

Article

Confucius' Understanding of the Relationship Between Divination and Morality of *Yizhuan* from the Mawangdui Silk Manuscript

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Abstract

Within the silk manuscript *Yizhuan*, Confucius underscores the priority of moral righteousness over divination, advocating the cultivation of virtue, benevolence, and righteousness as the proper way to seek auspiciousness and blessing. However, this stance serves merely as a value orientation for the study, application, and interpretation of the *Zhouyi*. In other words, moral virtue is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for divination. In fact, the emergence of the *Zhouyi* lies in the misalignment and separation between virtue and fortune. The “alignment of virtue and fortune [德福一致]” formed the foundation of the early Western Zhou view of the Mandate of Heaven and served to legitimize the Zhou replacement of the Shang Dynasty. Under this understanding of the Mandate of Heaven, judgments of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness could be made based on the presence or absence of virtue, thereby reducing the relative importance of divination. Confucius' early attitude toward the *Zhouyi* reflected this perspective. Nevertheless, the alignment of virtue and fortune could not adequately explain the evident inconsistency between moral conduct and human fate in reality. Consequently, by the late Spring and Autumn period, this framework gradually developed into the notion of “timely mandate” (*shiming* 時命), which denied a necessary correspondence between virtue and fortune. In response to this shift, the late-life Confucius and his disciples emphasized finding moral and spiritual grounding through virtue, while adopting a calm and accepting attitude toward external circumstances such as success and failure, wealth and poverty, and longevity and premature death. The shift corresponded to the transformation in the conception of the Mandate of Heaven. It was also in this context that Confucius came to value the *Zhouyi* in his later years.

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1. Introduction

The discovery of the Mawangdui silk manuscripts of the *Yizhuan* in Changsha, Hunan Province, China, in the 1970s has provided new evidence for re-examining the relationship between Confucius and the *Zhouyi*. For nearly a millennium, this relationship had largely been understood on the basis of the account in the *Kongzi shijia* 孔子世家 (*Hereditary House of Confucius*) chapter of the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), which records that Confucius developed a late-life fondness for the *Zhouyi* [晚而喜易]. However, this traditional view was later challenged during the Song Dynasty by Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修. In his

Yitongziwen 易童子問 (*Questions of a Child About the Zhouyi*), Ouyang Xiu examined the textual composition of the *Yizhuan*, arguing that not only the *Xici* 系辭 (*Appended Remarks*) but also the *Wenyan* 文言 (*Commentary on the Words of the Text*) and the *Shuogua* 說卦 (*Explanation of the Trigrams*) could not be attributed to Confucius. This skeptical turn initiated a long-standing scholarly challenge to the traditional account until the archaeological discovery of the Mawangdui texts provided concrete material evidence for re-evaluating the traditional understanding.

The record in the *Yao* 要 chapter of the silk manuscript *Yizhuan* states that “the Master developed a fondness for the *Zhouyi* in his later years, keeping it on his mat when at home and carrying it in his bag when traveling [夫子老而好《易》，居則在席，行則在囊]” (Liao 2008, p. 388)¹. This textual evidence appears to support the account recorded by Sima Qian 司馬遷. At the same time, it stands in clear contrast to Confucius’ earlier stance recorded in the same chapter: “Where virtue is lacking, one turns to Gods and spirits; where wisdom and planning fall short, one turns to divination [德行亡者，神靈之趨；智謀遠者，卜筮之繫]” (Liao 2008, p. 388). As Liao Mingchun 廖名春 notes, “Confucius not only did not favor the *Zhouyi* in his earlier years but also regarded such fondness as opposed to the cultivation of virtue and righteousness. In his view at that time, the *Zhouyi* was a book of divination, and thus not suitable for a gentleman” (Liao 2008, p. 173).

Confucius’ disciples found his shift in attitude difficult to understand, prompting him to explain: “I seek only its virtue. Though I tread the same path as the historiographers and shamans, I aim for a different end. The noble person cultivates virtue to seek good fortune, and thus seldom performs sacrifices; he acts with benevolence and righteousness to seek auspicious outcomes, and thus rarely resorts to divination. I place prayer and divination afterward [吾求其德而已，吾與史巫同途而殊歸者也。君子德行焉求福，故祭祀而寡也；仁義焉求吉，故卜筮而希也。祝巫卜筮其後乎]” (Liao 2008, p. 389). Lin Zhongjun 林忠軍 similarly points out: “Since the *Zhouyi* contains both divinatory and moral dimensions, Confucius distinguished between technical divination and virtue-oriented interpretation and privileged the latter. However, Confucius’ interpretive project aimed to highlight the priority of moral righteousness, centered on ‘benevolence’ (*ren* 仁), over divinatory practice” (Lin 2010, p. 46).

The divinations of Mu Jiang 穆姜 and Nan Kuai 南蒯 recorded in the *Zuo Zhuan* 左傳 are often cited as classic examples of “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占). As Chen Lai 陳來 points out, Mu Jiang had already realized that “‘virtue’ is related to ‘blessing’; those without virtue will surely fail to obtain blessing. Good fortune and misfortune are not determined by the oracle bones or milfoil stalks, but rely on moral conduct” (L. Chen 2009, p. 43). Ding Sixin 丁四新 also argues that these cases demonstrate that “the concept of ‘virtue and righteousness’ had been deeply integrated into the interpretive process of divination” (Ding 1999, p. 63). Liu Dajun 劉大鈞 similarly notes: “Mu Jiang believed that the interpretation of the hexagram statements should be judged according to the moral character of the inquirer” (D. Liu 2008, p. 92). Therefore, what scholars refer to as “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占) implies that judgments concerning the auspiciousness of hexagrams rely not only on the hexagram and line statements themselves, but also on the moral character of the inquirer. However, contemporary scholarship has generally overlooked cases in the *Zuo Zhuan* in which individuals lacking virtue nevertheless obtained accurate divinatory results. In other words, virtue is not a necessary prerequisite for accurate divination. Conversely, if one’s fortune were judged entirely based on virtue, the practice of divination would become redundant. Thus, whether from a theoretical or practical standpoint, the conceptual framework of “virtue-based divination” is difficult to sustain. The statement in the *Yao* chapter from the Mawangdui silk texts that “the *Zhouyi* will also be inappropriate if one divines without virtue [無德而占，則《易》亦不當]” does not mean

that those without virtue cannot accurately predict the future. Rather, it suggests that guiding people toward virtue is the proper way to approach the *Zhouyi* as a divinatory text.

It has often been argued that Confucius' fondness for the *Zhouyi* in his later years stemmed from his recognition and advocacy of the "words of antiquity [古之遺言]" preserved within it. In this way, he transformed the *Zhouyi* from a book of divination into a discourse on virtue and righteousness. This represents an important theoretical contribution of Confucius to the *Zhouyi*. However, it explains only why Confucius revised his earlier view of the *Zhouyi* but does not fully account for the depth of his late-life attachment to the text. Zhao Fasheng 趙法生 argues that certain highly abstract and general categories in the *Zhouyi* made it possible to grasp holistically the metaphysical Dao 道 underlying the cosmic order, human affairs, and all things between heaven and earth. Hence, "the fundamental reason for Confucius' devotion to the *Zhouyi* in his later years likely lies in his need for a metaphysical exploration of the Dao of the 'Three Powers (*sancai* 三才)', namely heaven, earth, and man" (Zhao 2012, p. 41). This view is highly insightful. Nevertheless, this paper contends that within the convergence of morality and divination, there lies another dimension that has not received attention: the influence of the *Zhouyi* on Confucius himself. In the *Analects*, Confucius remarks, "Grant me a few more years, so that I may study the *Zhouyi* from the age of fifty, then I might be spared from major errors [加我數年，五十以學易，可以無大過矣]" (Yang 1980, p. 71). This suggests that his primary motivation for engaging with the *Zhouyi* was to seek ultimate existential guidance. This profound concern was closely linked to the conception of the Mandate of Heaven embedded in the text, which differs significantly from the conventional Confucian understanding of destiny.

There are considerable debates regarding the dating and intellectual provenance of the Mawangdui silk manuscript *Yizhuan*. Liao Mingchun 廖名春 contends that texts such as the *Xici*, *Er San Zi*, *Yao*, and *Zhong* serve as reliable sources for investigating Confucius' thought on the *Zhouyi*, positing that "the Mawangdui *Yizhuan* most likely represents the work of disciples taught by Confucius' followers in the Chu region during his later years" (Liao 2008, p. 25). Ding Sixin 丁四新 similarly maintains that the sayings introduced by the formulas "The Master said" (*zi yue* 子曰) or "The Gentleman said" (*fuzi yue* 夫子曰) should be regarded in their entirety as Confucius' own exegeses of the *Zhouyi* (Ding 2017, pp. 125–44). It is fair to say that the *Zhouyi* exerted a profound influence on late-life Confucius.

This paper endorses these viewpoints and further explores the issue by drawing on the silk manuscript *Yizhuan*, as well as experiences and remarks of Confucius in his twilight years recorded in the *Analects*.

Starting with an analysis of the widely accepted academic concept of "virtue-based divination" (*dezhan* 德占), this paper demonstrates that the concept is untenable both logically and theoretically. Confucius advocated the primacy of virtue and righteousness (*deyi* 德義) over divination primarily to rectify people's over-reliance on divinatory practices and their tendency to reduce the *Zhouyi* to a mere divination text.

Secondly, it should be noted that an overemphasis on moral virtue may obscure the divinatory essence of the *Zhouyi*. Confucianism holds firmly that moral cultivation lies entirely within one's own control, whereas divination entails predetermination and inevitability. It alerts people to the limitations of human life, which human beings can never fully master. Moral cultivation bears no necessary connection to mundane pursuits of blessings and good fortune. This constitutes one intrinsic implication of the *Zhouyi*, and it was precisely this feature that appealed to Confucius, for it offered answers to the existential perplexities confronting him and his disciples.

Ultimately, Confucius' changed stance on the *Zhouyi* in his late life greatly shaped the development of Confucian views on the Mandate of Heaven and gave rise to the idea of "timely mandate" (*shiming* 時命) in an objective sense.

2. The Tradition of Moral Veneration and the Theoretical Origins of "Virtue-Based Divination" (*De Zhan* 德占)

The veneration of virtue has been a defining tradition in ancient China since the Western Zhou Dynasty and constitutes a cultural ethos that is partially reflected in the *Zhouyi*. Confucius, who famously described himself as a custodian of Zhou culture, inherited and further developed this virtue-centered ideal of governance, thereby laying the foundation for Confucianism. The emphasis on moral governance finds its full expression in the *Yizhuan*. At its core, however, the *Zhouyi* was originally a divinatory text. Whether the *Yizhuan* can fully reconcile the inherent tension between human morality and divine divination remains the central question to be addressed in this section.

2.1. The Tradition of Rule by Virtue and the Substantive Content of the View of the Mandate of Heaven in the Western Zhou Period

Emphasizing the cultivation of virtue is a critical feature of Confucianism and a fundamental trajectory in the development of ancient Chinese intellectual history. Since the early Western Zhou period, the concept of "matching Heaven with virtue [以德配天]" has been vigorously promoted, establishing the belief that a ruler's moral character is the ultimate prerequisite for receiving and retaining the Mandate of Heaven. Relevant passages in texts such as the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing* 诗经) and the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu* 尚书) indicate that the legitimacy of the Zhou state rested fundamentally on adherence to virtue, which in turn secured Heaven's favor: "It was thus that King Wen was made illustrious, and his fame reached up to Heaven, and he received the great appointment of Yin [乃惟時昭文王，迪見冒聞於上帝。惟時受有殷命哉]" (X. Sun 1986, p. 453). "Our king of Zhou treated the multitudes with reverence, was capable of employing virtue, and so became the counterpart of the spiritual Heaven. Heaven thereupon instructed him with its favor, and gave him the great appointment of Yin, to rule over all the regions [惟我周王靈承於旅，克堪用德，惟典神天。天惟式教我用休，簡畀殷命，尹爾多方]" (X. Sun 1986, p. 465).

In stark contrast, at the decline of the Shang Dynasty, King Zhou 紂王, despite his tyranny and moral vacuity, remained defiant when confronted by King Wu 武王, claiming, "Is it not that I have received the appointment of Heaven? [我生不有命在天]" (X. Sun 1986, p. 252). Mozi 墨子 similarly cites the "Great Declaration" (*taishi* 太誓): "King Zhou lived in a state of arrogant indifference, refusing to serve the Lord of Heaven, and abandoning the ancestral spirits. Yet he said, 'I have the appointment' [紂越厥夷居，不肯事上帝，棄厥先神祇不祀，乃曰吾有命]" (Y. Sun 2001, p. 206). That is, King Zhou operated under the assumption that the Mandate of Heaven was an unconditioned and permanent privilege, leading him to dismiss King Wu's punitive expedition. By contrast, the Duke of Zhou 周公 and his contemporaries maintained that Heaven would never permanently and unconditionally bestow the Mandate upon any single clan. Instead, rulership was understood to be dynamically determined by moral rectitude, encapsulated in the well-known statement: "The appointment is not constant [惟命不於常]" (X. Sun 1986, p. 371). This implies that the way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) is not partial, but rather supports only the virtuous. As Chen Lai 陳來 points out, the shift in the view of the Mandate of Heaven from the Shang to the Zhou marked a transformation in which "Heaven was no longer a capricious tyrant, but a judge with clear standards of good and evil" (L. Chen 2014, p. 23).

However, in balancing celestial mandates and human affairs, Western Zhou thinkers did not uncritically rely on omens or divination. Instead, they prioritized human moral

agency and practical wisdom, signaling an early matrix of humanism. This prioritization is vividly illustrated in the *Xunzi*: “When King Wu was launching the punitive campaign against King Zhou, the day of departure violated military taboos; he faced east, directly toward the Grand Year Star. Reaching the Fan River, the waters swelled; arriving at Huai, the walls collapsed; reaching Gongtuo, the mountains crumbled. Huo Shu, fearful, said: ‘In three days of marching, five calamities have struck—surely this campaign is not permissible!’ The Duke of Zhou replied: ‘King Zhou cut out the heart of Bi Gan and imprisoned Ji Zi, while Fei Lian and E Lai held power—how can it be permissible for him instead!’ ... Thereupon, he seized the moment provided by the people of Yin to punish King Zhou [武王之誅紂也，行之日以兵忌，東面而迎太歲，至泛而泛，至懷而壞，至共頭而山隧。霍叔懼曰：‘出三日而五災至，無乃不可乎？’周公曰：‘剗比幹而囚箕子，飛廉、惡來知政，夫又惡有不可焉！’……遂乘殷人而誅紂]” (Xianqian Wang 1988, pp. 134–35). By disregarding multiple inauspicious omens and basing his decision entirely on the moral asymmetry between the two regimes, the Duke of Zhou successfully overthrew the Shang. This narrative conveys a foundational value: in moments of historical transformation, human moral agency ultimately takes precedence over the deterministic interpretations of the Mandate of Heaven.

Moreover, according to the *Book of Documents*, “Three Supervisors and the Huaiyi rebelled [三監及淮夷叛]” after King Wu’s death, but the Duke of Zhou intended to launch a punitive expedition to suppress the rebellion. However, regional lords and officials, citing that “the task is arduous and vast, and the people are restless [艱大，民不靜],” urged the king to “defy the divination” (*weibu* 違卜) (X. Sun 1986, pp. 346–47). This episode indicates that even in the early Zhou period, divinatory outcomes no longer carried absolute authority. This humanist trajectory intensified during the Spring and Autumn period, giving rise to statements such as: “What the spirits depend upon is human virtue [神所馮依，將在德矣]” (Yang 1990, p. 310) and “The spirits bless the benevolent and bring calamity upon the unrighteous [神福仁而禍淫]” (Yang 1990, p. 821). These ideas further emphasized that the will of Heaven would shift in accordance with human conduct, as reflected in statements like: “Auspiciousness and inauspiciousness depend on humans [吉凶由人]” (Yang 1990, p. 369), “The people are the masters of the spirits [民，神之主也]” (Yang 1990, p. 382), and “Misfortune and blessing have no gates, they are summoned by humans themselves [禍福無門，唯人所召]” (Yang 1990, p. 1079). On this basis, the Western Zhou view of the Mandate of Heaven gradually developed into a theory of moral retribution, positing a strict correspondence between virtue and fortune: those who cultivate virtue receive celestial protection, whereas those who abandon virtue are divested of the Mandate or face divine retribution.

2.2. The Virtue-Oriented Nature of the *Yizhuan*

As Zhu Xi 朱熹 noted, the *Zhouyi* “was originally created for divination” (Zhu 2002, p. 2179). Foretelling auspiciousness and inauspiciousness through divination to pursue benefits and avoid harm is the fundamental function of the text. Confucius himself was undoubtedly proficient in this art, boasting that: “In a hundred divinations, I am correct about seventy [吾百占而七十當]” (Liao 2008, p. 389). However, he bifurcated the study of the *Zhouyi* into a tripartite hierarchy—“esoteric assistance” (*youzan* 幽贊), “grasping situational patterns” (*mingshu* 明數), and “attaining virtue” (*dade* 達德): “Through esoteric assistance, one grasps situational patterns; through grasping situational patterns, one attains virtue. Then, with benevolence... one enacts righteousness. If one engages in assistance but does not grasp situational patterns, that person is a shaman; if one grasps situational patterns but does not attain virtue, that person is a historiographer. Do not aspire to the divination of historiographers and shamans. Will scholars of later generations doubt me

perhaps because of the *Zhouyi*? I seek only its virtue. Though I tread the same path as the historiographers and shamans, I aim for a different end. The noble person cultivates virtue to seek good fortune, and thus seldom performs sacrifices; he acts with benevolence and righteousness to seek auspicious outcomes, and thus rarely resorts to divination. Shouldn't we then place prayer and divination afterward [幽贊而達乎數，明數而達乎德，又仁口者而義行之耳。贊而不達於數，則其為之巫；數而不達於德，則其為之史。史巫之筮，鄉之而未也，好之而非也。後世之士疑丘者，或以《易》乎？吾求其德而已，吾與史巫同途而殊歸者也]” (Liao 2008, p. 389). Confucius' quest for virtue was conceptualized by Lin Zhongjun 林忠軍 as “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占), which defines the demarcation between Confucius' teachings and the practices of historiographers (*shi* 史) and shamans (*wu* 巫).

Within this framework, shamans communicate with the divine through esoteric assistance, entering a state of mystical union with deities through ecstatic rituals that transform them into vessels for divine oracles. Conversely, historiographers master cosmic numbers, inferring the underlying laws and shifting trajectories of the cosmos through structural numerical relationships such as the numbers of yin and yang (*yinyang zhishu* 陰陽之數), celestial phenomena and calendrical calculations (*tianxiang lishu* 天象歷數), as well as specific divinatory numbers (*shishu* 筮數) and positional line numbers (*yaowei zhishu* 爻位之數). This process involves rational categorization and inference about cosmic order and change. Confucius, however, deemed both shamanic and historiographical divinations systematically flawed due to their partiality. The noble person transcends these limitations by securing good fortune strictly through virtuous agency, thereby reducing mantic rites to a subordinate status. Lin Zhongjun 林忠軍 therefore argues that “virtuous conduct and divination are two entirely distinct methods for obtaining auspiciousness and blessings,” and that Confucius inclined toward “virtue” rather than “divinatory practice”. Consequently, the text of the *Zhouyi* was transformed “from a book originally meant for divination into a philosophical work centered primarily on virtue and righteousness” (Lin 2007, p. 90).

Under the framework of the early Zhou period, suffering misfortune as a consequence of moral depravity was considered an immutable principle. A person devoid of virtue could not yield an auspicious outcome even if they drew a nominally “lucky” (*ji* 吉) hexagram; for the *Zhouyi* to assist such an individual in avoiding harm would be tantamount to subverting celestial justice. This mechanism presupposes a strict theoretical premise: the inquirer or the matter under divination must align with moral righteousness. This premise is vividly illustrated in the *Zuo Zhuan* through the celebrated case of Mu Jiang 穆姜, who conspired with Shusun Qiaoru 叔孫僑如 to depose Duke Cheng of Lu 魯成公. Following the collapse of the coup, she was exiled to the Eastern Palace, where she divined her fate and obtained the hexagram *Gen* 艮 changing to *Sui* 隨. Although the court historian interpreted the hexagram statement as an omen of her imminent release, Mu Jiang 穆姜, fully aware of her moral bankruptcy, insisted that her lack of virtue doomed her to die in confinement. And her prediction was tragically confirmed (Yang 1990, pp. 964–65). Similarly, the *Zuo Zhuan* records that Nan Kuai 南蒯, the steward of Bi (費邑) in the state of Lu 魯, performed a divination before his rebellion, obtaining the hexagram *Kun* 坤 changing to *Bi* 比, with the line statement “Yellow lower garment, supreme good fortune [黃裳元吉]”. He considered it greatly auspicious. However, Zifu Huibo 子服惠伯 argued that “this (auspiciousness) holds only for affairs of loyalty and good faith; otherwise, there is sure to be defeat... Although the divination is auspicious, it will not succeed [忠信之事則可，不然必敗。.....筮雖吉，未也]” (Yang 1990, p. 1337). As predicted, the rebellion ended in catastrophic failure.

Mirroring these historical accounts, Confucius proclaims in the *Yao* chapter that “one cannot understand the *Zhouyi* without virtue [無德，則不能知《易》]” (Liao 2008, p. 388) and “the *Zhouyi* will not be appropriate if one lacks virtue yet engages in divination [無德而占，則《易》亦不當]” (Liao 2008, p. 386). This reflects his belief that a person without virtue cannot truly comprehend or master the *Zhouyi*. For those with virtue or for virtuous actions, Confucius held that auspiciousness can be determined without resorting to divination. In the *Yao* chapter, he proposed that an enlightened ruler, by observing the changes in heaven and earth and discerning the essence of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, and by aligning with the will of heaven and earth to seek fortune and auspiciousness through virtue, benevolence, and righteousness, does not need to rely on divination: “Thus, the enlightened ruler does not observe celestial signs, does not consult the stars, does not select days or months, does not divine with turtle shells or yarrow stalks, yet knows the auspicious and the inauspicious to follow the heart of heaven and earth, this is called the Dao of the *Zhouyi* [故明君不時不宿，不日不月，不卜不筮，而知吉與凶，順於天地之心，此謂《易》道]” (Liao 2008, p. 389). Lin Zhongjun 林忠軍 refers to Confucius’ concept of divination based on virtue and righteousness as “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占). He argues that “Confucius’ interpretation of the *Zhouyi* aims to prioritize virtue and righteousness over divination, with benevolence at its core and replacing divination” (Lin 2007, p. 90).

2.3. Theoretical Inconsistencies and Structural Anomalies Within the Framework of “Virtue-Based Divination” (De Zhan 德占)

To critically evaluate this paradigm, several fundamental issues must be addressed. Firstly, extracting moral significance from the divinatory layer of the *Zhouyi* was by no means an exclusive invention of Confucius. One primary catalyst for Confucius’ late-life engagement with the text was his recognition that it preserved ancient teachings directly traceable to King Wen 文王.² The core text of the *Zhouyi* undeniably contains proto-moral elements, such as “Diligence and humility enable the noble person to bring affairs to completion and achieve a proper end [勞謙，君子有終]” from the hexagram *Qian* 謙, “One who does not give duration to his character, meets with disgrace [不恒其德，或承之羞]” from the hexagram *Heng* 恒, “One who does not maintain a constant heart will encounter misfortune [立心勿恒，凶]” from the hexagram *Yi* 益, etc.

However, if the primary objective of the early Confucian fellowship were merely the advocacy of moral cultivation, the classicist tradition already possessed cultural repertoires far more explicit and philosophically mature, such as the *Book of Documents*, the *Classic of Poetry*, and the *Three Ritual Classics* (*sanli* 三禮, including the *Zhouli* 周禮, *Yili* 儀禮, and *Liji* 禮記). Given that early Confucianism had already constructed a self-sufficient ethical-political framework, there was no compelling theoretical necessity to rely so heavily on an enigmatic manual. Wang Zhongjiang 王中江 points out that Confucius’ “exploration of the *Zhouyi* was focused not so much on divination and foretelling blessings or misfortunes in life, but rather on seeking from it universal principles and values such as the Dao of Heaven, morality, benevolence, and righteousness” (Z. Wang 2019, p. 43). Having regarded the *Zhouyi* in his youth as a mere instrument of popular divinatory practice, it was only through mature, late-life investigation in his later years that Confucius integrated the text’s internal cosmological structure with his understanding of the Mandate of Heaven, thereby expanding its ethical horizons.

Secondly, the conceptual framework of “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占) contains a fundamental logical inconsistency. Consider the classic episode in the *Zuo Zhuan* where Duke Wen of Zhu 邾文公 contemplated relocating his capital to Yi 繹. The official mantic inquiry yielded a paradox: the move would be “beneficial to the populace but

detrimental to the sovereign [利於民而不利於君]". Despite severe warnings from his diviners, the Duke resolutely prioritized the welfare of his subjects of the kingdom over his own longevity, relocating the capital and subsequently dying in the fifth month of that year (Yang 1990, p. 597). Although the Mawangdui silk manuscripts do not explicitly explain why a virtuous gentleman may encounter tragic misfortune, the foundational logic of "virtue-based divination" suggests that a wicked individual, even when obtaining a nominally auspicious hexagram, will ultimately suffer disaster. This premise fundamentally links the theory to the Western Zhou doctrine of retribution, which posits a conscious Heaven that rewards virtue and penalizes vice. Consequently, if this teleology holds, the structural mechanics of the divination itself ought to directly generate an inauspicious hexagram, rather than producing an auspicious omen that must subsequently be overridden or vetoed by human ethical judgment.

Finally, if virtuous actions automatically guarantee auspiciousness independent of divination, the practice of divination is rendered entirely obsolete, as Zichan 子產 of the state of Zheng 鄭 remarked, "A wicked man does not come to a good end; that is fate [凶人不終，命也]" (Yang 1990, p. 1230). The reality that virtue breeds fortune while vice unleashes calamity, a universal ethical axiom and a matter of empirical experience, means that divination loses its epistemological utility. This redundancy is explicitly captured in the *Xunzi*: "One does not need to divine if replacing the unworthy with the worthy is auspicious. Victory is assured without divination when order is used to attack disorder. [以賢易不肖，不待卜而後知吉。以治伐亂，不待戰而後知克]" (Xianqian Wang 1988, p. 504).

Nevertheless, Confucius' aphorism "if one approaches it through the lens of virtue, the *Zhouyi* becomes truly functional [擬德占之，則《易》可用矣]" (Liao 2008, p. 386) indicates that he did not advocate for a total abandonment of divination. This comports with his early instruction to Zigong 子貢: "If you are deferential and correct in your conduct and act with righteousness, then people will not be perplexed [孫正而行義，則人不惑矣]" (Liao 2008, p. 388). Nonetheless, Confucius did not discard divination. He was not only proficient in it but also lamented, "Grant me a few more years, so that I may study the *Zhouyi* from the age of fifty, then I might be spared from major errors [加我數年，五十以學易，可以無大過矣]" (Yang 1980, p. 71), believing that studying the *Zhouyi* earlier would have provided better guidance in life. This sigh suggests that even the most advanced moral agent requires the guidance of the *Zhouyi* to navigate the hazards of human life. This suggests that even virtuous individuals require some degree of guidance from divination, whose outcomes include auspiciousness, misfortune, remorse, and error, rather than guaranteeing auspicious results alone.

3. The Exposition of the Relationship Between Virtue and Divination in the *Yizhuan*

While Confucius consistently prioritized moral cultivation over predictive techniques, the pragmatic purpose of divination remained undeniably tethered to the pursuit of securing good fortune (*ji* 吉). However, it is a commonplace that the virtuous are by no means guaranteed worldly prosperity or protection from calamity. How, then, does the *Yizhuan* address this profound structural disconnection between virtue and fortune? Furthermore, what role did divination play when this ethical alignment fractures?

3.1. Viewing the Relationship Between Virtue and Divination Through the Dichotomy of Instrumental and Value Rationality

It is an inescapable aspect of the human condition to harbor anxieties about the future, to grasp the changes in the world and the course of one's life, and to anticipate fortune

while evading adversity. Confucius possessed a deep empathetic understanding of this human impulse. As recorded in the *silk manuscripts*, he strictly demarcated this psychological need from genuine philosophical insight: “Mastering divination and being skilled at prognostication is the way of the common people, not the Dao of the *Zhouyi* [良[筮而善占], 此百姓之道[也, 非]《易》也]” (Liao 2008, p. 388). For Confucius, an over-reliance on and fascination with mantic precision characterized a vulgar approach to the *Zhouyi*; such practitioners remained blind to its inner essence even if their empirical predictions proved flawlessly accurate. The noble person is distinguished from ordinary people and can truly grasp the essence of the text: “Now the *Zhouyi* causes the firm to know fear and the yielding to know strength; it enables the foolish to act without recklessness and the deceitful to act without guile [夫《易》, 剛者使知懼, 柔者使知剛, 愚人為而不妄, 敝人為而去詐]” (Liao 2008, p. 388).

For the noble person, moral cultivation constitutes the root (*ben* 本), while external vagaries of fortune and misfortune are merely the branches (*mo* 末). As the *Xiangzhuan* 象傳 (Appended Explanations) warns: “When virtue is meager yet the position is honored, when wisdom is small, yet the plans are grand, when strength is slight, yet the burden is heavy, few avoid calamity. ... The noble person first secures his own person and only then acts; he first calms his mind and only then speaks; he first establishes his position and only then makes requests [德薄而位尊, 知小而謀大, 力小而任重, 鮮不及。.....君子安其身而後動, 易其心而後語, 定位而後求]” (Liao 2008, p. 388). Through this pedagogical reorientation, Confucius sought to elevate the *Zhouyi* from a tool of vulgar prognosis into a manual for ethical self-rectification, though he did not deny the function of historiographers and shamans in interpreting divine will.

Structurally, this conceptual tension reflects the distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality, which is represented respectively as “the application of the *Zhouyi*” (*Yizhiyong* 易之用) and “the meaning of the *Zhouyi*” (*Yizhiyi* 易之義). The former refers to the divination system, which promises esoteric assistance and situational orientation. The latter embodies the normative value system superimposed onto these mechanics. As Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 noted: “Those who master this knowledge of occult arts and numbers do not disclose it lightly, nor do they transmit it to the unworthy. Moreover, they invariably exhort people to cultivate virtue and preserve their blessings, so that ‘Heaven protects them, and all is auspicious, with no disadvantage’. Failing to do so constitutes a ‘violation of the *Zhouyi*’. Thus, from the beginning, this knowledge inherently carries a sense of value. Although it subtly comprehends Heaven and Earth and communicates with the spiritual turtle and milfoil, it must guide people toward virtue... Therefore, the knowledge of occult arts and numbers takes moral conduct as its foundation, the study of human nature, principles, and metaphysical truths as its learning, while it itself is the branch, the technique” (Mou 2003, p. 114).

However, Mou’s assertion that “the knowledge of occult arts and numbers takes moral conduct as its foundation” represents a normative value orientation rather than a factual or technical prerequisite. The statement “one cannot understand the *Zhouyi* without virtue [無德, 則不能知《易》]” (Liao 2008, p. 388) implies that the unvirtuous will inevitably miss the ethical soul of the text, not that they are technically incapable of accurate divination. For instance, as Mencius said, “There were no righteous wars in the Spring and Autumn period [春秋無義戰]” (Yang 2008, p. 255), yet the *Zuo Zhuan* preserves numerous accounts of highly precise battlefield prognostications executed for unrighteous campaigns. Moreover, according to the *Zuo Zhuan*, during the struggle between the lord of the state of Lu and the long-usurping three Huan clans, Zang Hui 臧會, a senior officer of Lu, stole the precious turtle named Lougou (僕句) from Zang Zhaobo 臧昭伯 to divine “whether to be faithful or deceitful [以卜為信與僞]”. The divination result indicated that “deceit is

auspicious" (*jianji* 僭吉). After a series of twists, Zang Hui was eventually installed as the heir of the Zang clan by the powerful minister Ji Pingzi 季平子. Zang Hui thus exclaimed, "Lougou did not deceive me [儂句不余欺也]" (Yang 1990, pp. 1467–68). Here, "deceit" (*jianji*) denotes a flagrant violation of ritual propriety and honesty, yet the divinatory mechanism validated it as highly auspicious. Neither the diviners nor the divinatory practices could be considered virtuous, yet the mantic efficacy remained unimpeded.

In other words, virtue is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for successful divination. In historical reality, examples of the tragic misalignment between virtue and worldly fortune are abundant within the early Confucian community itself. Ran Boniu 冉伯牛, a disciple of Confucius and a representative figure of the "virtuous conduct category" (*dexingke* 德行科), contracted a severe illness. Confucius repeatedly lamented: "It is fate! That such a man should have such a sickness! That such a man should have such a sickness [命矣夫! 斯人也, 而有斯疾也! 斯人也, 而有斯疾也]" (Yang 1980, p. 58). Confucius' prominent student, Yan Yuan 顏淵, unfortunately died young, leading Confucius to mourn, "Heaven is destroying me! Heaven is destroying me [天喪余! 天喪于]" (Yang 1980, p. 112). Confucius himself never reaped material rewards or political achievement commensurate with his towering virtue. Instead, after a brief, aborted political tenure at the age of fifty-one, he spent his twilight years in perilous exile, wandering among fractured states, facing assassination attempts, and ultimately enduring the profound grief of outliving his own son. Regarding fate, the most widely known statement is made by Zi Xia 子夏: "Life and death are a matter of fate; wealth and honor depend on Heaven [死生有命, 富貴在天]" (Yang 1980, p. 125).

Following Confucius, this explicit acknowledgment of a deterministic fate (*ming* 命) invited scathing criticisms from Mozi 墨子, who condemned the Confucian validation of fatalism as inherently "inhumane" (*buren* 不仁) (Y. Sun 2001, p. 265) and "a monumental harm to the world [天下之大害]" (Y. Sun 2001, p. 273). Mozi targeted those Confucians who "hold to fate," accusing them of preaching that "Longevity and premature death, poverty and wealth, safety and danger, order and chaos, are inherently decreed by Heaven's Mandate and can neither be augmented nor diminished. Failure and success, reward and punishment, fortune and misfortune possess fixed, immutable limits; human knowledge and effort are entirely powerless against them [壽夭貧富, 安危治亂, 固有天命, 不可損益, 窮達賞罰, 幸否有極, 人之知力, 不能為焉]" (Y. Sun 2001, pp. 290–91). Mozi's sharp observation that "those who hold to fate are exceedingly numerous among the populace [執有命者以雜於民間者眾]" (Y. Sun 2001, p. 265) underscores a critical historical reality: in the wake of Confucius' passing, a pervasive fatalism had taken firm root. This philosophical backdrop highlights the acute crisis of the early Confucian project: if virtue cannot guarantee fortune, how can the *Yizhuan* salvage the *Zhouyi* as a meaningful spiritual compass?

3.2. The Recognition and Manifestation of the Discrepancy Between Virtue and Fortune in the *Yizhuan*

In historical and philosophical terms, the very genesis of the *Zhouyi* was rooted in a profound anxiety over the stark misalignment between moral virtue and worldly fortune. According to the Silk Manuscripts of the *Yizhuan*, the compilation of the *Zhouyi* explicitly reflects an acute structural tension between ethical righteousness and empirical auspiciousness. The *Zhong* 衷 chapter states: "Did the *Zhouyi* arise in the mid-antiquity? Might the creators of the *Zhouyi* have harbored anxiety and concern [《易》之興也, 於中古乎, 作《易》者, 其有憂患與]" (Liao 2008, p. 385)? The received version of the *Xici* also says: "Did the appearance of the *Zhouyi* occur at the end of the Yin Dynasty, when the virtue of the Zhou State was exalted? Did it concern the affair of King Wen and King Zhou? Therefore, its hexagram statements are perilous... Fearing from beginning to end, the essential

is to have no blame. This is called the Dao of the *Zhouyi* [《易》之興也，其當殷之末世，周之盛德邪？當文王與紂王之事邪？是故其辭危。……懼以終始，其要無咎，此之謂《易》之道也]”. This passage presents a serious challenge to the retributive model: given King Wen’s 文王 virtue, he should theoretically have enjoyed uninhibited, spontaneous auspiciousness. Why, then, was his path characterized by pervasive anxiety, constant peril, and trembling fear? The anatomy of this “anxiety” (*youhuan* 憂患) is articulated with even greater historical realism elsewhere in the silk manuscripts. For instance, the *Zhong* 衷 chapter further states: “The function of the *Zhouyi* lies in the corruption of the state of Yin and the flourishing virtue of the state of Zhou. It uses caution to preserve accomplishments, reverence to carry out affairs, and wisdom to avoid calamity... King Wen’s peril, his understanding of the numerological records transmitted by the historians—who could discern it [《易》之用也，殷之無道，周之盛德也。恐以守功，敬以承事，知以避患，□□□□□□文王之危，知史說之數書，孰能辯焉]” (Liao 2008, pp. 383–84)? The *Yao* chapter says: “King Wen was benevolent but could not achieve his aspirations, so he formed his plans. King Zhou was wayward. King Wen arose, concealed himself, and avoided blame. Then the *Zhouyi* began to transmit [文王仁，不得其志，以成其慮，紂乃無道，文王作，諱而避咎，然後《易》始興也]” (Liao 2008, p. 388).

Liao Mingchun 廖名春 believes that “from the context, Confucius was praising the wisdom of King Wen, holding that the *Zhouyi* embodies the historical experience of Zhou’s overthrow of Shang. Without studying the *Zhouyi*, it would be difficult to understand how King Wen dealt with King Zhou” (Liao 2008, p. 102). The Zhou conquest of the Shang was by no means a simple case of the virtuous one replacing the unvirtuous one. Given “the waywardness of Yin and the exalted virtue of Zhou [殷之無道，周之盛德],” the outcome might be obvious. Yet even the virtuous Zhou needed to “preserve achievement through fear, attend to affairs with reverence, and avoid calamity through wisdom [恐以守功，敬以承事，知以避患]”. King Wen 文王 was benevolent but “could not achieve his aspirations [不得其志],” and had to “conceal himself and avoid blame [諱而避咎],” shows that there is no linear, deterministic logical connection between internal virtue and external fortune. This acute realization of contingency aligns with a competing intellectual undercurrent of the Spring and Autumn period, which posited that the survival of states and the fortunes of human agents rested entirely with an opaque Heaven or an immutable, indifferent fate. For example, Fan Wenzi 範文子 of the state of Jin 晉 explicitly stated: “The survival or perdition of a state is a matter of Heaven [國之存亡，天也]” (Yang 1990, p. 883). When a comet appeared in the state of Qi 齊, Yan Ying 晏嬰 argued that performing sacrifices to avert disaster would be of no benefit, because the Mandate of Heaven would not be altered thereby: “The Dao of Heaven is not deceitful; it does not change its mandate [天道不謬，不貳其命]” (Yang 1990, p. 1479). In this sense, what Lin Zhongjun 林忠軍 calls “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占) cannot be sustained. In fact, the status and role of virtue in the *Yizhuan* as a divinatory text are not entirely consistent with the view of the Mandate of Heaven in the early Western Zhou period, which was theoretically grounded in the correspondence between virtue and fortune.

3.3. The Emergence of the View of Timely Mandate (*Shi Ming* 時命) and Its New Proposition Regarding the Virtue–Fortune Relationship

The foundational consensus in the Western Zhou period guaranteed a symmetrical reciprocity between human virtue and heavenly reward. This assumption was widely questioned during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Although various intellectual attempts were made to preserve the moral coherence of lived experience, none could fully resolve the empirical disjunctions inherent in the traditional retributive model (Qu and Chen 2016, pp. 77–79). Consequently, the classical doctrine of an anthropomorphic Mandate of Heaven gradually gave way, by the late Spring and Autumn period,

to the notion of timely mandate (*shiming* 時命). This conceptual shift was later reflected in Confucius' mature thought (Chao 2008, p. 59). At its core, timely mandate (*shiming* 時命) explicitly deconstructs the virtue–fortune alignment, emphasizing that external circumstances play a fundamental role in shaping human outcomes. This discourse on the tyranny of time and circumstance became general perception during the Warring States era. For instance, Mencius acknowledged the presence of an opaque cosmic force that “act without acting [莫之為而為者]” and “arrive without being summoned [莫之致而至者]” (Yang 2008, p. 171), attributing his political failure by declaring: “My failure to meet the Duke of Lu is due to Heaven [吾之不遇魯侯，天也]” (Yang 2008, p. 39). In the *Xunzi*, Confucius rejected Zilu's 子路 claim that “Heaven rewards the good with fortune and punishes the wicked with misfortune [為善者天報之以福，為不善者天報之以禍],” stating: “Whether one is worthy or unworthy is a matter of talent; whether one acts or not is a matter of human effort; whether one encounters opportunity or not is a matter of the times; whether one lives or dies is a matter of fate... Thus, the gentleman extensively learns, deeply plans, cultivates his conduct, and rectifies his behavior, waiting for the right time [夫賢不肖，材也；為不為者，人也；遇不遇者，時也；死生者，命也。.....故君子博學深謀、修身端行以俟其時]” (Xianqian Wang 1988, p. 527). Even Zhuangzi held similar views: “In the time of Yao and Shun, there were no destitute people under Heaven—not because wisdom prevailed; in the time of Jie and Zhou, there were no successful people under Heaven—not because wisdom failed; it was simply because of the trend of the times [當堯舜而天下無窮人，非知得也；當桀紂而天下無通人，非知失也，時勢適然]” (G. Chen 2007, p. 501). “The so-called recluses of antiquity did not hide their bodies from sight, nor did they seal their words from utterance, nor did they conceal their wisdom from expression—the timely fate was greatly awry [古之所謂隱士者，非伏其身而弗見也，非閉其言而不出也，非藏其知而不發也，時命大謬也]” (G. Chen 2007, p. 469).

The *Yizhuan* aligns closely with this intellectual trajectory. The silk manuscript *Ersanzi* 二三子 states: “The hexagram says: ‘The noble person is active and vigorous all day long; at nightfall, he is still cautious as if in danger. No blame.’ Confucius said: ‘This means that the noble person focuses on timeliness. When the time comes, he acts, 〇〇〇〇〇〇 exerting all his strength to achieve success, toiling even past midday without stopping, and when the time is fulfilled, he does not linger. The noble person's dedication to timeliness is like racing ahead; hence, the hexagram says, ‘The noble person is active and vigorous all day long’. When the time is over, he stops to settle himself; having settled, he remains still. Hence, it says: ‘At nightfall, he is still cautious as if in danger. No blame’ [卦曰：‘終日鍵鍵，夕惕若，厲無咎。’孔子曰：‘此言君子務時，時至而動，〇〇〇〇〇〇 屈力以成功，亦日中而不止，時年至而不淹。君子之務時，猶馳趨也，故曰‘君子終日鍵鍵’。’時盡而止之以置身，置身而靜，故曰：‘夕惕若，厲無咎。’”]” (Liao 2008, p. 372). The noble person therefore should “dedicate himself to timeliness” (*wushi* 務時) and “follows the appropriate moment” (*suishi* 隨時). When the historical window opens, he must resolutely actualize his potential; when it closes, he must retreat into unshakeable stillness to anchor his existence. This is what is stated by the *Tuanzhuan* 彖傳 of the *Gen* 艮 Hexagram in *Zhouyi*: “Stop when it is time to stop, go when it is time to go [時止則止，時行則行]”.

However, this responsiveness to temporal conditions does not imply a passive submission to external circumstances. When facing the flow of events dictated by fate, one should not yield to external circumstances. Rather, the noble person maintains autonomous choices while navigating the shifting demands of circumstance, balancing advancement and withdrawal, speech and silence. Taking the *Qian* 乾 hexagram as an example, Confucius believed it embodies the virtue of the noble person: “The *Zhouyi* says: ‘A dragon appears in the field. It is advantageous to see the noble person.’ Confucius said: This speaks of the virtue of the noble person. The noble person is pure, enlightened, and de-

voted to the Dao. He cultivates himself daily, awaiting employment. When employed, he acts; when not employed, he remains still [《易》曰：見龍在田，利見大人。子曰：君子之德也。君子齊明好道，日自見以待用也。見用則動，不見用則靜]” (Liao 2008, p. 384). The noble person on the premise of being “pure, enlightened, and devoted to the Dao” needs to act according to the time. “The ancient noble person, when good fortune arrives, advances; when good fortune departs, he yields [古之君子，時福至則進取，時亡則以讓]” (Liao 2008, p. 390).

4. Confucius’ Reinterpretation of the Conception of the Mandate of Heaven and Its Impact on His Disciples

The hermeneutic core governing the relationship between morality and divination ultimately converges on the problem of the relationship between virtue and fortune. This intellectual knot dictates not only how an individual negotiates the contingency of personal destiny but also how they pursue meaning and moral purpose in life. From the perspective of Confucianism, this issue ultimately concerns how one understands Heaven, humanity, and their relationship.

4.1. Alternative Conceptions of the Mandate of Heaven Beyond the Paradigm of “Matching Heaven with Virtue [以德配天]”

The belief in the Mandate of Heaven in the early Western Zhou Dynasty was undoubtedly shaped by multiple factors. In addition to legitimizing state power, it originated from the Zhou people’s indigenous faith and pragmatic needs to strengthen ritual authority and unite patriarchal clans. As Chen Lai 陳來 observes, “The evolution of religious and ethical concepts in the Western Zhou was primarily realized through political culture and political thought” (L. Chen 2009, p. 215). A core viewpoint articulated by the rulers of the Western Zhou Dynasty in the *Book of Documents* holds that the Zhou people received the Mandate of Heaven and replaced the Shang Dynasty on account of their virtue. They regarded moral conduct as a prerequisite for attaining the heavenly mandate, arguing that “Heaven would never bestow the great mandate upon those who fail to practice virtuous governance” (L. Chen 2009, p. 210). This is the well-established scholarly notion of “matching Heaven with virtue [以德配天]”.³

However, this moralistic emphasis has significantly obscured the far more complex conception of the Mandate of Heaven running through early Western Zhou texts. The *Zhaogao* 召誥 chapter (*Announcement to Zhao*) in the *Book of Documents* records the Duke of Zhou stating: “Now Heaven has ordained wisdom, ordained good fortune and ill, and ordained the length of our years [今天其命哲，命吉凶，命歷年]” (X. Sun 1986, p. 399). This statement not only reaffirms Heaven’s supreme sovereignty over humanity but also suggests that dynastic longevity is ultimately determined by a transcendent cosmic decree beyond human control.

The underlying logic of the “Virtue Matches Heaven [以德配天]” paradigm rests on a symmetry between human virtue and cosmic reciprocity: a deficit in virtue terminates the Mandate, whereas its preservation commands heavenly favor. Yet, by the middle and late periods of the Western Zhou, as political disorder and warfare intensified, this moralistic narrative system collapsed. The populace grew disillusioned, harboring deep resentment toward a seemingly capricious cosmos. Poems such as *Yu Wu Zheng* 雨無正, *Xiao Pan* 小弁, *Yun Han* 雲漢, and *Jie Nan Shan* 節南山 in the *Classic of Poetry* all attribute the people’s suffering to Heaven. Numerous examples in the *Zuo Zhuan* and *Guoyu* 國語 also indicate that Heaven caused the fall or prolonged prosperity of feudal states irrespective of the rulers’ “virtue” (Li 1978, pp. 37–42). Kwong-loi Shun 信廣來 observes: “This conception of t’ien as assigning political authority independently of merit reflected an awareness that

the contemporary retention of political authority had nothing to do with the ruler's merit" (Shun 1997, p. 16).

In the *Zuo Zhuan*, it is recorded that when King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王 inquired about the size and weight of the Nine Tripods (*jiuding* 九鼎), which are symbols of central authority, Wangsun Man 王孫滿 of the Zhou royal house replied: "Heaven blesses those with bright virtue, yet sets limits upon it. When King Cheng 成王 set the tripods at Jiaru 郊郚, he divined that the dynasty would last thirty generations and seven hundred years. Such was the Mandate of Heaven. Though the virtue of the Zhou has declined, its Mandate remains unchanged" (天祚明德, 有所底止。成王定鼎于郊郚, 卜世三十, 卜年七百, 天所命也。周德虽衰, 天命未改) (Yang 1990, pp. 671–72). The implications are clear. King Cheng's divination was understood to have predetermined a seven-hundred-year lifespan for the state of Zhou. Because Heaven's allotted span had not yet run its course, even the overwhelming military power of Chu 楚 was theoretically incapable of overturning the Mandate of Heaven. Similarly, in another example in the *Zuo Zhuan*, when the state of Wei 卫 prepared to relocate its capital to Diqu 帝丘, "the divination stated: 'This regime will last for three hundred years' [卜曰三百年]" (Yang 1990, p. 487). This conception of externally determined fate also permeated private life, manifesting in the widespread fatalistic conviction that the duration of a human life was predetermined: "whether one's life is cut short or prolonged is ordained [死之短長, 時也]" (Yang 1990, p. 598). By the Eastern Zhou period, the Mandate of Heaven had largely shed its moralistic skin, being widely perceived as an objective and unchanging law that stood completely insulated from human morality or military force.

Through analysis of the *Book of Documents*, *Classic of Poetry*, *Zuo Zhuan*, and *Guoyu*, Kwong-loi Shun 信廣來 notes that the concepts of "Heaven" and "Mandate" in early Chinese thought operated along two dimensions: "a normative dimension that carries implications about what should be done or should happen, and a descriptive dimension implying that certain things are not due to human effort or not fully within human control" (Shun 1997, p. 17). These two dimensions were deeply intertwined, presenting a profound intellectual inheritance that Confucius and his contemporaries directly confronted. Throughout the *Analects*, we catch glimpses of Confucius' attempt to bridge this chasm. As Shun notes: "According to the *Lun-yü*, although material well-being is something one desires, one's concern with self-cultivation should be independent of such material concerns... The idea of not worrying about material well-being or others' appreciation is related to the attitude of acceptance expressed in the use of 'ming'" (Shun 1997, p. 22).

It is precisely within this theoretical matrix that the "words of antiquity [古之遺言]" preserved in the *Zhouyi* are not limited to teachings on moral cultivation; they also embody the practical wisdom found within the art of divination, specifically, King Wen's approach to navigating circumstances when circumstances were unfavorable. As Chen Lai 陳來 brilliantly remarks: "The *Zhouyi*, as the 'words of antiquity', was originally a book of divination; even the Confucian school's use of it focused on reflecting upon the fortunes, misfortunes, successes, and failures of the human way. They did not discard divination, nor did they treat it purely as a book for advancing virtue" (L. Chen 1999, p. 31).

This model provided an indispensable anchor for Confucius' disciples when they were forced to confront their own profound ethical disillusionment. The foundational archetype was King Wen: despite the monstrous tyranny of King Zhou of Shang and the universal cries of the suffering populace, and notwithstanding King Wen's own towering benevolence, he could not trigger an auspicious cosmic intervention. Instead, because his historical time was not yet ripe, he was reduced to practicing political dissimulation to survive. Confucius' disciples found themselves trapped in an identical deadlock later. Stranded in the desolate wilderness between the States of Chen 陳 and Cai 蔡, starved of

provisions, and watching their fellow students collapse from severe illness, the community faced a breaking point. Driven to intense frustration, Zilu 子路 confronted Confucius with raw resentment: “Does even the gentleman encounter such dire straits [君子亦有窮乎]” (Yang 1980, p. 161)? Zilu’s rage cut directly to the heart of the virtue–fortune crisis: if moral cultivation is the absolute good, why does a supposedly moral Heaven allow the virtuous to experience hardship? As D. C. Lau noted, while the noble person guided by the Mandate of Heaven strives unceasingly to cultivate virtue, he must equally acknowledge the limitations imposed by the Mandate upon human agency: “Thus there are certain things which are brought about, not by human agency, but by Destiny. These are things over which human endeavour has no effect. Whether or not a man is going to end up with wealth, honour, and long life is due to Destiny” (Lau 2000, p. 28).

4.2. *The Logic of Divination and Its Conflict with Free Will*

Chung-ying Cheng believes that “The underlying logic is that divination should be seen as indicating both the limitations of the human condition and its freedom of decision and action” (Cheng 2003, p. 519). This viewpoint is highly insightful, yet it does not fully explain the relationship between these two dimensions. Chung-ying Cheng maintains that divination is not fatalistic, although it embodies determinism to some degree. A firm resolution to act brings about a corresponding consequence, without which precise prediction cannot be achieved. If human factors could arbitrarily alter divinatory outcomes, there would be little reason to take divinatory verdicts or divination itself too seriously.

According to the *Zuo Zhuan*, King Ling of Chu 楚靈王 divined his prospect for ruling the kingdom and received an inauspicious hexagram. Deeply dissatisfied with this outcome, King Ling declared: “I shall seize the realm by my own hand [余必自取之]” (Yang 1990, p. 1350). His willful conduct enabled him to seize the throne through usurpation, yet his cruel misgovernance eventually provoked a ministerial revolt that led to his suicide. In another case, the State of Wu 吳 launched an invasion against the State of Chu 楚. Chu’s Prime Minister conducted divination about the prospect of the battle and obtained an inauspicious result. Ziyu 子魚, the military commander, insisted on performing another divination at the cost of his own life, and this time the omen proved auspicious. In the ensuing battle, Ziyu took the lead in charging against the Wu forces and was killed in combat. The Chu army defeated the Wu army afterward (Yang 1990, p. 1392). These examples not only illustrate the accuracy and efficacy of divination, but also suggest that events follow predetermined tendencies and outcomes beyond human control. This corresponds precisely to what Chung-ying Cheng terms “the limitations of the human condition”.

In the opinion of Karyn Lai, “a fundamental assumption of divination is that a person can discover aspects of the future and is able to influence its course” (Lai 2008, p. 255). Nevertheless, this is only a rational assumption and ideal vision within Confucian theories of Heaven-human interaction and morality, rather than an accurate reflection of the actual human life.

Edward Shaughnessy identifies two separate sets of ideas within the *Xici*: the *Qiankunlun* 乾坤論 (*Essay on Qian and Kun*) focusing on how it is through “ease” (yi 易) and “simplicity” (jian 簡) generates “virtue” (de 德) and “patrimony” (ye 業), and the *Xicilun* 系辭論 (*Essay on the Appended Statements*) oriented toward divination. The author of the *Xicilun* 系辭論 upholds the divinatory nature of the text because “if one simply reads it, it is dead just like any other book of wisdom; but if one uses it in divination, setting its changes in motion, then it comes alive, changing so as to comment on each new situation addressed to it” (Shaughnessy 2022, p. 497). While divination can animate the vitality of the classic text, Edward Shaughnessy overlooks its essential traits. Rather than helping people understand unpredictable worldly transformations and harmonious human-environment

interactions through the *Zhouyi*, divination seeks certainty. As a practice of foretelling the future from the present, it pursues certainty through uncertainty and continually reminds human beings of their existential finitude.

Where can we locate Chung-ying Cheng's "freedom of decision and action"? Edward Shaughnessy draws on the *Book of Documents* and the *Zuo Zhuan* to emphasize the significance of the agent's will (*zhi* 志) in divinatory practices. He largely endorses Jao Tsung-i's assertion: "In antiquity when the king divined he was not at all completely basing his decisions on the report of the turtle, but was charging the turtle after his own will was first determined" (Shaughnessy 2022, p. 77). The Will (*zhi* 志) refers to determining one's intended deeds prior to divination. Such freedom lies in choosing whether and how to act with prior knowledge of the possible consequences, thereby constituting Cheng's conception of free will.

Endowed with "the sense of a link between the creative changes of the universe and creative human actions" (Cheng 2003, p. 522), wise people make appropriate choices and act accordingly. Mencius described Confucius as "the timely sage [聖之時者]," for he followed the principle: "Take office when it is proper to serve, retire when it is proper to withdraw, stay long when a lengthy tenure is fitting, and depart quickly when haste is called for" (Yang 2008, p. 47). The pinnacle of human existence therefore lies not in rigid adherence to static rules, but in adjusting to shifting situations. Still, Confucianism prioritizes commitment to self-governed moral cultivation over attempts to navigate uncertainties in life.

4.3. The Value Choice of Confucius and His Disciples

Early Confucianism assumes that moral agency lies within the self, as expressed in the statements that "The practice of benevolence lies with oneself [為仁由己]" (Yang 1980, p. 123) and "The moment I truly will it, humaneness is within my grasp [我欲仁，斯仁至矣]" (Yang 1980, p. 74). These statements anchor moral cultivation within human volition. However, the trajectory of the noble person is not limited to inward ethical cultivation; it also requires an integration between moral elevation (*chongde* 崇德) and the expansion of achievements (*guangye* 廣業). Liao Mingchun 廖名春 argues that the significance of Confucius' view of the *Zhouyi* "lies not only in *Zhouyi* studies but in proposing a new standard for the gentleman: the gentleman must both 'uphold the Dao' (*shoudao* 守道) and engage with Heaven and human affairs; he must cultivate virtue (*xiude* 修德) and grasp situational patterns (*mingshu* 明數)" (Liao 2008, pp. 125–26). To master these situational patterns is to grasp the urgency of timing (*shi* 時), the *Xici II* (*Xicixia* 系辭下) states that: "Adaptability means following the timeliness [變通者，趨時者也]". Confucius' stance toward the *Zhouyi* thus exhibits a dual structure. On the one hand, in terms of value orientation, it advocates using divination to understand the underlying principles, and regards moral cultivation as more important than divination. On the other hand, at the level of application, it acknowledges that even the noble person must adapt to temporal and situational constraints and act in accordance with the demands of the time.

As Liu Bin 劉彬 points out, although Confucius emphasized virtue, "the attainment of 'reaching virtue' presupposes a thorough understanding of the *Zhouyi* as practiced by shamans and historiographers" (Liu et al. 2016, p. 427). In this sense, virtue is redefined as a form of spiritual transcendence achieved precisely through confronting and accepting the absolute limitations imposed by fate. As Wang Xinchun 王新春 observes: "From the perspective of the *Yizhuan*, the actual human life is situated within certain temporal encounters of the great cosmos and of social human life. This temporal encounter possesses an irresistible priority or pre-givenness for the individual, who must, regardless of his will, accept the constraints of the established temporal encounter" (Xinchun Wang 2001, p. 40).

The distinction between the noble person and ordinary people becomes particularly evident at this point. Even in political failure or material deprivation, the exemplary person “maintains the integrity of his virtue [德行一也]” (Z. Liu 2005, p. 169). He treats the cultivation of the Dao and the formation of character as the self-contained, absolute anchor of life. Like an orchid growing deep in a valley, it blooms in fragrant solitude even when no one recognizes or appreciates it. This unapologetic commitment to inner moral light constitutes the true core of Confucianism, and it is precisely here that its ethical project achieves a profound convergence with the worldview of the *Zhouyi*.

Within the *Zhouyi*, the concept of “timeliness” (*shi* 時) refers not only to seasonal time but also to historical trends (*shishi* 時勢), temporal change (*shibian* 時變), and opportune moments (*shiji* 時機), which can be summarized as “hexagram time” (*guashi* 卦時). As Huang Shouqi 黃壽祺 points out: “The sixty-four hexagrams represent sixty-four ‘times,’ that is, they construct sixty-four specific contexts, illustrating from different angles certain principles of typical significance in the natural world and human society... The changing circumstances of the six lines in each hexagram are all confined within a specific ‘time,’ reflecting the patterns of development at a certain stage. Therefore, in reading the sixty-four hexagrams, one cannot overlook the concept of ‘hexagram time’” (Huang and Zhang 2007, pp. 463–64). Therefore, the divination represents the specific circumstances surrounding the matter under inquiry. What individuals can do is to understand this “hexagram time” and then take corresponding actions. However, this cosmic “time” is entirely independent of human desire or moral cultivation. One of the meanings of the character *yi* (易) in the word “*Zhouyi*” (周易) is changing (*bianyi* 變易). The *Zhouyi* presents a world of ceaseless generation and unending transformation driven by the opposition and intermingling of yin-yang (*yinyang* 陰陽), hardness-softness (*gangrou* 剛柔). Faced with such radical contingency, the noble person refuses to capitulate to the pragmatism of ordinary people, who treat divination merely as a tool for pursuing good fortune and avoiding calamity. Instead, the exemplary person turns to the text to refine their moral character.

Confucius stated that he was free from perplexities at forty, meaning that he had already gained a clear understanding of the moral principles that one ought to follow by then. Why did he still need to understand the Mandate of Heaven and develop a fondness for the *Zhouyi* in his later years? The reason lies in the profound hardships he experienced in his later years, during which the misalignment between personal virtue and historical fortune became an undeniable reality. Shattering his youthful optimism and his confident expectation that the ethical Dao would ultimately prevail throughout the world, the aging sage was forced to confront the tragic realization that his historical mission was destined to remain unfulfilled. His late lamentation reflects profound despair: “The phoenix does not come; the river gives forth no chart. It is all over with me [鳳鳥不至，河不出圖，洛不出書，吾已矣夫]” (Yang 1980, p. 89). Confucius’ earlier attitude toward divination, that “those who neglect moral conduct turn to the spirits; those who lack deep reflection frequently resort to divination [德行亡者，神靈之趨；智謀遠者，卜筮之繫],” indicates that he fully affirmed the moral principles provided by human reason, which serve as the basis for moral practice. But his statement that “the noble person cultivates virtue to seek good fortune, hence he seldom performs sacrifices; he acts with benevolence and righteousness to seek auspicious outcomes, hence he rarely resorts to divination [君子德行焉求福，故祭祀而寡也；仁義焉求吉，故卜筮而希也]” shows that although he was aware of the tension between moral agency and external circumstance, he still insisted on the priority and foundational role of virtue over fortune. This unyielding stance signifies that Confucius had negotiated a profound spiritual liberation. By fully mastering the “lower learning” (*xiaxue* 下學) of human affairs, he successfully “comprehended the higher” (*shangda* 上達) the Mandate of Heaven. Stripped of utilitarian calculations, insulated from the anxieties

of worldly loss and gain, he transfigured the cultivation of virtue into an absolute and self-contained moral pursuit.

Based on the foregoing discussion, we can better understand why the *Guodian Chu Slips* proposed the concept of “poverty and success depend on timing [窮達以時]” after Confucius: “If a wise and able man isn’t present at the right time, even his worth will not prevail. Yet if the time and circumstances are right, what difficulty could there be? ... Someone depressed at first but renowned and celebrated later, this is not due to an increase in virtue. Wu Zixu performed many meritorious deeds in his early years but was executed later; this is not because his wisdom declined. ... Encountering or not encountering [the right opportunity] is a matter of Heaven [有其人，無其世，雖賢弗行矣。苟有其世，何難之有哉。.....初沉鬱，後名揚，非其德加。子胥前多功，後戮死，非其智衰也。.....遇不遇，天也]” (Z. Liu 2005, p. 168). Under the theoretical framework of “the separation of heaven and human”, the *Guodian Chu Slips* hold that Heaven and human each have their own responsibilities. People should focus on what lies within their own control, namely the cultivation of virtue. Regarding whether they can achieve success, they can only await the opportune moment.

The external circumstances of life, including prosperity and adversity, wealth and poverty, are determined not by human factors such as virtue or wisdom, but by fate. Without the proper opportunity or historical moment in which to display one’s talents, even a virtuous and wise person may be at a loss; conversely, if one is born in the right time, everything will naturally fall into place: “Even if benevolence and sagacity can be possessed, but timeliness cannot be dictated by human will [縱仁、聖可與，時弗可及矣]” (Z. Liu 2005, p. 149). Even what Mencius describes as “preserving the mind and nourishing the nature—this is how to serve Heaven [存其心，養其性，所以事天也]” (Yang 2008, p. 233), and what Xunzi speaks of as “broadening one’s learning, deepening one’s strategy, cultivating the self, and rectifying conduct to await the right time [博學深謀，修身端行以俟其時]” (Xianqian Wang 1988, p. 527) can be understood as theoretical elaborations of this new Confucian paradigm of the Mandate of Heaven.

5. Conclusions

In retrospective perspective, although Confucius reconfigured his hermeneutic stance toward the *Zhouyi* in his later years, extensively elaborating its implicit ethical imperatives of virtue and righteousness (*deyi* 德義) and asserting their priority over mere mantic utility, he by no means negated the divinatory functions traditionally performed by shamans and historiographers. The dictum that “the *Zhouyi* will also be inappropriate if one divines without virtue [無德而占，則《易》亦不當]” should not be reductionistically misconstrued as establishing personal virtue as a structural or mechanical prerequisite for the operation of divination. Rather, it emphasizes that in studying, interpreting, and applying the *Zhouyi*, one should foreground the cultivation of individual virtue.

Within this framework, virtue functions as neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for mantic efficacy; rather, it operates just as a value orientation. Consequently, the increasingly prevalent construct of “virtue-based divination” (*dezhan* 德占) advanced by certain contemporary scholars is conceptually problematic, as it conflates ethical autonomy with the contingency of existence.

As this study has demonstrated, the paradigm of the early Western Zhou was anchored in a cosmic teleology that guaranteed a symmetrical alignment between human virtue and worldly fortune. However, under the profound socio-political dislocations of the late Spring and Autumn period, this moral consensus gradually transformed into a philosophy of fate governed by temporal contingency. The core premise of this intellectual shift was the progressive decoupling of virtue from external fortune, accompanied by

the realistic recognition that the actualization of a human life is decisively conditioned by “timeliness” (*shi* 時), understood as a set of non-negotiable external constraints, including epochal and geopolitical transformations.

This interpretive shift helps to retroactively explain Confucius’ sustained intellectual engagement with the *Zhouyi* in his later years: the text served as a mechanism for existential anchorage and psychical equanimity. Indeed, the very structural architecture of the *Zhouyi* was formed against the background of an acute awareness of this virtue–fortune asymmetry. The historical archetype embedded in the text is that of King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty: despite the moral depravity of the Shang regime and the towering benevolence of the House of Zhou, King Wen was unable to directly actualize his political ideals in the terrestrial realm. Instead, he was compelled to practice strategic concealment, endure adversity, and repeatedly engage in divinatory reflection to avoid political danger.

From this foundational narrative, Confucius extracted the profound wisdom of King Wen’s defensive action under the tyrant King Zhou: the agent must, at the axiological level, remain steadfast in moral commitment; yet at the practical level, even the most exemplary noble person must acknowledge, respect, and accommodate the limits imposed by external, pre-given structural circumstances.

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Notes

- ¹ The transcriptions of the silk manuscript *Yizhuan* cited in this article are based on *Bo shu Zhou yi Lun ji* 帛書《周易》論集》 (Liao 2008). With reference to other transcriptions and minor modifications.
- ² Liao Mingchun 廖名春 suggests that the Dao of King Wen that Confucius saw in the *Zhouyi* was not derived from the text itself but from “an authoritative and convincing document that interpreted the creative background and ideological purport of the *Zhouyi*. This document was essentially the earliest form of a commentary on the *Zhouyi*, namely the *Yi Xiang* recorded in *Zuo Zhuan*, Duke Zhao, Year 2” (see Liao 2008, p. 130), a view worth considering as well.
- ³ According to the *Book of Documents*, this was the prevailing view. Yet the motivations behind the composition of the *Zhouyi*, as well as divinations concerning monarchical tenure and dynastic longevity discussed later in this paper, show that ancient people also acknowledged a heavenly mandate unaffected by human volition. This constitutes one theoretical source of the later idea of the “timely mandate” (*shiming* 時命).

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