I Ching (Classic of Changes)

Yijing

The I Ching (Classic of Changes, also known as Yijing, 易經, the first of the Chinese Confucian classics, has profoundly shaped East Asian thought and culture and has also become influential among many intellectuals in the West. As a book about divination and the source of wisdom, it is both a repository of moral and political insight and a guide for individual self-fulfillment.

The I Ching (Classic of Changes, also known as the Yijing), one of the most widely consulted books in the Chinese tradition, had an incalculable influence throughout history and acquired a significant following even outside China in East Asia. Nowadays, besides those consulting it in its original language—often aided by translations into modern Chinese, Japanese, or Korean—thousands access it through translations into Western languages. Originally it was a manual of divination, and its oldest layers are traditionally attributed to King Wen and the duke of Zhou (eleventh century BCE). But modern scholarship regards its base texts as the product of anonymous and gradual compilation that reached its final form during the ninth century BCE. The Changes subsequently developed into a book of wisdom as it acquired a group of commentaries, the so-called Ten Wings (shiyi), traditionally attributed to the philosopher Confucius (551–479 BCE) but now reckoned of uncertain authorship dating mostly from the mid-third to the early second century BCE.

At the core of the Changes are sixty-four hexagrams (gua) and related texts: The hexagrams, formed by combinations of two trigrams (also gua), consist of six lines (yao) in vertical sequence, read from the bottom up. Lines are either solid (yang) or broken (yin), and their combination into sixty-four hexagrams is determined by numerical manipulation of divining sticks or the casting of coins. Each hexagram is assigned a name (guaming) indicative of the image (xiang) or abstract meaning of the hexagram statement (guaci) or “Judgment” (tuan), and each of the six lines has a line statement (yaoci) that contributes to the general topic of the Judgment and states a specific variation of it, often followed by an injunction to take or refrain from action, and often a final determination of “misfortune” or “good fortune.” The hexagrams, Judgments, and line statements are the oldest parts of the Changes and constitute the first chronological layer of a three-layered text.

Radical Reinterpretation

The original meaning of the Judgments and line statements, however, which were concerned with the mechanics of divination and its amoral consequences, was radically reinterpreted, either through ignorance or intent, by the exegesis (an explanation or critical interpretation of a text) of the “Ten Wings” to fit with Confucian morality; this reinterpretation shaped all subsequent
interpretation—up to modern times. The second layer includes another two parts: “Commentary on the Judgments” (Tuanzhuan), which expands upon the Judgments, and “Commentary on the Images” (Xiangzhuan), which addresses both the “Great Images” (Daxiang) or abstract meaning of the Judgments and the “Little Images” (Xiaoxiang) of line statements. The Tuanzhuan and Xiangzhuan are each divided into two sections, together forming the first four of the “Ten Wings.” The fifth of the “Ten Wings,” “Commentary on the Words of the Text” (Wenyun), containing elements of the second and third layers, consists of two fragments of a lost commentary on the hexagrams as a whole. Only those parts concerned with the first two hexagrams, “Pure Yang” (Qian) and “Pure Yin” (Kun), survived, and these deal with the philosophical and ethical implications of the Judgments.

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**Diagrams from the I-Ching, (the Book of Changes).** On the left is a Luo Shu diagram, on the right is a He Thu diagram. They represented a simple magic square and a cruciform array of the numbers from 1 to 10. Even or Yin numbers are represented in black and odd or Yang ones in white. The Luo Shu is a magic square in which the figures, added up along any diagonal, line or column, make 15, from which can be created a swastika symbol. The He Thu is arranged so that if the central 5 and 10 are ignored, both odd and even number sets add up to 20, a series of numbers which had symbolic attributions, for instance; the four seasons, five elements, etc.
based on Confucian thought. The sixth and seventh Wings are formed by the two parts of the “Commentary on the Appended Phrases” (Xici zhuan) or “Great Commentary” (Dazhuan). The first part is a group of essays on the general nature of the Changes; the second is a collection of remarks about the Judgments and line statements of individual hexagrams. The eighth of the “Ten Wings,” “Explaining the Trigrams” (Shuogua), addresses the meaning of the eight trigrams (bagua) in terms of yin-yang dualism and the theory of the five phases (wuxing), this indicative of early Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) thought. The ninth Wing, “Providing the Sequence of the Hexagrams” (Xugua), addresses each of the hexagrams and justifies their order in terms of etymology and pseudo-rational argument—often farfetched. The tenth Wing, “Hexagrams in Irregular Order” (Zagua), consists of brief remarks that define the meaning of individual hexagrams, often in terms of contrasting pairs.

Hexagram divination—originally a method of consulting and influencing gods, spirits, and ancestors (the “powerful dead”)—with the Changes became a method of penetrating moments of the cosmic order to discern how the Dao as macrocosm is configured at such moments and to determine what one’s own microcosmic status in it should be. One thus averts wrong decisions, avoids failure, and escapes misfortune and instead makes right decisions, achieves success, and garners good fortune. The hexagrams represent sixty-four archetypal situations possible for the individual. The casting of sticks or coins determines six lines, either solid (yang) or broken (yin); lines can be either “old,” about to change from yang to yin or yin to yang, which warrants separate consideration when the hexagram is interpreted, or “new” and not about to change, thus disregarded when individual lines of a hexagram are interpreted.
Consulting Hexagrams

When a hexagram consists entirely of “new” lines, only the Judgment, “Commentary on the Judgments,” and “Commentary on the Images” are consulted. But if one or more “old” lines occur, the line statements and the “Commentary on the Images” for such lines are also consulted. Furthermore, the Judgment, “Commentary on the Judgments,” and “Commentary on the Images” of the “new” hexagram resulting from the change of “old” lines to “new” are also consulted. For example, if in casting Hexagram 36, Mingyi (Suppression of the Light) (yang, yin, yang, yin, yin, yin), the third yang line is “old” and about to turn into a “new” yin line, this results in Hexagram 24, Fu (Return) (yang, yin, yin, yin, yin, yin). In general, Mingyi represents an unstable situation, a weak position for the individual in it, and advises patience and restraint; Fu by contrast represents a stable situation, a strong position for the individual in it, and advises assertive action. However, consulting the Changes is a much more enriching experience than this. Those interested in the Swiss psychiatrist C. G. Jung’s reading of the Changes and its influence on him, especially on his theory of synchronicity, should read Jung’s foreword to Richard Wilhelm’s The I Ching or Book of Changes. Richard John Lynn’s The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi is recommended as an accurate translation based on the most important of the traditional Chinese philosophical commentaries.

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Further Reading


