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# THE YIJING AND THE GENERATION OF INTERPRETATIONS: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE JESUIT FIGURIST INTERPRETATION OF THE YIJING IN CONTRAST TO THE XIANGSHU AND YILI INTERPRETATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the innovative interpretation of the *Yijing* by Jesuit Figurists during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. This paper examines how Figurists, such as Joachim Bouvet, endeavored to connect the *Yijing*'s teachings with Christian theology, suggesting that the hexagrams of the *Yijing* contained subtle connections to Christian truths. The study contrasts *Figurism* with the traditional Chinese methodologies of *Xiangshu* and *Yili*, highlighting the Figurists' efforts to establish a theological dialogue between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions. The paper also discusses the varied scholarly responses to *Figurism*, from criticisms of its selective interpretation of Chinese symbols, to positive appraisals of its cross-cultural bridge-building. Ultimately, this underscores the *Yijing*'s interpretive richness and its capacity to facilitate intercultural and interreligious engagement, advocating for a nuanced approach that respects the text's indigenous symbolic depth.

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## **The *Yijing* and Its Traditional Chinese Interpretations**

The *Yijing* (*I Ching* or *Book of Changes*) occupies a central position in Chinese philosophy and culture, exerting a profound influence on Confucianism, Daoism, and traditions beyond the borders of China. Far from being a mere divination tool, it is a comprehensive philosophical system composed of 64 hexagrams. Each hexagram symbolizes unique states and is complemented by evolving interpretations that underscore its pivotal role in Chinese intellectual history.

The traditional interpretation of the *Yijing* is predominantly represented by two methodologies: *Xiangshu* (象数), which focuses on the symbolic and numerological aspects intrinsic to cosmology, and *Yili* (义理), which focuses on the ethical and philosophical tenets within the Confucian ethos. The *Xiangshu* approach, deeply rooted in the early Chinese intellectual discourse and reaching its zenith during the Han dynasty, correlates hexagrams with the patterns observed in nature. Conversely, the *Yili* approach, crafted by Neo-Confucian scholars such as Zhu Xi, views the hexagrams as blueprints for personal moral cultivation and the governance of society. Collectively, these interpretative strategies have sculpted the *Yijing*'s influence on Chinese metaphysical and ethical contemplation.

Nevertheless, while the *Xiangshu* and *Yili* methodologies have been pivotal in forging the traditional Chinese comprehension of the *Yijing*, this paper seeks to delve into a less-discussed, yet noteworthy, interpretative lens that has its origins in Western thought: *Figurism*. *Figurism*, a product of the intellectual labor of Jesuit missionaries in China during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, represents a Western perspective that sought to reinterpret the *Yijing* in a manner that would harmonize its teachings with Christian theology. Prominent Jesuit Figurists, including Joachim Bouvet and his contemporaries, posited that encoded in the hexagrams of the *Yijing* were subtle allusions to Christian truths and scriptural

narratives. Their interpretative efforts aimed to establish that the *Yijing* was not merely a treatise on Chinese cosmology and moral philosophy, but also a divinely inspired text that anticipated the advent of Christ and the principles of the Christian faith.

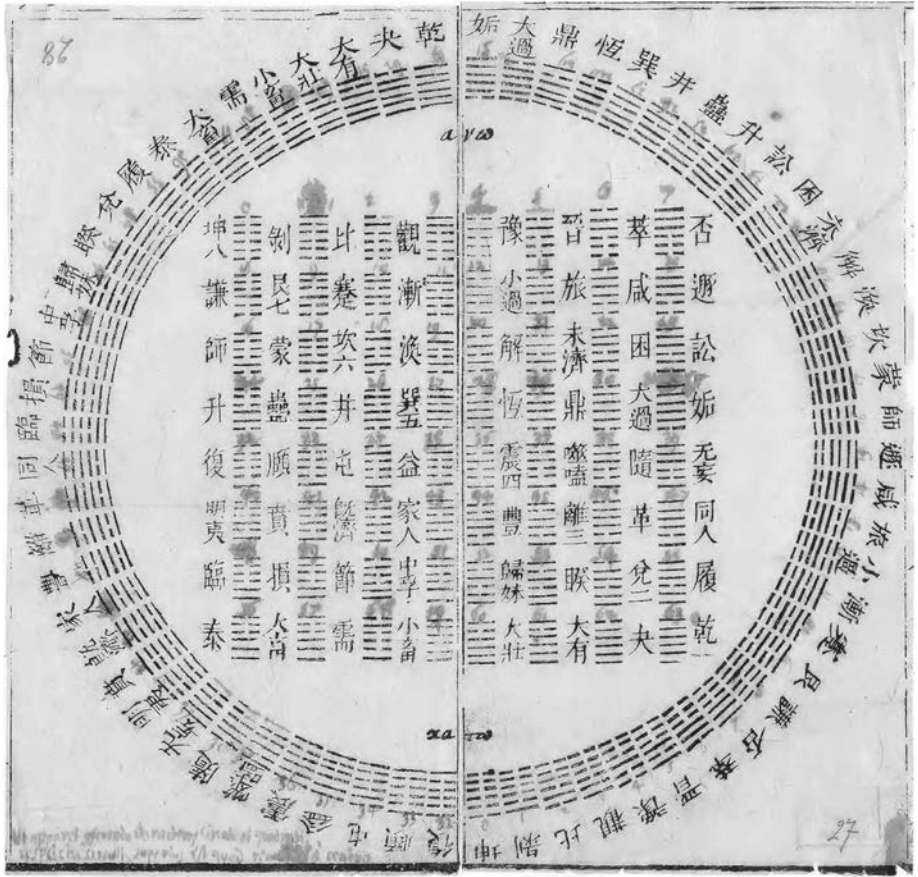


Illustration 1: Diagram of Hexagrams sent by Bouvet to Leibniz<sup>2</sup>

**Jesuit Figurists and their Interpretation of the *Yijing***

The Jesuit Figurists’ approach differs fundamentally from the *Xiangshu* and *Yili* methods in that it seeks to reinterpret Chinese symbols and cosmology within the framework of Christian doctrine. By doing so, the Figurists aimed to uncover a universal theological message within the

<sup>2</sup> Image taken from Wikimedia Commons. Accessed [2024/12/27]. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=36231359>.

*Yijing*, thereby supporting their missionary efforts in China by framing Christianity as a fulfillment of the ancient Chinese wisdom contained in the text. This interpretative strategy reflects a broader attempt by the Figurists to create a dialogue between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions, positioning the *Yijing* as a key text for cross-cultural exchange.

Matteo Ricci's earlier efforts to facilitate the engagement of Christianity with Chinese thought through Confucianism laid the groundwork for this strategy, which was cautious of elements incompatible with Christian theology, like the Neo-Confucian concept of "Taiji."<sup>3</sup> Ricci's approach was a critical phase in the Jesuit mission in China, where translation and cultural accommodation were central, and he primarily sought to build bridges between Christianity and Confucianism, recognizing the latter's influence on Chinese intellectual thought and its potential compatibility with Christian doctrines. As Kevin N. Cawley notes, "Ricci transformed and translated a Western idea of God into this other context,"<sup>4</sup> highlighting his careful approach to cultural accommodation.

Joachim Bouvet's *Figurism*, which emerged during the Qing dynasty, represented a significant shift from Ricci's approach. Influenced by Emperor Kangxi's interest in the *Yijing*, Bouvet proposed that the text contained hidden Christian truths, drawing parallels with earlier Christian practices of finding New Testament themes foreshadowed by the Old Testament. Influenced by his interests in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, he believed that the text had its origins in ancient Egypt during the time of the Biblical Patriarchs and contained hidden or "figured" Christian truths, hence the name "Figurism."<sup>5</sup> Bouvet's work, which built upon these earlier traditions, was part of a broader Jesuit strategy of cultural accommodation, aiming to present Christianity as an already integral part

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Nelson Cawley, "De-constructing the Name(s) of God: Matteo Ricci's Translational Apostolate." *Translation Studies* 6, no. 3 (2013), 293.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7.

of China's intellectual heritage.<sup>6</sup> This strategy was not only a theological innovation but also a strategic move to align Christianity with the cultural and intellectual priorities of Qing China, demonstrating a broader attempt by the Figurists to create a dialogue between Eastern and Western intellectual traditions.<sup>7</sup>

Bouvet's *Figurism* was instrumental in the Jesuit mission to integrate Christian theology with Chinese cosmology, particularly through engagement with the *Yijing*. This approach was in harmony with Emperor Kangxi's interests and was aimed at making Christianity more palatable to the Chinese elite. Bouvet's disciples, including Joseph Henri-Marie de Prémare and Jean François Foucquet, expanded upon *Figurism* by identifying Christian themes in other ancient Chinese texts and forging connections between Chinese and Christian cosmologies. Their work, while facing varying degrees of acceptance in the Chinese court, was part of a larger Jesuit strategy of "accommodation,"<sup>8,9</sup> which sought to adapt Christian teachings to local customs and intellectual traditions. Foucquet, in particular, followed Bouvet's approach of typological exegesis and the Confucian-Christian-Dao synthesis in his interpretation of the Dao, and he focused on profiling Jesus Christ as a Daoist sage who possessed the virtues of the Dao. This syncretic approach demonstrated the universality of Christian truths by connecting them with ancient Chinese wisdom, thereby supporting the broader Jesuit mission of cultural accommodation and presenting Christianity as the fulfillment of China's intellectual and spiritual heritage.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Standaert, *The Intercultural Weaving of Historical Texts: Chinese and European Stories about Emperor Ku and His Concubines*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, 238.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Lackner, "Jesuit Figurism." *In China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Hongqi Li and Thomas H. C. Lee, 129–150. Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1991, 132.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Hart, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 249.

Based on the provided content, it can be seen that the collective work of the Jesuit Figurists, particularly those of Joachim Bouvet and his disciples, resulted in the construction of a unique theological framework designed to span the cultural and religious chasm between East and West. By discerning Christian symbols within the corpus of Chinese literature, the Figurist approach endeavored to demonstrate the universality of Christian principles, suggesting their presence within the oldest strata of Chinese philosophical thought. This strategy not only bolstered the Jesuit missionary initiatives by portraying Christianity as being in harmony with Chinese cultural practices but also significantly contributed to the broader intellectual dialogue between China and the West during the early years of the Qing dynasty.<sup>11</sup>

### **Examples of specific hexagrams from the *Yijing***

In the following parts, this paper will conduct a comparative analysis of the representative hexagrams from the *Yijing* to reveal the unique features of *Figurism*, *Xiangshu*, and *Yili* Methodology. The exploration begins with the first hexagram, *Qian*.

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<sup>11</sup> Juan González de Mendoza, *The History of the Great and Mighty Kingdom of China and the Situation Thereof*. Vol. 1. Translated by Robert Parke, edited by George Staunton and R. H. Major. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. (Originally published in 1585), 98.

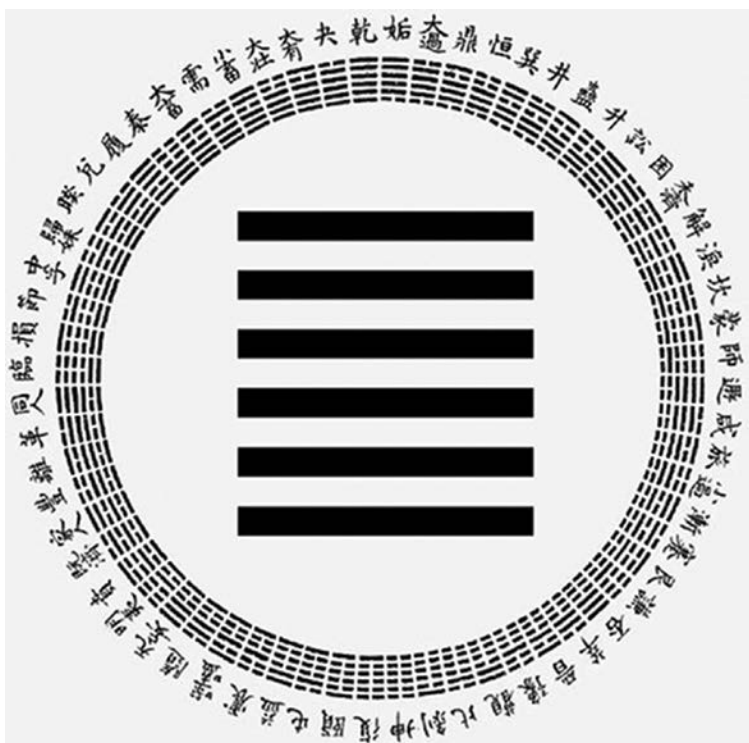


Illustration 2: I Ching Hexagram 1<sup>12</sup>

The *Qian* Hexagram (乾卦), as interpreted through the *Xiangshu* approach, symbolizes the essence of pure yang energy and is considered a representation of the creative force of Heaven.<sup>13</sup> The hexagram is composed of the two trigrams *Qian* (☰ Heaven) with a total of six unbroken yang lines, each of which signifies a stage in the unfolding of Heaven's creative power. This sequence of lines reflects the progressive manifestation of cosmic energy, emphasizing the cyclical and self-renewing nature of the universe. The dynamic yet orderly process of creation is a central theme of the *Qian* Hexagram. Numerically, the six

<sup>12</sup> "I Ching Hexagram 1: The Creative Heaven, Astrological Interpretation." Passion Astro. Accessed December 27, 2024. <https://passion-astro.com/i-ching-hexagram-1-the-creative-heaven-astrological-interpretation/>

<sup>13</sup> Iulian Konstantinovich Shchutskii, *Researches on the I Ching*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979, 271.

lines of the hexagram correspond to the number six, which is a symbol of the fullness of yang energy and its hierarchical structure within the cosmos. The interaction between the yang energy of Heaven and the yin energy of Earth illustrates the cosmic dualism, where *Qian* acts as an active agent of transformation, guiding both the material and immaterial realms through the heavenly influence.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Yili* tradition, the *Qian* Hexagram reflects moral authority, particularly in rulership. The unbroken yang lines symbolize the virtues of steadfastness, power, and leadership.<sup>15</sup> The hexagram serves as a moral compass for rulers, highlighting that true authority is derived from aligning with heavenly principles, such as integrity, wisdom, and the maintenance of order. Each line of the hexagram offers moral lessons for leadership, and the hexagram as a whole function as a metaphor for how a ruler should model their governance on the eternal, just, and creative forces of Heaven.<sup>16</sup>

Bouvet's *Figurism* interpretation of the *Qian* Hexagram offers a distinct perspective by recontextualizing it through Christian theological symbolism. Bouvet viewed the six unbroken yang lines as embodying divine perfection and omnipotence, aligning the hexagram with the biblical account of creation in Genesis. The focus of the hexagram on Heaven and creation was seen by Bouvet as a reflection of God's omnipotence, with each line symbolizing stages of divine creation. Bouvet further argued that the hexagram encoded Christian truths, with its yang energy symbolizing the divine nature of Christ and the Holy Trinity. He believed that the *Qian* Hexagram provided evidence of Christian doctrine within Chinese cosmology, suggesting that Chinese texts anticipated Christian revelation.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*. Translated by Cary F. Baynes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967, 155.

<sup>15</sup> Iulian Konstantinovich Shchutskii, *Researches on the I Ching*, 271.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Hart, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter*, 253.

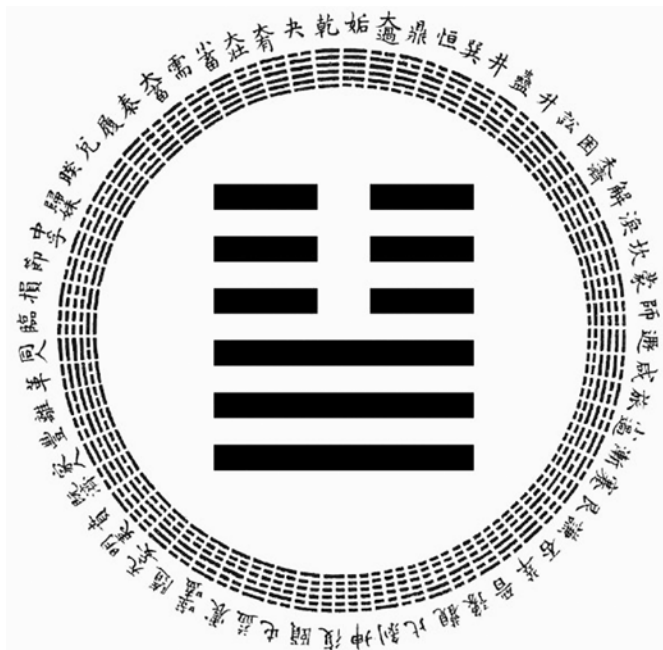


Illustration 3: I Ching Hexagram 11<sup>18</sup>

Another frequently referenced hexagram in the *Yijing* is the *Tai* (泰) hexagram. In the *Xiangshu* approach, the *Tai* Hexagram (泰卦), which is composed of the trigrams *Qian* (☰ Heaven) below *Kun* (☷ Earth), encapsulates a state of cosmic equilibrium between the yang force of Heaven and the yin force of Earth. This configuration symbolizes a harmonious interplay, fostering peace and prosperity. The ascending yang lines of *Qian* and the descending yin lines of *Kun* depict an ideal alignment between the governing force of Heaven and the nurturing energy of Earth. Sequentially, the *Tai* Hexagram's numerical positioning and inverted yin and yang lines emphasize equilibrium. The hexagram underscores balance and unity, reflecting the universal stability and the natural order of abundance and security that arise when Heaven and Earth are in perfect harmony, aligning with the cyclical nature of Chinese cosmology.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> "I Ching Hexagram 11: Peace, Astrological Interpretation," Passion Astro. Accessed December 27, 2024. <https://passion-astro.com/i-ching-hexagram-11-peace-astrological-interpretation/>.

<sup>19</sup> Iulian Konstantinovich Shchutskii, *Researches on the I Ching*, 301.

From the *Yili* perspective, the *Tai* Hexagram serves as a moral compass for governance and leadership. The balance between *Qian* (Heaven) and *Kun* (Earth) is metaphorical for just leadership, where rulers must merge virtue — encompassing the wisdom and authority of Heaven — with humility and care for the populace, represented by Earth's submission. This hexagram operates as a guide for virtuous governance, emphasizing that societal peace and prosperity hinge on a continuous commitment to moral principles. This interpretation resonates with Confucian ideals of leadership and political ethics, highlighting the importance of moral clarity and perseverance in the face of adversity.<sup>20,21</sup>

Bouvet's *Figurist* interpretation of the *Tai* Hexagram introduces a Christian theological dimension, interpreting the unbroken lines of *Qian* as symbolism of the Holy Trinity and the broken lines of *Kun* as representative of evil forces. Bouvet connected the hexagram's structure to the Christian eschatological battle between good and evil, where divine forces emerge victorious. He perceived the *Tai* Hexagram as an encoded message that reflects Christian truths, particularly the Trinitarian doctrine and the ultimate triumph of Heaven (God) over Earth (Satanic forces). This alignment of Chinese cosmology with Christian revelation was a significant aspect of the *Figurist* approach, which aimed to demonstrate the universality of Christian truths by linking them with ancient Chinese wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

Based on the above analysis, we can see that *Figurism* differs fundamentally from the traditional *Xiangshu* and *Yili* methods in that it uses Western transcendent and moralistic principles to reconcile the Chinese *Yijing* with Christianity. We can now examine how this interpretative method also generated various reactions from Eastern and Western scholars.

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<sup>20</sup> Richard John Lynn, *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 206.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wilhelm, *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, 279.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Jonathan Jackson Altizer, *The Transfiguration of the Trinity. In The Apocalyptic Trinity*, 119–132. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 119.

## Discussions and Conclusions

These responses from scholars can be categorized into negative, neutral and positive, reflecting the complexities of cross-cultural intellectual exchange.

Bouvet's *Figurism* was not without its critics. Early Jesuit authorities, including Antoine Gaubil, rebuked Bouvet for allegedly diluting Christian teachings, leading to the eventual rejection of his work by the Vatican.<sup>23</sup> More contemporary critics include the Chinese scholar Lili Zhang, who believes that the Jesuit Figurists selectively interpreted symbols and patterns to fit their theological agendas. She further points out the tendency of *Figurism* to subsume Chinese intellectual traditions under Western religious frameworks, which undermined the text's intrinsic value and philosophical depth.<sup>24</sup>

A more neutral assessment of Bouvet's *Figurism* comes from scholars who acknowledge both its innovative and problematic aspects. Michael Lackner, for instance, viewed *Figurism* as an ambitious, yet flawed, attempt to merge two distinct intellectual traditions. This perspective recognizes the complexity and challenges inherent in reconciling divergent philosophical and theological systems.<sup>25</sup> In a similar vein, James Legge, a Western sinologist, adopted a philological approach to the *Yijing*. His translation of the text did not endorse Bouvet's theological interpretations but aimed to make the *Yijing* more accessible to Western audiences, thereby fostering a more nuanced understanding of Chinese cosmology and its potential intersections with Western thought.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Antoine Gaubil, *Correspondance de Pékin: 1722–1759*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970, 264.

<sup>24</sup> Lili Zhang, "西方易学研究发展的四个阶段——以《易经》的性质为中心" [The Four Stages of the Development of Western Studies on the *Yijing*: Focusing on the Nature of the *Yijing*]. *Journal of Literature, History & Philosophy* 0, no. 3 (2024), 121.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Lackner, "Jesuit Figurism." *In China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 221.

<sup>26</sup> James Legge, *The Yijing*. 1964, 20.

As for positive reactions, Bouvet's *Figurism* received support from a spectrum of scholars who acknowledged its innovative approach in bridging Eastern and Western philosophies. Chinese scholars like Chen Xinyu recognized Bouvet's work under Emperor Kangxi as a pioneering endeavor in cross-cultural dialogue, appreciating the efforts to integrate the symbolic and numerological aspects of the *Yijing* with Christian theology.<sup>27</sup> This perspective was not restricted to the East, as Western scholars such as Leibniz were also captivated by the binary structure of *Yijing*'s hexagrams. They regarded Bouvet's work as an intellectual precursor to the Enlightenment's pursuit of universal knowledge, highlighting the potential for a unified understanding of the world's philosophical and theological traditions.<sup>28,29</sup>

This paper would like to place particular importance on Bouvet's relationship to Leibniz with whom he shared letters. Their correspondence significantly shaped Western philosophical engagement with Chinese thought. Leibniz, one of the first Western philosophers to write about Chinese thought and he depended on Bouvet for much of his knowledge of the subject. Bouvet who was originally a mathematician before becoming a missionary, is also responsible for alerting Leibniz that the hexagrams of the *Yijing* represents a binary number system similar to the one Leibniz was attempting to formulate. Perkins writes: "The discovery reinforced Leibniz's belief that the wisdom of the ancient Chinese surpassed that of the modern Chinese and his belief that Europeans could help to rediscover these truths. the Connection also increased Leibniz's faith in a rational structure underlying the Chinese language."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Chen Xinyu, *Baijin Yixue Sixiang Yanjiu: Yi Fandigang Tushuguan Jiancun Zhongwen Yixue Ziliao Wei Jichu* [A Research of Joachim Bouvet's Thoughts about the Yijing: Based on Yijing-related Manuscripts Preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Library]. Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2017, 186.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Hart, *Imagined Civilizations: China, the West, and Their First Encounter*, 200.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Lackner, "Jesuit Figurism." *In China and Europe: Images and Influences in Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, 143.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

As mentioned earlier, Bouvet, who was influenced by Hermetism, believed that the *Yijing* was traceable back to ancient Egypt and expresses the earlier sacred knowledge of the Biblical Patriarchs. Franklin Perkins points out that Leibniz was unsure or ambivalent about this connection and rather focused his attention on reason and natural theology.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, these considerations led Leibniz to a certain approach to the interpretation of Chinese texts based upon the principle of accommodation. Perkins writes: “One last principle supporting accommodation is Leibniz’s focus not only on what the Chinese texts ‘really’ intend, but on the possibilities of interpretation. This move corresponds to the hermeneutic principle... when a text is contradictory, we should take the good and eliminate the bad.”<sup>32</sup> This is based upon his belief in a shared rationality and his resistance to the more anti-accommodation positions of Nicolò Longobardi. This leads to a hermeneutics based upon the generosity of interpretation. Perkins also points out that this also gives some weight to political considerations over epistemological ones.<sup>33</sup> These considerations point to a hermeneutics of cross-cultural understanding based upon human connections rather than an emphasis on invariant truths. It allows Christian interpretations of traditional Chinese culture to stand side by side with other more established interpretations.

Therefore, this paper suggests that Leibniz’s principle of generosity of interpretation is a valuable framework to consider Bouvet’s *Figurism* within the context of the *Yijing* and its traditional Chinese interpretations. Such an approach respects the *Yijing* as an independent and dynamic text, emphasizing its intrinsic value and interpretive depth. It also recognizes the *Yijing*’s power to generate multiple meanings through diverse interpretive paradigms, including *Xiangshu* (象数), *Yili* (义理), and *Figurism*. These diverse paradigms also showcase the *Yijing*’s capacity to transcend cultural boundaries and facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

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<sup>31</sup> Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light*, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Moreover, the Figurist interpretations of the *Yijing* operated as an early bridge between the Christian and Chinese traditions. By identifying parallels between the *Yijing*'s symbolic structures and Christian theological concepts, Bouvet and his contemporaries fostered an early form of cross-cultural dialogue. The *Yijing*'s adaptability allows it to function as more than a historical or religious text; it becomes a participatory site for interpretive creativity and innovation.

In conclusion, this paper underscores the importance of approaching such Chinese traditional texts with generosity and respect, following Leibniz's hermeneutic principle of accommodation. Ultimately, the *Yijing* stands as a testament to the possibility of a shared human rationality, offering a model for how cross-cultural texts can foster mutual understanding and promote a more interconnected global intellectual community.

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