

## BOOK REVIEWS

*Yi Jing*. Translated by Wu Jing-Nuan. Washington, D.C.: The Taoist Center; distributed by the University of Hawaii Press, 1991.

One of the labors of Hercules should have been to translate the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes). Killing the Hydra or cleaning the Augean stables would have been a breeze by comparison. Few classics in any language have been so cryptic and so protean. The late Ming scholar Ni Yuanlu expressed a common opinion in stating that after more than “ten thousand generations” of written commentaries there was still no standard interpretation of the *Changes*. And these commentaries were, after all, written in Chinese.

Small wonder there is no “definitive” translation. I doubt there will ever be. The best that one can hope for is a relatively accurate rendering of a certain version of the *Changes* as it was generally understood at a certain time. The earlier the text, the more difficulties it presents to modern scholars, including, of course, translators. This is not only because the meanings of certain characters and concepts have changed, sometimes drastically, over time; it is also because so many of the details of actual divinations, myths, anecdotes, riddles, songs, and other oral traditions that once helped to explain and amplify the “original” material have been lost or distorted.

Wu Jing-Nuan’s approach to the *Yijing* is to seek “the simplicity of a Daoist translation with a ground of shamanistic practice,” and to “bring the poetry of the text to an alphabetic reality.” As he puts the matter elsewhere: “Oracles and prophecy were real and alive in the ancient world. Great men walked the earth, dragons leapt and flew; men, plants and animals possessed a more visible magic than we commonly acknowledge today. Like poetry, single words and simple phrases had the power to conjure up both personal visions and universal world views.”

This approach to the “original” text is highly commendable, if only as a reminder that the most commonly cited English-language translations of the *Yi*, by James Legge and Richard Wilhelm, are products of a decidedly neo-Confucian world view. The distance between Song dynasty interpretations of the *Yi* and those of the early Zhou is enormous—even though mediated somewhat by the Han commentaries known as the Ten Wings, which Mr. Wu also translates but does not elaborate on. By Song times, not only had the introduction of Buddhism fundamentally altered the contours of Chinese metaphysical discourse, but the rise of neo-Confucianism had also invested old graphs with new meanings. Thus, as Wu correctly points out, Wilhelm’s gloss on the commonly occurring character *zhen* as “perseverance” obscures its fundamental meaning in the *Yijing*, which is “to divine.”

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The author is well aware of the hazards of rendering any Chinese text into modern English. In his “Translator’s Notes,” he takes pains to point out that the use of a single word to translate a Chinese character (which he misleadingly describes as an “ideogram”) is “simplistic.” At the same time, however, he believes that “searching for the proper word, for the essence of the ideogram, brings the seed of understanding.” A single word, he asserts, “can trigger poetic nuances,” which in turn amplify the meaning of the graph in significant ways.

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He cannot have it both ways, however. Unless the reader knows early archaic Chinese, in which case there would presumably be no need to consult a translation, how can the “nuances” of the text be appreciated? Wu’s apparent solution to the problem is to provide his own elaborated commentary on the hexagram judgments (*guaci*) and individual line judgments (*yaoci*), based on scholarly research, popular techniques of traditional Chinese word analysis (*xiangzi* or *chaizi*), and various insights derived from his experience as both a Daoist philosopher and a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. In addition, he offers perspectives based on modern (Western) science and psychology. “My hope,” he tells us, “is to offer a rendition as close to the original as possible, within the confines of contemporary and personal thought.”

Again, the author seems to be in a bind. Does he mean to suggest that his commentary accurately reflects the thought processes and concerns of the Western Zhou people, some three thousand years ago? If so, we can only marvel at their intellectual sophistication. There is also the problem of the “original” text. As is well known, the Mawangdui manuscript edition of the *Yi*, unearthed in 1973 and finally transcribed in the March 1984 issue of *Wenwu* (Cultural Relics), is considerably different from the received version—not least in terms of its many variant characters and different hexagram order. But even assuming that the received version is in some sense more “correct” than either the Mawangdui manuscript or another version (one or more of which will certainly be discovered), how is the text to be understood?

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厲 癘

Presumably the best way to explore the “original” meaning of the *Yijing* is through rigorous philological analysis of the sort undertaken by Richard Kunst in his massive and illuminating dissertation on the subject (University of California, Berkeley, 1985). Wu’s commentary often makes reference to the ancient meanings of Chinese characters, but his approach is neither rigorous nor consistent. Scholarly and popular etymologies tend to intermingle promiscuously, and often graphs that deserve a detailed exegesis are translated only by a single word. Thus, for example, Wu invariably renders the term *li* as “danger”—without indicating the wealth of its associated meanings and related graphs (“poetic nuances”?), which conjure up specific images of scorpions (*wan*), demons (*li*), and disease (*li*), as well as more generally threatening themes of oppression, cruelty, and violence.

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On the whole, Wu's translation of the basic text is fairly accurate from the standpoint of ancient Chinese usage. One could, however, quibble with a number of his renderings, such as "high dragon" for *kang-long* (Qian, hexagram no. 1, line 6). The character *kang* has, after all, been interpreted in a wide variety of ways, some of which seem to be quite antithetical. For example, the *Shuowen* (Discussion of Writing) defines the graph as a "neck" or "throat" (read as *gang*)—a meaning also attached to an asterism of the same name that marks one of the twenty-eight lunar lodges (*xiu*) of ancient Chinese astrology. These things are in a certain sense "high." But other early sources interpret *kang* as referring to a "pit" (*keng*) or a "pond" (pronounced *hang*), decidedly low ground. In any case, Wu's commentary offers no explanation whatsoever for his particular choice.

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乾 亢

坑 沆

Although Mr. Wu employs philological scholarship to good effect in many instances, his book cannot be described as a scholarly work. Quite apart from his tendency to oversimplify or ignore complex hermeneutical issues, and the rather uneven quality of his admittedly colorful commentary, his Introduction blurs the very distinction he tries to draw between "history" and "myth." For example, he seems to accept uncritically the story of Fu Xi and the origins of the *Yi*, and as well the dubious assumption that Confucius was referring specifically to the *Changes* in the *An-alecets* 7:17. On the other hand, his tendency to describe the *Yijing* in modern scientific terms strains credulity in another direction. One wonders, for instance, how useful it is to talk of digital notations and analog waves in speaking of the *Yi*, or to refer to the ancient work as extending "far beyond a universe of Newtonian determinism, or a twentieth century theory of thermodynamic degeneration."

In the end, Mr. Wu is interested less in academic scholarship than in mantic practice. Rather than attempting to understand a given period and its intellectual parameters by reference to the *Yijing*, he aims ultimately to show that the work elucidates universal and timeless themes, or what he calls "pictures of potential advantage or misfortune." Viewing the *Yi* explicitly as a manual of divination and a "reflection of the myriad configurations of the universe," he wants to assist the reader in following the "path to harmony with heaven, man and earth." This goal is a noble one, and perfectly consistent with the early uses of the *Yijing* as near as we can reconstruct them. Thus, although we certainly should not accept Mr. Wu's translation uncritically, neither should we dismiss his interesting and provocative speculations.