

The I Ching: A Biography, by Richard J. Smith

Lives of Great Religious Books | Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012 | xxii + 278 pages | ISBN: 978-0-691-14509-9 (hardback) \$24.95



For most Western non-specialist readers, an introduction to the life of the *I Ching* (also called the *Yijing* and the *Changes*) will have its challenges. It is a text like no other within the world's major religions. At its core are sixty-four seemingly simple images, each constructed of six lines, which have collectively been understood by the most brilliant minds of China for well over two thousand years to represent perfectly the nature of reality, to reveal the past and future, and to provide a surefooted guide to right behavior. The *Changes* has no narrative, no gods to speak of, and by its very nature encourages a multiplicity of interpretations. Perhaps the most difficult leap for the initiate to this Chinese classic is that abstract pictures, not words, are at the heart of the meaning-making process.

These fundamental differences between the *Changes* and other major religious books are what make Richard J. Smith's biography (one in a new series from Princeton University Press about the reception of classic religious texts) such an excellent guide. If one cannot, at first, make heads or tails of what, exactly, has captivated the imaginative, intellectual and spiritual lives of so many people—if the allure of the images is unintuitive—one may at least appreciate seeing the book in action, as it evolved over time. Smith takes his readers through the *Changes's* life, from its elusive origins as one of many divination manuals, to a text with state-sanctioned commentaries and Confucian affiliations, to its destiny as an undisputed authority for Chinese life and thought at all levels of society. Not only that, Smith considers the *Changes's* presence in non-Chinese contexts, contrasting the book's life in its home country with that of its adoptive cultures in Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the West. An appreciation of the book's cultural importance grows as Smith transitions through so many successive periods and circumstances. To be privy to a bird's eye view of the history of the text (accomplished in under 250 pages) is to have glimpsed the sheer scale of human energy spent on its meaning and powers; it is to be persuaded of Smith's argument that the *Changes* has had such influence on account of "the intellectual challenges it

poses, the psychological insights it encourages, and the creative inspiration it affords” (212).

Smith’s biography is an excellent example of the clarity that may be lent by book history and reception methodologies. The key, I think, in Smith’s case, is his having struck the right balance between metaphysical and historical interests and examples, as he moves through his chronology. For example, by succinctly charting the schools of thought that developed in Early Imperial China, and their various readings of the *Changes*, one is helped to understand not only how the text met the intellectual and philosophical needs of the period but the historical circumstances themselves. Repeatedly, textual interpretation illuminates a particular moment in Chinese (or Japanese or Korean) history; and by tracing interpretive changes one absorbs more fully, along the way, the nature and fundamental appeal of the text. Balancing the historical and metaphysical, and the changing and the unchanging, attributes of this text’s reception is a particularly apt quality in Smith’s presentation because the *Changes* itself seems equally Earth-bound—a guide for the most mundane of life’s affairs—and quintessentially esoteric. Also satisfying to the historian, Smith at all moments seems to be in control not only of the enormous amount of commentary on the *Changes* but also of the most salient national, cultural, and philosophical circumstances impinging on the life of this text, from contact with new, “foreign” Buddhist ideas to the rise of emphasis on textual criticism in Korea. Moreover, he manages to consistently clue the reader into the distinctions between popular and more scholarly receptions, be alert to the physical environment, and bring colorful personalities into the narrative, where illustrative.

The section of the book that considers the Western reception of the *Changes* is the one to which the most outside knowledge is brought to bear by the present reviewer. Smith does two things very well on this point. First, he spends substantial time on fascinating, if somewhat obscure, pre-twentieth-century investigations by Westerners of the *Changes*. The attempt of the French Jesuit Joachim Bouvet to reconcile a Christian cosmology with the text and the effort of the British Protestant missionary Joseph Edkins to simply understand the wisdom of another people are well worth the pages spent on them; furthermore, these cross-religious case-studies vanquish what will be a preconception among many: that the Beat Generation were the first to appropriate from the East. Secondly, Smith does well also to highlight the fact that it was not only in America that the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s looked to East Asian religious traditions for creative, personal, cul-

tural, and political inspiration. Indeed, the author points to many artists and writers in Mexico, for example, including Octavio Paz, Salvador Elizondo, and Francisco Serrano, for whom the *Changes* was important.

That said, it is slightly disappointing that there is little in the way of an explanation as to why the *Changes* has appealed to post-1950s Western culture. And to the extent to which an explanation is offered, there is the possibility, at least, of a contradiction. On the one hand, Smith speculates that the popular appeal “can be explained primarily by the challenge the book seems to pose to conventional Western values” (194). Yet if, as he says, the influence has been “substantial and persistent” since the 1960s, to the extent that English translations and symbols from the *Changes* have become successfully commercialized (as he mentions), then there must be something at stake for people not quite aligned with the counter-cultural artists given attention in this section—Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, the novelist Philip K. Dick, and the like. If there was a successful move to the commercial mainstream, then there must be something about the book that appeals to a wider sector of society than discussion of this sub-culture would suggest. Smith alludes to this fact in his critique of another scholar’s article, saying “one did not have to be a hippie to explore and experiment; ‘straights’ discovered that they could also join the fun.” However, Smith himself hardly goes beyond the cliché. Moreover, Smith mentions that this commercialization “has increased steadily, and sometimes dramatically, in recent years,” which holds out the possibility that, actually, there just may be some phenomenon, some cultural development of the 1990s, for example, that has more pertinence to the discussion of the *Changes*’s history in the West than do the heady days of Flower Power.

Small, singular criticism aside, Smith’s biography does what an introduction should do: encourage the reader to want to know more and provide a smooth over-arching conceptual framework, in economic fashion, through which one may understand the details. It would, therefore, be a helpful tool in a university course on Eastern or World religions and is highly recommended.

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