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Daoist perspectives on knowing the future
Selections from the *Scripture on Great Peace*
(Taiping jing)
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Preface

This volume owes its existence to the unique environment for research on issues of “prognostication, fate and freedom” that prevails in the premises of the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities at the University of Erlangen. My sincere thanks go to Michael Lackner for inviting me there and to Michael Lüdke, Esther-Maria Guggenmos and all the others for having made my stay there as highly productive and greatly enjoyable as it was, not to forget Petra Hahm’s discreet help in facing all the hurdles of everyday life and work.

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Barbara Hendrischke
Introduction

In China, knowing the future was a discipline that largely depended on the perusal and production of written documents. This had been the case when history started with archives of oracle bones. Closer to the origins of Daoism, in Han dynasty times (202 BCE–220 CE), the Changes (Yi-jing 易經) was a popular book. Its core elements had been in use for prognostic queries since the beginning of the first millennium BCE. Scholarly additions gradually transformed it into a book of general knowledge on matters of natural processes and social life. It became an analytical tool far beyond its divinatory function. Its sixty-four hexagrams came to establish a presence in other writings while various newly developed intellectual skills were applied to the interpretation of those hexagrams. Several academic positions were established for the study of the Changes and the text also remained popular “among the people” as Ban Gu 班固 (32–92) put it. This is affirmed by the text’s presence in biographies of experts in recipes (fang shi 方士) from the Later Han (23–220 CE) period. This popularity, it can be argued, documented a realistic approach to foreknowledge. By using the Changes, a questioner expected to gain clarity about the parameters of his situation and the developments that were possible, which would perhaps enable him to make the most of a situation.

1 Peterson (1982) documents the potency that was attached to following the Changes. Lewis (1999: chapter 6) describes the development of its scholastic role.
2 “On arts and letters” (Yi wen zhi 藝文志) mentions four literati in official position (xue guan 學官) dealing with the Changes, and Fei Zhi 費直 and Gao Xiang 高相 (both first century BCE) who did so among the people (min jian 民間), see Han shu 30.1704.
3 Fan Ye’s 范曄 (396–446) “Traditions concerning recipes and techniques” (Fang shu liezhuan 方術列傳) mentions Yang You 楊由 and Duan Yi 段翳 as experts in the Changes, see Hou Han shu 82A.2716 and 2719.
4 Koselleck’s (2002: 136) thoughts on the art of prognosis are to the point: “Without constants in the different levels of permanence within the multitude of factors contributing to the formation of events to come, it would be impossible to predict anything at all.”
The scholarly craze for prognostic apocrypha (chén wéi 諧緯) that characterised the Later Han discourse is another example of the role of written materials in making predictions. Some of these materials figured as comments on classical texts and were said to derive from Confucius. Others were seen as derived from heaven. Historical developments pushed them into the limelight. In the turmoil of the first decades of the common era, contenders for the throne relied heavily on such documents to defend the legitimacy of their claim. Few of these documents have been transmitted. We therefore have to rely on quotations to understand what made them so successful that in Han dynasty times some saw their study as a gateway to the classics. The success of the apocrypha was supported by the fact that, as Marc Kalinowski puts it, “the last emperors of the Former Han reinforced the importance attached to astro-calendrical practices”.

Trust in a prediction relied on the belief that heaven was present in human activities. This belief led to the expectation that patterns manifest in or abstracted from nature would, if properly read, show heaven’s will. A common framework of analogical principles, methods and techniques was therefore put to diagnostic and prognostic use. When practised within these parameters, viewing the future affirmed the systematic coherence of things and events and the general regularity of basic processes. In the public arena such calculations were supported and

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5 Anna Seidel (1983: 291–323) gives a brief introduction to chén wéi materials. Zhao (2013: 115) argues that apocryphal texts “emerged as the most powerful intellectual weaponry in China in the first century A.D.” He shows that their transmission rested with teachers at the central National Academy (Zhao 2013: 201). Bujard (2009: 802) quite plausibly sees the creation of prognostic apocrypha as a reaction to scholarly veneration for the Classics, although it seems less clear that apocrypha in general deserve, as she suggests, the epithet “unorthodox”.

6 See Dull 1966, chapter 5.

7 See Dull 1966: 434. His appraisal, when comparing chén wéi materials with texts of more traditional origin and authorship, looks interesting: “The thought of the apocrypha seems to me to be a reversion to a more primitive conceptual framework but by a more modern and sophisticated mind, hence the striking emphasis on ordered categories.” (1966: 441). For a careful reading of a set of prognostic apocrypha, see Espesset 2014.

8 Kalinowski (2004: 227) links this fact to increased scholarly respect for texts on “numbers and techniques” (shù shù 數術) and with it materials on prognostication.
overshadowed by the propagandistic appeal of foresight that claimed heaven’s direct participation. When heaven, powerful as it was, sent an omen it was to be expected that what it indicated would come true. The discovery of prognostic apocrypha was one such omen. Therefore, centrally situated in everyone’s understanding and practice, prognostication appeared to be a component of all human undertakings, practised with some aplomb by leading intellectuals at the imperial court when they made political sense of heaven’s utterings and put to commercial use by diviners active in the market place. Since predictions were seen as reliable, or at least effective, prognostic apocrypha were subject at times to government censorship.

The Scripture on Great Peace (Taiping jing 太平經, hereafter TPJ) is situated within Later Han prognostic materials. It even includes one brief section that is written in the dense, poetic language of supposedly spirit-derived prognostic apocrypha and does homage to the Changes. In the TPJ the topic of knowing, and thereby shaping, the future is of such overwhelming importance that it is a convenient handle for introducing the text in all its diversity. The authors propose, as we will see, conflicting methods of prediction, envisage different futures and stress different possibilities of development. They struggle for visions of the future that range from maintaining the empire to personal survival. They all reserve some space and consideration for the communal values that were identified with traditional teachings but also propose, more or less decisively, that in the present situation these values can be maintained only in new ways. As a result, much of the text of the TPJ is aligned with the book’s title. In Han dynasty times, a book with “great
peace” in its title could only be future oriented. From the third century BCE onwards the concept of great peace referred to the ideal state of worldly affairs that any responsible thinker or politician would try to bring about. The received text of the TPJ can be read as within this tradition. The authors turn visions of cosmic harmony into proposals for social policy. Their impatience with the status quo is such that diagnosis quickly turns into prognosis, which is then followed by practical advice. Seeing themselves as placed in a desperate situation, their interest lies in escape routes, be that the healing of illness or the avoidance of imminent total cataclysm. These escape routes are partly situated within the possibilities outlined in received texts from the second century CE and partly beyond. This volume of translations is intended to document aspects of this difference, as if positions expressed in the TPJ might help analyse tensions that prevailed in the empire as it withered away and explain the strength of religious movements that were involved in its breakdown, as well as in the continued maintenance of social order and direction once it had disappeared. This short introduction can only hope to provide background information. Reading the TPJ demands some patience, as poorly written work often does. This patience is, I would argue, rewarded by the text’s originality. We here meet with new ways of speaking.

Origins of the TPJ

The TPJ has been preserved by means of a Daoist edition from the sixth century CE. Based on linguistic and doctrinal evidence, it may be said to consist largely of material from the second century CE. There are hardly any data that would allow us to construct its history between its supposed origin in the second century and the sixth century, so all we

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12 See Kaltenmark 1979: 21f. on the popularity of the vision of great peace and Zhao (2013: 67–71 and passim) on the history of the concept.