

Chapter 2

Zhu Xi's Conception of *Yijing* Divination as Spiritual Practice



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Abstract This chapter demonstrates the complexity and richness of the *Yijing* through Zhu Xi's 朱熹 perception of its divination. Zhu felt that both the “image and number” (*xiangshu* 象數) and the “meaning and principle” (*yili* 義理) schools had shortcomings and attempted to synthesize them. His novel approach was to insist that the real meaning of the *Yijing* could only be apprehended through the ritual of divination, and that the graphic elements (trigrams and hexagrams) were just as important as the textual elements. This was based on his belief that the *Yijing* had been created by Fu Xi expressly for the purpose of divination, and so its original meaning had to be understood in the context of the Sage's original intention in creating it. He further argued that Fu Xi was the first Sage in the “succession of the Way” (*daotong* 道統), and that Fu Xi's signal contribution to it was to provide a method—*Yijing* divination—by which later people could fully realize the unity of moral principle and natural principle and thus approach sagehood themselves.

1 Introduction

Despite the steadily increasing body of scholarship in both West and East Asia on the religious dimensions of the Confucian tradition, it is still not unusual to find Confucianism characterized as fundamentally a socio-ethical tradition in which ritual (*li* 禮) is primarily a method and legitimation of social control.¹ The theme of moral self-cultivation, especially in the Neo-Confucian movement, is likewise often regarded as something akin to contemporary humanistic psychology or self-help regimens.

¹Some of the major refutations of this approach are Taylor (1990), Wilson (2002), and Tu and Tucker (2003–2004).

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Thus, neither ritual nor self-cultivation in Confucianism is commonly understood to be essentially religious. Yet, Confucian ritual included two particular forms, divination and sacrifice, which are clearly religious in character and systematically related to the Confucian theory and practice of self-cultivation.

Divination and sacrifice as a ritual dyad constitute the earliest known form of Chinese religion—that of the rulers of the Shang dynasty as early as the fifteenth century BCE. They have continued throughout Chinese history, to the present day, as central features of popular Chinese religious life. They can be considered a model of the fundamental Chinese way of orienting the human world to the sacred—a kind of ritual *axis mundi* rooting our world in something that transcends it and thereby making it meaningful. Here I will explore one aspect of the continuity of the Confucian tradition with this central core of Chinese religiosity by focusing on the theory of *Yijing* divination developed by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), whose version of the Confucian tradition came to dominate the tradition and exerted tremendous influence on all levels of Chinese society into the twentieth century.

Zhu was the first to fully integrate the theory and practice of divination into the Confucian religious process of transformation into a Sage. He understood *Yijing* divination to be a ritual aid to the cultivation of “spiritual clarity” (*shenming* 神明), or the capacity of the human mind/heart to penetrate into the ultimate source of moral creativity underlying the phenomenal world.² Although his philosophy in general, including his theory of self-cultivation, was heavily influenced by his predecessor Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033–1107), in regard to the interpretation and use of the *Yijing*, he strongly criticized Cheng’s approach. Cheng had written a detailed and influential commentary on the *Yijing* in the eleventh century (his only full-length book), using the textual layers of the *Yijing* (but not the graphic layer of hexagrams and lines) as the source of moral guidance. Zhu argued that these textual layers were only intended as aids in the practice of hexagram divination, which was the *Yijing*’s original purpose in the mind of its original creator, the primordial sage Fu Xi 伏羲. Thus, to interpret the texts independently of their use in divination was to take them out of context and use them merely as screens on which to project one’s own ideas. Although Cheng’s ideas were generally fine, Zhu said that this way of using the *Yijing* neglected the opportunity to gain access to the mind of Fu Xi, who had first intuited the moral implications of the *yin-yang* patterns of the natural world. The method of divination that Fu Xi had devised, according to Zhu, was the crucial mechanism by which people of later eras could gain the assistance of the primordial sage in their own moral cultivation.

Zhu saw in the *Yijing* trigrams/hexagrams a formal representation of the fundamental ordering principle (*li* 理), which has two dimensions—natural principle (*tianli*

²The various methods of self-cultivation promoted by Zhu included intellectual cultivation or “following the path of inquiry and study” (*dao wenxue* 道問學), spiritual cultivation or “honoring the moral nature” (*zun dexing* 尊德性), and practice or putting one’s understanding of *li* into practice in moral behavior. The two quoted phrases are from the *Zhongyong*, Sect. 27. For a fuller delineation of Zhu’s methods of self-cultivation, see Smith et al. (1990, pp. 171–172). For a discussion of intellectual and spiritual cultivation, see Adler (2014, pp. 81–83). For my understanding of the word “spiritual,” see *ibid.*, p. 10.

天理) and moral principle (*daoli* 道理).³ Because of the extreme difficulty, in Zhu's view, of clarifying one's psychophysical nature (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性) enough to enable one to fully apprehend moral principle and put it into practice, he believed that ordinary humans needed to investigate things, patterns and principles in the natural world. Since it is often easier to understand natural principle than moral principle, one can first study the natural patterns and then “extend” them (*tuili* 推理), or infer from them, the moral connotations. But ultimately, the natural and moral patterns are consistent or continuous; they imply each other. This view—that moral value is inherent, at least incipiently, in the natural world—is one of the bedrock claims of Confucianism, going back to the pre-Confucian theory of the “mandate of Heaven” (*tianming* 天命).

Zhu believed that it was Fu Xi who had first intuited the linkage between natural principle and moral principle, and that this was the first representation of the Confucian Way (*Dao* 道). Fu Xi had represented that linkage in the form of the hexagrams, which were intended to function as a divination method for those who came later.⁴ This would enable ordinary people—people without his level of “spiritual clarity”—to learn to detect the most subtle patterns of change, or “incipiencies” (*ji* 幾) in the natural and social worlds. By learning to detect those changes and to respond (*ying* 應) to them in morally appropriate ways, ordinary people could become more spiritual (*shen* 神), authentically (*cheng* 誠) human, and therefore Sage-like. Zhu therefore entitled his own *Yijing* commentary *Zhouyi benyi* 周易本義 (The Original Meaning of the *Zhouyi*, 1188), intending it to provide access for ordinary people to the “mind of the sage” (Fu Xi). In Zhu's terminology, the sage's “human mind” (*renxin* 人心) perfectly reflects the “moral mind” (*daoxin* 道心), which in most people is obscured by selfish desires and other consequences of our physical nature. Thus, for Zhu, divination using the hexagrams of the *Yijing* was part of the process of self-cultivation aimed at the ultimate goal of becoming a Sage.

2 Divination and Sacrifice

To set Zhu Xi's theory of *Yijing* divination in a broader context, let us briefly review the role of the divination-sacrifice ritual dyad in Chinese religious life. The centrality of this phenomenon goes back, of course, to the Shang dynasty, when divination and sacrifice constituted the central linkage between the heavenly and earthly realms in the religious life of the Shang aristocracy, and the king was the pivotal figure ensuring

³ Although the Neo-Confucian usage of these terms is not consistent, and they are often understood synonymously, I think this distinction between the descriptive and normative aspects of *li* is useful. In general, Confucian usage of *tian* connotes naturalness, while that of *dao* has moral connotations.

⁴ Zhu believed that Fu Xi had created the hexagrams by doubling the trigrams. The more popular alternative theory was that Fu Xi had created only the trigrams and King Wen doubled them (Adler 2020, p. 3).

their harmonious co-existence.⁵ Through sacrifice, the king acknowledged the higher status of the ancestors and gods, and provided for their needs; through oracle-bone divination, he received confirmation that their needs were being met and that they were willing to act in favor of the king, his family, and the state he represented. The ultimate goal was to ensure the harmony and welfare of the heavenly, earthly, and social realms (Keightley 1978, 2000).

One of the more remarkable aspects of the history of Chinese religions is the extent to which these general themes and specific forms of religious practice, divination and sacrifice are still clearly evident in contemporary Chinese society. Anyone who has visited a Chinese temple has seen the centrality of divination (especially in the form of casting “moon-blocks”) and sacrifice (in the form of food offerings to the deities enshrined in the temple). Offerings to gods in temples are made by ordinary people and, less frequently, by priests in more elaborate rituals. Sacrificial offerings are also made in Chinese homes; many families have an altar table or shelf in the home, holding ancestral plaques on which are written the names and dates of the ancestors (in most cases, no more than two or three generations back) alongside images of gods, Buddhas, and/or Bodhisattvas. Offerings of fruit or rice, always accompanied by burning incense, may be made either daily, weekly, every fifteen days, on holidays, or on anniversaries of the ancestor’s death. Some extended families have family or lineage temples (*jiamiao* 家廟), whose altars hold plaques going back to their earliest known ancestor. Offerings to ghosts (the dangerous yet pitiable spirits who lack descendants to worship them as ancestors) in many Chinese communities are made every fifteen days by householders and businesses, always outside the home or business.

Oracle bone divination became obsolete during the Western Zhou dynasty (1045–771 BCE) and was eventually replaced by yarrow-stalk divination using the *Zhouyi*, later called the *Yijing*. Other forms of divination today are more common, especially the use of “moon-blocks” (*jiao* 琮 or *bei* 杯) and “divination slips” (*qian* 籤) by worshippers in Chinese temples. More elaborate forms of divination, requiring the hiring of specialists, include shamanistic spirit-mediums (*tongji* 童乩) and palanquin- or chair-divination (*jiaozi* 轎仔).

Although today’s Chinese communities are worlds apart from the warlike aristocracy of bronze-age China, in certain respects what we would call their religious goals are quite similar: healthy families with strong connections to their ancestors, prosperous communities that maintain good relations with the powers of nature and their deities, and a secure state whose government takes the welfare of its people as its first and highest duty. Harmony within society, with the natural world, and with the various types of spiritual beings (gods, ghosts, and ancestors), still pretty much defines the ideal Chinese state of things.

⁵Because of the limitations of the historical record, all we know of Shang religion is that of the royal family and court. It should not be assumed that common people at that time had the same beliefs or practices.

3 Confucian Ritual in the Song

3.1 *Sacrifice*

The forms of ritual that most concerned Confucian scholars throughout the history of imperial China were those practiced within the family, all of which revolved around ancestor worship. Indeed, communication and participation with ancestors has been one of the characteristic features of Chinese culture as a whole for millennia. As Ebrey (1991b, pp. xv, xiv) has put it, “The mutual dependence of the living and the dead, of ancestors and their descendants, had been a central feature of Chinese culture from ancient times,” and “the links of the living and the dead needed to be renewed on a fixed schedule through offerings and sacrifices to ancestors.”

Family rituals included the capping and pinning of young adult males and females respectively, marriage, funerals, and a wide variety of rituals that we can collectively call ancestor worship. Capping and pinning were varieties of late puberty rituals, transformations into adulthood, described in such classical texts as the *Yili* 儀禮 (Etiquette and Ritual) and *Liji* 禮記 (Record of Ritual), as well as in later ritual texts up through the Song dynasty. Capping/pinning and marriage were commonly understood not only as rites of passage, effecting and marking the major transitions between life stages, but also as rituals that ultimately served the purpose of continuing the family line. Likewise, funeral rituals, including a series of sacrifices extending over a twenty-five-month mourning period, were understood as the transformation of the deceased into an ancestor. When this process was completed and the ancestor was installed in the family shrine, ancestor worship would involve—at least according to the normative texts—daily activities such as a respectful “looking-in,” occasional reports to the ancestor about important family events, regular offerings of food and wine, and more elaborate sacrificial rituals on specified dates⁶ (Ebrey 1991b).

Interest in family rituals reached a peak during the Confucian revival of the Song. Part of the impetus of the Neo-Confucian revival was the view held by many Song intellectuals that China's infatuation with Buddhism and Daoism since the fall of the Han dynasty had contributed to the political weakness of the Song state in relation to the neighboring nomadic peoples to the north, one of whom, the Jurchen, did in fact conquer the northern half of Song China in 1127. And so the Neo-Confucian revivalists felt that by rejecting the foreign religion of Buddhism, by restoring the family descent line as the core of Chinese society, and by returning to what they believed were the original sources of Chinese culture—the wisdom of the ancient sages preserved

⁶Zhu Xi's *Jiali* 家禮 (Family Rituals) was the most influential ritual text of the last 800 years. Although it was widely circulated and regarded as the standard to strive for, it is important to bear in mind that it was a normative, not a descriptive, text. Actual practices varied considerably from family to family and rarely, if ever, followed Zhu's recommendations in every detail. For ancestor worship in particular, see Chaps. 1 and 5, and pp. xx–xxv.

in the Confucian scriptures (or classics)—the Song state could recover the glory and success of the early Zhou and Han periods.⁷

One of the strongest proponents of this view was Zhu Xi, who was born three years after the Northern Song fell to the Jurchen and the capital was relocated to the south. He and other like-minded Confucians regarded Buddhism as a threat to China's social fabric because of what they claimed was its disrespect for the family. Since Buddhism encouraged a monastic vocation—which to these Confucian eyes appeared to go against the very grain of the Chinese social order based on the family—Buddhism was seen as a serious threat to the social cohesion and strength of Chinese society and hence to the very survival of Chinese culture. This and the more obvious threat of invasion constitute a good part of the socio-political background of Zhu's efforts to synthesize the teachings of the Confucian tradition, from the earliest mythic sages right up to his immediate predecessors in the Northern Song period.

Perhaps the most broadly influential book among the many written by Zhu was his *Jiali*. The book quickly became authoritative after his death and was republished in various editions many times during the ensuing Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. It was part of Zhu's effort to strengthen the moral fiber of Chinese society by standardizing the major social rites of passage according to his reconstruction of the orthodox Confucian forms and principles. His lifelong mission was to construct a comprehensive system of education and personal moral cultivation—beginning in the family—by which individuals could approach as closely as possible the ultimate Confucian goal of sagehood. The larger socio-political goals depended, for him, upon a class of educated elite comprised of such individuals, who would strengthen and transform Chinese society through the force of their *moral power* or virtue (*de 德*).⁸ One became a Confucian Sage, according to this system, by transforming one's imperfect psychophysical nature into a condition of "spiritual clarity" (*shenming*), which would allow one's inherent *Heaven-endowed* moral nature to fully express itself. This was an extremely difficult process, in Zhu's view, and required all the help one could muster. As we shall see, he believed that *Yijing* divination was a powerful tool that could be employed to this end.

In addition to sacrificial offerings to ancestors within the family, Song Confucians also made offerings, accompanied by praise and prayer, to earlier Confucian sages. These were conducted in official Confucian temples; in smaller temples and shrines to some of the prominent sages of the past, such as Mencius (Mengzi 孟子, who lived in the fourth century BCE) and Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073); and in Confucian academies. Education was expanding greatly in the Song, in part because of the decreasing cost of printing books; the central government was establishing schools in every county, and many individual Confucian scholars (including Zhu) built and

⁷Although Buddhism was criticized as a foreign religion, it should be noted that by this time it had been practiced in China for about a millennium, and had been more or less Sinified for about five centuries.

⁸Ebrey (1991a, p. 47) has suggested that part of the motivation behind the growing interest in family rituals during the Song was to legitimize the social status of those educated elite who did not have official positions in government—a group that increased in numbers extensively during this period.

ran their own private academies. In these academies, prayers and offerings to the sages of the past were daily practices.⁹

3.2 Divination

Just as in the Shang period, Song communication or participation with spiritual beings through sacrificial offerings was complemented by various methods of divination, including divining blocks, geomancy, and the hexagrams of the *Yijing*. Song Confucian attitudes toward these popular forms of divination were mixed, although generally positive. Divination blocks were commonly used for questions such as selecting the proper day for a ritual. Some of the more conservative Confucians, such as Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and Cheng Yi, were opposed to geomancy in general (Ebrey 1997, pp. 75–107) (although Zhu Xi was not) and also to the use of divination blocks in certain circumstances: when important moral principles were involved, they felt that the *Yijing* should be used instead. In general, the *Yijing* was considered the most powerful and nuanced oracle, and the one most appropriate for the educated elite.¹⁰

As mentioned above, the primordial sage Fu Xi was central to Zhu's understanding of the nature and proper use of the *Yijing*. Fu Xi was important to Zhu in part because one of the myths recounting his creation of the *Yijing* was a paradigm of one of the central methods in Zhu's system of self-cultivation, the "investigation of things" (*gewu* 格物):

In ancient times, when Baoxi [Fu Xi] ruled the world, he looked up and contemplated the images in heaven; he looked down and contemplated the patterns on earth. He contemplated the markings of the birds and beasts and their adaptations to the various regions. From near at hand he abstracted images from his own body; from afar he abstracted from things. In this way he first created the Eight Trigrams, to spread the power of [his] spiritual clarity and to classify the dispositions of the myriad things.¹¹

The purpose of this kind of objective examination of the natural world, or "investigation of things," for Zhu, was to fully understand the order or principle (*li* 理)

⁹For more on shrines to past sages and worthies, see Neskar (1996, pp. 293–305). For the religious aspects of Neo-Confucian academies, see Walton (1993). For education during the Song, see de Bary and Chafee (1989), Walton (1999), and Lee (2000).

¹⁰Sima Guang wrote a book on family ritual, called the *Shuyi* 書儀 (Writing and Etiquette), which Zhu Xi relied on extensively for his *Jiali*. Cheng Yi, on whom Zhu relied most heavily overall, discussed family rituals extensively but did not write a book on them (Ebrey 1991b, pp. xix–xx, 37n, 140n, 155n).

¹¹*Xici* 擊辭 ("Appended Remarks" appendix of the *Yijing*), B.2, in Adler (2020, p. 287). In addition to Zhu's frequent references to this story, its importance to him is suggested by the fact that sometime between 1174 and 1183, he composed a series of "big character posters" (*dazibao* 大字報) quoting this passage and one other from the *Xici* (A.11.5). The set of fourteen sheets, each about fourteen inches high, is in the collection of the National Palace Museum in Taipei (see National Palace Museum 2000, pp. 86–87). Six of the sheets were on display at the museum during the summer of 2000.

of things, including the principle of one's own mind, which is the principle of being human—the principle of human nature (*xing* 性).¹² Of this, Mencius had said: “To fully develop one's mind is to know one's nature. To know one's nature is to know Heaven. Preserving one's mind and nourishing one's nature is how one serves Heaven.” (7A.1) Thus, to cultivate and perfect one's innate moral nature, in the Mencian tradition of Confucianism, is clearly a religious matter. It is a way of relating oneself (or, more precisely, realizing or actualizing one's inherent relation) to the unconditioned absolute, Heaven (*tian* 天). Moreover, this is more than *self*-realization; it is to realize the moral potential of the cosmos. Only humans have this capacity, and therefore this moral responsibility. As the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (Centrality and Commonality) puts it:

Only that one in the world who is most perfectly authentic [*cheng* 誠] is able to give full development to his nature. Being able to give full development to his nature, he is able to give full development to the nature of other human beings and, being able to give full development to the nature of other human beings he is able to give full development to the natures of other living things. Being able to give full development to the natures of other living things, he can assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth; being able to assist in the transforming and nourishing powers of Heaven and Earth, he can form a triad with Heaven and Earth.¹³

But how does divination figure into all this? First, it is important to realize that because of the scriptural prestige and authority of the *Yijing*, which at its core is a divination manual, *Yijing* divination had always been accepted and practiced by Confucians. While some Confucians disdained certain popular religious practices, such as the reliance on spirit-mediums for divination, the unquestioned authority of the *Yijing*—and especially the tradition that Confucius himself had written the appendices or Ten Wings¹⁴—outweighed any rationalistic doubts they might have had about this form of divination. For Zhu, another compelling point was the story of the creation of the *Yijing* by Fu Xi, who was also credited with the invention of implements for hunting and fishing, animal sacrifice, and the institution of marriage. Such mythic culture-heroes were regarded as historical characters and the inventors,

¹²After quoting the above story of Fu Xi in his *Yixue qimeng* (Introduction to the Study of the *Yi*), Zhu comments: “In the fullness of Heaven and Earth there is nothing that is not the wonder of *taiji* 太極 [Supreme Polarity, which Zhu identifies with *li*] and *yin-yang* 陰陽. It was to this that the Sage looked up in contemplation and looked down in examination, seeking from afar and taking from the near at hand. Of course, he could register things in his mind silently and transcendently [i.e., seeing things not immediately apparent].” (Adler 2002, p. 15).

¹³*Zhongyong*, Chap. 22, trans. Irene Bloom, in de Bary and Bloom (1999, p. 338), with “authentic” substituted for “sincere” (*cheng* 誠). Zhou Dunyi, in his *Taijitu shuo* 太極圖說 (Explanation of the Supreme Polarity Diagram), also develops the notion of the uniqueness of human beings, but grounds it in the cosmology of *qi* (the psychophysical substance of which all existing things are composed). In Zhou's other major work, the *Tongshu* 通書 (Penetrating Writing), which draws largely from the *Yijing* and the *Zhongyong*, he further develops this idea, defining sagehood in terms of *cheng* or “authenticity” (Adler 2014, pp. 203–204).

¹⁴This had been questioned by Confucian scholars since the early Song, and is not given any credence today.

so to speak, of Chinese culture.¹⁵ So Fu Xi's creation of the hexagrams and divination method of the *Yijing* placed that text and that particular method of divination at the very beginning of the history of Chinese culture. This too added to its prestige and authority.

More important for Zhu, though, was his theory that *Yijing* divination could be used as an aid in the process of self-cultivation. This was an original discovery by Zhu, and one that he took quite seriously. Yet, many later scholars, both in China and the West in modern times, have misunderstood his position on this point. To this day, one still hears or reads statements to the effect that "Zhu Xi considered the *Yijing* to be *only* a divination manual"—i.e. that he did *not* regard it as a significant component of the all-important process of self-cultivation. This view is actually an unexamined and uncritical assumption based on Zhu's oft-repeated dictum, "The *Yijing* was originally created for divination." But further examination reveals that Zhu meant that the *Yijing* was originally created for divination; that this is how it should be used; and that since the *Yijing* had been taken seriously not only by Fu Xi but also by King Wen, the Duke of Zhou, and Confucius, it must be part of the Confucian *Dao*. And for Zhu, this meant that it was part of the process of self-cultivation aimed at the ultimate goal of becoming a Sage.¹⁶

To make the *Yijing* more accessible and useful as a manual of divination, Zhu wrote a short book entitled *Yixue qimeng* 易學啓蒙 (An Introduction to the Study of the *Yi*, 1186), with extensive commentary on the symbolic and numerological meanings of the lines, trigrams, hexagrams, and various diagrams associated with the *Yijing*. He also provides instructions for the method of divination with yarrow (milfoil) stalks, developed by him from the sketchy method outlined in the *Xici* appendix (*Xici* A.9.3). His instructions include how to determine which line texts should be read as the specific prognostication for the situation at hand, based on the lines that are changing into their opposites (broken to unbroken, and vice versa).¹⁷

In the opening lines of his preface to the *Yixue qimeng*, referring to the story of Fu Xi's creation of the *Yijing* quoted above, he says:

The Sage [Fu Xi] contemplated the images [in heaven and earth] in order to draw the *gua*, and cast the yarrow stalks in order to determine the lines. This enables all people of later ages throughout the world to decide uncertainty and doubt, to settle indecision, and to be undeluded about following the auguries "auspicious," "inauspicious," "repentance" and "regret."¹⁸ This achievement can be called glorious. (Adler 2002, p. 1)

Here he is announcing the basic themes of his interpretive approach to the *Yijing*: the focus on Fu Xi's original intention in creating it, the original form it took (i.e.

¹⁵The other two earliest figures are Shennong 神農, the "Divine Farmer," who invented agriculture, and Huangdi 黃帝, the "Yellow Emperor," who invented the institutions of government. These three are called the Three Sovereigns (*Sanhuang* 三皇) and are still worshipped today.

¹⁶I have explored this more thoroughly in *Divination and Philosophy: Chu Hsi's Understanding of the I-Ching* (1984), and in *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching* (1990), Chaps. 6–7.

¹⁷For the *Yixue qimeng*, see Adler (2002).

¹⁸These are some of the formulaic responses that probably constitute one of the earliest textual layers of the *Yijing*.

the lines and *gua* 卦), and its intended use by later people in using divination (when necessary) to guide their moral behavior.¹⁹

Zhu also wrote a separate set of instructions for the ritual of divination, which is usually included as an appendix to his commentary, the *Zhouyi benyi*. In this piece, he emphasizes the religious character of the ritual, including the proper placement of a table in a room with a door facing south, burning incense, cleaning the table and the room, washing one's hands, and reciting an invocation before the divination. (Adler 2002, pp. 317–322)

In his commentary, Zhu takes pains to interpret the text according to Fu Xi's original intention in creating it—a hermeneutical approach not taken by Cheng and other Neo-Confucians. As a result, his commentary focuses more closely on the *yin-yang* meanings and relationships of the lines and trigrams, i.e. the original layer of meaning intended by Fu Xi, and on the implications for the diviner. Both the “original meaning” and “original intention” of the *Yijing* are emphasized in the *Zhouyi benyi*. The “original meaning” (*benyi* 本義) is the literal denotation of the text, referring to the structural features, numerological characteristics, and symbolic associations of the hexagram and its component lines and trigrams. The “original intention” (*benyi* 本意), or purpose, is divination. We can clearly see both of these in Zhu's commentary to Hexagram #14 *Dayou* 大有 (Great Possession) ䷍. The hexagram text for this is simply “Great possession, supreme success.” Zhu comments:

“Great possession” means the greatness of what one possesses. *Li* 離 [the upper trigram] resides above *Qian* 乾 [the lower], fire above heaven [trigram structure], so everything is illuminated [meaning of trigram structure]. Also, 6 in the fifth [the broken line in the fifth position from the bottom] is a single *yin* occupying the place of honor and is central [in the upper trigram], while the five *yang* lines respond to it [line structure], so this is great possession [meaning of line structure]. *Qian* is strong and *Li* is bright [trigram “virtues”]. The one occupying the place of honor [6 in the fifth] corresponds with heaven, so it is a Way of success [meaning of trigram virtues]. If the diviner has these virtues he will be very happy and successful [oracular intention]. (Ibid, p. 111)

4 Divination and Sagehood

In his two books on the *Yijing*, *Yixue qimeng* and *Zhouyi benyi*, we see Zhu Xi's theory of the *Yijing* in operation, but the theory itself is mainly to be found in his extensive recorded conversations and his numerous short essays.²⁰ For the Neo-Confucians, the ultimate goal of human life was to become a sage. But the vocabulary they used to describe sagehood shifted from the terminology used by Confucius and Mencius. One of the more significant terms that entered the lexicon in this respect was “response”

¹⁹Zhu stressed that divination was only to be used when one was unable to decide the correct course of behavior on one's own (Smith et al. 1990, pp. 202–204).

²⁰The conversations, compiled from several sets of verbatim notes taken by his students over the last twenty years of his life, are found in *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Master Zhu's Classified Conversations, 1270). The essays are found in the *Hui'an xiansheng Zhu wengong wenji* 晦庵先生朱文公文集 (Zhu Xi's Collected Papers, 1532).

(*ying* 應). This term, particularly in the dyad “stimulus and response” (*ganying* 感應), had become prominent much earlier in the Huang-Lao Daoist text *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (second century BCE). There, the Daoist sage-ruler, or “True Man” (*zhenren* 真人), “holds fast to the Responses of the Natural (*ziran zhi ying* 自然之應).”²¹ He therefore “is like a mirror, neither sending [things] away nor welcoming [things], responding (*ying*) but not storing.”²² This implies an affinitive correspondence between the sage and the natural world based on their common constitutive ground of *qi* 氣 (Le Blanc 1985, p. 208). Zhou Dunyi, who was strongly influenced by Daoism and whom Zhu later established as the first true Confucian sage since Mencius, defines the Confucian sage in the following way:

That which is “silent and inactive” is authentic (*cheng* 誠); that which is “penetrating when stimulated” is spiritual (*shen* 神).²³ That which is active but not yet formed, between existence and not existence, is incipient (*ji* 幾). To be authentic is to be essential, and therefore clear. Spirit is responsive (*ying*), and therefore mysterious. Incipience is subtle, and therefore obscure. One who is authentic, spiritual, and [aware of the] incipient is called a sage.²⁴

In his commentary on *Mencius* 7A.1 (quoted above), Zhu says:

Mind is a person's spiritual clarity (*shen-ming*). It is that by which one embodies the various principles and responds to the myriad phenomena. (Zhu 1190, 7:1a)

And in his “Treatise on the Examination of the Mind,” Zhu says:

The learning of the sages is to base one's mind on fully investigating principle, and to accord with principle by responding to things. (Zhu 1532, 67:19b)

So the sage, according to Zhu, is a person whose mind is sensitive enough to be able to *respond* spontaneously and appropriately to even the most subtle, incipient (*ji*) changes in the human and natural environment. The response is appropriate to the situation, or morally correct, because the sage's inherent nature (*xing*) is part of the universal natural/moral order (*li*)—as is the inherent nature of every human being. But only the sage has clarified or purified his physical nature (*qizhi zhi xing*) to the point where it no longer clouds or interferes with his essential moral nature. That clarity (*ming*) renders the sage “spiritual” (*shen*) so that his responses sometimes seem superhuman, like those of gods and spirits. But in fact, the sage is nothing more than fully human, which is why Zhou says, “Sagehood is nothing more than being authentic (*cheng*).”²⁵

In Zhu's reading, authenticity means “actualized principle (*li*).”²⁶ That is, the sage's thought and behavior fully manifest his moral nature, or the natural/moral order. And that order or principle is one of transformation and creativity. It is seen in

²¹ *Huainanzi* 6:6a; trans. Le Blanc (1985, p. 133). See my discussion of *ying* in Neo-Confucian thought in Adler (1998, pp. 123–149).

²² *Ibid*, 6:6b; trans. Le Blanc (1985, p. 135), echoing the earlier Daoist classic *Zhuangzi* (Chap. 7).

²³ Quoting the *Yijing*, *Xici* A.10.4 (Adler 2020, p. 279).

²⁴ This is Sect. 4 of Zhou's *Tongshu*, entitled “The Sage” (Adler 2014, p. 208).

²⁵ *Tongshu*, sec. 2 (Adler 2014, p. 207).

²⁶ See Zhu's comments on Sects. 2–4 of Zhou's *Tongshu* (*Ibid*, pp. 225–242).

the natural world as “birth and growth” (*sheng-sheng* 生生),²⁷ and in the sage as his ability to transform (*hua* 化) others by the force (or virtue, *de*) of his moral example, i.e. to create a humane society.

How then is *Yijing* divination relevant to the process of becoming a sage? How exactly does the *Yijing* work, according to Zhu Xi? Clearly, the concepts of change (*bian* 變, or *yi* 易) and transformation (*hua* 化, or *bianhua* 變化) are central to the *Yijing*. As an oracle, the *Yijing* is regarded in a sense as an instrument for the detection of patterns of change, and those patterns are understood to be based ultimately on the simplest such pattern—*yin-yang* alternation or transformation. Of course, real-life situations are likely to be highly complex iterations or combinations of this fundamental ordering principle. The process of casting a hexagram enables the diviner—through the spiritual power of the milfoil stalks²⁸—to detect patterns of change that might otherwise be too subtle or complex to perceive. By detecting them and applying the wisdom of the sages who created the *Yijing* to interpret the pattern and directionality of change at the given moment, the diviner can better adapt his or her behavior to the dynamic exigencies of the situation. Action that is consistent with the changing flow of events is more likely to succeed because it becomes part of the normative pattern that constitutes the *Dao* in Chinese religious cosmology. For Confucians, this *Dao* is inherently moral.

So *Yijing* divination, as Neo-Confucians understood it, is only indirectly or secondarily concerned with fortune telling. It is really more about apprehending the *present*, or the direction and character of the present flow of events, and choosing one’s course of action to fit into and make use of the energy of that flow in the most appropriate (moral) manner. When a hexagram is derived through the manipulation of the yarrow stalks, it is conceived as an image (*xiang* 象) or *reading* of that current, dynamic situation. Depending upon the numbers yielded by the manipulation and counting-off of yarrow stalks or the simpler procedure of tossing coins, each line will be designated as one of four types: changing *yang*, unchanging *yang*, changing *yin*, or unchanging

²⁷ *Yijing*, *Xici* A.5.6 (Adler 2020, p. 270).

²⁸ *Yijing*, *Xici* A.11.3, A.11.8 (Ibid, pp. 281–282).

yin.²⁹ After reading and interpreting the hexagram text and the line texts for any changing lines, one then changes those lines into their opposite, yielding a second hexagram. (If no lines are changing, the situation is deemed to be relatively static and no second hexagram is derived.) The second hexagram indicates the *potential* future state—provided that one's interpretation of the first hexagram was correct and one's subsequent behavior is appropriate to that situation. In other words, the second represents not necessarily the future, but rather the point toward which the present situation is tending.

The basic connection between the functionality of the *Yijing* and Confucian self-cultivation is expressed in the following passage from the *Xici* and Zhu's comment on it:

The virtue of the milfoil is round and spiritual; the virtue of the hexagrams is square and wise; the meanings of the six lines change in order to inform. With these the sage purifies his mind and retires into secrecy. He suffers good fortune and misfortune in common with the people. Being spiritual, he knows the future. Being wise, he stores up the past. Who is comparable to this? [It was] the ancients, with broad intelligence and astute wisdom; those who were spiritually martial and yet non-violent.

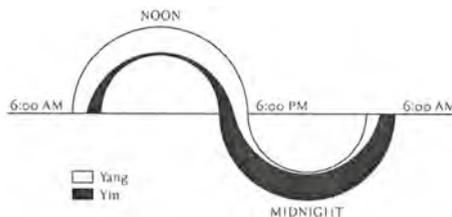
Zhu comments:

“Round and spiritual” means the unboundedness of transformation. “Square and wise” means that things have definite principles.... The Sage concretely embodies the virtues of the three [milfoil, hexagrams, and lines], without the slightest worldly tie. When there is nothing happening, then his mind is silent, and no one can see it. When there is something happening, then the operation of his spiritual understanding (*shenzhi* 神知) responds when stimulated. This means he knows what is auspicious and what is inauspicious without divination. “Spiritually martial and yet non-violent” means he apprehends principle without recourse to things.³⁰

Here Zhu points out that this refers to the fully realized sage, not to the ordinary person. According to him, the sage in fact does not need to resort to divination.

²⁹The below figure depicts the *yin-yang* cycle mapped as a day. The four types of lines correspond to the four stages of the cycle:

1. young *yang* (in this case midnight to 6 a.m.): unchanging *yang* line;
2. mature *yang* (6 a.m. to noon): changing *yang*;
3. young *yin* (noon to 6 p.m.): unchanging *yin*;
4. mature *yin* (6 p.m. to midnight): changing *yin*.



³⁰*Yijing*, *Xici* A.11.2 (Ibid, p. 280).

The sage himself, by virtue of his spiritual clarity, can spontaneously respond to the incipient signs of good fortune and misfortune, or the subtle tendencies of events, and thus can know their direction of change. This understanding is non-empirical in that it does not depend on prior exposure to things. He has the ability to transcend the usual limitations of cause and effect, e.g. “To hurry without haste, to arrive without going” (A.10.6), and to know the future. This is one of his god-like characteristics.

The *spiritual* capacity of both the *Yijing* and the sage is precisely their capacity to detect those otherwise undetectable subtle changes. According to the *Xici*, “To know incipience (*ji*) is to be spiritual.” (B.5.11) The Confucian sage, who symbolizes the potential perfection of human nature, is attuned to the flow of change in the natural and social environment and responds spontaneously, directly, and appropriately, with no need for intervening calculation or cogitation.³¹ For ordinary people, on the other hand, moral decisions usually require careful thought. It is when they have reached the limits of their current capacity to know the Way that the use of the *Yijing*, which embodies both the spiritual efficacy of the mechanism itself and the wisdom of the sages who devised it and contributed to the text, becomes appropriate.

The Neo-Confucian understanding of the *Yijing* developed by Zhu Xi gives ordinary human beings access to the very origin of the Chinese cultural tradition—Fu Xi’s creation of the *Yijing*. The “mind of the sage,” which is equivalent to the “moral mind” (*daoxin*) that is inherent in all humans but needs to be actualized or expressed through self-cultivation, is symbolized by Fu Xi’s mind as he surveyed the natural order, intuited or abstracted from it the moral order, and compassionately created a device by which ordinary humans could learn to recognize and internalize that same natural/moral order or principle (*li*). By learning to understand incipient change and how best to respond to it, according to Zhu, one can move closer to the goal—perhaps an unreachable goal, but a goal nonetheless—of manifesting that creative principle in one’s own action, as a sage.

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³¹ Readers might recognize in this picture the notion of *wuwei* 無為, or “effortless action,” which is typically identified with the *Laozi*. But as Slingerland (2003) has shown, for the Warring States period, various forms of this spiritual ideal were held by all the classical Confucians as well as the authors of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*. It is also clearly evident in Chan Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism.

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