu Shaogang said in his book, ‘Among the sixty–four hexagrams, many have meanings like regret, stinginess, bad luck, or punishment, but only the Qian hexagram has all three lower lines as lucky and all three upper lines as favourable.’¹



- How this important hexagram is presented in The Governing Principles of Ancient China.
- Which key verses about Qian hexagram did Wei Zheng and others select for Emperor Taizong to learn?
- How did the ideas about humility in theses verses influence Emperor Taizong's actual ruling?



Richard Wilhelm (1873– 1930)

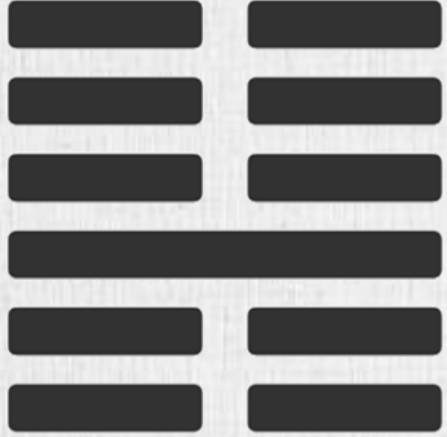


Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961)

The background is a traditional Chinese ink wash landscape painting. It features misty, layered mountains in shades of grey and white. In the lower left, a small boat with a person wearing a conical hat is on the water. On the right, a rocky outcrop with a few dark pine trees is visible. The overall atmosphere is serene and ethereal.

II. The Concept of *Qian* as Presented in *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*

Text	Books	<i>The Governing Principles of Ancient China</i>	<i>I Ching</i>
The Judgment (卦辭)			謙，亨，君子有終。
The Images (大象辭)		地中有山，謙。君子以裒多益寡，稱物平施。	地中有山，謙。君子以裒多益寡，稱物平施。
The Judgment彖辭		謙，亨。天道下濟而光明，地道卑而上行。天道虧盈而益謙，地道變盈而流謙，鬼神害盈而福謙，人道惡盈而好謙。謙，尊而光，卑而不可逾，君子之終也。	謙，亨。天道下濟而光明，地道卑而上行。天道虧盈而益謙，地道變盈而流謙，鬼神害盈而福謙，人道惡盈而好謙。謙，尊而光，卑而不可逾，君子之終也。
<i>First Yin</i> (爻辭) 初六		謙謙君子，用涉大川，吉。	謙謙君子，用涉大川，吉。
Commentary on the images小象辭		謙謙君子，卑以自牧也。	謙謙君子，卑以自牧也。
<i>Third Yang</i> 九三		勞謙，君子有終，吉。	勞謙，君子有終，吉。
Commentary on the images小象辭		勞謙君子，萬民服也。	勞謙君子，萬民服也。



**‘Superior man maintains a lowly
stance to nurture his own virtue.’²**

謙謙君子，卑以自牧也

——In *Qian* Hexagram – First Yin, the Commentary on the Images

‘謙謙’ (*qian qian*) means ‘utmost humility

Cheng Yi (1033–1107)



‘To conduct oneself with utmost humility is to be accepted by all.’

A humble leader

Wins trust from subordinates and the public

Remains safe even in dangerous situations

Receives aid from others when needed

Cheng Yi's interpretation

'Dwelling in a lowly and gentle position is the norm...'

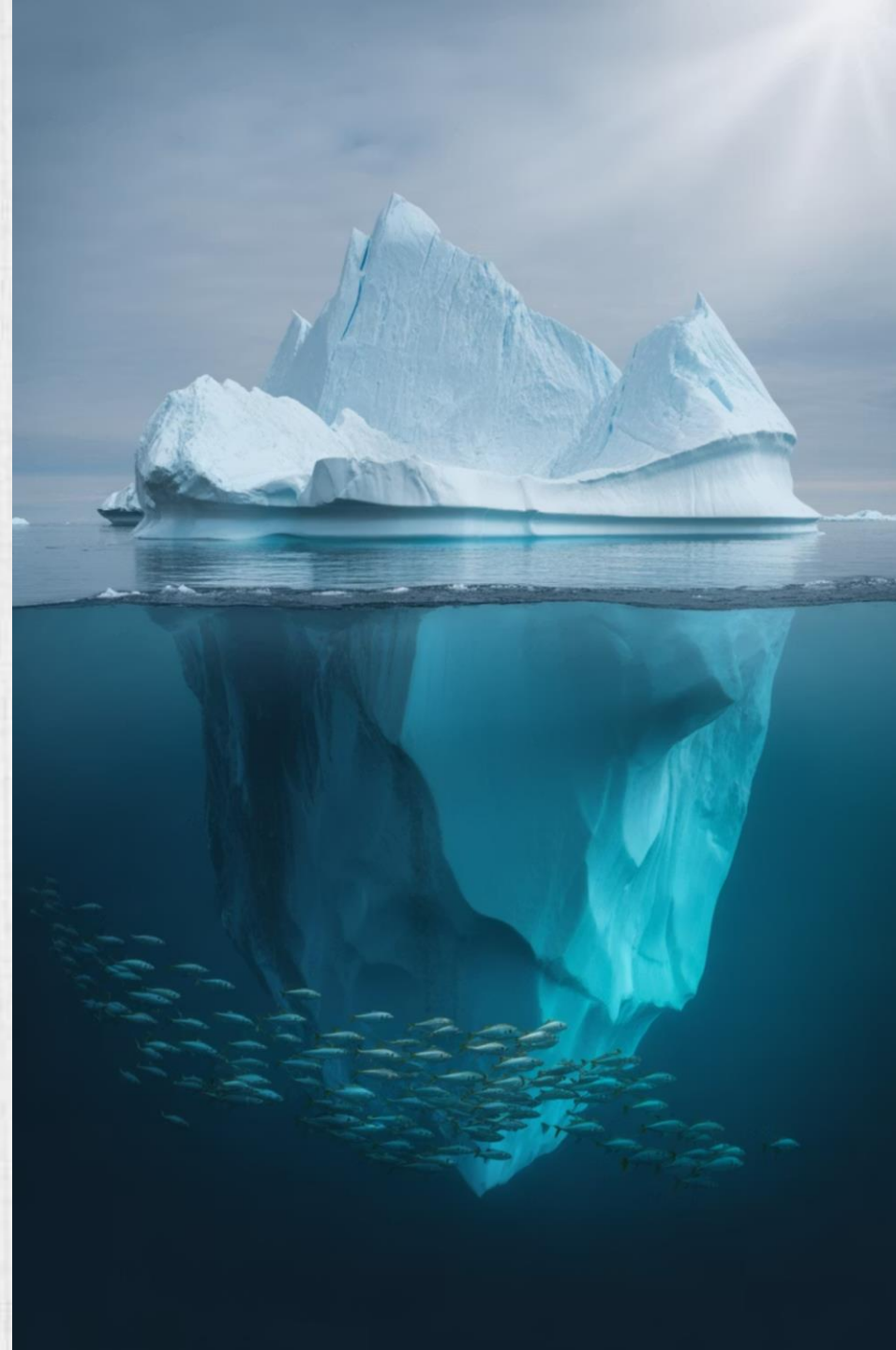
humility

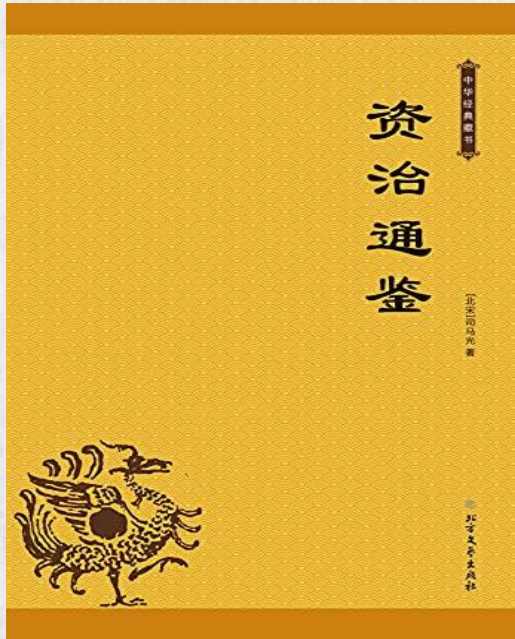


less
noticeable



minimising
errors





‘Being adept at heeding counsel’ stands as an expression of Emperor Taizong's humbleness.

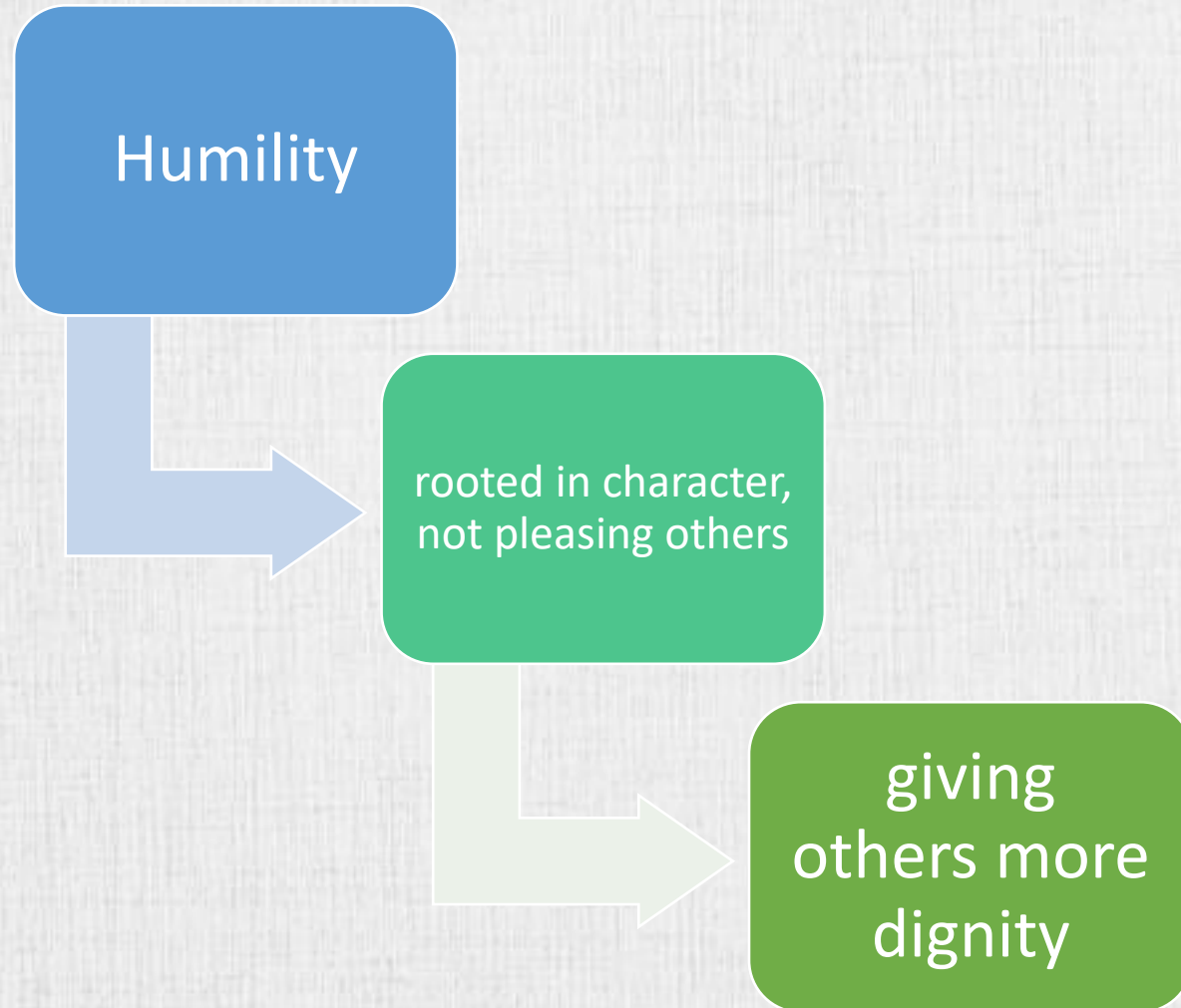
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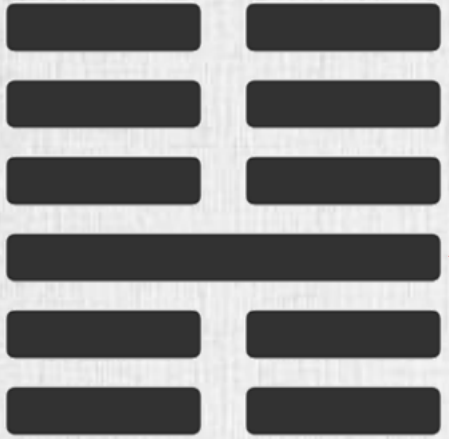
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Accepted his suggestions and corrected his own shortcomings.

Humility is an inner path of self-cultivation





‘The humility superior man, though accomplished, wins the respect of all the people.’³

勞謙君子，萬民服也。

——In *Qian* Hexagram – Third Yang, the Commentary on the Images

I Ching 易經 translated by Richard Wilhelm and C. G. Jung (New Jersey: Princeton University Press), p. 65.

Fu Lipu's interpretation

The humility superior man, when the court is distributing rewards, attributes all the credit to those who died in service, declines rewards for himself, and takes no personal gain. In doing so, he earns not only the respect of the living but also the gratitude of the dead.'

humility
superior

attributes
all the
credit

declines
rewards

takes no
personal
gain



True Submission

- Not just about physical submission
- Heartfelt admiration and respect





Fang Xuanling (579–648)



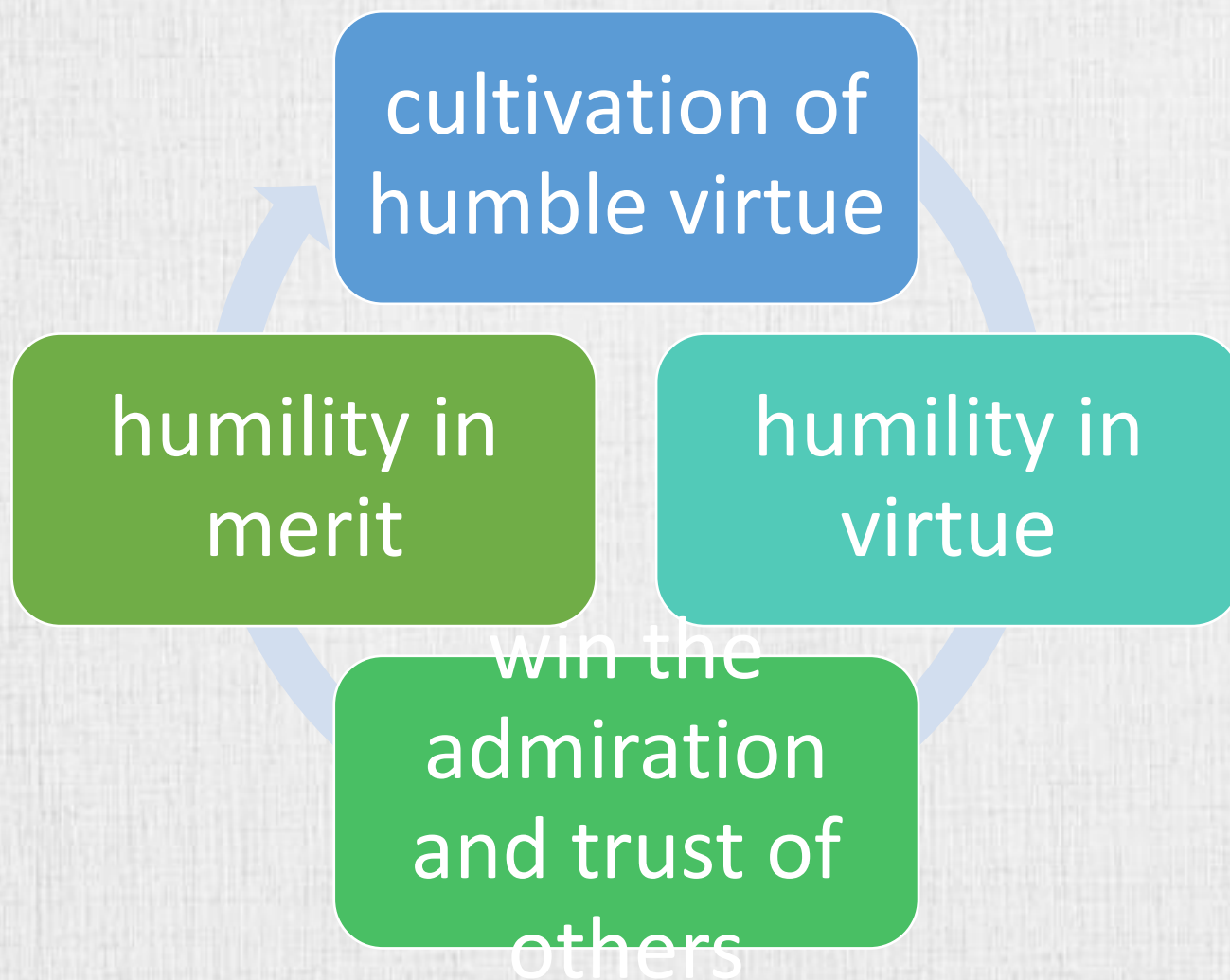
Du Ruhui (585–630)



Wei Zheng(580–643)



The Humility Cycle in Leadership



Superior man maintains a lowly stance to nurture his own virtue.

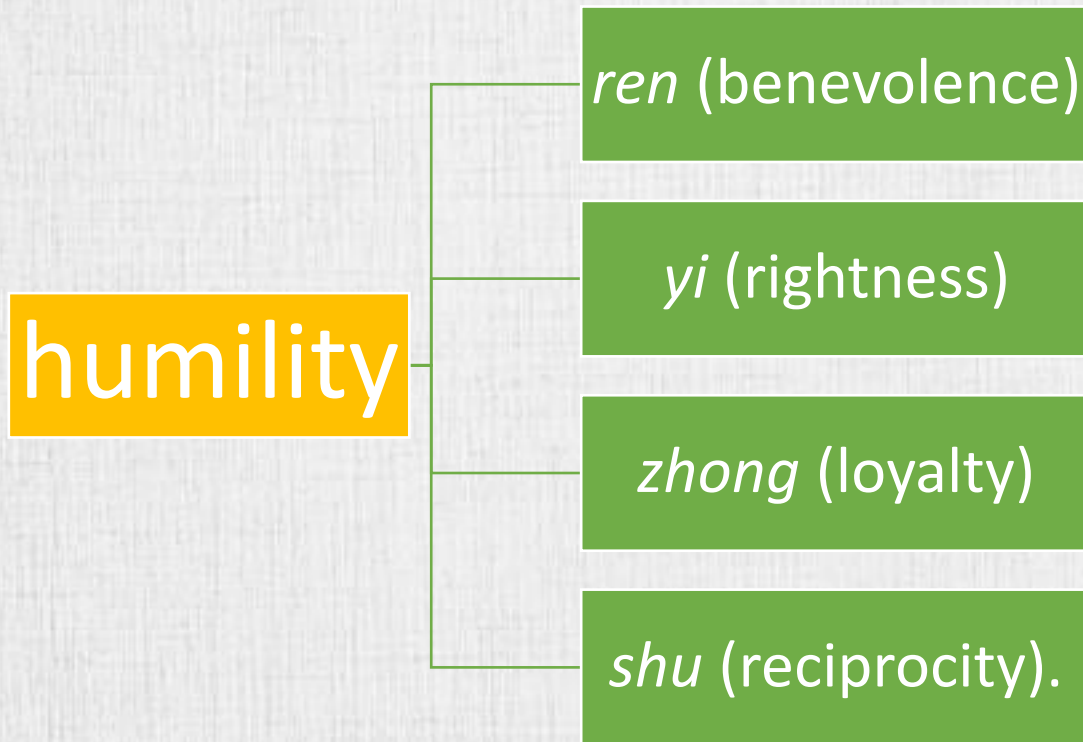
謙謙君子，卑以自牧也

The humble superior man, though accomplished, earns the willing submission of all the people.

勞謙君子，萬民服也。

Alexus McLeod's view

Humility has a relational or secondary function linked with other virtues.'



If a leader can consistently treat others with humility, the impact will be both profound and far-reaching.

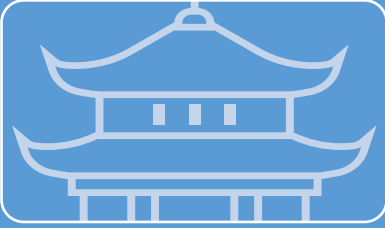
III. Conclusion



Conclusion

Emperor Taizong of Tang to take humility as a moral quality as the foundation of self-cultivation, and to implement the spirit of humility in governance practices. Ultimately, there aim was to achieve a harmonious society where leaders and subordinates are united.

Recommendations



Cultivate humility as a core virtue



Listen attentively and care for your people



Avoid claiming credit for yourself

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