One cannot understand Chinese concepts of leadership without understanding Chinese culture. And to understand the culture, it is necessary to go back 7,000 years. This may come as something of a shock to anyone who regards the era before the Internet as prehistory, but it is true. So, let’s begin the journey…

YI JING, THE BOOK OF CHANGES

Yi Jing, or the Book of Changes, is recognized as the origin of Chinese philosophy, culture and science. Legend has it that three sages contributed to this book over a period of 4,500 years. The first was Fu Xi, a mythical figure (he had a human head and a serpent’s body) who created eight hexagrams 7,000 years ago. The aim was to predict natural phenomena by using eight symbols (combinations of three lines) to represent eight core astronomical and geographical conditions. Zhou Wenwang (1152–1056 BC), a genuine historical figure, developed the model to 64 hexagrams and added commentary. Finally, Confucius (551–479 BC) – of whom we will hear much more – added further commentary.

The superficial purpose of the hexagrams is divination. But at a deeper level, the Yi Jing is many things: it is a philosophical book that teaches a method of dialectic thinking in a constantly changing macro- and micro-environment; it is a scientific book, outlining principles of astronomy, meteorology and physics; and it is a social treatise on how to interact with others and behave...
correctly in different situations. However, it delivers its messages in a coded way, and can only be understood by people who care to work out the code and the messages.

Throughout the millennia of Chinese civilization, Yi Jing has been used and misused in many ways. If philosophers and rulers have lived by it, so have crooks and fortune-tellers. In the modern world, the book is being rediscovered with exactly the same range of results. Philosophers used it to help understand life; feng shui “consultants” use it to add plausibility to their practices.

A good summary of the key concepts of the Yi Jing comes from Nan Huaijin, a great Sinologue who has witnessed the evolution of China over the past nine decades with deep understanding. At the heart of the model, he sees three principles:

- **Change**: Everything in the cosmos is changing constantly: space, time, human beings (physically and mentally), and so on.

- **Simplicity**: There is a rule underlining all these changes which would make it possible for people to understand all phenomena – however we have either lost or never possessed the wisdom to capture it.

- **Eternity**: There is a “thing” which is the core of the Cosmos. Unchanging itself, it drives all changes. In the West, it is seen as “God”; in Chinese philosophy, it is “dào.” (It is also the “ultimate truth” of ancient Greek philosophy.)

In addition to these three principles, there are three methodologies, three ways of asking questions: