

The Difficulty of the *Yijing**

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The *Yijing*'s 易經 difficulty is one thing that all of us know about this text—from personal experience, perhaps, or from examining any Chinese attempt to make the *Yi* work for them. This essay sets out why the *Yijing* is hard to understand. My demonstration is based in the *Yi*'s formal qualities—those linguistic and structural features that have proved so often so hard to read.

But other concerns also run through this investigation. One arises with the two kinds of material that constitute the *Yi*: Chinese language texts such as “Hidden dragon—do not act” and hexagrams such as ☰. The first of these materials is linguistic, the second non-linguistic. But both are sign-systems. The fact that these distinct systems should coincide in the *Yijing* has, I believe, important implications for our understanding of what might constitute textuality in ancient China. Another, more familiar, set of issues arises as soon as we invoke a word like “sign-system” or “textuality”—that is, as soon as we introduce foreignisms into traditional Chinese discourse. Yet here we will see that the *Yi* by its difficulty affords us a curious sympathy with its ancient Chinese readers, as each of us struggles with the familiar “modern” questions of ambiguity, obscurity, and indeterminacy.

This paper is structured into two sections by the *Yi*'s Chinese language texts and hexagram configurations. These systems are formally distinct, each with its own vocabulary, grammar, and way of writing. Historically most Chinese have emphasized one or the other. Indeed, the two major schools of *Yijing* interpretation, both identifiable in Han, can be roughly distinguished by their preference for one of them.¹ When the *Yi* is actually used, however, these systems constantly intermingle, entailing a certain fruitful disorderliness that we will encounter again and again. The Ten Wings (*shiyi* 十翼), the earliest commentaries on the text, are my main informants for readings of the *Yi*.² In addition, I refer often to the writings of Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249), Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-1077), and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), whose work has been extremely influential on the Chinese traditions.

* My thanks to Dave Collings, Pat Sieber, and Bill Watterson for kindly criticism and encouragement, and to Eugene Eoyang for urging me to treat the hexagrams as a non-linguistic system.

¹The *yili* 義理 (meaning-pattern) school emphasizes how the Chinese language texts can be read figuratively. The *xiangshu* 象數 (image and number) school emphasizes the rationality of hexagram structure and seeks objective methods for interpreting the text. My formalist investigation limits incursions into the historical questions that underlie this on-going division, for example, into the intellectual context that encouraged any particular reading of the *Yi*. For discussions of history, see Ch'i-yün Ch'en, “A Confucian Magnate's Idea of Political Violence: Hsün Shuang's (128-190 A.D.) Interpretation of the *I Ching*,” *T'oung Pao* 54 (1968), pp. 73-115; Kidder Smith, Jr., “*Zhouyi* Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 49 (1989), pp. 421-463; Kidder Smith, Jr., Peter K. Bol, Joseph A. Adler, and Don J. Wyatt, *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Tze-ki Hon, *Northern Song “Yijing” Exegesis and the Formation of Neo-Confucianism* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1992), a recent dissertation from the University of Chicago.

²The Ten Wings were written in late Warring States and early Han times, though the *Shuogua* 說卦 (Explanations of the Trigrams, Wing 7) certainly draws on much earlier traditions.

The Chinese Language Texts

Let's begin by considering the Chinese language texts of the *Yijing* as just another variety of "literature." Placing the *Yi* in this context has two immediate consequences: we announce our distance from the traditional Chinese readership, and we immediately recognize the difficulty the *Yi* presents as an extreme but by no means isolating form of indeterminacy. In particular, the texts may strike us as unusually fragmentary. For example, the first line statement of *Qian* 乾 ☰, the first hexagram, reads "Hidden dragon. Do not act." The sixth or top line statement of the sixty-fourth hexagram, *Weiji* 未濟 ☵, reads, in Richard Kunst's translation,

There will be a capture while drinking wine.	有孚(俘)於飲酒
There will be no misfortune.	無咎
It gets its head wet.	濡其首
There will be capture.	有孚(俘)
He will lose the spoon. ³	失是(匙)

We might conclude that the *Yi* is indeterminate because it is fragmentary. But, of course, even more apparently "complete" texts require larger contexts against which they may become intelligible. The question "What do these textual fragments mean?" is therefore first one of environment: "In what context should these lines be read?" Some scholars studying the history of the *Yi* suggest that the lines quoted above had specific referents when the text came together during the early years of the first millennium B.C.E.⁴ Thus we might imagine that a statement such as "It is profitable to ford the big river"⁵ would have been as laden with specific meanings as crossing the River Jordan has been in the Judeo-Christian traditions. But by the time of our earliest records of men and women using the *Yi*—the seventh century B.C.E. accounts preserved in the *Zuozhuan*—these referents seem to have been discarded or lost.⁶ For here, as almost ever after, diviners speak as if the *Yi* were utterly independent of any late Shang and early Zhou cultural context. It has thus been possible—necessary—to find an environment for the *Yi*, either in the political demands of the moment of divination, within the traditions of reading that gradually built up around the text, or by creating a new intellectual world to which the *Yi* was the key.⁷

How well can we interpret the *Yijing* if we look at these Chinese language texts alone? Our two examples suggest that the *Yi* rules on the advisability of certain actions—"Do not act"—and states that certain things will come about—"There will be

³ Richard Alan Kunst, *The Original "Yijing": A Text, Phonetic Transcription, Translation, and Indexes, with Sample Glosses* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1985), p. 367. Kunst's work attempts to reconstruct the *Yi* as it was read in early Zhou times. Standard translations such as Legge's and Wilhelm's instead seek to capture Song-Qing Neo-Confucian understandings of the text.

⁴ See Kunst, as above, and Edward Louis Shaughnessy, *The Composition of the "Zhouyi"* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1983).

⁵ See hexagrams #5 *Xu* 需, #13 *Tongren* 同人, #18 *Gu* 蠱, #26 *Dachu* 大畜, etc.

⁶ See "Zhouyi Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan*."

⁷ See, respectively, the *Zuozhuan* accounts, the Qing compendium *Zhouyi zhezong* 周易折中, and the strong readings described in *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*.

capture.” But there are no easy means to link either the advice or the predictions with the concrete grounds on which they seem to be based—the hidden dragon or the wetting of the head. These latter are a random-seeming collection of ordinary and extraordinary items and events—a spoon, a dragon—that may perhaps be read as portents. But the text does not explicitly invoke either moral, customary, religious, logical, or any other identifiable connections between these items and the advice and predictions it offers. The connections must be supplied by the reader from elsewhere. By contrast, when *Pian* 2 of the *Guanzi* mentions items from the natural and human worlds, it structures them as self-evident apothegms: “If a mountain rises high and never crumbles, sacrificial sheep will be presented to it.”⁸ The interpretive difficulties of the *Yi* thus do not lie in the ordinariness or extraordinariness of the things mentioned in its texts but rather in the apparent lack of “syntax” connecting them—to each other or to anything else.

Indeterminacy can be muted by strong generic identification, and the Chinese preoccupation with bibliographic categories can guide our own investigations here. The *Yi*, despite its strongly *sui generis* nature, was from Han times onward partially defined by its identification as one of the Five Classics, which suggest the basic generic options of “history,” “poetry,” and “ritual.” Contrasting the *Yi* with these texts will help isolate additional features that contribute to its inaccessibility.

To begin with, the *Yi* discourages readers from viewing it as history in the manner of the *Shu* or the *Chunqiu*.⁹ There are only scraps of story-line and never an identifiable speaking voice or someone addressed. The *Yi*, in other words, lacks narrative, narrator, and an implicit audience—anything that might identify a human voice or persona. In all these ways the *Yi* stands at considerable remove from the oral traditions so evident in the *Shu*—and indeed in almost every other pre-Qin “writing.” There are no disputes, no speeches, no great deeds. In terms of time and place, it consistently omits references to a locatable “here” or “now.” For example, instead of saying “over there from us” it says “Losing a sheep in Yi”; instead of saying “three days after today,” it says “Three days after the *jia* day.”¹⁰ A spoon is lost, a head is wet, and certain things are judged auspicious, without fault, or leading to remorse—that is all. By all these standards the *Yi* may be judged the quintessential written text¹¹—pure residue, bereft of context, syntax, voice, and intentionality.

We might argue that the *Yi*’s discourse makes the *Chunqiu* its closest relative among the Classics. Both texts have been seen as requiring an intensive hermeneutic

⁸W. Allyn Rickett, *Guanzi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 61.

⁹*Shi*, which we generally translate as “history,” did not arise as a bibliographic category until the fourth century C.E., and Han and earlier conceptions of *shi* activity are often at striking variance from those of the later traditions.

¹⁰See hexagrams #18 *Gu* 蠱 and #34 *Dazhuang* 大壯.

¹¹Walter J. Ong, student of oral culture, provides a list of what he calls the “psychodynamics of orality” in his *Orality and Literacy* (London & New York: Methuen, 1982), pp. 31ff. By these criteria we can roughly measure how far the *Yi* has traveled from its presumed oral origins. It is parsimonious, not “copious”; far from “the human life world”; and “objectively distanced” instead of “empathetic and participatory.” And yet we can also see how elements Ong and others associate with orality have been transformed through a recent-seeming and incomplete deracination. “The human life world” is close by, only fragmented; the *Yi* “conserves” traditional cultural elements, though extracting them from their cultural context; like oral tales, the text is “situational rather than abstract”; and it has a penchant for certain aggregated phrases like “the great man” or “the great river.” These examples complicate any dichotomizing of orality and literacy. The question of orality and its relationship to Warring States texts is currently being studied by Jens Østergård Petersen of Cambridge University and the University of Copenhagen.

if the depth of their intention is to be revealed. Nor is it surprising that the *Yi* and *Chunqiu* both retain a *set* of early commentaries through which they are usually read, not a single, dominant transmission, and that in imperial times more commentaries were written on these two classics than any other work.¹² But even the *Chunqiu* contains the elements of a bare historical narrative. Here, for example, are its opening lines, in Legge's rendering:

[It was his] first year, the spring, the king's first month.
In the third month, the duke and E-foo of Choo made a covenant in Mëeh.
In summer, in the fifth month, the earl of Ch'ing overcame Twan in Yen.¹³

元年,王正月。
三月:公及邾儀父盟於蔑。
夏,五月:鄭伯克段於鄆。

Unlike the *Yi*, the *Chunqiu* names specific time, place, and persons. Its events are never the insignificant doings of the anonymous but rather are public acts of political consequence. The fact that most of these are independently identifiable in the larger record of Chinese civilization links the *Chunqiu* strongly with that mainstream of high culture. No one ever doubts that the reality lying hidden in its texts has to do with principles of ruling—that the *Chunqiu* is “history.” But since the *Yi* lacks these connections, one cannot predict so clearly what kind of meaning it is meant to convey. Thus its Chinese readers have not treated it as history, either in our sense of “evidence about the past”¹⁴ or in their own sense as being primarily concerned with the activities of human governance.¹⁵

The *Yi* does share one key feature with the *Shi* (Book of poetry). Both texts have been read figuratively—as consisting of images that, when properly understood, reveal a significance greater than the literal meaning of their words.¹⁶ Much has already been said, in China and the West, about the problematic nature of figurative language. As John Thorpe writes,

Poets have an awfully easy time with image cause it's so rife, or they have a hard time cause it's too rife. Any loony-bin lodges idiot-savants of image who run on and on....¹⁷

¹²For the *Yi* these commentaries are the Ten Wings. For the *Chunqiu* they are the *Gongyang*, *Guliang*, and *Zuo*. For commentaries and sub-commentaries, see, for example, the bibliographic sections of the standard dynastic histories.

¹³James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, p. 3.

¹⁴Two exceptions come to mind. One is the *shi* 史 Mofu, who cites the dragon-texts of *Qian* to prove that dragons were once common in the land; see *Zuozhuan*, Zhao 29. The other is Gu Yanwu and those of his ilk among Qing philologists; see, for example, Gu's *Yiyin* 易音 (*Yijing jicheng* 易經集成 [Taipei: Chengwen, 1975] vol. 142). These men are historians, and the *Yi* is their data. Only recently, beginning with the work of Li Jingchi 李鏡池 in the 1920s, have scholars more generally begun to treat the *Yi* historically.

¹⁵See, *inter alia*, the general discussion of the *Shu* in the *Siku quanshu zongmu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1965), p. 89b.

¹⁶The *Zuozhuan* contains scores of examples of lines from each text being taken this way. The first self-conscious method for reading the *Shi* texts figuratively was developed in Han—see the discussion of *xing* 興 recorded in the “Great Preface” to the *Shi*. That approach to the *Yi* was developed 400 years later by Wang Bi; see his *Zhouyi lueli* 周易略例, especially essay 4, “Ming xiang” 明象.

¹⁷*Poetry as Air Traffic Control* (Smithereens Press, n.d.), n.p.

Figurative readings of the *Yi*, rather than resolving issues of indeterminacy, simply shift the interpretive process to a more familiar realm, one no more systematically governable than any other aspect of the text. But the category “poetry” is still useful to our investigation of the *Yi* as literature, since it was initially through poetry that modernists greatly expanded the possibilities of language. Because of these developments, the language of the *Yijing* no longer looks so peculiar to us. Yet this familiarity highlights our difference from the ancient Chinese: because the *Yi* looks like something we already know, but not like anything else they ever knew, then the more we understand the *Yi* in our terms, the less we do in theirs.

Ritual texts are the last category within the Five Classics that we need to consider here. Like the *Yi*, these texts are concrete and recommend specific actions. Early versions of them, pre-dating the Han, also neglect explaining what they describe, as if their meaning were entirely self-evident. But since ritual actions are intended to be both readily recognizable and endlessly repeatable, they exist in a shared social space of predictability, into which the *Yi* can be only partially brought by even the most stringent of state orthodoxies.

Ritual texts are like the *Yijing* in another crucial regard: though both include language, each depends heavily on non-linguistic sign-systems—either routinized action, or hexagrams (and, in the case of *Yijing* divination, both of these). Here ritual functions as animated signs, a practical semiotics, we could say. This has important implications for what constitutes a Chinese text. If we understand the Five Classics as various written strategies for comprehending the Whole, we must acknowledge that “text” importantly includes not only non-linguistic sign-systems like the *Yijing* hexagrams but also the physical practices of rituals. For, after all, the words and actions that make up *li* are only analytically separable—neither is efficacious without the other.¹⁸ Thus just as written documents are more than linguistic, texts are more than written signs.

I mentioned above that the *Yi* may be said to be the consummate written text, in that nearly every trace of human actors is absent from it. Its language is in this sense disembodied and, by the same measure, empowered to roam freely throughout the natural world. The text is in this sense *shen* 神, “a spirit” or “spiritual,” as the *Xicizhuan* 繫辭傳 repeatedly calls it. It is a text less of culture than of Heaven-and-Earth, of nature.

And yet it was also indubitably written, or recorded, by human beings. An early discussion of its origins, preserved in the *Xicizhuan*, addresses these dual, cultural-natural, claims, though it is speaking in this instance of the trigrams rather than the Chinese language texts. The sage Fuxi, it is said, drew the trigrams to represent the patterns of the natural world:

Of old, when Paoxi [=Fuxi] ruled all under heaven, he looked up and observed the images (*xiang* 象) in heaven, he looked down and observed the models (*fa* 法) of earth, he observed how the markings (*wen* 文) on birds and beasts fit with their locales. Nearby he took it from his body, at a distance he took it from objects. Thereupon he first made the eight trigrams.¹⁹

¹⁸ And thus we can also say that *li* encode networks of social and cosmological knowledge in a distinctive practice-oriented medium that is neither strictly “oral” nor “literate.”

¹⁹ Section B2.

This passage records the text's human redaction. But it also gives us one way—later there will be many others—to see how the *Yi* is embedded in the perennial triad of heaven, earth, and the human (here the sage's body), as well as in the myriad things (the objects that Fuxi observed). Throughout the *Xici* related claims are made about the *Yi*'s supra-human status—for example, that it operates on a level with Heaven-and-Earth, or that it is a true representation of Heaven-and-Earth.²⁰

This passage also foregrounds signs that are only partially linguistic or are fully beyond human language. These are identified by the *Xici* as *xiang*, *fa*, and *wen*—patternings as discerned in heaven, earth, and fauna. *Xiang* may be approximated by the word “symbol” or “figure,” though its technical sense in the *Yi*-traditions refers especially to the eight trigrams, which I will discuss in the next section. It thus applies to both linguistic and non-linguistic sign-systems. *Fa*, “model,” “standard” (and eventually both “law” and “*dharma*”) is too complex for serious treatment here, but by late Warring States and early Han times it is used in speaking of the application of cosmic models to human social forms.²¹ *Wen* by late Warring States means the patterns on things (in contrast to the patterns within them, which are *li* 理). Yet it also means writings, and elegant writings in particular. In the *Xici* it comprehends both nature and culture:

[The *Yi*] completes the *wen* (patterns) of Heaven-and-Earth. (A9)

[The *Yi*'s] intent is far-reaching, its verbalizations are *wen* (elegant, but also accurate as to pattern). (B5)

Things are mutually interwoven, therefore one speaks of *wen* (their patterns). *Wen* are not matched [i.e., people do not follow the *wen*-patterns], therefore one speaks of the auspiciousness and inauspiciousness within things. (B8)

Wen, then, are a category within the *Yi* that is, like the *Yi* as a whole, explicitly situated in both the human activity of writing (like the Chinese language texts) and the patterns of nature (like the hexagrams). They are another way to engage the crucial task of conjoining these worlds by identifying a sign/language that already essentially belongs to both. Yet *wen* are considerably less useful than hexagrams in this task because they are not subject to systematization—however suggestive, they're just the markings on birds or hills, too natural for easy naturalization. In this sense reading *wen* is like reading cracks in turtle plastrons, not like reading the *Book of Change*. As such *wen* will serve as a useful transition into the issues of the next section of this article, where the non-linguistic hexagram configurations will be addressed.

But *wen* as “elegant writing” also returns us to the starting point of this section: the *Yi* as literature, as recuperable through a simple extension of the standard techniques of modern reading. So simple an extension reminds us again of the difference between modern and ancient options. For a *littérateur* might be moved to appreciate

²⁰Sections A3 *et pas*. The manner of this representation has, of course, been subject to dispute. See Willard Peterson, “Making Connections: ‘Commentary on the Attached Verbalizations’ of the *Book of Change*,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42 (1982), pp. 67-116. Zhu Xi articulates one version of this relationship when he states that Fuxi was simultaneously contemplating his own, human, mind and also examining Heaven-and-Earth as they truly are, that is, both relying on his sagely intuition but also “contemplating above and examining below, seeking from afar and selecting from the near at hand.” See the discussion by Joseph Adler in *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*, p. 223.

²¹As in the supposed Huang-Lao materials from Mawangdui. See R. P. Peerenboom, *Law and Morality in Ancient China* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993).

the seeming arbitrariness of the *Yi*, marvel at its textual *bricolage*, admire the display of its assembled elements, so concrete, so apparently immediate, so anti-rational. A modern rationalist, on the other hand, might choose to dismiss the *Yi* as nonsense. But Chinese readers had neither of these options available. They could not step over these difficulties by regarding them as deficiencies of the text—for example, as evidence of its incoherence—nor could they engage the *Yi* as *jouissance*. For them the book's surface irrationality and aleatory nature were things they always needed to control. Indeed, the classic definition of divination given in the *Zuozhuan* is that it is "to resolve doubts" (*jueyi* 決疑).²² The hexagrams, to which we now turn, contain within themselves the possibility of just such resolution and control, for they are unambiguously structured with the clarity of a mathematical code. Yet we will discover that they raise difficulties of their very own.

Hexagram Structures

Of themselves, hexagrams are sufficient to distinguish the *Yi* from every other text in the Chinese (and any other) corpus. A hexagram is defined by its six line-places, which can be either solid or broken. Thus there are 2⁶ or 64 possible hexagrams. These constitute a self-contained sign-system, albeit a very simple one, with their own form of writing. This sign-system differs from natural languages like Chinese or Spanish in several ways. It is closed, not expandable by the addition of new words. Nor is it derived from speech—indeed, its signs have no independent phonetic value at all.

These signs are partially integrated into the Chinese language. *Qian* and *Kun*, the first two hexagrams, have high recognizability: most college graduates in Taiwan today could tell you what ☰ and ☷ are, though they might be unsure about what they "mean." These two hexagrams, then, are no more alien within Chinese than the Buddhist symbol *wan* 卐, though they are not as fully integrated as the numerals 1, 2, and 3 are into the German, Russian or modern Chinese languages. Most other hexagram configurations, however, are recognizable only to specialists. Thus a bit of the hexagram sign-system lies within the boundaries of ordinary language while most of it lies outside.

Yi traditions often voice concern with the inadequacy of language to meaning—in particular, with the inadequacy of the *Yi*'s Chinese language texts. Hexagrams are considered an alternative sign-system, one that offers more potent means for expressing otherwise hidden meaning through their super-linguistic clarity. The classical posing and resolution of this issue is found in section A12 of the *Xicizhuan*, the "Treatise of the Attached Verbalizations," probably dating from early Han. It reads:

The master said: "Writing does not fully express speech, and speech does not fully express intended meaning (*yi* 意)."

"Since this is so, then can the intended meaning of the sages not be perceived?"

The master said: "The sages set up images (*xiang* 象) to fully express intended meaning. They established hexagrams to fully express actuality. They attached

²² Huan 11. See James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* (Hong Kong, 1872), vol. 5, p. 55.

verbalizations (*ci* 辭) to these to fully express speech. It transformed and they penetrated it to fully express what is beneficial. They drummed it and danced it to fully express the spiritual (*shen* 神).”²³

Here the question of the adequacy of writing is asked in the context of universal cosmic processes of spirit-like transformation, to which the hexagrams implicitly belong. The linguistic aspect of the *Yi*—the verbalizations (*ci*)—is shown to rest on two other sign-systems, the images (*xiang*) and the hexagrams, which are claimed adequate to meaning and actuality.

Hexagrams, then, offer various promises—of a clear “expression of the actual” and of the perfect order of mathematics. They make this offer structurally. For structure is all that hexagrams consist in—all the rest is interpretation (all the rest is literature). This section explores the hexagram configurations and what skillful Chinese readers have seen there, looking from two perspectives: how the *Yi* is organized into sixty-four parts and how each hexagram is constituted from six broken and/or solid lines, that is, the relationships between hexagrams and the relationships within a hexagram.

Relationships Between Hexagrams

The relationship between any two hexagram configurations is simply a matter of formal definition. These relationships may be close or distant, and rely on criteria as simple as shared lines and inversions or as complex as serial transformations (*guabian* 卦變), nuclear trigrams (*huti* 互體), etc. The latter techniques are characteristic tools of Han *xiangshu* practitioners.²⁴ They provide a set of objectively definable manipulations and connections by which to fix a hexagram’s relationship to any number of other hexagrams, and thus its place in the larger matrix of the sixty-four. By relying on such methods, men such as Yu Fan 虞翻 (ca. 164-233) believed it possible to limit the arbitrariness of the figurative language of the Chinese language texts.²⁵

One significant relationship between hexagrams is the sequential ordering of the sixty-four. The current sequence is structured as thirty-two pairs. Twenty-eight of these pairs are the inversion of each other, as with #23 *Bo* 剝 ䷖ and #24 *Fu* 復 ䷗. In the remaining cases, where the hexagram would remain unchanged if inverted, each is the negative copy of the other, as with *Qian* ䷀ and *Kun* ䷁. There is, however, no formal principle by which to order these thirty-two pairs. That is, the serial ordering of the *Yi* hexagrams cannot be understood purely in terms of the line configurations of each pair of hexagrams. The obvious exceptions are the first and second hexagrams, *Qian* and *Kun* (primal yang and primal yin), and the sixty-third and sixty-fourth, *Jiji* 既濟 ䷾ and *Weiji* 未濟 ䷿ (Having Forded and Not Yet Forded). The latter are formally striking in that they are the only examples of perfect alternations of solid

²³ A12. See James J. Y. Liu’s discussion of this issue in *Language—Paradox—Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 25-37.

²⁴ See, *inter alia*, the discussions in Suzuki Yoshijiro 鈴木由次郎, *Kan’eki kenkyū* 漢易研究 (Tokyo: Meitoku, 1963); Qu Wanli 屈萬里, *Xian Qin Han Wei Yili shuping* 先秦漢魏易例述評 (Taipei: Xuesheng, 1975 [1942]); Hui Dong 惠棟, *Yili* 易例 (*Yijing jicheng*, vol. 150); and Jiao Xun 焦循, *Yi tongshi* 易通釋 (*Yijing jicheng*, vol. 120-21).

²⁵ See the discussions in Ch’i-yün Ch’en, “A Confucian Magnate,” pp. 102-103, and *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*, p. 19.

and broken lines. Thus the *Yi* has a beginning and an ending of sorts but lacks a beginning, middle and end.²⁶

Twentieth-century scholars have sought an underlying rationality for the sequence in purely mathematical terms.²⁷ To my mind all of these attempts have been unsuccessful. Martin Gardner has demonstrated that in fact no algebraic solution exists.²⁸ The more sophisticated these solutions become, the greater we can expect their distance to be from late Shang and early Zhou conceptualizations.

There have been various reorderings of the hexagram sequence. All are based on the hexagram configurations, not on the Chinese language texts, and thus proceed by privileging one of the *Yi*'s sign-systems at the expense of the other. First is the sequence from Mawangdui, buried in 168 B.C.E. and unearthed in 1974. It orders hexagrams according to their trigram structure. For example, all hexagrams with *Qian* as their lower trigram come first.²⁹ Though this reordering failed to survive above ground, similar principles informed the work of Meng Xi 孟喜 (fl. 69 B.C.E.) and Jing Fang 京房 (77-33 B.C.E.) and were further developed a thousand years later by the Neo-Confucian Shao Yong (1011-1077).

Shao's rearrangement preserves only *Qian* (as starting point) and *Kun* (as ending point) among the original famous landmarks. We can best explain his sequence if we invoke the system of binary mathematics. Treating the solid and broken lines as if they were 0's and 1's, *Qian* ䷀, with six solid lines, becomes the number 000,000; *Guai* ䷥, with five solid lines and one broken line on top, is 000,001, etc. In this way Shao turns the *Yi* into a perfectly structured vehicle for expressing the order of Heaven-and-Earth. Among other things, each hexagram is correlated with a time period, and each time period is envisioned as a stage in a universal unfolding. Thus the *Yi* marks the rhythms of a coherent, unified cosmos.³⁰

Shao Yong's reading of the *Yi* addresses only these formal aspects of the hexagrams, discarding nearly every interpretive method developed by previous readers. The Chinese-language hexagram and line statements, the relationship between lines within a hexagram, the accreted layers of traditional interpretation—none are amenable to mathematical expression and are thus abandoned. The hexagrams are revealed as constant and invariable, systematically predictable, and in precisely defined relationship with one another. They have achieved the pure power of mathematical signs. In order to reveal this brilliant rationality within the *Yi*, Shao Yong has translated one portion of the book into another, simpler, sign-system—a sign-system that we usually know by the name "numerology." Perhaps it is this reduction that

²⁶ Note that the *Xugua* 序卦, ninth of the Ten Wings, attempts to explain the current order of the hexagrams. It does so, however, in terms of the meaning of the hexagram *names*—their associations within the Chinese language—not in terms of the hexagram *configurations*. These explanations are based on the notion that nothing is constant and that things constantly give way to one another—a basic principle of *Yijing* philosophy that is said to be represented here in the sequence of hexagrams. While the *Xugua* connects each hexagram to its successor, it does not suggest an ordering of the whole nor argue that a single thread runs through the hexagram sequence. Indeed, one suspects that its method could explain the connection between *any* randomly selected pair of words.

²⁷ See, for example, Liu Yuzhang 劉毓璋, *Yijing shuli sixiang* 易經數理思想 (Taipei: N.p., 1978). See also the graphic analyses of Larry Schulz and Thomas Cunningham in their "The Seasonal Structure Underlying the Arrangement of Hexagrams in the *Yijing*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17.3(1989), pp. 289-313.

²⁸ "Mathematical Games," *Scientific American*, January 1974, pp. 108-113.

²⁹ See the discussions and text in *Wenwu* 1984.3, pp. 1-24.

³⁰ See Kidder Smith and Don J. Wyatt, "Shao Yung and Number," in *Sung Dynasty Uses of the Book of Change*.

has led to the marginalization of his idealized Whole within later Chinese intellectual history.

The Hexagram Configuration

As we have seen, each of the sixty-four hexagrams is rendered precisely by a combination of six broken and/or solid lines. This constitutes a simple sign-system of sixty-four elements. In purely formal terms, what do these elements mean? Shao Yong's answer is to demonstrate how the *Fu* 復 hexagram represents the first cyclic stage after *Kun* 坤, as one yang line returns to a previously all-yin configuration. That is, he suggests that these signs' meaning is complete in their interrelationship. But there are less confining modes of reading the hexagram configuration that nearly every other reader takes into account. By the time the Ten Wings were compiled in early Han, people had already noticed three limited ways in which these configurations could be made to speak. They are the iconic aspect of certain hexagrams, the relationships between lines, and the symbolism of the component trigrams.

First, certain hexagrams can be read as icons—that is, as pictorial representations. For example, hexagram #27 *Yi* 頤 ䷚, “corners of the mouth,” can be imagined as the representation of an open mouth. Hexagram #50 *Ding* 鼎 ䷱ is understood by almost all commentators as representing a cauldron; the earliest indication of this is its *Tuanzhuàn* 彖傳 commentary, which begins “*Ding* is an image (*xiang*).” More abstractly, the *Tuanzhuàn* also suggests that hexagram #24 *Fu* 復 ䷗, Return, is a graphic representation of the concept of reversion, as a single solid line “returns” to a host of broken lines. And of course the hexagrams *Qian* and *Kun* are seen as uniquely intense concentrations of yang and yin forces simply by virtue of their configurations.

These iconic readings imply that the *Yi* contains representations of the world, both of its physical elements and of its subtler processes. As a strategy it presumes the immediate perception of self-evident forms in a non-linguistic text. But such iconic analyses have been advanced for no more than two dozen hexagrams altogether, and the forcefulness with which they may be argued varies considerably by hexagram. The graduated incompleteness of this way of reading thereby suggests that ever subtler representations lie hidden in the text. This promise of meaning, incompletely fulfilled yet never denied, is paradigmatic of the relationship of reader to *Yi*.

Second, there are four formal relationships that can be discerned within every hexagram. These are implicit in the *Xiao Xiangzhuàn* 小象傳³¹ and *Tuanzhuàn*, are made explicit in the *Zhouyi lueli* of Wang Bi, and employed by almost all later readers. I will provide two examples. One is the claim that the second and fifth lines, standing in the center of their respective trigrams, are “central” (*zhong*, the mean) and therefore particularly auspicious. The *Xiangzhuàn* and the *Tuanzhuàn* use this to validate the meaning of a Chinese-language line statement and relate it to the hexagram configuration as a whole. For example, on the second line of hexagram #26 *Dachu*, the *Xiangzhuàn* repeats the line statement and then adds: “It is central and without regret.” The other example of a formal relationship is *ying* 應,

³¹The part of Wings Three and Four that comments on the six line statements, somewhat as the *Tuanzhuàn* comments on the hexagram statements.

“responsiveness,” which is said to be auspicious. Responsiveness obtains between lines 1 and 4, 2 and 5, or 3 and 6 when one is broken and the other solid.

In this way the hexagram structure becomes a potent set of relationships, not just a collection of six serial places. These relationships—for example, “centrality”—are as indisputable as anything in Heaven-and-Earth. Thus when the *Tuanzhuan* invokes one of these principles, it affirms not only that the hexagram configuration and Chinese-language text coincide—that the two sign-systems mean the same thing—but also that these sign-systems represent the basic elements of the cosmos.

But in actuality the line configuration and the Chinese language texts do not always suggest the same meaning—however central, the text of the fifth line statement can still read “inauspicious.” Furthermore there is no hierarchy among the four structural relationships—no one of them dominates the others in determining the meaning of a line. Instead they offer four independent measures to apply to any line, with the possibility—indeed, the eventual certainty—of mutually conflicting evaluations. For example, a second line is central and therefore auspicious. But if it does not respond to the fifth, it is inauspicious. Thus this set of relationships contains its own limitation—points at which it becomes self-contradicting. In this way the hexagram configurations simultaneously encourage rational inquiry and demonstrate the considerable residue of materials that elude it.

Third, as early as the seventh century B.C.E. interpreters of the *Yi* were dividing hexagrams into two three-lined figures or trigrams. (There are eight possible trigrams, or 2³.) By this time each trigram had a quality associated with it; thus accounts in the *Zuozhuan* report that *Qian* ☰ was heaven, *Sun* ☱ was wind, etc.³² These qualities became known as *xiang* or “images,” “figures.” Each hexagram is a unique combination of two of these eight qualities. Indeed, the *Xiangzhuan*, the “Commentary on the Images,” unexceptionally begins its remarks on the hexagram by listing this conjunction of trigrams qualities, e.g. “water and earth.”

Trigrams can be used to interpret the *Yi* in a staggering variety of ways. For example, someone encountering ☶ knows that it means “mountain,” and a reader thinking about “thunder” will be referred objectively to the trigram *Zhen* 震 ☳. In early times the number of figurative readings multiplied—the *Shuogua*, coming together perhaps in late Warring States or early Han, lists a score or more *xiang* for each trigram. Almost every later reader draws upon that list, which includes entries such as hardness, ditch, blood, etc. Yu Fan uses them to read line configurations, especially those of the four trigrams that can be discerned within a hexagram—the lower and upper, and the two internal trigrams constituted by lines 2-3-4 and 3-4-5. By this means he is aligning two sign-systems—*xiang* and trigrams—and translating the latter into the former.

Not only do *xiang* index trigram configuration to trigram qualities, as images they are also essential to any figurative reading of the *Yi*. *Xiang* then are another sign-system within the *Yi*, possessing characteristics of both its linguistic and non-linguistic systems, as well as serving to bridge the two in actual interpretative practice.³³ In the end, however, even for Yu Fan they are only *xiang*—figures like any other that will still require interpretation.³⁴

³² For a discussion of this *Zuozhuan* evidence, see Hellmut Wilhelm, “I-ching Oracles in the *Tso-chuan* and *Kuo-yü*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 79.4 (1959), pp. 273-280.

³³ In this regard note also their role in the thought of Shao Yong as a semiotic layer between physical

Hexagrams, then, turn out to be problematical in the same way as natural language. Are they fundamentally numerological, iconic, figurative? Preceding any of these readings, exceeding any of these attempts to structure them, their own structure remains incompletely readable. Furthermore, except in Shao Yong's radical pruning of the *Yi*, they are inseparable from the Chinese language texts. A simple, paradigmatic example is the relationship between the hexagram configuration and its name. Each hexagram can be represented by a unique configuration of broken and/or solid lines. It also has a name in Chinese. Some of these are by now fully proper names, like *Qian*, or nearly proper names, like *Kan* 坎. But almost all are also common Chinese words, like *fu* (return) or *jing* 井 (well). Thus the *Fu* hexagram can be written either in Chinese as 復 or in "Yijing" as ☱☵. (Both "復" and "☱☵" have the same pronunciation, the way that "three" and "3" do in English.)

Thus the *Yijing*'s two sign systems share their possibilities—and impossibilities. And so *Yijing* interpretation flows easily into a borderless ocean of materials, tightly or tenuously connected, with syntaxes both evident and concealed. The interpretive methods that scholars have chosen to negotiate this sea are virtually determinate of the meanings they will impute to the text. As a deeper investigation of these practices would constitute the case study of an individual interpreter, I direct interested readers to the books and articles mentioned in Note 1 above.

The Uses of Difficulty

Traditional readers, committed to the notion that "divination is to resolve doubts," have striven to resolve the difficulty of the *Yijing*. Yet we can safely assert that its obscurity has been crucial to its importance in the Chinese traditions. Its longevity as a tool in divination is due in part to the elusiveness of its meaning, since the fundamental uncertainty of prognostication demands a text that can be legitimately reinterpreted in retrospect.³⁵ Its extraordinary flexibility has made it available to radical neo-Classical movements, such as that of the Song Confucians. The indeterminacy of its Chinese language material has been coupled with its crystalline hexagram structures to create a text of rare profundity. In this regard Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) states, "How is the *Yi* the source of only the Five Classics? It is the mysterious abode of Heaven, Earth, and the spiritual forces."³⁶

The ambiguity of the *Yi* texts has sometimes also afforded super-human sanction for politically difficult acts. Thus the Kangxi Emperor remarks, in Jonathan Spence's reconstruction:

objects and mathematics, as discussed in *Song Dynasty Uses of the I Ching*, pp. 106ff.

³⁴The topic of *xiang* is immense and difficult, and full treatment would take us far from present concerns. Among the various important definitions of "Yi" that appear in the *Xicizhuan* is this one: "The *Yi* is *xiang*. *Xiang* are likenesses" (*Yi zhe xiang ye, xiang ye zhe xiang ye* 易者象也象也者像也) (B3). That is to say, the *Yi* works by a process of representation.

Finally, before leaving the question of alternative sign-systems altogether, it is worth mentioning the diagrams or *tu* 圖 that have been prominent in some *Yijing* expositions since Song times. Though the *Yi* contains no diagrams, much of its material is susceptible to diagrammatic representation. See especially the work of Shao Yong and Lai Zhide 來知德 (1525-1604).

³⁵As has been argued in "Zhouyi Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan*," p. 452.

³⁶*Tongshu*, section 30.

In bad droughts I have spent three days praying in a simple hut of mats, not even taking a bite of salted or pickled vegetables, and then—after the fast—walked to the Temple of Heaven; and in the spring drought of 1688 I ordered the *Book of Changes* consulted, and the diviners drew the hexagram *Kuai* [*Guai* or *Jue* 夬, hexagram #43], “Breakthrough,” which meant that rain would fall only after some of the great had been humbled. . . .

That same month I removed from office all the senior members of Grand Secretary Mingju’s clique.³⁷

Despite its obscurity, the *Yi* did not become an exclusively esoteric text—in contrast, for example, to the Kaballah. Harold Bloom has described the social conditions that encouraged the latter’s esotericism in the oppression and despair of medieval Jewry.³⁸ The *Yi*, however, has always remained at the disposal of society’s rulers. Since Han it has been accorded canonical status; under Tang it participated in the *Zhengyi* 正義 tradition; its place in Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy has been secure from the fourteenth century on.³⁹ And yet within its multiple hermeneutical spaces, individual scholars of the *Yi* have also developed their own thought forms—as *parts* of the Chinese tradition. In this way the *Yi* has afforded private access to the most valued secrets of the universe in visions that, however eccentric, still rested on shared classical foundations.

Since the Spring and Autumn period these scholars have argued with each other over whose interpretation of the *Yi* was correct. Instead of pitting one view against another, the Qing editors of the *Siku quanshu* take an imperial perspective on the whole. From this vantage, hermeneutic indeterminacy is only a matter of contending partial views. In the Preface to their section on the *Yijing* they write:

And so the *Yi* daily gives rise to new sprouts of discourse. These two schools [the *yili* and *xiangshu*, see note 1 above] and six lineages constantly contradict each other. Furthermore, the *dao* of the *Yi* is vast, and there is nothing it does not encompass. Side by side astronomy,⁴⁰ geography,⁴¹ music,⁴² strategy,⁴³ phonology,⁴⁴ and mathematics⁴⁵ each adduce the *Yi* for its arguments, as if to trap the heat of an outdoor stove.⁴⁶

³⁷ Jonathan Spence, *Emperor of China* (New York: Vintage, 1975), p. 57. See also Ch’i-yün Ch’en’s discussions in “A Confucian Magnate.”

³⁸ In *Kaballah and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1983 [1975]).

³⁹ Thus both Legge and Wilhelm base their translations on the Qing *summa* of the Cheng-Zhu tradition, the *Zhouyi zhezong*. The somewhat esoteric teachings of Shao Yong have perhaps appealed especially to these on the margins of power, including certain literati. But to find a use of the *Yi*’s obscurity comparable to that of the Kaballah we need to look at groups such as the Eight Trigram rebels that Susan Naquin has studied in *Millenarian Rebellion in China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁴⁰ As in the work of Meng Xi 孟喜 (fl. 51 B.C.E.) and Jing Fang 京房 (d. 37 B.C.E.), who correlated the hexagrams with the twelve months and 360 of the 386 lines with the 365-and-a-quarter days in a year.

⁴¹ As in the correlation of the eight trigrams with the eight directions, and related geomantic elaborations. See John Henderson, *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 12-22 *et pas*.

⁴² As in the correlation of the trigrams to the cosmic scale. See Fung Yu-lan, *History of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952-53), vol. 2, pp. 118-122.

⁴³ As in the *bazhen tu* 八陣圖 (diagram of the eight files) of Zhuge Liang (181-234).

⁴⁴ As in the *Yiyin* 易音 (Phonology of the *Yi*) of Gu Yanwu (1613-1682).

⁴⁵ As in the work of Shao Yong, among many others.

⁴⁶ *Siku quanshu zongmu* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1965), p. 1b.

Here the disputation of schools and scholars has become a demonstration of the natural inexhaustibility of the *Yi*. What we might call the paucity of the text has been inverted to become its wealth—an indication of that vast totality to which the imperial vision also aspires. Thus the ultimate meaning of the *Yi* is affirmed, preserved—in its necessary absence, we might wish to add.

These inversions mark our distance from Chinese tradition. For more clearly than any Chinese text, the *Yijing* appears to us as Barthes's onion,

a construction of layers (or levels, or systems), whose body contains, finally, no heart, no kernel, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing except the infinity of its own envelopes. . . .⁴⁷

Yet the radicality of these inversions also reveals our unexpected intimacy with that Chinese tradition. For the *Yi* has always plunged its readers into obscurity and indeterminacy, difficulties that remind us, with de Man, of another way in which "literature has always been essentially modern."⁴⁸ Our own vantage, furthermore, is equally imperialistic. Just as ancient Chinese advanced totalizing claims through ambitious strategies to comprehend the Whole, so modern Western readers have discovered that we can find nothing outside the text. Our visions link us within a vast empire of signs.

There is a final kinship to explore here. The great Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) takes hexagrams as signs in a process of mind-training.⁴⁹ His project is to work back past the meaning of the Chinese language texts to what he sees as the pre-linguistic expression of that meaning in bare hexagrams, and from hexagrams to the deeper layer of meaning that they in turn represent—to the very order of things, which he calls "the pattern" (*li* 理). In this regard he respects Confucius considerably less than the legendary Fuxi. As the first sage, Fuxi created the *Yi* from his direct discernment of world patterns—those *xiang*, *fa*, and *wen* that we examined earlier in this piece. Confucius is stuck with words, with language—he appended the verbalizations (*xici*) for the sake of those who must rely on reading aids, or translations, substitutive representation. Fuxi created only raw hexagrams—a text bereft of imprecise, superficial, and unnecessary linguistic elaboration. For Zhu Xi these hexagrams are signs of, but cannot themselves bestow, that direct and unmediated access to the pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual patterning of Heaven-and-Earth that is the fruition of his mind-training practices.

We may be unconvinced by any possibility of direct knowing. But while Zhu Xi's end-point is pre-linguistic, it's not pre-semiotic. Indeed, the order of things he calls "the pattern" can be understood as a layer of signs more subtle than human writing or speech. Zhu's view then is consistent with post-structuralist claims, that even supposed pre-linguistic phenomena have a necessarily textual representation. But the consistency of these two views goes deeper: post-structuralism, through its close attention to perception, to how we really read, might increasingly be said to take the functioning of mind as its true subject matter. If we take this prospect seriously, we

⁴⁷ Roland Barthes, "Style and its Image," in Seymour Chatman, ed., *Literary Style: A Symposium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 10.

⁴⁸ "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 151.

⁴⁹ See Joseph Adler's treatment, "Chu Hsi and Divination," in *Sung Dynasty Uses*, pp. 188 ff.

will be returned to a genuinely esoteric scholarship, in that specific techniques of mind-training will be required to master literary discipline, in addition to the conceptual training we are more familiar with. And thus again we would find a curious kinship with *Yijing* studies as they were once practiced in traditional China.