

On Luck and Divination in the *Mystery*

THE *MYSTERY* AS DIVINATION CLASSIC

Both the structure and imagery of the *Mystery*, as we have shown, make continual reference to the *Changes*, prompting a basic question: Why did Yang Hsiung choose to model his work upon the only book of divination included among the Five Confucian Classics? In various passages, Yang Hsiung identifies five aspects of the *Changes* that captured his interest: (1) the presumed integrity of the *Changes* text, (2) its breadth of meaning, (3) its abstruse language, (4) its usefulness as a tool for teaching morality, and (5) its thematic treatment of fate. Based on these five qualities, Yang Hsiung "considered the *Changes* to be the greatest of the Classics, and so he composed the *Mystery* [on its model]."76

On the first point, Yang Hsiung mistakenly thought the numerical notation77 of the *Changes* would have prevented significant omissions and interpolations, whether inadvertent or intentional; thus he presumed that the *Changes* text was, among the Five Classics,* the single most reliable guide to antiquity.78 In addition, the *Changes* was widely believed to be the only one of the Confucian Classics to have survived the famous Burning of the Books order under the previous dynasty of Ch'in.79

Second, Yang Hsiung argued that of the Five Classics only the *Changes* was broad enough to answer every moral question put to it, in part because of the different kinds of texts it includes. The *Changes* conveys meaning through the correlation of graphic symbols, verbal images, and classical allusions.80 The advantage of signs (graphic symbols, verbal images, or allusions) is that their multiple meanings are readily taken in at a single intuitive sweep. Graphic symbols in particular, by avoiding the connotations of words entirely, tend to provide insight into fundamental pattern, for they are at once simple and highly abstract.81 Metaphors and correspondences can further expand that meaning until a complete universe seems to be refracted through a single point. With lengthy analogies and linked propositions added in the appended commentaries of the Ten Wings, the complete text of the *Changes* appeals simultaneously to human intuition, to the aesthetic sense, and to rigorous categorical logic. Yang Hsiung hoped to imitate this breadth of coverage in the *Mystery*. He writes,

The *Mystery* . . . is like heaven in its vastness. . . . Were it not economical in its expressions, its points would not be detailed. Were it not compact, its responses would not have universal application. Were it

* See Key Terms, page 63

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not coherent, the events it describes would not be diverse. Were it not deep, its ideas would not reveal anything.⁸²

His admirers are right to see in it a mirror of All-under-Heaven designed to “cover many different aspects, though only a few guiding principles underlie it.”⁸³

Third, Yang Hsiung admitted that he intentionally adopted the abstruse phrasing of the *Changes* to provide himself with some measure of cover in a court rife with intrigue. In his long prose-poem, “Dispelling Ridicule,” Yang Hsiung tells of his fear that more forthright criticism might lead to his own execution.

A guest ridiculed Master Yang, saying, “You silently compose the five-thousand character *Mystery* with its leaves and branches so thickly spread. The explanations alone amount to some 100,000 words. Yet your position is only that of a Gentleman-in-Waiting. In my opinion, your ‘dark mystery’ is still [insipidly] ‘white.’ Why else have you been such a miserable failure as an official?”

Master Yang laughed and replied, “You only wish to vermilion my wheelhubs [i.e., wish to see me with high rank at court]. You do not realize that a single slip could redden my entire clan [through bloodshed]. . . . Those who say anything out of the ordinary are suspect; those who behave unconventionally are penalized for it.”⁸⁴

As we will see below, the theory of fate put forth in the *Mystery* directly challenged popular doctrines of legitimacy upon which the Han court rule depended. An unambiguous exposition of this theory would merely have provoked more trouble for Yang.

Fourth, Yang Hsiung knew that a carefully constructed book of divination would engage a wider audience than a conventional guidebook for morality. Ordinary folk (not necessarily the unlettered) tend to consult books of divination in hopes of being told which course of action will benefit them most. According to Yang’s own teacher, such people are far more receptive to moral precepts when teachings are disguised as oracular pronouncements sent from the spirit world.⁸⁵ The highly sophisticated mind, however, recognizes that something else is at work in the successful divination process: A close identification must be established between the inquirer and the ancient author(s) of the divination text (in Yang’s phrase, the individual “immerses” [*ch’ien*] himself in the sages)⁸⁶ until the questioner intuits how to apply the cryptic words on the page to his own particular situation. In the quality of that intuition lies the only proof that he has fully “internalized the model”; as Yang writes, “What is divine is not outside [any longer].”⁸⁷ In discovering the mind of the sages, then, the inquirer reverently engaged in the divination procedure learns to see

into his own heart as well.⁸⁸ The enlightened reader perceives divination as the perfect paradigm for all moral acts, which seek to “reanimate the old” through a complex process of identification followed by recreation.⁸⁹ The *Mystery* acts in this way, providing illumination for audiences at all levels of awareness. While the ordinary reader finds in it a series of examples outlining in relatively straightforward terms the decided advantages of moral behavior, the truly sympathetic reader engaged in a continuous dialogue with the text gradually uncovers a far more complicated analysis of the effect that individual morality and destiny have in shaping personal experience. In the process, he has received excellent training in the fine art of moral decision-making.⁹⁰

Fifth, Yang expected people to consult books of divination to learn about fate. Since Yang Hsiung particularly wished to address that problem, the neoclassical *Mystery* aptly takes the form of a divination manual.⁹¹ In early China, as in our own culture, numerous debates about fate’s role in human life took place in philosophical circles and in society at large. Few problems took intellectual precedence over the question of *ming* (the “Decree” or fate), since classical authorities made a thorough appreciation of it a prerequisite for self-cultivation. Confucius, for example, reportedly said, “He who does not understand *ming* has no way to become a superior man.”⁹² Similarly, the *Changes* defines the noble man as one who “delights in Heaven and understands *ming*.”⁹³ For this reason, Yang in one chapter explicitly states that the structure and the imagery of his text are designed in such a way as to “exhaustively present the Decree (*ming*).”⁹⁴ Yang Hsiung’s response to the problem of *ming* produced a vision generally faithful to the ethical norms of the Confucian *Analects* but also responsive to new intellectual concerns about timely opportunity (*shih*) in human life.⁹⁵ For this contribution to Confucian thought, he was soon recognized as a “master” in the orthodox tradition. Because Yang’s notion of the Decree informs the entire body of his mature work (including the *Model Sayings* and his late prose-poems, as well as the *Mystery*), the material below focuses on that topic.

EARLY NOTIONS OF *MING*: THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM OF FATE

Among modern translators, no consensus exists about the proper definition of *ming*; the term is most often rendered as fate or Decree (as in my own introductory remarks), but it is also translated as variously as “duty,” “destiny,” “predestination,” “causal connections and their possibilities,” “manifestation of Heaven’s will,” “the inevitable,” “empirical facts,” “created world,” “lifespan,” “objective circumstances,” “circumstances beyond human control,” and so on.⁹⁶ The problem is not simply one of

translation.⁹⁷ Any Chinese of Yang Hsiung's time would have found a bewildering array of usages for the term, some mutually contradictory. In part, the confusion stemmed from a typical feature of Chinese classical philosophy, in which rival thinkers consciously used the same terminology to articulate significantly different ideas. But there were also unconscious adoptions of meanings through conceptual overlays and etymological extensions as the so-called "Hundred Schools" of philosophy emerged from the earlier religious matrix.⁹⁸ Even in the Confucian canon alone, a single passage by the same classical authority may use the one character *ming* to denote two or three different things, since older ideas of *ming* (or Decree) continued to be used alongside newer usages.⁹⁹

As a student of archaic language script,¹⁰⁰ Yang Hsiung was in a better position than most to separate the tangled strands of linguistic convention. He surely knew that early Chou bronze inscriptions used an archaic form of *ming* as an alternate form of the character *ling*, which indicates a superior's orders to his subordinates.¹⁰¹ Typically, *ming* was associated with the king's decrees of investiture to his inferiors and with Heaven's decree to its chief representative, the king. According to an early Chou formulation, the Decree of Heaven (*T'ien ming*) was a special form of covenant. The covenant essentially stipulated that Heaven agrees to support a certain dynastic line so long as the throne, in return, promotes the well-being of its subject people. Four notable features of this covenant colored all subsequent discussions of *ming*: First and foremost, the Decree of Heaven presupposed a strong connection between Heaven and Man, though the earliest texts are preoccupied with the "One Man," the ruler.¹⁰² Second, the Decree of Heaven implied an impartial reward given for specific acts of "bright virtue."¹⁰³ Third, it viewed virtue primarily in terms of obligations to human society, rather than religious duties. Fourth, the Decree of Heaven promised Heaven's support to the recipient(s) for the duration of a fixed (though unspecified) time period, overlooking possible lapses in virtue that might occur while the covenant was in force.¹⁰⁴

All four aspects of the Decree of Heaven covenant (moral unity of Heaven/Man; reward for virtue; virtue equated with social obligation; and fixed term of contract) continued to form the core of meaning for *ming* over the course of the following several centuries, when the character *ming* came to be extended to other contracts between Heaven (whether seen as supreme god or natural order)¹⁰⁵ and individuals of ever lower rank—first ministers and aristocrats, and finally commoners.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the initial formulation of the Decree of Heaven doctrine became increasingly problematic as the scope of its application dramatically expanded. For one thing, as soon as ordinary people came to be credited with individual decrees, numerous objections were raised about the

supposed terms of this unspoken contract, since it was easy to find—and far less dangerous to comment upon—individual cases among the common people in which fate bore no apparent relation to virtue. Moreover, the easy conflation of the accretion of moral goodness with the accumulation of material goods appeared problematic, at least to some. There was also the issue of fairness to be considered if rewards or punishments were really being visited upon distant descendants.¹⁰⁷ Before long, a number of key questions relating to *ming* were put forward. Behind all of them lay a profound “metaphysical doubt as to whether Heaven is after all on the side of human morality.”¹⁰⁸ The main questions found in late Chou literature are summarized below:

What exactly is conferred at birth to humans which makes them essentially different from other living things?

Since both virtue and wisdom originate in a single deliberative organ (the *hsin* or “heart/mind”), what is the relation between virtue and wisdom?

Does the granting of motivational impulses and cognitive powers to humans at birth (what later is called the *hsing* or “human nature”)¹⁰⁹ include something (maybe the physical *ch'i*?) that predisposes, even determines, the length of lifespan, degree of material success, vocation, and more generally, the quality of life?

What outside factors, if any, affect the operation of individual *ming*, or is *ming* as part of human nature innate and abiding, impervious to external factors, as certain classical authorities suggest?¹¹⁰

Can a single standard even be established by which to measure an individual’s success or failure in human life? What, in other words, is justly called the “good life” (in classical Chinese, the good *ming*)?¹¹¹

Do acts of either conventional virtue or practical wisdom reap consequent rewards in human life?

Are rewards and punishments for human conduct meted out by a caring Heaven who speaks through this, or do good and evil acts somehow spontaneously call forth their own responses?

Which areas are the province of *ming*, since the Confucian *Analects* speaks only of “life and death” in connection with the term, in contrast to later thinkers, who gave it the widest possible construction, listing under its rule “death and life, preservation and ruin, failure and success, poverty and wealth, superior [station] and inferiority, blame and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat.”¹¹²

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At the heart of this philosophical quagmire lay the eminently practical question: Can individual conduct affect the course of personal fate? There were clear implications for everyday life. And so debate continued.

By the Warring States period (480–222 B.C.), no fewer than five competing theories had evolved concerning the relation of virtue and practical wisdom to chance:

View no. 1: There is no such thing as *ming*. Consequently, there is no preordained connection between either virtue or practical wisdom and the “good life.” Stated another way, no system of cosmic justice operates on behalf of human beings, so that the good are every bit as likely as the wicked to meet with bad fortune.¹¹³

View no. 2: *Ming* is determined in exact accordance with virtue or with practical wisdom, so that each separate act results in gain or loss to the doer, whether a conscious Heaven adjusts fate or the acts themselves spontaneously generate good or bad luck. In this view, the individual’s Decree can refer simultaneously to externally imposed “fate” or “destiny” and to the internal quality of individual life.

View no. 3: Individual *ming*, though originally conferred because of virtue, is given for a predetermined length of time, regardless of acts committed in the interval. In its extreme version, this idea opened the way for belief in fixed, interlocking cycles of fortune, like that posited by the cosmologist Tsou Yen (3d c. B.C.) and his adherents.¹¹⁴

View no. 4: *Ming* at birth predestines many, if not all, significant aspects of an individual’s life.

View no. 5: According to a related view, good acts generally make for a good life, though this is *largely* explicable in human terms. Meanwhile some inexplicable inequities exist. The wise man, then, can only do good and “await his fate” with cheerful equanimity.¹¹⁵

Never far from people’s thoughts in any age, questions about fate acquired a special urgency during the era aptly labelled “Warring States,” a period of incessant strife and rapid social change. Still, the notion of the Decree was not the primary focus of debate among recognized masters of Chinese thought in that age. The Hundred School philosophers, sensibly enough, were more preoccupied with questions about the ways a just society would foster the full development of human nature.¹¹⁶ By definition, a just society, once achieved, would inevitably reveal the true correlation between individual fate, will, and action because it would elevate men of true worth.¹¹⁷ It was far more practical, then, to try to resolve the many debates on human nature and kingly rule that split even the Confucian camp¹¹⁸ (especially when philosophical unity was deemed the first

step toward the political integration of All-under Heaven),¹¹⁹ than to try to establish the elusive nature, function, and scope of the Decree.

Shortly before Yang Hsiung's time in the first century B.C., definitions of human nature and the just society had been temporarily laid to rest as important philosophical issues. There were historical reasons for this. By mid-Western Han, the ruling Liu clan had succeeded in establishing its legitimacy, in no small part because of its repeated calls for recommendation of the worthy and its successful identification with the "uncrowned king," Confucius. Meanwhile, Tung Chung-shu (?179–?104 B.C.), "the father of Han Confucianism," had formulated a persuasive synthesis of opposing views of human nature, which accounted for the "mixed" character of human nature (that is, both its good and its evil tendencies) while confirming its origins in Heaven (which most thinkers presumed to be good).¹²⁰ Since professional scholars were in rare agreement on these major political and philosophical issues, they turned with renewed enthusiasm¹²¹ in the second century of Western Han to the question of *ming*'s operation of in human existence.

YANG HSIUNG'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF *MING*

Yang Hsiung's own solution to the question of *ming* was brilliantly simple and internally coherent. He did, however, leave his followers the difficult task of reconstructing that solution from scattered passages whose allusive (and elusive) tone intentionally imitated archaic Chinese writings produced by the sages rather than the closely reasoned rhetorical arguments of the Warring States philosophers.¹²² Since Yang's stated intention in the *Mystery* was to explicate the difficult problem of *ming*, it is at first puzzling that he employed the character only ten times in the entire text of the *Mystery* (three times with the earliest meaning of "[king's] commands").¹²³ Of course, Yang Hsiung could claim to be emulating the model of Confucius, who "seldom spoke of *ming*," presumably because the most sacred aspects of human existence are taboo.¹²⁴ But it is no less likely that Yang's reticence is meant to entice the reader to embark upon that step-by-step immersion in the sage-author's mind that schools the reader in the moral process itself.¹²⁵

Yang Hsiung imbedded the necessary clues to his solution for *ming* in three linked statements. The longest passage begins:

Someone asked about *ming*. I replied, "*Ming* refers to the decrees of Heaven. It has nothing to do with people's actions." "If people's actions do not constitute *ming*, I beg to ask what about people's actions?" I responded: "By [their actions] they may be preserved or lost; by them they may live or die. [Still,] that is not *ming*. *Ming* refers to what cannot be avoided."¹²⁶

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A second passage from the *Mystery* echoes the last line of the preceding statement with one important change; it substitutes “time” for *ming* or the Decree, saying, “Time is what cannot be overcome.”¹²⁷ And a third passage repeats the association of *ming* with time in defining the Decree as “what is timely or not.”¹²⁸

Yang Hsiung’s first statement about *ming* suggests that “fate” is an adequate translation for the term if we do not invest it with supernatural overtones. *Ming* in referring to time (meaning “present circumstance” as well as “opportune time”) describes the involuntary and imposed part of human existence that will not change through individual effort. (For example, Yang Hsiung came to maturity during an age of misrule and his beloved son died at an early age.) Thus, all three passages emphasize human limitations, for they suggest that any human can fail to meet with suitable opportunities to act. As a general rule, humans, no matter how worthy, can only watch for, not create, individual opportunities, since it is “Heaven that fixes the time.”¹²⁹ For this reason, one early thinker claimed, “Master Yang taught that to meet or not to meet [with one’s desires] is a matter of fate.”¹³⁰ Naturally enough, such a view of the universe considers skill in ascertaining the opportune time to be at the heart of practical wisdom.¹³¹

At the same time, numerous statements in the *Mystery* make it clear that for Yang Hsiung *ming* cannot imply total predestination. In the first passage cited above, for example, Yang specifically exempts “preservation and loss, life and death” from the domain of *ming*. Yang Hsiung readily admitted that certain well-defined limits circumscribed human existence: No human, however powerful, is immortal. And only a few will ever win great riches or a throne.¹³² These limits are comparatively insignificant, however, once the “preservation and loss” of virtue and the quality of one’s “life and death” become the individual’s ultimate concerns.¹³³ One passage in the *Mystery*, therefore, extols the glories attendant upon a virtuous old age,¹³⁴ while countless others depict the terrors of a premature fall brought on by a craven dependence upon material pleasure.¹³⁵ If we assume philosophical coherence in Yang’s mature vision, we can try to reconstruct his most important ideas about the Decree by piecing together general observations on fate and virtue that appear throughout his later works, especially the *Mystery*.

Yang Hsiung clearly demanded that the reader attempt this reconstruction, rather than rest content with fragmentary pronouncements. What are we to make of Yang’s initial statement that “preservation and loss, life and death” are exempt from *ming*, especially when we recall that these same four areas are specifically associated with *ming* in the canonical *Analects* attributed to Confucius?¹³⁶ It seems that Yang Hsiung wished to challenge his reader, as if he knew that the text can only really teach

when it fails to say what we expect it to say; partial truths in obvious conflict are then reexamined, so that a new unitary truth can be established.¹³⁷

Turning to specifics, the *Mystery* depicts four major factors affecting the course and quality of a person's life, though it never groups all four together in a single passage.¹³⁸ The four factors to be treated are:

Virtue
Tools
Position
Time

The first notable thing about this list is that Yang reserves *ming* for Time alone, although some early Chinese thinkers loosely viewed all four factors as aspects of *ming* insofar as *ming* may simply refer to the quality of human life. Once we understand the significance of Yang's four factors, this will assume considerable importance.

Elaborating somewhat upon these terms, Virtue refers mainly to the roster of traditional Confucian virtues (among them, filial piety, honesty, loyalty, and modesty). Yang also follows Confucian tradition in making the ritual act virtually synonymous with Goodness since ritual provides the form in which Goodness can be actualized.¹³⁹ (For more on ritual, see Key Terms.) For Confucians, ritual is the single mode of behavior capable of fostering necessary social order while satisfying our most basic human needs for beauty and communication. In Yang's writing, however, we also meet newer terms like "cautious watchfulness" and "timely action," associated most often with earlier writings of those very Taoists and Legalists he loved to refute.¹⁴⁰ Such catchwords can be justified in Confucian terms since even the best ritual requires proper timing to promote the common good.¹⁴¹ Finally, as a committed Confucian, Yang Hsiung believes that Virtue lies within the grasp of each and every human being, though lamentably few may choose to pursue its course.¹⁴²

Under the rubric of Tools, Yang Hsiung puts not only physical artifacts (like jars, stoves, and carts) but also the arts and institutions that civilize society. This single heading, in consequence, houses such disparate items as compass and carpenter's square, the Confucian Classics, the ritual system, supportive friendships, and the family, to the extent that they are civilizing agents.¹⁴³ There is, however, one glaring omission from the series. The *Mystery* never mentions the predictive arts touted by certain cosmologists, though the ancient art of divination by milfoil and turtle is often applauded by Yang as a sacred Tool that avails the noble man.¹⁴⁴ Thanks to the legacy of the early sages, all the proper Tools needed for civilization already exist.¹⁴⁵ However, the individual can take full advantage of these available Tools only if he has schooled

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himself in their proper use; by this training he acquires “practical wisdom” (*chih*).¹⁴⁶ Without such training, the individual either ruins good Tools or chooses Tools that are inadequate or inappropriate to the task.¹⁴⁷ Yang Hsiung provides many comic examples to illustrate his point. In one, a benighted soul lugs a boat overland, then rides a cart into water.¹⁴⁸ By analogy, men who employ Confucian doctrine to acquire wealth, rank, or long life misapply the Tool specifically designed to guide personal self-cultivation and social harmony.¹⁴⁹

Position refers both to social rank and to the physical location¹⁵⁰ that the individual occupies at the precise moment when action is required.¹⁵¹ The stock example of good position is that of the ruler, whose greater access to certain resources and opportunities exists (at least while he remains on the throne) regardless of his character; by virtue of his Position, he has what we might call a strategic advantage over others.¹⁵² Being in the right place at the right time, tradition suggests, is at least partly a matter of luck, since even the great sage-master Confucius failed to secure a government position commensurate with his talents.¹⁵³ In well-ordered states, however, Virtue helps to secure Position.¹⁵⁴

Time refers not only to the interlocking cycles of yin/yang and the Five Phases;¹⁵⁵ it also covers the individual cycle of each phenomenon in the cosmos (in Chinese terms, the “myriad things,” including Man himself) engaged in a continual process of change.¹⁵⁶ The ancient Chinese viewed Time in a complex fashion; for them,

there was natural, cyclic time, defined by the alternation of the farming seasons and of day and night. Human time reflected the cycles of life and the cosmos. Time was not purely cyclic. It was regressive in the sense that the perfect social order of archaic times was gone forever. But it was also progressive, in the sense that civilization was built out of a series of sagely inventions, . . . adaptations of natural patterns to human use. These inventions accumulated to let society survive and provide scope for its improvement.¹⁵⁷

For Yang Hsiung, the importance of Time can hardly be overestimated; in a passage cited earlier in this Introduction, Yang places Time in a series that includes Heaven, Earth, and the gods.¹⁵⁸ The Head texts of the *Mystery* depict the annual cycle with its four seasons; the Appraisals reflect the regular alternation of night/day and the sequential operation of the Five Phases. Within the nine Appraisals to each Head, three successive groups of three Appraisals represent the beginning, middle, and end of a specific process or life cycle, each unit of which carries with it its own constraints and benefits. For example, at the age of ninety, women do not bear children, though they may be singularly honored for their accumu-

lated wisdom and experience.¹⁵⁹ For this reason, we can think of Time as synonymous with present [or timely] “opportunity.”¹⁶⁰

If these four factors of Virtue, Tools, Position, and Time together determine the course of individual life, how do they relate to one another? The graphic summary of Yang’s comments shown in table 5 will help:

Table 5.

The Mysterious Tao in Operation

ASPECT:	Individual	Society	Heaven (deity or sky)
SCOPE:	With Man	On Earth	In Heaven
FACTOR:	Virtue	Tools, Position	Time (equated with the Decree)

Although oversimplified, the table highlights several important aspects of Yang’s solution to *ming*. It shows, for example, that Yang’s solution is somewhat more sophisticated than most, in that it accounts for wide variations in individual life by reference to four interdependent factors, rather than in terms of the usual dichotomies of fate-virtue, conduct-reward, Heaven-Man, inner-outer, and so on. It also has Tools and Position playing a mediating role between Virtue and Time. This is true in at least two senses: First, the acquisition of Virtue is entirely determined by the individual human will; “getting the opportune time” for conventional success, by contrast, is completely up to Heaven—in other words, outside human control.¹⁶¹ (Time is particularly associated with Heaven since the calendar reflects the movements of the heavenly bodies.)¹⁶² Tools and Position, products of civilized society, have been fashioned by sages upon the model of Heaven.¹⁶³ Their existence offers the single best proof of the integration of human with cosmic history, of Time with Virtue.¹⁶⁴ Second, while the acquisition of Tools and Position is in some undefinable measure attributable to Virtue,¹⁶⁵ it is Time that determines when Tools and Position can be used.¹⁶⁶ How does this work? According to Yang Hsiung, only the man who identifies completely with the sages can be called virtuous, for only he commands the sympathy, foresight, and dedication necessary to master the creations of the sages fully, so that Tools and Position are ready for use when opportunity arises.¹⁶⁷ Still, despite years of preparation, certain latter-day sages (Confucius among them) have never been called upon to employ the full range of their talents.¹⁶⁸

Various passages in the *Mystery* place the operations of all four factors (Virtue, Tools, Position, and Time) squarely in the realm of change. (Here Yang contradicts some other early texts, which show only *ming*

synonymous with change.)¹⁶⁹ And each of the four factors imposes definite limits on the individual. Time constraints are probably the most obvious in Yang's writings:

[Timely] opportunities come and go,
The gap between them finer than a hair.¹⁷⁰

Sheer probability argues against the frequent convergence of all four factors.¹⁷¹ Unfortunately, the conventionally defined "good life" of longevity, numerous progeny, wealth, high status, and good reputation depends upon the fortuitous coincidence of all four factors affecting humans.¹⁷² To the degree that Tools and Position are variables dependent upon both Time and Virtue, it is true that nothing can stop the individual from success when Time coincides with Virtue.¹⁷³ But with Tools and Position a function of Time, bad timing skews the personal equation in the direction of bad luck, so that the wisest of individuals must exercise extreme caution in order simply to survive.¹⁷⁴ In an age of disorder, high position may even make a person more than ordinarily vulnerable to attack.

Given the crucial importance of Time as a factor in human experience, it is all the more regrettable that Time (once again, meaning "present opportunity") is so limited. How much more convenient if Time, presumably regular in its movements, could be predicted or manipulated. That Time was regular, men of Han had no doubt.¹⁷⁵ Poetic diction, as well as the structure of the *Mystery*, reinforces the idea that astronomical Time is the product of the regular alternation of yin/yang and the Five Phases. In the shape of the calendar, Time even comes to symbolize the cosmic norms.¹⁷⁶ Why then does Yang continue to reiterate that Time lies beyond human control?

Respected scholars at the Han court had argued that Time was amenable to human understanding precisely because it was regular. The "father of Han Confucianism," Tung Chung-shu, stated this unequivocally:

The fact that definite propositions can be made about [the operation of the Five Phases aligned with the seasons] means that sage men can get to understand them.¹⁷⁷

The trouble was that it took only a series of small successive steps to move from understanding Time to "knowing" Time (both "understanding" and "knowing," after all, were indicated by the single character *chih*) to wanting to predict, even control its operations. As numerous contemporary references to magicians, astrologers, and diviners attest,¹⁷⁸ many hoped to predict and manipulate the future through "technical arts" (for instance, portent reading and numerology). Though such arts seemed to

corroborate the court-sponsored Doctrine of Mutual Interaction between Heaven and Man (*T'ien jen kan ying*) (and by extension, to prove the legitimacy of the Han throne), Yang Hsiung was anxious to disassociate himself from this pseudo-Confucian viewpoint.

The *Mystery* argues that the patterned operations of Time, however regular in the natural world, are not entirely knowable, notwithstanding the claims made by certain Han magicians. Since Time's movements cannot be forecast with absolute accuracy, manipulation of Time's operations is simply out of the question. Yang Hsiung supplies two reasons for this. First, according to Yang, all supremely great entities (a category that includes Heaven, Earth, the Confucian Classics, and Time) remain ultimately shrouded in mystery, because the part cannot fully comprehend the whole.¹⁷⁹ In one passage, he discusses the first three great entities:

Someone asked whether . . . they cannot be more easily comprehended. I replied, "They cannot. If Heaven suddenly could be measured, then its covering of things would be thin indeed. If Earth suddenly could be fathomed, then its support of things would be superficial indeed. Great is the way Heaven and Earth form the outer wall for the myriad things, while the Five Classics represent the retaining walls for the numerous theories."¹⁸⁰

Time, the fourth great entity, envelops all space and material change.¹⁸¹ Therefore, Man as one tiny part of phenomenal existence can never fully comprehend it; as Yang writes, "What is [truly] great has no borders; what changes has no [set] time."¹⁸² Yang was careful to say that even the sages are only "on the point" (*yu*) of fathoming it, since they know—at best—how to estimate (*ni*) the broad outline of the unknowable.¹⁸³ Humans intent upon greatness should seek to conform to Time, instead of challenging its manifest superiority, just as they submit to other superiors.¹⁸⁴

Yang Hsiung bolsters this argument by reference to the most current cosmological theory. To explain apparent anomalies in the sequential operation of the cosmic phases, Yin/yang Five Phases theorists at the Han court had already posited a so-called Principle of Masking. According to the theory, different rates of change among the five cosmic phases interacting in sequential order occasionally produce patterns whose origins are too difficult to read. (I see this as multiple waves reinforcing or canceling one other.)¹⁸⁵ The *Mystery* makes reference to this Principle when it talks of the Five Phases "concealing their actions."¹⁸⁶ Yang then proceeds to incorporate in the *Mystery* a striking parallel to the Principle of Masking. As early as the first tetragram, we find examples of Appraisals assigned yang (i.e., auspicious) values that inexplicably predict certain disaster (in conventional terms, if not always in moral terms) for the

individual confronting the particular slice of Time associated with that Appraisal.¹⁸⁷ As all of these anomalies occur in the last few Appraisals assigned to the Head (positions corresponding to the final stage of the human situation or lifespan when Time's limitations become most obvious),¹⁸⁸ the only possible conclusion to be drawn is that the inauspicious character of "human endings" in some few cases can override (or at least mask) the auspicious character of larger coincident cosmic cycles.¹⁸⁹ No explanation is given for what look like random events, perhaps because, according to Yang, the sage "may investigate irregularities but only records the constant sequences."¹⁹⁰ Yang may also intend by this device to indicate the relative weight of humankind in the triadic realms of Heaven-Earth-Man.¹⁹¹ In any case, Yang adapts the language of the cosmologists to undermine their bloated claims to foreknowledge.

At first glance, Yang's insistence on Time's unpredictability seems to undercut his continual exhortations to undertake timely action. But this is hardly the case. The *Mystery* emphasizes preparation for all eventualities. When trends change, a variety of signs will indicate the proper course of action. The most important of these are so-called "human portents."¹⁹² Given Time's inherent unpredictability, human behavior becomes the most reliable prognostic tool available. The ceremonial participant who oversteps ritual betrays his overweening ambition; the braggart is easily identified as "hollow." Both kinds of individual will surely land in trouble sooner or later. So reliable are these human portents that the wise man, curious about the future, shifts his attention from the stars (i.e., changes in the natural world) to the study of Virtue in society.¹⁹³ No wonder so many Appraisal texts in the *Mystery* treat ritual lapses as emblems of profound disorder.

More important, Yang Hsiung's key arguments about the moral life all follow directly from his single statement that Time (as a major determinant in destiny) lies beyond human control. This yields at least seven important corollaries, which appear in various places in his work:

1. Since the course of human existence depends upon various conjunctions of Virtue, Tools, and Position with unpredictable Time, the wise person devotes every effort to advance preparation in case future opportunity should present itself. From this commonsensical observation, Yang Hsiung extracts from the Five Confucian Classics a single underlying theme: the noble man "jealously guards his days" (*ai jih*) in order to make the best possible use of his limited time.
2. Since the principle of *ai jih* demands that one make the best possible use of limited opportunities, the evaluating mind should first determine, and then focus upon, subjects of greatest importance, while turning away from inherently unproductive subjects.

3. Careful investigation shows that ritual practice is the single most important subject amenable to human understanding and beneficial to mankind. Through its study, the wise person is transformed into the good person.

4. The study of ritual allows humans to develop in such a way that the individual can not only become “partner with” or “consort to” Heaven,¹⁹⁴ but can even partake of eternity itself. Alone among living things, Man has the power to participate in the divine life through Goodness.

5. If ritual acts cause humans to identify with, even partake of, the divine order, the would-be sage will not try to unduly control Tao in its various manifestations (including fate). Instead, he will acquiesce in the divine and mysterious order known as *ming* (in other words, accept all parts of the Heavenly plan).

6. “Understanding” (*chih*) (i.e., “accepting”) the Decree invariably brings certain physical and psychological advantages to the individual. In addition, a number of external advantages *incidentally* may derive from submission to fate. In contrast, no *certain* advantage lies in a person’s attempt to control his fate or pursue secondary goals such as power or wealth.

7. The most important advantage of Virtue lies in its potential to effect the ideal state of perfect community (Yang calls it “no gap”), which has both psychological and social dimensions.

PROPOSITIONS ABOUT TIME, LUCK, AND VIRTUE

Let us examine these linked propositions in greater detail, beginning with Yang Hsiung’s statement identifying the phrase *ai jih* as the single unifying thread running through sagely practice. In descending orders of literalness, *ai jih* means “to love the days,” “to be frugal in the [use of one’s] time,” and “to jealousy guard one’s time” in order to make the best possible use of limited chances and resources.¹⁹⁵ Yang’s preoccupation with *ai jih* may come as something of a minor shock to a reader of classical Chinese philosophy. Why? Generations have pondered a very different statement by the Master that identified “consideration for others” (*shu*) as the single theme binding together the entirety of the sage’s teachings.¹⁹⁶ Surely Yang Hsiung does not intend to challenge the words of the Master?¹⁹⁷

The two separate “threads” in fact can be seen to complement one another. If the individual lifespan cannot be extended beyond a certain maximum (the Chinese often talked of a hundred years or so), the brevity

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of human existence creates in us a heightened sense of obligation and care for human life, so that individuals wish to make the best use of Time. Yang Hsiung uses the analogy of the filial son to show how this works. For the filial son, the inevitable nature of his parents' old age and death produces in the son a acute sense of obligation and love.¹⁹⁸ All social relations, by analogy to this fundamental parent-child relation, are infinitely more precious because they are bound by Time, even where death is not an immediate threat. Time's inexorable flow means that mistakes in social relations may cause irreparable harm; for instance, harsh words or meaningless babble cannot be recalled once the sounds have "flown off" into the air.¹⁹⁹ Humans and human creations (including ritual) acquire heightened value precisely because of their fragile, transitory nature. The phrase *ai jih* indicates that human "love" (for others) in combination with the "days" (that is, Time) determines the Confucian focus on social relations.

Someone might object, as Yang Hsiung's opponents did:²⁰⁰ "How do we know that months and years spent in forging human relations represent the single best use of Time?" After all, human beings wish for a variety of benefits, and all are reasonable goals to the degree that they can increase human "greatness."²⁰¹

Various philosophers in ancient China suggested different methods to achieve human greatness. One definitional problem, of course, concerned the usual confusion of greatness with happiness. The Legalists, for example, had assumed that man can achieve supreme greatness only by the acquisition of political power, which endows a person with a charisma akin to the gods and ensures a kind of immortality through long-lasting reputation. Other thinkers countered that court life in and of itself presents so grave a risk to physical and mental well-being that conventional desires for high position destroy all possibility of true happiness. In that case, can such unhappiness be accounted great? Many thinkers debated the answer to this question. Some advocated detachment as the wisest goal for Man (given his limited resources), while others responded by experimenting with recipes for physical immortality.

Yang carefully analyzes the problem of maximum benefit without reference to the confusing issue of overlapping definitions for human greatness and happiness. By Yang's logic, a goal worth pursuing must satisfy three criteria:

1. Effort expended must result in measurable gain that is both certain and commensurate with the effort.²⁰²
2. The greater the gain the better.²⁰³
3. Personal gain is more safely held when benefits are extended to others, just as a wider base gives the wall additional security.²⁰⁴

In other words, the logical mind first determines which goals are both worthy and possible, then it finds a way to maximize benefits.²⁰⁵ Applying these observations, Yang makes short shrift of the usual claims that maximum satisfaction can be derived from the attainment of certain conventional goals, such as wealth, factual knowledge, political power, or physical immortality.²⁰⁶ He also plays up the continual frustrations experienced by the unlucky majority who can never reach external goals. In effect, he attacks all goals except the study of ritual precepts, arguing that only ritual can satisfy all three requirements for a worthy goal: First, it is possible to perfect oneself in ritual. Second, ritual action facilitates the effective expansion of one's circle of family, friends, and allies. Third, ritual action ensures that others will not resent this extension of personal charismatic power, no matter how great it becomes.²⁰⁷

Since man has limited Time (and consequently limited knowledge) at his disposal, he does better to focus on a few principles that he can then apply to numerous situations.²⁰⁸ Employing ritual, the truly wise man can use Time (which is limited, and so epitomizes change and decline) to offset the ill effects of Time. Such a person secures and sustains the maximum portion of greatness for as long as possible. This works because ritual precepts are limited in number, with only five fundamental paradigms (the Five Constant Relations of father-son, ruler-subject, husband-wife, elder sibling-younger sibling, and friend-friend) to be mastered. In addition, opportunities for the study of ritual are present everywhere. Confucius himself had remarked that they can be found in everyday life as well as in books,²⁰⁹ so that there is no need to resort to the complicated calculations and expensive instruments used by diviners and astrologers. As an added bonus, the careful analysis of ritual performance (those "human portents") yields more accurate information about prevailing social trends than the finest astrolabes and templates.²¹⁰ Finally, the decided advantage of ritual study is that its benefits are certain. At the very least, through ritual performance a person gains a secure sense of himself. In philosophical language, it satisfies deep physical and psychological longings to fulfill one's own potential as human being and to unite with one's fellow man.²¹¹ Ritual also allows a variety of important social institutions to function. And under ideal conditions, powerful ritual binds the entire universe in a voluntary community so tight that "no gap"²¹² (that is, no sense of alienation) remains. According to Yang, a man would be a fool to run after possibly unattainable goals while neglecting to pursue a sure thing.²¹³ For this reason, the prudent individual studies ritual and Virtue.

Yang's claims by no means stop here. According to the *Mystery*, ritual acts allow each individual *in some aspects* to escape the ruinous clutches of Time itself by entering the world of the eternal "constant norms."

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Since this argument is key to the *Mystery*, let us examine each of its steps with particular care.

Yang Hsiung describes the characteristic activities of the *Mystery* in the following passage:

As for the *Mystery*, . . .
The polluted it purifies.
The precipitous it levels. . .
The elevated it lowers.
The low it raises.
The abundant it takes from.
The depleted it gives to.
The bright it tones down.
The doubtful it clarifies. . .

In its active mode, the *Mystery* daily creates what it [the world] lacks and favors what it renews. In its quiescent mode, the *Mystery* daily depletes what it [the world] has and diminishes what it has completed.²¹⁴

He then asserts that noble man in practicing ritual operates in a fashion analogous to the *Mystery*.

If the noble man daily strengthens what is deficient in him [that is, the good] and eliminates what he possesses in surplus [that is, the evil], then the Way of the *Mystery* is nearly approximated indeed!²¹⁵

This means that the good person approaches the *Mystery* when he applies himself to the study of ritual. Since it is the social virtues, especially modesty and compliance, which are in short supply and actions contrary to ritual which are in oversupply, the good man employs ritual to habituate himself to a life that increases his good impulses and curbs his evil tendencies. In weighing the claims of competing desires within himself, the good man learns to use ritual to effect a balance in ever wider circles within the family and society at large, just as the Tao balances all aspects of Heaven-Earth-Man, thereby achieving true justice for all.²¹⁶ The ritual act, we are to conclude, partakes of divinity because it is categorically akin to the sacred *Mystery* in its operation. As an unseen motive force behind profound social change, the noble man mimics the cosmic *Mystery* in its catalyzing activity.²¹⁷ Through ritual, the noble man takes on divine aspects. The wide range of his abilities and contacts correspond to the vastness of the Tao.²¹⁸

Lest someone object that this picture greatly exaggerates the power of ritual, Yang Hsiung supplies what he considers to be a second proof of the divine quality of human ritual. This proof begins with the general rule

that each phenomenon in the world of Heaven-Earth-Man is subject to cyclical decline, as provided for in Yin/yang Five Phases theory. One passage in the *Mystery* says, for example:

By rule, abundance enters decline and what ends is born again. There is filling up and emptying out. . . . If yang fails to culminate, then yin fails to germinate. If yin fails to culminate, then yang fails to sprout. . . . Back and forth is their [yin/yang] sequence; twisting and turning is their path. . . . At one point there is life, at one point there is death. Day and night alternate. Yin and yang divide the numbers.²¹⁹

Ordinary life, then, is supremely “inconstant.”²²⁰ Few of Yang Hsiung’s readers would have balked at this vision of the universe. They consulted a divination text precisely because they were all too aware of life’s vagaries. But Yang Hsiung proceeds to make the further claim that Virtue, like the mysterious Tao, is also in some sense eternal, for it is in substance “ever new.”²²¹ Virtue, he insists, then becomes the single entity in all of phenomenal existence that is exempt from the time’s predations, since its accumulation does not force an inevitable reversal:

In the Way of Man, it is good fortune to be upright and calamity to be perverse. Therefore, the noble man is inwardly upright and outwardly compliant. . . . This is why the outcome of his actions is good fortune and not calamity. If in good fortune one does not do evil, [good fortune] cannot give rise to calamity. If in calamity, one does not do good, [calamity] cannot become good fortune. Evil and good! Evil and good! Evil and good! These are what ultimately reveal the noble man!²²²

This simple argument urging the continuous accumulation of Goodness is far more important than it looks. By the relatively simple act of distinguishing moral attainment from all other attainments, which are subject to cyclical reversal and decline (such as the accumulation of physical *ch'i*, of power, or of money),²²³ Yang Hsiung reasserts the primacy of the constant norms enshrined in ritual over other, transitory goals, which are often summed up in the term “the good life.” Virtue is seen in some sense as inviolable, eternal, and infinitely great in potential. After all, even death cannot alter or “snatch away” the quality of a man’s moral acts. Especially great virtue may even confer upon its possessors a kind of immortality in the form of lasting reputation.²²⁴ Therefore, Virtue becomes the only worthy goal for Man, since it fulfills Yang’s criterion for greatness: it reliably brings infinitely great rewards.

Since only the ritual act brings sure and great rewards, serious moral confusion results whenever the conventional “good life” is erroneously held up as a worthy goal for human beings.²²⁵ (In the first place, the adjective “good” should never be applied to *ming* at all, since Time, un-

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like Virtue, is not a human construction.) In fact, the term “good *ming*” is a misnomer whose continued use threatens to lead men from the productive pursuit of the Way into fruitless pursuits for long life, riches, and so on. As one Appraisal shows, in muddled fashion the typical loud mistakes contingent good luck for the sure rewards of Virtue:

Circumstance contrives; the faulty seems correct.
Fortunate men do not deem this a “happy coincidence.”
Wrong, though right by circumstance,
Means: Good men return to the constants.²²⁶

To dispel such popular confusion about “good *ming*,” Yang Hsiung tries to employ consistent terminology throughout the *Mystery*.²²⁷ “Good luck” and “bad luck” (*chi hsiung*) are used in connection with aspects of the conventional good life, such as wealth, high status, and long life. Since luck is tied to Time, it cannot be won by effort; therefore, it makes no sense to regard it as the supreme goal in life, though good men may sometimes achieve it “incidentally.”²²⁸ “Favor” and “blame” (*hsiu ch’iu*) refer to the societal reaction (in the case of blame, this means the social cost) to a particular course of action. Once again, the good opinion of one’s contemporaries is ultimately beyond the control of the individual, and so the wise person refuses to rely upon it for psychic, physical, or economic benefits.²²⁹ In contrast, “good fortune” and “calamity” (*fu huo*) refer to the moral and immoral life respectively:

What Heaven and Earth honors is called “good fortune.” What the ghosts and spirits bless is called “good fortune.” What the Way of Man delights in is called “good fortune.” Whatever is despised and abhorred is called “calamity.”²³⁰

Since the Way of Man (i.e., Virtue through self-cultivation) by definition lies within the grasp of each individual, the individual holds complete responsibility for his own good fortune (that is, morality),²³¹ disproving the mistaken assumption of “ordinary folk who think that misfortune and good fortune are determined by *ming*.”²³²

According to Yang, conventional bad luck may even be welcomed as a boon so long as it brings the individual a better appreciation of his own ritual obligations.²³³ Yang Hsiung’s famous prose poem “Expelling Poverty” comes close to burlesque when it details the moral and psychic benefits of dire poverty for the individual:

All others lock themselves in.
You alone live in the open.
All others tremble with fear.
You alone have no apprehensions.²³⁴