Classical Exegesis and Social Change: 
The Song School of Yijing Commentaries 
in Late Imperial China 

Tze-ki HON 
State University of New York, Geneseo

ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that for centuries, the civil service examinations played an important role in promoting social mobility in late imperial China. The examinations not only broke down the monopoly of the power of the aristocrats, but also created literati-bureaucrats who helped the imperial court to rule China. In this paper, I will use the Yijing commentaries to elucidate this momentous social change. Viewing these commentaries as historical documents rather than mere explanations of this Classic, I compare three major Yijing commentaries: Yichuan yizhuan of the Northern Song period (960-1127), Zhouyi daquan of the Ming period (1368-1644), and Zhouyi zhezhong of the Qing period (1644-1911). The three commentaries are chosen to highlight the three epochs in the social history of late imperial China: the rise of literati-bureaucrats during the Northern Song period; the strengthening of the state-lineage alliance during the Ming period; and the expansion of the role of the literati in the print market during the Qing period. The focus of my comparison will be the seemingly insignificant change in state orthodoxy regarding the order of Cheng Yi's (1033-1107) and Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) Yijing commentaries. Rather than putting Cheng Yi ahead of Zhu Xi as in the Zhouyi daquan of the Ming, the Qing editors of the Zhouyi zhezhong reversed the order by placing Zhu Xi ahead of Cheng Yi. This change from Cheng-Zhu to Zhu-Cheng, I will argue, was not only a strategic adjustment in interpreting the Yijing, but also a potent symbol of the social transformation in early Qing China.

Keywords: Cheng Yi, Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, literati-bureaucrats, self-identity, social mobility, Yijing commentaries, Zhu Xi

It is commonly known that the “Song School of Yijing commentaries” (Song Yi, hereafter, Song School) dominated the studies of this classic in late imperial China. From its rise to prominence in the Northern Song (960-1127) through its codification and canonization in the early Ming (ca. 1415) to its decline and fall in the mid Qing (ca. 1750), the Song School defined the textual body of the Yijing, established the parameters for its interpretation, and facilitated its circulation among the educated elite. At the core of the Song School were two commentaries: Yichuan yizhuan (A Commentary on the Changes [by a reader] from Yi River) by Cheng Yi (1033-1107), and Zhouyi benyi (The Original Meanings of the Changes of the Zhou Dynasty) by Zhu Xi (1130-1200). As
the twin leaders of the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism, Cheng Yi's and Zhu Xi's commentaries were promoted by the imperial court as the standard reading of the Yijing. Tested in the civil service examinations, they jointly shaped the cultural agenda of the literati-bureaucrats and the self-identity of the educated elite.

On the surface, since Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi were the twin leaders of the Cheng-Zhu orthodoxy, it seems logical that they must have shared similar views on the Yijing. But, in reality, their commentaries were quite different. As a follower of Wang Bi (226-249), the founder of the yili (meanings and principles) exegetical method, Cheng Yi read the Yijing as a moral and philosophical treatise. As a supporter of Shao Yong (1011-1077), the major figure of the xiangshu (images and numbers) exegetical method, Zhu Xi read the Yijing as a manual of divination. Thus, from the beginning, the followers of the Song School had to find ways to reconcile the differences between the yili and xiangshu methods. To this end, they had to constantly reinterpret Cheng Yi's and Zhu Xi's commentaries to keep pace with the changes in the two methods and the needs of the audience. Therefore, the questions this study seeks to answer are: Why was the Song School built on a precarious balance between two competing exegetical methods? What was so profound in Cheng Yi's and Zhu Xi's commentaries that made combining them the best option for building an exegetical paradigm? What changes were adopted in the Song School to make the two commentaries compatible and meaningful?

In what follows, I will answer these questions by giving a brief account of the Song School in the Ming and Qing periods (roughly from the 1400s to the 1750s). This survey serves two purposes. First, with respect to the Yijing exegesis, it draws attention to the tremendous efforts that were made to revive and reshape the Song School over those three hundred years, showing that the Song School was a living tradition that evolved over time to cope with the momentous changes in late imperial China. Second, with respect to methodology, this survey underscores the connection between classical exegesis and social change. Focusing on the two most influential state-sponsored Yijing commentaries in late imperial China—the Zhouyi daquan (The Compendium of Cheng Yi's and Zhu Xi's Commentaries on the Changes of the Zhou Dynasty, 1415) and the Zhouyi zhezhong (Balanced Annotations of the Changes of the Zhou Dynasty, 1715)—this survey shows how the Song School was transformed from the “Cheng-Zhu paradigm” in the Ming into the “Zhu-Cheng paradigm” in the Qing. This change, I contend, reflects a major shift in the literati's self-identity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To prove my point, I will draw upon recent social studies of late imperial China to show the parallels between the changes in the Song School and the changes in Chinese society. These parallels, I argue, indicate that the changes in the Song School were not only a strategic adjustment in classical learning but also a potent symbol of social transformation.

Differences between Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi

Generally speaking, Cheng Yi and Zhu Xi shared similar views on the Confucian classics, but they differed tremendously in their readings of the Yijing. One of their differences concerned the contents of the classic. For Cheng Yi, the Yijing was a