"Knowing the Self and Knowing the 'Other': The Epistemological and Heuristic Value of the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes)"

I

Serious study of the *Yijing* or *Classic of Changes* (also known as the *Zhouyi* or *Zhou Changes*) is no longer the monopoly of China specialists. Thanks to a spate of recent translations of the *Changes* by scholarly associations such as the Groupe de travail du Centre Djohi, and individuals such as Richard Kunst, Richard Rutt, Richard John Lynn, Edward Shaughnessy, Wang Dongliang and others, as well as to the ongoing efforts of dedicated and talented researchers both East and West, we now have enough high-quality *Yi*-related books and articles in Western languages to enable non-specialist scholars and students to do interesting, broad-ranging and solid work on the *Changes* without having to read Chinese or Japanese. Of particular value for research is a broad-ranging reference work by Professor Nielsen, titled *Companion to Yi jing Numerology*.

Abbrreviations:


1 RICHARD J. SMITH, George and Nancy Rupp Professor of the Humanities and Professor of History, Department of History, Rice University, Houston, Texas. Specialties: Social and Intellectual History, Comparative History. E-mail: smithrj@rice.edu.


3 For a historically and topically organized list of Western-language works on the *Changes*, see the "Topical On-line Bibliography" at http://www.aasianst.org/eaa/smith.htm. This bibliography is part of the appendix to Richard J. Smith, "The *Yijing* (Classic of Changes) in Global Perspective: Some Pedagogical Reflections," *Education About Asia* 8.2 (Fall 2003): 5-10.
and Cosmology (2003), which is far more intellectually sophisticated and stimulating than its title might suggest.  

Ironically, however, the more we know about the *Yijing* the more problematical the document seems to become. Even Chinese scholars cannot agree on its basic "nature" (*xingzhi*). Some consider it to be nothing more than a divination manual, a quaint relic of China's "feudal" past. Others have described it as a book of philosophy, an historical work, an ancient dictionary, an encyclopedia, an early scientific treatise, and a mathematical model of the universe.  

To some scholars, the *Yijing* is a sacred scripture, not unlike the Christian Bible, the Jewish Torah, the Islamic Qur'an, the Hindu Vedas and certain Buddhist sutras. To others it is a work of "awesome obscurity," teetering on the brink between a "profound awareness of the human mind's capacities and superficial incoherency."  

How do we account for such divergent views? One of the principal arguments of this brief article is that the *Yijing* mirrors the mentality of its adherents. That is, there are as many versions of the *Changes* as there are readers of the document and commentators upon it. And there have been many readers and commentators indeed. In the words of the great Qing scholar, Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), "The nine traditions of philosophy and the hundred schools of thought have all drawn upon [the *Yijing*] to promote their own theories."  

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5 See, for example, YJYY, 1: 13 ff. 
6 I have offered a few tentative comparisons between the *Yijing* and these works in "The *Yijing* (Classic of Changes) in Comparative Perspective: The Value of Cross-Cultural Investigations," *International Journal of the Humanities* 1 (2003): 776-801. 
8 See the discussion of this point in Edward L. Shaughnessy, "Commentary, Philosophy, and Translation: Reading Wang Bi’s Commentary to the *Yijing* in a New Way," *Early China* 22 (1997): 221-245, esp. 223. 
9 ZMTY, Jingbu, Yilei, 35 (6:10a).
Different perspectives naturally yield different understandings, whether they are the product of religious or philosophical affiliations, scholarly fashions, politics, social status, gender, personal taste, or other variables of time, place and circumstance. 10 For those who take the Changes seriously, and approach it with intellectual depth and psychological insight, the text proves to be profoundly stimulating and endlessly provocative. But for those of a shallower intellectual or psychological disposition, the rewards may not be so substantial. In the pithy words of a Chinese proverb: "The shallow man sees [the Yijing's] shallowness, while the deep man sees [its] depth." 11

We should also keep in mind that the Book of Changes is an extraordinarily challenging document. In the first place, for the past two thousand years or so, the work has consisted of two distinctly dissimilar parts, each problematical in its own way. One section, the cryptic "core" or "basic text," is extremely ancient, diverse in origins, unsystematic, and subject to radically different readings and understandings. The other part is a set of sophisticated but not entirely consistent commentaries known as the "Ten Wings," written by a series of unknown authors several hundred years after the "basic text" initially took form (around the 8th century, B.C.E.). During the last few decades, archaeological discoveries in China have brought to light several different versions of both segments of the Changes, complicating rather than simplifying the search for meaning, even in the so-called "received version" of the classic. These discoveries have

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10 One of the most important features to keep in mind about Yijing exegesis (and, in fact, all classical Chinese exegesis) is the role of such variables. See, for example, the Changes-related scholarship of authors such as Gao Huaimin, Liang Han Yixue shi (A History of Changes Learning in the Han Dynasty; Taipei: Zhongguo xueshu zhuzuo jiangzhu weiyuan hui, 1970) and Xu Qinting, Liang Han shiliu jia Yizhu chanwei (An Explication of Sixteen Schools of Commentary on the Changes in the Han Dynasty; Taipei: Wuzhou chuban she, 1975). An excellent Western language study that emphasizes these variables is Howard L. Goodman’s "Exegetes and Exegesis of the Book of Changes in the Third Century A.D.: Historical and Scholastic Contexts for Wang Pi" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1985; available from UMI Dissertation Services/ProQuest).

also prompted a reconsideration of long-standing accounts of the *Yijing*’s origins and historical development.\(^{12}\)

Although designed in part to explicate the earlier "core" of the *Changes*, the commentaries known as the "Ten Wings," officially attached to the classic in 136 B.C.E., were never able to resolve all or even most of the textual controversies surrounding it. Moreover, these commentaries themselves became the subjects of intense scholarly debate. Meanwhile, new ways of thinking about the classic arose, expanding the scope of interpretive possibilities to include developing systems of thought as well as innovations in various "technical" areas—notably calendrical science, chemistry and alchemy, astronomy and astrology, mathematics and numerology.

Thus, over the course of two millennia, thousands of additional commentaries were written on the *Yijing*, each reflecting a distinctive technical, philological, religious, philosophical, literary, social or political point of view. As early as the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) more than seven hundred different scholarly approaches came to be identified with the document.\(^{13}\) Not surprisingly, Confucians found Confucian meanings in the *Changes*,\(^ {14}\) Daoists found Daoist meanings in it,\(^ {15}\) and Buddhists found Buddhist meanings in it.\(^ {16}\) And, as indicated above, people in different periods of Chinese history quite naturally used the *Yijing* for different purposes and in different ways, in accordance with the times. On some occasions, exponents of the classic used it to support the status quo; on others, they employed it to advocate radical change.

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13 See ZMTY, *Jingbu*, *Yilei*, 28 (4:12a-b); see also ibid., 20 (3:15a-b), 28 (4:12a-b), etc.

14 Most Chinese interpretations of the *Changes* in imperial times were based on what might broadly be categorized as a "Confucian" orientation.

15 See, for example, Wang Zhongyao, *Zhongguo Fojiao yu Zhouyi* (Chinese Buddhism and the *Zhou Changes*; Taipei: Dazhan chuban she youxian gongsi, 2003).

16 See, for instance, Zhan Sichuang, *Yixue yu Daojiao sixiang guanxi yanjiu* (Research on the Relationship between *Changes* Studies and Daoism; Xiamen: Xiamen daxue, 2001).
But despite these divergent viewpoints, needs and uses, virtually everyone in China prior to the twentieth century considered the *Classic of Changes* to be a document of unrivalled prestige and unparalleled scriptural authority—a work that profoundly affected the way Chinese elites, and much of the rest of Chinese society as well, comprehended the world and expressed their understanding of it. In part because of its great prestige in China, the historical and cultural influence of the *Yijing* extended well beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom. Indeed, during the past thousand years or so, the work has gradually become a global property. By stages, the *Changes* spread from China to other areas of East Asia—notably Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The Jesuits brought knowledge of the classic to Europe during the eighteenth century, and from there it travelled to the Americas, finding a particularly receptive audience in the United States from the 1960s onward.

As a result, the *Yijing* has touched many realms of modern Western culture, from the psychology of Carl Jung to the architecture of I.M. Pei. The choreographers Merce Cunningham and Carolyn Carlson have found inspiration in the *Changes*, as have such noted composers as Joseph Hauer, John Cage and Udo Kasemets. It has been a significant element in the art of individuals such as Eric Morris, Arnaldo Coen, Arturo Rivera, Augusto Ramirez, and Felipe Erenberg, and in the writings of a wide range of Western authors, including Philip K. Dick, Allen Ginsberg, Octavio Paz, Herman Hesse, Raymond Queneau and Jorge Luis Borges. I might add that the practice of *fengshui*,

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which has recently attracted so much attention around the world, has its conceptual roots in, and derives much of its analytical and symbolic vocabulary from, the *Classic of Changes*.

In contemporary East Asia, the *Yijing* continues to thrive, as it has for at least two thousand years, serving as a divinatory text, a book of wisdom, a source of psychological guidance, and an inspiration to writers, artists, musicians, mathematicians and scientists. To be sure, during the twentieth century the work was denounced periodically by various Chinese governments--most persistently and aggressively by the People's Republic of China from 1949 to the late 1970s. But even in the PRC there has been a dramatic revival of interest in the *Changes*, particularly in the 1980s--a phenomenon known in the Chinese press as *Yijing re* ("Yijing Fever"). One question of particular interest to Chinese scholars is whether the *Yijing* anticipated modern scientific theories, from computer logic and eight-tier matrix algebra to the structure of DNA. I shall return to this intriguing question.

II

What should be evident from this brief overview, is that the *Classic of Changes* is a rich epistemological resource--one that can achieve what Professor Chung-ying Cheng has termed the "onto-hermeneutical" purpose of helping us to understand the world both phenomenologically and ontologically at the same time. Professor Cheng has aptly described the symbolic system of the *Yijing* as one in which we find dynamic interaction,

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and ultimate unity, not only between theory and action but also between understanding and practice.

How and why is this so? Primarily, it is because the symbols of the *Changes* were not designed simply for the sake of intellectual knowledge, but as a means for apprehending the nature of reality, as a means of contributing to "world-making through practice and action." Using hexagram #20, "Guan"--which he translates as "Comprehensive Observation"--Professor Cheng has shown how the *Yijing* contributes to the related processes of illumination (*ming*) and resolution (*jue*). These processes, as he analyzes them, may be viewed in terms of five stages: observation, symbolization, systematization, divination, and interpretation.22

To this stimulating onto-hermeneutical perspective I would like to add a related one: Shao Yong's (1011-77) idea of "reflective viewing" (*fanguan*)--that is, the notion of looking at things from the object's point of view rather than one's own. The aim of this exercise, grounded solidly in *Yijing* cosmology, ontology and epistemology, is to link the individual to the entire universe and to direct one's moral actions properly--not simply to satisfy one's philosophical curiosity.23 As I have suggested briefly elsewhere, a determined effort to grapple with the "otherness" of the *Changes* can not only provide us with a way of appreciating ideas that initially seem hopelessly "foreign" to us, but it can also assist in the process of self-understanding.24

At first glance, there is no classical Chinese text quite like the *Changes*; it seems to be about as "other" as one can get. After all, what does one make of a book that tells us: "Wrap the melon with purple willow leaves. Hold a jade talisman in the mouth. Something falls from the sky."25 Yet by engaging the *Yijing* seriously and

22 Ibid.
24 See my article cited in note 3 above.
25 Richard A. Kunst, 327, translating the 5th line of the Gou hexagram (#44). Later, this line would be commonly understood as "With his willow and bottle gourd, this one harbors beauty within, so if there is
comparatively, we can not only make sense of the document, and thereby gain insights into Chinese history and culture, but we can also begin to see our own heritage in a somewhat different light. Viewed in this way, perhaps the *Changes* can indeed be compared to the *Bible*, the *Torah*, the *Qu’ran*, the *Vedas* and other sacred scriptures, despite the glaring differences that distinguish it from them. One common denominator is certainly the role of commentaries in explaining, rationalizing, and rendering more consistent and coherent, the earliest versions of these great historical documents.

At the heart of *Yijing* interpretation is correlative thinking. Here, for example, is an early account involving the Qin state's punitive expedition against the state of Jin in 645 B.C.E, recorded in the *Zuozhuan* (Commentary of Zuo). Before the attack, the Qin diviner, Tu Fu, consulted the *Changes* regarding the outcome. He drew the hexagram Gu ("Poison," "Ills to be Cured," #18), the judgment of which reads in part: "Auspicious occasion; it is fitting to cross the great river." Tu thus predicted victory, remarking that the Qin troops would cross the river separating them from Jin, defeat the enemy, and capture the Marquis of Jin, whom Tu likened to an evil fox. He further explained that since the inner (lower) trigram of Gu was Xun (Wind), and the outer (upper) trigram was Gen (Mountain), this signified that the triumphant autumn winds of Qin would blow down the fruits of Jin on the mountain and make possible the seizure of Jin’s timber.

Over time, however, hexagram analysis became far more complex. In the first place, by the second century B.C.E. at the latest, each of the Eight Trigrams (*bagua*) destruction, it will only come from Heaven." See Richard John Lynn, 413. Cf. Wang Bi's gloss, ibid., 413-414 and Cheng Yi's gloss, ibid., 415-416.


27 See my article cited in note 6 above.

28 For the importance of correlative thinking throughout the imperial era, see A.C. Graham, *Yin-Yang and the Nature of Correlative Thinking* (Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies, National University of Singapore, 1986).

29 "Grand occasion" translates *yuanheng*, a term that originally connoted a great sacrifice ("grand treat" or "prime receipt") and later came to be understood as "fundamental prevalence" or "supreme success."

came to be associated with various features of the natural order, processes, interactions with other trigrams, directions, animals, plants, parts of the body, and social relationships. Thus, for example, the early commentary known as "Explaining the Trigrams" (Shuogua) tells us that Gen, generally identified with Mountains: (1) "reciprocally circulates material force (qi)" with Dui (Lakes); (2) makes things stop; (3) is associated with the northeast,\(^\text{31}\) is "where the myriad things reach the end of their development;" (4) is resourceful in providing things with ends and beginnings, (5) has the nature of a dog, (6) works like the hand; (7) not only symbolizes the mountain but also the footpath, the small stone, the gate tower, the fruit of trees and vines, the gate keeper and the palace guard, the fingers, the dog, the rat, the black maw of species [of birds and beasts of prey] and the youngest son. Finally, with respect to trees, Gen is the kind that is "sturdy and much gnarled."\(^\text{32}\)

Thanks to the Shuogua commentary, the relationship between the trigrams in any given hexagram presented a far greater range of symbolic possibilities than ever before. And this was only the beginning. Throughout the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) a great number of interpretive schemes developed. Some linked trigrams and hexagrams with cosmological variables such as the five agents or qualities (wuxing), the ten "heavenly stems" (tiangan), and the twelve "earthly branches" (dizhi).\(^\text{33}\) Others involved the invention of new trigram configurations and literally hundreds of new trigram associations.\(^\text{34}\) Still others correlated the trigrams and hexagrams with various seasons,

\(^{31}\) Significantly, this is the spatial position of Gen in the Later Heaven (Houtian) configuration of the Eight Trigrams. But in the Former Heaven (Xiantian) order, it operates in the northwest.

\(^{32}\) Richard John Lynn, 119-124 (modified).

\(^{33}\) Bent Nielsen, 7-8 and 180-183.

\(^{34}\) Bent Nielsen, 308 and Liu Yujian, Liang Han xiangshu Yixue yanjiu (Research on the Images and Numbers School of Changes Learning in the Han Dynasty; Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chuban she, 1996), 739. For examples of the way, "lost images" found their way into commentaries on the "Explaining the Trigrams" commentary, see Zhu Xi, Zhouyi benyi (The Basic Meaning of the Zhou Changes; Taibei: Xinwen chuban gufen youxian gongsi, 1979), 424 ff.
periods of the year, and even systems of musical notation. The geomatic “compass” (luopan) employed by Chinese specialists in “siting” (kanyu, fengshui, dili, etc.) reflects a number of such Yijing-inspired correlations.

By the Song period, both the trigrams and hexagrams of the Changes came to be connected in various ways with the numerical symbolism of the Hetu (Yellow River Chart) and Luoshu (Luo River Writing). These two famous diagrams, of relatively recent provenance but ancient pedigree, came to be viewed by most scholars in late imperial China as integral to the Yijing. Indeed, both found their way into imperially authorized editions of the classic.

The intricate interpretive systems associated with the Hetu, Luoshu and other Song dynasty diagrams purported to explain everything in the universe. As the great Qing dynasty scholar Jiang Yong (1681-1762) put the matter much later:

The Hetu, Luoshu, trigrams and hexagrams, and individual lines all emanate from the same source. [They reflect] common trends, and are mutually interactive; hence, concepts such as gougu [a traditional system of triangulation] and chengfang ["multiplication squares"] in mathematics, the five sounds and six notes [wuyin liulü] in music, the positions of the seven luminaries [qiyao] in astrology [tianwen], the najia and nayin systems of five agents specialists, the resonant and pure consonants in phonetics, the li and qi of the geomancers' compass, the doushou and qimen methods of the "day-selection" [zeri] experts, and even the

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35 Bent Nielsen discusses a great many of these systems under headings such as ba gong, ba gua liu wei, ba gua wu xing, gua qi, bao tao, bi yao, dui tui, fan gua, fei fu, gua bian, gua qi, gua zhi, hu ti, lian hu, na jia, na yin, pang tong gua, sheng jiang, si zheng gua, wuxing, xiao xi, yao chen, etc.


37 See Bent Nielsen under headings such as He tu, Luo shu, Hou Tian tu, Tai ji tu, Xian tian tu, etc.

38 Much controversy surrounded the issue of the origins and authenticity of these diagrams. See Sun Guozhong, "He Luo xue fazhan gaikuang--He Luo zheng" (An Overview of the Development of Hetu and Luoshu Scholarship), an appendix to Jiang Yong's *He Luo jingyun* (The Quintessence of the Yellow River Chart and the Luo River Writing; Beijing: Xueyuan chuban she, 1989), 445-471.


foundations and principles of medicine--including the five movements and six "breaths" of heaven and the veins of the human body--all emanate from the Hetu, Luoshu, trigrams, hexagrams, and lines. 41

In short, for Jiang, as for many Chinese thinkers, all celestial and terrestrial phenomena fit into certain mathematical patterns and regularities which, when revealed in the trigrams, hexagrams, Hetu and Luoshu, guaranteed the comprehensibility and commensurability of the entire natural order. 42

To be sure, the Qing period was a time when a number of prominent scholars criticized and even questioned the provenance of diagrams such as the Hetu and Luoshu. 43 On one side of the debate, in the skeptical tradition of Ouyang Xiu (1007-1072) of the Song, savants such as Huang Zongxi (1610-1695), Wang Fuzhi, Huang Zongyan (1616-1686), Mao Qiling (1623-1716), Hu Wei (1633-1714) and Wang Maohong (1668-1741) denounced these and other such interpretive schemes as Daoist inventions. But on the other side, following Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the darling of Qing dynasty state orthodoxy, there were a number of other scholars, including Fang Yizhi (1611-1671), Lu Shiyi (1611-1672), Tang Bin (1627-1687), Lu Longqi (1630-1693), Li Guangdi (1642-1718), Hu Xu (1655-1736), Yang Fangda (fl. c. 1724), and Jiang Yong, who believed earnestly that the charts were both authentic and valuable. 44 Still other intellectuals--for instance, Dai Zhen (1724-1777), Fang Dongshu (1772-1851), and even much later scholars such as Hang Xinzhai (1869-1924)--defended the inclusion of these

41 Jiang Yong, personal preface, 16-17.
42 Among the many fascinating illustrations to be found in Jiang Yong's He Luo jingyun is a comprehensive three-page chart purporting to show that the principles for all things had their source in the Yellow River Writing. See Jiang Yong, 337-339.
diagrams in orthodox works such as the *Zhouyi benyi* and the *Zhouyi zhezhong* on the grounds that, whatever their provenance, they preserved a rich and valuable traditional understanding of the text. 45

IV.

In any case, the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 marked the end of official state support for the *Yijing* and the beginning of a period of Western-inspired scientific skepticism, in which Chinese intellectuals either ignored the *Changes* altogether or approached the document as an historical artifact; it was no longer an officially sponsored sacred text. Prior to the growth in popularity of Marxism-Lenininism during the 1920s and 30s, most studies of the *Yijing* focused on historical and philological questions that were informed by a new critical (i.e. "scientific") attitude, but not a comprehensive ideological framework. Scholars debated issues relating to the dating, authorship and evolution of the *Changes*, the philosophical nature of the document, its interaction with various systems of thought and belief over time, the meaning of its written texts and symbolism, and its use as a record of ancient Chinese beliefs and practices. 46

Marxist scholars, for their part, sought to link the *Yijing* to newly introduced philosophical concepts such as dialectical materialism, as well as to the notion of

44 For an excellent summary of Qing debates over the *Hetu* and *Luoshu*, see Sun Guozhong, 463 ff.
45 Zhu Xi’s spirited letter, explaining why he “never doubted” the authenticity of the *Hetu* and *Luoshu* is reproduced in Sun Guozhong, 458-460. Significantly, the section on the *Hetu* and *Luoshu* in the *Tushu jicheng* precedes the section on the *Yijing* itself. See Chen Menglei et al., *Jingji dian* 1, 55: 543-627.
changing relations of production.\textsuperscript{47} In response, a number of Yi-oriented Chinese philosophers, notably Xiong Shili (1885-1968) and later, Fang Dongmei (1899-1977), tried to find ways to counter Marxist and modernist theories by "revitalizing" traditional Chinese thought--a trend that continues to this day.\textsuperscript{48} Still other intellectuals sought to understand the Yijing in terms of modern Western science, beginning with the apparent link between the Changes and binary mathematics that the Jesuit priest, Joachim Bouvet, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz had first identified in the 17th century.\textsuperscript{49}

Over time, such thinkers--Westerners as well as Chinese--have come to use "data" from the Yijing to show connections to a great many different realms in modern mathematics and science, from linear algebra and quantum mechanics to molecular biology and computer coding.\textsuperscript{50} Not all Chinese (or Western) scholars have embraced such ideas, however. Liu Zheng, for one, has written that “not a single work on the study of the Yijing . . . [has been able to] prove any sort of mutually engendering relationship or any logical evolutionary law existing between the Zhouyi and . . . [the disciplines of biology, chemistry, physics, physiology and computer science].” From Liu's perspective, exponents of the so-called "scientific school" of Yijing studies have made a critical mistake by subjectively identifying modern science with the philosophy of the Changes. As he puts it, the use of "modern scientific and technological theories to explain and read the ancient Yijing is simply not a scientific attitude." Yet even Liu thinks that the Book of

\textsuperscript{46} Yang Qingzhong, Ersh shiji Zhongguo Yixue shi (A History of Changes Studies in 20th Century China; Beijing: Renmin chuban she, 2000), 60-141.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 99-112.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 151-160, 517-525.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 406-422.
\textsuperscript{50} YJJC, 2: 240-283.
Changes can perhaps provide a new "methodology" by which modern science and technology might be better understood.\footnote{Liu Zheng, "The Dilemma Facing Contemporary Research in the I-ching," Chinese Studies in Philosophy, 24.4 (Summer, 1993): 47-64.}

In short, as in the past, the *Yijing* continues to offer intriguing possibilities to creative minds: comparisons to be made, insights to be gained, models to be tested, problems to be solved, and secrets to be discovered. The eternal beauty of the document lies in the vast field of potential that it offers.