

## The Jesuit Translation and Interpretation of the *Yijing* (*Classic of Changes*) in Historical and Cultural Perspective

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**[Abstract]** This article examines the Jesuit translation and interpretation of the *Yijing* (*I Ching*, or *Classic of Changes*) from the historical and cultural perspective. The Jesuits dissected Chinese characters for religious interpretation, equated the trigrams and hexagrams with Christian conceptions, and linked Chinese cultural heroes with biblical figures in order to establish compatibility between the *Yijing* and the *Bible*. Although the Jesuit hermeneutical strategy described as “Figurism” failed in the end, this interpretive approach was part of a long tradition of *Yijing* exegesis, textual transmission, and cultural transformations, which sheds new light on questions of cross-cultural exchanges and understanding.

**[Keywords]** The *Yijing*, Jesuits, translation, interpretation, Figurism

### Introduction

The *Yijing* (*I Ching*, or *Classic of Changes*, 易經) began as a divination manual about three thousand years ago in ancient China, but it evolved to become “the first of the [Chinese] classics.” With its philosophical sophistication, psychological potential, and encyclopedic comprehensiveness, it has had unrivalled prestige in China since ancient times. As Steve Moore puts it: “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...then surely two would appear far ahead of the rest of the field. One, of course, is the Christian *Bible*. The other, though it may surprise readers brought up in Western traditions of literature and learning (and especially those who regard it as little more than a fortune-telling book), is the *I Ching*, or “*Book of Changes*” (Hacker et al., 2002, p. XIII). Virtually every aspect of traditional Chinese culture was touched by the *Yijing*, from language, literature, art, and music, to philosophy, religion, politics, military affairs, social life, mathematics, medicine, and science.

In part because of its great prestige in China, the historical and cultural influence of the *Yijing* extended well beyond the ever-shifting borders of the Middle Kingdom. Indeed, during the past thousand years or so, the work gradually became a global property. By stages, the *Changes* spread from China to other areas of East Asia, notably Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. The Jesuits brought knowledge of the classic to Europe during the eighteenth century, and from there it travelled to the Americas, finding a particularly receptive audience in the United States from the 1960s onward. Today, there are relatively few places in the entire world where one or another version of the *Yijing* cannot be found (Smith, 2008, p. 4). It also found a number of ardent and influential admirers over the next three hundred years or so, ranging from the mathematician Wilhelm Gottfried von Leibniz (1646-1716) to the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961). To this day, the *Changes* remains a vital and valued work in many parts of the globe, boasting hundreds of “translations” in a wide variety of Asian and Western languages, as well as many millions of adherents. It has also been the inspiration for a great deal of creative activity on the part of Western writers and artists (Smith, 2003). A recent annotated bibliography on the *Yijing* (Hacker et al., 2002) lists more than 500 books and dissertations and about the same number of articles related to the *Changes* in English alone.

The Jesuit approach to the *Yijing* provides a particularly interesting glimpse into the process of cross-cultural exchange and understanding because it involves not only the transmission of the Chinese classic to the West but also the transmission of the *Bible* to China through the *Changes*. Recognizing the *Yijing*'s enormous reputation, its rich and provocative symbolism, its deep philosophical content, and its practical utility, the Jesuits saw the document as an effective means by which to link two seemingly different philosophical and religious traditions. They regarded this classic as a convenient tool of cross-cultural communication and assimilation. Moreover, in using the *Yijing* to carry out their own evangelical agenda, the Jesuits came up with some ingenious methods to decipher the Chinese classic and to find hidden biblical messages in the *Yijing*, trying to demonstrate a strong affinity between the world's two greatest books. Though the Jesuit enterprise ended in failure, this interpretive approach serves as a new way to deal with Chinese canonical books and as a valuable guide to bridge the cultural gap between the East and the West.

### **The Jesuit Encounter with the *Yijing***

The Jesuit missionaries played the major role in transmitting Chinese culture to the West. Ironically, the westward movement of the *Yijing* began with the eastward movement of the West. Beginning in the late sixteenth century, in a pattern replicated in many other parts of the world, Jesuit missionaries traveled to China, attempting to assimilate themselves as much as possible into the host country. They studied the Chinese language, learned Chinese customs, and sought to understand China's philosophical and religious traditions--all with the goal of winning converts by underscoring affinities between the *Bible* and the Confucian classics. Naturally, the *Changes* served as a major focus for their proselytizing scholarship (Smith, 2012, p. 171). In the course of their study, they not only produced a vast number of works on China both in Chinese and in their native languages, but also collected a large number of alien artifacts.

One of the prominent figures involved in this process was the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730). In 1688 Bouvet arrived in Beijing, and two years later he entered the service of the Kangxi emperor (1662-1722), becoming one of his mathematics instructors and spending as much as two hours a day tutoring the Qing monarch in algebra and geometry. Moreover, the two men were both fascinated by the *Yijing* and regularly discussed it to the point of "talking about the *Yijing* every day." The emperor showed particular interest in Bouvet's claim to be able to predict the future with numerological charts based on the *Changes*. According to Bouvet, "I brought with me [to China] a special knowledge of the Hebrew Mosaic cabbala [aka Kaballa, etc.], and of the Pythagorean and Platonic philosophy, which are the true elements of the whole hieroglyphic wisdom of the Chinese, or rather [that] of the Old Patriarchs" (Collani, 1985, p. 156).

As is well known, from the time of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) onward, the strategy of "cultural assimilation" involved assiduous study of the Chinese language, as well as a concerted effort to learn as much as possible about Chinese philosophy, religion, literature, and customs. The Jesuits also engaged in some inventive strategies of accommodation, but their encounter with Chinese civilization involved far more complex cultural negotiations than the standard narrative of "adaptation" and "acculturation" suggests. Their evangelical strategy was to apply a European Figurist hermeneutical discourse to China, that is, to show by means of textual analysis how key elements of biblical prophecy could be found in ancient Chinese scriptures (Smith, 2008, p. 179). Bouvet's correspondence with Wilhelm Gotfried von Leibniz and other Europeans, as well as his many Chinese-language writings, testifies to his efforts to link the religious traditions of China and the West through the *Yijing*.

### The Jesuit Translation of the *Yijing*

The first book in a European language to give substantial attention to the *Changes* was a Jesuit compilation known as *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese). Although acknowledging that the *Yijing* had been “misused” by Daoist fortune-tellers and “atheists” (i.e., Neo-Confucians), it chronicled the generally accepted history of the document, emphasizing the moral content of the work. Like many Chinese Christians who sought to use the symbols of the *Changes* to illustrate biblical virtues, the editors of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* focused on the Qian hexagram (谦, “Modesty,” number 15) (Smith 2012, p. 180). It is a collaboration done by a group of twenty-two Jesuits, four Dominicans, and one Franciscan in Guangzhou between 1665 and 1671, and it was published in Paris in 1687. It also contains translations into Latin of the *Daxue*, *Zhongyong*, and *Lunyu*. The person who primarily is responsible for producing this work is the Flemish Jesuit Philippe Couplet (1623-1692), and his co-editors had been the Sicilian Prospero Intorcetta (1625-1696), the Fleming Francois de Rougemont (1624-1676), and the Austrian Christian Herdtrich (1624-1684). Their translations were, in reality, versions that had been worked and reworked in the mission over the hundred years since Ricci arrived.

The book has been described as a culmination of Ricci’s formula of accommodation. The Jesuits recognized that the *Yijing* was important, but they distrusted it because they thought it was the key text of the Song neo-Confucianists, whom they regarded as atheists. Couplet included a somewhat grudging description of the *Yijing* in *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, giving a table of the hexagrams (called *figurae*) and a Latin translation of Hexagram 15, which appealed to the Jesuits because it was easy to take in a Christian sense as an example of “accommodation.” Scholars today, however, would doubt whether qian ever meant what Christians mean by humility. As is clearly shown by the Great Treatise, it meant deference and appropriate demeanor rather than interior self-denial (Rutt, 1996, p. 61). This is a very verbose translation. For example, forty-four Latin words are used to translate the six words of the second line: 6, 2: cry out, modesty, upright, lucky 六二，鸣谦贞吉。

The first complete translation of the *Yijing* in a Western language (Latin) was undertaken by three Jesuit scholars who were extremely critical of the allegorical approach adopted by Bouvet and his followers. This anti-Figurist group consisted of Jean-Baptiste Regis (1663-1738), Pierre-Vincent de Tartre (1669-1724), and Joseph Marie Anne de Moyriac de Mailla (1669-1748). All three men denied that the Chinese classics contained any truths of the Christian faith, and they all denounced the Figurists for producing what de Tartre disparagingly called the “Cabala [Kabbala] of the Enochists” (Smith, 2012, pp. 180-181). This work was completed in 1736 but was not published until a century later, when a young German sinologist named Julius Mohl (1800-1876) produced a two-volume printed version of several hundred pages at Stuttgart and Tübingen in 1834 and 1839 entitled *Y-King antiquissimus Sinarum liber quem ex latina interpretatione P. Regis aliorumque ex Soc Jesu P.P. edidit Julius Mohl (Yijing, the Most Ancient Book of the Chinese, Edited by Julius Mohl Based on the Latin translation of Father Regis and Other Fathers of the Society of Jesus)*. Their work was a plain translation, faithful to the terseness of the Chinese. Thus, for the second line of Hexagram 15 where Couplet uses forty-four words, Régis uses only six: “Clamosa seu apparens humlitas, solidum bonum.”

Standards and models of vocabulary had now been set for translators into English and other European languages (Rutt, 1996, p. 66). Mohl’s *Yijing* contains three parts: Part I is a historical-critical introduction to the *Yijing*; Part II constitutes the translation; Part III includes the appendices and several other dissertations. The concept of God in the *Yijing* is dealt with in the appendix

“Shuoguzhuan” 说卦傳 in an annotation, and there is a long dissertation on the term “Supremus Imperator,” Shangdi 上帝, who is described as a Lord and Governor of the world (Collani, 2007, p. 273).

The first translation of the *Yijing* into a modern European language was done by a Breton Jesuit, Claude de Visdelou (1656-1737). Visdelou was one of the Catholic missionaries sent to China by King Louis XIV in 1687. His work on the *Yijing* was published in 1770 as a supplement of Antoine Gaubil (1689-1759)'s translation of the *Shujing*. One of Visdelou's contributions was the creation of the terms “trigramme” and “hexagramme” to designate the three-lined and six-lined *gua* 卦 of the *Yijing*. Visdelou only translated Hexagram 15 of the whole text into French and also dictated a brief “Notice,” which gives a summary account of the *Yijing*. Another Jesuit version in Latin was printed in Shanghai in 1880 in a bulky five-volume set prepared by the Italian Angelo Zottoli (1826-1902). The *Yijing* was placed in the intermediate section, before the *Analectis* and *Mencius*. Only Hexagrams 1 to 6, 15, and 33 were translated, with most of the Ten Wings (Xici, Shuogua, Xugua and Zagua) included.

The first complete English translation of the *Yijing* was done by an Irish Anglican missionary, Thomas McClatchie (1814-1885), and was published in Shanghai in 1876. McClatchie, like Father Joachim Bouvet before him, maintained that the *Yijing* originated in the time of the Great Flood recorded in the *Bible* and had been carried to China by one of the sons of Noah after the Deluge. However, whereas Bouvet had tried to use the *Changes* to prove that the ancient Chinese had knowledge of the “one true God,” McClatchie believed that the work reflected a form of pagan materialism “perfected by Nimrod and his Cushites before the dispersion from Babel.”

He identified Shangdi (the ancient Shang dynasty deity) as the Baal of the Chaldeans and pointed to a number of cross-cultural correlations involving the number eight, including the total number of Noah's family, the principal gods of the Egyptians, and the major manifestations of the Hindu deity Shiva (Smith, 2012, p. 183). McClatchie introduced phallic elements in the yin/yang theory and identified the first two hexagrams of the *Yijing* with the male and female sexual organs.

James Legge (1815-1897) was a Scotsman who went to Hong Kong in 1843 as a missionary. Like the Jesuits, Legge believed that the Confucian classics were compatible with Christian beliefs, and so he consistently rendered the term Di (or Shangdi) into “God,” but he was not a Figurist. In 1882 he published a complete English translation of the *Yijing* as Volume 16 of *The Sacred Books of the East* series edited by the famous orientalist F. Max Müller (1823-1900). Legge's translation (1963) remained the standard English-language version of the *Changes* until the mid-twentieth century, when the missionary-scholar Richard Wilhelm (1873-1930) published his German translation (1924) of the *Yijing* in English in 1950, translated by one of Carl Jung's students, Cary Baynes as *I Ching, The Book of Changes*. Wilhelm remained a missionary, but a secular one whose rendering of the *Yijing* (1967) was based on the assumption that it was solely a Chinese classic with no genetic links with either the ancient West or the Near East.

### **The Figurist Approach to the *Yijing***

Bouvet and his colleagues, Jean-François Fouquet (1665-1741), Joseph de Prémare (1666-1736), and Jean-Alexis de Gollet (1664-1741) represented a development in Western Christianity known as the Figurist movement. In general, the Figurists developed a method of exegesis called “Figurism.” In brief, the Figurists tried to find in the Old Testament evidence of the coming and significance of Christ through an analysis of “letters, words, persons and events.” Apart from the literal meaning of the “outer” text, in other words, there existed a hidden “inner” meaning to be

discovered. In China, this gave rise to a concerted effort to find reflections (that is, “figures”) of the biblical patriarchs and examples of biblical revelation in the Chinese classics themselves (Smith, 2012, p. 172). The Figurist method consisted in finding “figures” for the future redeemer in the canonical books of China, as well as in Daoist and Neo-Confucian literature. These figures, mostly mythological Chinese emperors and heroes, were compared with the patriarchs of the Old Testament or even identified with them (Collani, 1985, pp. 173-199). Of all the Figurists (about one-third of all French Jesuits in China, eventually), none enjoyed the emperor’s favor as much as Bouvet, and none became as preoccupied with the *Changes* and with prophecy.

Bouvet and his followers were masters of the Figurist art form. Their writings provide numerous examples of their Figurist approach to the Confucian classics. Using a rather strained etymological approach to various written texts, as well as an evaluation of the trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yijing*, they found all kinds of hidden messages. Dissection of the Chinese character for Heaven (天) into the number two (二) and the word for Man (人) indicated a prophecy of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. The character for boat (船) could be broken down conveniently into the semantic indicator for a “vessel that travels on water” (舟) and the characters for “eight” (八) and “mouth(s)” (口), signifying China’s early awareness of Noah's Ark, which contained, of course, the eight members of Noah's family (Smith, 2012, pp. 172-173). The fact that the Chinese had this character was proof for the Figurists that the Chinese were the descendants of one of Noah’s sons, in this case, of Shem.

In Figurist discourse, a wide variety of Chinese philosophical terms closely associated with the *Changes* came to be equated with the Christian conception of God, including not only Tian (天, Heaven) and Shangdi (上帝, the Lord on High), but also Taiji (太極, the Supreme Ultimate), Wuji (无極, the Infinite Ultimate), Taiyi (太一, the Supreme One), Dao (道, the Way), Li (禮, the Principle) and even yin (阴) and yang (阳) (Lundbaek, 1991, p. 116). Matteo Ricci evidently knew the *Yijing* and also used it to prove that the ancient Chinese already had had knowledge about the one true God. He finally came to the conclusion that Taikieo (taiji) was God and nothing else. Prospero Intocetta, the Sicilian Jesuit who translated and edited the *Sapientia Sinica* (Wisdom of China, 1662), which was a translation of *Daxue* and the first five parts of *Lunyu*, also identified taiji with the Christian God. The authors of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* claimed that taiji was yuanqi or “material prima,” which included everything and produced yin and yang (Collani, 2007, pp. 234-237).

Certain trigrams and hexagrams were similarly revealing. In the Figurist view, the three solid lines of the Qian trigram (乾, “Heaven,” number 1), which naturally referred to Creation itself, represented an early awareness of the Trinity. The hexagram Xu (需, “Waiting,” number 5), with its stark reference to “clouds rising up to Heaven” (in the Commentary on the Images), indicated the “glorious ascent of the Savior.” The hexagrams Pi (否, “Obstruction,” number 12) and Tai (泰, “Peace,” number 11) referred, respectively, to “the world corrupted by sin” and “the world restored by the Incarnation,” and so forth (Smith, 2012, p. 173). Fouquet claimed that Hexagram 13 told of the Fall of Man and the coming of Emmanuel, while Hexagram 59 predicted the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God at the end of time (Rutt, 1996, p. 63).

Bouvet states, as the general moral of hexagram 15: “God hates the proud ones and loves the humble ones.” But the hexagram, of course, alludes to the Saint, the redeemer, the “Xim gin” (i. e. Shengren 聖人). God humbles himself by the incarnation of his son, and this son “humbled himself and became obedient to death -- even death on a cross” (cf. Phil. 2,8). Each Christian

knows that this humbleness was the main virtue of the redeemer and the basis for the law of the Gospel. By means of his holy humbleness, the righteous persists in holiness till the end and in this way gains justice. All peoples on earth voluntarily submit to his divine example (Collani, 2007, p. 275).

Efforts to link Chinese cultural heroes to biblical figures produced all kinds of creative connections: Peng the Ancestor (Pengzu, 彭祖) became Adam; Fu Xi (伏羲), putative inventor of the eight trigrams, was the mysterious Patriarch Enoch, who reportedly “walked with God,” learning about creation, mathematics, astronomy and the end of the world. References to the moral exemplar Yao (堯), they argued, must have been derived from the Hebrew term Yaweh. The mythological Chinese emperor was “identified” by Bouvet with the Patriarch Enoch of the Old Testament; the *Yijing* was, therefore, a fragment of the Apocalypse of Enoch, which at that time was still undiscovered. Fuxi is, in his theory, only one of the many names of Enoch who was known among the old nations by different other names: Hermes Trismegistos of the Greek, Thot in Egypt, Edris or Adris in Arabia (Collani, 2007, p. 243). In Bouvet’s opinion, Fuxi, or Enoch, had read in heaven the vestiges of the most important future events which formed, together with other revelations, the corpus of the *Yijing*. Fuxi, of course, had used an allegorical way to write down these mysteries. However, the *Yijing* has been misused for divinatory purposes about wars, the happiness of the people, and other things (Collani, 2007, p. 254).

### Conclusion

Unfortunately, Figurism was forbidden in the course of the Chinese Rites Controversy and, as a consequence the Figurists’ *Yijing* studies, also fell into oblivion. Eventually, Bouvet’s Figurist enterprise, like the broader Jesuit evangelical movement, fell victim to harsh criticisms from Chinese scholars as well as to vigorous attacks by other members of the Christian community in China and abroad. In the end, Rome proscribed all Bouvet’s Figurist writings and forbade him to promulgate his Figurist ideas among the Chinese (Smith, 2012, p. 177). However, Figurist approaches to the *Changes* continued to appear in the West during the remainder of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The *Yijing*-based numerological, historical, and theological speculations of the Figurists became part of a long hermeneutical history of creative *Yijing* interpretations, textual transmissions, and cultural transformations, which provide a deep insight into the issues of cultural transmission and mutual understanding of different nations and races in the world.

With their studies on the *Yijing*, the Figurists and, especially, Bouvet used the “superstitious” *Yijing* for their theology and developed a new way to deal with the Chinese canonical books. With all their fantastic interpretations of the hexagrams, the Figurist approach opened new horizons for understanding China, and the Chinese and developed a new understanding of how theology should be (Collani, 2007, pp. 257-258). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the world becomes more interdependent and interrelated, cross-cultural exchanges and understanding also become more and more important. The expansion of electronic communications worldwide may unite national cultures to an unprecedented degree, but they will not necessarily homogenize them. Ethnic, religious, and cultural differences are still likely to lead to conflicts and confrontations. The clashes of civilization between the East and the West may seem even more inevitable. Since the *Yijing* speaks to many different people in many different ways, the Chinese wisdom and Chinese resources contained in it can be employed as a means of understanding each other and appreciating alien cultures. Therefore, the comparative study of the *Yijing* in historical and cultural perspectives serves as a useful starting point.

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