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Minford, John, trans., *I Ching* (*Yijing*): *The Book of Change*

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Translations of the *Yijing* 易經 or *Scripture of Change* over the past few decades have tended to be more historically based than those that came before, most of which treated the text as a "timeless" book of oracular and (in its later layers) philosophical wisdom. The most influential earlier translations into English were those of James Legge (1882) and Richard Wilhelm (1924 German edition translated into English by Cary F. Baynes in 1950). Both Legge and Wilhelm were aided by Chinese scholars who regarded the commentaries of CHENG Yi 程頤 (1033–1107) and ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) as authoritative, so their translations did in fact loosely reflect a particular historical period (the Song 宋 dynasty) and a particular school of thought (Cheng-Zhu 程朱 Confucianism). But neither translator explicitly acknowledged this, and Wilhelm added a heavy dose of German idealism and Jungian psychology to his translation and commentary.

Scholars since at least the 1960s in the English-speaking world have been examining how certain figures were conditioned by their own historical contexts in their approaches to the *Yijing* (see, e.g., CHEN Chiyün's 1968 paper, "A Confucian Magnate's Idea of Political Violence: HSÜN Shuang's [荀爽] Interpretation of the *Book of Changes*"; Kidder Smith's 1979 dissertation, *CHENG Yi's Commentary on the Yijing*; Joseph Adler's 1984 dissertation, *Divination and Philosophy: ZHU Xi's Understanding of the I Ching*; NG Wai-ming's 2000 book, *The I Ching in Tokugawa Thought and Culture*; and HON Tze-ki's 2005 book, *The Yijing and Chinese Politics: Classical Commentary and Literati Activism in the Northern Song Period, 960–1127*). But the earliest translation of the *Yi* 易 situating it in a particular historical context, to my knowledge, was Richard Kunst's 1985 dissertation, *The Original Yijing*. A similar approach, although not a translation, was Edward Shaughnessy's 1983 dissertation, *The Composition of the Zhouyi* [周易]. Both Kunst and Shaughnessy focused on the text in its original, Zhou 周 dynasty, context. In 1994 Richard Lynn published a translation based on and including the commentary of WANG Bi 王弼 (226–249), which was the "orthodox"

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interpretation until the Song dynasty. Richard Rutt followed in 1996 with one attempting to situate the *Yi* in its original Zhou dynasty context (like Kunst), as did Margaret Pearson in 2011. All these translations were based on the "received" text of the *Yi*, which is the one embedded in WANG Bi's commentary. An older version, discovered at Mawangdui 馬王堆 in 1973, was translated by Edward Shaughnessy in 1996, as were two other partial versions, more recently discovered, in 2014.

John Minford's new translation is impressive and unique in several respects. First, its length: over 900 pages (and priced remarkably low, at $35 in cloth). In fact, it is really two translations in one. The first is the "Book of Wisdom," which is the full *Yijing* including most of the appendices traditionally attributed to Confucius (the "Ten Wings"). This part includes the *Tuanzhuan* 彖傳 (commentary on each hexagram text, called here "On the Judgment"), the *Xiangzhuan* 象傳 ("On the Image" of each hexagram and line), parts of the *Shuogua* 說卦 ("The Trigrams Expounded," split up here under each of the eight hexagrams composed of the same trigram duplicated), the *Wenyan* 文言 ("On the Words," under hexagrams 1 and 2), and parts of the *Xici* 繫辭 or *Dazhuan* 大傳 ("The Great Treatise," split up under several hexagrams to which Minford thinks they especially apply). He does not include the *Xugua* 序卦 (Sequence of the Hexagrams) or the *Zagua* 雜卦 (Miscellaneous Notes on the Hexagrams).

The second part is the "Bronze Age Oracle," which includes only the hexagram texts attributed to King Wen 文 of the Zhou dynasty and the line texts attributed to his son, the Duke of Zhou. (This earliest layer of the text was originally called the *Zhouyi* [Changes of Zhou], and some scholars today use that term in contradistinction from *Yijing*, denoting the full text with the appendices.) Both are based on the "received" text. The "Book of Wisdom" translation includes Minford's paraphrased "digests" of some of the later influential commentators, such as CHENG Yi, ZHU Xi, WANG Fuzhi 王夫之, the Daoist alchemist LIU Yiming 劉一明, other Daoist and Chan/Zen 禪 masters, James Legge, GAO Heng 高亨, CHEN Guying 陳鼓應, François Jullien, and a rather eclectic group of others, including a contemporary Hong Kong professor emeritus of marketing, plus Minford's own ideas (indicated as such). Longer comments may include eleven or twelve paraphrases. As an example of how this reads, here is the beginning of a relatively short one, a sixteen-sentence comment on the *yang* 陽 line in the fifth place of Qian 乾 "Heaven" (22):

> Yang Line in Yang Place. Centered and True. This is the Great Man's Work, writes CHENG Yi, this is the business of the Sage. The Great Man is the Dragon, comments XU Ji. The Work is the flight. Here, comments Jullien, following WANG Fuzhi, the Yang which has been slowly accumulating is suddenly transformed; it attains perfect freedom of movement (*aisance*).

The "Bronze Age Oracle," or Part II of this book, like Richard Rutt's translation, attempts to get to the original meaning of the text, cutting through the later commentary tradition. After the hexagram and line texts in this part Minford adds only explanatory comments of his own, which are extremely

well-researched. So Part I is the *Yijing* as it has been interpreted by the later tradition (right up to the contemporary world), while Part II is the original *Zhouyi* as a manual strictly for divination, understood as part of the ritual dyad of sacrifice and divination.

Another impressive feature of this book is the wealth of sinological material Minford brings to the difficult task of illuminating the meanings of the *Yi*, which is well-known as the most enigmatic and obscure text in the Chinese canon. Minford is, of course, an accomplished and highly-respected literary translator. His best known works are Sunzi's 孫子 *Art of War*, Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, and the last two volumes of David Hawke's 5-volume translation of *Honglou Meng* 紅樓夢 (*Dream of the Red Chamber*, or *Story of the Stone*), all of these published in the Penguin Classics series. To the *Yi* he brings numerous parallels from the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Scripture of Songs*), *Shujing* 書經 (*Scripture of Documents*), *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, various poets, and others. Western materials also occasionally appear, such as an 1849 British book of popular rhymes demonstrating that yarrow, the plant whose dried stalks are used for *Yijing* divination, was thought to have oracular powers in England as well as China (xxix). The erudition and scholarship are truly impressive.

Despite the breadth and depth of scholarly expertise embodied in the book, Minford states that "this is not a translation for sinologists or scholars" (xxviii) and "not an academic translation" (7). He calls it "a scriptural translation" (3). By this he means that it is intended primarily for *users* of the *Yi*, and that he does not hesitate to enter the conceptual world of the text. He includes a fifteen-page section on "How to Consult the *I Ching*," much longer than other user-oriented books. In it he goes through in detail not only the methods of casting yarrow stalks and throwing coins but also which parts of the text are supposed to be consulted depending on which lines of the hexagram are "changing lines" and how one might go about interpreting them, complete with specific examples.

In his Introduction, in a section on "The *I Ching* in the West," Minford characterizes Western perceptions of the *Yi* as ranging from the "highly reverential to the baffled, utterly skeptical, or dismissive" (xxi), and notes that some recent and rigorous scholars (e.g., Richard Lynn, Michael Nylan, A. C. Graham) have staked out a "middle, psychological, ground" (xxiii) from which the *Yi*, in both its oracular function and its embedded philosophy, can be taken seriously. Minford seeks to occupy that middle ground. However, some readers may be given pause by the impression that in certain respects he moves closer to the "reverential" end of the spectrum. Some of this is based on stylistic decisions. For example, he refers to the Daoist master Liu Yiming, whom he paraphrases frequently, as "Magister Liu," but not so any other Daoist or Chan Buddhist "master." In the translations he capitalizes every word that he feels has a special resonance in the *Yijing* commentary tradition or that was inherited from the older Shang 商 oracle-bone system of divination, such as the oracular formulas. He also includes occasional Latin phrases that more or less convey the same meaning as a phrase or line of the text. So, for example, here are his translations of the hexagram text (the "Judgment") of hexagram 2, Kun 坤

"Earth," consisting of six *yin* 陰 (broken) lines, in both the "Wisdom" (left) and the "Oracle" (right) versions. In the Oracle version Minford uses Bernhard Karlgren's reconstructions of ancient Chinese pronunciation. I present them in two columns for comparison, but in the book they are on pages 31–32 and 513–514:

Kun	***K'wen***
Earth	**Earth Flow**
Supreme Fortune.	Supreme Fortune.
Steadfastness of a Mare	Sacrifice Received.
Profits,	Profitable Augury
Equae soliditas.	For mare.
The True Gentleman	Destination
Has a Destination.	For noble man.
Sit quo est.	Straying at first,
At first he goes astray,	Finding the way.
Then finds a Master.	Profit.
It Profits	Strings of cowries
To gain friends	Found
In West and South,	West and South,
To lose friends	Strings of cowries
In East and North.	Lost
It is Auspicious	East and North.
To rest in Steadfastness,	Augury of peace.
Bonum est.	Auspicious.

Minford admits that "some readers may find [the capitalization] tiresome" (lxiv). I find it excessive and annoying, although I suppose it does add to the runic quality of the lines. I would have limited it to the oracular formulas, such as "supreme fortune" (*yuan heng* 元亨), "profitable augury" (*li zhen* 利貞), "auspicious" (*ji* 吉), "inauspicious" (*xiong* 凶), and "no fault" (*wu jiu* 无咎). As for the use of Latin, Minford says:

> I sincerely believe that these occasional Latin snatches, which I have used mainly for the incantatory formulae of the Chinese, can help us relate to this deeply ancient and foreign text, can help create a timeless mood of contemplation, and at the same time can evoke indirect connections between the Chinese tradition of Self-Knowledge and Self-Cultivation on the one hand, at the center of which has always stood the *I Ching*, and, on the other, the long European tradition of Gnosis and spiritual discipline, reaching back as it does to well before the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, to before Ignatius of Loyola and Thomas Aquinas, to Antiquity and beyond. It was the Delphic oracle, after all, that counseled visitors to its shrine to know themselves. We all come to places and books such as this seeking answers to questions that are fundamentally the same....
>
> My little scraps of Latin … serve as slightly subversive reminders that we will never be out of the dark [in reading this book], that we can hope to do little more than clutch at the *disjecta membra* of the past. (4–5)

I quote these passages at some length to convey some of the "feel" of this book and to suggest why Minford hesitates to call this an academic or scholarly translation (although I think that applies more to the first than to the second). In addition, his strategy of commenting on the text in the form of an eclectic digest of previous commentators renders his interpretations, and therefore his translations, somewhat personal. As he says in the Introduction:

> I have not followed any one of the countless "schools" of exegesis. In the composite running commentary I have created for this translation, I have been unashamedly eclectic, choosing whatever seemed to me most helpful for today's reader. In contrast with this, Richard Lynn's fine translation scrupulously follows one influential interpretation, that of WANG Bi. (xvii)

The distinction between this translation and Lynn's hits the nail right on the head. Although, as mentioned above, Lynn is not averse to taking seriously the worldview of the *Yi*, he avoids the "timeless wisdom" approach by attempting to give us the textual interpretation of one particular, historically-situated person, WANG Bi. While we certainly can "never be out of the dark" in imagining what this book "really" means, we can, in theory, be reasonably certain about what one particular person thought of it (even though we are still relying on Lynn's interpretation of WANG Bi). But once we venture into the "timeless wisdom" approach all we are left with, ultimately, is what *the translator* thinks this "deeply ancient and foreign text" means, whether he or she is an amateur who doesn't even read Chinese or an accomplished and rigorous scholar like John Minford—even if (as is the case here) this translator has "digested" an enormous plateful of earlier commentators. In terms of scholarly value, I think Lynn's approach is preferable. It is to Minford's great credit that he acknowledges the difference between the two. Some may think it actually enhances the ultimate value of this translation.

So, we are left with the paradox that this is a book informed by a high level of scholarly rigor and erudition that is (allegedly) not a scholarly translation. The scholarly apparatus includes a substantial introduction and an introduction to each of the two parts; the aforementioned section on consulting the *Yi*; reproductions and explanations of the "Fu Xi [伏羲] sequences" of the trigrams and hexagrams; a table of the sixty-four hexagrams; a classified and annotated bibliography; a list of names and dates, including both Chinese and Western commentators and scholars; a very substantial (21-page) glossary; an index; and a finding table for hexagrams. The book is very well-produced and edited, although I did find two endnote numbers in the "How to Consult" section (xxxvii) whose actual notes I could not find anywhere in the book. The translations, aside from the capitalized words, Latin phrases, and sometimes precious line divisions (see above), are excellent, although occasionally too impressionistic for my taste (e.g., "Crystal Comprehension" for *da ming* 大明, 10). Part II is especially good in the way it artfully conveys what I call the runic quality of the original. One minor inconsistency, on the ambiguous question of who was the first Zhou king: Minford comes down in favor of both King Wu 武 (xiv) and King Wen (45). Unfortunately there are no Chinese

characters, except for the frontispiece title and hexagram names in brush calligraphy, even in the Chinese sections of the bibliography—consistent with the author's insistence that this is not a book for scholars. There are additional footnotes and sources on his website (johnminford.com). Nevertheless I do recommend this book for scholars and students, whether or not they are users of the *Yijing*. The price is certainly unbeatable. Anyone with a special interest in the *Yi* or a general interest in Chinese culture will find a great deal of value in it.