

# The *Yijing* and Chinese Politics

Classical Commentary  
and Literati Activism  
in the Northern Song  
Period, 960–1127



Tze-ki Hon

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*To Wan-Chiung* 婉瓊

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# Chronology of Northern Song Emperors

Taizu 太祖, 960–76

Taizong 太宗, 976–97

Zhenzong 真宗, 997–1022

Renzong 仁宗, 1023–63

Yingzong 英宗, 1063–67

Shenzong 神宗, 1068–85

Zhezong 哲宗, 1086–1100

Huizong 徽宗, 1101–1126

Qinzong 欽宗, 1126–27

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## *Introduction*

This book is about how the educated elite of the Northern Song (960–1127) came to terms with major political and social changes through commenting upon the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). By relating classical commentary with history, this book attempts to link two different fields of study in premodern China: the study of the *Yijing* and the study of the Northern Song. Although the relationship between the two fields has long been recognized, little effort has been made to render the relationship explicit. Thus, the goal of this book is to demonstrate how the *Yijing* commentaries can be an important source of information on the momentous political and social changes of eleventh-century China.

The study of the *Yijing*, originally developed as part of the missionaries' attempt to match Christianity with Confucianism, has been conducted in a fashion best described as the "book of wisdom" approach. Even though it has long been known to Western scholars that the *Yijing* was originally a divination text in early China and did not become a Confucian classic until 135 B.C.E.,<sup>1</sup> major *Yijing* translators such as Rev. Canon McClatchie, James Legge, and Richard Wilhelm interpreted the classic as if it were transtemporal. Certainly, this ahistorical approach has the merit of giving interpreters the liberty to render the text in ways that are accessible and meaningful to Western



audiences, and the popularity of the Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes translation during the 1950s and 1960s proves the strength of this approach. However, the “book of wisdom” approach also ignores the history of the text and the impact of that history on the social and cultural life of China. As Richard John Lynn points out, “we are becoming increasingly aware that the [*Yijing*] exists in as many versions as there are commentaries on it: its text is so dense and opaque that its meaning depends on how commentaries interpret it.”<sup>2</sup> And the limits of the “book of wisdom” approach are most revealing in its lack of attention to *Yijing* learning during the Northern Song—a period widely known in standard accounts of Chinese classical commentary as one of the most productive times in the history of the classic.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, the study of Northern Song China has been driven by an interest in social mobility. From Edward Kracke to John Chaffee to Robert Hymes and Peter Bol, historians are concerned with broad patterns of socioeconomic transformation by analyzing the civil service examination system and the changes in the self-identity of the educated elite.<sup>4</sup> There is, of course, much to be gained from this “longue durée” approach, such as a deeper understanding of the structure of Chinese society, and a better view of the mechanisms through which different groups of Chinese rose and fell on the ladder of success. However, in centering on broad patterns of socioeconomic change, historians have not been giving sufficient attention to classical studies, particularly classical commentary. This lack of attention to classical commentary is troubling in light of the historians’ quest for better understanding of the complexity of Northern Song social change. Well known for its success in opening the floodgate of social mobility by institutionalizing and expanding the civil service examinations, the Northern Song was a time when classical studies became a major channel for the educated elite to succeed socially and politically. For pragmatic purposes or personal interests, members of the Northern Song educated elite had to excel in classical scholarship in order to be significant players in social and political discourse. And there is no way to gauge the full impact of social change on their lives and their self-perception unless we examine carefully their classical scholarship.

### *Coming to Terms with Change*

How am I going to link the two fields of study? To answer this question, we need to know what the *Yijing* is about. The *Yijing* (also known as

*I Ching*) literally means “the classic of change.” It is a text of multiple layers, and through these multiple textual layers, it discusses the notion of change. First of all, the original layer of the classic, commonly known as the *Zhouyi* (The *Yi* of the Zhou [Dynasty]), consists of sixty-four hexagrams, each accompanied by a hexagram statement and six line statements.<sup>5</sup> The sixty-four hexagrams are graphic representations of a dynamic universe. As a grouping of six lines intricately related, each hexagram is a field of action with multiple actors or factors. Reading from the bottom to the top, a hexagram is a situation in which six players or components are locked into a complex network of correspondence based on their positions in the hexagram and their *yin* (passive) and *yang* (active) predisposition. For instance, the first, second, and third lines (counting from the bottom) are considered to be the lower trigram, and the fourth, fifth, and sixth lines are grouped together as the upper trigram. Each trigram is regarded as a separate unit with its own dynamics, and each plays an important role in influencing the overall relations of the six lines. Within a hexagram, the second line and the fifth line are considered to be a pair, even though they are far apart spatially. The second line (usually known as the line of an official) is supposed to render direct service to the fifth line (usually called the line of an emperor), and in turn, the fifth line is expected to supervise the second line in carrying out whatever task is at hand. To make the *Yijing* even more interesting with respect to graphically depicting the possibility of change, each hexagram can be linked to, and sometimes even be transformed into, another hexagram based on line alignment or the *yin-yang* correspondence. Accordingly, the sixty-four hexagrams become sixty-four different configurations of forces that are part of a gigantic and dynamic system. As such, they symbolize the infinite possibilities of structuring human and natural resources in coming to terms with contingency and change.

In addition to the sixty-four hexagrams, the *Yijing* also contains the Ten Wings—seven pieces of commentarial material divided into ten documents including *Tuan* (Commentary on the Hexagram Statements) I and II, *Daxiang* (Commentary on the Images of the Hexagrams), *Xiaoxiang* (Commentary on the Images of the Hexagram Lines), *Xici* (Attached Verbalization or Great Treatise) I and II, *Wenyan* (Commentary on the Words of the Text), *Shuogua* (Remarks on Trigrams), *Xugua* (The Sequence of Hexagrams), and *Zagua* (The Miscellany of Hexagrams). Although written in a different style and focusing on different issues, the Ten Wings share the same theme

of comparing changes in the human world with those in the natural world, making both appear to be resonating with one another.<sup>6</sup> This theme is particularly clear in the *Xici*, which stresses the mutual correspondence between the natural and the human worlds.<sup>7</sup> Consider, for instance, the discussion of “the Way of the Three Realms” (*san ji zhi dao*) in chapter 2 of *Xici* I. Speaking of a hexagram as representing both the natural and the human worlds, the *Xici* chapter describes the movement of the six lines as the transformation of the “Three Realms”—Heaven (*tian*), Earth (*di*), and Humankind (*ren*).<sup>8</sup> Whereas Heaven and Earth denote the forces of change in the natural world, Humankind symbolizes what human beings can do to manage their lives. Thus, the mutual correspondence and interdependence of the six lines—particularly the ways in which the *yin* lines interact with the *yang* lines—reflect waxing and waning, rise and fall, and fortune and misfortune in both the natural and the human worlds. The six lines of a hexagram imply that what happens in nature will have an impact on human beings, and vice versa.<sup>9</sup>

Through these different measures—graphic images, diagrams, philosophical treatises, and short essays—the *Yijing* reveals patterns of change. It discusses how to initiate change when things do not work, and how to cope with atrocity and turmoil when things have been turned upside down. Addressing an issue that is so fundamental to human life, the *Yijing* speaks to everyone who is in the midst of change. For the blessed, it issues warning about the transience of success and the danger of hubris. For the downtrodden, it offers encouragement to make the best out of a given situation and to work for a better future. For the rest, it provides resources to anticipate, in Richard Gotshalk’s terms, the “movement into the unknown and the uncertain.”<sup>10</sup>

From historical sources, we learn that people of the Northern Song were indeed facing dramatic change. During the Northern Song, none of the big aristocratic families who had previously monopolized power and wealth had survived.<sup>11</sup> The trinity of their power—land ownership, access to office, and education—was rendered ineffective by the introduction of the civil service examination system as the ladder of success.<sup>12</sup> Testing candidates’ command of the classics and language skill, the civil service examinations were open to all who could pay their way to the examination halls. In theory if not in practice, merit rather than family background determined one’s chance to enter into the government. Although historians are still debating on what exactly that social mobility meant and how big an impact the social mobility

had on Chinese society as a whole, there is little doubt that the social structure of China in the eleventh century was quite different from that in the ninth and tenth centuries. As expected, this drastic social change created anxiety among those who were in the midst of it. Especially for the people on the upper rungs of the social ladder, the stake was even higher. If they managed to cruise through what John Chaffee calls “the thorny gates” of civil service examinations,<sup>13</sup> they would gain power, wealth, and prestige, transforming themselves into active players in governing. But if they were stopped at the thorny gates, they would remain obscure scholars who might continue to write to lament their fates or to teach to plant seeds for future change, but they would have limited impact on government and society. Recently historians such as Peter Bol, Beverly Bossler, and Tao Jingsheng have found an array of materials including letters, poems, paintings, funerary writings, and tomb inscriptions in which the educated elite expressed in clear terms their hopes and fears of this drastic change.<sup>14</sup>

This anxiety about change and the apprehensions about the uncertain future also contributed to a great number of writings on the *Yijing*, the classic that directly dealt with the question of change. For instance, in the “*Yiwen zhi*” (Record of Literature and the Arts) of the *Song shi* (History of Song), we are informed of more than sixty commentaries written on the *Yijing* during the Northern Song. Although many of these commentaries are no longer extant today, the list of commentators is impressive, including such major cultural figures as Chen Tuan (?–989), Shi Jie (1005–1045), Liu Mu (?–?), Shao Yong (1011–1077), Hu Yuan (993–1059), Ouyang Xiu (1007–1070), Zhang Zai (1020–1077), Wang Anshi (1021–1086), Sima Guang (1019–1086), Su Shi (1037–1101), Cheng Yi (1033–1107), and Lü Dalin (1046–1082?).<sup>15</sup> If we add to this list authors of treatises, essays, and poems about the *Yijing*—for instance, Li Gou (1009–1059) who wrote thirteen essays on the *Yijing*, and Fan Zhongyan (989–1052) who composed five rhapsodic poems (*fu*) on themes of the *Yijing*—the number of Northern Song *Yijing* exegetes would be staggering.<sup>16</sup> Further evidence of this tremendous outburst of energy on the *Yijing* is found in the comments of the eighteenth-century editors of the *Siku quanshu* (The Complete Works of the Emperor’s Four Treasuries). Viewing the history of *Yijing* learning as a linear progression of “two schools and six subgroups” (*liangpai liuzong*), the editors held the Northern Song in high regard by linking many of the key developments in *Yijing* learning to that period. According to the editors, whether it was the *xiangshu* (image

and number) or the *yili* (principle and meaning) school of *Yijing* commentary, the Northern Song commentators were well represented, and many of them (e.g., Chen Tuan, Shao Yong, Hu Yuan, and Cheng Yi) were in fact pivotal figures in establishing the basic rules for interpreting the *Yijing*.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, despite their huge number and the high honor bestowed on them in later centuries, the Northern Song *Yijing* commentaries have not been studied as *voices of change* in the way that some historians have done with letters, poems, paintings, funerary writings, and tomb inscriptions of the same period. This is partly due to, as discussed earlier, the “book of wisdom” approach of *Yijing* studies that presents the classic as transtemporal and ahistorical. This is also partly due to the lack of dialogue between scholars in the field of *Yijing* studies and the field of Northern Song studies. To fill this void, this book examines the *Yijing* commentaries written from the 1050s to the 1090s, when the Northern Song educated elite felt most acutely the impact of political and social change on their lives. Focusing on three exegetes—Hu Yuan, Zhang Zai, and Cheng Yi—this book examines the debates among the educated elite over their role as political and social leaders. By comparing these three exegetes’ readings of the *Yijing* with those of their peers, this book traces the changes in the self-identity of eleventh-century educated elite, who considered themselves to be corulers of the empire rather than the emperor’s subservient administrators. This self-identity of the educated elite was predicated upon an assumption that only they could fully comprehend the intricacy of human affairs and that even the emperor himself had to learn from them about the skills of ruling. This assumption, presumptuous and impractical as it may seem, won the day in the Northern Song. In this book, we will see why this assumption appeared to be convincing to the educated elite, how the assumption acquired new meaning over time as the country’s fiscal and military crises deepened, and what impact it had made on the political discourse of the Northern Song.

### *Synchronic Comparison*

In recent years, we have witnessed a tremendous increase in interest in the study of Chinese classical commentary. This interest has shed new light on what “classic” meant in imperial China and how a classic was transmitted in the Chinese tradition. For instance, John Henderson has identified the assumptions and strategies that governed the Chinese

commentators in interpreting the Confucian classics.<sup>18</sup> Based on a comparison of differing commentaries to the *Shijing* (Odes, or Book of Poetry), Steven Van Zoeren demonstrates the creative process in which the Chinese commentators rendered a classic anew.<sup>19</sup> Concentrating on the commentaries to the *Laozi*, Rudolf Wagner explains the craft of the commentator Wang Bi (226–249) in relating the classic to his times.<sup>20</sup> Employing the European theories of hermeneutics to discuss Chinese classical commentaries, Daniel Gardner and On-cho Ng demonstrate how a detailed study of the Confucian commentarial tradition will yield a deeper understanding of Chinese cultural history.<sup>21</sup>

With respect to the Northern Song, two works are extremely important in elucidating the historical significance of classical commentary. One is Alan Wood's *Limits to Autocracy: From Sung Neo-Confucianism to a Doctrine of Political Rights* (Honolulu, 1995), in which the author compares the commentaries to the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals) by Sun Fu (992–1057), Cheng Yi, and Hu Anguo (1074–1138). Wood uses these three commentaries to demonstrate how the Northern Song educated elite intended to gain more power by supporting imperial autocracy on the basis of “honoring the emperor and expelling the barbarians” (*zunwang rangyi*). He explains that, paradoxical as it may seem, the educated elite's support of imperial autocracy rested on a pragmatic calculation—the opportunity “to appropriate for themselves the emperor's power through their dominance of the government bureaucracy.”<sup>22</sup> While Wood may be too ambitious in using the Northern Song case to launch his broad-sweeping comparison of Chinese, Japanese, and European political philosophy,<sup>23</sup> nonetheless his analyses of the three *Chunqiu* commentaries point to the close connection between classical commentary and political discourse during the Northern Song.

Even more relevant to the present study is *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching* (Princeton, 1990) jointly written by Kidder Smith, Peter Bol, Joseph Adler, and Don Wyatt. The book is significant in two respects. First, it represents the first attempt at defining a methodology for studying *Yijing* commentaries as historical documents. Calling their method “the study of the [*Yijing*] in history,” the four authors plan to show “how a classic was appropriated by later thinkers, how a single text could be taken to mean many different things, and what it is about the [*Yijing*] that made it so significant to literati of the [Song].”<sup>24</sup> In essence, they lay out an approach that centers on the *Yijing* commentaries rather than the *Yijing*, that focuses on the creativity of *Yijing* commentators

in reinventing the classic, and that stresses the historicity of *Yijing* commentaries as direct responses to change in time.<sup>25</sup> Second, by offering a detailed analysis of four eleventh- and twelfth-century *Yijing* commentaries, the authors of *Sung Dynasty Uses of I Ching* demonstrate what commentators must do in order to make the *Yijing* meaningful to their readers. On the one hand, they must understand the spirit and letter of the *Yijing* in light of its received commentarial tradition. In the case of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it means that the commentators had to be familiar with the differences between the Han Dynasty method of employing images and numbers in interpreting the *Yijing* and the Wang Bi method of rendering the *Yijing* as a moral and philosophical text.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, commentators must give life to the *Yijing* by transforming it into a voice of the present, speaking directly to issues at hand. In the context of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it means that the commentators had to wrestle with such issues as the relationship between literary creation (*wen*) and moral cultivation (*dao*), and the link between self-cultivation (*de*) and the pursuit of knowledge (*xue*).<sup>27</sup>

Their contribution to the historical study of Northern Song classical commentary notwithstanding, Wood and the four authors of *Sung Dynasty Uses of I Ching* adopt what I would call a diachronic comparison of classical commentaries. By that I mean they compare classical commentaries across time, decades or hundreds of years apart. Take, for example, the three exegetes whom Wood compares. Sun Fu lived in the early Northern Song period, shortly after political fragmentation had ended. The mood of his time was one of hope and optimism. In contrast, Cheng Yi spent much of his mature life confronting factional rivalry of mid-Northern Song. The climate of his time was one of conflict and reconciliation. For Hu Anguo, who lived during the transition from the Northern Song to the Southern Song, he faced the threat of foreign invasion and endured the humiliation of seeing the Song court move from Kaifeng to Hangzhou. The environment of his time was one of crisis and turmoil. Given the distinct differences between these three exegetes, comparison of their *Chunqiu* commentaries cannot be done simply on such a broad basis as statecraft (Sun) versus morality (Cheng and Hu).<sup>28</sup> Rather, it has to be done by taking into account the distinct historical context in which each commentary was written.

Similarly, *Sung Dynasty Uses of the I Ching* is hampered by its temporal structure. Writing their works at a time when eleventh- and

twelfth-century intellectual life was considered to be part of the “unfolding of Neo-Confucianism,”<sup>29</sup> the four authors saw the Northern Song *Yijing* learning as a stepping-stone for Zhu Xi’s (1130–1200) grand synthesis. Although the bulk of the book is clearly about the Northern Song, with five out of seven chapters devoted to eleventh-century *Yijing* scholars, including Ouyang Xiu, Su Shi, Shao Yong, and Cheng Yi, ultimately it is Zhu Xi of the Southern Song who ties the book together. Born a century later than the rest of the exegetes discussed in the book, Zhu Xi is presented as the one who “resolves” the differences and the controversy among the Northern Song exegetes.<sup>30</sup> Even though Zhu Xi’s *Yijing* scholarship was evidently based on prior work in the Northern Song (particularly those of Shao Yong and Cheng Yi), in their concluding chapter, the authors of *Sung Dynasty Uses of I Ching* suggest that Zhu’s achievement in *Yijing* learning “was part of his exhaustive reevaluation and systematization of virtually the entire Chinese cultural tradition.”<sup>31</sup>

In view of the limitations of a diachronic comparison, I adopt in this book a synchronic comparison. I structure the book in accordance with three time periods of the Northern Song: (1) the early Northern Song, covering from 960 to 1022, in which the Song court rebuilt a centralized government by marginalizing aristocratic families and the military establishment on the one hand, and forming a partnership with civil bureaucrats on the other; (2) the mid-Northern Song, covering from 1023 to 1085, in which the Song court decided to carry out large-scale reforms to address problems arising from the increase in fiscal costs and alarming military failures; (3) the late Northern Song, covering from 1086 to 1127, in which the Song government suffered, as a consequence of its flip-flop in reforms, from rounds of factional rivalry among civil bureaucrats. In each of these periods, I focus on one *Yijing* commentary as my entry point into the milieu of the time. Accordingly, for the early Northern Song period, I examine Hu Yuan’s *Zhouyi kouyi* (The orally transmitted meanings of the *Yi* from the Zhou [Dynasty]);<sup>32</sup> for the mid-Northern Song period, Zhang Zai’s *Hengqu yishuo* (An explanation of the meanings of *Yi* [by a reader] from Hengqu); and for the late Northern Song period, Cheng Yi’s *Yichuan yizhuan* (A commentary on the *Yi* [by a reader] from Yi River). Unlike Wood and the four authors of *Sung Dynasty Uses of I Ching*, I examine these three commentaries not just as they are, but also compare them with other commentaries of the same period of time.<sup>33</sup> For Hu Yuan, I compare his commentary with those of Li Gou and Ouyang