

# Predictable problems

STEVE MOORE ponders Western attitudes to the Chinese *Book of Changes*, and wonders if they could reveal some uncomfortable truths about our own society.



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"Remember that the *I Ching* does not tell the future, but offers advice on how you should conduct yourself in the present ..."<sup>1</sup>

"*I Ching* does not say what is going to happen."<sup>2</sup>

More succinctly than some, these two quotes pretty well sum up contemporary western attitudes to the *Yijing* (*I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*): if we move beyond simply treating it as a philosophical work and actually use it as a book of divination, then we're generally told that it should be consulted for guidance as to the best way to act in certain situations, rather than to predict the future. Which, for most Westerners, is satisfactory enough.

It would hardly do in China, however, the land of the *Yijing's* origin. When we turn to the earliest surviving records of *Yijing*-divination in the book's homeland, we find people predicting the future right, left and centre. These records are found in the *Zuo zhuan*, a chronicle compiled in the 4th century BCE, and covering events from the 8th to the 5th centuries. So here, for example, we find Duke Huan of Lu enquiring about the future of his new-born son; the Earl of Qin asks whether his attack on the neighbouring state of Jin will be successful; Queen Mu Jiang divines about whether she'll get out of jail; and so on. These aren't questions about the correct way to behave. Of course, there are also occasions later in the same chronicle where the *Yijing* is quoted as a philosophical text, or used to decide moral questions; but here, right at the beginning of the book's history, it's being used to predict the future.<sup>3</sup>

Now, you might think that the *Yijing* was only used for prediction in the early stages of its development, and the emphasis on guidance is a later and more advanced usage that replaced the earlier one, but that isn't the case either.

Right to the end of the Imperial period, we still find lay-people and scholars alike seeking predictions from the *Book of Changes*, including one, taken for the year ahead on New Year's Day, 1911, which seems to have predicted the uprising that led to the

## Throughout its history it's been used for prediction

BELOW: Chinese deity Kiang-tse-ya holding an *I Ching* hexagram and the ying-yang symbol.

foundation of the Republic of China.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, I'm not suggesting here that the *Yijing* was *only* used for predicting the future in Traditional China... undoubtedly, it was also being asked for guidance as to the best way to act. But throughout its history it's been used for prediction *as well*. For some reason, this blatantly obvious fact doesn't seem to have accompanied the book on its journey to the West, which rather leaves one wondering why.

We can probably trace the most immediate cause of the modern "guidance-not-prediction" attitude to the translation by Richard Wilhelm, which was pretty much the standard edition when the *Book of Changes* first really burst upon Western consciousness in the 1960s. The *locus classicus* for the notion that the *Yijing* is a "book of wisdom" rather than a fortune-telling work is contained in Wilhelm's introduction, originally published in German in 1924 and translated into English in 1950,<sup>5</sup> and it has to be added that this notion has proved remarkably convenient for niche-marketing the book in the self-help/self-development area.

It's interesting to note that Wilhelm, like the previous translators of the *Yijing* into English (Canon Thomas McClatchie, 1876; Rev. James Legge, 1882), was a Christian missionary, and that all of them were working in the early Darwinian period, when it seemed that Western scientific rationalism would sweep away all the old superstitions. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that, despite being one of the Chinese classics, the *Yijing* would prove difficult to deal with – so difficult, in fact, that Legge treated the book almost entirely as a philosophical work, and barely mentioned its divinatory aspect at all, not even its use for personal guidance.

To admit the *Yijing* could be used for foretelling the future would be more problematical still, of course, because that could be taken to imply that the future



was predictable, predetermined and, taking things to their logical conclusion, predestined (I use the word here in a secular sense, rather than referring to religious doctrines regarding the destiny of the soul after death).<sup>6</sup> For most people in the West, this notion would have the immediate implication that we have no free will, which is anathema to our individualistic and competitive view of society. More specifically, though, predestination can be a mite problematical both for Christians and scientists.

On the religious side, predestination leads to a moral quagmire: if we have no free will, we similarly have no ultimate responsibility for our actions. Worse – not only for Christians but for any monotheistic religion with a creator God – is that if the deity has created a predestined world then God himself is responsible for all the evils it contains.

For the scientist, predestination has a number of implications, two sample areas being evolution and quantum physics. If predestination were to be accepted, evolution could no longer be defined in terms of natural selection based on *random* mutation, as there would simply be no randomness. Similarly, we'd have to abandon the idea that evolution is non-teleological, and so has no inherent purpose or final result. Instead we'd have to have a determinist evolution, where future forms of life were already defined, and current evolutionary processes could only lead toward those, rather than to anywhere that environmental conditions might drive them.

As for quantum physics, the currently prevalent Copenhagen interpretation, relying as it does on uncertainty and probability – where the properties of an entity remain truly undecided until observed – would be called into serious question in the event that predestination actually existed. If the future were predetermined, there would simply be no uncertainty, nothing to decide about, and probability would become irrelevant. This doesn't mean that quantum physics would be overthrown as such, but the Copenhagen interpretation would have to be rethought or replaced, perhaps with one of the alternatives, such as the Many Worlds interpretation, where everything that can possibly happen actually *does*, spawning myriad universes every instant, of which we only become aware of the one we live in – in this case, the predestined one. So, ultimately, whether you're religious or scientific, predestination is trouble.<sup>7</sup>

It's possible to sympathise with Legge, Wilhelm and the others, who

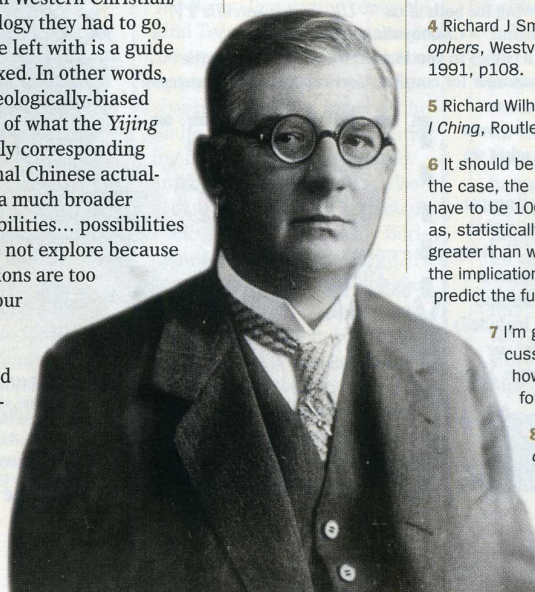


were among the first to open up Chinese culture to the West. Among their very necessary tasks was to translate the Confucian Classics into English, and that included the *Yijing*, which, uncomfortably, had “divination text” written all over it. So, like the elephant in the room, the early translators just ignored the predictive uses of the book, and repackaged it to present only the wisdom and guidance aspects. Those aspects were always present, of course, but so were the predictive ones; as the latter don't fit in with Western Christian/scientific ideology they had to go, and what we're left with is a guide for the perplexed. In other words, we have an ideologically-biased interpretation of what the *Yijing* is, only partially corresponding with the original Chinese actuality, which has a much broader range of possibilities... possibilities which we dare not explore because their implications are too dangerous to our worldview.

Western astrology found itself in a similar position in the 19th century,

ABOVE: Consulting the *Yijing* by using yarrow stalks.

BELOW: Richard Wilhelm, who produced a classic translation of the *Book of Changes* but downplayed its divinatory usage.



with a change of emphasis away from prediction to character analysis,<sup>8</sup> and like the *Yijing* and many other divinatory systems, has now found a snug berth in the Mind & Body/self-development industry. As for the *Yijing*, for most of the 20th century, academics wouldn't even discuss its divinatory aspects at all – not even personal guidance, let alone its use for predicting the future. So, a large part of its history has been neglected or erased because, quite simply, we dare not face up to its reality.

Of course, outside of Christian and scientific/rationalist society, it's quite obvious that millions of people across the globe have, for thousands of years, been predicting the future using a large number of different divinatory systems, not just the *Yijing* ... apparently a completely futile endeavour which we in the West *know* cannot possibly work (at least by no more than the statistical rate of coincidence), because if we admit that it could, we let the genie out of the bottle and our entire comfortable existence has to be questioned.

And yet... is it more likely that millions of people, over thousands of years, relentlessly indulged in a practice that didn't work, doesn't work, and will never work (why didn't they give up?), or that there might actually be something in this prediction lark?

Before you answer that, watch out for the genie... **[I]**

## NOTES

- 1 Neil Powell: *The Book of Change*, Orbis, 1979, p9.
- 2 Krystyna Arcanti: *I Ching for Beginners*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1994, p5.
- 3 Kidder Smith, Jr: “Zhouyi Interpretation from Accounts in the *Zuozhuan*”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 1989, pp421–464.
- 4 Richard J Smith: *Fortune-Tellers & Philosophers*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1991, p108.
- 5 Richard Wilhelm (trans. Cary F Baynes): *I Ching*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, p.111.
- 6 It should be pointed out that for this to be the case, the prediction system does not have to be 100 per cent accurate. So long as, statistically, the results are noticeably greater than would be attributable to chance, the implication would be that it is possible to predict the future.
- 7 I'm grateful to Ian Simmons for discussing scientific points with me; however, I alone am responsible for the text appearing here.
- 8 Patrick Curry: *A Confusion of Prophets*, Collins & Brown, 1992, p162.