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Editor

The Making of the Global *Yijing* in the Modern World

Cross-cultural Interpretations and Interactions

Editor

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Chapter 3

Reexamining the English Translation of the *Yijing*

Dennis Kat-hung Cheng

Abstract Translation is the ground for the reception of the *Yijing* outside China, especially in Anglophone countries across Europe and North America. Essentially, translation is a *reinterpretation* of the original text, rather than a technical task of simply replacing the original language with another language to capture the verbal meanings. Regarding translation as such, two major challenges should not be neglected. First is the multiplicity of the meaning(s) of *words* as a major characteristic of Chinese linguistics, while second is the way to distinguish various kinds of variations (*yiwen* 異文, same word written in different forms) accurately. Some of these variations should be read as alternate forms (*yiti* 異體) carrying different sounds and meanings, while some should be read as another character with the same phonetic structure. By selecting examples from a few English translations of the *Yijing* by Western scholars, this chapter attempts to argue about the difficulties reflected in the diverse translations and to encourage translators to explore further into the Chinese linguistic context of words and phrases of the original text.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, translation has become an independent discipline with its own epistemological premises, including the hermeneutic ones, so much so that there exists the academic field of translation studies. Insofar as hermeneutics is principally involved with understanding, translation cannot be a simple task of switching from one language to another. Generally, translators presume that there are ways to capture the meanings of the translated words accurately, no more and no less. Those who translated the *Yijing* or the *Zhouyi* (Classic of Changes) are no exception, even though this classic poses many more challenges, primarily because of the metaphoric nature of the text, which includes not only words but also graphic representations by way of the trigrams and hexagrams, not to say the numerous graphs and diagrams proposed

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by the philosophers of the Song period. The *Yijing* is one of the *Wujing* 五經 (Five Classics) in the Confucian canon and ranks first among the *Sanxuan* 三玄 (Three Mysteries) in the Daoist scriptural tradition. It contains a lot of symbolic language and metaphors with Confucian as well as Daoist referents. The ambiguity of the *Yijing* text does not come from any authorial intent to bedazzle the readers. Instead, it uses metaphoric language to highlight the inner connections of things and beings as the ultimate nature of existence. If we take a closer reading of the *Yijing*, we can see numerous examples of such linguistic expressions for the purpose of manifesting its core teaching. For example, the *guaci* 卦辭 (judgment of the hexagram) of Hexagram #1 *Qian* 乾—*yuanheng lizhen* 元亨, 利貞—should be translated as “grand sacrifice, in favor of divination,” if we stick to the etymological meanings of the four words. But if we revisit the commentaries, we see that the line has generally been interpreted as “ultimately auspicious, in favor of perseverance.”¹ The two renderings do not contradict each other, and indeed, from an interpretive perspective, the two layers of meaning have been embedded in many commentaries, ever since the appearance of the classic. Borrowing the terms used in oracle divination, the author of the *Guayaoci* 卦爻辭 (general and line judgments of the hexagrams) highlights the prosperity conveyed by the six lines that represent the lifetime career of a *junzi* 君子, or a political leader, from being *qianlong* 潛龍 (hidden dragon) to *feilong* 飛龍 (flying dragon), consistently expressing the moral message of #1 *Qian*. Some translators have connected the original meanings to those found in the later commentaries. For example, John Minford’s English translation, *I Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Oracle and Book of Wisdom*, comprises two parts. Part one, “Book of Wisdom,” elaborates on the morals of the hexagrams of the canonized *Yijing*, while Part two, “Bronze Age Oracle,” provides the supposed original meanings for what he defines as the “oracle period,” which refers to the first half of the first millennium BCE. However, the case of two layers of meaning being developed in different historical stages is different from their co-existence that I have just pointed to.

For most translators, dealing with a word that carries more than one meaning is to select a linguistic equivalent based on their knowledge of philology as well as the original text. The process of selection is guided by the ultimate goal of distinguishing the correct and the incorrect. For instance, once a translator accepts the Shanghai Museum bamboo-slip version of the *Yijing* in which Hexagram #48 *Jing* is written as “莖” instead of “井” in the received version—he/she definitely may translate the hexagram as a “Well,” based on the hieroglyphic form of the character. However, if we refer to the line judgment of the beginning line at the bottom, *jiujing wuqin* 舊井无禽, and at the same time consult Wang Yinzhi’s 王引之 (1766–1834) *Jingyi shuwen* 經義述聞 (Disquisitions on the meanings of the classics heard [from my father]), the word *jing* 井 refers to *jing* 莖 (well) and *jing* 阱 (trap) simultaneously.²

¹The Wilhelm-Baynes translation reads, “The Creative works sublime success, Furthering through perseverance.” (Wilhelm 1964, p. 4).

²The line judgment actually elaborates on a situation emphasizing on the *uselessness* of the well. “*Jingni bu shi* 井泥不食” means that a well which is dried up and filled with mud is not able to

(Cheng 2012, p. 79; Shaughnessy 2014, p. 120) Therefore, in this case, it is not appropriate to say that one is correct while the other is incorrect. This is a typical example of polysemy—the coexistence of several possible meanings for a word. This example shows the importance of understanding the polysemic meanings of words as a major task in the process of reading and interpretation.

Etymology is linguistic knowledge. However, more than occasionally, such technical knowledge and the interpretive sensibility that stems from it are ignored by translators. From the hermeneutic standpoint, language is directly linked to the reader who interprets, the text that is being read, as well as the all-encompassing interpretive community and milieu. As a matter of fact, the importance of linguistic factors has long been discussed by philosophers, especially the German fellows. For example, Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), who travelled across Europe, North and Central America, and Russia, believes that “languages are views of the world.” (Gadamer 1975, p. 401) As pointed out by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) (Ibid, p. 431), “language is a central point where ‘I’ and world met or, rather, manifest their original unity.” Language plays a crucial role in the effort to construct (or re-construct) a coherent world order in which every aspect of the whole picture is logical and understandable. Likewise, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) (2012, pp. 59–60) declares that “language, despite the different concurrently and consecutively held views expressed in it, encompasses within itself a single system of ideas which, precisely because they are contiguous, linking and complementing one another within this language, form a single whole whose several parts, however, do not correspond to those to be found in comparable systems in other languages.” Inevitably, the gap between “this language” and the “other languages” is always huge, and linguistic knowledge plays a big role in bridging it. In terms of the *Yijing* philosophy, the original unity of “T” and the world that Gadamer alludes to is not static but continuously dynamic; the never-ending interaction of *yin* and *yang* is the universal co-existence and nexus of the binary forces: life and death, positivity and negativity, happiness and sorrow, auspiciousness and misfortune, and so on. Language is a medium or a tool that represents the nature of these dialectic phases, movements and relations. We may say that the language of the *Yijing* is an example of the *yin-yang* philosophy because of the numerous words with infinite meanings that are often intricately related. A single word may simultaneously develop two (or more) meanings that are opposite to each other, such as the case of *fanxun* 反訓 (adverse meanings) in Chinese philology.³ When dealing with the semantic systems of words and names in ancient Chinese, one should not underestimate the fluidity of this language in particular. We have to bear in mind the particularity of Chinese (unlike Indo-European languages)—using *fangkuaizi* 方塊字 (square character) to represent meaning via a combination of visual form and audible sound. Sometimes,

provide water for drinking, while “*jiujing wuqin* 舊井无禽” means that the dried-up well which has been reused as a trap does not successfully catch prey.

³For example, *qiu* 仇 (enemy) and *qiu* 逌 (spouse) are etymologically one word. Their pronunciations are the same but the written forms are different, while carrying meanings opposite to each other.

there is the borrowing of the sound of one word to express the meaning of another word, that is, the practice of *jiajie* 假借. In this light, we know how challenging it is to translate a Chinese classic into another language, especially one that belongs to an entirely different language system that is not part of the Indo-European variety.⁴

The *Yijing* is among the most studied texts of the Chinese tradition, not only in China but also throughout the world. As I have discussed elsewhere, translation is the ground for the reception of the *Yijing* outside China, especially in Anglophone countries across Europe and North America. (Cheng 2018, pp. 231–264) This explains why new English translations have never stopped appearing. Essentially, translation is a reinterpretation of the original text, rather than a simple replacement of its language with another that supposedly captures the original verbal meanings. A translation that involves much interpretation entails two major challenges. The first is to engage effectively with the multiplicity of meanings of words, which is a major characteristic of Chinese linguistics. The second is to distinguish accurately various kinds of *yiwen* 異文 (variant characters—same words written in different forms). Some of these variations should be read as *yiti* 異體 (alternate forms) carrying the same (or similar) sound and meaning,⁵ while some should be read as different characters with the same phonetic structure.⁶ As there are so many English translations of the *Yijing*, it is only feasible to focus on some representative examples and reveal their problematic renderings of the Chinese text. The point to drive home is that in order for translators to do their job properly and accurately, they must become familiar with the Chinese linguistic contexts of the words and phrases of the original text, for precisely the aforementioned reasons. My intention is to revisit the effort of translating the *Yijing* from a hermeneutic perspective and rethink the importance of the linguistic and philological methodology.

2 Issues in the Translations of the *Yijing* Text

Some Western scholars adopt the methodological premise that the *Yijing* was a collection of divination records from the ancient Chinese agricultural society. In this light, they connect the hexagram names to animals or livestock. In his translation *The Book of Changes (Zhouyi): A Bronze Age Document Translated with Introduction and*

⁴Some may argue that Japanese and Korean are grammatically agglutinative languages while Chinese is an isolated language. The grammatical differences between Chinese and the two languages are obvious. However, in the case of the *Yijing*, Chinese versions were broadly used by traditional Japanese and Korean scholars. Via the method of *kunyomi* 訓読み, learners can use traditional Japanese pronunciation to read the content of the Chinese version and capture the meaning of the Chinese characters. (The meaning of *sektok* 釋讀 in Korean is the same as that of *kunyomi* in Japanese.) Translation is not as crucial for East Asian (including Japan, Korea and Vietnam) learners as it is for Western learners.

⁵For example, *yu* 毓 and *yu* 育.

⁶For example, *gai* 改 and *yi* 改.

Notes, Richard Rutt (1996) translates Hexagram #15 *Qian* 謙 as “Rat” by referring to the related word *shu* 鼯:

Base (6): Scrunching rat. *A prince may cross a big river.* AUSPICIOUS. (謙謙, 君子用涉大川, 吉)

(6) 2: Squealing rat. AUSPICIOUS AUGURY. (鳴謙, 貞吉)

(6) 3: Industrious rat. *For princes, ultimately* AUSPICIOUS. (勞謙, 君子有終吉)

(6) 4: *Unfavorable for nothing.* Ripping rat. (无不利, 爲謙)

(6) 5: Not rich, because of the neighbors. *Favorable for a foray. Unfavorable for nothing.* (不富, 以其鄰, 利用侵伐, 无不利)

Top (6): Squealing rat. *Favorable for mobilizing to attack a capital city.* (鳴謙, 利用行師征國)

In the *Yijing* commentarial tradition, the term *junzi* 君子 in the beginning line (Rutt uses the term “base line”) connects to the term *qianqian* 謙謙 (which is an adjective) to form a complete phrase *qianqian junzi* 謙謙君子. But when Rutt reads the word *qian* as *shu*, he has no choice but to detach the term *junzi*, which he translates as “a prince,” from *qianqian* and connect it to the following sentence. Obviously, a different translation of the hexagram name may lead to a totally different reading or interpretation on the whole passage. From the etymological perspective, the word *jian* 兼 is the component that is shared by, and links up, the two characters of *qian* 謙 and *shu* 鼯. I do not know of any convincing evidence that may support Rutt’s decision to ignore the interpretations in numerous traditional annotations of the word *qian* and select *shu* without any linguistic reference. Rutt might be sharing the assumptions of the early twentieth-century Chinese scholars of the *Gushibian* 古史辨 (Critiques of ancient history), doubting the ancient past movement who cast their skeptical and critical views on ancient Chinese history, and accordingly, argued that the only merit of the *Yijing* was that it was a straightforward historical record of an ancient agricultural society.⁷ In the preface of his book, Rutt (1996, p. ix) also shares his experience of “living in a Korean village community among men who needed no translation” during the 1950s. Combining his life experience and admiration for the scholarship of the *Gushibian* scholars, Rutt refused to adopt inherited interpretations in the commentarial tradition, and decided to translate the text in his own way. With the same mindset, he translates Hexagram #16 *Yu* 豫 as “Elephant,” as he matches the word with *xiang* 象 which literally refers to the animal. Not surprisingly, the rendering of the meanings of the lines becomes awkward and hard to read. If *xuyu* 盱豫 in the third line is translated as “watchful elephant raising its head,” with the first word *xu* 盱 being read as an adjective, then why is *mingyu* 冥豫 of the top line translated as “elephant in darkness,” with the first word *ming* 冥 being regarded as a noun? Where is the semantic, syntactical, and grammatical consistency? Rutt is of course not the only scholar inclined to read the *Yijing* text as a historical record of an

⁷In chapter one “The Background: Bronze Age China” of *The Book of Changes (Zhouyi)* Part I, Rutt (1996, pp. 9–25, 41–43) gives a comprehensive description on the historical background of the classic including social customs, economic background, agriculture, warfare and hunting. He highly praises the contribution of the *Yijing* scholars of the early twentieth century including Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978) and Li Jingchi 李鏡池 (1902–1975).

agricultural society. Minford, in his *I Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Oracle and Book of Wisdom*, translates #16 Yu as “elation” in Part I but as “elephant” in Part II. He provides only one argument for using “elephant” as the translation: “Elephants were hunted in ancient China, and were buried sacrificially. Their remains have been found at Yinxu.”⁸ (Minford 2015, p. 574) Obviously, while archeological evidence is often tremendously helpful, it is grossly inadequate and one-sided to consider only excavated relics and totally ignore the very pertinent linguistic factors.

Apart from the cases of *qian* and *yu*, there are also other hexagram names read by scholars as names of animals or livestock. For example, Rutt (1996, p. 256) reads Hexagram #33 *Dun* 遯 as *tun* 豚 and translates it as “Pig.” We should note that in traditional exegeses, *dun* 遯 is a variation of the word *dun* 遁, both meaning “to hide” or “to flee” and referring to the behavior of recluses.⁹ In his *Unearthing the Changes*, Edward L. Shaughnessy (2014, pp. 104–105) translates *dun* in the Shanghai Museum manuscript version, written as 豮, as “piglet.” This is the same way of thinking.¹⁰ I am not saying that the *Yijing* has nothing to do with the ancient agricultural society. It is also a fact that livestock is mentioned in hexagrams. For example, pertaining to Hexagram #26 *Dachu* or *Daxu* 大畜 (Big Livestock, or the taming power of the great), the names of the animals *liangma* 良馬 (good horse), *tongniu* 童牛 (young bull), and *fenshi* 豮豕 (gelded boar) are mentioned in the lines. But with regard to the word *dun* 豮, to the best of my knowledge, it is merely a variation of the written forms of the words *dun* 遯 and *tun* 遁, nothing more and nothing less. All these varied forms of the character have the same sound and meaning, and therefore must not be read or translated differently.

Sometimes, translators do refer to important old commentaries for their translations. For example, in the case of Hexagram #34 *Dazhuang* 大壯 (The Growth of the Great), translators have adopted the meaning of *zhuang*, *shangye* 壯, 傷也 (injury, or wound) provided by Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166), which is recorded in the *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 (A Dictionary on the Words and Variations of the Ancient Classics). Hence, the word *zhuang* 壯 is translated as “injury” (Rutt) or “wound” (Shaughnessy and Minford). However, if we refer to the statement *juzhi gao, xin bugu yi* 舉趾高, 心不固矣 (When stepping with the toe raised high, there is surely the lack of confidence) in the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 (Zuo’s Commentary of the Spring–Autumn Annals), then we should know that the beginning line *zhuang yu zhi* 壯于趾 actually expresses the moral message of the phrase *juzhi gao* 舉趾高 in the

⁸In *I Ching: The Essential Translation of the Ancient Chinese Oracle and Book of Wisdom* Part II, Minford (2015, p. 571) also translates *qian* 謙 as “rats.”

⁹According to the *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 (A Dictionary on the Words and Variations of the Ancient Classics), the word *dun* “遯” was also written as “遯” or “遁,” the difference is only the form/structure of the word, which means three of them carry the same sound and meaning.

¹⁰In footnote 1 on p. 104, Shaughnessy (2014) writes, “For 豮, probably to be read as *tun* 豚, ‘piglet,’...whereas the Wangjiatai Guicang manuscript gives the hexagram name as 遯. This latter writing is also attested in the *Jingdian shiwen*, as well as *dun* 遁, ‘to move, to flee, or to hide.’” Shaughnessy is a leading expert in ancient Chinese paleography; however, he did not explain why he decided to read *dun* 遯 as *tun* 豚.

Zuo zhuan, which warns against excessive self-confidence and does not convey the meaning of “injury of the foot.”

3 From Variation to Polysemy

As I mentioned above, there are numerous variations in the *Yijing* text, including the received as well as excavated versions. We may easily identify variations in some of the early received texts (during or before the Wei-Jin period) in the *Jingdian shiwen*, but we will need much more time to compare the Shanghai Museum bamboo version, the Wangjiatai bamboo version (*Wangjiatai jian* 王家台簡), the Mawangdui silk manuscript (*Mawangdui boshu* 馬王堆帛書) version, and the various forms of even one single word. For example, in the case of Hexagram #25 *Wuwang* 无妄 (The Unexpected), the form in the received text generally appears as “无妄,” but it is “毋亡” in the Wangjiatai bamboo version, “亡忘” in the Shanghai Museum version, “无孟” in the Mawangdui silk manuscript, and “无亡” in the Fuyang bamboo version (*Fuyang hanjian* 阜陽漢簡). To ordinary readers, these variations are very confusing, but for *Yijing* scholars who are well trained in Chinese linguistics and textual criticism, these variations are the same in terms of sound and meaning; they vary only in form, that is the hieroglyphic structure of the characters.

For some highly controversial examples, especially for those words that are intrinsically polysemic, incorporating all excavated texts and dictionaries may not help. A case in point is the term *yiri* 已日 in Hexagram #49 *Ge* 革 (Reform, or Molting), the first character of which appears in some versions as “己,” while in some other versions, it is written as “巳.” There are only very slight differences that separate the three characters “己,” “巳,” and “巳,” which have the different sounds of “ji,” “yi,” and “si” respectively. Interestingly and consequently, it is not surprising to find that there are three different interpretations pertaining to the three respective forms of the one character in the commentarial tradition. In the Han period, major *Yijing* scholars, such as Xun Shuang 荀爽 (128–190), Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), and Gan Bao 干寶 (286–336), tended to read the word as “己” which means “completed” or “ending.”¹¹ Richard John Lynn’s (1994, p. 445) *The Classic of Changes, A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* adopts the version of “己” in translating the entire statement which appears as “Only on the day when it comes to an end does one begin to enjoy trust.”

¹¹ Xun Shuang focused on the fifth line and argued that “it had completed in becoming the king” (五已居位為君). Wang Bi’s interpretation of the line is that “reforms cannot be accomplished by oneself. Once reform has been completed, the *junzi* comply with the reform” (不能自革, 革已, 乃能從之). Gan Bao’s interpretation of the line is that “the day the mandate of Heaven has arrived” (天命已至之日). The sources of the Han scholars are quoted from *Zhouyi jijie* 周易集解 by Li Ding-zuo 李鼎祚 (1996).

Later scholars, such as Wang Yinglin¹² 王應麟 (1223–1296) and Wang Fuzhi¹³ 王夫之 (1619–1692), read the word as *si* 巳, which is the sixth among the twelve *dizhi* 地支 (earthly branches indicating the twelve time-units of one day), representing the temporal span of 9 am to 11 am.¹⁴ Twentieth-century Chinese *Yijing* scholars, such as Gao Heng 高亨 (1900–1986) and Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 (1911–2000), also read this character as *si* 巳 but argued that it was a *jiajie* word to represent the word *si* 祀, meaning “sacrifice,” as was the term *siri* 祀日 which means “the day of sacrifice.” (Gao 1984, vol. 4; Zhou 1993) The English translations by Richard Rutt and Geoffrey Redmond adopt the version of “巳.” Rutt (1996, p. 272) translates the hexagram name as “Leather” (*pige* 皮革) instead of “Reform,” and renders *siri nai fu* 巳日乃孚 as “On a sacrifice day, use the captives.” Redmond’s (2017, p. 265) *The I Ching (Book of Changes): A Critical Translation of the Ancient Text* translates *siri nai fu* as “On a ‘si’ day, sacrifice captives.”

Interpretations regarding the version of *jiri* 己日 also vary. In his famous work *Ri zhi lu* 日知錄, Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–1682) accepted Zhu Zhen’s 朱震 (?–1138) argument to read the term as “己日,” *ji* 己 of which is the sixth among the ten *tiangan* 天干 (celestial stems), each constituting a temporal unit of ten days. (This is somewhat like using Monday, Tuesday, and the rest of the specifically named days to count one week.) According to Gu’s explanation, the *Yijing* espouses the philosophy of change and praises the idea of *zhong* 中 (the mean, the neutral, the impartial or middle point). Metaphorically, the units of the ten celestial stems are successive cycles that display the rise and fall of a policy or its development process. *Jiri* (the day of *ji*), being the sixth day passing the middle point of the period, serves as a reminder for the preparation for the changes that are represented by the seventh stem of *geng* 庚 (referring to *geng* 更 with the same sound, which means “reform”). The interesting point is that Gu offered another related argument that regarded *ji* 己 as an association of “改” (normally pronounced as *gai*) that carries the same sound—“己” is actually the left part of the hieroglyphic form of “改”—suggesting that “己日” is actually “改日,” while the character “己” here should be pronounced as “*gai*” instead of “*ji*.” According to Gu, “己” carries two meanings simultaneously: “己日” (*jiri*) is the sixth day in the celestial stem system, and also assumes the other form “改日” (*gairi*), which means “the day for reform.” Gu’s argument is the one I support, as it argues on behalf of the character “己” in terms of polysemy.

The example of “己日” is not an isolated case. If we study the other hexagrams of the *Yijing*, we will find that polysemy is ubiquitous. Apart from the aforementioned cases of “井,” “阱,” and “棊,” here are a few more examples:

¹²In volume 1 of his *Kunxue jiwen* 困學紀聞 (A Collection of Audible Knowledge in Endure Learning), Wang refers to the Han philosophy which takes “巳” as the representation of the exhaustion of the *yang* air to interpret the term as indicating the increase and decrease of the *yin* and *yang* air (皆陰陽氣數之變).

¹³In volume 4 of his *Zhouyi neizhuan* 周易內傳 (Inner Commentaries of the *Zhouyi*), Wang argued that *siri* 巳日 is on the day at the *si* 巳 among the twelve *shichen* 時辰.

¹⁴Ancient Chinese people use twelve *shichen* to divide the length of twenty-four hours, which means one *sichen* is equal to two hours.

1. In the fifth line of Hexagram #3 *Zhun* 屯 (Difficulty in the Beginning)—*zhun qi gao* 屯其膏, the character *zhun* “屯” simultaneously carries the meaning of “difficulty” and “gathering, or collecting” (*tun* 囤).
2. The character *xu* “需” in the fifth line of Hexagram #5 *Xu* 需 (Waiting)—*xu yu jiushi* 需于酒食 (Nourished with food and wine)—should also be read as *ru* “醕,” which directly refers to the nourishment of food and drinks.
3. The character *you* “祐” in the top line—*zi tian you zhi* 自天祐之—of Hexagram #14 *Dayou* 大有 (Possession of the Great, or Abundant Harvest) corresponds to the second word of the hexagram name, “you有.” Carrying the same sound, the two words refer to the plentiful (有) gifts that are the blessings (祐) from heaven.
4. Hexagram #30 *Li* 離 (Fire, or Attaching) has multiple symbolic meanings. The symbolic meaning related to the nature is “fire.” The fourth line—*fenru* 焚如—refers to “fire” that mirrors the symbol of “water” in Hexagram #29 *Kan* 坎 (Water, or Trap). Simultaneously, the name “*Li*” carries the meaning of “attaching” (*li* 麗). The *Tuan zhuan* 彖傳 (Commentary of the Hexagram) claims that “*li* is *li*” (*li, li ye* 離, 麗也). It also corresponds with “the setting sun” in the third line—*ruze zhi li* 日昃之離.

4 Closing the Hermeneutic Circle?: From Language to Philosophy in the *Yijing*

Variations of the word *ji* 己 of Hexagram #49 *Ge*, which reflect the complexity of the interpretation of the texts, not only remind us that philology is essential to establishing the etymology of words and meaning of the texts, but also lead us to rethink a series of important questions related to linguistics and hermeneutics: How should we evaluate interpretations that stem from misreading (e.g. *ji* 己 reads as *yi* 已 or *si* 巳) of the original text? Should these interpretations (as well as the resulting philosophies) be legitimized as valuable contributions to the commentarial tradition? Should there be boundaries that delimit interpretations? If Gadamer’s “hermeneutic circle” does exist, can it ever be closed, at least in some instances?

Essentially, there are two ways of interpreting the texts. One emphasizes loyalty to the original text. The fundamental premise is the very existence of a text constructed by words, phrases, sentences, passages and paragraphs. Under no circumstance should the reader be allowed to betray the text by inserting or replacing words that suit their own thoughts; nor should they intentionally misread the words or sentences in order to induce meanings for their speculation. Without challenging a particular authority, ever since the pre-Qin period, the *Yijing* commentarial tradition in China has been pursuing the *original meanings* based on textual evidential research. One of the most famous masterpieces is the *Jingdian shiwen* in which the author Lu Deming 陸德明 recorded the variations initiated and adopted by the numerous scholars from the Han dynasty to the Wei-Jin period. On account of the abundant information provided, users of this source would have the confidence to compare different versions and then choose and use those they deem the most cogent.

However, we should note that the presumption of the existence of original meaning was a common interpretive premise for the Chinese readers of the classics to begin with, in spite of the diversity of interpretation. In other words, there was always the acknowledgment that the original thoughts of the ancient sages were embedded in the classics.

Modern scholars may not have the same fealty to the ancient sages anymore, and therefore, recognizing or denying the existence of original meaning is not the crux of the matter. Nevertheless, when we read the lines of the text and come up with their meanings, we are dealing with some sort of original meaning as a practical matter. Setting the question of authorship aside, as long as we recognize the basic textual settings of the *Yijing*, including *yaoti* 爻題 (line titles, such as *chului* 初六, *jiuer* 九二 and *liusan* 六三) as well as their roles in the constitution of a hexagram (from the beginning line to the top line), we have to admit that to a certain extent, original meanings do exist in these settings. It is only when we accept these unalterable textual settings that reading becomes meaningful and productive. Hence, we should not underestimate these basic reading principles. Ever since the *Gushibian* (doubting the ancient past) movement, some *Yijing* scholars have become too involved in denying traditional scholarship and boldly speculated about alternative meanings. For example, in the Fuyang bamboo slip version, Hexagram #23 *Bo* 剝 (Hitting, or Splitting Apart) is written as “僕.” The editor Han Ziqiang 韓自強 reads the fourth yin line “*bao chuang yi fu* 剝床以膚” as “*pu qiang yi fu* 僕戕以膚.” He argues that the word *chuang* 床, written as “臧” in the Mawangdui silk manuscript, should be an associative word of *qiang* 戕 (hurt) which has a similar sound. He then concludes that “僕戕以膚” means “the slave hurts his/her skin,” while “剝床以足” of the beginning line and “剝床以辨” mean “the slave hurts his/her foot” and “the slave hurts his/her knee” respectively. The problem is that if #23 *Bo* is interpreted as “Slave,” what would then be the meaning of Hexagram #24 *Fu* 復 (Return), which mirrors its binary couple #23 *Bo*? Obviously, Han does not bother to consider the many interpretations in the long commentarial tradition or the system of meanings of the sixty-four hexagrams. It would not be difficult for any reader who has any linguistic knowledge to know the absurdity of Han’s interpretation. Instead of accepting his speculation, we need to dig into the texts layer by layer, in order to apprehend the original thoughts embedded in the lines and sentences. Even then, we may still be a long distance away from the philosophies encased in the text. For cases such as the words *jiri* of #49 *Ge*, given all the evidence I have provided, there is almost no room for a different interpretation, unless there is new evidence from yet another newly excavated text. In other words, from a philological point of view, it is not impossible to say that the hermeneutic circle can be closed.

To scholars of hermeneutics, it is hard to imagine that the hermeneutic loop can be closed, not only because of the complexity of the interpretation of abstract ideas, but also because hermeneutic is basically creative, with no delimitation of the possibility of meanings. Interpretation is never a one-way explanation of a static classic or text. Instead, from time to time, the person who interprets always brings in new insights, and makes interpretation a perpetually creative process initiated from the two-way interaction of the reader and the text. Ever since the *Yijing* text was authored,

everything in it, including the *gua* 卦 (including the six-line hexagram and the name), *yao* 爻 (lines), *ci* 辭 (the moral of the lines), as well as the hexagram sequence, has been found to originate from two signifiers: a broken line representing *yin* and a solid line representing *yang*. Every part in the *Yijing* develops from nothing but the *yin* and *yang* lines. Only with these two signifiers can the trigrams be constructed, and further result in the sixty-four hexagrams. People may argue that these two signifiers are not even Chinese characters but only symbols. Now, the question is: If the general definition of Chinese characters is a unification of sound, form and meaning, then what do we mean by *wenzi* 文字 in Chinese? What would be the difference between symbols (or signifiers) and characters? It may not be easy to imagine the territory of *wenzi*. For example, “冂” and “匚” are nothing for ordinary readers but symbolic components of many other Chinese characters such as *tong* 同 and *qu* 區. However, both “冂” and “匚” are characters recorded in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (General Dictionary of Words and Characters). “冂” carries the sound “*jiong*” which refers to remote areas far away from countryside (*Shuowen jiezi* says: “邑外謂之郊, 郊外謂之野, 野外謂之林, 林外謂之冂.”). (Xu 2013, p. 230) “匚” carries the sound “*fang*” which refers to a square vessel. (Ibid, p. 641) Some particular cases may even be more surprising. For example, a simple vertical stroke “丨” is also a Chinese character, recorded in the *Shuowen jiezi*, with a core meaning of “linking the lower and the upper” (下上通也), but it carries two different sounds, differentiated by two different ways of writing: the one that goes from bottom to top is pronounced as “*chuang*,” and the one that goes from top to bottom is pronounced as “*tui*” (引而上行, 讀若凶; 引而下行, 讀若退). (Ibid, p. 20) These examples illustrate the fluidity of Chinese language and provide coordinates for us to rethink the nature of the lines, trigrams and hexagrams, as well as all the graphs and diagrams authored by later philosophers.

From a linguistic point of view, there is always a core meaning (or an anchor meaning) supporting the meaning system of a word family (a set of associative words which have kinship relations). This core meaning can always be precisely obtained and pinpointed through philological analysis. However, linguistic analysis will never limit philosophical interpretation. Essentially, there are two ways of interpretation. One follows the linguistic pathway to extend new meanings without deviating from the anchor meaning, while the other follows the interpreter’s philosophical speculation to a new horizon that may not have any connection with the linguistic setting. The aforementioned examples may not imply that the *yin* and *yang* lines are definitely characters instead of bare signifiers, but at least we may say that there are possibly philosophic connotations embedded within the line system that includes the trigrams and hexagrams composed of the broken and solid lines. As we know, the eight trigrams came to exist in a group, not one by one, to represent systematic thoughts which are interrelated and interdependent to each other; they are not meant to be read individually and disparately one by one. If the trigram *Qian* represents “father” and *Kun* represents “mother,” then the other six trigrams would become symbols representing siblings—three brothers and three sisters. But if *Qian* and *Kun* are read as symbols representing “Heaven” and “Earth,” then the symbolic meaning of the other six trigrams should be understood as “Fire,” “Water,” “Mountain,” “Thunder,”

"Wind," and "Swamp." Hence, when two trigrams combine to become one hexagram, and when the sixty-four hexagrams combine to become thirty-two binary couples, we can imagine how vast the expanse of interpretive creativity can be. This creativity is reflected ultimately in the multiple expressions of the hexagram names, judgments and sequences.

The multiple meanings of the hexagram names point to the fact that the *Yijing* is a creative philosophical work with a delicately designed system of meanings, where there is a core meaning on the one hand, and many extended associated meanings on the other. Together, they form an organic structure which may be regarded as a cohort of meanings, in which the fluidity of interpretations is not only possible but also required. In the nexus of the *gua*, *yao* and *ci*, this fluidity has two characteristics. The first is the philosophical coherence supported by a linguistic structure based on the hieroglyphic form of the character and the audible sound. In the theory of the hermeneutic circle, the philological context of the text serves not only as a medium transmitting the original meaning assigned by the author to the reader, but also an abstract, self-contained meaning system embedded within the articulation with words, phrases and sentences. Hence, reading is a critical intellectual activity that is related to understanding, which entails indispensable linguistic analysis. The so-called hermeneutic circle is not a single but multiple circles that exist among the author, the text (as represented by a specific language), and the reader (inspired, but at the same time, limited by the boundary of his/her knowledge). Here we may take note of the co-existence of both the openness and non-openness of interpretation. Interpretation is open without any presumed limits because "meaning" can never be confined to what may be called the "original meaning" intended by the author, to the extent that we give credence to Roland Barthes's (1915–1980) cogent idea of "The Death of the Author" (1967) which honors the agency of the reader. (In this sense, even the various interpretations derived from the misreading of the phrase *jiri nai fu* 已日乃孚 should also be legitimized as valuable contributions to the commentarial tradition.) Yet, interpretation is also constrained because the linguistic settings and contexts of any text are delimited and defined by the language components of the words and sentences. In view of these two dialectical dynamics, can we ever close, so to speak, the hermeneutic circle, so that we may arrive at some understanding, which may be so definitive that it could exclude all other understandings? It seems that the way to do so is to explore the meanings embedded within the linguistic structure of the text, especially linking the multiple meanings embedded in the text to those recorded in the exegeses and commentaries. The key method is to grasp the core meaning through careful evidential research into the *jing* 經 (text) proper and their many *zhuan* 傳 (commentaries), while bearing in mind that the authors of the earliest commentaries and exegeses are plausibly the most trustworthy readers of the original text.

Needless to say, we should never exclude new interpretations, as long as they do not violate the meanings embedded in and conveyed by the native language of the text. As mentioned above, in the case of the *Yijing*, it could be said that the trigrams, hexagrams, names, line judgments, and so on were at one time all new elements creatively developed from the basic *yin-yang* cosmological conception,

represented by two simple symbols “——” and “— —.” Take the first character *yuan* “元” of the general judgment—*yuanheng lizhen* 元亨利貞—of Hexagram #1 *Qian*, for example. The *jiaguwen* 甲骨文 (the oracle bone script) hieroglyphic form of *yuan* “元” is actually a human head, the most important part of the human body as well as the embodiment of our intelligence. This explains why Xu Shen 許慎 (2013, p. 1), in his dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi*, says that *yuan* “元” means *shi* 始 (beginning). Several centuries after the *Guayaoci* had been authored, the author of the *Tuan zhuan* honored #1 *Qian* as the beginning of all beings (*wanwu zi shi* 萬物資始). Based on the hieroglyphic form of a human head, the *Tuan zhuan* elaborates the greatness of Heaven:

Great indeed is the *qian-yuan* (supreme Creative) (*dazai qianyuan* 大哉乾元)
 To which all beings owe their beginning. (*wanwu zi shi* 萬物資始)
 Hence it is the ruler in Heaven. (*nai tong tian* 乃統天)
 The clouds accumulate to release rain. (*yun xing yu shi* 雲行雨施)
 It nurtures the earth to give birth to all beings. (*pin wu liu xing* 品物流形)
 The sun rises and falls continuously. (*dai-ming zhongshi* 大明終始)
 The six lines (representing the development of the nature) can then be accomplished. (*liuwei shi cheng* 六位時成)
 A *junzi* selects wisely the proper moment to ride on the creative force to approach heaven. (*shi cheng liulong yi yu tian* 時乘六龍以御天)

There are only four characters in the general judgment of #1 *Qian*, and yet, the *Tuan zhuan* developed them into a long passage. Obviously, the author of the *Tuan zhuan* embraced the polysemy embedded in the judgments of the images and lines of the hexagram, inducing and engendering new meanings and messages from the character *yuan* “元,” and thus resulting in a poem built on multiple imageries—the human head, the beginning, the sky with the sun, clouds and rain, and heaven—to give praise to *qian* as a major creative force of heaven and for how it penetrates to nurture all beings in nature.

By extending symbolic meanings of the trigrams and hexagrams, the author of the *Yijing* easily borrowed the metaphors of one hexagram and applied them to another. For example, the author of the *Xiang zhuan* 象傳 (Commentary on Symbols) elaborates on the moral message of Hexagram #7 *Shi* 師 (Army): “*Shi* is the symbol of water beneath the earth; a *junzi* should thus learn to embrace his people and support his troops (*di zhong you shui, shi*; *junzi yi rongmin xuzhong* 地中有水, 師; 君子以容民畜眾). Those troops become a part of the author’s explanation of the moral message of the hexagram stemmed from the embedded metaphor in the lower trigram *Kan* 坎, which carries the meaning of “water” (based on the *Shuogua zhuan* 說卦傳 [Explaining the Hexagrams]) as well as “troops,” according to part four of the chapter of “*Jinyu* 晉語” in the *Guoyu* 國語 (Discourses of the States), which states: “*Kan* is the symbol of troops” (*kan, zhong ye* 坎, 眾也).

Among the Ten Wings, the *Xici zhuan* 繫辭傳 (Commentary on the Appended Judgments) is famous for its creative interpretations. The first two hexagrams *Qian* and *Kun*, which represent “Heaven” and “Earth,” are extended to two different ideas

yi 易 (convenience) and jian 簡 (simplicity). Without mentioning or echoing the metaphoric meaning of a combination of six yin lines and another combination of six yang lines in the *Guayaoci*, the author further touches upon the convenient and simple manner/nature of *Qian* and *Kun*. He argues that the “convenience of Heaven is easy to know” (乾以易知) while the “simplicity of Earth is easy to function” (坤以簡能). “Since it is easy to know, it lasts long” (有親則可久), and “since it is easy to function, it accomplishes big” (有功則可大). “Last[ing] long” represents the moral of a profound person, while “accomplish[ing] big” represents his career. The author concludes the morals of these two beginning hexagrams by elaborating on their new meanings creatively, and interprets how the spirit of “Heaven” and “Earth” creates impact on the humanistic world by guiding the morality of the profound persons. Considering the *Yiwei*’s 易緯 (Latitudes of the *Yijing*) multiple interpretations of the word yi 易: *jianyi* 簡易 (convenience and simplicity), *bianyì* 變易 (changes), and *buyi* 不易 (unchange). The author also echoes the etymological meaning of the word yi 易 by splitting the meaning of the term *jianyi* 簡易 to interpret Hexagrams *Qian* and *Kun*.

5 Concluding Remarks

In our present global world with countless transnational and cross-cultural activities spanning East and West, translation has become an important discipline unto itself. For a fact, translations in different areas for varying purposes have their own specific requirements. When dealing with ancient classics, translation is a highly challenging task ultimately in pursuit of the philosophical meanings embedded in the literal texts. In this case, language transmits not only literal meanings but also the philosophical messages ensconced therein. Therefore, language itself is a core part of philosophy. Translations of an ancient classic such as the *Yijing* must transcend the surface verbal meanings and seek to reinterpret the text via both linguistic and philosophical analyses, although the very beginning of such an endeavor must be the exploration of the particularities of the original language with a view to revealing the meaning hidden behind the original text. The Chinese *fangkuaizi* is a unity of form, sound and meaning through various combinations. Some contain one hieroglyphic form carrying one or more sound(s) related to different meanings; some borrow the form of another character to represent a different sound and meaning; and some have more than one form carrying a group of inter-related meanings with only one sound. This chapter reveals how polysemy functions in the *Yijing* and the commentaries. Some English translations are wise enough to provide two translations for a hexagram name. Minford even provides two parts with two sets of translation to represent the meanings of the texts in two chronological stages—the “Bronze Age Oracle” and “Book of Wisdom.” However, most English translations have failed to disclose and engage with the linguistic strategies of the *Yijing*.

The fluidity of Chinese language and the multiplicity of meanings of Chinese characters should never be underestimated. For translators of the ancient Chinese

classics, especially the *Yijing* which is a philosophic classic, it may not be totally effective to just distinguish variations of a character (*yiwen*) and to locate the sound and meaning by simply checking old dictionaries, because the language of the text has more or less become a sort of symbol—the form functioning somehow like the graphic representation of a trigram or hexagram. Language is no longer just a medium of carrying or transmitting meaning but a way of portraying a holistic worldview, wherein there are connections among not only words and sounds, but also things and beings within the heaven and the earth. In this light, translation is hermeneutics. Knowing that the hermeneutic circle is a multitude of circles, the translator navigates the texts to be rendered with due regard to the openness and constraint of interpretations, producing new meanings that nonetheless pay homage to the original ones intended by the authors of the exegesis and commentaries. By selecting examples from a few English translations of the *Yijing*, this chapter aims to draw attention to the particular linguistic nature of the ancient Chinese language, reminding ourselves that since translation is the ground for the reception of the *Yijing*, we need to produce good translated versions, which have to probe deeply into the linguistic contexts of the words and phrases of the original text. To so describe and prescribe the project of translation is not to criticize the work of particular scholars; it is to encourage all of us to do a better job, as members of an interpretive community with a shared future.

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