



**The emperor's miracle  
machine**



**English  
podcast transcript**

# The emperor's miracle machine

## *Yijing: The Book of Changes Pt. 2*

### English transcript

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*FM: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, a podcast produced by METIS, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices. You can find us at [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch).*

*This episode is dedicated to Yi Jing. We have already recorded an English podcast on Yi Jing with Kai Marchal and Eliane Schmid, which you can find on our website, including transcript. In this episode we want to deepen the discussion. My name is Frederike Maas and I am pleased to welcome Kai Marchal once again on this topic. Kai Marchal is professor of philosophy at the National Chengchi University in Taipei.*

*Welcome Mr. Marchal.*

KM: Good afternoon Mrs. Maas.

*FM: Mr. Marchal, even though we have already referred to the English podcast and transcript, perhaps you can begin by briefly explaining what the Yi Jing is?*

KM: So, the *Yi Jing* is kind of like a miracle machine, in a sentence. It's a book, you wouldn't believe it sometimes, that shows up in all kinds of cultural contexts. It's a very strange cultural phenomenon. And in the last 100 years it has spread all over the world and is

mentioned today in the same breath with genetics, computers, the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics and with all kinds of esotericism. One also finds the *Book of the Changes* mentioned in the newest Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle*. It's about a protagonist who has a dream, and in this dream, she has an out-of-body experience and then sees a hexagram from the *Yi Jing*. And this list implies the incredible speculative power of this book. It's fascinating on the one hand, it is of an incredible fascination, so Bob Dylan also quotes it in one of his songs, I think it's called *Idiot Wind* from the 70s. This idea that you can foresee the future with the help of *Yi Jing*, you flip a coin and then understand something about your own life, it's very, very powerful. And yes, at its core, *Yi Jing* is an overall cosmic vision. It says something about everything; about the universe, that you can foresee the future with the help of this book. So, the princes, the kings, had their advisors, who then advised on war or marriage with the help of this book. So this has a very specific historical context. It can be dated approximately to the time between 1000 and 800 B.C. The book was written in a longer process. So, it doesn't have just one author, like so many books in China, but a great many authors were involved. Traditionally, of course, it is the heroic emperors of prehistoric times. There are certain mythical stories about this book. And Confucius is also said to have played a role. But today's scientific view is of course a bit more sober. So probably these heroes did not exist at all. It is a book that has gradually formed over many centuries. There are then also all kinds of commentaries. The last completed one, the most famous commentary, then dates from about 300 B.C. So between 800 and 300 B.C. the book was formed. And to the structure of the book: There are on the one side the so-called hexagrams and trigrams. I'm sure that will mean something to some of the listeners. So, a hexagram is basically just a combination of lines, six parallel lines. And there are the solid lines, they represent yang, and then there are the broken lines – the non-solid lines – they represent yin. And yang yin, yin and yang, we know that even today in everyday language: yang represents the creative element and yin represents the receiving element, that is, the male and the female. Two different energies, so it is said in the traditional world of imagination. And a hexagram, the hexagram with the six solid lines, that is the first hexagram, represents a constellation; a certain situation that can occur in the world again and again. And since there are only six positions and, in each position, there can be either a yin or a yang line, there are 64 combinations. So, there are 64 hexagrams. Then you can combine that even further, so aleatory is at play, and you then come up with tens of

thousands of possible states. And according to the traditional reading, the book with these thousands of states contains all possible states in the universe.

*FM: You already mentioned that the book was well received in Europe as well. In the English podcast you speak of a connection to C. G. Jung. The latter emphasizes as a guiding principle of Yi Jing a principle of synchronicity, as he calls it, which he recognizes as authoritative in this book. Jung characterizes it as opposite to the causal principle that is particularly familiar to us in the West. Can you briefly explain how this synchronicity is supposed to work and to what extent Jung's reading is at all legitimate?*

KM: Well, C. G. Jung understands this synchronistic principle quite simply as the idea that we may nevertheless interpret certain events that are not linked via a causal relationship as being connected. The examples then often come from his practice. So the patients dream something, for example, and then something happens in the outside world, in the real world. And C. G. Jung then says that one can connect this dream with the event in the outside world, that there is a connection there. I think this interpretation of C. G. Jung has of course some specific context in psychoanalysis. This context is of course not given in the *Yi Jing*. The *Yi Jing* is much older, where completely different cultural convictions play a role. But nevertheless, this idea helps a little bit to understand the book. Because in fact, as I just said, everything is supposed to be contained in this book. And the idea of a distinction between the inner world and the outer world is not really drawn in this book either. So the microcosm – my own body, my sensation – and the macrocosm are in an immediate relationship to each other. And this immediate relationship is not to be understood causally. So, the idea that when billiard ball A hits billiard ball B, billiard ball B rolls away; this is how we often understand causality. With this understanding spatial and temporal proximity is presupposed. The two billiard balls would have to be on the same billiard table. And according to *Yi Jing* it is exactly different; the synchronicity does not presuppose spatial and temporal proximity. So that not only events in the inner world and the outer world can have a relationship to each other, but also events which take place in geographically separated points. So, if in Asia a sack of rice tips over and I dream a nightmare here in Zurich. These two events may be interpreted as connected, according to the *Yi Jing*.

*FM: The Yi Jing, if I may consciously formulate it this way, seems to be predestined in a special way for a kind of everyday esotericism, which is possibly also problematic, because it serves a logic of purpose, which contradicts the actual basic principles of the Yi Jing, as we have just discussed them. What I mean by this is that if you browse esoterically inclined internet forums, you will readily be told that the Yi Jing should simply be tried as a solution to everyday problems. Is such a solution-oriented application also demonstrable in ancient or even modern China, or is that a Western misappropriation?*

KM: Yes, that's a great question. We have to look more closely, of course. The *Yi Jing*, as I said, is almost 3000 years old, and through the millennia, of course, it has been interpreted in very different ways not only in China, but in East Asia. I was just talking about the structure of the book. So, there are these hexagrams, these six strokes or six lines, and besides that, of course, there's textual material, lots of it, in a very complicated language, and certain sayings. Each line is connected with a saying. And these sayings are often about salvation or disaster, luck, or misfortune. And you can then apply these sayings very specifically to your own life, so that of course the interpretation of this book takes a lot of time at first. And I think in these esoteric internet forums, people naturally look for something else. It's about directly, immediately finding a solution to their own problems. So somehow: I've gone through a difficult divorce, or I have digestive problems and then maybe you find such an esoteric website and you start to be interested in the *Yi Jing*. And there is of course the problem that the *Yi Jing* is read in a relatively reified context. And if you take a closer look, if you really take the time – and the *Yi Jing* needs time – then there is also criticism of such reified readings in China. So, the idea that one can actually predict the future with the help of the *Yi Jing*, was criticized very early in China. There is a stronger philosophical interpretation that is connected with the name 'Wang Bi', from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D., which put more emphasis on the metaphysical or cosmological ideas in these commentaries. So, it's not about the very specific prophecy of the future, but it's about better understanding the relationships between man and the world, and also creating resonance relationships. And maybe I can add one more point: So the *Yi Jing*, of course, is often read like tarot cards in the West these days. But the same thing happens in China or in Taiwan or in Hong Kong. People want a quick answer, and since the *Yi Jing* with all the hexagrams is basically a kind of Rorschach image, so each hexagram is a Rorschach image

and it's all ink blobs and everybody sort of sees in it what they want to see, it's very under-determined, it sort of makes sense for a lot of people. You can also get information from the fortune teller about the *Yi Jing* and about your own future. That's one line. But the interesting thing, which we should not forget, is that there has also always been another philosophical, or rather speculative way of interpretation. I always remember a colleague of mine in Taiwan, a philosopher who, I think, towards the end of his life considered himself a Habermasian, who did a lot of Kant and who therefore had a very critical view of modernity, a secular view of modernity. In his spare time, he used to interpret the *Yi Jing* to his students. That is perhaps a good example to illustrate this open interpretation of this book. You can simply reject it as irrational, but again and again you also find very rational people who recognize themselves in this book.

*FM: It also seems legitimate to me to take Yi Jing seriously in its practical life reference, as you have just explained it to us. Do you see a possibility to distinguish meaningfully between a merely technical or reified use and a genuine interest in dealing with this book not only intellectually but also in relation to life?*

KM: Yes, that is certainly a question to which it is difficult to formulate a general answer. You really have to see it in the concrete contexts, since the *Yi Jing* is read in Switzerland, in Germany, in France, in North America, in completely different cultural contexts and by different generations. One criterion that I think of right away, of course, is the question of applicability, financial applicability. And I think it's not good if you have to pay a lot of money for any courses on the *Yi Jing*. The *Yi Jing* should be free and should be open, accessible to all. And then as soon as it is put into commercial contexts, so to speak, there are probably some things that are misunderstood. In Wang Bi there is the statement that previous knowledge actually causes limitation. There is probably something to it. So in the 38<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Daodejing*, this need for previous knowledge, for control, which we of course have very strongly in modern times, should probably be kept out of this book a little bit. On the other hand, one can of course phrase it a little more positively, that with a little openness and with an enlightened attitude, one can surely learn something in this book about a more flexible way of dealing with uncertainties. By looking at these different hexagrams, so to speak, by perhaps even laying out a hexagram with the coin oracle and

asking a question about it, one perhaps also enters into a dialogue with oneself. Well, one is always easily locked up in one's own thoughts in everyday life and does not escape one's own inner voice. If you then have a counterpart, even if it's just a book, and you open yourself up to this counterpart, you can perhaps also learn something about your own life.

*FM: I would also be interested in your own approach to the Yi Jing. As a university professor in Taipei, the book is part of your teaching material. How do you treat it there with your students? Do you limit yourself to a scholarly approach or do you also discuss the Yi Jing's life guiding approach?*

KM: Well, I don't teach the book often, but I have taught it before. And a difficulty also for young people in Taiwan is firstly the language. It's a very old text and you have to translate it into modern Chinese. But people really enjoy it. They are often very beautiful, very poetic sayings that are very open to interpretation. So reading these texts requires a great, long time. You can do that, but then it becomes a text exercise in the academic sense, so to speak. As a teacher, I would never trust myself to lay out a hexagram for another, young person. Of course, this is something that only a fortune teller does, in Taiwan, in that concrete social context. I think a university teacher, or a person working in an academic context, will be a bit cautious, because many people still associate the idea of certain spiritual forces with this book, also in Asia, not only in North America, also in Asia. And there, of course, you don't want to say anything, so to speak, wrong, not to give young people wrong ideas.

*FM: You say that spiritually you can possibly compare it with the status that the Bible has in the European context. So the book is also something sacred, holy?*

KM: Definitely. That's what it is. Many young people are in great awe of this book, and of course it is easily abused. Compared to the Bible... in terms of the genre of the text, it is of course a completely different text than the Bible. I had already mentioned the metaphor of the machine. The *Yi Jing* has something machine-like, aleatory, an almost mathematically closed system. And that also fascinated Leibniz and many others, John Cage. So as a text, the *Yi Jing* works quite differently than the Bible. But as to the content, so to speak, one can

say that from both texts, of course, quite elementary impressions or also ideas have been drawn. So, the idea of the creator god and then also the creation of the world, as we find it in the Bible, one cannot find as such in the *Yi Jing*. But there are other stories, for example about these heroic sages of prehistoric times, who created civilization. And this is certainly very interesting and stimulating and one should know more about this in the present time.

*FM: I would like to expand on the book in its specific use. It seems to me that you want to say that the Yi Jing would more or less be used correctly if it paused one's everyday life by inviting reflection on the same. So are we simply misunderstanding the book if we want to read it as a kind of condensed set of information of instructions for action?*

KM: Absolutely. So, if you delve a little deeper into this book, you notice the many obstacles that are there. That stand in the way of understanding. And that's why, of course, in the traditional living environment, *Lebenswelt*, you need an interpreter, a fortune teller, so to speak, who explains this book to the listeners. So, of course, it seems like a kind of a secret knowledge. But, perhaps to give a more concrete example: These 64 hexagrams all have names. There are the first two hexagrams – the creative and the receptive – so once there are six yang lines and once there are six yin lines. You can still understand that. So, yang and yin, yin and yang, these are two basic forces or two energies that supposedly constitute the universe, that also flow through our bodies. But then, for example, with the third hexagram, there is the name 'difficulty at the beginning'. And then it is not quite so easy to interpret anymore. Or then there are also hexagrams, like for example the ninth one with the name 'the taming power of the small'. What does 'the taming power of the small' mean? So, it takes a certain hermeneutic effort to infer a concrete meaning. Or number 18: 'work on what has been spoiled'. And as you can hear, there are positive and there are negative hexagram names. And that's an important idea. The book seeks to guide us by always giving some rather positive instructions or hints, finger pointers, and then some rather negative. And so sometimes there's talk of threat and danger. You are warned that you should under no circumstances continue what you are doing. But if you look at the book as a whole, the positive comments on the individual lines are much more frequent than the negative ones. The ratio is 430 to 130. So there's something very optimistic about the book.



*FM: But did I understand correctly that you said that it takes a mediator to interpret the book for us? So, as a reader I don't have direct access to this book at all?*

KM: Of course, it's a bit like Christianity, where it was long believed that clergy was needed, a mediator between man and God. And in the Chinese world, the idea is of course somewhat different, but in fact there has always been, or in many social contexts, an interpreter. There have been, of course, individuals reading privately on their own. But oftentimes, the broader population went to a fortune teller who laid it out for them. To give another example, the *Yi Jing* naturally contains very concrete ideas about space and time. And so, for example, the Chinese perception of time was quite different, for example in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, than that in Europe. And the first British envoys who traveled to China in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and had an audience with the emperor, they once described it as if the clocks in China were a thousand years old. The time was different, and the negotiations took much longer. Maybe that also had something to do with this overall cosmological vision of *Yi Jing*.

*FM: You also mentioned Leibniz, who was very interested in combinatorics and perhaps for that reason was interested in the Yi Jing. You further referred to the Yi Jing as a machine and spoke a lot about mathematical structures. How should I understand this? The Yi Jing as a machine? Do you mean it metaphorically? Or in what way is the term 'machine' accurate here?*

KM: I was just thinking of the idea that the *Yi Jing* is a self-contained system that provides answers to all kinds of questions. So, a bit like a room, a black box that you can't see into. And something happens in there, and then this black box spits out a piece of paper with an answer to one's own life problem. So as a metaphor, a metaphor, it works quite well and, I think, captures an important function of this book quite well. It's closed, but it supposedly contains all possible states of the world. That's sort of the traditional, metaphysical or speculative belief that was shared by a great many Chinese scholars. And then beyond that, of course, you can refer to this idea of the two states. So, this binary code: ying and yan. That is, as I said quite abstractly, with the help of these two lines – a solid line and a broken line – like the zero and the one in the computer code. And Leibniz must have been very

enthusiastic about this book at the time. Because there was no such book in Western philosophy. And I think he also saw in it an answer, or a possible universal language. A language that could actually replace the individual, naturally developed languages in a future cosmopolitan age. In addition, of course, one can also point out that the *Yi Jing* is also closely connected with Chinese mathematics. Chinese mathematics – we don't usually know much about it in Europe – was once a very successful tradition of scholarship. The Chinese mathematicians, for example in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century, were certainly much better than the mathematicians in medieval Europe. There were really important breakthroughs there. And so, for example, the Gaussian elimination method was described very early. And there was all kinds of algebra and other forms of calculation. The art of calculation played a big role. And what one could also add is that in China there was never the idea of an axiomatic deductive method of proof. So, these mathematical procedures and rules were derived analogously. And then diagrams, as we know them from the *Yi Jing*, often played a big role as well as this concept of the 'Ying Yan', the change. I am not an expert myself, but the idea of change was also taken up in Chinese mathematics and played a big role there. So it was less about capturing a substance or a state that was removed from change, but it was actually about describing states of change.

*FM: Unfortunately, we've already come to the end of our podcast. Thank you, Kai Marchal, for your participation and the stimulating conversation.*

KM: Thank you Ms. Maas. It was very nice.

*FM: I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom Talks and to browse the media offerings of the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and practices that can be found at [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch). Directly below the podcast you will find the link to our text archive. Thank you for your time and hope to see you soon.*

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