

# The Open Nature of the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes) and Its Exegetical Approach

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**Abstract:** *The Yijing has been accepted as the first among the Chinese classics for over two millennia and it not only occupies a central position in Chinese culture but also has a profound impact on many other cultures. Chinese and Western evaluations of and approaches to the classic have been varied and colorful, regarding it as, among other things, a divination manual, a philosophical text, a historical work, a psychological guide and a scientific treatise. The exegesis of the Yijing is open-ended and versatile rather than definitive or immutable. Yuan Heng Li Zhen in the text of hexagram Qian is of great importance for the understanding of the Yijing. There are always different readings and various interpretations on the four characters, revealing infinite interpretive possibilities and flexible exegetical approaches.*

**Key Words:** *The Yijing; Open Nature; Yuan Heng Li Zhen; Exegesis*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Yijing*, (*I Ching*, *Classic of Changes*, or *Zhouyi*), has been regarded as the first among the Chinese classics for over two thousand years. In the first century B.C., Yang Xiong (53 B.C.-A. D.18) commented: “Of the six classics, no other classic is greater than the *Yijing*”. Ban Gu (32-92) praised it as “the source of the Great Dao”. Smith (2008: xi) observed: By almost any standard, the *Classic of Changes* is one of the most important documents not only in Chinese history but, arguably, in world history as well, and for this reason alone it deserves to be better understood, particularly by Westerners. According to Steve Moore (Hacker et al. 2002: xiii): “If the importance of books is measured by the numbers of their readers, the amount of commentary written on them, the quantity of editions and translations...then surely two would appear far ahead of the rest of the field. One, of course, is the Christian *Bible*. The other, though it may surprise readers brought up in Western traditions of literature and learning (and especially those who regard it as little more than a fortune-telling book), is the *I Ching*, or “*Book of Changes*”.

Since the seventeenth century the study of the *Zhouyi* has aroused continuous interest from scholars outside China and the Far East and become an international subject of inquiry. Western scholars and thinkers from Leibniz and J. T. Haupt to Carl Jung and Richard Wilhelm have time and again reconfirmed the intellectual value of and extraordinary fascination with this work (Gu 2005) . An annotated bibliography on the *Yijing* (Hacker et al. 2002) lists more than 500 books and dissertations and about the same number of articles related to the *Yijing* in English alone.

## 2. THE OPEN NATURE OF THE *YIJING*

About the true nature of the *Yijing*, the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century literary compilation known as the *Siku quanshu* (Complete Collection of the Four Treasuries) has this to say in their introductory remarks:

The *Yijing* allows us to decipher the way of Heaven and illumine human affairs. . . . Its way is broad and great, encompassing everything, including astronomy, geography, musicology, the art of war, the study of rhymes, numerical calculations, and even the practice of alchemy, which lies beyond proper categories of learning, et cetera. All these branches of learning can draw upon the *Yi* to illustrate their arguments (Ji Yun et al.1987: 2b-3a).

Shchutskii makes an insightful comment on the open nature of the *Yijing*:

In European sinology it has been said that the *Book of Changes* is: (1) a divinatory text; (2) a philosophical text; (3) simultaneously a divinatory and a philosophical text; (4) the basis of Chinese Universalism; (5) a collection of proverbs; (6) the notebook of a politician; (7) a political encyclopedia; (8) an interpretative dictionary; (9) a Bactrian-Chinese dictionary; (10) a phallic cosmogony; (11) the most ancient historical document in China; (12) a textbook of logic; (13) a binary system; (14) the secret of the cubocubus; (15) the accidental interpretations and combinations of lines; (16) the tricks of street fortune telling; (17) childishness; (18) delirium; and (19) a Han forgery. The most complicated and at the same time the simplest answer did not occur to anyone: that is, that the *Book of Changes* came into being as a text around the very ancient practice of divination and subsequently serves as ground for philosophizing, which was especially possible since it (the *Book of Changes*), as a little understood and enigmatic archaic text, presents a wide scope for creative philosophical thinking (Shchutskii 1980: 55).

Ming Dong Gu calls the *Yijing* “an open classic”:

I venture to suggest that the *Zhouyi* has been able to retain its exalted status as history's primary classic and has attracted the attention of scholars all over the world largely because it is an open book amenable to appropriations and manipulations by people of any political doctrine, religious belief, and moral standard, and its openness comes from its being a semiotic system whose principle of composition warrants unlimited interpretation. During the last two millennia the *Zhouyi* has been appropriated by all the major religions of China and by practically all of the so-called “hundred schools” for their political, social, ethical, and aesthetic agendas. Confucianists, Daoists, Buddhists, and thinkers of other schools of thought have all adopted the text in whole or in part. In the West, Leibniz' use of the eight trigrams for the advancement of his binary-system theory is perhaps the most famous and most brilliant case of appropriation (Gu 2005) .

The notion of openness is related to textual analysis and to hermeneutic theories. Be it philosophical or literary in nature, hermeneutic experience entails a sense of openness in interpretation because, as Gadamer (1975: 319) points out, it “has its own fulfillment not in definite knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself.” Umberto Eco (1989: 1-23, 44-83), the Italian semiotician and literary theorist, was the first to advance the idea of openness in textual interpretation. Predicated on C. S. Peirce's theory of semiosis, or the incessant production of interpretants in the process of interpretation, “openness” in theory means that a text is not an enclosure of words the messages of which are finite and limited, but a hermeneutic space constructed with imagistic or verbal signs capable of generating unlimited interpretations. In commonsense terms, it means that a text either has no “correct” interpretation or has multiple interpretations. The idea of

openness is not alien to Chinese tradition. In fact, it arose precisely from the study of the *Zhouyi*. In the “Xicizhuan” (Appended verbalizations), the famous saying “[In the interpretation of the Dao,] a benevolent person who sees it will say that it is benevolent; a wise person who sees it will say that it is wise” expresses perhaps the earliest notion of openness in the Chinese tradition and offers a hint at the true nature of the *Zhouyi* (Gu 2005). So both in China and abroad, the evaluation and interpretation of the *Yijing* has been varied and colorful, treating it as an open system of representation subject to appropriation and manipulation.

Clearly this “globalization” of the Changes was in part the product of its exalted

reputation in China and its many alluring special features — its challenging and ambiguous basic text, which encouraged all kinds of interpretive ingenuity; its elaborate numerology and other forms of symbolic representation; its utility as a tool of divination; its philosophically sophisticated commentaries; its psychological potential (as a means of attaining self-knowledge); and its reputation for a kind of encyclopedic comprehensiveness. But the spread of the *Yijing* was also facilitated by the self-conscious strategies employed by those who sought to use it in various environments for their own political, social, intellectual, or evangelical purposes. (Smith 2008: 4) Therefore, the Figurism interpretation of the Jesuits, who sought to emphasize affinities between the *Bible* and the *Yijing*, and the domesticating interpretation of some Asian scholars in Japan and Korea, who tried to assimilate and domesticate the *Yijing*, clearly shows the lasting appeal of the *Yijing* and its varied exegetical approaches.

It is important to remember, however, that despite its unchallenged scriptural status and canonical authority, the *Yijing* allowed and even encouraged, an enormous amount of interpretive flexibility — more, it seems safe to say, than any other classic. By nature it was (and it remains) an extraordinarily open-ended, versatile, and virtually inexhaustible intellectual resource. Thus, as we shall see, there are any number of ways to approach the work, whether as a book of divination or as a source of philosophical, spiritual, or psychological inspiration; whether as a Confucian text or a Buddhist or Daoist one (Smith 2013). Many hexagram judgments and line statements, as well as the comments of the *Ten Wings*, are extremely cryptic and subject to any number of interpretations. There are as many versions of the *Yijing* as there are readers of the document and commentators upon it. Approaches to the *Yijing* vary greatly from person to person and from place to place.

### **3. THE OPEN INTERPRETATION OF YUANHENGLIZHEN**

Let’s look at the important Qian hexagram statement -- the first line in the *Yijing*: 乾元亨利贞 Qian: yuan heng li zhen to reveal the exegetical openness of the *Yijing* discourse. There are several ways of punctuating it:

- (1) Qian: yuan, heng, li, zhen 乾: 元, 亨, 利, 贞。
- (2) Qian: yuan, heng, lizhen 乾: 元, 亨, 利贞。
- (3) Qianyuan: heng, lizhen 乾元: 亨, 利贞。
- (4) Qian: yuanheng, lizhen 乾: 元亨, 利贞。

Different punctuations signify different syntactical relations and result in different

readings. These different readings have actually been attempted historically. The first

reading is the standard one found in the *Zixia yizhuan*, the *Zuozhuan*, and some major *Zhouyi* exegeses, which gave rise to the so-called “four virtues”; the second reading can be found in the

Guoyu, which puts li and zhen together, but it still views the four characters after the first one as an explanation for qian; the third in the “Wenyan”, which attaches yuan to qian and puts li and zhen together, thereby making the sense of the group entirely different from the first two reading; and the fourth in Wu Cheng’s (1249-1333) Yizuanyan, which relies on Xu Shen’s definition of zhen - “Zhen is to ask by means of divination” -- and glosses lizhen together as “beneficial for divination”. Li Jingchi, a modern scholar, through grammatical and discourse analysis, argues that the fourth is perhaps the most correct reading (Gu 2005) .

When the four characters “yuan heng li zhen” are punctuated separately they form the famous theory of four virtues, that is, “the first and chief quality of goodness”, “assemblage of excellence”, “the harmony of all that is right” and the “faculty of action”. By contrast, some scholars punctuate the four characters into two parts -- “yuan heng” and “li zhen”. But this does not reach a consensus. For example, ZHUXI interpreted “li zhen” as “li zai yu zheng” (the advantageous lies in the right), and Gao Heng said, “li zhen means beneficial to divine”. Xia Hanyi (Shaughnessy 2010) proposes that the four characters should be punctuated into two parts, yet different from that of ZHUXI and GAO HENG. Firstly we prove that the character heng is derived from the character 饗 (entertain) so “yuan heng” means the prayer of the divination is enjoyed by the spirits. Then we believe that “li zhen” means beneficial to divine. Superficially it seems to be an anomaly if the first divine result asks the diviner to make a divination again. However, Xia Hanyi proves that ancient Chinese divination always make xi zhen (make a second divination) . Li zhen is to guide the diviner to make a second divination.

According to Kidder Smith and other scholars (Smith et al.1990), the original meaning of “yuan heng li zhen” when the *Yijing* was composed over the early centuries of the first millennium B.C.E. was perhaps “Initial receipt: profitable to divine,” indicating that the *Yijing* could be usefully consulted. But at least as early as the third century B.C.E. this phrase was reread as four qualities: “primal, successful, beneficial, upright.” These words have since been combined and interpreted in various ways. Some have directed this phrase of the *Yijing* away from matters of divination. This rereading represents one of several steps in transforming a specialized divination text into a “classic” (ching) that might eventually support the interest of Sung China’s most creative moral thinkers.

In the extant Western translations and interpretations, scholars have followed Chinese scholarship in one way or another but still demonstrate considerable differences. Different schools of approaches result in different ways of understanding and exegesis.

A moral/ethical reading of yuan, heng, li, zhen can be found in the following translations of the *Yijing*: Legge (1964: 57): Khien (represents) what is great and originating, penetrating, advantageous, correct and firm. Wilhelm (1968: 4) : The creative works sublime success/furthering through perseverance. Lynn (1994: 129): Qian consists of fundamentality, prevalence, fitness, and constancy. Lee (1971: 167) : “What is great and originating,” “What is penetrating,” “What is advantageous,” “What is correct and firm.” Shchutskii(1980: 138): impulse, completion or development, favorable, steadiness. He also suggests that the Qian hexagram statement should be rendered as: "The creative heaven is the great all-penetrating and the proper steadfastness."

A divinatory reading of yuan, heng, li, zhen can be found in the following translations of the *Yijing*: Redmond (2017: 63-66) : Qian Heaven (The Creative)Begin with an offering; beneficial to divine. Shaughnessy (1983: 123): Primary receipt: beneficial to divine. Rutt (1996: 127-128) : Supreme offering. Divination Favourable. Richard Kunst (1985: 241): Grand treat. A favorable determination.

A philosophical reading of yuan, heng, li, zhen can be found in the following translations of the *Yijing*: Cheng (2011): creation, prospering, facilitating, and preserving. Minford (2014: 9): Supreme Fortune. Profitable. Steadfast. Smith (2012: 213): Great, Penetrating, Proper, and Right or Immoveable.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Richard Lynn declares in the introduction to his translation, “In my view, there is no one single *Classic of Changes* but rather as many versions of it as there are different commentaries on it” (Lynn 1994: 8). The *Zhouyi* is an open system of representation and that its mystery lies in its openness, in its capacity to be interpreted in as many ways as an interpreter's ingenuity allows. Because of its potentially unlimited openness, the *Zhouyi* will continue to fascinate scholars despite attempts to view it as a closed system with a finite message (Gu 2005). As Gardner (1998: 397-422) reminds us, “there simply is no one stable or definitive reading of a canonical text.” It is necessary to bear in mind that exegesis of any kind is open and multidimensional, allowing for different approaches and diverse interpretations. This is true of Qian: yuan, heng, li, zhen and other Chinese philosophical terms as well as the whole process of the *Yijing* exegesis, East and West, and they will continue, no doubt to be.

The last few decades have witnessed a dramatic revival of interest in the *Yijing*. Much of this interest has been generated by a sense that the *Yijing* still has a significant role to play in the modern world—in the realm of scientific inquiry, as a psychological or spiritual guide, as a managerial handbook, and so forth. (Smith 2008: 218) Therefore, there will be no “authentic” or “essential” *Yijing*, only different versions of it. The *Yijing* research and scholarship will allow, even encourage an extraordinary wide range of exegetical approaches, which will not only increase the understanding of the *Yijing* but also develop the interpretive possibilities of the classics as a whole. In this way the *Yijing* will reach more people and influence more cultures, serving as a bridge of cultural exchanges across the world.

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