

# The *I Ching* A Biography

BY RICHARD J. SMITH

PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012

278 PAGES, ISBN 978-0691145099, HARDCOVER

Reviewed by Robert Steed

**Author's note:** *Smith uses the Wade-Giles spelling of "I Ching" in the title of his book, but uses the Pinyin "Yijing" in the text of the book. He includes a note about why he does this, and I will follow his choice in this review.*



Richard J. Smith's *The I Ching: A Biography* is a concise and well-written guide to the historical development and cultural contexts of this famous text. It is suitable for use by high school and undergraduate survey-level instructors as well as for higher-level instructors. The prose is accessible for those levels, and instructors wishing to incorporate Yijing-related content into history, religion, literature, or cultures classes should find it to be a most helpful resource.

Smith primarily approaches his explanation and analysis of the Yijing using a chronological

framework. Beginning with what can be reconstructed of its earliest layers and uses, he proceeds forward through history, showing in each age how it was understood and used. In addition to historical development, Smith examines the text's geographical movement as well, explaining how the text comes to be valued first by East Asian cultures outside of its Chinese homeland and then by the Western world. As Smith succinctly writes,

*My goal in this biography is to trace the evolution of the Yijing across space and time and to account for its broad reach and sustained appeal, not only in the country of its birth but also in distant and dissimilar lands. (11)*

After a brief introduction in which Smith provides a description in general terms of the Yijing, what hexagrams are, a bit on methods for using the text, and a word on its use by non-Chinese cultures, he explores more in-depth, chapter by chapter, its historical development and uses. He does so by dividing his study into two parts, "The Domestic Evolution of the Yijing" and "The Transnational Travels of the Yijing." The first section is comprised of three chapters. Chapter one, "Genesis of the *Changes*," focuses on the origins of the classic in its homeland and home culture. Smith describes the structure of the Yijing and provides explanation of the hexagrams (in a general sense) and some of the complexities involved in comprehending the text. The second chapter, "The Making of a Classic," traces the transformation of the Yijing from being a divination-oriented text to one that was seen as containing profound philosophical implications, although never leaving its divinatory character out of the mix. Smith points out in particular how use of the Yijing shaped and was shaped by Han dynasty correlative thinking processes, which focused upon the relationships between various components of a holistically unified cosmos. *Yin and yang* and five phases theory were employed to show how everything that exists could be in relationship with and affected by everything else that exists. Chapter three, "Interpreting the *Changes*," details how different philosophical, political, and religious groups employed the text historically.

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Smith here shows how flexible and adaptive the use of the Yijing became and how it could be used to suit a wide variety of purposes, and he does this with great precision over the course of this fifty-page chapter.

At this point, Smith makes a transition to the second part of his book, focusing on the movement of the Yijing beyond its cultural homeland. Chapter four, "The *Changes* in East Asia," follows the transmission of the text around greater East Asia; and chapter five, "The Westward Travels of the *Changes*," traces its transmission to Europe and the Americas. In both chapters, Smith is careful to analyze the ways in which this Chinese text was understood and employed by the cultures into which it came into contact, including polemical uses. The "Concluding Remarks" summarize much of what preceded it in the rest of the book and emphasize just how central an understanding of the Yijing is to comprehending many facets of Chinese, and to some degree, world culture.

Smith provides rich supplemental material, including twenty illustrations, a list of hexagrams, and a chronology of Chinese dynasties, all helpful for introductory-level students. This material also helps the reader to comprehend more fully the world of the Yijing, which frequently can be quite abstruse for non-experts (or even for experts, for that matter). His bibliography is thorough, and the endnotes are well-arranged and helpful. Finally, the index is comprehensive.

One of the advantages to this book is Smith's prose; not only is it clear and accessible, but he writes in a way that brings the material to life. He is an engaging writer, and even though every now and then he (rarely) lapses into an overly academic syntax, on the whole he avoids this. This "biography" of the *Yijing* is an attractive and thorough resource. It should prove to be a useful addition to any library (academic or not) and a valuable help in any high school or college courses that incorporate study of the *Yijing* in any classroom context. ■

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### ERRATUM

The *EAA* volume 17, no. 3, winter 2012 included a review of Ron Knapp's excellent work *Things Chinese: Antiques, Crafts, Collectibles*. Unfortunately, the accompanying image was a cover photo of another book with a similar title. Please see the Tuttle Publishing ad on page 7 of this issue for the correct image for Professor Knapp's book. The editors apologize for this error.