

BOOK NOTICE

Margaret Pearson. *The Original I Ching: An Authentic Translation of the Book of Changes*. Tokyo, Rutland, Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2011.

Reviewed by
Geoffrey Redmond*

When a new translation of the *Book of Changes* appears, the inevitable question is, “Why one more?” After all, the Wilhelm-Baynes translation under the Bollingen Press imprint of Princeton University Press was a best-seller and Amazon lists hundreds of entries under “*I Ching*.”¹ Yet, there is always room for translations with a fresh approach, given the uncertainties created by the extreme polysemy of Western Zhou Chinese, numerous changes in meaning over the past three millennia, topical allusions that are no longer recognizable, and the variants found in newly excavated texts.

Pearson’s work is in the lineage of the Doubting Antiquity movement of the early twentieth century, which tried to remove the later “Confucian” accretions and restore the original Western Zhou meanings. Most such reconstructions replace the received ethical readings of common words, notably 元亨利貞 *Yuan, Heng, Li, Zheng*, with more concrete ones. Pearson retains the ethical readings, but breaks new ground in challenging the misogynistic interpretations that she attributes to later commentators, beginning with Wang Bi. Though other perspectives on women in the *Zhou yi* are possible, this is an important effort in studying what early texts have to tell us about the lives of women in early China.²

Two brief examples will illustrate her approach. A passage often interpreted as prescribing a subordinate role for women is the reference to a female horse in the phrase 元亨利牝馬之貞 *yuan, heng, li, pin ma zhi zhen* of the judgment text of Hexagram 2 坤 *Kun*. Wang Bi comments: “We have the female of it [the horse], so it represents the acme of

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1. Richard Wilhelm and Cary F. Baynes, *The I Ching or Book of Changes: The Richard Wilhelm Translation rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press. Bollingen Series XIX. 3rd edn, 1967).

2. Geoffrey Redmond and Tze-ki Hon, *Teaching the I Ching (Book of Changes)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2013), 72–92.

compliance."³ Pearson follows Wilhelm-Baynes in translating 亨 *heng* as "persistence," rather than "compliance," thus removing any suggestion of female stereotyping. She does not however use the proposed Western Zhou meaning of *heng* as offering, which would turn the phrase into a reference to using a mare as sacrificial victim, plausible in light of similar specifications of sacrificial animals in the oracle bone inscriptions.

Another passage that refers to women is the judgment of Hexagram 44 姤 *Gou*: 女壯勿用取女. As translated by Wilhelm-Baynes: "The maiden is powerful. One should not marry such a maiden."⁴ Pearson has: "The woman is great. Do not grab the woman."⁵

This, an apparent reference to bride stealing, is better than Wilhelm-Baynes's rendition, given that the actual Chinese does not advise against wedding the woman *because* she is powerful. Alternatively, this phrase could be read as advising not to marry the woman *even though* she is strong, strength being a desirable trait in an era of harsh manual labor.

Pearson's translation is very readable and sinologically-based, making it a good starting place for those beginning with this daunting classic. By raising gender issues, her translation will also be stimulating for scholars of this classic.

3. Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press), 142f.

4. Wilhelm-Baynes 171.

5. Pearson 176.