HUMAN AGENCY AND CHANGE: A READING OF WANG BI'S *YIJING* COMMENTARY

It is commonly accepted that Wang Bi (226-249 C.E.) made significant contributions to the study of the Yijing (Book of Changes). Before his premature death at the age of twenty-three, he wrote a key commentary to the Yijing, the Zhouyi zhu (Commentary on the Changes from the Zhou Dynasty). A testimony to his genius was his philosophico-ethical reading of the sixty-four hexagrams that not only challenged the Han dynasty interpretations of Yijing commentary, but also later became the model of the *yili* (meaning and principle) school of Yijing exegesis.² Besides interpreting the hexagrams, he also wrote a series of essays offering his insights into how the Yijing should be read. Known to us as the Zhouyi lüeli (Brief Remarks on the Changes from the Zhou Dynasty), his essays helped to transform the Yijing from a manual of divination into a book of wisdom, teaching its readers how to respond to their surroundings creatively and proactively. Although he died before writing a commentary on other parts of the Yijing—i.e., the Xici (Appended Phrases), Xugua (Sequence of Hexagrams), Shuogua (Explanation of Hexagrams), and Zagua (Miscellaneous Notes on Hexagrams)—his follower, Han Kangbo (d. ca. 385), did provide a summary of his views on those very parts of the Classic.3

His contributions notwithstanding, Wang Bi is an enigma to many *Yijing* scholars. The source of ambiguity lies in his identity as a Neo-Daoist. Equally at home with both Confucianism and Daoism, his true allegiance was uncertain. For some scholars, he was a brilliant Confucian exegete who brought out the true meaning of the *Yijing* by way of the Daoist philosophical polarity of Being (*you*) and Nonbeing (*wu*). For others, he was a Daoist who corrupted the *Yijing* (the head of the canonized Five Confucian Classics) by making it look like the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. From the early Qing to the present day, appraisals of Wang Bi have been ambivalent. On the one hand, he is given credit for "sweeping away" the Han Dynasty practices of inter-

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preting the *Yijing* based primarily on the hexagram images and numerology. On the other hand, he is condemned for converting the *Yijing* into a Daoist text, blurring the line between Confucianism and Daoism. A prime example of this ambivalence toward Wang Bi is the remarks made by the editors of the *Siku quanshu* (The Complete Works of the Emperor's Four Treasuries):

Discussing the matter with a calm mind, we should give credit to [Wang] Bi and [Han] Kangbo for making important contributions in elucidating the meaning and principle [of the *Yijing*]. They rescued the *Yijing* from the contamination of necromancers and numerologists. Nevertheless, by stressing vacuity and emptiness [in their commentaries], they erred in reading the *Yijing* in light of the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. It is our view that their contributions and errors were of equal weight.⁴

The remarks of the *Siku quanshu* editors not only shaped the view of the Qing *Yijing* experts, they continue to influence the perspective of contemporary scholars. For many decades, contemporary scholars have taken the *Siku* editors' remarks as the point of departure in their studies of Wang Bi. Some scholars (such as Pi Xirui, Qian Jibo, and Zhou Yutong) are so convinced by the *Siku* editors' remarks that they repeat them verbatim.⁵ Others (like Zhu Bokun and Jin Jingfang) accept the remarks in principle but are ready to make slight modifications.⁶ A few scholars (including Tang Yongtong and Alan Chan) cast doubt upon the remarks and offer alternatives for assessing Wang Bi.⁷

This essay is an attempt to go beyond the doctrinal controversy on Wang Bi. It is concerned not so much with Wang Bi's true philosophical allegiance as with what one may learn from his Yijing commentary. Driven by the doctrinal controversy, some contemporary scholars have been reading Wang Bi's commentary selectively. They focus on a few hexagrams, like the hexagram "Fu" (Return, #24), which appear to reaffirm the philosophical polarity of Being and Nonbeing. They concentrate on Han Kangbo's summary of Wang Bi's comments on the Xici, which seem to reiterate the main themes of Wang Bi's commentary to the *Laozi*, the *Laozi zhu*. Certainly no one is expected to be comprehensive in examining a commentary, but selective reading does limit the scope of discussion on Wang Bi as an original Yijing exegete, thereby also distorting his reading of the classic. In particular, selective reading gives one an impression that the Zhouyi zhu is best read as an appendix to the Laozi zhu, reaffirming and clarifying what has already been said in the latter commentary. By design or default, this image of the Zhouyi zhu lends support to the Siku editors' claim that Wang Bi read the Yijing in light of the Laozi.

In this essay, I will present a different reading of the Zhouyi zhu, casting my net a bit wider in examining the commentary. First, I will focus on the Zhouyi lüeli to identify Wang Bi's primary concern in reading the Yijing. Since classical exegesis is the interplay between a classic and its interpreter,8 we need to take into account Wang Bi's pre-understanding in order to appreciate his creative and critical responses to the *Yijing*. Following that, I will examine his commentary on a number of hexagrams, including "Shi" (The Army, #7), "Sun" (Diminution, #41), "Yi" (Increase, #42), "Kun" (Oppression, #47), "Jiji" (Ferrying Complete, #63), and "Weiji" (Ferrying Incomplete, #64). These hexagrams are selected partly because they are seldom discussed in the current studies of Wang Bi, and partly because Wang finds them important in elucidating the central meanings of the Yijing. As will be shown, Wang pays special attention to "Jiji" and "Weiji," the last two of the sixty-four hexagrams. To him, "Jiji" and "Weiji" are illustrations of the fact that the Yijing is a text that resists closure, one that offers insights for adapting to constant changes.

CHANGES AS THE DIALECTICS OF OPPOSITES

To understand Wang Bi's primary concerns in his reading of the Yijing, we need to situate him in his own time. Born in 206 C.E., six years after the collapse of the Han Dynasty, Wang Bi was thrown into a situation in which there seemed to be few certainties in life. China was divided into three separate kingdoms—the Wei, the Shu, and the Wu—and there was widespread disorder. Political authority changed hands frequently, towns were invaded, and homes were destroyed. When everything was in ruin, fewer and fewer people followed the Confucian teachings on honesty, loyalty, and filial piety. Instead, trickery, usurpation, and pragmatic calculation became the accepted strategies for survival.9 The collapse of the Han social and political order was particularly disturbing to a sensitive soul like Wang Bi, who spent his brief life witnessing the Cao family of the Wei losing power to another aristocratic family, the Sima. In 249 C.E., the year he died, the Sima family was on its way to toppling the Cao family and unleashing yet another massive killing of political opponents. Wang Bi escaped execution because of his premature death due to illness, but his friends were not so lucky. Many of them (including He Yan, ca. 190–249 C.E.) lost their lives in the vicious political persecutions. 10 Wave after wave of persecutions in Wang Bi's time not only revealed the horror of political struggle, but also demonstrated the limits of human power. Despite the universal and perennial human aspiration to build a perfect society once and for all, the collapse of the social

and political order seemed to suggest that humankind did not have the ability or the knowledge to bring order to the world.

Horrifying and depressing as it was, the collapse of the social and political order in the third-century China also offered the young and the bright with ample opportunities for innovation and invention. As Han learning lost its authority in explaining social and political life, third-century thinkers were free to imagine new ways of understanding the world. No longer restricted by the old habit of mind and wearied by spending years in memorizing writings of major teachers, many broke new grounds in philosophy, classical exegesis, and literary analysis. This freedom to imagine the unimaginable was particularly important to a young genius like Wang Bi, who, throughout his life, was constantly encouraged by his peers to challenge the accepted conventions. As Rudolf Wagner points out, the ingenuity that Wang Bi expressed in his commentaries on the *Laozi* and the *Yijing* was a result of the "cult of youth genius" which gave premium to one's originality and creativity in reading the classics.¹¹

Given the turmoil and the intellectual freedom of Wang Bi's time, it is not surprising to find that a main theme in the *Zhouyi lüeli* is how to develop a new perspective of life in dealing with drastic changes. In concise language and with concrete examples, Wang argues that the *Yijing* is a book about understanding changes. For instance, in the essay "Ming yao tong bian" (Understanding changes by illuminating the hexagram lines), he tells us what changes mean to him:

What are changes? [Changes] are the results of [the interaction] between the innate tendency of things (qing) and their responses to external stimuli (wei). The actions generated by this interaction are not explicable in numerology. Hence, [matters in this world] go against their innate tendencies in assembly, dispersion, contraction and extension. What appears to be hot-tempered likes what is quiet, and what is in essence soft loves what is firm. Natural tendency and stimulated responses are in opposition, and essence and expectations are contradicting. Even the sophisticated measuring system cannot keep records of these things, and even sagely intelligence cannot create standards for them. They are beyond the leveling of laws and the standardization in measurements.¹²

Unlike our modern linear conception of change, which refers to a radical transmutation of character and a replacement with something else, the changes that Wang Bi speaks of border on contradictions. For him, changes are the dialectics of opposites. They operate on the premise that things have an urge to search for and become their diametrical opposites. Changes occur, for instance, when someone who is hot-tempered likes to find a companion who is quiet and stable, or when a thing that is soft seeks the company of a thing that is firm. Since there is such a discrepancy between what one is and what one

desires, Wang Bi finds human attempts to rationalize changes fruitless. For him, human artifacts created to rationalize, categorize, and systematize changes—e.g., numerology, calendars, laws, measurements, repeatable patterns—can never predict or explain changes. Nor can they prevent changes from happening. Changes simply run their own course, beyond the reach of conventional human reasoning.

Although not explicitly stated in the quotation, Wang Bi's conception of changes is based on the notions of *yin* and *yang*. As a pair of opposites, *yin* (soft, submissive, enduring) and *yang* (firm, aggressive, swift) are co-dependent and mutually reinforcing. Represented in a hexagram as broken lines (*yin*) and straight lines (*yang*), the two opposites form a perfect pair because each of them contains something that is lacking in the other. Hence, in the *Yijing* two *yang* lines or two *yin* lines will always cause conflicts; but one *yin* line and one *yang* line will resonate with each other, regardless of how far apart they may be. While reading the *Yijing*, as Wang Bi reminds us, the first thing we need to look for is the resonance of *yin* and *yang*.

For Wang Bi, *yin* and *yang* are not only the foundational concepts of the Yijing, but also the necessary tools to make sense of contradictions and irrationalities. To drive home his point, in the remaining portions of "Ming yao tong bian," he gives us a list of examples demonstrating the discrepancy between appearance and reality. For him, because of the dialectics of opposites, "what are near to each other are not necessarily partners, and what are far apart are not necessarily enemies."13 In music, for instance, he reminds us that when notes of the same tone correspond, they are not necessarily equal in pitch. In geography, places high up on the mountains are often not as desirable as valleys in receiving water, because water flows from the highlands to the lowlands.¹⁴ With respect to human relationships, he calls our attention to the fact that kinsmen may not necessarily be on friendly terms because of their different dispensations, and strangers may end up becoming compatible partners because of their common interests. Particularly in times of war and emergency, he finds the discrepancy between kinship and friendship to be even clearer. "If the abandoned spears are scattered on the ground," he says, "then the six close relatives [i.e., father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife] cannot protect one another. When crossing a river in the same boat, one does not need to worry about Wu and Yue [two bitter enemies in 500 B.C.E.] having different purposes."15

With the above examples, Wang Bi points out the artificiality of the "normal" ways of distinguishing relationships—far and close, high and low, big and small, love and hate, true and false, affinity and discordance, and so on. These distinctions are artificial not only because

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they are human-made, but also because they put people or things into categories. By assigning ranks, roles, and status to people or things, these distinctions suggest a direct correspondence between name (ming) and reality (shi). 16 Accordingly, those who are in high social positions must be superior to those who are in lower positions, and kinsmen must be on friendlier terms than strangers. However, this supposed correspondence between name and reality only works in times of peace and order, but not in times of war and emergency. As Wang Bi points out, during wartime, practical considerations supersede social distinctions. The one you are supposed to love most may be the first one you abandon for personal interests, and the one you are supposed to hate most may be the one you have to befriend to achieve a common goal. By questioning the correspondence between name and reality, Wang Bi draws our attention to the fact that the world is far more dynamic and complex than what human distinctions can convey. The world is so full of motion and movement that things keep changing into something else. In this world where nothing is stationary, there is no norm in our conventional static sense; the only "norm" that remains is the ceaseless changes propelled by the dialectics of opposites.

Mastering Changes through the Yijing

Speaking of the "norm" of changes, Wang Bi writes in "Ming tuan" (On the *Tuan* commentary):

Things do not err; they always follow a pattern. They are united with their same source, and grouped together with their same origin. Therefore, they are complex but not chaotic; they are numerous but not confused.... Hence, if someone searches things from the source, one will notice that although things are many, one can master them by adhering to the One. If someone examines things from the origin, one will notice that although meanings are diverse, one can cover all of them with a single name.¹⁷

Here, on the surface, Wang Bi seems to have reversed his stance with regard to changes. Unlike what he has done in "Ming yao tong bian," Wang Bi no longer dwells on the immensity and multiplicity of changes. Instead, he speaks of the need to master changes. He argues that although things in this world are numerous, diverse, and in flux, they nevertheless share the same "source" (zong) or the same "origin" (yuan), and are regulated by the same "pattern" (li). Wang Bi asserts that there is constancy, normalcy, and centrality in changes. What one should not forget, however, is that Wang Bi does not use the terms "source," "origin," and "pattern" as abstractions separable

from concrete realities. In other words, the constancy of changes does not exist outside of changes; it is embedded in every single instance of change. For Wang Bi, the "smallest number" of the many is always that which *regulates* the many, and the "oneness" of the activities is always that which *controls* the activities. It is precisely in the concrete acts of regulating and controlling that the hidden constancy of changes reveals itself. In this regard, the "source," the "origin," and the "pattern" of changes are never separable from changes. Because of this, to master changes, one first has to embrace changes.

It is from this perspective that Wang Bi finds special value in the *Yijing*. For him, the 64 hexagrams and the 384 hexagram lines of the *Yijing* are the concrete embodiments and manifestations of changes. They are symbols indicating the multiple possibilities of change in this world. By thinking through the hexagrams and the hexagram lines, Wang Bi argues that we are able to reflect on three things: (1) our current situation (*shi*), (2) our position in the current situation (*wei*), and (3) the range of possibilities to respond to our situation (*ying*). To explain these three important values of the *Yijing*, Wang Bi writes in "Ming gua shi bian tong yao" (Adjusting to changes by illuminating hexagrams and understanding hexagram lines):

Hexagrams are [representations of] time, and hexagram lines are [representations of] adjustments to changes in time. Since there are favorable and unfavorable times, in human practices some have to be in activity and some have to be in hiding. Since there are big and small hexagrams, some [hexagram] words denote danger and some denote easiness. The constraints of a time can be converted into fruitful use, and the good fortunes of another time can be converted into a calamity. Hence, when hexagrams are in opposite shapes, their hexagram lines change accordingly. In this regard, there is no constant way in one's action; nor is there any fixed pattern for events. To act or to remain inactive, to bend or to unbend, all have to be done in accordance with the demands of changes.¹⁹

Here, Wang describes to us what he sees as an important feature of the *Yijing*, that is, its sixty-four hexagrams represent sixty-four different situations. Among these hexagrams, some are favorable and some are unfavorable; some demand immediate action and some require passivity. The nature of each hexagram is revealed in its name, and the potentials for change are conveyed in its six lines. Given these sixty-four situations, as a kind of pre-destined fate, Wang ascribes human activism to the hexagram lines. The six lines in each hexagram are six different responses to the same environment or circumstance. They represent the room for maneuver in each particular situation. Precisely in this juncture that exists between what is required and what can be done, Wang Bi sees the fluidity of human affairs. With proper action, one can turn what appears to be a failure into a bless-

ing. Conversely, lacking appropriate action, one can render what appears to be flourishing into a disaster.

This fluidity of human affairs is unequivocally spelled out in Wang Bi's commentary on the *Tuan* statement, "Timely mounting on the six dragons" (*shi cheng liu long*), of the "Qian" hexagram (The Creative, #1). The original *Tuan* statement says: "Because the holy man is clear as to the end and the beginning, as to the way in which each of the six stages completes itself in its own time, he mounts on them toward heaven as though on six dragons." Wang Bi explains,

Because the six stages do not lose their time in completing themselves, they help to clarify the Way of the end and the beginning. There is no constancy in the elevation and demotion [of the six stages], and they are employed in response to the needs of the times. When in dormancy, one will follow the example of "the submerged dragon." When in activity, one will follow the example of "the flying dragon." Hence, it is said: "Timely mounting on the six dragons."

The "six dragons" or the "six stages" that are spoken of here are the six yang lines of the "Qian" hexagram. In the "Qian" hexagram, each yang line is a type of dragon: the first line is "the submerged dragon"; the second is "the emerged dragon"; the third is "the superior man in constant self-strengthening"; the fourth is "the dragon in quandary"; the fifth is "the flying dragon"; and the sixth is "the arrogant dragon."²² In his comment, Wang explains that the "six dragons" are metaphors for our timely adaptations to the ever-changing environment. The "six dragons" tell us that there is no fixed rule in human activity. At some point in time, a person may have to remain dormant due to unfavorable circumstances, but at another point in time when the situation has improved, the same person can be assertive and forward-looking. In keeping with the changing demands of our surroundings, we have to shift continuously from one "dragon" to another "dragon." By timely shifting from one "dragon" to another, we gain control of our surroundings, take command of our lives, and immerse ourselves in the constancy of change.

ELIMINATION OF THE OMENS

This theme of human agency and activism runs through the entire *Zhouyi zhu*. It is especially evident in Wang Bi's sustained efforts to obliterate the fortune-telling aspects of the hexagrams. For Wang, despite the fact that the *Yijing* was originally a book of divination, the omens of its hexagrams, be they auspicious or inauspicious, do not have fixed meaning.²³ Whether a hexagram is auspicious or inauspicious does not depend on its omen; rather, it depends on how well a

person responds to the situation made known through the hexagram. Hence, in Wang's commentary, no hexagram is absolutely auspicious, and no hexagram is absolutely inauspicious. Every hexagram seems to have both strengths and weaknesses. Regarding the apparently auspicious hexagrams, he always points out the source of decay hidden in them. Likewise, regarding the apparently inauspicious hexagrams, he always demonstrates the grounds for hope embodied in them.

Take, for instance, the hexagram "Shi" (The Army, #7). Judging by its line statements, the hexagram "Shi" is definitely auspicious. Its second, fourth, fifth, and sixth line statements contain such words as "auspicious" or "without remorse." But to the reader's surprise, in his commentary Wang Bi focuses on the danger of this hexagram. Even more astonishing is the fact that he chooses the most auspicious line, the second line, to issue his warning about impending danger. In the hexagram "Shi," the second line is the most auspicious because it is the dominant line of the hexagram. Its power comes from the fact that it is the only *yang* line among five *yin* lines. Being the only *yang* line in the hexagram, the five *yin* lines compete to join with it to form a pair. As auspicious as it may seem, Wang Bi reminds us that there is potential for great danger in this line:

By being a firm line occupying the central position, and by its resonance with the fifth line, [the second line] attains an optimum position in the army. It receives grace from above [i.e., the fifth line], and commands the army. Since its responsibility is huge and its duty is heavy, it will have misfortune if nothing is accomplished. Hence, it must need fortune [i.e., with something accomplished] in order not to have remorse.²⁴

In this comment, Wang Bi speaks on the hexagram "Shi" in general as well as its second line in particular. Taking "Shi" (Army) to mean both an organized mass and columns of soldiers, Wang Bi cautions his readers that the value of any massive organization depends on whether the organization will yield any result. A massive organization, be it military or civilian, demands huge human and material resources. With its huge costs, the leaders of the organization must have clear goals in mind and must possess well-planned strategies to achieve those goals. It is precisely the huge costs of organizing the masses that prompt Wang Bi to see in the second line a sign of misfortune. Being the leader of the six lines, the second line is given the heavy responsibility of charting out the course of the group. On the surface, it is an honor that everyone longs for. But at the same time, it is a dangerous moment, because one's personal fortune and the fortune of the whole group can be ruined in one stroke. In this sense, what seems to be auspicious may portend disaster.

In the same vein, one should not overlook the sinister potential in the overwhelmingly auspicious hexagram "Yi" (Increase, #42). Judging by its line statements, "Yi" is even more auspicious than "Shi." Among its six lines, five of them contain such words as "auspicious" and "without remorse." The only exception is the sixth line at the top. The line statement of the sixth line says: "He brings increase to no one. Indeed, someone even strikes him. He does not keep his heart constantly steady. Misfortune." In commenting on this line, Wang Bi explains why this top line should spell misfortune:

At the top of "Yi," [the sixth line] reaches excess. He is a man without a fixed mind, because he keeps demanding more. Since his demands are insatiable, others do not bestow anything on him. By remaining isolated without companion, his statements are one-sided. It is because man generally hates overindulgence, [the person in the sixth position] has more than one adversary. Hence, the line statement says: "Indeed, someone even strikes him."

Following a long-standing tradition of *Yijing* exegesis, Wang Bi considers the top lines of all hexagrams as ominous. The top lines are always problematic because they reach the extreme limit of the hexagrams, and by extension, they transgress what is available and proper.²⁷ In the case of "Yi" (Increase), the top line has reached the point of excess in its demand for property. Its demand is no longer to satisfy its needs but purely to fulfill its lusts. For this reason, Wang Bi regards the top line of "Yi" as a symbol of human overindulgence. He warns his readers that misfortune will come to the sixth line because of its lack of moderation.

HUMAN AGENCY AND ACTIVISM

Precisely because human factor is sometimes more crucial to the outcome of an event, Wang Bi does not find the inauspicious hexagram "Sun" (Diminution, #41) terribly frightening. Judging from both its hexagram image and its line statements, "Sun" represents a decrease of what is below to satisfy the interest of what is above. The hexagram calls attention to a situation in which those who are high up in social position take advantage of those who are in a low position, or in which those who are strong politically or physically victimize those who are weak. It symbolizes the replacement of what is just and proper by what is unfair and indecorous. Yet, despite the injustice, Wang believes that there is still room for optimism. For instance, in commenting on the hexagram's *Tuan* statement—"Decrease combined with sincerity brings about supreme good fortune without blame. One may be persevering in this" hexagram's—he writes,

When one brings good fortune in one's act of diminishing [what is below to the interest of what is above], one must have done one's work with sincerity. . . . [His act of diminution is as follows:] he does not eliminate the firm in his diminution of the firm for the soft; he does not profit the people in higher position in his diminution of the lower for the higher. He has no remorse and has the ability to become proper because he diminishes the firm not to achieve anything unjust, and he profits the people in higher position not to please them. Even though he may not be able to redress the major problems of the day, he will not be deterred from persevering in his work.³⁰

In this comment, Wang Bi tells us that the source of hope in "Sun" comes from one's ability to refrain from causing excessive harm to others. In the situation of "Sun," everyone has to engage in some fashions in the unjust work of bullying the poor and powerless for the interest of the rich and the powerful. Nevertheless, it does not mean that everyone is equally vicious. As Wang points out, there is always a range of possibilities in which one can reduce to the minimum the harm on the public and still accomplish one's assigned duty. Hence, "supreme good fortune" will come to those who take advantage of this range of possibilities and bring benefit to the public. Once again, it is human judgment that determines the outcome of an event, not the circumstances.

For similar reasons, the "oppressions" in hexagram "Kun" (Oppression, #47) are avoidable. Judging from its line statements, "Kun" is hopeless. All of its six lines are plagued with some form of oppression: the first line is oppressed under a barren tree; the second is oppressed while drinking and eating; the third is oppressed by stone; the fourth is oppressed in a golden carriage; the fifth is oppressed at the hands of a man with purple knee bands; and the sixth is oppressed by creeping vines. Given this extremely adverse situation, there seems to be no room for optimism. But, as with the "Sun" hexagram, Wang Bi manages to find favorable factors in the "Kun" hexagram. On its sixth line statement—"He is oppressed by creeping vines. He moves uncertainly and says, 'Movement brings remorse.' If one feels remorse over this and makes a start, good fortune comes" "But one feels writes."

Located at the top of "Kun," [the sixth line] walks where there are no roads, and lives without a comfortable place. This is indeed the ultimate oppression. In general, one will think of changes when in trouble and ponder solutions when being oppressed. The word "say" here is to denote thinking and pondering. When one has pondered how to act, one will be rewarded when circumstances improve. That is to say, one will have a solution to one's oppression.³³

To the surprise of many readers, Wang Bi turns what appears to be an ominous statement into a statement of encouragement. By

dwelling on the word "say," Wang Bi argues that by making the right decisions after spending time evaluating the situation, one can reverse what seems to be an oppressive situation into an opportunity for growth and advancement. In his comments, he stresses that severe trouble is the most accurate test of one's character, and making the right decision is the only way to bring one out of adversity. Some people may fall easily into trouble, but the intelligent ones can always find their way out. Hence, he urges his readers to read the sixth line of "Kun" as an invitation to demonstrate one's perseverance and wisdom in charting oneself out of trouble. He suggests to them that they consider oppressions as blessings in disguise, wherein one can truly demonstrate one's profound intelligence.

Incompletion—Completion—Incompletion: A Constant Process

In general, in the Zhouyi zhu Wang Bi treats each hexagram as an independent unit describing one specific situation. But on a few occasions, he breaks his own rules by linking a hexagram with its neighboring hexagram to form a pair. An example is his commentary on "Jiji" (Ferrying Complete, #63) and "Weiji" (Ferrying Incomplete, #64).34 Given Wang's emphasis on studying the Yijing as a book of wisdom, one should not be surprised to find him reading "Jiji" and "Weiji" in conjunction as a pair. Being the last two hexagrams of the Yijing, a question that many readers would ask in reading "Jiji" and "Weiji" is what is to be done next. Shall we put aside the Yijing after reading the final two hexagrams, or shall we continue reading the Yijing by going back to the first hexagram? Is reading the Yijing a once-in-a-lifetime event, or is it a process that has to be repeated regularly? For Wang Bi, as the Yijing comes to an end, "Jiji" and "Weiji" offer him an opportunity to discuss the importance of re-reading the Yijing on a regular basis.

In addition, the titles of the two hexagrams raise the question of whether there is perfection in the *Yijing*. The crux of the matter is the implication of "Weiji" (Ferrying Incomplete) following "Jiji" (Ferrying Complete), rather than the other way around. If indeed completing the task at hand is the key issue in the *Yijing*, then "Jiji" should be placed after "Weiji." With "Jiji" as the ending, it would give the classic a closure and an optimistic tone. It would suggest that if not now, at least in the distant future, all the problems in this world are going to be resolved. With "Weiji" as the ending, however, the *Yijing* becomes open-ended. As the complete act of ferrying in "Jiji" turns into an incomplete act in "Weiji," the *Yijing* seems to suggest

that there is no perfection on earth. What is at one point a perfect state will quickly become imperfect at another moment. For Wang Bi, this peculiar ending of the *Yijing* needs explanation. While the ending may look pessimistic to some, he argues that it reiterates the importance of human activism in shaping the unfolding of events.

In Wang Bi's commentary, he first relates "Jiji" to "Weiji" is his comment on the *Xiang* (Image) statement of "Jiji." The original statement goes as follows: "Water over fire: the image of the condition in 'Jiji.' Thus the superior man takes thought of misfortune and arms himself against it in advance." Wang Bi's comment explains why the superior man has to think of misfortune ahead of time:

One should not forget death when one is still alive, and one should not forget Ferrying Incomplete [weiji] when one is in the state of completing the ferrying [jiji].³⁶

By skillfully evoking their hexagram names, Wang Bi demonstrates the inter-relationship between "Jiji" and "Weiji." He argues that the two hexagrams are inseparable in the mind of the superior man. For the superior man, who always plans ahead of time and expects what is still in the making, the state of completion means preparing for incompletion to come. This is not to say that the superior man is overworried. The wisdom of the superior man in planning ahead of time lies in his realization that everything in this world is constantly in flux. Since both objective reality and the subjective human condition are perpetually shifting, the moment of their harmonious integration is always transient. When either one of them changes, or worse still, both of them change, the whole equilibrium is upset, and the process of searching for a new equilibrium has to begin anew. It is from this perspective that Wang Bi finds the *Xiang* statement revealing.

This theme of humanity in constant search for equilibrium with its surroundings is carried further in Wang Bi's comment on the sixth line statement of "Jiji"—"He gets his head in the water. Danger."³⁷ He writes,

Locating at the top of "Jiji" when the state of completion is exhausting itself, [the sixth line] has to model after "Weiji." In modeling after "Weiji," [the sixth line] first has to bear some troubles.³⁸

In this comment, Wang expands on the inter-relationship between "Jiji" and "Weiji." On the surface, "Jiji" and "Weiji" are indeed two totally different states: one is completion and the other incompletion. But at a deeper level, the two states are actually the two poles of the same continuum. When one reaches the end of completion, one arrives at the beginning of incompletion. This continuum calls our attention to our constant quest for equilibrium with our surroundings.

More importantly, this continuum is moving circularly, not only from completion to incompletion, but also from incompletion to completion. Because of this, Wang Bi cautions his readers that "Weiji" should be understood both negatively as incompletion and positively as the potential for completion (*keji*). In commenting on the *Tuan* statement of "Weiji"—"Although the lines are not in their appropriate places, the firm and the yielding nevertheless correspond" he writes:

Because the positions [of its six lines] are not in their appropriate places, ["Weiji"] is in the state of incompletion. Because the firm and the yielding [of its six lines] correspond, ["Weiji"] is the potential for completion.⁴⁰

In this comment, Wang Bi employs the hexagram image of "Weiji" to explain its dual meanings. On the one hand, judging from its hexagram line positions, "Weiji" is in a dreadful condition: its yang positions (first, third, and fifth) are occupied by yin lines, and its yin positions (second, fourth, and sixth) are occupied by yang lines. Being in the wrong positions, all of the six lines cannot fully utilize their potentials. At the same time, although all the positions of "Weiji" are in the wrong order, the lines correspond with one another in terms of their *yin-yang* nature: the *yin* lines at the first and third positions correspond respectively with the yang lines at the fourth and sixth positions, and the yang line at the second position corresponds with the *yin* line at the fifth position. Because of these correspondences among the six lines, "Weiji" is full of imminent vitality. Once this imminent vitality is activated and realized, "Weiji" will be on its way to completion. In this sense, "Weiji" clearly symbolizes the potential for completion. Once again, the driving force that will transform a dreadful "Weiji" (incompletion) into a more hopeful "Weiji" (the potential for completion) is human agency.

IN SEARCH OF OPTIMUM BALANCE

For Wang Bi, the six lines of "Weiji" express the power of human activism. They collectively symbolize the gradual process by which the potential for completion is realized through human intervention. This process of realizing the potential for completion comes to fruition at the sixth line of "Weiji," right at the point that "Weiji" turns into "Jiji." Regarding this turning point, Wang gives a detailed analysis in his comment on the sixth line statement. The line statement says: "There is drinking of wine in genuine confidence. No blame. But if one wets his head, he loses it, in truth." Wang's comment reads:

At the top of "Weiji," [the sixth line] turns into "Jiji." The principle of completion is to appoint appropriate persons to the jobs. Having appointed appropriate persons to the jobs, [the sixth line] can have full trust in them without any doubt in mind, and can engage in entertainment. Hence, it is said [in the line statement]: "There is drinking of wine in genuine confidence. No blame." It is because [the sixth line] is able to trust others, he will always be relaxed without worrying about the daily affairs being unmanaged. However, if he does not worry about the daily affairs being unmanaged and engages himself in entertainment excessively, he will become exorbitant. He loses himself in immoderation as a consequence of his genuine confidence. That is why [the line statement] says: "But if one wets his head, he loses it, in truth."

With this comment, Wang Bi tries to answer two questions regarding the turning of "Weiji" into "Jiji." The first question is how this is possible. To answer the question, Wang expands a little further on his analysis of "Weiji" as the potential for completion. He argues that upon reaching its sixth line, "Weiji" has already redressed its problem of misplaced line positions. The six lines of "Weiji" are now so rearranged that they become "Jiji." In Wang Bi's comment, this rearrangement of line positions is referred to as "appointing appropriate persons to the jobs." Perhaps even more revealing is Wang's answer to the second question. The second question is why the latter part of the line statement changes abruptly into an ominous pronouncement. To answer this question, Wang reminds his readers of his initial position on how "Jiji" is related to "Weiji": one should not forget incompletion when one is still in completion. Upon becoming "Jiji," the sixth line of "Weiji" has to embark on its preparation for its downfall, as do the other lines of "Jiji." The exhortation on moderation that Wang Bi puts forward at the end of his comment tells his readers that, upon reaching completion from incompletion, the other side of the circle from completion to incompletion begins anew. In short, the sixth line of "Weiji" has turned into the first line of "Jiji."

Thus, instead of seeing the inconclusive ending of the *Yijing* as a pitfall, Wang Bi considers it profoundly meaningful. By remaining open-ended, he suggests that the *Yijing* not only brings to our attention the fluidity and contingency of life, but also forces us to reflect upon our own precarious situations. By showing completion and incompletion as a continuum, he reminds us that we are in the constant process of striving for an optimum balance between our objective surroundings and our subjective needs. As completion quickly becomes incompletion, and vice versa, we have to constantly reflect on our situations in order to come to grips with changes.

YIJING AS A POINTER

By stressing human agency and activism in his reading of hexagrams, it is clear that Wang Bi sees the Yijing as a series of metaphors. If indeed human beings have to constantly find the optimum balance between the demands of their surroundings and their own needs, then the purpose of studying the Yijing is to expand one's horizons so as to be at ease with changes. Reading the Yijing becomes an occasion to develop a mental picture of one's surroundings, such that one finds out the opportunities and the limitations in a given situation. As metaphors, hexagrams and hexagram lines serve different functions. While a hexagram connotes a field of action with six participants, the six hexagram lines stand for the six players in that field of action. Symbolizing the whole, a hexagram represents the complex web of relationships governing the actions and interactions of the six players. Symbolizing the parts, hexagram lines represent what the six players can or cannot do to advance their interests. Hence, in reading the 64 hexagrams and the 384 hexagram lines, the Yijing readers are constantly reminded that every aspect of human life, big or small, is governed by the part–whole relationship. The readers are constantly reminded that finding out the nature of the part—whole relationship in each given situation—be it in family, society, or a solitary quest for spiritual communion with nature—is the key to one's success in mastering change.

When the *Yijing* is read as a pointer, guiding us from what is partial to what is holistic, it greatly expands our horizons. It helps us develop a mental picture of our surroundings, allowing us to sort out the opportunities as well as the limitations in each given situation.⁴³ In this juncture that exists between our limitations and our room to maneuver, Wang Bi finds the *Yijing* insightful. It is insightful not only because it offers hope in the fluidity of human affairs, but also because it stresses human agency and activism in coming to terms with the challenges of life. With a critical assessment of our surroundings through a reading of hexagrams, we are empowered to turn what appears to be a failure into a blessing, or an impasse into a test of character. We learn that we are constantly striving for a balance between our surroundings and our subjective needs. We also learn that in order to master changes, we have to look for the constancy of change.

It is uncertain whether Wang Bi's emphasis on human agency and activism in the *Zhouyi zhu* makes him more a Confucian than a Daoist. As Alan Chan has pointed out, even if we categorize Wang Bi as a Confucian, his understanding of Confucianism was so unique that he had "reinterpreted the Confucian tradition in a new and profound

way."⁴⁴ Keeping in mind that Wang Bi was skeptical about the correspondence between name and reality, he would probably prefer us to leave him out of doctrinal controversy, and remember him simply as an innovative *Yijing* exegete who captured the spirit of the classic in the language of the third century.

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ENDNOTES

- 1. A standard biography of Wang Bi is found in the *Wei shu* and the *Shishuo xinyu*, now reproduced in *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, ed. Lou Yulie (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), pp. 639–646. For a biography of Wang Bi in English, see Rudolf G. Wagner, *The Craft of a Chinese Commentator: Wang Bi on the Laozi* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 9–26; Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue: A New Translation of the Tao-te Ching of Laozi as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 5–18; Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 10–15.
- 2. See Tang Yongtong, *Tang Yongtong xueshu lunwenji* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), pp. 245–279. Cf., T'ang Yung-t'ung, "Wang Pi's New Interpretation of the *I Ching* and *Lun-yü*," translated by Walter Liebenthal, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 10 (1947): 124–161.
- 3. In the received version of the *Zhouyi zhu*, it consists of both Wang Bi's commentary to the sixty-four hexagrams and Han Kangbo's commentary to the *Xici*, *Xugua*, *Shuogua*, and *Zagua*. The received version first appeared in 630 C.E. in Kong Yingda's *Zhouyi zhengyi* (The True Meanings of the *Changes* of Zhou Dynasty). From the Tang to the Ming, the *Zhouyi zhengyi* was the standard *Yijing* commentary authorized by the imperial court, and was tested in the civil service examinations. In this study of the *Zhouyi zhu*, I use LouYulie's annotated version in *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*.
- 4. Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao (Hainain: Hainain chubanshe, reprint, 1999), p. 14.
- 5. See Pi Xirui, *Jixue tonglun* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1954), pp. 24–25; Qian Jibo, *Zhouyi jieti jiqi dufa* (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1965), pp. 21–36; Zhou Yutong, *Qunjing gailun* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1931, Taipei reprint, 1968), p. 36.
- 6. See Zhu Bokun, *Yixue zhexue shi* (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1989), volume 1, pp. 236–286; Jin Jingfang, *Zhouyi jiangzuo* (Changchun: Jinlin daxue chubanshe, 1987), pp. 6–7.
- 7. Tong Yongtong is one of the most articulate critics of the *Siku* editors' remarks. In his study of Wang Bi's commentary on the *Yijing* and the *Analects*, he argues that Wang Bi's "Daoist" style of exegesis was a commonly accepted convention shared by most literati of the early third century. In addition, in terms of Wang Bi's moral philosophy, Tong finds that he was every bit a Confucian, despite his adoption of Daoist terminology. See *Tang Yongtong xueshu lunwenji*, pp. 264–276; c.f., T'ang Yung-t'ung, "Wang Pi's New Interpretation of the *I Ching* and *Lun-yü*," pp. 124–161. Expanding on Tong's argument, Alan Chan argues that deep in his heart Wang Bi was a Confucian, although he had reinterpreted the Confucian tradition in a new and profound way. See Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of Wang Pi and the Ho-shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao Tzu* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 28–37.
- 8. On the interplay between a classic and its interpreter, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), pp. 265–271, 291–300; David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics*,

- Religion, Hope (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1987), pp. 1–27; Paul Ricoeur, History and Truth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), pp. 41–62. For a thoughtful discussion of how the "German hermeueutics" can be applied to the study of Chinese classical exegesis, see On-cho Ng, "Negotiating the Boundary between Hermeneutics and Philosophy in Early Ching Ch'eng-Chu Confucianism: Li Kuang-ti's (1642–1718) Study of the Doctrine of the Mean (Chung-yung) and Great Learning (Ta-hsueh)," in Kai-wing Chow, On-cho Ng, and John B. Henderson, eds., Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 165–193.
- 9. Etienne Balazs, *Chinese Civilization and Bureaucracy: Variations on a Theme*, translated by H. M. Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 187–225.
- 10. See Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, pp. 10–15. Alan Chan makes an insightful observation about the peculiar way in which Wang Bi's biography appears in the *Sanguo zhi* (Records of the Three Kingdoms). Instead of appearing as an independent biography, Wang Bi's biography appears in the form of a note appended to the biography of Zhong Hui (225–264). Chan argues that this peculiar arrangement reflects the political stand of the *Sanguo zhi* editors, who attempted to de-emphasize the historical importance of those who were related to the Cao family. See Chan, *Two Visions of the Way*, pp. 20–21.
- 11. Rudolf G. Wagner, The Craft of a Chinese Commentator, pp. 9–26.
- 12. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 597. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 27.
- 13. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 597.
- 14. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 597.
- 15. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 597.
- 16. Wang Bi was continuing a late Han practice of making a distinction between names and reality. See Tang Yongtong, *Tang Yongtong xueshu lunwenji*, pp. 196–232.
- 17. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 591. Translation is that of Wing-tsit Chan with modifications; see Chan, A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 318–319. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, The Classic of Changes, p. 26.
- 18. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 604.
- 19. *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, p. 604. For another translation of these few lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classics of Changes*, p. 29.
- Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 371.
- 21. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 213. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 129.
- 22. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, pp. 3-10.
- 23. An important milestone of the Western studies of the *Yijing*, Richard John Lynn's full translation of the *Zhouyi zhu* makes Wang Bi's commentary available to the Western audience. But there are a few problems in Lynn's translation. One of the important ones is his emphasis on divination in Wang Bi's commentary (see *The Classic of Changes*, pp. 18–22). Although it is true that that the *Yijing* was originally a manual of divination dated back to its earlier layers in the Zhou Dynasty (1122 B.C.E.–771 B.C.E.), Wang Bi appeared to write his commentary to set the *Yijing* free from the fortune-telling tradition. Nowhere in the *Zhouyi zhu* did Wang Bi discuss the method of divination. For a discussion of Lynn's translation, see Tze-ki Hon's review in *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 33 (1995): 2: 280–282.
- 24. *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, p. 256. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 179.
- 25. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 165.
- 26. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 430. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 398.
- 27. See Wang Bi's discussion on the precarious position of top lines in his essay "Bian wei" (On the position of hexagram lines) in *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, p. 613.
- 28. In commenting on the *Tuan* statement of "Sun," Wang Bi defines the nature of "Sun" as follows: "The way [i.e., the basic nature] of 'Sun' is to take from what is below to

- benefit what is above, and to take from what is firm to benefit what is soft" (Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 420).
- 29. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 156.
- 30. *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, pp. 420–421. For another translation of these few lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, pp. 41–42.
- 31. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, pp. 182–184.
- 32. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 184.
- 33. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 457. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 434.
- 34. Besides "Jiji" and "Weiji," Wang Bi also reads "Qian" (The Creative, #1) and "Kun" (The Receptive, #2), and "Ge" (Revolution, #49) and "Ding" (The Caldron, #50) as pairs of hexagrams. With respect to "Qian" and "Kun," he follows a longstanding tradition of reading the two hexagrams as the symbols of *yin* and *yang*, the two foundational concepts of the *Yijing*. (See Wang Bi's commentary on the first and sixth lines of "Kun," Wang *Bi ji jiaoshi*, pp. 226–228). In interpreting "Ge" and "Ding," he discusses the importance of establishing a new political order ("Ding") immediately following a change of government ("Ge") (*Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, pp. 464–474).
- 35. Richard Wilhelm's translation with modifications. See *The I Ching*, pp. 710–711.
- 36. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 526. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 539.
- 37. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 248.
- 38. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 528. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, p. 542.
- 39. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 715.
- 40. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 531. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, pp. 64–65.
- 41. Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, p. 252.
- 42. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, p. 533. For another translation of these lines, see Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes*, pp. 549–550.
- 43. In his comparison of the *Xici* and the commentaries of Wang Bi and Han Kanbo, Qian Bingdun points out that one major contribution of Wang Bi is his insistence on developing a broad perspective on the manifold changes in this universe. See Qian, "*Yizhuan* he Wang Han yizhu zhi benti lun yanjiu," in *Guoji yixue yanjiu*, 2 (1996): 221–324.
- 44. Alan Chan, Two Visions of the Way, pp. 28-29.

CHINESE GLOSSARY

Fu	復	Pi Xirui	皮錫瑞
Han Kangbo	韓康伯	Qian	乾
He Yan	何晏	Qian Jibo	錢基博
Jiji	既濟	Qing	情
Jin Jingfang	金景芳	Shi (Reality)	實
Keji	可濟	Shi (Situation)	時
Kun	困	Shi (Hex. #7)	師
Li	理	Shicheng liulong	時乘六龍
Ming	名	Shuogua	説卦
Ming tuan	明彖	Siku quanshu	四庫全書
Ming yao tong bian	明爻通變	Sun	損

Tang Yongtong	湯用彤	Yijing	易經
Tuan	彖	Yin	陰
Wang Bi	王弼	Ying	應
Wei (External stimuli)	偽	You	有
Wei (Position)	位	Yuan	元
Weiji	未濟	Zagua	雜卦
Wu	無	Zhou Yutong	周予同
Xiang	象	Zhouyi lüeli	周易略例
Xici	繋辭	Zhouyi zhu	周易注
Xugua	序卦	Zhu Bokun	朱伯昆
Yang	陽	Zong	宗
Yi	益		