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The Transmission of the *I Ching* to the West and the Changes in Its Cultural Imagery Through Translation

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Abstract:
This article explores the transmission of the I Ching to the West and the evolution of its cultural imagery through translation. As a cornerstone of Chinese traditional philosophy, the I Ching has influenced numerous fields, from astronomy and medicine to ethics and science. One of the earliest Chinese texts to be introduced to the West, it has, to some extent, shaped Western intellectual thought. The article traces the journey of the I Ching from the late 17th to early 18th century, beginning with Jesuit missionaries such as Joachim Bouvet, Joseph de Prémare, and Jean Francoise Foucquet, who interpreted the text through a Christian lens, seeking parallels between Confucian symbols and Christian doctrine. In contrast, the early 20th century saw a shift with the rise of scientific and archaeological criticism during China's New Culture Movement, where scholars used modern methodologies to analyze the I Ching, stripping away its traditional metaphysical interpretations. This trend transformed the I Ching into a book of divination, reflecting the primitive aspects of society. The article also highlights how the text was embraced in the West, particularly during the early 20th century, where scholars like Richard Wilhelm interpreted its teachings as a guide to overcoming the cultural crises in Europe following World War I. The study underscores the dynamic, evolving nature of the I Ching's interpretations and its ongoing significance in cross-cultural communication and intellectual history.

Keywords:
I Ching, cultural imagery, translation

1. Introduction

The *I Ching* (or *Yijing*,《易经》) is the source of natural philosophy and ethical practice in traditional Chinese thought and culture. It is praised as "the head of all classics, the source of the great Way" (群经之首，大道之源) and has influenced fields such as astronomy, geography, medicine, mathematics, and science, a reach unmatched by any other classic. The *I Ching* is also one of the earliest Chinese texts to be transmitted to the West, and its dissemination has, to some extent, influenced Western civilization. Steve Moore, the author of *I Ching: An Annotated Bibliography* (2002), once said: "If the importance of books is measured by the numbers of their readers, the amount of commentary written on them, the quantity of editions and translations…and, perhaps more than this, the way they've affected human live across the centuries and the

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continents…then surely two would appear far ahead of the rest of the filed. One, of course, is the Christian Bible. The other, though it may surprise readers brought up in Western traditions of literature and leaning (and especially those who regard it as little more than a fortune-telling book), is the *I Ching*, or "Book of Changes."[1] The famous American scholar of *I Ching*, Edward Shaughnessy, made similar comments. [2] The *I Ching* has been traveling westward for over four hundred years and continues to attract waves of Western scholars who research, interpret, and translate it. Over the course of this history, people's attitudes toward the *I Ching* have undergone a process of complex change, and its interpretation and translation have shown divergent faces.

2. Figurist Interpretation

From the late 17th to the early 18th century, Jesuit sinologists like Joachim Bouvet (1656–1730), Joseph de Prémare (1666–1736), and Jean Francoise Foucquet (1665–1741) represented the Figurists. They employed a method of interpretation similar to that used for the Bible, seeking Christian marks within the Confucian classics, especially the *I Ching*. They attempted to match symbols and figures from Confucian texts with those from Christianity, hoping to uncover the gospel message within. For example, Bouvet believed that the legendary creator of the Bagua (Eight Trigrams), Fuxi, was the same as Enoch from the Bible, possessing accurate knowledge of the Creation, which he expressed in the hexagrams of the *I Ching*. The term "*wan xiang*" (万象) in the *I Ching* was used to refer to all the images and symbols coming from the Creator. In the hexagram Tai (泰), the statement of the fifth-line "*diyi guimei*" (帝乙归妹 , Emperor Yi marrying off his younger sister) was interpreted by the Figurists as symbolizing God with "*diyi*," and the Virgin Mary with "*mei*." This line was seen as referring to the doctrine of God choosing the Virgin Mary to give birth to the son of God. The yang lines (☰) of the hexagram Qian (乾) was thought to represent the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, suggesting that the Chinese had early knowledge of it. At the same time, the Figurists also analyzed Chinese characters for hidden "Catholic truths." For example, the character " 婪 " (greed) consists of " 林 " (meaning "forest") on top and " 女 " (meaning "woman") below. The Figurists interpreted this as an allusion to Eve eating the forbidden fruit and thus incurring "original sin." This interpretive method was an inheritance and creative development of Matteo Ricci's (1552–1610) "accommodation" policy, as well as the result of various ideologies at the time: first, Jesuits in China believed that proving the essential harmony between Confucian teachings and Christian doctrine was the best way to ensure Christianity's establishment and future development in China; second, they used this method to demonstrate to the European Church that their missionary efforts in China were promising; third, the rise of early Qing Dynasty philology, which began to reflect on Song Dynasty Confucian commentaries, promoted the reinterpretation of ancient texts, which also impacted the Figurists. The implementation of this interpretive strategy was a normative result of religious belief, as well as a form of cultural understanding and communication.

3. Contextualist Interpretation

Starting from the 1930s, influenced by the May Fourth Movement and the archeological and historical critique of the "Skeptical School of Ancient History" , and driven by Western phonology, the Contextualist School, represented by figures such as Arthur Waley, Richard Alan Kunst, Richard Rutt, and Edward Shaughnessy, began to attempt to remove the moralizing significance that Confucianism has imparted to the classics

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and seek to explore the original meaning of the hexagrams. The *I Ching* was placed within a specific historical and geographical context for interpretation, and its traditional sacred connotations were stripped away. Translations by the Contextualist School reduced the *I Ching* to a mere divination book, devoid of profound philosophy. Instead, it was depicted as reflecting the crude, even barbaric aspects of primitive society, including tribal wars, captives, human sacrifice, corporal punishment, and exorcism rituals. Using textual analysis, philological methods, and comparative studies, they applied modern scientific and academic knowledge from fields such as archaeology, comparative folklore, astronomy, and phonology. These new approaches broke down the boundaries of traditional *I Ching* studies, presenting a radically different interpretation of the text: for example, the hexagram Qian, which traditionally symbolized the *yang* force of heaven, was now interpreted as a record of the seasonal changes of the "Azure Dragon" constellation; the hexagram *Meng* (蒙), once associated with the theme of "innocence" and "enlightenment," was reinterpreted as a reference to the parasitic plant dodder, reflecting ancient superstitions about it; the phrase "*yuan heng li zhen*" (元亨利贞), originally interpreted as "four virtue" (benevolence, propriety, righteousness and wisdom), was reassessed as "grand sacrifices, beneficial for divination"; the symbol of integrity, "*fu*," (孚) was now associated with captives.[3] Thus, the *I Ching*, once considered a book of profound philosophy, was reduced to a collection of ancient folk customs and historical records.

4. Philosophical Interpretation

By the early 20th century, the devastating defeat in World War I greatly exacerbated Germany's internal conflicts. Political division, economic hardship, and social discord led to a sense of existential crisis, where the former glory of material culture was replaced by the suffering and pain caused by war. The intellectual climate in Europe became pervaded by pessimism. In this context, intellectuals such as Richard Wilhelm turned their attention to the East, hoping to draw wisdom from the ancient East to heal the spiritual wounds of Europe and spiritually rescue European culture from its crisis. Richard Wilhelm translated and interpreted the *I Ching*'s principles, using the alternating cycles of *yin* and *yang*, and eternal change of the universe to encourage the pessimistic, confused, and anxious Europeans: nothing is eternal, and the current crisis signals the possibility of a new birth for humanity. If Europe could adopt the order depicted in the *I Ching*, it could overcome its chaotic and depressing reality. Therefore, a positive and optimistic attitude toward the future should be maintained, rejecting despair. At the same time, he used the *I Ching*'s artistic spirit to advocate for the inheritance of Germany's excellent artistic traditions and the transformation of the decline in German art. Richard Wilhelm's introduction of Chinese classics, particularly the *I Ching*, had a profound influence. His German translation of the *I Ching* was eventually translated into at least nine Western languages and went through numerous reprints, achieving significant distribution. His translation truly "opened" the *I Ching* to the Western world, winning admiration from intellectuals in various fields, including Swiss analytical psychologist Carl Jung and Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse. Richard Wilhelm's translation was driven directly by the realities of his time and the society, marking a milestone in the history of *I Ching* translations.

5. Conclusions

It is clear that the interpretation of the *I Ching* has evolved with changing cultural backgrounds and histor-

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ical realities. Its meaning is never self-evident or constant. Interpreters from different eras continuously interact with it, and in these interactions, meaning is shaped and reconstructed, developing alongside the times. This process ensures that the *I Ching* remains relevant to each era and is intimately connected to our lives. This embodies the concept in the *I Ching*'s "Great Commentary" (《系辞传》), that is, "the essence of the *I Ching* is the endless cycle of birth, growth, and change in the universe" (生生之谓易). Therefore, when evaluating the translation of the *I Ching*, we should adopt a historicist approach, placing it in a broader social and historical context to better understand its significance and restore its historical reality. We can measure it from both horizontal and vertical perspectives. From a horizontal, spatial comparison, we should examine how the translations and their outcomes stood in relation to global trends within the same historical context. From a vertical, temporal comparison, we should focus on the historical significance of translators' efforts, the contributions they made to cross-cultural exchange, and so on. Instead of solely focusing on the question of fidelity in early translations, it would be more valuable to explore their actual contributions to cross-cultural exchange and their impact on future generations, as well as to have a keen appreciation of the complexity and multidimensionality of their translation practices. For instance, when comparing the Jesuits' Figurist translation strategy with Spanish missionaries' attitudes toward Mayan and Native American cultures, we can see that Ricci's "accommodation" policy was a positive and culturally respectful approach. In Europe, influenced by the Renaissance, open interpretations of ancient texts became popular, and the Jesuits' Figurist translations were entirely acceptable in that era. Looking vertically, the Jesuits' translation of Chinese texts into Europe and their introduction of Chinese culture sparked a "China craze" in Europe. Confucian philosophy, as reflected in the Confucian classics, along with its views on nature, morality, and politics, played a notable role in the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the German philosophical revolution, influencing many European thinkers. Similarly, later Protestant missionaries' studies and promotion of Chinese culture had a profound impact on the political, intellectual, and cultural spheres of 19th-century Europe and America. Only by examining and evaluating the translation activities in the history of Sino-Western cultural exchange from multiple dimensions and levels can a more comprehensive and objective conclusion be reached.[3]

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