



A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO THE *ZHOUYI* FROM A PEIRCEAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at the semiotic interpretation on the signs of the Zhouyi. Semiotics, although it was born from western background, could give us the effective tool for understanding the semiotic character of the Zhouyi, because the use of the signs had been the universally diffused phenomena in the ancient times. In this paper, the semiotic aspect of Zhouyi is explained mainly from the perspective of C. S. Peirce who represents the American semiotic tradition. His semiotic viewpoint could give us a useful frame of reference for clarifying the Zhouyi's semiotic aspect. Peirce's semiotic view implies two important philosophical doctrines, namely, the pansemiotism and synechism. Pansemiotism is the view that all environmental phenomena are semiotic in their essence, whereas the synechism is the tendency to regard everything as continuous. In Peirce's synechism that does not distinguish the physical phenomena from the spiritual phenomena, we can find the similar element analogous with the worldview included in the Zhouyi. Peirce analyzed the meaning of semiosis through the triadic relation among the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Three elements of the Zhouyi's semiosis consists of the image of the gua, the phrase of the gua, and the meaning of the gua. In addition, Peirce introduced the trichotomy of signs according to which the signs are classified into the index, the icon and the symbol. Based on Peirce's definition, the sign of the Zhouyi can be regarded as having the character of both icon and symbol. But, the index does not belong to the character of the Zhouyi sign. Finally, Peirce admitted the abduction, or the abductive inference as the method of logical reasoning in addition to the induction and deduction. Abductive reasoning is the process of adopting an explanatory hypothesis, when an inquirer considers of a set of seemingly unrelated facts, armed with an intuition that they are somehow connected. As the historian, Carlo Ginzburg suggested, the abductive reasoning is a way of thinking that is typical to the divinatory paradigm. As the divinatory paradigm is based on the personal knowledge, and can be obtained by conjecture, Ginzburg also called it as the evidential, or conjectural way of thinking. Peirce thought that the abduction played a crucial role in forming the logic of the scientific discovery. He interpreted the abduction essentially as a creative process of generating a new hypothesis. Unfortunately, the importance of the abduction has been largely overruled by the analytic tradition in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. However, to make an antithesis between science and divination as the rationalism and irrationalism does not help at all for the discovery of truth.

Keywords: *Zhouyi*. Semiotics, Peirce, index, icon, symbol, abduction

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The western semiotics and the Zhouyi have not had so much in common in their objectives. Originally, the western semiotics was born from the symptomatology. Western semiotics has tried to find the earlier traces of the semiotic thinking from the thinkers who worked in the various fields of the human knowledge. Thomas Sebeok found the origin of western semiotics from Hippocrates (BC.460-BC.377) and the medical science of ancient Greece. According to Sebeok, semiotics had been a science of vital signs in the ancient Greece. With this regard, it is worthy of notice that Galen (AD.130-200), a famous medician during the Roman Empire regarded the symptomatology as the main area of medical science.² The Greek word, semeion was used as the synonym with tekmerion which meant the symptom or the evidence and proof.³ This tells us that the semiotics had been originated from the symptomatology or the medical semiotics. The duty of doctors is to figure out the symptoms of the patients. He makes use of auscultation in order to make a diagnosis. On the other hand, the semiotic origin of Zhouyi signs has their roots in the use of the oracle bones for divination in the ancient China. In the early stages, the means of divination was to observe the cracks formed by burning the shells of the tortoises. But afterwards it had been gradually replaced by the milfoil. But from a semiotic perspective, whether it is an omen or symptom does not make any difference because both of them can be thought as the sign to be interpreted. As is well known, the Zhouyi is the semiotic system that consists of sixty-four hexagrams and three hundred and eighty-four yaos. As long as these hexagrams have the semiotic nature, there is enough reason to apply semiotic perspective for the reading of the Zhouyi. The relevance between the semiotics and Zhouyi is grounded on the fact that the human being is basically sign-interpreting, sign using, and sign-making. As Sheldon Lu said, the semiotic point of view is indeed coeval with human being's contact with their *Lebenswelt* from the earliest times.⁴ Mankind has used the sign as the medium for expressing emotions, concepts, or various experiences of life since the prehistoric times. In recent times, the semiotics is penetrating into every field of humanities

such as anthropology, education, literature, politics, sociology, psychology, etc. But in spite of its semiotic outlook, it is paradoxical that little attention has been paid to its semiotic relevance from the part of Zhouyi specialists.⁵ However, if we consider that the semiotic character constitutes an essential feature of the Zhouyi, the importance of semiotic interpretation cannot be too much emphasized. Although one cannot deny that semiotics was born from western background, it is certain that it could give us the effective tool for understanding the essential character of the Zhouyi.

In this paper, I am going to explain the semiotic aspect of Zhouyi in the light of C. S. Peirce's point of view. In many essential respects, Peirce's semiotic standpoint could be the useful frame of reference also for elucidating the Zhouyi's semiotic aspect. In the second section of my paper, I am going to explain the relevance between Zhouyi and Peirce's two important philosophical doctrines, i.e., pansemiotism and synechism. In the pansemiotic view, all environmental phenomena are considered to be semiotic in their essence, whereas in the synechism, everything is thought to be as continuous. Then, Peirce's theory of semiosis will be dealt with in comparison with Zhouyi. According to Peirce, the semiosis is caused by the interaction between the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. Roughly speaking, those three elements correspond respectively to the image of the gua, the phrase of the gua, and the meaning of the gua. In the subsequent, I will analyze the semiotic character of the Zhouyi image by using Peirce's trichotomy of signs that consists of index, icon, and the symbol. Based on Peirce's definition, the sign of the Zhouyi can be regarded as having the character of both icon and symbol. But, the index does not belong to the character of the Zhouyi sign. Moreover, I am going to suggest that there is some similarity between Peirce's logic of abduction and divinatory thinking of Zhouyi. Abductive reasoning is the process of making an explanatory hypothesis towards a set of seemingly unrelated facts to which an inquirer approaches with an intuition that they might be somehow connected. As the historian, Carlo Ginzburg suggested, the abductive reasoning is a way of thinking that is typical to the divinatory paradigm. The divinatory paradigm is the evidential, or conjectural way of thinking because it is based on the personal knowledge, and can be obtained by conjecture.

1 This is a revised English version of a paper entitled "The Semiotics of the Zhouyi: The Semiotic Character of the Zhouyi seen from a Peircean Approach (주역의 기호학: 피스의 관점에서 본 주역의 기호학적 성격)" which was originally published in Korean in the *Journal of Korean Philosophical Society*, Vol. 115, 2010 (철학연구, 대한철학회, 115 권, 2010).

2 Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio. *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), Preface, xxi.

3 Vincent M. Colapietro. *Glossary of Semiotics* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 177.

4 Sheldon Lu. "I Ching and the Origin of the Chinese Semiotic Tradition", *Semiotica*, 170, 171 (2008).

5 The studies of Zhouyi done from the semiotic perspective can be enumerated as follows; Yeoungyu Park, "The Semiosis of the Image (Xiang): A Peircean Approach to the Yijing", The doctoral dissertation paper of the University of Hawaii, 1998; Ming Dong Gu (Rhodes College), *The Zhouyi* (Book Of Changes) as an open classic: A Semiotic Analysis of its system of representation, 257-282, *Philosophy East and West*, 55, No.2, (2005); Sheldon Lu, "I Ching and the Origin of the Chinese Semiotic Tradition", *Semiotica*, 170 (2008), 169-185.

I. PANSEMIOTISM AND SYNECHISM

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) is appreciated largely as a founder of pragmatism, but he was also second to none in his contribution to the semiotics. Semiotics, as Peirce thought, was a science that encompasses the domain of both human and natural phenomena. Such view that regards the whole world as a semiotic sphere is called the pansemiotism. The next paragraph demonstrates his pansemiotic view. The entire universe – not merely the universe of existents, but all that wider universe, embracing the universe of existents as a part, the universe which we are all accustomed to refer to as “the truth” – that all this universe is perfused with signs, if not composed exclusively of signs.

The important element in Peirce’s pansemiotism is the theory of synechism which expresses the tendency to regard things such as space, time, and law as continuous. He borrowed the term from the Greek word, ‘syneche’ which means ‘the continuous’. His conception of synechism has various implications. Sometimes, it is logically defined but in other cases, is interpreted as having ethical meanings. According to Peirce, the synechist does not admit that physical and psychical phenomena are entirely distinct and refuses to admit that life ends at death of physical bodies. With regard to this synechic view, there is certainly a thread of connection between Peirce and the Eastern worldview. In the Eastern philosophical tradition, we can find some parallel ideas which have a close affinity with Peirce’s synechism. For instance, the synechism is similar to the Buddhist Pratitya-samutpada theory, i.e., the theory of dependent origination in that it comprehends everything in a continuity. Moreover, the general trend of Chinese philosophy is more akin to the synechism than to atomism.⁶ As Joseph Needham pointed out, the Chinese had traditionally understood the physical universe as a “perfectly continuous whole”. According to such a view, the universe was seen as a continuous medium or matrix within which interactions of things took place, not by the clash of atoms, but by radiating influences. Such a synechic point of view can be found also in the Zhouyi. In the semiotic view of Zhouyi, space and time is interrelated and everything in nature is closely connected with the change of time. For instance, as the statement of the Judgment (象傳, Tuan zhuan) in the Gu hexagram (蠱卦) says that “the end is the beginning; such is the procedure of Heaven” (終則有始, 天行也), the idea of continuity is held in the circular movement of celestial bodies. Similarly, it is held in the Xuguazhuan(序卦傳), the commentary on the sequence

of the hexagrams) that there is no end to the universe because the whole of the universe is a spatio-temporal continuum, as it is stated that “no creation can be finished, so we follow it with incompleteness (物不可以窮也, 故受之以未濟終焉)”.

II. PEIRCE’S SEMIOSIS AND THE *ZHOUYI*

Peirce defined the sign as something that stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.⁷ In contrast with Saussure who used the dyadic relation of signifying and signified, Peirce analyzed the interaction of signs through the triadic relation among the representamen, the object, and the interpretant. He referred to this process of interaction as the semiosis which means the process of signification. First, the representamen is a thing serving to represent something as to an interpreting mind. Second, the object is that which the sign represents, usually something else. Third, the interpretant is the effect of a sign on someone who reads or comprehends it. The interpretant is a mental entity which is created by the representamen. The interpretant is either equivalent to the sign, or more developed one which the initial sign creates in the mind of the person. For example, if there is a stop sign at the street corner bearing the letters S-T-O-P, the meaning of the sign is not immediately perceived but attained by a subsequent thought that interprets it as a signal to stop. If we compare Peirce’s semiotics with that of Saussure, its characteristics could be clearly revealed. While Saussure analyzed the sign by the dyadic relation of signifier (signifiant) and signified (signifié), Peirce explained the sign by the triadic relation between a representamen, an object and an interpretant. And He called the interaction between these three elements as ‘semiosis’. To put it brief, semiosis is a process of signification.

In the semiotics of the Zhouyi, the elements that constitute the semiosis are the image of gua (卦象, guaxiang), the words of the gua (卦辭, guaci), the meaning of the gua (卦意, guayi). The guaxiang (卦象) is the image expressed by the trigrams like Qian (乾, ☰), Kun (坤, ☷), Kan (坎, ☵), Li (離, ☲). The guaci (卦辭) is the divinatory words linked to the sign of guaxiang such as “The dragon lying hid in the deep. It is not the time for active doing (qianlongwuyong, 潛龍勿用)”. The guayi (卦意) is the meaning which the guaxiang contains. For example, Qian means the heaven and Kun means the earth. These three constituents of trichotomy correspond to what Wangbi analyzed the semiosis of the Zhouyi by the triadic relation between the xiang (

⁶ John L. Bell. *The Continuous and the Infinitesimal in Mathematics and Philosophy* (Milano, Italy: Polimetrica, 2006), 48.

⁷ *Collected Papers*, Vol. II, 228; recited from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol.7, 438, Macmillan & Free Press.

象), the yan (言), and the yi (意) in the *Zhouyi Lueli* (周易略例, Brief Remarks on the *Zhouyi*).

If we apply Peirce's classification to the *Zhouyi*, it is certain that the *guaxiang* corresponds to the representamen. But it is difficult to find the counterpart that matches with object or interpretant in the semiotic system of *Zhouyi*. In the case of *guaci*, the words that convey the meaning should be counted as representamen, but the meaning contained in the *guaci* must be seen as the interpretant. As for the *guayi*, it includes both the object referred by the sign of *gua* and interpretant. Peirce classified several interpretants into different trichotomies. The most general trichotomy consists of the immediate interpretant, the dynamic interpretant and the final interpretant. First, the immediate interpretant can be thought as the total unanalyzed impression which the sign might be expected to produce prior to any critical reflection upon it. It is related to the peculiar interpretability before the sign gets any interpreter. Second, the dynamic interpretant is the direct or actual effect on the interpreter produced by a sign upon some interpreting agency. The dynamical interpretant is a single actual event experienced in each act of interpretation. Therefore, it is different in each from that of the other. Third, the final interpretant is the effect the sign would produce upon any mind upon which circumstances should permit it to work out its full effect. Peirce defined the final interpretant as "that which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached". Elsewhere he said that the final interpretant is the "effect that would be produced on the mind by the sign after sufficient development of thought". It is the understanding that we can get at the end of inquiry if we reach a true understanding of the dynamic object.

Let's apply Peirce's trichotomy of interpretant into the semiotics of *Zhouyi*. The example can be drawn from the case of Cui Zhu (崔杼, or courtesy name, Cui Wuzi; 崔武子)'s divination with yarrow-stalk in the *Zuozhuan* (左传). According to the record of the 25th year (i.e., B.C. 548) during the Reign of Duke Xiang (襄公), Cui Zhu, a high minister of Duke Zhuang of Qi (齊莊公) met the Tang Jiang (棠姜), the widow of Duke Tang (棠公), when he paid a condolence visit upon the death of Duke Tang. As he was so attracted by her beauty, he wanted to take her as his concubine. But Dong-guo Yan, her younger brother who worked as a Cui Zhu's servant was strongly opposed to the marriage. So he conducted the divination in order to predict whether it would be an appropriate action to marry her. He obtained the hexagram Kun (困卦) transforming into Daguo (大過卦). When he asked what the divinatory result meant, all of the official diviners replied that it was a propitious sign, whereas the judgment affiliated to the third line of the hexagram Kun (困卦) clearly indicated ominous. But Chen Wenzhi (陈文子)

who was also a *dafu* (大夫, a name for senior officials) of the State Qi (齊) expressed a different opinion after he examined these hexagrams. In the third line of the hexagram Kun (困卦), it is written that

"Distressed by rocks, he lays hold of thorns. Entering his palace, he does not see his wife. It is ominous (困于石, 據于蒺藜, 入于其宮, 不見其妻, 凶)". Based on that divinatory statement, he mentioned that the marriage ought not to be carried out. "Distressed by rocks (困于石)" indicates that he will encounter difficulty if he goes forward. "Laying hold of thorns (據于蒺藜)" indicates that he will be harmed; "Entering his palace, he does not see his wife (入于其宮, 不見其妻)" means that there will be nowhere to turn to." But Cui Zhu replied; "She is already a widow; what does all this matter? Her former husband had already suffered the ominous things." Finally, his decision to marry her brought him only the misfortunes because his new wife, Tang Jiang betrayed him by having a sexual relation with Duke Zhuang of Qi (齊莊公). Being infuriated by Duke Zhuang's behaviour, Cui Wuzi assassinated the Duke. But his attempt to make Tang Jiang's son as his successor brought a conflict between two sons of his former wife and a son of Tang Jiang. Taking advantage of a family feud, Qing Feng (慶封), arch-rival of Cui Wuzi attacked his house and killed two sons of his former wife. Moreover, Tang Jiang ended her life by hanging herself. So the prophecy came to be fulfilled as it was written in the divinatory statement of the hexagram Kun (困卦); When Cui Wuzi entered his palace, he could not see his wife (入于其宮, 不見其妻).

Now, let's adapt Peirce's theory of interpretant into the divinatory case of Cui Zhu. The immediate interpretant is the *gua* image (卦象) itself obtained by milfoil divination upon which the actual interpretation is not yet done. On this stage, the mere observing the image created by the hexagram change from the Kun (困卦) into Daguo (大過卦) belongs to the stage of immediate interpretant. As the statement affiliated to the third line of the hexagram Kun (困卦) said that one could not see his wife even if he entered his house, it does not need a second thought in order to understand that it is an ominous situation. In this stage, the meaning is immediately grasped at once. This is the stage in which the interpreter understands merely the conventional meaning commonly used in a society. In order to produce the immediate interpretant, it is assumed that the signs have to produce only the unanalyzed effects and that the interpreter should neither mix his personal experience nor make any deliberate thinking.

Next step is to produce the dynamic interpretant. The interpretation of the official diviners, or Chen Wenzhi, or Cui Zhu belong to this second stage. Although they observed the same signs, they put forward the different interpretation. As a matter of fact, there was

an element of ambiguity because the statement of the third line in the hexagram Kun (困卦) suggested only the possibility that something ominous would happen and did not specify who the victim would be. In a situation that Cui Zhu wanted to marry Tang Jiang, it seems to be very reasonable to expect that the divinatory statement saying “Entering his palace, he does not see his wife (入于其宮, 不見其妻)” should be applied to Cui Zhu. But strangely enough, all of the official diviners had concurred with each other in the view that it should be considered to be an auspicious sign. In all likelihood, their political interest could have affected to make their judgement. Meanwhile, Chen Wenzhi, another *dafu* (大夫, senior official) of the State of Qi (齊) predicted on the basis of the hermeneutic knowledge that some gloomy things would happen to Cui Zhu if he should carry out the marriage with Tang Jiang. As he predicted, it happened that two sons of his former wife were killed and Tang Jiang died by hanging herself. As a consequence, it was proven to be Chen Wenzhi who offered the most suitable explanation for the situation. But Cui Zhu who was blinded by love did not accept the seemingly plausible explanation offered by Chen Wenzhi. Although the statement of the third line in the hexagram Kun (困卦) predicted that the bad things would follow, Cui Zhu interpreted it to his own advantage by saying that it would not cause him any harm because the misfortunes had been already brought to Tang Jiang’s former husband. This shows that the dynamic interpretant varies according to the subjective conditions of the interpreter.

Finally, what is the final interpretant in this case? Peirce defined the final interpretant as the “effect that would be produced on the mind by the sign after sufficient development of thought.” The final interpretant is what our understanding of the dynamic object would be at the end of inquiry if we had reached a true understanding of the dynamic object. The final interpretant is the final consensus that communities of inquirers aim at in their investigations. If all participants who took part in the interpretation could concur in their view, i.e., if they could reach the conclusion unanimously on whether Cui Zhu should take Tang Jiang as his wife, that would be a final interpretant. Unfortunately, it is doubtful whether such complete consensus could exist at all since the interpretation could not but depend on the subjective mind of the each interpreter in the case of divination. If we use the term in a narrow sense, the final interpretant could be defined as the stage when a certain interpretation reaches at a moment that causes to make a certain action. In the case of Cui Zhu’s divination, it would be the stage when Cui Zhu’s interpretation of the divinatory statement arrives at a final conclusion to take Tang Jiang as his wife after deliberate considerations.

III. TRIADIC ASPECTS OF SIGN AND ITS RELATION TO THE *ZHOUYI*

Peirce considered the sign as a medium for communication. Among the various kinds of media that are used in order to represent the essential character of the object, the most frequently used one is the visual media made by visual design. Peirce proposed that visual signs could be defined as three categories; index, icon and symbol. Of Peirce’s many ways of distinguishing signs, the triad of index/icon/symbol focuses on the relations of signs to their objects. An index is a sign that denotes its object by virtue of an actual connection involving them. The index bears a direct existential or physical connection with its object although it bears no resemblance to its object. An icon is a sign that denotes its object by a relation of resemblance or likeness. A symbol is a sign that denotes its object solely by virtue of the fact that it will be interpreted to do so. Based on Peirce’s definition, the signs of the *Zhouyi* are considered to possess the character of both icon and symbol. In order to be an icon, there should be a resemblance or likeness between the sign and the object. The signs of the *Zhouyi* satisfy the necessary condition for the icon because the most of the signs in the *Zhouyi* bear a partial resemblance with the object that they denote. For instance, the figure of Qian (乾) trigram was made by imitating the flow of Qi (氣) while the figure of Kan (坎) trigram was drawn by delineating the movement of water. And the signs of the *Zhouyi* can be regarded as symbols because those images are not necessarily but arbitrarily related with the object. The relation between a certain trigram and a certain object depends in all respects on the volition of the sign inventors. Therefore, the signs of the *Zhouyi* are considered to be the iconic symbols. But it does not seem that the index belongs to the character of the *Zhouyi* sign, because its sign does not demonstrate the influences of the object.

IV. LOGIC OF ABDUCTION AND ITS RELATION TO THE *ZHOUYI*

Finally, Peirce admitted the abduction, or the abductive inference as a method of logical reasoning in addition to the induction and deduction. Abductive reasoning is the process of making an explanatory hypothesis towards a set of seemingly unrelated facts to which an inquirer approaches with an intuition that they might be somehow connected. Carlo

Ginzburg, a noted historian and pioneer of microhistory suggested, the abductive reasoning is a way of thinking that is also found in the divinatory paradigm. As the divinatory paradigm is based on the personal knowledge, it is the evidential, or conjectural way of thinking. Peirce thought that the abduction played a crucial role in forming the logic of the scientific discovery. He interpreted the abduction essentially as a creative process of generating a new hypothesis. Unfortunately, the importance of the abduction has been largely overruled by the analytic tradition in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. However, to make an antithesis between science and divination as the rationalism and irrationalism does not help at all for the discovery of truth.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the semiotic aspect of Zhouyi is explained mainly from the standpoint of C. S. Peirce who is the one of the founders of contemporary semiotic movement. As the Zhouyi is the system that consists of sixty-four hexagrams and 384 yao (爻), we have sufficient reason to regard the Zhouyi as the semiotic system. Semiotics, although it was born from the western intellectual background, could give us the effective means also for understanding the semiotic character of the Zhouyi.