

Introduction

For those who think of themselves as secular, rational, and scientific, the *Yijing* seems to be a work of “awesome obscurity,” full of unfamiliar symbols and cryptic sayings, and reflecting a worldview sometimes described as “mystical” or “prelogical.” And for those of a more religious disposition, the lack of a cosmology based on the willful actions of a god or gods seems equally puzzling. In either case the *Changes* appears to be little more than a series of briefly annotated broken and solid lines that have no meanings except for those arbitrarily imposed on them by centuries of often-conflicting Chinese commentaries.

Yet there is logic to the work, which, for at least three thousand years, China’s greatest minds have sought to fathom and articulate. Into the twentieth century, the *Yijing* occupied a central place in Chinese culture, from the realms of philosophy, religion, art, and literature to those of politics and social life. Thinkers of every intellectual persuasion found inspiration in the language, symbolism, and imagery of the *Changes*. The work also inspired many impressive artistic and

literary achievements, and it provided an analytical vocabulary that proved extraordinarily serviceable in virtually every area of elite and popular culture, including science and technology. In premodern times, Chinese scientists used *Yijing*-derived symbolism, numerology, and mathematics to explain a wide range of natural processes and phenomena in the fields of knowledge that we now call physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology, medicine, meteorology, and geology. And even today many devotees of the *Changes* see in the mathematical symbolism of the document the seeds of modern scientific theories, from the binary logic of computers to the structure of DNA. In short, to understand much of Chinese history and culture, we need to understand the *Changes*.

From the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) through the Qing (1644–1912 CE), the *Yijing* remained a work of enormous and unchallenged scriptural authority; everyone in Chinese society esteemed it and employed it in some way, from emperors and officials to artisans and peasants. Commoners used pages from the book as a charm to ward off evil, and scholars gave it pride of place as “first among the [Confucian] classics.” Although the document contains few explicit references to supernatural beings or supernatural forces, it has always had a profoundly spiritual dimension. Indeed, the *Changes* describes itself as “the most spiritual thing in the world.” By virtue of its spiritual power, we are told, the *Yijing* “lets one know what is going to come, and by

virtue of its wisdom, it becomes a repository of what has happened.”¹ But whereas most religious traditions, both East and West, have emphasized the activities of a god or gods as an explanation for cosmic processes, devotees of the *Changes* have long held the view that such explanations reside in the cosmic powers embodied in its lines, trigrams, and hexagrams.

The central preoccupation of the *Yijing* throughout the imperial era (from the Han to the Qing) was how to understand the patterns and processes of nature, and how to act in harmony with them. The most common term for nature in premodern China was Dao, usually translated as “the Way.” Although this long-standing metaphysical concept had neither a personality nor a particular identity, it remained an overarching unifying truth among the Chinese in the same general sense that concepts such as Yahweh, Allah, God, Brahman, and Ultimate Reality were in the Judaic, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, respectively. To fathom the Dao was to understand the various types of change in the universe, from the cosmic to the mundane, from recurrent cycles of movement—ebb and flow, rise and decline, advance and retreat—to physical and metaphysical transformations. From this sort of understanding came an appreciation of proper timing and positioning, essential in a culture where the ritual ideal had always been to do the right thing, at the right time, in the right place, facing the right direction.

What Is the *Yijing* and How Does It Work?

The *Changes* first took shape about three thousand years ago as a divination manual, consisting of sixty-four six-line symbols known as hexagrams. Each hexagram was uniquely constructed, distinguished from all the others by its combination of solid (—) and/or broken (— —) lines. The first two hexagrams in the conventional order are Qian and Kun; the remaining sixty-two hexagrams represent permutations of these two paradigmatic symbols.



Qian



Kun

At some point in the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1045–256 BCE), no later than the ninth or eighth century, each hexagram acquired a name, a brief description known as a “judgment,” and a short explanatory text for each of its six lines called a “line statement.” This highly compact document, less than 4,200 characters in length and probably first inscribed on strips of bamboo, became known as the basic text of the *Yijing*. The operating assumption of the *Changes*, as it developed over time, was that these hexagrams represented the basic circumstances of change in the universe, and that by selecting a particular hexagram or hexagrams and correctly interpreting the various symbolic elements of each, a person could gain insight into the patterns of cosmic change and devise a strategy for dealing with

problems or uncertainties concerning the present and the future.

During the third century BCE, a set of diverse and poetic commentaries known as the “Ten Wings” became attached to the *Changes*, and the work received imperial sanction in 136 BCE as one of the five major Confucian classics. These Ten Wings—particularly the so-called Great Commentary—articulated the *Yijing*’s implicit cosmology and invested the classic with an alluring philosophical flavor and an attractive literary style. The worldview of this amplified version of the *Changes* emphasized correlative thinking, a humane cosmological outlook, and the fundamental unity of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. For the next two thousand years or so, the *Yijing* held pride of place in China as the first of the Confucian classics.

How does the document work? The first point to be made is that the *Changes* allows, and even encourages, an enormous amount of interpretive flexibility; by nature it is an extraordinarily open-ended and versatile intellectual resource. It reflects what Keats once referred to as “negative capability”—the capacity to encounter uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts “without an irritable reaching after fact & reason”—and it relies on many different ways of knowing. Thus there can be any number of approaches to the classic, whether as a book of divination or as a source of philosophical, spiritual, or psychological inspiration. The editors of China’s most important premodern literary compilation,

the *Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries*, remarked in the eighteenth century that interpreting the *Changes* was like playing chess: no two games are alike, and there are infinite possibilities. Chinese scholars have identified literally hundreds of interpretive traditions focused on the *Yijing* in imperial times alone.

As indicated above, the judgment (sometimes described as a “hexagram statement,” “decision,” or “tag”) suggests the overall meaning of the hexagram, in particular its powers and possibilities. The six lines of each hexagram represent a situation in time and space, a “field of action with multiple actors or factors,” all of which are in constant, dynamic play.² The lines, read from bottom to top, represent the evolution of this situation and/or the major players involved. The first, second, and third lines constitute a “lower” trigram, and the fourth, fifth, and sixth lines form an “upper” trigram, each having its own set of primary and secondary symbolic attributes. Interpretation involves an understanding of the relationships among the lines, line statements, and trigrams of the chosen hexagram, and often an appreciation of the way in which the selected hexagram is related to other hexagrams. Commentaries of every conceivable sort have historically provided guidance in negotiating a path to understanding.

I have chosen the Gen hexagram—variously translated as Mountain, Restraint, Keeping Still, Bound, Stabilizing, Limited, Immobile, Steadiness, and the like³—as my primary example of hexagram analysis throughout this biography, not only because many

Chinese scholars, past and present, have considered it to capture the essence of the *Yijing*, but also because it had particularly wide appeal as an object of contemplation for Confucians, Buddhists, and Daoists alike. Below is a general description of Gen, based on a well-known set of Chinese commentaries.



Gen

The image of this hexagram is the mountain, the youngest son of Heaven and Earth. The solid line at the top represents the *yang* (active) principle, because it strives upward by nature. The broken line at the bottom represents the *yin* (passive) principle, since the direction of its movement is downward. Thus there is rest because the movement has come to a normal end. In its application to man, this hexagram turns on the problem of achieving a quiet heart and mind. It is very difficult to bring quiet to the heart and mind. Although Buddhism strives for rest through an ebbing away of all movement, the *Changes* holds that rest is merely part of a polarity that always posits movement as its complement. . . . True quiet means keeping still when the time has come to keep still, and going forward when the time has come to go forward. . . . When a man has become calm, he may turn to the outside world. He no longer sees in it the struggle and tumult of individual beings, and therefore he has that

true peace of mind that is needed for understanding the great laws of the universe and for acting in harmony with them. Whoever acts from these deep levels of understanding makes no mistakes.⁴

The judgment of the Gen hexagram may be translated: “Keeping his back still he no longer feels his body. He goes into his courtyard and does not see his people. No blame.” Although commentaries on this judgment vary widely, the general idea seems to be that the person to whom the hexagram refers—finding himself in the sort of situation that the hexagram describes—must calm his mind, conquer his emotions, and not be swayed by either his own ego or outside influences in making decisions and responding to changing circumstances. According to some commentators, the judgment refers to the effort by King Wen (ca. 1100–1050 BCE), founder of the Zhou dynasty, to withdraw from activity at a critical time in the consolidation of his regime, sitting in stillness while contemplating the future. The six lines of the hexagram, then, describe the stages of this contemplative process.

Generally speaking, the line statement of the first (bottom) line of the Gen hexagram indicates the need to take stock at the very beginning of a situation, without rushing into it precipitously. The second line statement warns against the dangers of being swept into action by powerful forces. The third line statement advises calmness and self-control, which must develop naturally and not be imposed artificially. The fourth

line statement describes a situation in which the subject is making progress but has not yet conquered his egotistical drives and desires. The fifth line statement refers to the need for the subject to be cautious in what he says and to know when to speak and when to remain silent. The sixth line statement marks the attainment of equanimity and insight, thus facilitating success in all things.⁵ Lest this seem like a simple process, it should be noted that in imperial China it was not uncommon for a scholar to spend days or even weeks contemplating a single hexagram. The reasons for this will become apparent as we proceed through the life of the *Yijing*.

The Transnational Travels of the *Changes*

The *Yijing*'s great prestige and multifaceted cultural role in China naturally commended it to several civilizations on the Chinese periphery—notably Korea, Japan, and Vietnam—each of which had long been influenced significantly by Chinese philosophy, religion, art, literature, and social customs. In all these environments, the *Changes* enjoyed an exalted reputation, and in each it was employed in a variety of cultural realms, as it had been in China. The process of transmission in East Asia was relatively uncomplicated—in part because the classical Chinese language in which the *Yijing* was written served as the literary lingua franca of virtually all educated Korean, Japanese, and Viet-

name elite until the late nineteenth century. Despite this powerful cultural common denominator, however, over time the *Changes* came to be used and understood in ways that reflected the particular needs and interests of the host environment, and in the process the *Yijing* became domesticated.

Similar processes of appropriation and adaptation took place much later in the West, but for somewhat different reasons and with sometimes radically different results. First, the *Yijing* had to be translated into various Western languages by scholars who had different levels of language ability and different political, religious, or personal agendas. In East Asia the *Changes* remained part of the dominant culture into the twentieth century, whereas in Europe and the Americas, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, the radical otherness of the *Yijing* led to its use primarily as a countercultural document. To be sure, some individuals—Christian missionaries in particular—tried to find affinities between the *Changes* and the Bible, and scholars of various sorts sought to understand the document on its own terms, as a historical artifact rather than a living document. But on the whole the *Yijing* served in the West as a tool for challenging the establishment rather than supporting it.

The *Yijing* has touched many realms of modern Western culture, from the psychology of Carl G. 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 com-

posers as Joseph Hauer, John Cage, Udo Kasemets, and James Tenney. It has been a significant element in the art of individuals such as William Littlefield, Eric Morris, Arnaldo Coen, Arturo Rivera, Augusto Ramírez, 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. The practices of fengshui and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which have attracted so much attention around the world in recent decades, have their conceptual roots in, and derive much of their analytical and symbolic vocabulary from, the *Classic of Changes*.

A Brief Overview

My goal in this biography is to trace the evolution of the *Yijing* across space and time, and to account for its broad reach and sustained appeal, not only in the country of its birth but also in distant and dissimilar lands. My account begins with a chapter describing the origins of the *Changes*, focusing on the mythology that surrounds the document, its early structure and functions, and the way in which the basic text reflects the values and preoccupations of Bronze Age China. It also discusses competing versions of the *Yijing*.

The second chapter addresses the process by which the *Changes* became a Chinese classic in 136 BCE, giving special attention to the role of the Ten Wings in

providing the document with a coherent cosmological framework and in expanding dramatically the interpretive possibilities of its hexagrams, trigrams, and lines. Chapter 2 also offers a brief comparison between the version of the *Yijing* that was fixed in 136 BCE (see the list of hexagrams at the beginning of this book) and competing versions, notably the so-called Ma-wangdui manuscript, discovered in 1973.

Chapter 3 consists of two parts. The first part explores a few of the many ways that Chinese commentators have approached the *Changes* from the second century BCE to the present. This discussion not only underscores the enormous complexity of *Yijing* interpretation; it also identifies and explains the numerical and other forms of correlative logic that so often informed it, suggesting, at least implicitly, comparisons with the kabbala and other mystical approaches to sacred texts. The second part focuses on the divinatory role of the *Changes* in Chinese society, giving attention to the rituals accompanying it, certain basic patterns of interpretation, and some specific examples of actual divinations undertaken by emperors, officials, scholars, and professional fortune-tellers.

The next two chapters address the travels of the *Yijing* and the transformations it underwent. Chapter 4 looks at the reception of the document in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet, illustrating the various cultural uses to which it was put, as well as the sometimes substantial modifications it experienced over time. Chapter 5 examines the problems of translation

that arose when advocates of the *Changes* sought to introduce the Chinese classic to Western audiences. A common feature of this process has been acute scholarly rivalry, often marked by acrimonious critiques leveled by translators against their predecessors and contemporary competitors. The chapter ends with a few examples of how the *Yijing* has found its way into Western culture, first as an alternative to mainstream culture and then as a commercial product of it.

My brief concluding remarks are designed to show why the *Changes* deserves to be considered one of the great works of world literature, on a par with such religious classics as the Bible, the Talmud, the Qur'an, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Lotus Sutra. The criteria include similarities in evolution, longevity, domestic significance, and global spread.