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## Transitions and Transformation: Asian Literature Across Time and Space

### *The Yijing (Classic of Changes) as a Teaching Tool*

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There is probably no work in the modern world that is at once as instantly recognized and as widely misunderstood as the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes)—commonly known as the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*. From both a Chinese and a global perspective, it is a document of extraordinary significance; yet most Westerners, and even many Chinese, have long considered the *Changes* to be a work of "awesome obscurity."

Fortunately, in recent years a wealth of Chinese, Japanese and Western scholarship has succeeded in stripping away much of the mystery of the *Yijing*, solving many long-standing textual problems and, of course, raising new and interesting questions. This brief article makes no attempt to catalogue the vast body of recent scholarship on the *Changes*, much less to review it systematically. My goal is simply to suggest how college-level teachers in different disciplines, and with different area interests, can employ the *Yijing* productively in the classroom. For this reason I will focus primarily on a few English-language works that are scholarly, readable, and readily accessible to specialists and non-specialists alike (see "Works Cited").

First a bit of background. The *Yijing* began as a primitive fortune-telling manual perhaps three thousand years ago. It developed out of the complex interaction between an unwritten oracular tradition and an elite system of divination involving both writing and a sophisticated numerology. This interaction took place primarily during the latter part of the Zhou dynasty, from about the eighth to the third centuries B.C.E.

During the following century, a number of philosophical commentaries, known collectively as the "Ten Wings" (*Shiyi*), were incorporated into the "basic text" of

this document. Thus amplified, the *Changes* came to be viewed no longer as simply a divination manual but also as a repository of profound moral and metaphysical truths—largely because the commentaries were attributed (erroneously) to Confucius (551-479 B.C.E.). Had it not been for this erroneous attribution, we may doubt whether Chinese scholars would have given the document so much careful scrutiny and searched so relentlessly for its deeper significance over the next two thousand years.

The "Ten Wings"—particularly the "Great Commentary" (*Dazhuan*) or "Commentary on the Appended Phrases" (*Xici zhuan*)—gave the *Yijing* an explicitly metaphysical and moralistic cast, one that reflected orthodox "Confucian" values as well as a correlative cosmology based on numerical and other symbolic correspondences and resonances between Heaven, Earth and Man. Another edition of the *Changes*, buried in a Han dynasty tomb at Mawangdui, Hunan, in 168 B.C. and discovered only in 1973, differs in a number of respects (see below), but its commentaries reflect these same, deeply rooted cosmological assumptions.

Joseph Needham has remarked that in contrast to Western-style "subordinative thinking," which relates classes of things through substance and emphasizes "external causation," in Chinese-style correlative thinking "conceptions are not subsumed under one another but placed side by side in a *pattern*;" and things behave in certain ways "not necessarily because of prior actions or [the] impulses of other things," but because they resonate with other entities and forces in a complex network of associations and correspondences. This explains why the hexagrams of the *Yijing*, as well as their constituent trigrams and individual lines, were viewed as the keys to cosmic understanding in

China; for according to the “Great Commentary,” they reflected the images, patterns and powers of the universe. It also explains the close affinity between the *Yijing*, as a way of knowing, and Chinese ritual (*li*), as a way of acting—or, more accurately, positioning. Both provided a means by which what was hidden could be made manifest, what seemed separate could be united, and what had become imbalanced could be centered.

Now to the classroom. At present I use the *Yijing* as a teaching tool in several different ways. In my two-semester survey course on Chinese history (History 341 and 342), I try to show how the *Changes* evolved over time, and how in particular it has inspired an enormous number of commentaries—each reflecting a particular period in China’s political, social, intellectual and cultural history. In my one-semester, topically-organized course on traditional Chinese culture in the Qing period (History 250), my focus is on the pervasive influence of the *Yijing* in realms such as language, philosophy, religion, art, literature and social life. In my one-semester course on Asian Civilizations (History 206) I attempt to show how the *Yijing* arose in China and then “traveled” to other parts of Asia, notably Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Tibet, and how it eventually found its way to the West. And in my one-semester contemporary Chinese culture course (History 220), which focuses on “cultural China” (i.e., the PRC, Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities), I urge my students to consider not only the diverse uses to which the *Yijing* has been put in these different environments during the last few decades, but also the “globalization” of the document, and its relation to the “export” of traditional Chinese beliefs and practices (such as *fengshui*).

Although these are not, of course, the only ways to introduce students to the *Changes*, they suggest a few potentially fruitful areas of inquiry—particularly since we now have excellent translations of the *Yi* (notably Lynn, 1994, and Shaughnessy, 1998) as well as a considerable amount of scholarship for both guidance and documentation. Let me elaborate a bit on some of the possibilities.

Experientially, students stand to learn a great deal from the process of *Yijing* divination, which can be done collectively in class, or individually (or in collaborative groups) outside of class. In a sense, hexagrams are the textual equivalent of Rorschach inkblots, which provoke illuminating emotional and/or intellectual responses. Journals provide an excellent means of evaluating this type of work, which, if done in the proper spirit, and with a high degree of cultural sensitivity, yields fascinating results—particularly when it is undertaken on several occasions during the course of a semester.

In order to appreciate the pervasive influence of the *Yijing* in Chinese political, social, intellectual and cultural life, students might be directed toward the Western (and Chinese) sources cited in Richard Smith (1991), chapter 3, and (1998b), esp. pp. 395-404, notes 17-60. The various indexes to Needham et al. (1962-present) under the heading “*I Ching*” reveal the prominent place of the work in the

history of traditional Chinese science, technology and medicine.

Students can learn a great deal by comparing different editions of the *Changes*—for instance, the “orthodox” received version (declared a “classic” in 136 B.C.E.) and the roughly contemporary Mawangdui silk manuscript edition. As Shaughnessy (1998) points out, there are many striking similarities between these two collections of documents, as well as a number of glaring differences. What do these similarities and differences reveal about the intellectual and cultural environment of early Han China? How do they highlight issues of textual authenticity, textual transmission and textual transformation?

Students can also profitably compare changing interpretations of the *Yijing* over time, using material from ancient China—Fu (1995), Gotshalk (1999), Kunst (1985), Shaughnessy (1983 and 1992), Kidder Smith (1989), Rutt (1994) and Whincup (1986)—early imperial China—Lynn (1994) and Shaughnessy (1998)—the Song dynasty—Birdwhistell (1989), Chang (1986) Cleary (1995), Wilhelm (1967), Kidder Smith et al. (1990) and Wyatt (1996)—and the Ming-Qing era—Black (1989), Cleary (1986 and 1987), Henderson (1984) and Smith (1991, chapter 3 and 1994).

One of the most fascinating features of the *Yijing* is the way its influence has spread beyond the borders of China. In Asia, the prestigious work traveled easily to Japan, Korea, Annam (Vietnam) and Tibet, where it interacted with each indigenous culture in interesting and complicated ways. In the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries brought the *Changes* to the attention of their contemporaries in Europe, including the famous German mathematician, philosopher and theologian, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz. Eventually the *Yijing* found its way to America, where it has long enjoyed great popularity, particularly during the 60s.

Students can not only explore this process of transmission in different cultural environments; they can also make explicit cross-cultural comparisons—investigating, for instance, the use of language and symbolism in the *Changes* and in other major literary traditions, or examining the specific relationship between the ideas of the *Yijing* and those of Western thinkers such as Leibniz, Alfred North Whitehead, Martin Heidegger and Carl Jung. Comparisons can also be drawn between the *Yijing* and certain great monuments of world literature, including the Hebrew and Christian *Bibles*, the *Qu’ran*, and the *Vedas*.

At first glance it may seem that there is little to connect these diverse works. Unlike the *Yijing*, the other “classics” are prolix, rich in myth, and possessed of powerful narrative structures. Furthermore, each is grounded in a major religious tradition—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. What makes them comparable, however, is their exalted canonical status, the scholarly debates that surround their origins and early evolution, their openness to additions and other modifications, their “spiritual” character, their claims to both depth and comprehensiveness, and, above

all, the similar commentarial strategies that have shaped and defined them. Other points of affinity include themes of prophecy or revelation and elaborate systems of numerology.

Of course, close comparisons will reveal important contrasts. For instance, the divinatory practices associated with the *Yijing* have long been a central feature of Chinese culture, whereas divination and numerology have remained outside the mainstream of Judeo-Christian culture. But interesting comparisons can certainly be made between the divinatory theories and practices of the *Yijing* and those of other non-Western traditions.

Finally, students might want to investigate how and why the *Yijing* has experienced such a dramatic revival on the Chinese Mainland after decades of official criticism and condemnation. Obviously the "Open Policy" after 1978 has encouraged this particular "fever" (*Yijing re*) by expanding the parameters of both academic and popular discourse. Other factors include state-sponsored "national studies" (*guoxue*) and the search for ancient and indigenous sources of inspiration at a time of "spiritual crisis" (*jingshen weiji*). But another factor certainly seems to be national pride, prompted by the discovery of certain affinities between the ancient *Yijing* and modern science.

There are, of course, many other ways to use the *Yijing* creatively in the classroom. Perhaps a brief divination will reveal them.

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