PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHINA

EDITED BY
ALAN K. L. CHAN AND YUE-T KEUNG LO
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Hexagrams and Politics

Wang Bi’s Political Philosophy in the Zhouyi zhu

TZE-KI HON

Since the publication of Tang Yongtong’s 湯用彤 article in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies in 1947,¹ Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) has been a main focus in Western studies of Chinese philosophy. This interest in Wang Bi is due in part to his brilliant commentaries on the Laozi 老子, the Lunyu 论語, and the Yijing 易經. It is also built on what Tang Yongtong called “the transition from cosmology to ontology,” in which Wang Bi is said to have introduced a new mode of thinking known as xuanxue 玄學 (Scholarly Exploration of the Mysterious Dao).² Commonly rendered as “Neo-Daoism,” xuanxue is compared to an Aristotelian ontology for its attempt to define the essence of the universe based on the dichotomy of certain key concepts: you 有 (being) and wu 無 (nonbeing), ti 體 (substance) and yong 用 (function), and yi 一 (one) and zhong 中 (many).³ These bipolar concepts, as Tang emphasizes, direct our attention from the phenomenal events surrounding us to the underlying structure or hidden pattern of the universe.

While Tang’s thesis has inspired a large number of works on Wang Bi’s xuanxue,⁴ scholars tend to ignore his Yijing commentary, the Zhouyi zhu 周易注. Even when they discuss the Zhouyi zhu, they do so only selectively. For instance, they pay special attention to Wang’s essay “Zhouyi lüeli 周易略例” and his commentary on the hexagram “Fu 復 (#24), where he appears to develop an ontology of wu. They stress the Jin dynasty (265–420) commentator Han Kangbo’s 韓康伯 summary of Wang’s interpretation of the concept of “da yan zhi shu” 大衍之數 in the “Xici 繫辭 (Appended Remarks) section of the Yijing, where Wang seems to discuss the relationship between the “one” and the “many.”⁵ Certainly, this selective reading helps to elucidate “the transition from

12. Ibid., 35–36.
15. Ibid., 90; emphasis mine.
19. Alan Chan, Two Visions, 45–46.
20. This complements Tze-Ki Hon’s study, “Hexagrams and Politics: Wang Bi’s Political Philosophy in the Zhouyi zhu” in this volume. The argument there is that Wang’s concern in the Yijing is principally political theory, and not ontology. If Hon and I are right, this suggests that we need to see xuanxue as situated in the milieu of a concern for politics and not exclusively speculative ontology. Alan Chan also makes a similar point in his study of He Yan 何晏 in this volume.
21. Indeed, this is consistent with Xu Gan’s 徐幹 (170–217) treatment of names, just a decade before Wang Bi. His theory of names is correlative and at the same time metaphorically captures political (but not metaphysical) ideas. Thus for Xu Gan, the semiotic point that names (ming) should correlate with its actuality (shi) is the metaphor for the political prescription that one’s reputation (ming) should accord with one’s true abilities (shi). See John Makeham, Name and Actuality in Early Chinese Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).
22. Introduction, 37.
23. Consider the famous “straw dogs passage” in chapter 5 of the Laozi; see Classic, 60.
24. See Alan Chan, Two Visions, 54.
25. Hence li is a heuristic concept, which captures parallel ideas. It has no ontological or cosmological reference to a law of nature, in contrast with the Neo-Confucian concept of li. See Alan Chan’s discussion in Two Visions, 53–54.
26. See Alan Chan, Two Visions, 54.
cosmology to ontology,” thereby drawing a sharp distinction between the scholarly pursuits in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and Wang Bi’s xuanxue. Nevertheless, it does not give an account of Wang Bi’s contribution to Yijing studies, nor does it explain why the Zhouyi zhu was for many centuries considered to be the standard commentary to the classic.

The challenge of the Zhouyi zhu is that it does not fit Tang Yongtong’s thesis. Unlike his commentary to the Laozi, Wang Bi seldom discussed the ontology of wu when interpreting the Yijing. It is particularly true of his commentary on the sixty-four hexagrams and the “Wenyan” 文言, where his main concern was building a responsive government and a stable society. This political reading of the hexagrams had won him honor and fame in both medieval and late imperial China. For instance, the Tang court scholar Kong Yingda 孔顥達 (574–648) considered him the best Yijing commentator in history because of his discussion of the art of governing. Likewise, the Tang exegete Li Dingzuo 李鼎祚 distinguished him from other Yijing commentators by his undivided attention on “human affairs” (renshi 人事). Similarly, the Northern Song scholar Li Gou 李觀 (1009–1059) applauded him for addressing “the urgent needs of state affairs” (急乎天下國家之用). Other Northern Song exegetes, such as Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019–1086) and Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), wrote new Yijing commentaries modeling after Wang’s political interpretation of hexagrams. Certainly these scholars’ views of Wang Bi reflect their interests and those of their times; but they also mean that there must be sufficient political discussion in the Zhouyi zhu to justify their views.

Then, what was Wang Bi’s xuanxue? Was it a philosophical pursuit that marked the transition from cosmology to ontology? Or was it a multifaceted system of thought that included philosophical and political elements? To answer these questions, in this chapter I will compare the Zhouyi zhu with the commentaries of Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), Xun Shuang 荀爽 (128–190), and Yu Fan 廣範 (164–233). The goal of this comparison is twofold. First, I will locate the Zhouyi zhu in its own context. Rather than reading the Zhouyi zhu retrospectively as the beginning of xuanxue, I will show that the Zhouyi zhu was indeed a product of third-century China. Its intent, in short, was to address concrete and specific issues of the period. Second, directly answering the question about the nature of Wang Bi’s xuanxue, I will demonstrate that Wang was as much a political thinker as a philosopher. I will affirm what Rudolf Wagner and Yu Dunkang 余敦康 have found, namely, that Wang’s ontology was a political philosophy that promoted a new sociopolitical order after the fall of the Han dynasty.

**Yijing Commentaries in the Late Eastern Han**

Although none of the Yijing commentaries of the Eastern Han period (25–220) survives, large numbers of excerpts are available in Li Dingzuo’s Zhouyi jiie 年易集解 (Collected Commentaries on the Yijing). The Zhouyi jiie is especially helpful in reconstructing the views of three late Eastern Han commentators: Zheng Xuan, Xun Shuang, and Yu Fan. Not only were their commentaries frequently quoted or excerpted in the Zhouyi jiie, their interpretations of the sixty-four hexagrams (particularly Yu Fan’s) were listed systematically, providing a clear picture of how they understood the hexagram images and hexagram lines. Also, living close to Wang Bi’s time and yet operating in a different cultural environment, the three commentators provided a stark contrast to what we call xuanxue. In the quotations and excerpts, we find their exegetical method drastically different from Wang Bi’s, and we know that they lived in a world substantially different from Wang Bi’s.

One of the assumptions of the three Eastern Han commentators was that every word in the Yijing is a metaphor for trigrams and hexagrams. For them, this rule applies not only to those sections devoted to hexagram images such as the “Da Xiang” 大象 and the “Xiao Xiang” 小象, but also to every part of the Yijing. Even those Yijing passages that explicitly discuss historical events—such as the reference to the founding of the Shang and Zhou dynasties in Hexagrams “Ge” 革 (#49) and “Ding” 奚 (#50)—have to be understood as symbols for trigrams and hexagrams. In the words of Yu Fan, trigrams and hexagrams are essential to understanding the Yijing because they are “the vehicle for observing images and attaching words” (皆觀象繫辭). Thus, during the Eastern Han, the accuracy and proficiency of a Yijing commentator was measured by his ability to read the Yijing as hexagram images. For example, in the “Wenyan” of “Qian” 乾 (#1), Confucius reportedly discussed the harmony in nature where “water flows to where it is wet, and fire goes toward where it is dry” (水流濕，火就燥). In interpreting the “Wenyan” statement, Xun Shuang wrote:

When the yang force is activated in trigram “Kun,” “Kun” becomes “Kan.” Because “Kun” symbolizes pure yin, “wet” is mentioned in the “Wenyan”. When the yin force is activated in trigram “Qian,” “Qian” becomes “Li.” Because “Qian” symbolizes pure yang, therefore “dry” is mentioned in the “Wenyan”.

陽動之坤而為坎，坤為純陰，故曰「濕」也。陰動之乾而為離，乾者純陽，故曰「燥」也.
For Xun Shuang, every word in the “Wenyan” statement is a symbol of a trigram. So, water stands for “Kan” ☰; wet represents “Kun” ☰; fire invokes “Li” ☰; dry implies “Qian” ☰. With this metaphorical reading, Xun Shuang turns the “Wenyan” statement into a meditation on the relationship of trigrams.

Similarly, in commenting on “Ge” (#49), Zheng Xuan uses its two trigrams to explain why it should be taken to mean a dynastic change. His commentary reads:

“Ge” means to change. Water and fire grow together when they are applied to the changes in human affairs. Their effects are similar to rulers who are commissioned by heaven to change the calendar and the color of clothing. This is the meaning of “Ge.”

革, 改也。水火相息而更用事, 獨王者受命, 改正朔, 易服色, 故謂之「革」也。18

Zheng Xuan’s argument rests on the two trigrams that make up “Ge” ☰: “Li” ☰ at the bottom and “Dui” ☰ at the top. For him, “Li” represents fire, and “Dui” symbolizes water. When water flows from the top, and fire provides heat from the bottom, they symbolize a situation where everything is well coordinated and fully prepared. For Zheng Xuan, this is the perfect condition for a leader to start a new dynasty.

To maximize their opportunities to read the Yijing as a text about hexagram images, the three Eastern Han commentators came up with a number of interpretive strategies. One strategy was that a hexagram can automatically transform into its opposite (or pangtong 旁通) by converting the yang lines into the yin lines or vice versa.19 For example, “Qian” 乾 (#1) ☰ can become “Kun” 坤 (#2) ☰ and “Fu” 覆 (#24) ☰ can transform into “Gou” 告 (#44) ☰. With the yin-yang conversion, the Eastern Han commentators doubled their resources in commenting on hexagrams. Take, for instance, Yu Fan’s commentary on the hexagram statement of “Bo” 剌 (#23) ☰. He wrote:

[“Bo” symbolizes] the diminution of the yang by the yin and its opposite hexagram is “Guai.” With the soft changing the firm, [“Bo” refers to a situation where] the Way of petty persons is strengthened: fathers are murdered by their sons, and kings are murdered by their officials. Thus, [the hexagram line says:] “It would not bring benefit if one embarks on an adventure.”

隆消乾也。與夫旁通。以柔變剛, 小人道長, 子弑其父, 臣弑其君, 故「不利有攸往」也。20

By mentioning that “Guai” (43) ☰ is the pangtong hexagram of “Bo,” Yu Fan inserts hope in a seemingly bleak situation. Although “Bo” is where the yin dominates the yang by five to one, he reminds readers that the present situation is temporary because the reverse will soon occur (such as in “Guai”) where the yang will dominate the yin. By highlighting “Guai” as a pangtong hexagram of “Bo,” Yu Fan underscores the codependency of yin and yang, and the changeability of hexagrams.

Another strategy is that a hexagram can become another hexagram by transposing some of its lines. Known as yuwai 易位, this strategy allows commentators to introduce other hexagrams when commenting on one hexagram. For instance, “Tai” 泰 (#11) ☰ will become “Jii” 聚 (#63) ☰ by transposing its second line (a yang) and its fifth line (a yin). Likewise, “Dazuang” 大壯 (#34) ☰ will transform into “Xu” 霞 (#5) ☰ by switching its fourth line (a yang) and its fifth line (a yin). Much more versatile than pangtong, the transposition of hexagram lines gave the Eastern Han commentators the flexibility to inject new ideas into a hexagram, even if those ideas were foreign to the hexagram. Take, for instance, “Dazuang” 大壯 (#34) ☰. It is a hexagram about “great strength,” or more specifically the strength of the first four yang lines advancing into the territory of the top two yin lines. Although “Dazuang” appears to be aggressive, assertive, and adventurous, Yu Fan emphasized caution and patience in his commentary. He wrote:

Zhuang means injury. Da refers to the fourth line. [The fourth line] loses its position by submitting to the yin [in the fifth line]. [The interlocking trigram] “Dui” stands for destruction and damage. Hence, there is injury. If [the fourth line] changes its position with the fifth line, then the order [of the hexagram] will be proper. For this reason, [the hexagram line says:] “benefits will come to one who perseveres.”

壯, 傷也。大盡四。失位為陰所乘, 兇為穢折, 傷。與五易位乃得正, 故「利貞」也。21

In “Dazuang” ☰, the bottom four yang lines are encroaching upon the territory of the top two yin lines, and a confrontation seems inevitable. And when the confrontation intensifies, the devastating effect will first be felt by the fourth line because it is at the frontline of the advancing yang lines. For Yu Fan, the only way that the fourth yang line can avoid a devastating blow is to switch its position with the yin fifth line,
thereby transforming “Dazhuang” into “Xu” ䷳. Being an auspicious hexagram full of encouraging phrases such as “beng” 亨 (prosperous) and “zhèn jì” 至吉 (perseverance yields good results), “Xu” will bring peace and calm to an otherwise tense situation.

In addition to yiwei, a hexagram can transform into another hexagram with its interlocking trigrams (bugua 互卦 or buti 互体), that is, using four or five of the hexagram lines to form two trigrams.²² For instance, “Ge” 阁 (#49) ䷳ can transform into “Jiiji” 既濟 (#63) ䷶ by its interlocking trigrams. In commenting on the hexagram statement of “Ge,” Yu Fan wrote:

After the fourth line changes into a yin, [trigram] “Li” is formed. Because the fifth line is in the middle of [trigram] “Kan,” the hexagram statement says: “There is a growth of trust after a day of activity.” Thus, after the fourth line changes [from a yang into a yin], hexagram “Jiiji” 既濟 is formed.

四動體離, 五在坎中, 故『已日乃孚』。四既變以成既濟。²³

According to Yu Fan, a series of steps have to take place for “Ge” to transform into “Jiiji.” First, the yang fourth line of “Ge” transforms into a yin line. Then, the third, fourth and fifth lines of “Ge” form trigram “Li” ䷳. And then, the fourth, fifth, and sixth lines of “Ge” form trigram “Kan” ䷶. Finally, by combining the “Li” and “Kan” trigrams, one will have the hexagram “Jiiji.” Seemingly complicated and cumbersome, this method gave the Eastern Han commentators the liberty to render some of the ambiguous Yijing lines into metaphors for hexagrams. A case in point is the meaning of “the growth of trust after a day of activity” (已日乃孚) in “Ge.” With the two interlocking trigrams of “Ge” in mind, Yu Fan had little difficulty in explaining the meaning of this line. For him, “Li” [third, [transformed] fourth, and fifth lines of “Ge”) denotes the sun or ri 日, and “Kan” [fourth, fifth, and sixth lines of “Ge”) represents trust or fu 孚. Joined together, “Li” and “Kan” form the hexagram “Jiiji,” which describes the peace and prosperity of a perfect order in which all the yang positions (lines 1, 3, 5) are occupied by yang lines and all the yin positions (lines 2, 4, 6) are occupied by yin lines.

In stressing the interchangeability of hexagrams, the Eastern Han commentators made clear that hexagrams have to be understood as parts of a collectivity rather than discrete entities. For them, the goal of studying a hexagram is to find out where it stands in the system of hexagrams.²⁴ To this end, they often list a number of possible hexa-

grams into which a hexagram may transform, reminding readers that no hexagram is fixed both in form and in substance. This emphasis on the collectivity of hexagrams does not imply that individual hexagram lacks intrinsic value. What it means is that the value of a hexagram has to be measured in terms of its relationship to other hexagrams. Take, for example, “Fu” 復 (#24). As mentioned earlier, “Fu” is linked to “Gou” (#44) ䷽ through pangtong. In addition, “Fu” is part of a series of hexagrams demonstrating “return in seven days” (七日來復). Originally part of the hexagram statement and the “Tuan” 象 statement of “Fu,” “return in seven days” was understood in the Eastern Han as the return of the yang force after being diminished by the yin force. For them, the ebb and flow of the yin and yang forces can be represented in twelve hexagrams:


Known as Xiao xi gua 消息卦 (“Flying and Hiding Hexagrams”), this series of hexagrams denotes both the gradual increase of the yang force (reading from “Fu” to “Qian”), and the gradual increase of the yin force (reading from “Gou” to “Kun”).²⁵ Moreover, the twelve hexagrams are supposed to be continuous, that is, when the series ends with “Kun,” it will begin anew with “Fu.” Based on Xiao xi gua, Yu Fan explained the meaning of “return in seven days”:

[The “Tuan” statement] means that when “Qian” turns into “Kun,” [the yang force] emerges at the bottom of [trigram] “Zhen” to form [Hexagram] “Fu.” Because the yang is the Way, hence, the statement says: “The return of the Way.” The firm is represented by daytime. Since it takes six days for the six lines of “Qian” to be replaced by the yin, when the firm emerges at the bottom [of “Fu”], the statement describes the process as “return in seven days, the movement of heaven.”

謂乾成坤, 反於震而來復。陽為「道」, 故「復其道」。剛為晝日, 消乾六爻為六日, 剛來反初, 故「七日來復, 天行也」。²⁶

For Yu Fan, “return in seven days” simply means the return of the yang force through seven hexagrams. In the commentary, he mentions that it takes six hexagrams (from “Gou” to “Kun”) for the six yang
In his commentary, Zheng Xuan skillfully employs hexagram images to prove that “Ding” teaches the moral duty of a sagely ruler. To make his point, he first calls attention to the two trigrams that make up “Ding” 鼎, “Sun” ☼ at the bottom and “Li” ☽ at the top. Then, he defines “Ding” as the combined force of wood (“Sun”) and fire (“Li”), highlighting the fact that “Ding” is used for preparing food for people. He then expands on the theme of meal preparation by creating two interlocking trigrams from “Ding”: “Qian” ☼ (the second, third, and fourth lines) and “Dui” ☼ (the third, fourth, and fifth lines). With these two interlocking trigrams, he underlines the political and moral implications of “Ding.” That is, with the metal in “Qian” and the water in “Dui,” a ruler possesses the necessary resources to feed the people and thereby apply the “way of humanity and righteousness.” By invoking the hexagram images of “Sun,” “Li,” “Qian,” and “Dui” in interpreting “Ding,” Zheng Xuan proves that images are the key to understanding the Yiijing. As we will find out, Wang Bi has problems with this method and he strives to give a different reading of the Yiijing.

Hexagrams as Discrete Situations

In their recent works, Rudolf Wagner and Yu Dunkang point out that the precocious genius Wang Bi was living in a time of unprecedented freedom, the Zhengshi 正始 era (240-249). The unprecedented freedom of the Zhengshi era came from two sources. First, during the Zhengshi era, there was relative peace after years of tension and commotion following the fall of the Han dynasty. Being a member of what Wagner calls “the first post-war generation” after the destruction of the Han, Wang Bi no longer felt the need to follow the Han tradition of learning that emphasized rote memorization, respect for precedence, and adherence to received teaching. As a result, he was free to find new ways to understand the classics. Second, the Zhengshi era was a time of fundamental reforms in government and society. Politically, the Han imperial system was replaced by a coalition of military generals and local magnates. Socially, the center of power was shifted from the imperial court in the capital to provincial leaders. These drastic changes offered the best and brightest, such as Wang Bi, with ample opportunities for innovation. Particularly under three forward-looking leaders—Sima Shi 司馬師 (208-255), Xiahou Xuan 夏侯玄 (209-254), and He Yan 何晏 (d. 249)—there were concerted efforts to cultivate a “cult of youth genius,” which gave premium to originality and creativity in interpreting the classics, expressing thoughts, and coming up with new ideas.
In this atmosphere of youthful exuberance, it came as no surprise that Wang Bi proposed to read the Yi jing from a totally new perspective. In his essay “Zhouyi lüeli,” we find evidence of a young and brilliant scholar who attempted to break from tradition by completely rewriting the rules of interpreting the Yi jing. One of the new rules he proposed was that the Yi jing should be read not as a system of hexagrams, but as a text about the ambiguity of change. In the section “Ming yao tong bian 明爻通變, he questioned the usefulness of numerology, calendars, laws, measurements, and customs, which, he claimed, gave people a false sense of security and an illusion for predicting the future.³² For him, changes simply run on their own course beyond human comprehension. In music, he reminds us that when notes of the same tone correspond, they are not necessarily equal in pitch. In geography, he stresses that 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. In respect to human relationships, he points out that kinsmen may not necessarily be on friendly terms because of their different dispositions, and strangers may end up becoming compatible partners because of their common interests.³³ With these examples, he draws attention to the artificiality of the “normal” ways of distinguishing relationships—far and near, 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 they are human-made, but also because they put people or things into categories, assuming a direct correspondence between name (ming 名) and reality (shi 實).³⁴ But Wang Bi cautions us that the world is far more complex and complicated than what human distinctions can convey. In this world where nothing is stationary, there is no norm in our conventional static sense; the only “norm” is the ceaseless changes that take contradictory forms.³⁵

To come to terms with changes, Wang Bi proposed a new way to read the Yi jing. Unlike the three Eastern Han commentators, he suggested reading the sixty-four hexagrams independently as sixty-four separate situations. In the section “Ming gua shi bian tong yao 明卦適變通爻, he stresses that there is much to be learned from each hexagram without linking it to other hexagrams.³⁶ For him, each hexagram, whether auspicious or inauspicious, simple or complicated, is a symbol of the possibility of change. First, a hexagram denotes a specific situation (shi 時), such as war, peace, harmony, discord, conflict, and reconciliation. Second, the six lines of a hexagram represent the room to maneuver (or yong 用) within that particular situation, showing both challenges and options. Precisely in this juncture that exists between what is given and what can be done, Wang Bi sees the fluidity of human affairs and the importance of making the right decisions. With proper action, he asserts, one can turn what appears to be a failure into a blessing. Lacking appropriate action, he cautions, one can make what appears to be flourishing into a disaster. For him, the greatest contribution of the Yi jing is that it allows one “to contemplate changes by examining the hexagram lines, and [in so doing] exhaust the possibilities of change” (觀爻思變, 變斯盡矣).³⁷

In order to exhaust the possibilities of change, Wang Bi urged his readers to adopt a flexible attitude toward hexagram images. In the section “Ming xiang 明象, he asked his readers to “forget about the hexagram images after attaining their meanings” (得意而忘象).³⁸ By “forgetting about the hexagram images,” Wang Bi did not mean that commentators need no longer pay attention to them in interpreting the Yi jing. What he meant was that commentators should stop treating every word of the Yi jing text as a symbol of trigrams and hexagrams. Rather, they should use the Yi jing creatively and flexibly to come to terms with changes in their lives. In a sarcastic tone, he ridiculed what he considered to be the erroneous practices in the Eastern Han. He asked if it was necessary to use a horse as a symbol to indicate “vitality” (jian 健), or to use a cow to indicate “obedience” (shun 順).³⁹ Underlying these rhetorical questions was his concern about the Eastern Han practice of linking a hexagram to a system of hexagrams. He was particularly critical of the method of interlocking trigrams, which, he believed, gave the commentators too much liberty to bend and manipulate a hexagram. Regarding the Eastern Han practice of linking a hexagram to a system of hexagrams, he issued a stern warning:

When interlocking trigrams are inadequate to explain a hexagram, [the commentators] employ other means to transform hexagrams. And when that proves inadequate, they employ [the theory of] Five Agents. Once they have decided to deviate from the original meaning [of the Yi jing text], they continue to create sophisticated methods [to bolster their claims].

For Wang Bi, his new interpretive theories would not only shed light on the Yi jing, but also recover the original meanings of the text that had been disguised and deformed by the Eastern Han commentators.
To Mount the Six Dragons in a Timely Manner

In his commentary, Wang Bi stresses the importance of “mounting the six dragons in a timely manner.” He tells us that at a certain point in time, a person may have to lie dormant due to unfavorable circumstances, thus assuming the role of a “hidden dragon.” In another point in time when the situation has been greatly improved, the same person can be assertive and forward-looking, thereby assuming the role of a “flying dragon.” By “mounting the six dragons in a timely manner,” we will gain control of our surroundings, take command of our lives, and above all, immerse fully and fruitfully in changes.

Since Wang Bi believes that the purpose of reading the Yi Jing is to come to terms with changes, he considers every hexagram as equally important. For him, what makes a hexagram auspicious or inauspicious does not depend on its omen; rather, it depends on how well a person responds to the situation revealed in the hexagram. For this reason, when commenting on the apparently auspicious hexagrams, he always points out the hidden dangers and the source of trouble in them. Likewise, regarding the apparently inauspicious hexagrams, he always highlights the source of hope and the potential for growth in them. Take, for instance, the hexagram “Shi” (師) (#7). “Shi” is definitely auspicious, as the statements of the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth lines contain words such as “auspicious” (吉) and “without remorse” (無咎). But to a reader’s surprise, in his commentary Wang Bi focuses on the danger of this hexagram. Even more astonishing, he chooses the most auspicious line, the second line, to issue a warning about impending danger. In the hexagram “Shi” (師), the second line is the most auspicious because it is the dominant line of the hexagram. Its power comes from being the only yang line among five yin lines. As 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 readers that there is potential for great danger in this line. His commentary reads:

For Wang Bi, the danger of “Shi” lies in the fact that the value of any massive mobilization depends on whether it will achieve its goal.
A massive mobilization, be it military or civilian, demands huge human and material resources. With the huge costs, the leaders must have clear goals in mind and must possess well-planned strategies to achieve them.\(^{46}\) It is precisely the huge costs of organizing the masses that prompt Wang Bi to stress the danger in the second line. Being the leader of the six lines, the second line is given the heavy responsibility of charting out the course for the group. On the surface, it is an honor that everyone longs for. At the same time, it is a dangerous moment, because the fortune of both the leader and the whole group can be ruined in one stroke.

Precisely because human decision is crucial to the outcome of an event, Wang Bi does not find “Sun” 损 ( #41) ominous. On the surface, the “Tuan” statement of “Sun” seems to suggest a worrisome situation. By defining “Sun” as “diminishing of what is below to satisfy the interest of what is above” (損下益上), the “Tuan” statement refers to a time when those who are high up in social position take advantage of those who are in low position, or when those who are politically or physically strong victimize those who are weak. Yet, despite the glaring injustice, Wang Bi stresses optimism in “Sun.” His commentary reads:

If a person diminishes the firm without doing anything vicious, or benefits those above without flattering them, then what blame is there to rectify? Although he is not able to save big troubles, if he sets out to do things this way, he will not be rejected.

損剛而不為邪，益上而不為腴，則何咎而可正？雖不能拯濟大難，以斯有往，物無距也。\(^{47}\)

Wang Bi tells us that the source of hope in “Sun” comes from one’s decision not to cause excessive harm to others. In the situation of “Sun,” where everyone cannot but engage in bullying the poor and powerless, there are ways that one can minimize the pains inflicted on the victims. For Wang Bi, “supreme good fortune” (yuan ji 元吉) will go to those who find ways to minimize harms to the public while carrying out their unpleasant tasks.\(^{48}\)

This reverse reading of hexagrams recurs in Wang Bi’s commentary on the last two hexagrams, “Jiji” 既濟 (Completion, #63) and “Weiji” 未濟 (Incompletion, #64). On the surface, “Jiji” 既济 appears to have a perfect order of lines: the yang in the first position is aggressive to begin a new enterprise; the yin in the second position is supportive to the fifth line; the yang in the third position is ready to make the leap from the lower trigram to upper trigram; the yin in the fourth position is going to rest after making the transition to the upper trigram; the yang in the fifth position is strong and assertive in providing leadership to the entire hexagram; and the yin in the sixth position is ready to yield graciously after finishing its service. In short, everything is in the right place and in the right order. Yet, ideal as “Jiji” may appear, Wang Bi urges caution and introspection in this seemingly ideal situation. His commentary reads:

Do not forget about destruction while one is safe; do not forget about incompleteness while one is in the state of completion.

因不將亡，故將不至乎濟也。\(^{49}\)

Wang Bi issues the warning because people usually lose their focus when things seem to run smoothly. With no incentive to make further improvement, they waste their time in waging wars (e.g., the third line) or elaborate meals (e.g., the fifth line). At the end, disasters occur (zhong luan 終亂) and the perfect order collapses.

Conversely, despite its ominous title “Incompletion,” Wang Bi considers “Weiji” promising. On the surface, “Weiji” is clearly hampered by the wrong order of its six lines. All of the yang positions (first, third, and fifth lines) are occupied by yin, and all the yin positions (second, fourth, and sixth lines) are occupied by yang. With the wrong order, the six lines are out of sync, incapable of forming a cohesive and supportive team. Yet, for Wang Bi, it is precisely this imperfect order that gives “Weiji” the drive, the impetus, and the vitality to push forward. To make his point, Wang Bi argues that “Weiji” should be understood positively as “the potential for completion” (keji 可濟):

Because the positions [of the six lines] are not in order, the hexagram is not able to complete its task. Since the firm and soft [lines] correspond to one another, the hexagram has the potential for completion.

位不當，故未濟。剛柔應，故可濟。\(^{50}\)

In the commentary, Wang Bi stresses that although all the positions of “Weiji” are in the wrong order, the six lines correspond with one another in terms of their yin-yang nature. That is, the yin at the first and third positions corresponds with the yang at the fourth and sixth positions, and the yang at the second position corresponds with the yin at the fifth position. Because of these correspondences, Wang Bi contends that “Weiji” is full of immanent vitality. Once the immanent vitality is activated and realized by people making the right decisions (such as the sixth line), “Weiji” will be on its way to completion. As with “Sun” ( #41), Wang Bi uses “Weiji” to show that human decisions, not circumstances, determine the outcome of an event.\(^{51}\)
A New Political Order

By stressing human agency in initiating and completing changes, Wang Bi's *Yijing* commentary offered third-century readers not only a new interpretation of the classic, but also a new vision of political order. As mentioned earlier, the political reality of third-century China was such that military generals and local magnates had replaced the Han imperial court and the aristocrats as the real power holders. On the one hand, the devolution of power created a more diverse and complex political landscape, giving rise to ample opportunities for negotiation, cooperation, and collaboration. On the other hand, the competition among multiple players made political maneuvers highly contentious and conflictual, creating a tense if not hostile environment. Thus, the pressing need for Wang Bi and his "post-war generation" was to define a new political order that would preserve the fluid and diverse political environment as well as prevent the country from degenerating into civil war. Characterized by Yu Dunkang as "collaborative centralization" (*bexie de tongyi* 和諧的統一), the new political order was composite in nature. It must be flexible enough to cater to local needs yet strong enough to unite the country.

In this context, Wang Bi's two interpretive strategies—treating each hexagram separately and focusing on the six lines of a hexagram—were imbued with political meanings. First, by focusing on one hexagram at a time, he argued that politics is complex and complicated, so much so that it requires careful and thorough understanding of its various facets. By not linking a hexagram to a system of hexagrams, he treated each political event as unique and independent, dictated by its own set of rules, its own group of players, and its own anticipated outcomes. In so doing, he privileged the centrifugal forces that were on the rise after the collapse of the Han imperial authority. Second, by focusing on the different functions of the six lines of a hexagram, he stressed the need for consultation, cooperation, and partnership in making political decisions. As individual players, the six lines of a hexagram are indeed different; they are different in roles, potential, temperament, and aspiration. But as parts of a team, the six lines have to work together. To achieve their common goal, they have to learn to coexist, compromise, and above all, make sacrifices. By stressing the need for "mounting the six dragons in a timely manner," Wang Bi promoted a collaborative spirit that had brought peace to parts of China during the Zhengshi era.

The political underpinning of Wang Bi's two interpretive strategies is clearly shown in his commentary on "Ge" 革 (#49) and "Ding" 鼎 (#50). As mentioned earlier, the two hexagrams are explicit in their political discussion. In "Ge," the discussion is focused on dynastic changes, particularly the "change in the mandate [of heaven] with Tang [of the Shang dynasty] and [King] Wu [of the Zhou dynasty]" (湯武革命). In "Ding," the discussion focuses on rebuilding the political order after a dynastic change, centering on the symbolism of a cauldron. In the Eastern Han, commentators did not suppress the political connotations of these two hexagrams. As we recall, in commenting on "Ding" Zheng Xuan stressed the moral duty of a political leader to implement "the way of humanity and righteousness." Yet, the Eastern Han commentators were not interested in the two hexagrams per se, but rather their connection to other hexagrams. For instance, they discussed how "Ge" 革 can be transformed into "Dun" 道 (#33) by transposing its first and sixth lines, and they described how "Ge" can become "Meng" 蒙 (#4) 革 through *pangtong*. Regarding the reference in "Ge" to the dynastic change in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, Yu Fan simply turned it into a discussion of the interlocking trigrams. First, he equated the historical reference to trigram "Qian" 乾 because of its emphasis on bravery and daring acts. Then, he equated trigram "Qian" to the third, fourth, and fifth lines of "Ge." After that, he suggested a change of trigram, turning the trigram "Qian" into the trigram "Li" 利 by replacing the middle yang line with a yin line. With this change, "Ge" 革 is transformed into "jiji" 齊, proving that the dynastic change in the Shang and Zhou dynasties was indeed auspicious and fruitful.

Turning to Wang Bi, we find a different interpretation of "Ge" and "Ding." For Wang Bi, "Ge" does not only mean the dynastic change in the Shang and Zhou dynasties, but also gradual and incremental political reforms. By giving "Ge" a broader meaning, he calls attention to a host of problems in a political reform, particularly its goal, implementation, support, duration, and outcome. To make his point, he focuses on the hexagram line "There is a growth of trust after a day of activity" (已日乃孚). His commentary reads:

Ordinary people may participate in learning a habit, but they have difficulty in adapting to drastic changes. They may participate in celebrating the completion of a task, but they have difficulty in making plans at the beginning. For this reason, the Way of drastic change is that trust will not be earned within a day; it has to be earned after a whole day [of work]... If at the end of the day there is still no sign of trust [from the people involved], then the drastic change must be inappropriate. Whenever drastic change is initiated, there is bound to
be remorse and regret. But if a drastic change is appropriate, remorse can be avoided.

夫民可與習常，難與遽變。可與樂成，難與慮始。故革之為道，即日不孚，已日乃孚也。… 已日而孚者，革不當也。悔者之所生，生乎變動者也。革而當，其悔乃亡也。56

Apparently, Wang Bi reads the statement “There is a growth of trust after a day of activity” both as an advice and a warning. As an advice, the statement counsels the leaders not to rush to implement political reform, but to give the people plenty of time to adjust to the changes. As a warning, the statement implies that a political reform will fail if the leaders do not carry it out patiently and prudently. To “avoid remorse” (悔乃亡), Wang Bi urges the leaders to seriously consider the interests of the people.

To further his argument, in the rest of his commentary Wang Bi describes the concrete steps that a ruler must take to carry out a successful political reform. He stresses that in the initial stage of the political reform (symbolized by lines one and two), the leaders should explain and publicize the new rules, so that the people will know what to do. He emphasizes that only after a long period of education and implementation (indicated in lines three and four) should the rulers take aggressive actions to force people to alter their behavior, including imposing severe punishment on those who oppose changes.57 But at the end of the political reform (signified by lines five and six), he insists, the rulers should stop the aggressive intrusion in people's lives, allowing them to live normally without the fear of punishment.58 Throughout his commentary, Wang Bi stresses prudence and patience in the leaders, cooperation and support from the people. For him, it takes two parties to make a successful political reform, and the goal of political reform is to create a culture of trust in which everyone—the ruler and the ruled, the powerful and the powerless—will find a role to contribute to society.

The same emphasis on building a collaborative culture is found in Wang Bi's commentary on “Ding.” In his commentary, Wang Bi discusses at great length the dual symbolism of “Ding” as a cauldron. As a sign of political authority, a cauldron is passed from one ruler to another to signify the transfer of power. As a cooking utensil, a cauldron is heated on a pile of wood to make food. Seemingly unrelated, Wang Bi argues that the two functions of “Ding” are essentially the same because both involve an intricate process of “removing the old and acquiring the new” (故去取新). Regarding “Ding” as a political symbol, Wang Bi's commentary reads:

In “Ge,” one removes the old; in “Ding,” one acquires the new. To establish the new [institutions], it is imperative to appoint the right persons [in the government]. To remove the old [institutions], it is imperative to establish a clear set of laws. “Ding” is a hexagram that concerns with the completion of a political reform. Since change has begun in “Ge,” the completion of the reform [in “Ding”] requires fashioning ceremonial vessels and establishing laws. If the political reform is not followed by the founding of institutions, chaos will occur. If laws and institutions fit the needs of the time, the result of the political reform will be auspicious.

卒去故而鼎取新。取新而當其人，易故而法制齊明。… 墟者，成變之卦也。革既變矣，則制器立法以成之焉。變而無制，亂可待也。法制應時，然後乃吉。59

Regarding “Ding” as a cooking utensil, Wang Bi comments:

The function of a cauldron is to cook food. Because “Ge” is to remove the old and “Ding” is to create something new, it is appropriate that “[Ding]” is a vessel for cooking and blending. Even the sages and the worthies cannot forsake the task of removing the old and acquiring the new.

亨者，鼎之所為也。革去故而鼎成新，故為亨施調和之器也。去故取新，聖賢不可失也。60

In both cases, Wang Bi attempts to draw a direct parallel between cooking and governing. To prepare for cooking, a cauldron must be cleared of leftovers (as in first, second, and third lines of “Ding”).61 To cook a meal, fresh food and ingredients must be put into the cauldron gradually and orderly, allowing them to boil, simmer, and mix together (as in fourth, fifth, and sixth lines of “Ding”).62 Similarly, in rebuilding a political order after a dynastic change, the leaders also need to “remove the old and acquire the new.” First, they have to establish their authority by discrediting and dismantling the previous regime. Then, they create a new government by setting a new political agenda, recruiting a new corps of officials, and issuing a new set of rules. In the process, the leaders (like a cook) need to act in a timely manner and carefully to create the right environment. They should not be too aggressive in dismantling the old regime, nor should they be too timid in founding a new political structure. Whatever measures they may take, the leaders must remember that political reform is not complete until the old system is totally replaced by a new one.63
Xuanxue as Political Philosophy

For third-century readers, Wang Bi's message in "Ge" and "Ding" was clear. In both hexagrams, they were warned of the huge political and social costs in dismantling the old political structure. In both hexagrams, they saw the strenuous efforts that were required to establish and maintain a new political order. While appearing to be more a reformist than a revolutionary, Wang Bi's political vision was aimed at the reality of his time. After the fall of the Han dynasty, he saw the need for establishing a new political order that would be less restrictive and autocratic. At the same time, he was mindful of the danger of allowing military generals and local magnates to take radical and explosive acts in pursuit of power. For this reason, even if the devolution of power in the third century appeared to encourage military generals and local magnates to take extreme measures, he reminded them of the importance of careful planning and thorough preparation in making political decisions. As shown in the slow but meticulous process of negotiation and cooperation in "Ge" and "Ding," Wang Bi promoted a system of government that was collaborative and yet centralized. On the one hand, it was a political structure based on a partnership among equals rather than the domination of the imperial court. On the other hand, it required a new type of leaders who were willing to make compromises and sacrifices to balance the interests of the central authority and the local leaders.

As such, Wang Bi's xuanxue was not only a philosophical meditation on the essence of the universe, but also a plan for rebuilding the political order of third-century China. Of course, as Tang Yongtong has pointed out, xuanxue was built on pairs of dichotomies such as you and wu, ti and yong, and yi and zhong. It is also true that Wang Bi's xuanxue was founded on an ontology of wu, clearly spelled out in his commentary to the Laozi. Yet, as Rudolf Wagner has suggested, the dichotomies of you and wu, ti and yong, and yi and zhong also connoted forms of partnership or webs of relationship in government and society. Rather than viewing wu (nonbeing) merely as the ontological basis of the cosmos, we can also see it as the totality of the various political groups in government. Rather than viewing ti (substance) merely as the foundational structure of the universe, we can also see it as a political environment in which multiple players negotiate for power. Rather than viewing yi (one) merely as "one of the many," we can also see it as "one among the many" connoting a partnership among equals. This change of perspective does not diminish the importance of Wang Bi as a profound philosopher who made tremendous contribution to Chinese thought. Rather, it adds a new layer of meaning to Wang Bi's philosophy which has both ontological and political implications. More important, it gives us a better understanding of why, throughout medieval China, Wang Bi had been considered the best Yijing commentator in history, and his Zhouyi zhu was accepted as the standard commentary to the classic.

Notes

6. The "Wenyan" consists of two parts. One part offers comments on the
hexagram “Qian” 續 (#1), and the other on the hexagram “Kun” 坤 (#2). In the received text of the Yijing, the “Wenyuan” is included in the two hexagrams.


13. Although he was born in the Eastern Han period and lived until the Three Kingdoms period, Yu Fan is generally considered to be an Eastern Han commentator by virtue of his style of commentary. See Zhu Bokun, *Yixue zhexue shi*, 202–11; Liao Mingchun, *Zhounyi yanjiu shi*, 107–15.


16. *Zhounyi jijie*, juan 1: 17a; *Zhounyi jijie zhuanshu*, 51–52. All translations in this article are mine.

17. *Zhounyi jijie*, juan 10: 8a; *Zhounyi jijie zhuanshu*, 435.


22. Although this method of reading the *Yijing* hexagrams seems conventional from today’s perspective, the yili 義理 commentators during the Wei-Jin, Tang, and Northern Song periods focused instead on the meaning of each hexagram. Wang Bi was among the first who stressed the importance of treating each hexagram as an independent unit; see further discussion below.

23. For a discussion of how commentators used the *Xiao xi gua* to interpret the *Yijing*, see Bent Nielson, *A Companion to Yi Jing Numerology and Cosmology*, 274–76. The translation given here is Nielson’s; see 59–62.

24. *Zhounyi jijie*, juan 6: 3a; *Zhounyi jijie zhuanshu*, 263.


31. Ibid., 597.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 604.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 609.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.


42. In his commentary on “Qian,” Wang Bi focuses on what the six lines mean. He frequently quotes the “Wenyuan,” which also discusses the meanings of the six lines. Throughout his commentary, Wang Bi does not mention any other hexagram. See Wang Bi’s “Ming gua shi bian tong yao” for his view on finding the meaning of each hexagram, *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi*, 604.
43. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 213.
44. My translation of this line is substantively different from that of Richard Lynn. See Lynn, The Classic of Changes, 179. In translating the line, Lynn does not give due attention to Wang Bi’s reference to hexagram images, particularly the meaning of the term “zhong” 中. By rendering zhong as “the Mean” (especially in the line “yi gang ju zhong”), Lynn injects a moral tone to an otherwise straightforward discussion of hexagram image.
45. Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 256.
46. In commenting on the hexagram line of “Shi,” Wang Bi cautions readers that before “staging a military campaign and mobilizing the masses” (興役眾眾), the leaders must make sure that they have a good chance to achieve their goals. If the military campaign is likely to fail, they should not launch the adventure. See Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 256.
47. Ibid., 420–21.
48. See Wang Bi’s commentary on the fifth line of “Sun” in Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 423.
49. Ibid., 526.
50. Ibid., 531.
52. Yu Dunkang, He Yan Wang Bi xuanxue xintan, 315–38.
53. Ibid.
54. Zhouyi jijie, juan 10: 8a; Zhouyi jijie zuanshu, 435–36.
55. Zhouyi jijie, juan 10: 9b; Zhouyi jijie zuanshu, 438.
57. In commenting on the “Tuan” statement of “Ge,” Wang explains what leaders should do to “bring joy through the practice of civility and enlightenment” (文明以説). His advice is that they should “respond to [the demands] of heaven and follow [the concerns] of the people” (應天順民). In commenting on lines 1 and 2 of “Ge,” Wang Bi stresses the difficulty in the early stages of political reform when leaders have to face resistance (line 1) and seek support (line 2). See Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 465–66.
58. In commenting on lines 4, 5, 6 of “Ge,” Wang Bi focuses on the changes that a political reform will bring. First, after a while, there will be more support to the reform when its effects become clear (line 4). Second, after its full implementation, the reform will win support from even the most stubborn opponents (line 5). Finally, at the end of the political reform, the whole society (including the uneducated) will be delighted to be part of the new political system (line 6). See Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 466–67.
59. Ibid., 468–69.
60. Ibid., 469.
61. See Wang Bi’s commentary on lines 1 to 3 of “Ding,” Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 469–71.
62. See Wang Bi’s commentary on lines 4 to 5 of “Ding,” Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 472–73.
63. See Wang Bi’s commentary on the hexagram statement “鼎、元吉，亨。” Wang Bi ji jiaoshi, 468–69.
64. See Alan Chan, Two Visions of the Way, 45–88; Wagner, The Craft of a Chinese Commentator, 53–114. Also see Jude Chua’s discussion in this volume.